

The Beginning of the US-China Strategic Competition in Maritime Security: A Securitization Approach

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This article traces the origins of US-China strategic competition in maritime security by analyzing the securitization of China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea. Around 2010, China accelerated its naval buildup and expansion into the South China Sea, resulting in conflicts with neighboring East Asian countries. The South China Sea has been considered a region where the US and China could collide, as one seeks to expand its influence while the other seeks to contain it. Consequently, this article's analysis has significant implications for understanding the beginning of the US-China strategic competition in maritime security. In particular, the article draws on securitization theory and analyzes how the "China threat" discourse in the US has securitized China's actions in the South China Sea.

Keywords US-China strategic competition, maritime security, South China Sea, US foreign policy, securitization

Introduction

The most challenging global and regional security threat to the US in terms of Indo-Pacific national security is China, and countering China was said to be the top national security priority in the second Trump administration. The US 2022 *National Security Strategy* clearly defined China not just as a competitor but as the only country with the intent to reshape the international order and the power to realize that intent (The White House 2022, 23). In this sense, the strategic competition between the US and China, or the struggle for global dominance between the two countries, is a structural variable in the international system that is reshaping the international order in the 21st Century. The US foreign policy toward China, in line with US-China strategic competition, is also affecting US relations with its key allies in Asia. For example, the US is strengthening its cooperation with the Republic of Korea (ROK), supporting Japan's international

role to leverage alliances in countering China, and institutionalizing trilateral security cooperation among the US, the ROK, and Japan.

The US foreign policy toward China and its transformation are a key variable affecting international relations in the Indo-Pacific region, including US-ROK, US-Japan, and ROK-Japan relations. Therefore, this article's objective of tracing the beginning of the US-China strategic competition has theoretical and practical implications. The shift of US foreign policy toward China began in the Obama administration. In a 2011 article in *Foreign Policy*, Hillary Clinton, then the Secretary of State, announced a new US foreign policy toward China, called "Pivot to Asia," or the rebalancing of Asia policy (Clinton 2011, 56-63). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, US administrations have exercised engagement policies toward China to embrace China as an ordinary member of the international community (Eun and Kim 2022, 70). The US, however, began to perceive China as a national security threat in the 2010s, with the announcement of the Pivot to Asia policy. The US 2015 *National Security Strategy* welcomed the peaceful rise of China (The White House 2015). The US 2017 *National Security Strategy*, however, defined China and Russia as challengers to US power, trying to erode US security (The White House 2017). Then the US began its strategic competition with China.

This article aims to trace the origins of US-China strategic competition in maritime security by analyzing the US's securitization of China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea. In particular, this article focuses on the origins of the US-China strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific oceans, where the two powers could collide. Around 2010, China accelerated its naval capabilities buildup and expansion beyond its near seas into the South China Sea, resulting in conflicts with neighboring East Asian countries. The South China Sea has been considered a region where the US and China could collide, as one seeks to expand its influence while the other seeks to contain it. In this sense, tracing how the US has perceived Chinese activities in the South China Sea has significant implications for understanding the origins of US-China strategic competition in maritime security. This article traces how the US has perceived Chinese activities in maritime domains as a national security threat and explains this process using securitization theory, focusing on the "China threat" discourse in the US that securitizes China's actions in the South China Sea.

This article proceeds as follows. The next chapter discusses securitization theory, with particular attention to the security studies of the Copenhagen School. It explains the theoretical differences between the Copenhagen School's approach to security studies and conventional security studies, as well as the securitization process. Then, the article traces and explains the US's securitization process of China's activities in the South China Sea in the 2010s by focusing on the China threat discourse in the US. In the final section, this article summarizes the key arguments.

Securitization Theory

A Constructivist Approach to Security Studies

The Copenhagen School of security studies in international relations made considerable contributions to understanding security issues. First of all, it expanded the scope of traditional security studies, which had focused on war and the use of military force, by diversifying the scope of security issues (Buzan 1997, 13). The Copenhagen School emphasizes security as a social process from a constructivist perspective, and its approach helps us understand complex security issues and the securitization process of non-traditional security issues in the post-Cold War era (Baysal 2020, 7). In its understanding, security is a speech-act in which a securitizing actor presents an issue or problem as a threat or a social issue, and then the issue becomes a security issue. The Copenhagen School rejects the idea that there must be objective external threats when discussing security. It also pays attention to social acts whereby a securitizing actor perceives something as a threat and presents it as a security issue. In this sense, the Copenhagen School's approach to security is constructivist. It argues that security issues are not objective but are constructed (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1998, 23-26).

Balzacq (2019) and others agree that the process of securitization is best understood from a constructivist perspective. They emphasize, however, that security is not just a speech-act. They argue that securitization is the politics of the extraordinary, and that we need to look at the practices and different techniques of governments (Balzacq 2019, 334-40; Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka 2016, 504-7).

Process of Securitization

Security is the act of treating an issue or problem as a special kind of politics, and securitization is an extreme version of politicization. For example, a nonpoliticized issue, which does not require any state's involvement, becomes a politicized issue, accompanied by public debates, government decisions, and resource allocations to address it. It then becomes a securitized issue that is treated as an existential threat, requiring actions beyond normal political procedures. Any issue can move along a continuum from a nonpoliticized issue to a politicized issue and finally to a securitized issue (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1998, 23).

The process of securitization in a liberal-democratic society is as follows. Something is designated as a security issue that is important and requires priority. The issue must be presented as an existential threat. One can argue that if we do not address this issue now, it would severely damage our existence, and that we need to deal with it through extraordinary measures, such as levying taxes or allocating society's resources to a specific task. In this way, the issue becomes or is accepted as a security issue, and security is thus a self-referential practice. It is accepted as such not because a physical threat exists, but because it is presented

in society as an existential threat through discourse. In security discourse, an issue or problem is dramatized and presented as a top priority by labeling it as a security concern. To understand the act of securitization, you do not need to find and assess objective threats that actually endanger a referent object; instead, you need to grasp the process of constructing a shared understanding of what is to be regarded as a threat to a society or state, since the process of securitization is a speech act.

However, the existence of a discourse that presents something as an existential threat to society or the state (a referent object) does not necessarily lead to securitization, and this act of presentation is a *securitizing move*. An issue is successfully securitized only when the audience accepts that it is an existential threat and agrees to take measures beyond regular ones to address it. If we cannot identify such acceptance of an existential threat and such extraordinary measures, the process is a securitizing move, not successful securitization. It is important to distinguish between a securitizing move and successful securitization (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1998, 24-26).

As an intersubjective process, audience assent or acceptance in the securitization of an issue is a critical step; however, the concepts of audience and audience acceptance are underdeveloped or under-theorized (Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka 2016, 499-501). There is a need to articulate the role of audiences more coherently as a theory (McDonald 2008, 572-3). There should be further empirical research to specify and theorize the criteria for audience acceptance. In this article, I define securitizing actors and audiences as public figures responsible for national security policy, including political leaders, high-ranking policymakers in US administrations, members of the US Congress (senators and representatives), foreign and security experts, and primary US news sources. They are directly or indirectly involved in the formulation and/or implementation of foreign policy and/or security policy. I concur with the criticism that the Copenhagen School's securitization theory does not clearly theorize the specific conditions of successful securitization of an issue, so I define a radical policy change as an indicator of successful securitization (Jackson 2006, 313-5). An issue or problem is securitized by adopting a special or radical policy or measure to address it, distinct from existing policies. Some may argue that the general public should be included in the audience category, but its inclusion would be methodologically problematic until we have a theory of audience acceptance for the general public.

The Beginning of the US-China Strategic Competition in Maritime Security: A China Threat Discourse in the US and the Process of Securitization

Even though this research focuses on maritime security, US-China relations as a rivalry between the incumbent dominant power and the rising challenger with the possibility of power transition, and the subsequent East Asian order in the post-Cold War era, have been complicated by many issues, including China's rising economic and military power, North Korea's nuclear standoff, and the Taiwan contingency (Goh 2005; 2019). The US and China attempted to manage this rivalry in the early 2010s. For instance, US President Barack Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping held a summit in June 2013 at which they emphasized the significance of developing a new model of US-China relations that would prevent conflict between an established power and a rising one, avoiding the consequences that had driven the relationship into strategic rivalry. At that time, the US supported China's development in a way that was consistent with international rules. However, China's military modernization, its power projection, including its assertive action in the South China Sea, also increased the risk of an accident or miscalculation (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2014, 59).

This section traces and explains the process by which the US perceived China's activities in the South China Sea as a national security threat in the 2010s through securitization theory. As Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998) explained, an issue or problem becomes a security issue through the following securitization process: (a) an issue or problem is presented as an existential threat in discourses, and (b) the audience accepts that an extraordinary measure is needed to tackle the threat. An issue or problem is securitized by adopting a special policy or measure to address it that is distinct from existing policies. We can also identify a securitization process through elevated threat perception (the increasing level of threat perception of China's maritime actions in this study) (Jackson 2006, 312). Based on securitization theory, this section traces and explains the process by which the China threat discourse in the US concerning Chinese assertive activities in the South China Sea was presented, augmented, and accepted among policymakers in the 2010s. There were critical moments in the securitization process, including the harassment of the USNS *Impeccable* in 2009 and the Chinese reclamation and militarization of islands in the South China Sea. The US ultimately abandoned its engagement policy, adopted a new foreign policy toward China outlined in its 2017 *National Security Strategy* document, and began strategic competition with China (The White House 2017). I use the remarks of political leaders and policymakers in US administrations, senators and representatives in the US Congress, foreign and security experts, and primary US news sources from 2009 to 2016 to trace the China threat discourse in the US that

securitizes China's actions in the South China Sea.

China's Strategic Objectives and China's Efforts to Expand Its Influence into the Far Seas

In the early 2010s, the US understood that China's strategic objectives had been consistent over time. They included "preserving Communist Party rule, sustaining economic growth and development, defending national sovereignty and territorial integrity, achieving national unification, maintaining internal stability, and securing China's status as a great power" (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2012, 2). Protecting China's sovereignty and territorial integrity has been considered a core interest. China's leaders stressed the goal of achieving benchmarks by 2020, which included the successful restructuring of the economy, military modernization, capability building for a Taiwan contingency, protection of sea lines of communication, and defense of territorial claims in the East and South China Seas. As China has depended more on maritime commerce and its perceived security interests have changed, some domestic voices called for a more active and assertive role on the international stage. They advocated strengthening the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s power projection capabilities well beyond Taiwan and regional issues (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2013, 3-21).

As a continental power, China has been focused on near-seas defense with its offshore defense strategy since the 1980s. PLA General Liu Huaqing once called for operations beyond China's near seas and asserted that China needed to develop aircraft carriers. China's growing interests in commercial and diplomatic areas had begun to be reflected in the country's navy missions, which called for far-seas operations beyond its near seas (Park 2010, 124-7). In particular, Beijing's eagerness to secure its energy sources from overseas made the country more dependent on sea lines of communication, such as the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca. In 2010, over 80 percent of China's oil imports went through the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca.

In the mid-2000s, Chinese leaders, including military leaders, began envisioning an expanded maritime strategy beyond their near seas. For instance, in 2004, President Hu Jintao declared the "Historic Missions of the Armed Forces in the New Period of the New Century," (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2011, 16) a mission statement that emphasized the PLA's role in securing China's national interests. These new missions established a rationale for China to have missions beyond its maritime periphery. In December 2006, President Hu added that the People's Republic of China (PRC) should continue to strengthen and modernize the PLA Navy. In the same year, Wu Shengli, commander of the PLA Navy, also called for a "powerful (Chinese) navy" (ibid., 39). It is noteworthy that China's State Oceanic Administration announced that "building maritime power is China's historic task for the 21st century, and the decade from 2010-2020 is the key historic stage for realizing this task" in its 2010 China Ocean's Development

Report (ibid., 57). China had deployed its navy beyond its maritime periphery. The PLA Navy's counter-piracy escort operations in the Gulf of Aden are one example of China's efforts to realize the new historic missions set by President Hu. The PLA Navy has shown its capability to conduct operations beyond the second island chain with nine deployments to the Gulf of Aden between 2009 and 2011. In 2010, China also dispatched the country's first large hospital ship to Africa, and the PLA conducted an evacuation operation of PRC citizens from Libya (ibid., 16-60). In March 2010, a Chinese warship stopped at Abu Dhabi ports, marking the first deployment of the modern PLA Navy to the Middle East and a critical moment for the PLA Navy's power projection beyond its near seas (Wong 2010). The US assessed that the commissioning of the Liaoning, China's first aircraft carrier, was the most significant development in the PLA Navy. It was estimated that the aircraft carrier could navigate in the East and South China Seas in the near future, and that a carrier battle group would enhance the PLA Navy's long-range operational capabilities (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2013, 65-66). The PLA Navy conducted submarine deployments to the Indian Ocean in 2014, its first "far seas" deployments well beyond the first island chain (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2015, 41). This development was likely very alarming to US policymakers.

Harassment of the USNS Impeccable

Before the US made its official pivot to Asia in 2011, a China threat discourse emerged in the US that worried about China's assertive and expansive activities in the South China Sea, regarding them as threatening US national security. The harassment of the USNS Impeccable by Chinese vessels in the South China Sea in 2009 stoked fears about China among US policymakers, and played a critical role in disseminating the China threat discourse in the US. On March 8, 2009, five Chinese vessels maneuvered aggressively close to a US Navy ship, the USNS Impeccable, which was conducting a surveillance operation in the South China Sea. The Chinese vessels included an intelligence-collection vessel, patrol vessels from the Bureau of Maritime Fisheries, the State Oceanographic Administration, and two small trawlers. The Chinese vessels dangerously approached the USNS Impeccable within twenty-five feet. The White House urged China to respect international law in the aftermath of the harassment by Chinese vessels and announced that the US would continue to operate in the South China Sea (*Associated Press* 2009).

The harassment of the USNS Impeccable by Chinese vessels in the South China Sea invoked a China threat discourse that assessed Chinese assertive activities and expansive efforts in the South China Sea as damaging to US national security and urged the US government to take stronger action against China. For instance, the US Department of Defense urged China to constrain its aggressive actions in the South China Sea that would endanger US Navy ships

(*Fox News* 2009). Members of the US Congress also expressed grave concerns about the Impeccable incident and assessed the Chinese move to be strategic. At a hearing before the Subcommittee on East Asia and Pacific Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations on July 15, 2009, Senator Jim Webb assessed that the Chinese vessels interfered with the principle of freedom of navigation and argued that the Impeccable incident and the disputes concerning sovereignty in the South China Sea demonstrated growing assertiveness by China regarding its maritime rights (US Government Printing Office 2009). One month earlier, at a hearing before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Representative Madeleine Z. Bordallo stressed the danger that Chinese naval modernization poses to US national security, stating that developing anti-ship cruise missiles or an aircraft carrier could directly target US naval forces in the Asia-Pacific area (US-China Economic and Security Review Commission 2009). The congresswoman urged the US to show its commitment and capabilities to defend itself and its allies against China by maintaining a strong forward presence in the region. *The Washington Post* also assessed that China was projecting military power in maritime domains and strengthening its naval capabilities (Tyson 2009).

Voices on the China threat in the maritime domain continued in 2010. In March, Robert F. Willard, the commander of the US Pacific Command, testified before Congress and expressed concern that China's military modernization was designed to challenge US freedom of action in the Asia-Pacific region (Wong 2010). On June 9, 2010, at an Asia Society dinner, Admiral Michael G. Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, also expressed concern about China's heavy military investments (Asia Society 2010).

Amid security concerns over China's military modernization and assertive activities in the South China Sea, the US government signaled an unprecedented move by indicating that it could intervene in territorial disputes in the South China Sea between China and its neighboring countries. Speaking at a forum in July 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton announced that the US could step into territorial disputes. She stated that it was in the US national interest to mediate such disputes (Jacobs 2010).

US Asia Rebalancing Policy and the Ongoing Discourse on China Threat

In November 2011, the Obama administration officially started the Asia rebalancing policy by announcing its pivot to Asia (Clinton 2011). The discourse on the China threat, which presented Chinese maritime activities in the South China Sea as a national security threat to the US and called for more determined action against China, persisted among US policymakers and in Congress.

As a former Navy pilot and a senior Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, Senator John S. McCain was at the forefront of the China threat discourse, which called for a tougher policy toward China across

many issues, including the South China Sea dispute. He urged the Obama administration to make it clear to China that it could not do whatever it wanted. McCain stressed the significance of the principle of freedom of navigation as a vital US interest, emphasizing that China's claim to the South China Sea was a violation of the principle of freedom of navigation of the seas for which the US has fought wars (Shalal-Esa 2011). On September 20, 2012, Senator James M. Inhofe, ranking member of the Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, also assessed China's series of military activities in the South China Sea as destabilizing and harmful to regional security. He emphasized that China had continued its threatening and aggressive actions in the South China Sea despite the passage of a resolution in the US Congress (US Government Printing Office 2012). James R. Clapper, the director of national intelligence, presented the reassessment of China, stating that "China poses a mortal threat to the US," adding that the assessment was not a myth (Bosco 2012).

On March 5, 2013, Howard P. McKeon, Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, assessed that China's activities in the South China Sea "pose a threat" to US national security interests, to US regional allies and partners, and to the sea lines of communication that are vital to the stability of the world economy (US Government Printing Office 2013a, 2). Admiral Samuel J. Locklear III, Commander of the US Pacific Command, at a hearing on April 9, 2013, before the Armed Services Committee, shared surprising intelligence on Chinese military operations, including increased maritime intelligence collection operations by China in 2012 and the country's historic first missions beyond the first island chain into the Indian Ocean and within the US exclusive economic zone off the coasts of Hawaii and Guam (US Government Printing Office 2013b).

Dana Rohrabacher, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats in the US House, at a hearing on October 30, 2013, on "China's Maritime and Other Geographic Threats," presented China as a clear threat, stating that "Red China is the threat of the 21st Century" (US Government Printing Office 2013c, 1). Senator Robert Menendez, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, at a hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations on June 25, 2014, criticized China's provocative actions in the South China Sea that were coercing and threatening neighboring countries with military force to settle territorial disputes (US Government Printing Office 2014). Menendez continued, stating that China's actions in the South China Sea threatened regional stability as well as longstanding US interests in the freedom of navigation, the free flow of commerce, and the peaceful diplomatic resolution of South China Sea disputes in line with international law. Menendez also called for an evaluation of the strategic reality posed by China's rise and a reconceptualization of the problems facing the US (ibid.). On July 7, 2014, *The Washington Post* reported that a narrative was taking hold that China ultimately wanted to push the US out of Asia (Denyer 2014).

China's Reclamation and Militarization of Islands in the South China Sea

China's reclamation and militarization of islands in the South China Sea provided more credibility to the China threat discourse in the maritime domain. US policymakers presented China's activities more explicitly as a national security threat to the US. They urged the US government to take tougher and more immediate action to address China's aggressive maritime actions.

For example, Senator John McCain reemphasized the dangers posed by China's aggressive activities in the South China Sea. He presented the China threat more clearly at a hearing before the Committee on Armed Services on April 14, 2015. He assessed that China's land reclamation and construction activities on islands in the South China Sea, including the Spratly Islands, along with the command and control, surveillance, and military capabilities that China could have on these islands, were "a direct challenge to the interests of the United States and the nations of the Asia-Pacific region" (US Government Printing Office 2015a, 2). He added that such unilateral efforts by China to change the status quo in the South China Sea through force and intimidation destabilized peace across the Asia-Pacific region. Once again, Senator McCain urged the US government to take tougher action. He highlighted that the US should cooperate with allies and like-minded countries to apply a comprehensive strategy to influence China's behavior (*ibid.*).

Senator Bob Corker, who raised concerns over an incoherent China policy in 2014, also highlighted the seriousness of China's reclamation and militarization of islands in the South China Sea at a hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations on "Safeguarding American Interests in the East and South China Seas" on May 13, 2015 (US Government Printing Office 2015b). He shared intelligence that China was intentionally engaging in land reclamation and the construction of facilities that could be used for other purposes, such as military ones. China was constructing airstrips and ports, and Corker emphasized that the scope and scale of those activities were unprecedented in the South China Sea. He added that he had sent a letter to the Secretaries of State and Defense, along with Senators Menendez, Reed, and McCain, to express his grave concerns about China's aggressive actions to change the status quo through land reclamation and the construction of military facilities in the South China Sea. Senator Benjamin L. Cardin agreed with the argument that Senator Corker had made about the China threat, stating that China's actions jeopardized the free flow of commerce in the region and adding that the US had a direct interest in this matter and should do everything it could to resolve the issues peacefully (*ibid.*). Senator Cardin also stressed that the US should continue to demonstrate a long-lasting commitment and enduring presence in the region. Bonnie S. Glaser (2015), a senior adviser at the Asia Center for Strategic and International Studies, similarly raised concerns about China's ultimate objective in the South China Sea at a hearing before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission on May 15, 2015. The

senior adviser assessed that China ultimately sought to control as much of the South China Sea as possible. She expected that China would defend its sea lines of communication and increase the costs to the US of navigating in the region.

Officials in the US administration also joined the China threat discourse. Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken presented China's unilateral and coercive actions to change the status quo in the South China Sea as a threat to peace and stability in the region (Denyer 2015). Secretary of State John Kerry specifically pointed to the land reclamation issue at the East Asia Summit on August 6, 2015. It is important to note that the Secretary presented the issue as "an urgent regional priority," and he made clear that the US had expressed concern to China about its land reclamation efforts (The US Department of State 2015). He then emphasized that freedom of navigation and overflight are critical components of international maritime law and made it clear that the US would not accept restrictions on these freedoms. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter also expressed the US's opposition to China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea on April 8, 2015, in response to a question on China's construction efforts in the Spratly Islands (LaGrone 2015). He stated that there would be no changes to the status quo and delivered the US position that it would take a strong stand against the militarization of disputes in the South China Sea.

The call for a tougher policy against China continued in the US Congress. Senator John McCain (2015), for example, continued to speak forcefully about the China threat, as he did in his opening statement at the Senate Armed Services Committee meeting on maritime security strategy in the Asia-Pacific on September 17, 2015. He explained recent developments in China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea, noting that China's military modernization would deny the US the ability to access and operate in the Pacific, and that China was rapidly militarizing the reclaimed land, constructing military-purpose structures such as garrisons, intelligence and surveillance infrastructure, harbors, and airstrips. He also emphasized that China was unilaterally changing the status quo through coercion and intimidation, and that the objective was to assert sovereignty over the South China Sea, a critical sea line of communication for the global economy. He called for a new China policy to address this issue, as the threats posed by Chinese actions were not conventional. He warned that the China threats would harm the national security interests of the US, the peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific region, and a rules-based international order (ibid.). The US Navy (2015) also assessed China's naval expansion as a challenge to the US in its strategy, as detailed in *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, which was released in March 2015. The strategy estimated that the goal of China's military modernization was not clear, so there was a risk of misperception and the escalation of conflicts in the process, during which China used coercion and intimidation in dealing with its maritime disputes. Matt Salmon, the chairman of the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific of the Committee on Foreign

Affairs in the House, raised the threat from China at a joint hearing on July 7, 2016 (US Government Printing Office 2016a). He clearly stated that the threat posed by China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea was severe and that China's actions undermined international norms. He acknowledged that US policies, including publicized freedom of navigation operations to address China's assertive claims in the South China Sea, had failed, and that tensions continued to mount. He also pointed out the important development that China had come to control many areas with the help of military facilities in the disputed areas. He expected that the South China Sea territorial disputes would pose significant challenges.

Elbridge Colby, the Robert M. Gates Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security, emphasized the severity of the threat posed by China to the interests of the US and called for hawkish policies toward China at a hearing on September 22, 2016, before the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (US Government Printing Office 2016b). In particular, he criticized the US government's hesitancy in addressing China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and the negative impacts of that hesitancy on US relations with its allies and partners in the region. He stressed that the situation was more serious and that the US required resolute leadership and long-lasting strength to urge the countries in the region to balance China. He judged that China's militarization of the islands in the South China Sea, including the Spratly Islands, posed a greater threat to US forces and regional states than was appreciated. He then outlined two principles for US action to address the China threat: (1) demonstration of greater resolve to assume risk, and (2) building up the military and economic strength of US allies and partners. He called for more assertive freedom of navigation operations and an intensified military presence in the region. He also strongly urged the US Congress to support and fund the government's military presence in the region.

The US Department of Defense's annual reports on China's military and security developments also addressed China's reclamation in the South China Sea as a special topic. The 2015 report explained that "China engaged in an extensive land reclamation effort at five of its outposts in the Spratly Islands in 2014" (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2015, 70). The 2016 report, in particular, paid special attention to China's reclamation and militarization efforts in the South China Sea with detailed information as well as satellite images of the outposts, including the Mischief Reef outposts, Johnson Reef South outpost, Hughes Reef outpost, and so on (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2016). For example, China completed the reclamation of the Mischief Reef outposts and built an airstrip and ship berthing area there. The original size of the outpost expanded from 0.6 acres to 1,408 acres. In the case of the Johnson Reef South outpost, China completed reclamation in 2014, built headquarters, a power generation facility, and a lighthouse, and the outpost's original size expanded from 0.3 acres to 27 acres (*ibid.*, 13-21).

In sum, the audience in the process of securitization, such as political leaders, policymakers, members of Congress (regardless of their political orientation), and national security experts, gradually reached a consensus that China's actions in the South China Sea were a clear existential security threat to the US. They called for a policy change to address the China threat. As this article concurs with the criticism that the Copenhagen School's securitization theory does not clearly theorize the specific conditions of successful securitization of an issue, this article argues that a radical policy change is an indicator of successful securitization (Jackson 2006, 313-5). Further research, however, is needed to develop a theory of audience acceptance. Based on the indicator of successful securitization, it could be inferred that the audience had accepted that an extraordinary measure was needed to tackle the China threat when a radical policy change was made: the adoption of a new national security strategy that defined China as a revisionist country challenging the US. The perception of China in the new strategy was itself *extraordinary*, and the policy toward China was also an *extraordinary measure* compared to existing policies.

2017 US National Security Strategy and the Beginning of a New China Policy

In December 2017, the US (under the Trump administration) announced a new national security strategy, which succeeded and updated the 2015 US *National Security Strategy* (The White House 2015). In the end, the US securitized China's aggressive activities in the South China Sea, as securitization theory explains, by adopting a new policy toward China, which was outlined in its newly published *National Security Strategy* (The White House 2017). The announcement of the new *National Security Strategy* and the new China policy was an explicit acknowledgement that the existing US policy was not effective in addressing the issues presented in the China threat discourse and that the US needed a new and extraordinary approach.

A comparison of the 2015 and 2017 US *National Security Strategy* publications shows clear differences in the perceptions of the US government toward China and its policies related to China. Table 1 summarizes the significant transformations in US perceptions and policies toward China between 2015 and 2017.

The 2015 US *National Security Strategy* presented an assessment that China's rise was an important factor, along with India and Russia, that would influence the future of relations among major powers (The White House 2015). The strategy expressed US willingness to welcome the rise of a stable, peaceful, and prosperous China. That policy could be termed an engagement policy toward China, which sought to develop a mutually beneficial relationship by cooperating on issues such as the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, public health, and climate change. The US acknowledged that there would be competition; however, it expressed its willingness to avoid confrontations with China by managing the

Table 1. Major Changes in US Perceptions and Policies toward China

	2015 US National Security Strategy	2017 US National Security Strategy
US Perceptions of China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The rise of China is an important variable that would affect relations among major powers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China is a revisionist country that challenges the US
Policies Toward China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement policy • Welcomes the peaceful rise of China • Encourages China to respect international norms and principles • Cautious about China's modernization of the military • Rejects coercion or intimidation by China in territorial disputes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Containment policy • Rejects China's unfair trade practices • Limits China's acquisition of sensitive technologies • Supports the One China policy • Strengthens relations with Taiwan
Maritime Security Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourages China to respect international norms and principles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China's construction and militarization of outposts in the South China Sea threaten the free flow of trade and endanger regional stability

Source: Author.

competition and reducing the risk of misunderstanding or miscalculation. The strategy stated that the US would make China respect international rules and norms on maritime security, trade, and human rights. The strategy also stated that the US would monitor China's military modernization and expanding presence in Asia.

The 2017 US *National Security Strategy* demonstrated a dramatic shift in perception and policy toward China, signaling the official start of US strategic competition with China (The White House 2017). The new strategy was the culmination of the China threat discourse that many policymakers, members of Congress, and foreign policy experts had raised for a decade. They had presented China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea as a threat to US national security interests. The China threat discourse, which had presented a threat from China, was supported and shared, and finally accepted, resulting in a dramatic shift in perception and policy toward China that was articulated in the 2017 US *National Security Strategy*.

The 2017 US *National Security Strategy* expressed a perception of both the world and China that differed from the 2015 strategy. The new strategy observed that the world had entered a period of great power competition, in which China was developing military capabilities to deny US access and contest the US ability to operate in vital commercial zones. Moreover, the 2017 strategy officially defined China and Russia as revisionist powers and challengers to US power, influence, and interests, seeking to damage US security and prosperity. It

described China as a revisionist power that sought to expel the US from the Indo-Pacific region and reorder it in China's favor.

The 2017 US *National Security Strategy* presented a dramatic shift in policy toward China, criticizing previous US engagement policies that had supported China's rise and its integration into the international order. The strategy argued that China had exploited its access to the US to develop its economic and military capabilities. Although it did not exclude the possibility of cooperation between the US and China, it strongly criticized China's construction and militarization of outposts in the South China Sea as threatening the free flow of trade and endangering regional stability. The new strategy also assessed that China was undertaking rapid modernization of its military to constrain US access to the Indo-Pacific region. It stated that the US would respect the "One China" policy while maintaining its strong relationship with Taiwan in line with the Taiwan Relations Act. The strategy also criticized China's unfair trade practices as well as investments in critical sectors and sensitive technologies. It pledged that the US would cooperate with its partners to challenge China's unfair trade practices, limit China's acquisition of sensitive technologies, and help states in South Asia maintain their sovereignty as China expands its influence in the region.

Conclusion

This study traced and examined the origins of US-China strategic competition in maritime security by analyzing the securitization of China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea. In particular, it analyzed the process of securitization in which the US has come to perceive Chinese activities in the South China Sea as a national security threat and, using securitization theory, explained this process, focusing on the China threat discourse in the US. As securitization theory explains, the process of securitization, in which the US has perceived Chinese activities in the South China Sea as a national security threat, is consistent with a constructivist argument. As a result of the harassment of the USNS *Impeccable* by Chinese vessels in the South China Sea, a China threat discourse emerged, raising security concerns about China's aggressive actions and was increasingly shared among policymakers in the government, members of Congress, and foreign policy experts. The land reclamation and militarization of islands in the South China Sea further strengthened the China threat discourse, which presented China's maritime activities as a US national security threat and called for a tougher policy toward China. High-ranking foreign and security policy officials also joined the discourse, which eventually led to a dramatic change in perception and policy toward China. In this sense, the shift from the China policy as articulated in the 2015 US *National Security Strategy* to the 2017 US *National Security Strategy* was not a sudden change but the result of a gradual process of

securitization of China.

Although this article enhances understanding of the origins of US-China strategic competition through the securitization approach, it nevertheless has limitations, and additional research is needed to address these limitations. First, this article does not analyze the specific processes through which the 2017 national security strategy was formulated. Such an analysis would provide a more rigorous understanding of the causal effect of the China threat discourse on the policy shift toward China. The research, however, would be challenging, as it would open the black box of the decision-making processes that led to the final version of the 2017 *National Security Strategy*. Second, while this article identifies critical junctures, such as the USNS Impeccable incident and China's island militarization effort, it does not succeed in analyzing the change in audience acceptance levels. Therefore, future research should focus on theorizing the conditions or levels of audience acceptance. Third, as this article focuses on the US perception of China, it does not fully address the motivations behind China's aggressive actions. If future research seeks to analyze the interaction between the US and China, a full account of the motivations behind China's aggressive actions and interactions between the two powers, including China's responses to the US's China threat discourse and policy moves, should be included in the analysis.

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