

# Chinese strategies and American policies in the South China Sea

A qualitative study of a geopolitical conflict  
based on neorealistic theory

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## ABSTRACT

The tense situation over the territorial conflict in the South China Sea has intensified in recent years with China's increased military presence and actions. This has contributed to increased concern among the ASEAN states in the region. It has also affected the United States's security policy on how to relate to China as an international power. The main objective of this study is to examine the political goals and strategies of its military presence that China and the US have in the SCS and how these are reflected in the relevant scientific literature. Within the framework of the theory of international relations, this paper is based on the perspective of neorealism in order to explain China's and the US position to each other within the scope of the SCS conflict. By using qualitative discourse analysis, I have been able to identify significant discourses in how scholars in the social sciences view the conflict in the SCS based on China's interests and the US's position. This study found that the discourses on China's military escalation in the SCS could be divided into two directions of neorealism, the defensive and the offensive, where the former affirms the pursuit of national security and economic stability, while the latter affirms the pursuit of increased hegemonic power and national sovereignty. The US policy in the SCS is to preserve its unipolar role as a superpower with the intention of maintaining security and stability with its allies in the region by limiting China's military power influence.

**Keywords:** South China Sea, conflict, China, United States, qualitative discourse analysis, neorealism, military

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## ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN:	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CCP:	China's / Chinese Communist Party
CDA:	Critical Discourse Analysis
DA:	Discourse Analysis
ECS:	East China Sea
FONOP:	Freedom of Navigation Operations
IR:	International Relations
NATO:	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
QDA:	Qualitative Discourse Analysis
SCS:	South China Sea
UN:	United Nations
UNCLOS:	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
US:	United States

# **1. Introduction**

The topic discussed in this thesis revolves around the security positions of the great powers China and the United States (US) and the goals of the increasingly tense situation around the territorially disputed and security-infected region around the South China Sea (SCS). This study is based on empirical data from primarily qualitative social science studies concerning the power countries' influence, position, interests and relation to each other in the SCS region. By using qualitative discourse analysis (QDA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA), I aim to deepen my insights into the conflict around the SCS from the perspective of the major actors and try to find out their future plans and strategies for how they address the territorial disputed region based on an international relations theory framework of neorealism and its branches.

My personal motivation for choosing this topic for the thesis is based on my strong interest in world politics in general, and the growing rivalry between China and the US in particular. I myself have visited the US several times, and lived in China for 8 months, and therefore have good experiences of these two countries. Since this program covers the field of Asian studies, it is of course reasonable to direct my geographical focus to a conflict area in this continent. Additionally, I would be interested to find out how the strategic interests around these two countries, especially China, are discussed and how the discourses presented in the literature can be analyzed and put into contexts around a selected theoretical framework.

## **1.1 Background**

The real background to the territorial conflict in the SCS goes far back in history. However, in order to focus more closely on contemporary times, the conflict has intensified since the 1970s when large oil and gas deposits in addition to fishing resources, especially in the area around the Spratly Islands, became the subject of increasingly intense demands between the adjacent countries, where China has dominated its presence. Although the conflict in the SCS is directly and fundamentally about a conflict manifestation between China and its relationship with



the ASEAN countries, the extent and impact on global affairs will be an issue that does not overlook American intervention (Weissmann 2015, p. 601). The US, as well as the neighboring ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries, awareness of China's increased presence in the SCS is confirmed by new satellite images showing Chinese initiatives for the construction of new artificial islands, physical expansion of existing islands, construction of ports, runways and military installations such as fighter jets, cruise missiles and radar systems. In the area around the SCS, the US also has important security policy and economic interests. Some of the US actions to respond to the rearmament of China have resulted in increased support and cooperation with the most affected ASEAN countries, mainly the Philippines, as well as increased implementation of freedom of navigation (FONOPs) in the area (Blackwill et al. 2022).

## **1.2 Mapping out the SCS**

The SCS is a large marginal sea located between the Indian Ocean in the west and the Pacific Ocean in the east, with an area of about 3,500,000 km<sup>2</sup>. What has mainly been the subject of territorial disputes among the surrounding states includes the many reefs, islands and archipelagos such as the Spratly Islands and the Paracel Islands. Distinctive claims between the countries are about access and the right to utilize the important natural resources such as the fishing industry, exploration of crude oil and natural gas, as well as access to important shipping lanes. Trade via cargo ships passing SCS is estimated at about one third of global maritime trade. The Spratly Islands and the Paracel Islands are considered two of the most important strategic territorial outposts in the SCS and have both historically been used as important naval bases for during previous wars and conflicts in the region. In recent years, however, China has increasingly claimed these islands by trying to establish new military facilities for the navy and as air bases. This is despite the fact that several islands are claimed by Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei. It is in particular the increased Chinese presence in the area that in recent years has given rise to increased concern among the other countries. In addition to these countries, there is also a significant US military presence in the form of both aircraft carriers and other naval units, which further strengthens the geopolitical dispute in the region. For maps of the

South China Sea, see *Appendix 1 and 2*.

### **1.3 Research questions**

With this brief background and basic insight into the territorial conflict / dispute surrounding the most directly affected parties in the SCS, my main focus will be on the political goals and strategies of its military presence that China and the US have in this region. The majority of that study will cover China's role and strategic interests in the region, and a small portion will address US policy toward China. I would like to emphasize that this seemingly broad and comprehensive purpose and topic is primarily intended to contribute to increased interest among both researchers and the general public, and therefore not to try to find decisive answers or explanations to the questions asked. I have chosen to divide the study into two main questions. My research questions are as follows:

1. What are China's strategic goals and interests in SCS, and how are they presented in scientific articles?

In order to answer this question, I will select a wide range of articles from scholars with different backgrounds and ideological positions on China's security policy and its relations with primarily the US. In this way, based on discursive analysis, I can interpret and analyze their view of how China acts in SCS with relevance to the theoretical framework IR, and more in-depth neorealism and its branches. By identifying relevant discourses linked to the theories, the next step is to try to create an overall picture of the different strategies China refers to in its military activities in SCS.

2. What is the US's policy against China in SCS, and how is it presented in the scientific articles?

These two questions will form the basis of the purpose of this study. This is followed

by detailed comparisons and analyzes of the answers given in the empirical findings and analysis chapter, in order to integrate the two countries' different purposes in the SCS into a larger perspective within the framework of international relations theories. Both questions will be answered and analyzed separately and then compiled into a conclusion in the final part of the thesis.

#### **1.4 Significance and academic contribution**

There is a wealth of academic literature linked to both the conflict itself over the SCS and China's strategic goals and interests and the US's policy against China and with its presence around the SCS marine area and its disputed islands. However, there is reason to try to study this topic more closely in order to see with discursive methods how the two countries' strategic stance in the SCS affects the political and military relations between the two. An important reason for the significance of this subject is the increasingly escalated and strained security situation between the world powers, not only between the US and China in the SCS and Taiwan, but also between Russia and NATO concerning the ongoing war in Ukraine. As world politics and international relations constitute an extensive academic spectrum, this thesis will be limited to clearly analyzing and discussing the most important aspects concerning China's and the US's position and relationship to each other based on its common military presence in the SCS. The idea is that the findings presented will contribute to greater interest and attention among both scholars and others to study more deeply about how the relationship between the world's great powers will develop and its potential to change the current balance of power and world order.

#### **1.5 Outline of the thesis**

The premise of the study has now been established in this introductory chapter, and the rest of the thesis will thus proceed as follows: The second chapter will provide an engagement with previous academic literature with different discursive perspectives concerning the conflict in the SCS, as well as an in-depth background studies on contemporary China - US political relations. The third chapter will introduce the conceptualisation and theoretical framework of the thesis which will mainly focus on

international theories and conflict related frameworks because this study covers over a broad field of international policies. In the fourth chapter I will go through the main methodological approaches such as data collection and research and analytical design etc .. The fifth chapter will be the most comprehensive chapter where the empirical findings and analysis of the data will be discussed. The concluding sixth chapter will be a conclusion of the most important findings for this study.

## **2. Literature Review**

This chapter aims to highlight interesting literature on the study of the territorial conflict in the SCS Region and what findings and conclusions have previously been done, as well as how this conflict and its involved actors have been framed in the social literature. In addition, I will focus on two of the most important actors in the SCS conflict, China and its political relations with the US. The policies and goals of these two countries within the SCS region will then be studied in more depth in the section of empirical findings and analysis. Since the topic covers a wide range of literature, I will specifically focus on reviewing literature with a contemporary timeframe, from the year 2000 to present. The relevant existing literature has to be critically mapped out in order to provide a context as well as illustrating why this thesis topic is worthwhile studying. I will start to address a number of common discourse descriptions of the SCS conflict in the social science literature, and then continue with an in-depth background approach on the contemporary political China - US relations, to provide important insights on China's and the US's attitude to the conflict around the SCS.

### **2.1 Discourse findings of the SCS conflict**

In this section, I will address a number of different background perspectives on how the conflict in SCS is reflected in the scientific literature.

#### *2.1.1 Avoidance of military confrontation: Diplomacy and multilateral cooperation*

There is a wealth of research and literature on the SCS conflicts covering different perspectives. One discourse on the SCS conflict points to a development that for many years has managed to avoid military confrontation among the actors involved. Despite speculation about the serious situation from mainly US policy analysts, military confrontation in the region has been avoided. The reason for this can be linked to two interconnected categories of processes, elite interactions and regionalization. The former combines progress through diplomacy and personal networks, while the latter is linked to the positive effects of combined forces of Sino-ASEAN approachment and economic integration and interdependence. In the latter

process, China has played a particularly prominent role (Weissmann 2010, pp. 64-67). The discourse of seeking to prevent military confrontations and maintain peaceful instruments, through primarily diplomacy, is a frequently discussed approach to the territorial SCS conflict among scholars. This diplomacy is based on the implementation of bilateral or multilateral cooperation and agreements. Problems arise if different economic and security policy interests of the various actors collide, with China and the US together with ASEAN playing key roles in this region. If the diplomatic orientation fails, the alternative will increase the risk for the states involved to build up their military capabilities to assert their rights by force. This will in the long run worsen the security situation and instead lead to military confrontation (Sheldon 2012, pp. 1011-1015). Since the ASEAN member states, where four of these claim a number of islands and maritime areas in the SCS, cannot measure up to the capacity of the Chinese navy, the diplomatic line to unity becomes particularly important. However, the diplomatic benefits will not be fully utilized as the ability of the ASEAN countries concerned to unite their foreign relations with each other. This further strengthens China's position at the diplomatic level and thus gains greater influence in the region. To withstand China's increasing pressure, it is recommended that the ASEAN states that stable conflict management should be the objective of ASEAN's conference diplomacy (Sato 2013, pp 106-108).

### *2.1.2 Potential risk of military confrontation: Strategic purposes vs. security policies*

Although the diplomatic orientation played a key factor in the stability of the region around the SCS, it has not been able to resolve the fact that the conflict over disputed territories remains. Therefore, another discourse seeks to focus on the political power struggle between China's strategic methods of seeking to reclaim "lost territories" as part of China's quest for greater national sovereignty, as opposed to the US's pursuit of security and stability in the region through peaceful policy instruments. As part of both China's and the US's dispute, there is an interest in gaining an alliance with the ASEAN states, especially Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia, which are geographically at the center of the disputed region. Despite maintaining diplomacy and negotiating security guarantees within the SCS region, the discursive power ideological differences remain a barrier to excluding military confrontation (Lee Lai

To 2003, pp 36-38). Another discourse which is further based on the framework of states' purpose to claim their sovereignty in territorial conflict areas with strategic tools. From a theoretical point of view, frameworks assume that states have the opportunity to use three types of strategies in a territorial dispute: threats or use of force; offer territorial concessions; or delay. However, there is reason not to limit these three strategies to conceptualization of the framework, but should be constructed and allow for more nuance (Taffer 2015).

### *2.1.3 Changing power distribution and conflict management*

Like many discursive analyzes of the SCS territorial disputes, the US is one of the main key players in both rivalry with China and as a pillar of support for many of the Southeast Asian countries. However, there are conclusions that point to a decline of US presence and alliance support to the ASEAN countries, along with the tense situation in SCS due to an unequal distribution of power in the region, in favor of China's increased military presence. Like Weismann's (2010, pp. 64-67) argue that cooperation through economic integration and interdependence, Emmers (2009, pp. 17-18) argues that the key concepts of peace and stability in the region need to be maintained and strengthened through joint exploration and development of resources, especially between China and the surrounding the countries of Vietnam and the Philippines. However, a joint exploration and development scheme would need to be preceded by the negotiation of a framework that freezes existing territorial claims and constitutes a binding code of conduct regulating regional inter-state relations and managing existing or potential disputes. The discourse on the changing balance of power in the SCS is supported by other analyzes which indicate that the ASEAN states' way of handling the conflict process with China has resulted in increased tensions in the area, rather than mitigating the situation. Thus, China has taken advantage of ASEAN efforts to develop a code of conduct that is premised on the ASEAN way of conflict management (Majumdar 2015).

### *2.1.4 Reviewed discourse conclusions*

From what has emerged from this literature review, there are a number of different approaches to how the SCS conflict is approached within the framework of discourse analyzes. In my compilation, there are three types of discourses, the first of which deals with how the parties involved have been able to maintain stability and prevent military confrontation through diplomatic instruments and international cooperation and agreements (e.g., Weissmann 2010; Sheldon 2012; Sato 2013). In contrast to this more "positive" discursive view of the SCS situation, the growing tension in the region is due to a growing political power struggle between China's strategic goal of increased influence and sovereignty, against the US and ASEAN countries' pursuit of security and national freedom. In other words, a political ideological rivalry with different interests (e.g., Lee Lai Too 2003; Taffer 2015). The third discourse depicts the conflict as part of a changing distribution of power within the region where China strengthens its power at the expense of the ASEAN countries' British ability for foreign policy unity and way of conflict management (e.g., Emmers 2009; Majumdar 2015).

The mentioned discourses thus provide a general background with different perspectives on how the conflict in the SCS develops and the underlying causes. These discourses provide important conditions for the approach of analysis on China's and US's policy stance and goal in the SCS region. I will now address some general reviews on contemporary China - US political relations.

## **2.2 China - US political relations**

Relations between China and the US have undergone many changes since the days of the Cold War, and in connection with China's economic upswing, however, ties between the two countries have become ever stronger. This trend seems to have gone in the opposite direction in the 2010s, in connection with deteriorating bilateral relations and cooperation in a number of social disciplines such as increased geostrategic and ideological special interests, economic and trade conflicts, and increased intentions for security tensions, not least China's escalated military presence around Taiwan and the SCS. This has led security analysts and observers from both countries to warn that the situation may in the long run lead to a long-term, full-scale



confrontation. Wang & Hu (2019) argues that this tense situation will most likely not be reversed without a vigorous effort to change the focus of the countries' foreign policy. What could possibly prevent a military confrontation is based on the Chinese proverb "Fighting without breaking".

With regard to the declining relationship between China and the US, which came to be strengthened in the mid-2010s, links between economic issues and security policy issues are presented as a particularly contributing factor. Foot & King 2019 (pp. 39-50) identifies two main strands of this connection: the first one points to China's progress in developing and utilizing new technology that has significant commercial and military value; the second strand relates to legal and economic instruments that the US government has adopted in the wake of China's commercial interest to prosecute its wider strategic competition. The reason for China's successful progress in innovation and technology, Foot & King claims, is due to the Trump administration's failure to realize that the US is now more than ever dependent on close cooperation with China. Instead, Trump's increased demands and tone towards China have led to a collision course for president Xi Jinping's strategies for Chinese expansion. The conflict in technology and innovation for military ambitions can in the long run be seen as a security policy threat, which can greatly jeopardize the security around the SCS.

Issues related to technology and innovation are just examples of the generally deteriorating relationship between China and the US. The structural world order also risks changing, and allows for far-reaching consequences and where the bipolar system between these great powers in many respects both resembles and distinguishes the American-Soviet bipolarity during the Cold War. Maher 2018 (pp. 498, 523-525) uses the term bipolarity to illustrate the rivalry between two dominant powers, where bipolarity can be characterized by both cooperation and competition between these states. Where common interests such as economic development force the great powers to cooperate, differences in political ideology mean the pursuit of increased power needs and claims to influence over new domains. This gives implications to

say the new period of bipolarity, with China as competitor to the US, will be filled with various risks and uncertainties (Maher 2018, p. 525).

The consistently complicated relationship and problems of finding constructive paths of cooperation between China and the US are not only found in security and economic issues, but practical dilemmas can also be linked to different values and doctrines. Factors such as these are particularly important for states' ways of acting around conflict and security policy, which well reflects the current situation in the SCS. For example, the differing views on human rights generate institutional opposition between the two countries, which in turn has contributed to prejudice and hostility between Western liberal democracy and the socialist system with totalitarian characteristics. For example, the differing views on human rights generate institutional opposition between the two countries, which in turn has contributed to prejudice and hostility between Western liberal democracy and the totalitarian socialist system. With this insight, Liu 2020 (p. 452) emphasizes the importance of global leadership and its political attitude and governance, which during Donald Trump's presidency has led to less American international responsibility and obligations in, for example, security cooperation with its allies. At the same time, Xi Jinping's government has unhindered its positions, not only militarily, but also played a more active role in international communities and organizations. Another example is the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, where China has succeeded well in keeping the spread of infection and the consequences it entails. It is differences in global leadership that have indirectly opened up new opportunities for China to expand its influence, not least in its immediate territorial area. There are implications like these that point to the US handing over its global leadership to China (Liu 2020, pp. 448-452).

The social science discourses on the conflict over the SCS and the underlying political relations between China and the US reported in this chapter suggest that there are good reasons to study the deeper conflict over the SCS and in particular China's and US attitudes in this geographical area. As for the complicated situation regarding the SCS, according to the literature (Wang & Hu (2019); Foot & King 2019; Maher 2018;

Liu 2020), there are clear tendencies towards deteriorating relations in a variety of disciplines between China and the US, which in turn indicates an increasingly strained security situation for the stakeholders within the SCS, where the ASEAN countries risk being at the center of a military confrontation between the two superpowers.

The growing military escalation around the SCS in recent years should be seen as an important theoretical approach to how the rivalry between China and the US may be further intensified and establish the possibility that the conflict will turn into a military confrontation. However, there are also analysts who believe that the development of the relationship between these two countries can take place in the direction of peace, yet that the development can go in both directions, depending on which theoretical strand (realism, liberalism, and constructivism) is used. But it is also conceivable that the future will be shaped by a fusion of different forces, some mutually reinforcing and others opposing (Friedberg 2005).

In the next chapter I will introduce the theoretical approach to this thesis.

### **3. Theoretical Framework and Conceptualisation**

What follows in this chapter is a discussion of the concept of *international relations* with the focus on perspectives of *neorealism* well utilised in this thesis. The theoretical conception of neorealism will break down into suborientated theories such as the *defensive* and *offensive* branches, followed by the notion of *security dilemma* theory and finally the *balance of power* and *balance of threat* theory. These theories are important for describing and analyzing the political relations between the two countries and can be used as support for how states act on the basis of their own interests, identities or as a basis for how the structural world order works.

All these theoretical perspectives and their connections to international relations and security and power political disciplines will be included as a basis for the study's topic and purpose.

#### **3.1 International relations theories (overview)**

International relations theories is a broad social science discipline that addresses the study of international relations (IR) from a theoretical perspective. One of its main purposes is to try to explain causal and constitutive effects in international politics. The main schools of thought in IR are realism, liberalism and constructivism (Snyder 2004, p. 52). Since this thesis focuses on the study of IR from a power and conflict policy perspective, I believe that realism and in particular the branch of neorealism is most appropriate. It is on the basis of this theoretical framework that the study of the relationship between China and the US will primarily be referred to.

An early view of the theoretical scholarship orientation of IR was about how the need for the balance of power system during the interwar years would be replaced by a system that would instead focus on collective security, so-called "idealists" (Burchill & Linklater 2005, p. 6). This system of change in the discipline of IR theories studies is contradicted by Long & Schmidt 2005, who instead gives a revisionist account of the origin of IR as a social policy theory, and claims that this field of study has its roots in late 19th century imperialism and internationalism. This revisionist account is

based on the argument that IR before the First World War existed in the form of colonial administration and racial science.

The political interactions that IR represents at the global level include what are commonly referred to as "global players", which includes not only nations (states), but also organizations (international and non-governmental) and large transnational corporations. The complex concept of definition within IR is not only about international politics, however Rittberger 2004 (p. 1) also emphasizes the importance of foreign policy. Unlike the more or less structured interaction of international politics between international actors, foreign policy is based on an international actor's efforts to satisfy and protect its own interests and values outside its own borders.

### **3.2 Neorealism**

The conflict and the infected relationship between China and the US in the SCS signal a power struggle between two different political ideologies striving to meet their own interests and goals. This power rivalry has significant connections to the theory of neorealism (also called structural realism), which is a branch of the wider concept IR theories. This theory focuses on the role of power politics where conflict and competition are particularly dominant features and regards cooperation and mutual interests between international actors as very limited. One of the state's most important interests is to safeguard its own security and thus survival. In this way, this international system presupposes an anarchist state in which states are forced to engage in power politics in order to defend their own security and arouse suspicion against the possible hostile intentions of other states (Jervis 1999, pp. 42-63). Within the framework of neorealism, there are two main strands of theoretical perspectives; *defensive neorealism* and *offensive realism*.

#### *3.2.1 Defensive neorealism vs. offensive neorealism*

Since the basic principle of neorealism is based on an anarchist ordering principle where states' 'distribution of capacity is independent of each other, Waltz (1979) argues that states' primary interest is to ensure their own survival by maintaining moderate and reserved policies in order to strive for maximum security. This defensive orientation of realism contrasts with Mearsheimer's (1995) view that the anarchist system of order is decentralized in the sense that there is no formal central authority, meaning that every sovereign state is formally equal in this system. Therefore, Mearsheimer points out that a state's survival is not just about maximizing its capable security, but that states are forced to act on the basis of their own interests in order to strengthen their capacity vis-à-vis others. The drive to preserve its existence forces the state to increase its relative power by developing offensive military capabilities to encounter foreign interventionism. This in turn forces other states to do the same to ensure their survival. This mutually escalated military readiness and capacity among states generates uncertainty in the form of the so-called *security dilemma* (Rosato 2021; Mearsheimer 1995). Hence, the security dilemma arises as a result of the balance of power that results from each state's efforts to maximize its relative power over other states. Regarding the distribution of power within the international system, Waltz (1979, pp. 132-133) points out that neorealism presupposes three possible alternatives to global superpowers: a unipolar system with only one superpower; a bipolar system with two great powers; and a multipolar system with more than two great powers. From a security perspective, a bipolar system is considered to be the least risky for war, since the balance of power can only take place through internal balancing, since there are no alternatives to entering into an alliance with another major power.

The defensive and offensive branches in neorealism both agree that it is the foundation of the international structure that triggers states to compete with each other, since states' primary interests are to be autonomous. However, it is the view of survival that distinguishes them. While Waltz aims for states' primary interest in survival to maximize their defense capabilities for defense purposes, Mearsheimer goes a step further and points out that states' ability to survive is linked to maximizing their position of power. Since all states theoretically strive for maximum power, this embarrasses in a balancing act and security dilemma (Mearsheimer 2001). When it

comes to security dilemmas, it is interesting based on the situation that takes place between China and the US in the SCS.

### *3.2.2 Security dilemma*

The concept of security dilemma as a branch of IR theory was first coined in the 1950s by John H. Herz, and has since been discussed among social scientists and developed various reasoning. The key issue is to explain how states seek to increase their security by gaining military strength where consequences may end up in military conflict that generates an outcome no actor truly desires (Herz 1950; Jervis 1978; Snyder 1984). In other words, the security dilemma can psychologically be said deeply rooted in a state's subconscious of suspicion towards other states.

Although the concept of security dilemma as a consequence of the structure of the anarchic world order is shared by both defensive and offensive neorealist scholars, there are some differences in how it is interpreted. Offensive neorealists, such as Mearsheimer, claim that states' pursuit of their own security is governed by a behavioral pattern in which suspicion of other states forces a state to maximize its power in order not to be conquered and thus lose its existence. Therefore, the security dilemma is inevitable. Defensive neorealists, such as Waltz, instead claim that security dilemmas do not have to be inevitable because states try to find a balance of power against each other and form alliances in an effort to preserve their existence (Walt 1998, pp. 31-32).

When it comes to the underlying causes of the security dilemma and the way in which it arises, there are disputes among IR scholars. Constructivist IR scholars, such as Wendt, argue that security dilemma is not the result of an anarchistically structured world order, but that it is the effect of a socially structured world order composed of intersubjective understandings between states (Wendt 1992). This claim is shared by Mitzen, who argues that security dilemmas may arise in the wake of states' pursuit of ontological security instead of rationalistic security seeking (Mitzen 2016).

### *3.2.3 Balance of power and balance of threat*

According to the defensive neorealist orientation, when states can secure their survival by preventing other states from acquiring too much military power to dominate other states, a so-called balance of power arises within the structure of the international system. According to this theory, a state with high power could gain advantages over weaker states, and thereby strive to unite in a defensive coalition. According to Kegley & Wittkopf (2005, p. 503) conflicting views as to whether a system of balance of power would be more stable and secure compared to a system of a dominant state, since there is disagreement about the claim that aggression would be unprofitable when there is a balance of power between rival coalitions. In practice, this view would mean that a balance of power between China and the US would not encourage going to war with each other, as it would not be justified for reasons of profitability.

Contrary to the perception of defensive realists that balance of power contributes to increased security by states being part of a coalition, Mearsheimer claims (2010, p. 83) that offensive realists see that the inefficiency of this system contributes to opportunities for other states to take advantage of their rival states. In addition, Mearsheimer points out that there are limitations in a state's capacity to increase its defense budget and military arsenal strong enough to withstand a possible attacking state (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 157).

Another interesting theoretical perspective in the disciplines of neorealism is Stephen M. Walt's idea that states balance against threats, rather than power, i.e. balance of threat (Walt 1987, p. 5). Power is an important factor in states' propensity to achieve a balanced balance with other states. However, there are several other factors that contribute to threats posed by states, such as geographical proximity, offensive capability and perceived intentions (Walt 2002, p. 134). The theory of balance of threat is supported by the defensive realist Kenneth Waltz, who points out that it is interesting as an important complement within the concept of balance of power. He further adds that theories cannot be generalized without deviations, ie that theories at one level of generality cannot provide answers to questions about things at another level of generality (Waltz 1979, p. 121). Walt's theory of balance of threat makes it



possible to indirectly explain or predict potential threats that a state will most likely be balancing against.

With this theoretical approach as a framework, I will in the next chapter go through the essential methodological approach that will be used through the data collection and analysis to address the research questions.

## **4. Methodological Approach**

In this chapter I will present the chosen research design, a discussion of the study's ontological and epistemological positioning, what methods of data collection are adopted, the analytical methods, followed by the thesis' limitations, ethical considerations and reflexivity.

### **4.1 Research design**

The natural starting point in this study is that it represents a qualitative, descriptive and inductive approach to the purpose of the subject studied. This in turn creates the conditions for which choice of research design and approach is most suitable.

The choice of research design and research methods is of the utmost importance for the credibility of a research study and its implementation. Since the empirical material mainly consists of narrative theories focusing on various societal disciplines, I believe that discourse analysis is an appropriate methodological approach. Qualitative discourse analysis is a common analytical method, and is particularly suitable for understanding and explaining studies that concern socio-political and similar disciplines. This method is suitable for studying and analyzing international conflict relations such as the territorial disputes regarding the SCS, and should be seen as part of motivated opinions and alternative courses of action that should be applied to resolve political conflicts (Johnson & Johnson 2000, p. 291). From a research methodological perspective, the conflict over the SCS can be integrated within the framework of case studies. Although The SCS conflict is included as an empirical case in international conflict relations, it is important to emphasize that it can not automatically be representative but instead be intended to provide limited explanations of individual cases or phenomena, they are often intended for theoretical insights into the characteristics in a wider population (Seawright & Gerring 2014, pp. 294-208). The active choice to adopt a qualitative research approach and methods for this study leads to a discussion about ontological and epistemological positioning of the different approaches. In the next section, I will explain and reason about why the qualitative focus on how the empirical data is addressed for this study.

## 4.2 Ontological and epistemological positioning

When it comes to the ontological and epistemological positions of research design main approaches, qualitative or quantitative, both represent significant impacts of the type of study being conducted. Bryman (2016, p. 33) points out that qualitative research identifies the social reality as where individuals' characteristics and societal structures are constantly changing. Quantitative research, on the other hand, he argues that it embodies the view of social reality from an objective reality.

Since the purpose and the included research question for this study are based on finding out and reflecting on the goals and interests of China respectively the US in the growing territorial dispute of SCS, there are a variety of ontological and epistemological schools of thought that reflect on. Epistemic relativism fits well into this study, as it claims that although there are relative facts about truth, rationality, justification, etc., there is no perspective-independent fact in the matter (Boghossian 2006, pp. 35-37). This, in turn, can serve as a basis for explaining the claim of the countries involved to territory on the basis of their own interests.

As a researcher perspective, however, there are implications that interpretivist epistemological positioning would be appropriate because it helps the researcher to, by studying narrative data and through examination, gain an understanding of the social world. This means that the empirical data and findings about the territorial conflict on the SCS should not be seen as a value-free set of facts that lead to knowledge of the objective and ultimate truth (Bryman 2016, pp. 26, 375).

While epistemology is of great importance and represents the understanding of what constitutes knowledge and in qualitative research, the ontological point of view invites the researcher to consider the nature of social phenomena (Bryman 2016, p. 4). To follow Bryman's reasoning for the case of study in this thesis, I suggest that constructivist ontology is a suitable standpoint since it implies that reality around us is understood, shaped och revised through social properties or social interactions since territorial disputes arise through socio-political and ideological conflicts.

### **4.3 Data collection methods**

The data collection and the approach it is performed are of significant importance for credibility and its relevant to the outreach for the purpose of the study and the analysis of processed data to provide answers to the research questions sought.

#### *4.3.1 Review and analysis of scientific articles*

When it comes to the approach to how to collect data practically for this specific thesis, a significant part will be based on literature reviews and analysis, which means that qualitative data is collected through analysis and discussion of scientific literature (books, and digital sources), documents, articles and reports. Since a master's thesis forms the basis for demonstration in research thinking and doing, Hart 1998 (pp. 14-19) argues that analysis of scientific articles as a methodology means opportunities for independent and critical thinking for how a student approaches the empirical material in order to answer the research question. As a researcher, it is also important to provide sufficient arguments that can be justified based on previous research. From a methodological point of view, this is important because the choice of method for data collection can have a substitutional significance for the arguments presented, such as both qualitative and quantitative data and findings on the causes behind the conflict - related developments in the SCS and the actions and positional attitudes of the countries involved.

Using scientific material such as documents and articles can be perceived as effective and convenient because the research material being studied is already available. Since the majority of the collected data consists of secondary data, Ainsworth (2021) points out that this method of data collection requires more critical thinking on the part of the researcher because he or she handles data that may contain factual errors, manipulated or incomplete information. Therefore, it becomes particularly important to select data with high reliability and credibility, such as recognized researchers and studies concerning China's and US's involvement of the territorial conflict in the SCS region.

Since this study will not be conducted through field studies where primary data is collected through various methods such as interview views and observation and my own research, I have chosen to implement this thesis using data collection methods in the form of secondary data. Another motive for the choice of data collection method is based on the fact that other methods of data such as interviews or observations through fieldwork had not significantly added anything valuable in that the purpose and structure of the subject is too general and does not directly affect any specific person or groups of people in society. Therefore, I believe that data collection through secondary data and with the help of discourse analysis is the method that most suitably adapts to this study.

#### *4.3.2 Data collection and analysis procedure*

In order to address the main purposes of the research questions for this thesis in a structured and systematic approach, I have prepared a template of this procedure. In order to achieve useful empirical data, I have largely used the search engine on Google Scholar by searching for scientific articles and reports with relevance based on the topic of the conflict in the SCS and China's strategies and interests with these military presence and actions in that area. I have done similar procedure for with the American part, but to a lesser extent. As extra data material, I have via Youtube search for clips with oral statements and discussions from scholars who are well versed in this topic. In connection with searching for revelatory discourses on this subject, I have focused a lot on starting from a theoretical framework based on international relations and the concept of neorealism (a modified branch of realism) and its main tracks defensive and offensive neorealism. In addition, I have added reasoning about side tracks such as the security dilemma and the power of balance. By studying the arguments and angles of approach that various scholars report on my issues, I conduct a discourse analysis of the material to connect these arguments to different discourses within the framework of the neorealist disciplines. My main focus is not which these scholars are in terms of their background, gender, age, etc., but instead it is the arguments in their discourses that are important, ie to analyze which arguments can be related to the different theoretical orientations.

#### 4.4 Qualitative Discourse Analysis

Because the thesis is inductive in nature, one particular analytical tool that is suitable for this kind of study is, as previously mentioned, *qualitative discourse analysis (QDA)* or just *discourse analysis (DA)*. QDA has both a theoretical and methodological aspect. During the data collection, scientific literature with a wide spread of discourses was implemented, but for the analysis of the data however, analytical tools within QDA is used. QDA is about studying and analyzing the uses of language. Since the method is applied in several different social science disciplines, there are different approaches on how discourse analysis is used as an analytical tool, of which *critical discourse analysis (CDA)* is one of the most common (more about CDA later). CDA contributes with the idea of examining segments, or frames of communication, and using this to understand and develop a meaning and a "meta" level, instead of only at the level of actual semantic meaning (Hodges et al. 2008, pp. 570-572). Because this study is based on reviewing data on international relations and conflicts which falls under the field of social sciences, which is a common discipline for the application of QDA, and is well suited based on the type of literature being studied.

The application of discourse analysis as part of power theories in political science is well established. The power that China and the US possess and exercise in the SCS can draw theoretical parallels to T. Hobbes's view that power is equal to the ability to influence, limit or control human behavior (Pedersen 2009, p. 8). This would mean that China and the US use their political and military power to influence and control both their opponents and their allies in order to achieve their own interests. This theoretical view of the practical use of power goes against Foucault's idea that power is rooted in what is taken for granted. In other words, power is not only the ability to influence the behavior of others, but that power is found embedded in both individual and collective identities and for the underlying conditions of interests, expectations and interpretations to be understood as rational. The relationship between A and B as power determines productivity (Foucault 1969). This view suggests that it is the relationship between China's preferences and the US's preferences that generates the productive effects of power.

#### *4.4.1 Critical discourse analysis (CDA)*

One major application of discourse analysis that goes deeper into this study is the critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA can be seen as a nuanced form of QDA, which emphasizes the critical aspect of its analytical method. One of the main proponents of the CDA, Fairclough (1995), argues that language should be analyzed as a social practice through the lens of discourse in both speech and writing. In addition, he further develops his framework with three types of analysis methods; analysis of language texts, analysis of discourse practice, and analysis of discursive events in sociocultural practice. Unlike Fairclough, van Dijk believes that in order to relate power and discourse in an explicit way, a cognitive interface of knowledge, models, ideologies is needed along with other social representations of social abilities, which also relate to the individual, social, and the the micro and macro levels of social structures (van Dijk, 1993). These forms of analytical methods come within framework for my studies of the empirical data that include discursive interpretations of international conflict relations.

### **4.5 Limitations, ethical considerations and reflexivity**

This section addresses the important practical research ethics issues that are important for how a researcher approaches and relates to the subject studied, the references and the empirical data that is available.

#### *4.5.1 General limitations*

Since the collection of empirical data will generally be based on secondary data, this means limitations in how the material can be processed and analyzed, which in the long run may affect the result and conclusion in relation to the research question. Turner 1997 (pp. 16-17) claims that in contrast to conducting fieldwork, analysis of secondary data means a greater risk that the researcher misinterprets data as well as poorer presence and awareness in the study process. This requires the researcher to devise qualitative strategies to adapt his or her research method. As previously mentioned, it is suggested that qualitative discourse analysis should be used as an analysis method in this thesis. Turner also argues that the risk of limitations when the researcher uses data sets that due to their convenience, and as a result become too accessible and overused. This is of course important to keep in mind in my choice of

data collection method and analysis. Therefore, it becomes extra important to select and combine relevant data that is in line with the main purpose of the thesis, as well as to process and analyze the material in an efficient way to minimize the risk of misinterpretation and convenience.

#### *4.5.2 Ethical considerations*

In terms of ethical considerations, there are important angles to approach here. Since the method of data collection for this thesis will primarily be based on scientific articles, news articles, and reports, it is important for the researcher to follow clear and strict guidelines for the empirical material approached. Some of the basic ethical guidelines, emphasizes Bryman (2016) is that the researcher has a considerate and respectable relationship with the studied material and its authors. In addition, it is important for researchers to state their purpose in connection with the ethical considerations, as this affects the researcher's credibility. This insight is also useful for my thesis, because I want to emphasize my unconditional and neutral political stance in the international relations between the actors involved in the infected region around the SCS.

Finally, I would like to emphasize my full cooperation and responsibility for following research ethics rules and guidelines established by the Swedish Research Council (2017). My intention for conducting this study is based on my personal responsibility to be transparent and impartial with the empirical data I receive, and that no persons are harmed or subjected to unfair treatment.

#### *4.5.3 Reflexivity and positionality*

Reflexivity is an important element in social science research, and researchers have to be reflective about the implications of their methods, values and biases and how these can generate and add new knowledge of the social world. One has to show sensitivity to his or her own cultural, political and social background and context, and how these can have an influence of the knowledge production (Bryman 2016, p. 388). As for this study's epistemological positioning, the reflexivity and positionality are of significant importance, because my role and as a researcher in this study is to remain neutral and



politically independent in my conduct of the study and the interpretations of the literature and empirical data relating to politically disputed territories in the SCS. This insight is important to bear in mind, because knowledge and conviction about the world and its complex dynamics is a matter of interpretation. Hence, the need for researchers to reflect on their own position in order to generate knowledge through analyzed data is important. Of course, there is the awareness of my own background as a Western man with Western values and culture, can unconsciously have an impact on this study, not least for interpretation and understanding in the analytical processing of the empirical material. With this self-awareness, I have throughout the research process been careful to try to minimize the possible distortions and misinterpretations of the findings in this study.

This was the compilation of the main components of the methodological approach for this thesis. The selected topic with its purpose and research question will now be addressed further in the next chapter on empirical findings and the analysis.

## **5. Empirical findings and analysis**

In this chapter, I will begin by going through empirical findings in the form of scientific text articles as well as oral video statements from various scholars in order to answer the research questions. By identifying important key concepts in the discourses referred to, the next step is to find out how the discourses and the arguments that the authors highlight are presented on the basis of the theoretical frameworks. In other words, I will thus apply discourse analysis to try to identify the texts' message and relevance to the different theoretical directions of neorealism, offensive neorealism and defensive neorealism in an inductive approach. Hence the purpose will be to analyze which scholars whose discourses point to a Chinese offensive and defensive strategy for their military presence and actions in the SCS. I will also do a short section and analysis of the US position and strategy against China in the SCS conflict.

Research question 1:

- *What are China's strategic goals and interests in SCS, and how are they presented in the scientific articles?*

### **5.1 Discourses on China's strategies in SCS**

In this section I will address some of the most relevant discourses on China's approach and strategies in the SCS. By identifying particularly relevant arguments and discussions, I will divide the discourses into different sub categories to facilitate the analysis process later in the chapter.

#### *5.1.1 Thucydides Trap*

In order to return the geopolitical conflict in the SCS to the theoretical concept of international relations, there are strong reasons why China's actions are moving in a neorealist direction. Whether it is a defensive or offensive orientation of neorealism, there are disagreements among scholars. Allison Graham, with the support of the term Thucydides Trap, describes the tense China-US relationship as a conflict with the

potential to turn into a full-scale war. This observation is based on a number of historical instances of emerging power rivaling a ruling power, ended in war. In other words, it means describing a tendency towards war when a rising power challenges the status of a dominant power (Graham 2017).

Although the tense situation in the SCS has grown increasingly serious, it is just one example of a series of pressing issues where the two nations' disputes risk increasing the likelihood of both of them ending up in the Thucydides trap. Yu & Yap (2020) refers to the fact that the two countries are facing an ideological collision course between American exceptionalism (freedom, individualism, democracy, etc.) and the Chinese dream (collectivism, socialism, national pride, etc.) that China and the US are pursuing a foreign policy whose purpose is both on a collision course, in other words a quest for power aimed at an offensive neorealist direction (see chapter 3).

However, there are critical voices around the reasoning that China and the US are slipping into the Thucydides Trap, which instead points to a more defensive direction of neorealism. In fact, China's increased military activity in the SCS and ECS is due to the fact that its ambitions are primarily to strengthen its regional position in Asia, and to prioritize economic and domestic interests and issues (Hanania 2020; Freedman 2017). There are also analyzes that argue that China's military capabilities are still inferior to those of the US's, along with a lack of networks with close alliances and a censorship regime that undermines innovation and technological progress (Buruma 2017; Waldron 2017).

### *5.1.2 Hegemonic dominance*

The assumption that China's strategic goal is to achieve hegemonic dominance in the eastern hemisphere is supported by many scholars, including Mearsheimer (2020) who is a strong intercessor of the offensive orientation of neorealism. In support of this, he sets out two principled goals; the first is about acquiring as much power as possible; and the second is the aim to push the US out of Asia. The reasons lie in China's weak history when Japan was superior to power in Asia, which in China is

still seen as a humiliating part of its past. Additionally he adds, if China achieves enough power, their intentions are likely to interfere in the politics of the western hemisphere the way the US interferes in Asian politics. The strategy for China lies in all the lessons of history and copying the US actions and foreign policies. This in turn would force the US to focus and defend its dominance in the western hemisphere (Mearsheimer 2020, 28:00-33:00).

Although the majority of security analysts believe that China's plans for a military attack on the US or ASEAN country are less likely, there are some warning signs. Mastro (2020) believes that such a scenario would happen if the CCP, led by Xi, begins to raise its voice for nationalist rhetoric, which aims at an aggressive application to assert sovereignty by, for example, urging state-owned media to propagate in such a direction. In step with an increasingly advanced technical ability and a well-developed strategy, the Chinese navy could carry out increasingly advanced military exercises that could be interpreted as war operations. These actions would have the consequences of a change in the behavior of the naval unit of the Chinese military. However, it is likely that the US Navy will respond to these actions to hold back the Chinese offensive.

### *5.1.3 Militarization and armed militia*

There are several ways to understand the ideological thinking behind China's increasingly aggressive policy in the SCS region. One significant approach is, according to Kaplan (2014), strong historical connections to similar actions the US did in the 19th century and early 1990s, which was they gain strategic control over the Caribbean, which in turn gave the US hegemonic dominance over the western hemisphere. This meant that they could influence the balance of power (see Waltz 1979, p. 121 and Mearsheimer 2010, p. 79), in the eastern hemisphere. Similarly, China is trying to take control of the SCS, as it is a favorable strategic hub for the Chinese navy to expand its territorial waters. The nature of *militarization* that China is acquiring in the SCS should be cautiously seen as a step towards strengthening its defense capabilities, rather than a means of maximizing its position of power in order to forcibly conquer hegemonic dominance. However, Kaplan believes that China's

primary goal is only to dilute American navy presence in the East and Southeast Asia sea, because China is not able to defeat the US in case of war (Kaplan 2014). This in turn can be linked to the defensive orientation of neorealism, where China's goal is to assert its sovereignty without intending to wage war with either the US or any of the neighboring countries in the SCS.

Another point of view claims that China's increased activity in the SCS is not primarily for military offensive purposes, but instead only for defense military defense purposes, and that most of it is about investments in facilities for scientific research, bases for oil exploitation, fishing activities, support for coast guard etc .. However, international analysts claim that the majority of the growing Chinese activities in the region have anti-military purposes, such as construction of facilities and bases for military aircrafts, missile systems, long-range radar, piers for naval combatants etc .. Carlyle A. Thayer (2016) emphasizes that these conflicting claims about the ongoing activities between China and the US in the SCS, give rise to debate and discussion among scholars in both countries, about whether the activities are a case of militarization or not. The problem with how to define the term militarization does not only refer to as a place with military character. However, Thayer goes a step further by adding that the complete definition of militarization with a state's intentional purpose of making preparations for war (Thayer 2016, 16:20-19:54). According to this definition of militarization, it can not be ensured that China's intentions with its military activities in the SCS are to prepare for acts of war, as there are also other uses of the military facilities China establishes in the area, such as building artificial islands and rebuilding existing islands.

Since the term militarization does not provide a completely clear definition that refers to a state's offensive or defensive purpose in asserting its sovereignty, the balance in the arguments becomes difficult to specify. However, there are significant implications that China's actions in the SCS are primarily about militarization, at least in order to secure territorial control and dominance over neighboring ASEAN countries in the region, as well as attempts to deter the US and its allies. That China would intend to militarily attack the US would not be likely. According to Grossman

(2020, pp. 2-7), US commanders and officials along with allies are concerned about China's demonstrably increased military activities and exercises in the SCS, especially with regard to new Chinese bases for fighter jets, submarines and warships on the strategically important Spratly Islands and Woody Island.

As for China's view on the SCS, they claim control of all waters and airspace in the region. To delve deeper into China's strategy in practical perspective, there are reasons to try to understand the underlying factors that govern these military actions. Gregory Poling (2019, 00:00-1:40), points out one of China's effective methods is the use of armed militias that camouflages itself by operating on fishing boats. This maritime militia is one of the main foundations of the Chinese navy's power projection in the SCS. The Spratly Islands located at the southern end of the SCS are of particular interest due to its strategic location and its scattered range of natural islands. Many of the islands are inhabited in part by the Philippine population, which has often been a target for Chinese militia boats. These operations can be seen as a minor component of China's overall goal of establishing effective dominance of all the waters and airspace within the so-called 9-dash line<sup>1</sup>. Instead of using military actions that may lead to war with the US or any other country, Poling argues that China primarily intends to use the paramilitary forces (armed militias) to effectively take control of territorial waters and space in the SCS, in order to prevent other actors from operating in the areas. This shows a well-developed strategic skill to gain control over important goals in the SCS.

#### *5.1.4 The Chinese leadership and economic strategic interests*

Although China has long claimed and sought to assert and extend its territorial influence in the SCS, there are strong signs that this process has intensified during President Xi Jinping's tenure in power. This in turn raises the question of how Xi's leadership sets China's foreign policy agenda in the region. A possible explanation for Xi's tougher political stance in the SCS can be seen in the background of China's

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<sup>1</sup> 9-dash line - Refers to a boundary within the SCS that borders on the territorial waters that China has historically perceived as its own, without legal basis (Riegl et. al, 2014).

critical image of humiliation and weakness towards the US and neighboring countries in a historical context. Therefore, it is important for Xi and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to show strength and legitimacy both to maintain confidence in the eyes of their own people, and to pursue power and dominance in the international arena. However, Chan & Li (2015, pp. 45-46) argues that the Chinese government should be well aware of the negative economic consequences that could affect the country's prosperity if it completes its military rearmament in order to wage war with its neighbors or the US. Therefore, it is important for Xi that neither back off nor push too much forward. This assumption would mean that the primary strategy is to follow a defensive realistic orientation where maximum security and national sovereignty are of the highest priority (see Waltz 1979).

From a security policy perspective, SCS is a special core interest for Xi Jinping. McDevitt (2014, pp 31-32) points out a number of important points to China's military upgrade in the region. Common to these is that China wants to achieve territorial dominance through both its own ports and waterways in order to acquire strategic and trade advantages in the area. China's optimistic calculations of the supply of oil and gas in the SCS would make the country less dependent on long-distance and costly shipments of these raw materials, which currently come from Africa and the Persian Gulf. Secured access to valuable natural resources and other economic values is of high priority according to McDevitt (2014). In this way, the military presence in the area contributes to increased power and security for China.

#### *5.1.5 Security and sovereignty issues*

The assumption of China's foreign policy purpose in the SCS is not about an offensive military escalation for military confrontation, gets heard from another scholar of Chinese background. Zhou Fangyin (2016, pp. 888-890) argues that the Chinese defensive orientation of realism is due to rational calculations and practical considerations to strive for a defensive stance to prevent possible economic losses. For those ASEAN countries that are even more dependent on trade relations for economic stability, do not want to risk going into military conflict with China. The point of Zhou's reasoning lies in China's strong ability to exploit flexibility in their

policy stance in the SCS. It is based on, on the one hand, balancing military capabilities to ensure its own security and territorial control in the area without crossing the line of military confrontation with Vietnam, the Philippines and the US, and on the other hand, maintaining and securing economic cooperation through free trade with other countries in the region.

The multidimensional and flexible strategy model that is assumed to constitute China's goals and interests in both SCS and ECS includes important factors such as economics, diplomacy, military and civilian elements, etc. This explanatory model is supported by analysts, such as Shuxian Luo (2021), who also claim that China's implementation of the strategy that they can act patiently and flexibly by spending significant resources and willing to absorb at least some of the reputation and other costs that other countries could try to impose on China in response to China's actions.

The fact that the conflict in the SCS has intensified in recent years and with increased Chinese military presence and activities may need a more detailed explanatory model that goes beyond the scope of only one paradigm of IR theories. According to Regilme Jr. (2018, pp. 230-232), an important starting point for China to strengthen its position and try to push back American dominance in the SCS is based on the domestic political strategic determination. As for the US stance on the conflict, the situation is more complicated as the ASEAN countries' security guarantee rests heavily on a US commitment to protection. Given the changing security situation in the world, not least with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, North Korea's constant nuclear threats to South Korea and Japan, and instability in the Middle East with Iran as a potential security threat, US military capabilities are becoming increasingly strained, which may affect it supported the security of the countries around the SCS and Taiwan.

#### *5.1.6 Joint development and cooperation*

Although most observers describe the situation in the SCS as a conflict that has gradually increased in effort in recent years, there are observations that since 2017



have been arguing about an improved relationship between China and the ASEAN organization. This is thanks to political initiatives for serious discussions and development events, primarily between China, the Philippines and Vietnam. According to Huaigao Qi (2019), this builds a Chinese initiative whose purpose is to follow a multilateral development program with the Philippines and Vietnam contribute to improved relations in terms of trade passages, natural resources and ports etc.. For the ASEAN countries, this may mean a unique chance to take part in a collaboration in the area of oil and gas resources, which can generate a more stable environment for future maritime delimitation negotiations between the countries in the area. Mutual dependence can lead to improved relationships and a more stable security situation if the collaboration works out well. From the Chinese side, the initiative for this multilateral development program is divided into both economic and strategic incentives. The economic aspect is linked to domestic demand for energy resources as well as the construction of a free trade zone, a common market and a strengthening of economic integration vis-à-vis the ASEAN countries. Among the strategic incentives are China's ambitions to become a leading maritime power along with maintaining peaceful and constructive ties with the neighboring countries in the region, as well as to thaw the frosty relationship with the US (Qi 2019, pp. 220, 235-236).

Research question 2:

- *What is the US's policy against China in SCS, and how is it presented in the scientific articles?*

## **5.2 The US's policy in SCS**

The US military presence in the SCS dates back to World War II, and over time has been an increasingly important waterway for global trade. However, this free trade has been supported by an interest in which access and security formed the basis of the US presence. Fravel (2014) argues that these two ingredients are the main principal interests of the US. This view of the right to free passage regulates, for example, freedom of navigation for both commercial and military ships. The security principles require a specially organized US military presence whose main task is to maintain

order and stability between the actors who exploit the territorial waters in the SCS, both commercial and military units. As China has increased its presence in the region in recent years, both commercially and militarily, US policy has been put under new strain. Therefore, it suggests that the conflict between China's increased claims to its own sovereignty and the US's interests of free access and stability, may jeopardize the relationship between the countries. What would speak for a peaceful development, or at least a *status quo*<sup>2</sup>, depends to a large extent on how willing the two countries are to prioritize common interests that stand in contrast to armed conflict (Fravel 2014, p. 2;9)

There are critical voices regarding how both the Obama and Trump administration have handled the situation in the SCS in the last decade, when the Chinese escalation took place at a very fast pace. Lack of action and retaliation against China's offensive in the SCS has created a precarious situation for the US to halt China's militarization, building islands in important outposts in the region. According to Brands & Cooper (2018, pp. 13-14, 28-29), the US has put itself in a position of strategic deficit. However, there are a number of options for countering China's offensive in the SCS. However, these strategies require both sacrifice and risk-taking, but on the other hand would mean relief in the tense situation. Regardless of the risks of action taken, it is of the highest priority for the US to prevent the security situation from turning into a military confrontation, especially with regard to the allies of the US.

For decades, American hegemonic domination of the world has sought to promote a liberal structure with democratic freedom, regional alliances, and global capitalism. However, there are tendencies that this structural ideal is about to be pushed back by an unbalanced world order, with realistic elements of territorial interests and intensified conflicts of political ideological counterparts. The rise of authoritarian powers, such as Russia's military invasion of Ukraine and Europe and China's military threat to Taiwan and military expansion in the SCS, sets the tone for how the US needs to change its foreign policy and strategy to maintain its interests and security. One, according to Rolf & Agnew (2016, pp. 267-268), particularly important aspect

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<sup>2</sup> Status quo - describes a state as unchanged after an event, such as war.

that can partly explain China's actions in the SCS, is that the US in its role as a unipolar superpower has not undertaken to sign legally binding documents such as the UNCLOS Convention on International Law. The lack of regulation through binding international agreements means further difficulties in resolving disputes concerning states' territorial claims. By extension, proponents of liberalism's idea of globalization are undermining states' interests in sovereignty. Therefore, the importance of bilateral diplomacy between the US and China becomes particularly important in keeping the conflict in the SCS under control.

When it comes to possible alternatives to how to prevent the conflict in SCS from escalation into war, the US is in a leading position to take action. A key concept suggests that the US should engage in confidence-building measures such as concluding binding agreements in agreement with common areas of cooperation. It can be about including safety exercises, improved intelligence and communication in marine industries. In addition, Glaser (2012, pp. 7-9) argues that the US should encourage clarity and new dialogue mechanisms between the actors who share common interests on security and free navigation in the SCS region.

Although there is much discourse on US policy that suggests restrictive or balanced attitudes towards China's increased military activities in the SCS, there are discourses that argue that the conflict between the two countries points to an inevitable potential risk of war, where both the conflict over Taiwan and the territorial disputes in the SCS are key geopolitical risk factors. John Mearsheimer, (2020) based on his own theory of offensive realism, points out that China's primary geostrategic goal is to control and dominate Asia in the same way that the US dominates the Western Hemisphere. To achieve this, China needs to make sure it is the most powerful state in Asia and try to drive the US military presence out of its geographical vicinity. The next goal for China would be to politically interfere in the Western Hemisphere in a similar way as the US does in Asia. This means that the ambition for China to gain dominant power is simply to copy the American model of hegemonic dominance. As for the US position to respond to China's power ambitions, they will prevent China from becoming the dominant hegemonic power in Asia and beyond. According to his

own theoretical assumptions and historical references, Mearsheimer believes that the US does not tolerate peer competitors who challenge its position as the number one power in the world. Thus, the tense security situation between the two will increase to the extent that a war may become a fact (Mearsheimer 2020, 34:00-36:00).

### **5.3 Analysis of discourses on China's strategies in SCS**

An important note before I begin to analyze the empirical material, it is important to emphasize that none of the selected texts originate from sources directly or indirectly linked to either the US or Chinese respective governments or its authorities. Thus, the material is independent of state influence or affiliation, which constitutes an important basis for a fair and politically independent review and analysis.

The various discourses concerning China's military activities in the SCS and the US attitude towards China's policy are characterized exclusively from a neorealist perspective. A first observation of the analysis and interpretation of the processed empirical material suggests both similarities and differences in how the authors of the scientific articles reflect the geopolitical conflict in SCS with China's ambitions and strategy in main focus. Although the selection of scientific articles, reports, and statements consists of a broad spectrum of relevant empirical data to address the aim of the research questions, there are clear patterns in how scholars in this field of study claim their stance in the context of the SCS conflict. By analyzing and identifying key arguments from each discourses on the Chinese strategy in SCS, I will identify the scholars whose arguments and positional stance can be related to the different theoretical orientations within the framework of IR and the neorealism directions.

Within the theoretical framework of offensive neorealism, I have chosen with the help of the CDA to begin this process by identifying important discourses of social science concepts that can argue that the purpose of China's increasing military presence and actions in the SCS is to acquire maximum hegemonic power to take control by developing offensive military capabilities to encounter foreign interventionism.

### *5.3.1 Discourses of offensive neorealism*

A basic analytical factor regarding the discourses presented in the texts and oral statements is that the arguments that are highlighted greatly reveal the nuances of the articles and the authors' position on the theoretical concepts. This is particularly clearly expressed in the case of Mearsheimers (2020, 28:00-33:00) and Grahams (2017) arguing that China's military escalation into SCS is in line with an offensive neorealist direction and the theory of Thucydides Trap, respectively. Thus, they both refer from their own theoretical observations when they explain their picture of the way and for what purpose China strives for its actions, and that the US as a defender of its hegemonic dominance as the world's foremost superpower faces a challenging state that wants take over that role. However, there are fundamental theoretical differences, where the Thucydides Trap is mainly based on historical examples where rivalry between states' pursuit of dominance leads to war. The offensive neorealist theory refers to states' pursuit of maximum power over other states (see chapter 3).

With regard to other discourses on China's strategies in SCS, according to my analysis, the arguments put forward by various scholars are not as clear in which direction of neorealism is referred. In the example of the Thucydides trap, there are both arguments that speak for and against such a scenario. However, it is conceivable that the scholars who are critical of a scenario in which China and the US will fall into the Thucydides trap base their arguments as incompatible with the theoretical framework that the Thucydides trap (and in turn offensive neorealist direction) does, for example that primary China's strategy in SCS aims at neoliberal ideals such as economic interests and material interests. One such example is Hanania 2020; Freedman 2017 arguing that China's ambitions are about acquiring benefits for economic gain, such as natural resources, access to trade passages and ports, etc. Another important discourse that greatly affects the outside world's concerns about China's military intentions is derived from the discussion of how far the aggressive rhetoric and ideological interests of sovereignty that the CCP and President Xi are capable of pursuing. My analysis of Maestro's (2020) reasoning around this reveals

that there is a psychological power play in how communication from is conveyed from the Chinese leadership to the outside world, especially towards the neighboring countries in the SCS and the US. One possible purpose of this rhetoric and spread of propaganda could be to create uncertainty and suspicion, which in turn builds up an image that can be interpreted as hostile by the American side. This in turn sends signals of an offensive strategy that has the potential to lead to military confrontation.

Many of the arguments raised for China's intentions with its military presence in the SCS do not directly reveal the neorealist stance of the scholars. This indicates a very complex and difficult to analyze situation where many factors come into play. Therefore, many discourses become ambiguous in their messages, and a combination of arguments that can both be analyzed and interpreted as in an offensive and defensive direction, and also something that stands between them. In the next section I will address the discourses that I consider from a defensive neorealist direction.

### *5.3.2 Discourses of defensive neorealism*

In this section, I will within the framework of defensive neorealism identify important social science conceptual discourses that can argue that the purpose of China's increasing military presence and action in the SCS is to provide maximum capacity to ensure its security. This direction of neorealism is not only based on defense policy arguments, but also takes into account strategically important economic policy interests. A first note for this section is that, based on the selected scientific articles, I have been able to identify more discourses that can be traced to a defensive neorealist direction or neutral positioning for the arguments that explain China's military activities in the SCS. Since there are ambiguities or unclear implications on arguments that guide the discourses towards a defensive neorealist direction, it is important to be able to identify key concepts that these texts have in common. A thorough discursive analysis is that these scholars present arguments that suggest that China does not intend to enter into a military confrontation with the US. However, this does not mean that there are arguments in favor of a conscious Chinese militarization or territorial claims against neighboring countries.

With regard to the term militarization, my analysis of Thayer's (2016, 16: 20-19: 54) definition of the term is that China's intentions are that the construction of military facilities and the deployment of combat units in the SCS should only be considered as defense strategic actions, although there are no guarantees of a strategic counter-offensive against the military presence of the US and its allies. This takes the reasoning about militarization to another level that I choose to identify as offensive defensive strategy. I make that interpretation based on Kaplan's (2014) and Grossman's (2020) thoughts on China's militarization, where the purpose is based on a defense-oriented neorealist policy by using offensive military materialist construction and demonstrations in the form of military exercises, discouraging American navy and airspace presence. However, such an offensive security policy can have consequences that further strengthen tensions by increasing suspicion between the two countries' intentions, hence the *security dilemma* (see chapter 3).

Poling's (2019, 00: 00-1: 40) discourse that China would use paramilitary forces as a method to discreetly take control of important islands and outposts in the SCS, is in my opinion to be considered a demonstration in strategic skill from China's perspective.

Apart from the practical and military actions that China is applying to the SCS, it is important to analyze and discuss the underlying factors that are driving the increased Chinese militarization into the SCS. Common to the scholars with Chinese backgrounds (Chan & Li 2015; Zhou 2016; Luo 2021) is that their image of China's actions follows a typical defensive neorealist orientation (see Waltz 1979) with arguments that lead into domestic political tracks. My analysis of these scholars' discourses is that they represent foundations that rest on the ideological and economic core values of the Chinese Communist Party. My interpretation is that President Xi's strong leadership and harsh rhetoric are symbolically important for maintaining and, in the long run, strengthening its position and popularity among its own people, thus preventing political opposition from arising, even within the CCP. Thus, the purpose of strengthening the country's sovereignty vis-à-vis the outside world, and in particular towards the US, becomes particularly important. However, as Chan & Li

(2015) have suggested, it is important for Xi and CCP not to push the military offensive too far, which could lead to hostilities with the US. My second important analytical observation from the aforementioned discourses is signaling that the economic factor plays a key role for Xi and the CCP further strengthen their power for the people, as China's modern economic reforms have contributed to the prosperity and wealthiness of the people. With an increased military presence in SCS, the country's economic interests can benefit as a result of improved trade advantages.

Improved trade advantages lead to the next track in economic interests. My view of McDevitts' (2014) discourse on the construction of military bases, ports and waterways are further investments to meet strategic economic profit interests, which in turn are intended to strengthen the Chinese economy and prosperity. This strategy of military reinforcement in the SCS can also be related to the defensive neorealist direction in the sense of protecting and securing the country's supply of important raw materials, which requires special security policy measures in the form of military protection.

As further significant implications that one of the most important goals for China in the SCS is to acquire economic assets and benefits, give strong assertions in Qi's (2019) discourse on joint development in SCS. Contrary to McDevitt's (2014) reasoning, my view on Qi's argument is that China, instead of using military means for economic exploitation, invests in cross - border cooperation with development programs to access important energy resources more efficiently, etc. About this purpose has honest intentions and is carried out according to fair principles, it indicates a strongly defensive neorealist positioning, rather closer to a neoliberal direction which falls beyond the scope of the chosen theoretical framework for this thesis. When it comes to the strategic goal for China, my interpretation of the discourse is that China also in this case tries to balance the frosty relationship with its neighbors, and perhaps most importantly with the US, which means that China is still inferior to the superpower in west and thus refrains from militarily challenging its rival. Another interpretation may mean that these interests would give the appearance



of a peaceful rhetorical cover on the part of Beijing, whose purpose is in fact to weaken its competitors in the SCS, and thus strengthen its power.

#### **5.4 Analysis of discourses on US's policy in SCS**

As an analysis of China's strategic direction in the SCS, there are discourses that point to both an offensive and a defensive orientation in the perspective of neorealism. This affects the US policy against China in the SCS conflict against a great deal of uncertainty in how the US should act from outside to preserve its interests in the area. This psychological geopolitical uncertainty in turn leads to the track around the security dilemma. As Brands & Cooper (2018) suggest, the former American hegemonic dominance in both SCS and ECS has been weakened and put in a precarious situation at the expense of inadequate actions against China's progress. Therefore, my analysis of this discourse is that the increasingly tense relationship between the US and China has entered a stage of security dilemma, which is in line with the development reminiscent of a psychological power rivalry where both countries are subconscious of suspicion towards each other (see chapter 3). However, there is some uncertainty as to whether this discourse follows an offensive or defensive direction of security dilemma. However, my analysis of Brands & Cooper's (2018) statement is that the main priority of the US is to have stronger implications for pursuing a policy that prevents military confrontation with China, hence a defensive direction.

As the US's unipolar position as the world's sole superpower has weakened in recent years, with China's and Russia's increased military ambitions to strengthen / regain power in its immediate areas have added new conditions for the US to encounter these competing rivals. My analysis of Rolfs & Agnews (2016) and Glasers (2012) arguments suggests that they need to change their policy against China and Russia. When it comes to China and the SCS conflict in particular, it is important from the American side to contribute to trust and cooperation around diplomacy and binding agreements that intend to thaw the increasingly cold relations with China. However, it is important to maintain a strong rhetoric and stance against China from US interests and strategy. In order to achieve effective and peaceful solutions, it is crucial that both

parties talk and cooperate on issues they both have as common interests and goals. In addition, as Rolf & Agnew (2016) point out, it can be effective to seek cooperation and agreements at independent institutional levels, such as the United Nations (UN).

To take a closer look at the issues that unite the respective divisions of China and the US in SCS, there are significant conclusions to be drawn. My view of Fravel's (2014) discourse is that a fundamental issue that unites the interests of the two countries is about ensuring stability and security, that is, refraining from war as far as possible. Which in turn can be attributed to a defensive neorealist attitude from both parties. However, my analysis of this discourse is that the two countries refer to different interests when it comes to the security argument. While China strives for security and stability in order to defend / strengthen its own sovereignty and economic independence in the SCS, the US uses the same argument to satisfy both its and the neighboring and allied countries' interests in the area of democratic ideals and free trade. My second finding is that both countries are basically striving for a peaceful solution to the conflict over the SCS. The problem that can put such a desirable solution out of play is therefore whether the two countries are willing to sacrifice in the interests that devote them. For Chinese governance, it is primarily about guaranteeing the continued existence of CCP power over the people, while for American governance, the primary goal is to stand up for democracy and freedom. By this I mean that the conflict in the SCS is not only about power and security (neorealist parameters), but also symbolic political issues such as ideological values and ideals.

With regard to the American unipolar position as the world's dominant superpower, there is reason to speculate that this dominance is under pressure and possibly threatened. John Mearsheimer's (2020) discussion of the rivalry around the US and China is not only about the conflict in the SCS, but should be seen as a power struggle on a global level. My analysis of Mearsheimer's statements suggests that an ideological and geopolitical collision between the two countries is likely from a power and survival perspective. However, I believe that there are shortcomings in this type of discourse, as it only relates to its own theoretical point of view and historical

references. It does not take into account reciprocal factors such as economic because both countries are heavily dependent on functioning trade and investment to meet their economic interests and prosperity, which in my opinion is an important reason for maintaining a peaceful relationship. Another factor that Mearsheimer's discourse does not touch on is that the so-called 'balance of terror' or 'mutual assured destruction'<sup>3</sup> can have a decisive effect on the countries' attitude not to go to war with each other. On the other hand, I believe that there is strong substance in the arguments concerning Mearsheimer's claims that the power ideological driving forces to possess hegemonic dominance are significant for a potential risk of military confrontation.

With these empirical findings and analysis for the research questions has come to an end. In the last chapter, I will go through the most important conclusions for the study and present the key findings of the analysis I have arrived at.

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<sup>3</sup> A situation where both actors have sufficient quantities of advanced nuclear weapons to wipe each other out. In such a situation, war is meaningless, which paradoxically means that peace is maintained. An important condition for achieving mutually assured destruction was that neither party could knock out the other before it had time to react.

## 6. Conclusion

Based on the purpose, including the relevant research questions asked for this study, there are a number of important conclusions to be drawn. The discourses on China's strategic interests and goals for their military presence and actions in the SCS show a number of different perspectives and ideas about how the scholars discuss this. The same goes for the US's involvement in this conflict. To begin with China's role in the SCS, my analysis shows that the discourses discussed among scholars can be divided into the two main branches of the theoretical framework of the international relations theory of neorealism; the offensive and the defensive direction. The scholars who argue that China's military escalation into the SCS point to an offensive neorealist direction such as Mearsheimer and Graham use both theoretical and historical evidence and statements for how states act to secure and achieve their main interests, which primarily aim to gain as much power capacity as possible through military rearmament. The discourses of the offensive neorealist direction are interesting from several perspectives, for example, the arguments discussed among scholars suggest that a future military confrontation between China and the US is highly probable. However, there are major uncertainties and ambiguities about how the discourses that reflect on China's and the US's interests in the SCS can be considered as potential military conflict or not. When it comes to China's interests, in my analytical view, there are more discourses among scholars that point to the country's military focus in SCS moving towards a defensive direction rather than an offensive direction. I base this observation on the discourses that do not describe a conscious strategy for China to forcibly take control of the SCS with the risk of military confrontation with the US, rather as discourses whose arguments point to China's primary goal being to strengthen its sovereignty and economic influence.

There are also other strong implications that the escalating military tension in the SCS should not be seen as a sign of a possible war between China and the US. Firstly, such a scenario could have devastating consequences as both countries have nuclear weapons. Secondly, there are several discourses that suggest that it is in the interests of both countries to maintain security and stability, as well as the effort to maintain strong economic relations, both between China and the US, as well as other countries

in the region. One of the core interests of the CCP, led by President Xi, is to satisfy and earn the trust and acceptance of the people, where economic development and socialist values lay the foundation for the sovereignty of the Chinese nation. It is discourses around this balance between economic success and national security and sovereignty that pave the way for priorities of a strong defense capability through the expansion of territorial claims such as in the SCS. While the primary interests of both countries are based on common foundations of economic stability and peaceful international relations, there are underlying factors that explain the behavior of nations that govern the military presence and increased tensions in the SCS and in the area of Taiwan. Discourses such as Maestro (2020) and Brands & Cooper (2018) discuss, suggesting that military tensions between China and the US are heightened by suspicion of each other's intentions and different interests and security priorities, which is expressed in the two countries' different governance, the authoritarian ruled China and the democratic ruled US. In my point of view, this factor could complement the neorealist theory of how states act on the basis of affirming their own values and interests in addition to guaranteeing survival such as prioritizing security and power.

To relate to the chosen methodological approach for this study, my application of discourse analysis of the studied empirical material has contributed to a deeper understanding and unique explanatory models for how a conflict-related empirical case with two major actors in focus, integrated into a system that builds on international relations from a neorealist perspective. This is not to say that this theoretical connection should be taken with great caution as it is limited to an explanatory model that primarily affirms the game of power politics through which includes security and power. Therefore, there is a high probability that the analysis of data and the answers given would have led to other interpretations and discussions about another qualitative method had been applied. The same also applies to the theoretical framework in international relations, whose multi-oriented disciplines provide different explanatory models for the complex and dynamic mechanisms that govern how the global actors interact with each other.

Finally, this study has helped to clarify in a comprehensive and reliable way how the general picture of the conflict based on discursive analysis of its relevance to scientific articles and statements from various of scholars in this field. The uniqueness of the study lies in the ability to gain an understanding and discussion of how large global actors act on the basis of a geopolitical power game within the framework of the theoretical framework defensive versus offensive direction of neorealism. However, there is room for critical views on the choice of method, research design and theoretical framework chosen for this field and case of study. How would these factors affect the outcome and credibility of the analysis of the empirical data? That said, the outcome of this study should be seen as an important source of inspiration for broader and deeper research on world policy conflicts between major global actors such as China and the US. This discipline of study has become even more relevant with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which in turn can be seen as a potential risk of developing into a world war. Similar to Russia's relationship with Ukraine, which has already broken out in war, there are similar relations between China and Taiwan, whose tense situation may also culminate in war, hence China's military expansion into the SCS is an important platform for the country's military units. With these procedures, I see the theory of neorealism as particularly interesting and relevant in terms of the geopolitical conflicts that include the examples mentioned. Therefore, there are further reasons and scope for further research that can lead to a deeper understanding and explanation of states' behavior and actions to meet their interests, preserve their security and strengthen their power.

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## Appendices

*Appendix 1* – This map below shows the territorial disputed borders between the involved countries in the SCS region. The red line marks the marine territory that China claims, the so-called 9-dash line, which covers most of the entire SCS. *Source:*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Territorial\\_disputes\\_in\\_the\\_South\\_China\\_Sea#/media/File:South\\_China\\_Sea\\_claims\\_map.svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Territorial_disputes_in_the_South_China_Sea#/media/File:South_China_Sea_claims_map.svg)



*Appendix 2* – This map shows Chinese and American naval and air bases with the SCS region. It shows how China has established air bases on the strategically important Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands. The US military presence is primarily stationed with naval and air bases in the Philippines. It is important to note that the map was published in 2016, hence with a reservation for new changes. *Source:*

<https://www.eurasiareview.com/23122016-the-south-china-sea-through-eyes-of-chinas-military-analysis/>

