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Balancing the rise of China: United States policy in the South China Sea

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Abstract

The threat of a rising China to the U.S. led international system has resulted in the increase in competition and tension between the two states. The disputed South China Sea (SCS) is one of the theatres in which this developing competition takes place. Utilizing Offensive Realism theory as a framework, the SCS is examined as a potential flashpoint for the escalation of an international incident into conflict between the U.S. and China. The political/security context in which Sino-U.S. relations occur is established through an analysis of the law of claims at sea and the disputes claimants. The theoretical framework provides a means to interpret the actions of both China and the U.S. in the context of a competition for power, by establishing the causes of war and the strategies utilized by rising and status quo powers against each other. The conduct of China and the U.S. both generally and regionally are then examined on three levels: national opinion, strategy and tactics. The results of each level are then juxtaposed to determine their effect on tension and thus the likelihood of conflict occurring. It is determined that the national opinion and strategy levels have a net effect of decreasing tension, whilst the tactical level dramatically increases tension within the region. The tension in the region is therefore moderated by the national opinion and strategy levels, limiting the potential of an international incident acting as a flashpoint for conflict, but ensuring the likelihood of a prolonged stalemate and the emergence of a new Cold War.