

Maritime Disputes as a Test of Communist Party Legitimacy

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Structured Abstract

Article Type: Research Paper

Purpose—Discussions regarding China’s assertiveness toward disputed maritime territories in the East and South China Seas have mostly examined the issue through the lens of realist international relations theory and power transition theory focusing on China as a rising power challenging the U.S. order. This paper examines the domestic pressure faced by China’s ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) as a motivating factor behind China’s assertive maritime behavior.

Findings—This examination finds that looking at domestic pressure and the need for the CPC to maintain legitimacy as influencing factors can help explain China’s behavior, which would otherwise seem perplexing when viewed only through a realist international relations lens.

Practical implications—This paper offers a deeper understanding of China’s motivations behind its recent behavior. This can assist in further analysis and in formulating policy for managing the disputes and efforts to decrease tension in the region.

Originality/Value—By examining the maritime disputes from the perspective of Chinese domestic policy, this paper deviates from the typical approach to framing this issue and offers an alternative to a realist international relations approach that tends to only support zero sum policy.

Keywords: China, East China Sea, legitimacy, maritime security, maritime territorial disputes, South China Sea

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Introduction

China has become increasingly assertive in recent years in demonstrating its claim to disputed territories in the East and South China Seas. Island building, increased encounters with its Asian neighbors, and confronting U.S. naval vessels and aircraft have repeatedly made international headlines. Amidst the rising tensions, all sides claim to seek a peaceful resolution to the situation. Yet it is difficult to envision a peaceful solution when the situation is viewed as the inevitable result of a rising China deliberately seeking to assert itself as the new regional hegemon.

This paper will argue that instead of viewing China's actions in the East and South China Seas as purely motivated by international politics, it is helpful to examine how China's actions toward maritime disputes affect the legitimacy of the Communist Party of China (CPC). In addition to the pressures of international politics, the CPC is facing tremendous domestic pressure as well. If the U.S. and other stakeholders to the disputes truly seek to work with China for a peaceful solution, it will be helpful to understand the internal politics affecting China's actions.

Realist Theory and Power Transition Theory

When examined through a realist lens, it is easy to see China's increasingly assertive actions in and around disputed maritime territories as the natural result of a rising power as predicted by power transition theory. Power Transition Theory, as first put forth by Kenneth Organski,¹ argues that a rising power tends to eventually challenge the dominant power as the two approach parity in overall power and the rising power is dissatisfied with the current regional or world order. The current dominant power will take action in attempt to maintain its preeminent position and the two are likely to have conflict. Because the circumstances described in power transition theory match the conditions that, according to Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War, led Athens and Sparta into conflict, Graham Allison² applied this concept to the U.S. and China and concluded they are caught in a "Thucydides Trap," i.e., on a collision course toward conflict. Choosing to refer to the situation as a "trap" is significant as it emphasizes the inevitability of the situation.

Power transition theory and the Thucydides Trap are consistent with John Mearsheimer's offensive neo-realism theory of international politics, as put forth in his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.³ This theory is a pessimistic one, depicting great powers as, rather than seeking balance, to be constantly seeking greater power to ensure their security, which in turn threatens their neighbors and causes them to seek greater power as well.⁴ The result is a persistent trend toward conflict. These pessimistic theories are very influential on Western, particularly U.S., academics and policy makers, and offer a grim prediction for the future of the U.S. relationship with a rising China.

From a neo-realist perspective, a more assertive posture concerning the disputed islands and territories in the East and South China Seas was bound to follow China's

gains in economic and military strength. But as the West views the actions of China through the realist lens, China's actions are also perplexing. In the realist tradition of states acting as monolithic rational actors in a self-help security maximizing structure, China's actions could be seen as counterproductive. While an outcome in the East and South China Seas that results in China's undisputed ownership of claimed territories would no doubt be a favorable outcome to China, current actions appear to be doing more harm than good. The disruption of the status quo is increasing tensions in general. But more specifically, China's actions are causing its potential rivals to band together against a perceived rising Chinese threat.

For example, Vietnam and the Philippines, once rivals in the South China Sea disputes, announced their intentions last year to pursue joint patrols and greater military cooperation in the South China Sea.⁵ As a response to rising tensions, Vietnam has also increased its cooperation with India, with the two countries announcing a Joint Vision Statement for military cooperation through 2020.⁶ Japan, having already reinterpreted its constitutional military limitations to allow for collective defense in 2014, has also begun to participate in naval exercises with the U.S. and India as part of a trilateral effort to share the task of patrolling the Asian seas to counter rising Chinese military presence.⁷ Examples such as these are plentiful in the news in recent years.

Perhaps even more importantly, China's growing assertiveness is creating a desire among the Asian states for increased U.S. military presence in the region. Last year, amidst an atmosphere of increasing cooperation, the U.S. lifted its decades long ban on lethal weapon sales to Vietnam, and the U.S. Navy announced plans for increased port visits to its former enemy.⁸ The U.S. Navy also returned to Subic Bay in the Philippines, nearly 25 years after closing its base there.⁹ Coupled with the Philippines legal challenge in The Hague International Tribunal against China's claims in the South China Sea, the Philippines seemed poised to move forward on a decidedly anti-China, pro-U.S. foreign policy path, until the new, outspoken, Filipino President, Duterte, made a dramatic turnaround and tilted away from the U.S. and toward China. This dramatic turnaround, however, was due in large part to Duterte feeling personally insulted by former U.S. president Obama and his administration's criticism of Duterte's violent domestic anti-drug campaign and a perceived pattern of overbearing U.S. meddling in Philippines affairs.¹⁰ With Duterte's more favorable opinion of the new U.S. President Trump, an influential Philippine military with strong ties to the U.S., the fact that China remains domestically unpopular in the Philippines, and the fact that the disputed islands remain a point of contention with China, analysts are already predicting the Philippines drifting back to its more traditional position in the U.S. sphere.¹¹

Apprehension toward rising Chinese military assertiveness is alarming even the U.S.'s more stable regional allies. When Former U.S. President Obama stationed U.S. Marines in Darwin, Australia, as part of his pivot to Asia, the move was seen as the longtime U.S. ally choosing in favor of the U.S., its military ally, over its largest trading partner, China.¹² Australian officials cited China's rising assertiveness as one of the factors behind the decision.¹³ While continued presence of U.S. forces in Korea can be explained by the threat of North Korea, Japan allowing continued U.S. presence

in Okinawa, despite strong local opposition, is because of Japan's growing problems with China in the East China Sea.¹⁴

This drive toward greater U.S. military presence in Asia can be summarized by recent remarks from U.S. Senator John McCain, calling for a U.S. military buildup in Asia, "I believe there is strong merit for an Asia-Pacific stability initiative which is similar to the European deterrence initiative we've pursued over the last few years."¹⁵ He further explains, "Despite the U.S. efforts to rebalance to the Asia-Pacific, U.S. policy has failed to adapt to the scale of China's challenge."¹⁶ At a time when North Korea is capturing much media focus, McCain is reminding the American people that it is China that needs to be counterbalanced.

From a realist perspective, antagonizing the U.S. and Asian rivals over tiny islands and rocks, with the result of provoking a greater anti-China military cooperation in the region, does not seem prudent for China unless it is part of a deliberate strategy of establishing regional dominance through aggressiveness. In other words, it appears that China is confident in its newly achieved power and is taking action to challenge the reigning power as would be predicted in power transition theory. It is possible to argue that the assertive behavior is necessary because China needs access to the natural resources in and around the disputed territories. But if the issue was primarily over access to natural resources, there should have been greater enthusiasm from all parties to pursue joint development agreements (JDA) as a pragmatic compromised solution.

JDA's have been reached between most of the countries in Southeast Asia in the waters around Malaysia and Indonesia, and in the Gulf of Thailand.¹⁷ Yet finding similar compromised solutions in the middle of the South China Sea remains elusive. Analysts argue that this is because the claims in the South China Sea involve unresolved sovereignty disputes which add political considerations and are emotionally charged.¹⁸ This argument could easily be applied to China and Japan's dispute over Diaoyu/Senkaku as well.

This growing propensity for assertive actions and lack of enthusiasm for pragmatic compromised solutions confuses the U.S. and its allies as to what China's intentions are and how far it is willing to go in confronting rivals over disputed maritime territories. China considers territorial integrity to be a "Core Interest," but there is no consensus as to what a core interest entails as a matter of policy regarding China's disputed territories. Exact wording from the "China's Peaceful Development White Paper," reads as follows:

China is firm in upholding its core interests which include the following: state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification, China's political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability, and the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development.¹⁹

It is clear that the stated interests are important, and China has declared that it will be firm in upholding them. But there is confusion surrounding the core interests of territorial integrity, since not all of China's controversial territories are equal. Michael

Swaine, writing for the China Leadership Monitor studied the origin and evolution of how China uses the term “Core Interest” in its statements about international politics. The term first began to appear in a foreign policy context in reference to Taiwan as one of China’s core interests in 2002 and 2003.²⁰ Shortly after, China extended the term to Xinjiang and Tibet as well.²¹

The confusion came in 2010 when Western media, beginning with the *New York Times*, began reporting that China had elevated disputed territories in the South China Sea to “Core Interest,” putting them on the same level as Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang.²² In 2013, media outlets beginning with *Tokyo Kyodo News* began reporting that the China had identified the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in the East China Sea as a “Core Interest” as well.²³

While Chinese officials did mention East and South China Seas territories as being associated with the core interest of Territorial Integrity, it is not clear if any of these maritime territories individually, or even if all the maritime territories collectively, represent a “Core Interest” to the extent that Taiwan does, despite how analysts outside of China may have reported it as such. Confusion on this issue of core interests is exacerbated because China has thus far refused to clarify explicitly where East and South China Seas territories rank in their magnitude as “Core Interests,” instead keeping its core interest policy somewhat ambiguous.

Given China’s deliberate ambiguity toward its core interests and toward what is motivating its surge in assertive behavior in recent years, U.S. and Western analysts, not surprisingly, are interpreting China’s words and actions through the international relations lenses that Western analysts are familiar with, projecting offensive realism and power transition theory onto China’s actions. From this point of reference, the U.S. and its allies are trying to formulate their response accordingly. It is possible that this is all the result of the “tragedy of great power politics,” as Mearsheimer would prescribe. It could, however, be argued that Western models of international relations theory do not apply well to China. To better understand China’s intentions in the East and South China Seas, it is helpful to examine the situation from the perspective of China’s leaders and what pressures they face. From this perspective, one sees China’s foreign policy actions through the lens of the domestic pressures on the CPC, and how maritime disputes factor into its need to maintain party legitimacy.

Why Legitimacy Is Important

First, one must understand why party legitimacy is such an important concept in China. First and foremost, survival of the CPC is tied to its legitimacy; the party must maintain legitimacy in order to continue to exist as the governing body of China. To understand why, it is necessary to understand the concept of political legitimacy, and how it applies to the CPC.

Political legitimacy, as a topic or theory within political science, applies, of course, to all governing bodies, and deals with how and why a governing body is legitimate in the eyes of those it governs, specifically addressing the effectiveness of

the governance, and why those governed accept the governing body's authority to implement policy and law, select leaders, and legitimately use force. Legitimacy has been a topic of discussion among Western philosophers, political theorists, and social scientists for centuries, explored in the writings of notable figures such as John Locke, Max Weber, and Robert Dahl, among many others.

Though there is no universally accepted definition, a definition based in Western liberalism seems to be the most recognized globally. For example, The Fund For Peace, in cooperation with *Foreign Policy Magazine*, publishes an annual Fragile State Index²⁴ to quantify and rank each country's stability. One of the criteria that factors into the index, State Legitimacy is a measure of the legitimacy of the state's governing body. The measure includes: Illicit Economy, Drug Trade, Corruption, Government Effectiveness, and Power Struggles, none of which would seem controversial. But the index also factors in Political Participation, Electoral Process, Level of Democracy, and Protests and Demonstrations, clearly defining legitimacy based on Western liberal-democratic norms.

China is judged harshly from these standards, and is ranked of 137 out of 178 countries in State Legitimacy, right behind Pakistan and Uganda, two states categorized as highly unstable according to this index.²⁵ Yet China is the number two economy in the world, commands significant global influence, and is overall ranked relatively stable at 93 out of 178, despite the low legitimacy rating.

The root of the problem is that China's system is not inclusive, the everyday people of China cannot decide who their leaders are. From a Western liberal perspective, it is difficult for a government to maintain legitimacy when people have little to no say in who is elected, and what policies are implemented. China's overall success, then, is a bit paradoxical if China's government is so lacking in legitimacy, at least by Western liberal standards. This is why China is the topic of such a great amount of literature on party legitimacy and speculation on how much longer the CPC can survive.²⁶

But China has its own tradition of political legitimacy, and it is one that pre-dates Western liberal philosophy, dating back to the beginning of the Zhou dynasty, circa 1046 BCE, and its "Mandate of Heaven." Under the Mandate of Heaven, a ruler was selected by the heavens to rule, but the mandate could be lost if the ruler's performance caused him to fall out of favor with the heavens. The Zhou used this to justify the legitimacy in seizing power through the overthrow of the previous Shang dynasty.²⁷ This established a long tradition of legitimacy based on performance in Chinese political culture.²⁸ Nowhere in the Chinese tradition of legitimacy was the inclusiveness or openness that Western liberalism prescribes.

The exact criteria for what makes for successful governing performance is fluid and can be adapted to the times and the philosophy of the day. As described by Philip Kuhn,²⁹ Chinese political philosopher Wei Yuan in the nineteenth century articulated how legitimacy of authoritarian, non-inclusive, rule was justified through its efficacy in solving the problems faced by the Chinese nation. To Wei, increasing inclusiveness meant increasing participation from the elite scholarly class in order to increase effective policy, not increasing participation of the masses to create universal democratic

representation. Legitimacy was in the eyes of the literati more so than in the eyes of the masses, as it was the literati who understood the teachings of Confucius and Mencius. Mencius ascribed legitimacy to the ruler following the “Kingly Way,” essentially a Confucian moral path dedicated to the benevolent rule of the people.³⁰ In this way, the concept of maintaining the Mandate of Heaven, i.e., legitimacy, is compatible with any ensuing political philosophy. As Kuhn argued in his interpretation of the writings of Wei Yuan, the Chinese understanding of legitimacy is in the efficacy of the ends, not the means.³¹

Chinese traditional performance legitimacy was also fully compatible with Marxism-Leninism and its Chinese offshoot, Maoism. Based on the concept of Lenin’s vanguard party, the vanguard is a revolutionary party necessary to lead the proletariat in their struggle against the oppressive capitalist state. This party would continue to lead the proletariat until communism was achieved. Mao’s CPC was essentially a Leninist vanguard party which Mao adapted to China’s situation. Notable modifications to traditional Marxism/Leninism that went into creating Maoism are a greater focus on the peasantry, and a need for constant revolution.³² Under Maoism, the CPC’s legitimacy was earned through its effectiveness at promoting revolutionary zeal and adherence to the Chinese Communist ideals, rather than effectiveness at providing for the livelihoods of the Chinese People, hence the frequent purges and episodes like the Cultural Revolution. With the reforms implemented in the late twentieth century under Deng Xiaoping, pragmatism in achieving economic success and continued development became the foundation for the CPC’s performance legitimacy. But as Dingxin Zhao³³ argued, the danger in performance legitimacy is that it is based on fulfilling promises, and is thus vulnerable if those promises cannot be kept.

The CPC’s struggle with legitimacy then could be described as two-fold. On one hand, it faces a deep traditional need to maintain its “Mandate of Heaven” through constant performance based legitimacy. Its performance can be defined as economic success, Confucian morals, communist zeal, or really anything so long as it is compelling to the people and they feel content enough not to revolt and overthrow the CPC. More recently, however, as China has re-emerged as a global economic power, it has integrated into a world dominated by Western institutions. As Western influences reach the Chinese people, the CPC finds itself under pressure to prove its legitimacy externally as well. This is because the Western assumption is that a democratically elected governing body is legitimate *a priori*, by virtue of the fact that it is a representation of the will of the people. A single party system, therefore, is not inherently legitimate and is under the burden to prove and continue to maintain its legitimacy.

While facing external pressure from the West to justify its one-party system, China also faces increased pressure from within as the Chinese middle class grows and citizens are exposed to more Western norms. If the CPC wants to maintain a non-inclusive, one party rule, essentially rejecting the Western liberal form of legitimacy, it must demonstrate its legitimacy in other ways, namely through effective performance. Given this internal and external pressure to consistently demonstrate legitimacy,

the CPC must continuously make efforts to ensure it is demonstrating its effectiveness.

Why the Maritime Territories Are Important for Legitimacy

It is against this backdrop that the necessity to remain strong on the maritime disputes becomes clearest. The CPC actively promotes itself as the only entity that can protect China's core interests.³⁴ This encourages nationalism in the public's attitude toward international affairs and is helpful in strengthening the image of the party, and thus can be an effective tool of party legitimacy. But as Zeng and his colleagues³⁵ point out, this may be out of sync with China's foreign policy goals because it encourages the public to demand a strong stance on the territorial disputes, even if a more compromised approach would serve China's foreign policy better. This was evident in the uproar over the Japanese nationalization of Diaoyu/Senkaku and is also increasingly evident in the Chinese people's attitudes toward the South China Sea.³⁶

The problem, then, is that this limits the party's options in its ability to reach for compromised solutions. The CPC must present the image that it is strong on the East and South China Sea disputes. If it is perceived to be weak on these issues, it calls into question its ability to secure the more significant territories, most notably Taiwan. Appearing weak or incapable of securing what rightfully belongs to China does not bode well for a party deriving legitimacy from its ability to protect territorial integrity.

Individual maritime territories on their own are not "Core Interests" of the same magnitude as the core interest of maintaining the Chinese political system. Likewise, they are not of the same magnitude as the core interest of protecting territory such as Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Tibet. Despite any controversy, Xinjiang and Tibet are fully integrated into the Chinese mainland. Taiwan's pseudo independent status is unique, but nearly every world leader recognizes its importance to China's identity. Even U.S. President Trump, after initially stirring controversy by speaking with the Taiwanese president, officially acknowledged the One China Policy regarding Taiwan.³⁷

The maritime territories by contrast are disputed and there is no mutual understanding of ownership among regional and world leaders. But China's assertive position in the East and South China Seas in this context becomes necessary as a factor in protecting the more significant core interests. How China manages the disputes over maritime territories sets a tone and establishes precedent which can either strengthen or weaken China's hold on more significant territories. Additionally, the CPC's actions regarding maritime disputes affect the perceived effectiveness of the CPC, necessary to the core interest of maintaining the Chinese political system.

This can help explain why China has not been clear on what "Core Interest" means regarding island territories. China does not want war with the U.S., and a

recent survey shows that the Chinese people do not either.³⁸ But the same survey shows that the Chinese people absolutely do not want China to back down on these issues. This puts the CPC in a tight position as it must take actions and make statements that look strong in the eyes of the Chinese people, yet try to avoid escalating the situation beyond control. Ambiguous policy and messaging such as a vaguely defined concept of “Core Interests” can be a helpful tool in providing some room to maneuver in such situations. China is showing determination by associating maritime territories with its core interests, yet avoiding establishing firm “Red Lines” that may force the CPC into unfavorable action. This is a wise move when contrasted with, for example, how President Obama’s Syria red line turned out to be a political disaster as the U.S. was caught unprepared and unwilling to take action to follow up on its own “Red Line.”

Given the risk of war with the U.S. and the risk of driving the nations of Asia together against China, an important question, then, is how necessary is a strong position on island territories for party legitimacy? After all, the party has other tools at its disposal to maintain legitimacy. CPC legitimacy has primarily been maintained through continued economic growth since Deng Xiaoping’s reforms beginning in the late 1970s, particularly among those who still remember the misery of the Mao era.³⁹ Unfortunately, China’s rapid economic growth has not been without problems internally.

According to a recent Pew Research Center report,⁴⁰ corruption, pollution, uneven wealth distribution, and poor safety standards in food, medicine, and industry potentially undermine China’s prospects for continued growth and the support for the CPC. Hu Angang,⁴¹ in analyzing China’s growth trajectory, highlights the income gap as a serious problem. China’s rapid growth has been at the expense of the egalitarian principles that Mao championed and used to indoctrinate and create the communist identity for the Chinese people. Hu also identified problems in decreasing foreign consumption of exports in the post financial crisis world and the problem of aging population, much like Japan faced after its rapid growth.⁴² Like Japan and the four Asian Tigers (South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong) of the twentieth century, China’s miracle growth cannot continue at such a strong pace forever, and China’s growth has already begun slowing down. The sum of all of this is that the CPC may be nearing the limit of how much it can leverage economic growth to promote its legitimacy.

According to the Pew report,⁴³ corruption among Chinese officials was the number one concern for Chinese people about their government, so it is not surprising that recent Brookings Institute research indicated fighting corruption as one of the most necessary means of enhancing legitimacy.⁴⁴ This explains why Xi Jinping has made fighting corruption one of his stated goals. In a speech made to the Chinese Xinhua news agency, Xi referred to catching high ranking corrupt officials, “Tigers,” as well as low ranking corrupt officials, “Flies.”

We must uphold the fighting of tigers and flies at the same time, resolutely investigating law-breaking cases of leading officials and also earnestly resolving the unhealthy tendencies and corruption problems which happen all around people.⁴⁵

Xi understands how the perception of corruption is damaging to the party's image, as indicated by his statements to the party's top discipline body:

The style in which you work is no small matter, and if we don't redress unhealthy tendencies and allow them to develop, it will be like putting up a wall between our party and the people, and we will lose our roots, our lifeblood and our strength.⁴⁶

But fighting corruption can be messy and can create infighting and permanent enemies among the party's factions. When former Politburo Standing Committee member, Zhou Yongkang, was investigated and eventually convicted, the case looked like a factional purge, as Zhou Yongkang was of the same faction as Bo Xilai, the former Party chief in Chongqing who was investigated and convicted two years prior.⁴⁷ Even if investigations and convictions are not driven by factional politics, it is difficult to negate that perception.

As John Lee⁴⁸ indicates in his analysis, attacking corruption too aggressively is politically risky and can be damaging to the CPC internally. China's political system and its economic growth, fueled by State Owned Enterprises (SOE), is predicated on a system of connection and political position. A strong anti-corruption campaign attacks this very structure.⁴⁹ Also, while the Chinese people like to see corrupt officials being rooted out and punished, such actions can draw more negative attention toward the party as scandals are aired publicly.

Given the limits of performance legitimacy based on economic growth and fighting corruption, the CPC needs to augment its perceived efficacy in other ways. Recent studies⁵⁰ suggest legitimacy, if taken to mean satisfaction of the Chinese people in the performance of the CPC, derives as much from collective identity and perceived efficacy of the CPC in making China a great nation. Part of this legitimacy, then, is the collective faith of the people in the CPC's ability to protect China's interests from external threats. This fits well with Xi Jinping's grand strategy and the "China Dream" slogan, the essence of which is about state prosperity, collective pride, collective happiness, and national rejuvenation.⁵¹

Thus, while territorial security is not the only way to build party legitimacy, it is a necessary method. Unlike continually large economic growth, which cannot be sustained forever, or battling corruption, which can be damaging to the party, territorial security projects party strength against outsiders. It creates a sense of defending Chinese "us" against an outsider "them." This is why CPC strength in asserting Chinese interests in the East and South China Seas maritime disputes has shown to be effective way to harness nationalism to enhance the CPC's image based on public opinion surveys.⁵²

Conclusion

China's increasing assertive behavior in and around disputed territories in the East and South China Seas, and the U.S. and Asian states' alarm and response does

seem to be playing out according to Mearsheimer's great power tragedy and the patterns of Organski's power transition theory. Theories of international relations such as these are useful frameworks for understanding the relationships between states and the patterns of behavior and trends toward conflict. This paper does not aim to detract from the explanatory power of these theories.

However, considerations of international politics are not the only factors that influence the decisions and actions of states. States formulate policy and decisions through the functioning of the offices of their political structures within their political cultures. Decisions are influenced by the reality of domestic pressures. In this sense, the situation with the CPC's need to maintain legitimacy and nationalism's impact on CPC decisions on the maritime disputes are not drastically different than any other country.

Yet, due to IR's fixation on the third level of analysis, there is little literature or analysis dedicated to understanding the internal factors that shape the CPC's, and by extension, China's, actions in international affairs. If the U.S., its allies, and other stakeholders in the emerging tensions in the East and South China Seas analyze China's behavior only through the lens of neo-realism and power transition international relations theory, they will formulate responses accordingly and continue to escalate the tension. This becomes the self-fulfilling prophecy; because the key players are viewing the situation as a Thucydides Trap, actions aimed only at counterbalancing and containment will ensure that it is a Thucydides Trap. While increased militarism may not necessarily lead to war, it could lead to increased tensions, arms race, lack of stability, and damage economic growth as instability and tension stifle trade and investment.

In order to find a peaceful resolution to the disputes in the East and South China Seas and relieve the increasing tensions in the region, the key stakeholders must find solutions that are acceptable to all parties. In regard to China, understanding the domestic pressure and the CPC's motivation behind their actions could be helpful if both sides truly seek to find some acceptable solution. When the problem is approached from the perspective of domestic politics, a creative solution involving JDAs or some type of partitioning could work if it is framed in a way that allows each side to save face and claim some amount of victory for its people. No solution will be easy, but a compromised solution is possible when all sides consider that no nation would go to war over small islands if nothing more than the islands' own intrinsic value was at stake.

Notes

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