

THE SECURITY DILEMMA BETWEEN CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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ABSTRACT

China's tremendous economic growth from 1978 to 2010s has enabled Beijing to expand military growth for Beijing. This has made China to become more prosperous and stronger than ever before. This is also shifting the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region, especially when the United States is already being the dominant power since the end of Cold War. Throughout different years the United States has had different perceptions on commenting China's rise. Since 2020 relations between two countries have been intensified when then Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi mentioned the resurfacing of "Cold War" mentality. This essay employed examples from case studies and interactions between leaders and social actors. This essay is going to discuss extensively on the rise of China and the reactions from the United States towards that. Furthermore, it is going to explain how a security dilemma between the two countries occurred that stemmed from the two factors aforementioned. This writing discovered that the rise of China that completely shifted the balance of power is through military presence in South China Sea. China has employed military, diplomatic and economic powers to influence the reality on the ground. This is a reality that United States had to willingly accepted and trying to alter course of balance of power have been the norm for Washington. Lastly, this writing concludes that security dilemma occurred for both countries since the two are suspicious to one another.

Keywords: Security Dilemma, China, United States, Indo-Pacific

ABSTRAK

Pertumbuhan ekonomi Tiongkok yang luar biasa dari tahun 1978 hingga 2010-an telah memungkinkan Beijing untuk memperbesar kekuatan militernya. Hal ini telah membuat Tiongkok menjadi lebih makmur dan lebih kuat dari sebelumnya. Hal ini juga menggeser keseimbangan kekuatan di kawasan Indo-Pasifik, terutama ketika Amerika Serikat telah menjadi kekuatan dominan sejak berakhirnya Perang Dingin. Selama tahun yang berbeda Amerika Serikat memiliki persepsi yang berbeda dalam mengomentari kebangkitan Tiongkok. Sejak tahun 2020, hubungan antara kedua negara telah meruncing ketika Menteri Luar Negeri Tiongkok saat itu Wang Yi menyebutkan munculnya kembali mentalitas "Perang Dingin". Esai ini menggunakan contoh dari studi kasus dan interaksi antara pemimpin dan aktor sosial. Esai ini akan membahas secara luas tentang kebangkitan Tiongkok dan reaksi Amerika Serikat terhadapnya. Lebih jauh, akan dijelaskan bagaimana dilema keamanan antara kedua negara terjadi yang berasal dari dua faktor yang disebutkan di atas. Tulisan ini menemukan bahwa kebangkitan Tiongkok yang secara terbukti menggeser keseimbangan kekuatan adalah melalui hadirnya militer Tiongkok di Laut Tiongkok Selatan. Tiongkok telah menggunakan kekuatan militer, diplomatik, dan ekonomi untuk memengaruhi realitas di lapangan. Ini adalah realitas yang harus diterima Amerika Serikat dengan sukarela dan upaya mengubah arah keseimbangan kekuatan telah menjadi norma bagi Washington. Pada ujung tulisan ini menyimpulkan bahwa dilema keamanan terjadi pada kedua negara karena keduanya saling curiga.

Kata kunci: Dilema Keamanan, Tiongkok, Amerika Serikat, Indo-Pasifik

1. Introduction

The United States became the hegemon after the outset of the World War II, and became the undisputed hegemon during the Cold War. Since the end of Cold

War, the United States possessed economic and military power with diversified network of alliance. The Washington's presence in the Indo-Pacific almost omnipresent throughout proxy wars against

communist regimes during the Cold War. They participated in Korean War (1950-1953) supported the South Korea, and Vietnam War (1955-1975) supported South Vietnam (Whiting, 2018). During the Cold War, the US had a vicious rival against the Soviet Union's Communist regime. Washington's policy makers then marched to promote US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in the west to contain the Soviet Union, while also expanded eastward that is successfully making Russia grieving (Folly, 2000). Washington planted its influence to many parts of the globe, and successfully led the international order through defence alliance after the fall of Soviet Union in 1991.

Meanwhile, China has evidently risen as a new great power thanks to its outstanding economic growth. Beijing opened its economy in 1978, and consequently had a 9 percent in average of economic growth until 2017. The rise of China is similar to the United States, when increased in wealth transferred into more powerful military capabilities. The rise of China is within the Indo-Pacific region where 70 percent of world's economy is located. The Indo-Pacific region is very dynamic since ASEAN states are also located there. The United States as the status quo felt threatened with China's rise, and fearing that their position might be displaced. This essay is going to explain two important factors; China's rise as a prominent power at the Indo-Pacific, secondly the US' respond to China's rise in the Indo-Pacific. Lastly, I am going to explain on how security dilemma erupts after the aforementioned factors were taken into account.

2. Literature Review

Security dilemma is a concept within the theory of realism. Stephen Walt writes security dilemma is a phenomenon when a state building armaments, building alliances and putting military forces on alert would eventually make other state insecure

and respond unsettled (Walt, 2023). The result of security dilemma is creating states more hostile to one another. Evidently, NATO has made advancements in the border of Russia, namely Ukraine. However, NATO insists the creation of the alliance purposefully for defence. Russia would not take it at face value, and would take the eastward expansion of NATO to their border is an aggravating threat. Another example that Walt gave is the action of the United States in backing Iran's rivals in the region, imposing harsh sanctions and conducting cyberattacks. Iran would not simply stand still to these harsh treatments, even from the US. Iran has developed its latent force of nuclear deterrent, backed Hezbollah and conducted attacks on oil facilities (Walt, 2023).

The third example is China's rise in Asia has significantly rise its military capabilities in naval and air presence. Which is threatening United States' position as the existing status quo in Asia. China has grown wary on US-Japan alliance over the years since the second world war (Walt, 2023). It is logical within security dilemma framework that Beijing wants to strengthen itself when threatened near its periphery. Waltz compels that world leaders should understand this concept when making foreign policy, and disappoints when this concept is basically taught at the first year of international relations study. While John Mearsheimer in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* and the leader of offensive realist writes security dilemma is inescapable.

Since state is never uncertain of other state's intention and state always aiming to become the regional hegemon. Mearsheimer posits that state is absolutely secured when they become the hegemon in the system (Mearsheimer, 2014). This is because state is trying to make absolute gains in every chance they have. While it quite differs on definitions, Walt and Mearsheimer agree that states are uncertain on other states' intentions. Walt emphasises

that states pursue relative gains to be more proportionate in gaining power for defensive purposes. Mearsheimer, on the other hand, claims that states want to be the hegemon in which they want to take absolute gains. These definitions of security dilemma are important in understanding the later discussion on China and United States.

3. Research Method

This research conducted through a qualitative research method. According to Bruce Berg in *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, there is symbolic interactionist perspective in conducting qualitative method. Interactionist is shown through actions and statements from human interaction, just like we expect lecturer would frequently do in classes. They teach with slides and ask questions to students to receive feedbacks. Interactionist agree that human interactions create basic form and source of data (Berg, 2001). This research has conducted data from diverse range of human interactions, namely leaders of country and prominent international relations theorists.

Cresswell also signifies that writer of the research essay is the main actor to make use various literatures in conducting relevant data (Cresswell, 2003). This research has drawn examples from books, journal, relevant website and speech from government's officials. This research has also conducted through taking samples of case studies. Case studies are relevant since the fact could not be altered, and purposeful in determining the scope of the research.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. United States' Respond to China's Rise

China has experienced significant economic growth since the 1970s to 1990s. Growing economies means more energy for China. They began to realise that they need safer maritime routes that carry their energy supplies. Hu Jintao made an interesting

statement namely the "Mallaca's Dilemma" in 2003. Beijing implied that it wants to better safeguard its maritime routes of its energy supplies back to the homeland (Myers, 2023). The Malacca is encircled with navies from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. China fears of a naval blockade in the near future from the United States if their navies are weak (Myers, 2023). The "Mallaca's Dilemma" is one of the driving forces for China to strengthen themselves in military and other instruments.

China has used its Coast Guards to escort their ships carrying energy throughout South China Sea and Mallaca's Strait. The use of Coast Guards to safeguard Chinese ships carrying energy supplies have been protested by ASEAN-claimant states in their maritime territories (Scott, 2019). When Hu Jintao's regime has put greater emphasis on China's sphere of influence in Southeast Asia, the United States had its focus on its War on Terror. When the 9/11 tragedy occurred, Washington consequently changed its priority. The United States launched its war on terror, and the Middle East was the region of highest priority. Over the years of Washington's War on Terror, China continued to prosper and its military capability has also strengthened. (Ding & Panda, 2021).

Washington grew wary of China's military development and tried to contain China diplomatically in 2003. "Responsible Stakeholder" was a speech made by Robert Zoellick, a Deputy Secretary of State. In that speech, Zoellick made an important note that China has been growing big and will be influential to the world in years to come (Zoellick, 2001). ASEAN states have also grown wary on Chinese' military and economic might, and pondered whether Washington had an equal commitment compared to the Middle East. Later on, United States' Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made an essay "Pivot to Asia" and signalled that Asia region is going be the next pivot (Ross, 2012).

Obama's administration changed the "pivot" since they did not want to be seen as solely focusing on Asia. Hence, Obama announced the new strategy, namely, Rebalance to Asia. Obama's Rebalance to Asia was a crucial turning point to reassert U.S.' political, economic and military leadership in Asia. Rebalance to Asia policy essentially warned the world that the United States is not ignoring developments in Asia. However, when *Pivot to Asia* was announced, Beijing's military capability is pale in comparison with the U.S. (Ross, 2013). Beijing had just released one aircraft carrier in 2011 (Liaoning), and it was made in the Soviet Russia. While the United States had already 11 during that year (Scott, 2019).

Since the Rebalance to Asia was announced, the United States deployed more military assets in the region. Firstly, military capabilities such as "Ford-class aircraft carrier, Virginia-class attack submarine, Zumwalt-class stealth destroyer, Aegis missile defence-equipped vessels, littoral combat ship, B-2 bomber, F-22 and F-35 fighters, and P-8 patrol aircraft". Secondly, there is also an accessed agreement between the United States and Philippines. The two signed The Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement in April 2014 (Scott, 2018). The Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement has allowed the US navy to access four airfields and a land base in the Philippines. The defensive agreement has allowed Philippines and United States strategic joint patrols in Palawan Islands to sail encircle the South China Sea. Thirdly, the US has also provided a security assistance, the Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative that target vulnerable and potential loyal US partners in Southeast Asia. Those countries include Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand over five years. Fourthly, Washington also frequently conducts its Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) within China's 12 miles of nautical claims. Fifthly,

the United States possesses a critical base in Guam to facilitate an aircraft carrier. These are significant acts of commitment from Washington prove that they are willing to lead and provide the security commitment to the region. However, Robert Ross, international relations Professor from the Boston College argued that the US overestimated China's threat, and the Pivot to Asia policy was unnecessary.

The Rebalance to Asia policy was considered critical for the US since China's expansion in the Indo-Pacific has not been diminished ever since. The domestic factor of China should also be overlooked to understand why China has become more aggressive in tandem with its remarkable economic growth. China has always had an outward looking foreign policy since Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao to the sitting president. Deng Xiao Ping, former Head China's Military Commission is famously known for the emblem, "hide your strength bide your time" (Benvenuti, Chung & Tan, 2022). It is signifying that displaying great power capability in international affairs is not a recommendable in his regime. Xi Jinping was elected as the president in 2013, just two years after the announcement of Obama's Rebalance to Asia. Xi was faced with two overarching challenges, the domestic and foreign policies. An imminent danger of corruption is not far, and his administration has dealt with corruption problems swiftly (Ding & Panda, 2021). In international affairs, he had to dealt with the rising nationalism groups in upholding sovereignty and fears over Japan-US ties. Beijing already experienced Japanese colonialism, and they would not forget the "Century of Humiliation". China does not want their influence to be subdued globally. Xi and his supportive groups as well as state-controlled think-tanks have agreed that China's peaceful rise in the world is within his era. Xi's willingness to appear strong globally is appreciated among Chinese policy-makers (Rim & Platte, 2023). China accumulation of soft power

through economic and cultural affinity have matched its hard military power. Analysts have pointed out that Chinese military spending from 2015 to 2021 is considered to be the largest military spending since the end of World War II (Walters, 2023). Thus, China is embracing its almost complete power instruments (security & diplomatic) to coerce and woo Beijing's neighbouring countries (Scott, 2019).

The two countries diplomatic relations soured in 2020. United States and Australia brought the international and their domestic attention to investigate thoroughly on Wuhan. Back in 2020, Foreign Minister Wang Yi made a comment, "American politicians are taking China-US relations hostage and pushing us to the brink of a "New Cold War". During the pandemic, Chinese leadership has not distracted from the plan to expand in its claim in the South China Sea (Ding & Panda, 2021). Chinese Coast Guard conducted exercises and anti-submarines drills near the Spratly and Paracel Islands. Beijing has deployed its primacy marine technologies for securing and exploring energy resources in the disputed region in the South China Sea. China has evidently solidified its position in the Indo-Pacific theatre with various instruments, such as military, informational gathering and energy exploration (Rim & Platte, 2023).

Washington takes note of these developments, and came up with a refurbished policy in February 2022 named Indo-Pacific Strategy (White House, 2022). The Indo-Pacific Strategy claims that China is a revisionist and consider Beijing as a challenge in the Indo-Pacific region. Since China has used its tools to subdue other countries in economic, diplomatic, military and technology. The document states China wants, "to become the world's most influential power". In other word, Washington accuses China as a revisionist power. The United States simply could not contain China in the Indo-Pacific region, since Beijing has a geographical advantage

over them and militarily superior compared to its closer neighbours. The two considerations aforementioned have made the United State to buck-pass the security commitment in the region. United States, India, Australia and Japan have created the QUAD since 2008 to share the responsibility of natural disasters (Smith, 2021). In 2017, the QUAD has shifted its focus from disaster relief into security talks. In tandem with the QUAD, President Donald Trump completely solidified the term "Indo-Pacific" into a formal Washington's policy term (White House, 2017). Later on, Malabar Exercise was conducted in 2021 between the navies from the four countries of QUAD (Parker, 2023). With the QUAD, the US has better and more solid alliance in the Indo-Pacific. Especially when India and Japan have put their commitment into the US-led alliance. Another significant security alliance is the AUKUS. AUKUS stands for Australia, United Kingdom and United States. This is an alliance to strengthen these countries in security commitment and informational technologies. The AUKUS would equip Australia in a nuclear submarine, and this is a strategic step for Australia and its allies to roam across the Indo-Pacific region (Immanurdin, Sudiarmo & Sianturi, 2024). It is evident that the United States have responded China purposefully to intensify military presence in the Indo-Pacific.

4.2. The Beginning of Security Dilemma

The beginning of security dilemma in the Indo-Pacific began in the 1970s. It started when China took over the Paracels Islands in 1974. Mao Zedong led the Central Military Commission as well as a president, and Premier Zhou Enlai ordered the operation. The reason for the invasion to the Paracels is still unknown. However, there is a suggestion that China might fear that Russians might use the island after the Vietnam war ended (Guan, 1999). Paracel Island is situated 165 miles

south-east of the Hainan Island of China, and 225 miles of Vietnam's Eastern front. Paracels known to Chinese as *Hsiha* or Western Sands, and Hoang Sa to the Vietnamese. The Chinese government made a claim that the archipelago was frequently visited in the 15th century by Admiral Cheng Ho, a famous Chinese navigator. The Vietnamese also claimed the archipelago since the French recognised the territory belongs to Vietnamese Emperor Gia Long of Annam since 1802. The French colonised Vietnam for quite a long time. The incident in Paracels resulted in a naval clash. The Paracels are now under total control of the Chinese government with adequate military capabilities, such as an airstrip with fighter aircraft hangers, naval facilities, surveillance radars, surface to air missiles (SAM), and anti-ship cruise missiles. While adjacent to the Paracels is where the Spratlys Islands are located. Spratlys used to be under the authority of Japan but Tokyo surrendered it under the San Francisco Agreement in 1951 (Keesing's Record of World Events, 1974). After the San Francisco Agreement of 1951, countries such as China, Philippines and Vietnam made claims on Spratlys. However, Japan did not specify which state belongs to the Islands. Frequent naval clashes have kept happening between Hanoi and Beijing until this day. There are two significant years in time that naval clashes between China and Vietnam around Spratlys and Paracels occurred in January 1974 and March 1988 (Keesing's Record of World Events, 1974).

The United States as the solely great power back in the late 1970s was not responsive towards Chinese claim to the sovereignty issues at the South China Sea. The State Department's response in 1974 was "for the claimants to settle among themselves" (Guan, 1999). The situation in South China Sea is gradually progressing toward China's militarisation in the region which has made Washington responded differently years later. Contrary to US'

nonchalant actions in 1974, Washington began to disrupt China's development in 2020 (McLaughlin, 2020). Washington has been continuously passing through disputed territory under the Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), and maintained that the action is given to states under the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea. Evidently in July 2020, Secretary Pompeo issued a statement, "The United States champions a free and open Indo-Pacific. Today we are strengthening US policy in a vital, contentious part of that region, the South China Sea." The statement also signifies that Washington stands against the bully that China imposed. Furthermore, the U.S. also commented in rejecting China's claims to Mischief Reef, Second Thomas Shoal, James Shoal, and China's claims of an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that ranges from the Scarborough Reef and the Spratly Islands.

Some states questioned the US' commitment, especially during the Trump's famous jargon "America First" during his previous presidential campaign. Some states were pessimistic on the US' commitment at the South China Sea. It turned out that Trump was tough on China. When Trump left the Presidential Office, his successor, Biden published the document *Indo-Pacific Strategy* in 2022. The document mentions that deterrence is required to fend off any efforts to alter territorial boundaries and subduing sea sovereignties for some countries. The change of reactions from Washington implied that maritime rights in South China Sea has deemed as potential threats to displace US' influence in the region. Expectedly, the Chinese government responded the US' intrusion with strong remarks, "We advise the US side to earnestly honour its commitment of not taking sides on the issue of territorial sovereignty, respect regional countries' efforts for a peaceful and stable South China Sea and stop its attempts to disrupt and sabotage regional peace and stability."

The United States aware that they were the regional hegemon (Ross, 2013). That privilege position is under threat since China has risen as a competitor. These developments from China at the South China Sea have evidently developed into a security dilemma in the Indo-Pacific. Traditionally, United States' presence in the Indo-Pacific is not new. Hawaii became US' possession in 1898, and was incorporated into one of the US' states in 1959 (Scott, 2018). For Washington's policy makers, Hawaii is the gateway to the Indo-Pacific. It is completed with high-end naval technologies. Hawaii is also the house of the US Pacific Command (PACOM), and in May 2018 renamed into US Indo-Pacific Command (IPCOM). Another strategic location for US' military asset is in Guam. Guam has been under possession under Washington's territory since their victory over Spain in 1898. Washington has laid significant military infrastructure in Guam to handle aircraft carriers and B-52 bombers. Guam has become the location of the biennial large-scale *Valiant Shield* exercises and *Cope North* exercises between US and Japanese air forces since 1999 (Scott, 2018). In addition to this, the United States has had one big issue concerning Taiwan to Chinese policy makers. China is still uneasy with Washington's commitment to support Taiwan in selling armaments. The support towards Taiwan is stipulated under the US' Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 (Mastanduno, 2023).

China compelled to make further developments at South China Sea, and building military base there since Beijing is also threatened with the US' alliance with Japan and support over Taiwan. The United States is also tied militarily with South Korea, and personally participated at the Korean War (Masuda & Mattelaer, 2024). However, previous to 2000, China was not considered as a great power. In this instance, Washington is unsettled with China's militarisation since their

commitment to safeguard the security of their alliance could diminish. Nation-states such as Japan, South Korea, Philippines and Taiwan relied heavily to the United States for security. Washington is suspicious over Beijing's intentions at the Indo-Pacific.

It is evident that the international system at the Indo-Pacific is spiralling into security dilemma. The security dilemma has forced a condition where it is inescapable for China and United States to diminish their intensity in the Indo-Pacific.

5. Conclusion

Firstly, both China and US have always been trying to become the regional hegemon in the Indo-Pacific since the end of Cold War. It is exemplified through Chinese actions in taking unilateral possession over Paracel Islands in 1974. While gradually expanding Chinese territory into fortified military base at the South China Sea, including Paracels, Spratlys, Mischief Reef and Scarborough Shoal. The United States also built itself to become the hegemon with military presence in the Indo-Pacific, such as housing the Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) in Hawaii and conducting military exercises with allies in Guam. The US has been a traditionally great power in the Indo-Pacific, and the US military presence in the region should not be underrated. Interestingly, both countries worked together in containing Soviet Union since they feared that the Soviet would become the new regional hegemon in Asia.

China then took over the Soviet's position as a new rising power, and became suspicious over US' intentions in building military ties with Japan and South Korea. The US also began to suspicious over Chinese intentions in building military power from its transfer over tremendous economic growth. Washington wants to be regarded as a reliable guarantor of security and economic partner. The US simply does not want to lose its influence in the Indo-Pacific, and it is proven through the US'

Rebalance to Asia in 2013. It is sensible that security dilemma has occurred on both sides. The two states are suspicious over one another, and it has been spiralling into tight rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. It is currently inescapable that two sides would break down from rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. Secondly, it is likely that China will retake US' domination in the Indo-Pacific. This is due to the geographical proximity of China in the Indo-Pacific combined with economic influence towards wooing neighbouring countries.

The United States' economic influence through partnership is not as solid as China. This is because China has imported much of its goods and services throughout the region. However, there are prescriptive requirements to research and explore in the next journal on Chinese and United States economic influence in the

Indo-Pacific. Moreover, it is also true that China could not be the regional hegemon and dominate the West. The West is dominated by US and its long-time allies. This research has explained that security dilemma has erupted between China and the United States. There is a limitation in projecting the competition in wider aspects between China and United States. This research only takes accounts on the security-diplomatic tightening rivalries between the two countries.

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