

Sovereignty Dynamics In The US-China Geopolitical Conflict In The South China Sea

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ABSTRACT

The South China Sea is a strategic area rich in natural resources and international trade routes, making it a hot spot in global geopolitical conflicts. This research analyzes the dynamics of sovereignty in the geopolitical conflict between the United States (US) and China in the South China Sea. This research uses a qualitative approach with descriptive analysis methods to examine how the two countries utilize their sovereignty claims as a tool to strengthen their respective political and economic positions in the region. The research results show that shifts in the understanding of maritime sovereignty have created significant challenges for regional and global stability, especially in the South China Sea. Different interpretations of sovereignty and maritime rights between major powers such as the United States and China, as well as ASEAN countries, have blurred traditional boundaries and increased regional militarization. This research finds that to overcome the emerging tensions, innovative maritime diplomacy approaches are needed, the development of new conflict resolution mechanisms, and the possibility of redefinition of the concept of sovereignty to be more inclusive and adaptive. This approach is expected to create solutions that maintain a balance between national sovereign rights and global stability, as well as ensuring compliance with international legal principles.

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INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea has become one of the most strategic and challenging areas in global geopolitics, especially in recent years (Hidayat et al, 2024). This region not only has extraordinary economic value because it is rich in natural resources such as oil and gas, but it is also a very important maritime trade route, where around one third of all world sea trade passes through this region (Rosmawandi, 2022). Therefore, the South China Sea is the center of attention of various countries, including the United States (US) and China, which both have great interests in this region.

In the last decade, tensions in the South China Sea have increased along with China's ambitions to expand its influence in this region. China has claimed most of the South China Sea as its own based on the "nine-dash line" which often conflicts with sovereignty claims from other countries in the region, such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei (Laksmi et al, 2022). This claim then sparked a strong response from the United States, which accused China of violating international law and threatening freedom of navigation in this vital region. The US, as the country with the largest military and economic power in the

world, sees China's actions as an attempt to undermine the rules-based international order (Deni & Sahri, 2017).

This conflict became more complex with the military involvement of both countries. The US consistently carries out "freedom of navigation" operations in waters claimed by China, as a form of rejection of territorial claims that are considered illegal (Maksum, 2017). On the other hand, China continues to strengthen its military presence in this region by building artificial islands and military infrastructure, which further worsens the situation. The two countries were also involved in a war of words that further escalated tensions, with harsh rhetoric and mutual accusations of triggering regional instability (Sudira, 2014).

The rivalry between the United States and China in the South China Sea has brought about profound changes in the way sovereignty is understood and implemented in the region. Traditionally, sovereignty is seen as the exclusive right of a country to regulate its territory without interference from outside parties (Bidara et al, 2018). However, amidst this conflict, the concept of sovereignty has become more complex and is often interpreted differently by the various actors involved. For China, claims to the South China Sea are based on historical arguments rooted in the "nine-dash line" that surrounds almost the entire region. China sees this area as an integral part of its territory and, therefore, feels it has the right to regulate and exploit the natural resources within it (Damara et al. 2023).

On the other hand, the United States and its allies consider China's claims as a serious challenge to international law, especially the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which is the basis for determining maritime boundaries between countries (Amaral & Hapsari, 2023). The US believes that maritime sovereignty must follow internationally agreed rules, and any claim that exceeds these provisions is a violation of the international order. For this reason, the US is actively carrying out freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea, which aims to demonstrate that these waters are international property and are free to be traversed by ships from any country (Shafitri et al, 2024).

The new dynamics emerging from this rivalry have challenged the existing international order, especially in terms of law enforcement and norms governing relations between countries. In this context, sovereignty is no longer just a matter of geographical boundaries, but also includes broader strategic, economic and military aspects (Haryanto, 2016). China, with its construction of artificial islands and military installations, seeks to create "facts on the ground" that strengthen its sovereignty claims, while asserting its influence in the region. Meanwhile, the United States, with its dominant military power, is trying to restrain China's expansion and ensure that the South China Sea remains open and free for all countries (Dwiguna & Rpfii, 2019).

The implications of this shift are very significant for regional stability. Countries in Southeast Asia, which are geographically and economically highly dependent on the South China Sea, are in a difficult position. On the one hand, they want to maintain good relations with China as a major economic power, but on the other hand, they also rely on military and diplomatic support from the United States to protect their sovereignty and national interests (Chalid et al., 2016). The increasing tensions in this region have forced these countries to balance their interests amidst the rivalry of the two great powers, which in turn creates new and increasingly complex political dynamics (Djuyandi et al., 2021).

The rivalry between the United States and China in the South China Sea reflects the struggle for dominance over this very strategic area. The South China Sea, as a major trade route and a region rich in natural resources, has great geopolitical value (Waluyo, 2020). For China, control of this region is important to strengthen its position as a major regional power and expand its influence in the Asia-Pacific. Meanwhile, the United States sees its military presence in the South China Sea as an effort to maintain the balance of power in the region and uphold freedom of navigation which is a basic principle of US foreign policy (Ramadhan, 2018).

Geopolitics in the South China Sea is increasingly complicated with the involvement of other countries such as Japan, India and Australia, which also have strategic interests in this region (Fajrina et al, 2020). This rivalry is creating new tensions and alliances, accelerating the arms race in the Asia-Pacific. Apart from that, ASEAN countries in this region must balance their national interests amidst pressure from both parties. This conflict is a symbol of shifting global power and shows how competition between the US and China can affect international stability and security (Nugraha, 2021).

The aim of this research is to understand how sovereignty dynamics in the geopolitical conflict between the United States and China in the South China Sea affect international relations and regional stability. This research is useful for policy makers, academics and international relations practitioners in formulating more effective diplomatic strategies and provides insight into how the competition between these two great powers has an impact on the international legal order and security in the Asia-Pacific region.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative method, which according to Sugiyono (2010), aims to understand social reality by seeing the world as it is, not as it is ideally. This approach allows researchers to get an in-depth and nuanced picture of the phenomenon under study by collecting rich and detailed data through literature studies in journals, books, online sources and so on (Yulianah, 2022). In this context, the research is descriptive, which means the main focus is to describe and explain the dynamics of sovereignty in the geopolitical conflict between the United States and China in the South China Sea in detail. With an open-minded nature, the researcher attempted to accommodate the various views and interpretations that emerged from the research participants, thereby providing a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of how sovereignty is practiced and understood in the context of this conflict.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sovereignty, in the classical Westphalian sense, refers to the supreme authority of a state over its territorial area, which includes complete and exclusive control over all aspects that occur within the state's geographical boundaries. This concept, which emerged from the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, emphasized the importance of sovereign rights as a basis for international stability and interstate relations. In this context, sovereignty is understood as the absolute power of a state over land areas and territorial waters that can be clearly mapped geographically and are recognized internationally.

However, in a maritime context such as the South China Sea, the concept of sovereignty becomes much more complex. The South China Sea is an area involving many overlapping territorial claims from various countries, including China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei. Sovereignty in international waters does not only involve rights to land areas, but also considerations regarding navigation rights, exploration of natural resources, and international law such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In this situation, sovereignty claims often intersect with the principles of freedom of navigation and the rights of other states, which makes classical notions of sovereignty inadequate to deal with the complex dynamics occurring in the South China Sea.

Maritime sovereignty goes beyond mere control of territory; it includes the ability to project power, secure trade routes, and manage natural resources. In a maritime context, sovereignty does not only mean exclusive rights over territorial waters, but also includes influence and control over activities occurring at sea, including international navigation and resource exploitation. Countries with great maritime powers, such as the United States and China, use warships, military bases, and maritime infrastructure to strengthen their claims to sovereignty and project power in strategic waters.

The shift from the classical understanding of sovereignty is becoming increasingly clear in the dynamics of the conflict between the US and China in the South China Sea. China, for example, has built artificial islands and military installations in the region to secure its territorial claims and strengthen its position as a dominant power. This move allows China to control vital trade routes and protect energy supply routes and natural resources. Meanwhile, the United States conducts freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) to assert international navigation rights and limit Chinese expansion, demonstrating how maritime sovereignty is also linked to military capabilities and geopolitical strategy.

China, with its "nine-dash line" claims, has expanded its interpretation of sovereignty far beyond traditional boundaries. These claims, first identified in the 1940s, outline a maritime boundary that covers almost the entire South China Sea, including areas also claimed by neighboring countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei. Based on ancient maps and historical records, Beijing argues that these historical claims give it exclusive rights to large parts of the sea. China sees the "nine-dash line" as a legitimate basis for claiming sovereignty over the waters and resources contained therein, including small islands and coral reefs in the area.

In an effort to support its claims, China has taken various concrete actions, including building artificial islands and military infrastructure in disputed areas. This development not only serves to strengthen China's military presence in the South China Sea but also to claim control over strategic trade routes and natural resources such as oil and gas. Beijing claims that these actions are part of their sovereign rights and are necessary to maintain national security and protect their economic interests in the region.

On the other hand, the United States, although it has no direct territorial claims in the South China Sea, positions itself as the guardian of "freedom of navigation" and the rules-based international order. The US views the South China Sea as a crucial global trade route and is committed to safeguarding international navigation rights regulated by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Within this framework, Washington considers that any attempt to limit access or claim territory in violation of international law

has the potential to undermine the basic principles underlying the global maritime legal system.

The United States is actively engaged in freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea in response to Chinese actions deemed to undermine freedom of navigation. Through these operations, the US seeks to assert the right of military and civilian vessels to traverse waters claimed by China without fear of restriction or intervention. This is part of Washington's strategy to ensure that international waters remain open and accessible to all countries in accordance with recognized international law.

Washington argues that China's actions, such as building artificial islands and strengthening its military in the region, not only violate the rights of other countries but also threaten overall regional stability. The United States is concerned that China's dominance in the South China Sea could create instability, damage the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region, and affect broader international relations. By positioning itself as the guardian of freedom of navigation, the US seeks to limit Chinese expansion and maintain an international order based on globally agreed laws.

The United States' approach in the South China Sea reflects a "broader conception of collective sovereignty," in which sovereignty is not simply understood as a state's exclusive right to its territory, but also involves a responsibility to protect international norms and shared interests. In this view, collective sovereignty emphasizes the importance of collaboration between countries and maintaining agreed rules to maintain global stability and prevent one country from dominating strategic areas that impact many countries. The US, as a global power, feels it has a responsibility to ensure that the principles of international law, such as freedom of navigation and maritime rights, are respected and consistently enforced.

By positioning itself as the guardian of international order, the US seeks to uphold the norms underlying the global legal system, including the right to access and use of international waters. It not only aims to protect its own strategic and economic interests but also to ensure that small and medium-sized countries have fair and unimpeded access to waters of global importance. This approach highlights how great powers, in this case the United States, see sovereignty as a concept involving global responsibility, where maintaining international rules becomes an integral part of their role in maintaining world peace and stability.

This shift in understanding sovereignty has profound implications for regional and global geopolitics. First, it has blurred the boundaries between national sovereignty and international strategic interests. In this context, sovereignty no longer only revolves around exclusive control over physical territory, but also involves broader interests that cross national borders. When major powers such as China and the United States engage in competition over strategic maritime areas, sovereignty claims often overlap with larger international strategic interests, such as securing trade routes and control over natural resources.

This has led to confusion in the definition and practice of sovereignty, as states attempt to balance their national rights with the need to maintain stability and global interests. For example, China's actions in expanding its territorial claims through the construction of artificial islands and military strengthening can be seen as an attempt to

dominate a region that is also vital for other countries and international trade movements. Meanwhile, the US response in maintaining freedom of navigation and international norms shows how collective sovereignty and global interests can interact and influence foreign policy. This shift marks a fundamental change in the way sovereignty is understood and applied in an era of globalization, where traditional boundaries are increasingly blurred and strategic interests often transcend national boundaries.

Second, these changes have driven the militarization of the region in a significant way. China, in an effort to strengthen its claims in the South China Sea, has built and armed artificial islands located in the disputed area. The military infrastructure built includes runways, radar facilities, and air defense systems, which not only strengthen China's military presence in the region but also serve as a strategic point to control the vast waters and natural resources that surround it. This move is part of China's strategy to strengthen regional dominance and project its maritime power more effectively.

On the other hand, the United States has responded by increasing its naval presence in the South China Sea. Through freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) and the deployment of warships and aircraft in the region, the US aims to assert international navigation rights and respond to Chinese actions deemed to threaten regional stability. This increased naval presence also reflects efforts to maintain the balance of power in the region and prevent unilateral domination by one country. The militarization of the region, driven by rivalry between China and the US, shows how changes in understandings of sovereignty can trigger an arms race and increase tensions in a strategic region that is critical to regional and global stability.

Third, the evolution of the concept of sovereignty has influenced broader regional dynamics, especially for ASEAN countries which are in the midst of competition between the United States and China. ASEAN countries, which are located in a highly strategic region and also have territorial claims in the South China Sea, face significant pressure to choose sides or seek balance amid tensions between these two great powers. With increasing militarization and geopolitical rivalry, ASEAN countries are often caught in a complex diplomatic dilemma, where they must navigate their relations with China—as a major economic power and trading partner—while also considering support from the United States that guarantees freedom of navigation and regional stability.

This pressure is pushing ASEAN countries to seek a difficult balance between maintaining economic and strategic ties with China and committing to the principles of international law supported by the United States. Some ASEAN countries may be inclined to support a stronger position against China's territorial claims to protect their own rights in the South China Sea, while others may prefer to strengthen cooperation with the US to ensure security and freedom of navigation. This difficulty in finding the right position shows how the evolution of the concept of sovereignty not only influenced interactions between great powers but also had a profound impact on small and medium-sized states that had to balance their national interests amidst intense geopolitical competition.

Different interpretations of sovereignty and maritime rights have created a highly volatile environment in the South China Sea, where rivalries between major powers such as the United States and China, as well as territorial claims from ASEAN countries, exacerbate tensions in the region. Uncertainty and intense competition often fuel conflict and increase

the risk of regional instability. However, amidst these tensions, there are opportunities for dialogue and negotiation that can help defuse the situation and find mutually beneficial solutions. Some scholars, such as Hayton (2020), propose innovative approaches to resolve these conflicts, including a "shared sovereignty model" that allows the countries involved to share the responsibilities and benefits of contested maritime areas. This model suggests that by integrating the interests and rights of all parties, long-term solutions can be achieved through cooperation and fair sharing of resources. This approach offers the potential to create a new framework that not only reduces tensions but also strengthens regional security and stability by supporting inclusive and pragmatic international legal principles.

The challenge ahead for the international community is to find an effective balance between respecting different interpretations of sovereignty and maintaining regional and global stability. On the one hand, it is important to recognize and respect the legitimate sovereignty claims of each state, which is a fundamental principle of the international system. However, on the other hand, there needs to be a strong mechanism to ensure that these claims do not destabilize the region or undermine the principles of international law that support freedom of navigation and use of the sea. This requires intensive diplomatic efforts, inclusive negotiations, and the development of innovative frameworks to enable countries with competing claims to reach fair and constructive compromises.

This may require innovative approaches to maritime diplomacy, the development of new conflict resolution mechanisms, and perhaps even a redefinition of the concept of sovereignty itself in the 21st century maritime context. In facing complex challenges in the South China Sea and other international waters, maritime diplomacy approaches must go beyond traditional dialogue between countries with competing claims. This approach needs to include multilateral collaboration involving various stakeholders, including countries directly involved as well as third parties who have an interest in maintaining regional stability. Effective maritime diplomacy must be able to bridge differences in interpretations of sovereignty by offering pragmatic solutions that focus on mutual interests and compliance with international law.

The development of new conflict resolution mechanisms is also key in facing this challenge. This mechanism could include a more structured international mediation platform, discussion forums involving all relevant parties, as well as clear procedures for handling maritime disputes. This approach will not only help resolve existing conflicts but also prevent future escalation of tensions by creating more efficient channels of communication and resolution. In addition, conflict resolution mechanisms must be based on existing principles of international law, but with sufficient flexibility to accommodate contemporary dynamics and needs.

Finally, there may be a need for a redefinition of the concept of sovereignty itself in the 21st century maritime context. With the increasing complexity of interactions between states and the global impact of national actions, maritime sovereignty can no longer be understood only in terms of rigid traditional boundaries. Instead, there must be a more dynamic understanding that includes aspects such as environmental sustainability, international access rights, and regional cooperation. This redefinition will help create a more inclusive and adaptive framework, one that not only accommodates individual

countries' interests but also supports global balance and security. In this way, the concept of sovereignty can be integrated with modern principles that support international peace and stability in an era of ever-growing globalization.

CONCLUSION

Shifts in the understanding of sovereignty, especially in the maritime context, have created major challenges for regional and global stability. Tensions in the South China Sea, involving rivalry between the United States and China and the territorial claims of ASEAN countries, show how different interpretations of sovereignty and maritime rights can blur traditional boundaries and fuel regional militarization. In the midst of this competition, efforts to respect different sovereignty claims while maintaining international stability are becoming increasingly complex, requiring innovative maritime diplomacy approaches and effective conflict resolution mechanisms. To overcome this challenge, an approach that includes multilateral collaboration and the development of settlement mechanisms is needed. new disputes, as well as the possibility of redefinition of the concept of sovereignty in the maritime context of the 21st century. More inclusive and adaptive diplomacy, involving all relevant parties and focusing on shared interests, will be critical to creating just and sustainable solutions. By doing this, the international community can strike a balance between respecting national sovereign rights and maintaining global stability, ensuring that the principles of international law remain upheld amidst the complexities of modern geopolitical dynamics.

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