The Influence of Naval Competition between the United States and China on the Militarization over Asian Maritime Claims

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Abstract

Recent interactions between China and the United States have displayed intense competition between the two great powers and signaled intensified instability in Asian waters: A collision between a Chinese fighter and a U.S. Navy EP-3 in 2001, harassment of Chinese vessels to the survey ship USNS Impeccable in 2009, and a dangerous encounter between a U.S. naval warship, Decatur, and a Chinese naval warship, Lanzhou, near the Spratly Islands in 2018. These skirmishes in Asian maritime areas have aroused great interest from scholars and practitioners who study conflictual behaviors between the two great powers, the United States and China. This research focuses on how naval power dynamics between the United States and China influence their conflictual behaviors in Asian waters. Similar to the hegemonic stability arguments, as the challenger (China) decreases a naval power gap with the dominant state (the United States), the former becomes dissatisfied with and questions the existing order, which increases uncertainty over Asian waters. Empirical results show that as China modernizes its naval power and reduces a naval power gap with the United States, the number of conflictual behaviors over maritime claims in Asia increases.

Keywords: *Naval Competition between the U.S. and China, Maritime Claims, Asia*

Introduction

Two major trends are notable in interstate conflict studies. First, disputes over maritime areas have been increasing while competition to conquer land has been decreasing. According to the Issue Correlates of War (ICOW) project,[1] among issue claims over land, river, and maritime areas from 1900 to 2001, 86 maritime claims[2] occurred during that time period, which is two times more likely than land and river claims. Second, since the end of the Cold War, the central point of interstate interactions and the world economy has moved from Europe to Asia.[3] The frequent use of terms that represent the great power competition between the U.S. and China, such as the New Cold War and Cold War 2.0, shows the importance of Asia in explaining issues in world politics.[4] These two trends, naturally, tell that skirmishes over maritime areas in Asia, such as the South China Sea and East China Sea disputes, have aroused great interest from scholars and practitioners to study conflictual behaviors among states and great powers.

In 2016, even though the International Court of Justice in the Hague delivered no legal bases for China's arguments around its artificial islands in the South China Sea,[5] China has continuously argued for its sovereignty and sovereign rights over these artificial islands and surrounding maritime areas. To deal with the controversial issues in the South China Sea, China has routinely deployed naval warships to consolidate its arguments over the disputed maritime areas. Even though the United States is not a direct party to the dispute, it has repeatedly warned that any disruptions of sea traffic or free navigation in the area will not be tolerated[6] because these assertive actions of China in the South China Sea have substantially influenced the U.S. strategic and economic interests in the Asia-Pacific region. As part of the efforts to maintain stability in the sea in Asia, the U.S. Navy has conducted the Freedom of Navigation Operations, which

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1) ICOW is a research project that collects systematic data on contentious issues over land, rivers, and maritime areas. Data is available on the ICOW Web site at http://data.icow.org.

2) Maritime claims involve diplomatic contentions between two or more states over the access to or the usage of maritime areas. The South China Sea disputes and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands disputes are common examples of maritime claims. More details will be discussed later.

3) Jo Inge Bekkevoldand and Geoffrey Till, "International Order at Sea: What It Is. How It Is Challenged. How It Is Maintained," In *International Order at Sea How it is challenged, how it is maintained*, eds. Jo Inge Bekkevold and Geoffrey Till(New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 7-9.

4) U.S. Congressional Research Service, "Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense—Issues for Congress(2022)," See https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R43838.pdf, p. 35.

5) Jane Perlez, "Tribunal Rejects Beijing's Claims in South China Sea," *The New York Times*, July 12, 2016.

6) Geoffrey Till, *Seapower A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 290.

sometimes led to several skirmishes between the United States and China. For example, a collision between a Chinese fighter and a U.S. Navy EP-3 in 2001, harassment of Chinese vessels to the survey ship USNS Impeccable in 2009, and a dangerous encounter between a U.S. naval warship, *Decatur*, and a Chinese warship, *Lanzhou*, near the Spratly Islands in 2018, clearly show an increasing uncertainty and instability between two great powers in Asian waters. As these examples show, Asian waters, including the South China Sea, have emerged as an arena of strategic competition between the United States and China.

As the primary means of foreign policy in the sea, naval power has been commonly used to support states' foreign policy behaviors in the sea, which range from coercive to pacifying options.[7] Naval power is the most appropriate means to influence opponents by overcoming the problem of "stopping power of water"[8] to project power.[9] There are no exceptions for the United States and China. Frequent and aggressive interactions between the two great powers and maritime claimants over Asian waters are a function of naval power. Thus, one question can be raised. How do naval power dynamics between the United States and China influence conflictual behaviors over maritime claims in Asia?

Similar to the hegemonic stability arguments, as the challenger (China) decreases a naval power gap with the dominant state (the United States) in Asian waters, the former becomes dissatisfied with and questions the existing order, which increases uncertainty over Asian waters. Empirical results show that as China modernizes its naval power and reduces a naval power gap with the United States, the number of conflictual behaviors over maritime claims in Asia increases.

This article proceeds as follows. Part one explains the concept and importance of maritime claims. Part two develops my theoretical arguments about how naval power dynamics between the United States and China influence the occurrence of militarized disputes over Asian maritime claims. Part three specifies a research design to test a hypothesis, and the last part discusses empirical results, implications, and limitations of this research.

Maritime Claims

The ICOW project defines maritime claims as an explicit contention between

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7) Ken Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1979), p. 251.

8) It is necessary to project power in order to influence other states' behaviors. When compared to land, the projection of power at sea is difficult because the sea hinders power projection. Thus, without an appropriate means, power projection at sea is limited. Refer to John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: Norton, 2014), p. 114.

9) Jonghwan Han, "A Vanguard of Foreign Policy over Maritime Claims: Naval Power rather than National Power," The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis, Vol. 32, No. 2(2020), pp. 315-316.

two or more states over the access to or the usage of maritime areas. It includes a wide range of contentions about sovereignty or the usage of maritime space, ranging from verbal quarrels to wars. Compared to other types of issue claims over land and rivers, maritime claims have an inherent problem: uncertain borderlines. It is clear to divide the land into pieces and assign individual rights to hold, while establishing boundaries of nonstationary resources, especially water, is vague and unclear.

After the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982, which proclaimed criteria for boundaries of territorial waters, contiguous zones, continental shelves, and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs),[10] discordances among coastal states over maritime areas have been intensified. In addition, rising demands for natural resources in the sea and fishing have dramatically increased the possibility of maritime claims. To be specific, according to the ICOW project, maritime claims are the most frequent type of claims over territorial issues that began between 1900 and 2001.[11] Table 1 indicates the total number of each type of ICOW claims that began between 1900 and 2001. Among 157 issue claims initiated between 1900 and 2001, more than half of them (54.8 percent) were maritime claims, which is more than double the rate of land claims (35) and river claims (36).

<Table 1> The number of each type of ICOW claims that began between 1900 and 2001

Type	Maritime claims	Land claims	River claims	Total
Number of claims (%)	**86 (54.8%)**	35 (22.3%)	36 (22.9%)	157 (100%)

10) "Territorial waters" are maritime areas that stretch from the baseline (usually the mean low-water mark) out to 12 nautical miles (nm). Within territorial waters, coastal states can exercise sovereignty. "Contiguous zones" are maritime areas that stretch from the baseline out to 24nm. Within contiguous zones, coastal states can exercise authority for customs, fiscal, immigration, and sanitary issues. "Continental shelves" are seabed areas up to 350nm from the baseline. Within continental shelves, coastal states have sovereign rights over non-living and living resources. "Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs)" extends 200 nm from the baseline. Within EEZs, coastal states have exclusive rights regarding the exploration and the usage of living and non-living resources. Refer to Victor Prescott and Clive Schofield, *The Maritime Political Boundaries of the World, 2nd ed.* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2005).

11) Data is collected from the current published version (1.10) of ICOW Claim-Level Summary Data. The dataset covers land/river/maritime claims in the Western Hemisphere and Europe from 1900 to 2001; it will include the claims made in Asia and the Middle East in the future update. It is available on the ICOW Web site at http://data.icow.org.

As <Table 1> demonstrates, when compared to other types of claims, maritime claims have been the most frequent claims. It seems maritime claims will occur more frequently in the future due to the heavy reliance of the world trading system on the sea and the importance of the sea as a food source for the growing world population. These necessities to use and to access to the sea will lead to more intensive competition and tension among coastal states about exclusive rights to use resources in the sea, such as fisheries and offshore oil.

<Table 2> compares the numbers of all types of Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs)[12] and fatal MIDs, which result in at least one fatality, over ICOW claims initiated between 1900 and 2001. According to <Table 2>, among all types of claims, maritime claims are most likely to experience all types of MIDs. To be specific, 41.9 percent of maritime claims during this time period experienced one or more MIDs, while 25.7 percent of land claims and 19.4 percent of river claims produced all types of MIDs. Therefore, between 1900 and 2001, maritime claims appear to be the most conflictual type of claims. Relatedly, Nemeth et al. (2014) argue that from the perspective of security and economic importance, maritime claims generate more potential triggering points for militarized conflicts.[13]

<Table 2> Militarization of each type of ICOW claims that began between 1900 and 2001

	Maritime claims	**Land claims**	**River claims**
All types of MIDs			
Yes	**36 (41.9%)**	9 (25.7%)	7 (19.4%)
No	50	26	29
Total	86	35	36
Fatal MIDs			
Yes	6 (7%)	4 (11.4%)	3 (8.3%)
No	80	31	33
Total	86	35	36

12) Militarized Interstate Disputes(MIDs) are defined as "historical cases of conflict in which the threat, display or use of military force short of war by a member state is explicitly directed towards the government, official representatives, official forces, property, or territory of another state. Disputes are composed of incidents that range in intensity from threats to use force to actual combat short of war." Refer to Daniel Jones, Stuart Bremer, and David Singer, "Militarized Interstate Disputes, 1816−1992: Rationale, Coding Rules, and Empirical Patterns," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 15, No. 2(1996), p. 163.

13) Stephen Nemeth, Sara Mitchell, Elizabeth Nyman, and Paul Hensel, "Ruling the Sea: Managing Maritime Conflicts through UNCLOS and Exclusive Economic Zones," *International Interactions*, Vol. 40, No. 5(2014), pp. 711-736.

There have been many quantitative studies that analyze maritime claims. These studies investigate maritime claims based on two different levels of theoretical factors: (1) systemic level: international institutions[14] and systemic level of democracy;[15] and (2) dyadic level: issue salience,[16] past experience,[17] the presence of resources,[18] rivalry,[19] and joint democracy.[20] While naval power greatly helps account for states' foreign policy behaviors over maritime areas, surprisingly, there have been few theoretical and empirical studies on interstate conflicts that focus on the role of naval power to explain issues over maritime claims. As Nyman (2013) argues, disputes over maritime claims are primarily conducted by claimants' navies.[21] Furthermore, factors at the systematic or regional level matter in studying interstate conflicts because they can influence the formation of competitive or peaceful environments for states, such as the level of competition between the dominant and the challenging states. Thus, this research supplements previous literature by focusing on naval power dynamics between the dominant state (United States) and the challenging state (China) to explain issues in Asian waters.

14) Andrew Owsiak and Sara Mitchell, "Conflict Management Regimes and the Management of Land, River, and Maritime Claims," *Political Science Research and Methods*, Vol. 7, No. 1(2019), pp. 43-61.; Holley Hansen, Sara Mitchell, and Stephen Nemeth, "IO Mediation of Interstate Conflicts: Moving beyond the Global versus Regional Dichotomy," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 52, No. 2(2008), pp. 295-325; Sara Mitchell and Paul Hensel, "International Institutions and Compliance with Agreements," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 51, No. 4(2007), pp. 721-737; Stephen Nemeth, Sara Mitchell, Elizabeth Nyman, and Paul Hensel, "Ruling the Sea: Managing Maritime Conflicts through UNCLOS and Exclusive Economic Zones," pp. 711-736;

15) Mark Crescenzi, Kelly Kadera, and Sara Mitchell, "A Supply Side Theory of Mediation," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 4(2011), pp. 1069-1094.

16) Paul Hensel, Sara Mitchell, Thomas Sowers, and Clayton Thyne, "Bones of Contention: Comparing Territorial, Maritime, and River Issues," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 52, No. 1(2008), pp. 117-143.

17) Paul Hensel, Sara Mitchell, Thomas Sowers, and Clayton Thyne, "Bones of Contention: Comparing Territorial, Maritime, and River Issues," pp. 117-143.

18) Áslaug Ásgeirsdóttir and Martin Steinwand, "Distributive Outcomes in Contested Maritime Areas: The Role of Inside Options in Settling Competing Claims," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, November 23, 2016.; Elizabeth Nyman, "Offshore Oil Development and Maritime Conflict in the 20th Century: A Statistical Analysis of International Trends," *Energy Research & Social Science* 6(2015), pp. 1-7.

19) David Lektzian, Brandon Prins, and Mark Souva, "Territory, River, and Maritime Claims in the Western Hemisphere: Regime type, Rivalry, and MIDs, 1901 to 2000," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 4(2010), pp. 1073-1098.

20) Kelly Daniels and Sara Mitchell, "Bones of Democratic Contention: Maritime Disputes," *International Area Studies Review*, Vol. 20, No. 4(2017), pp. 294-310.

21) Elizabeth Nyman, "Oceans of Conflict: Determining Potential Areas of Maritime Disputes," *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 33, No. 3(2013), p. 6.

How Naval Power Competition between the United States and China Influences the Occurrence of Militarized Interstate Disputes over Maritime Claims in Asia

The theories about hegemonic stability and international hierarchy insist that the presence of preponderant hegemonic power leads to stability in the system, since states advantaged by the existing order naturally follow the system to further their interests, and states disadvantaged by the status quo have no choice but to subordinate to the current rules due to considerable power disparity. However, different rates of growth resulting from industrialization, population growth, and technological innovations cause the fluctuation or decline of the dominant power, which is followed by the rise of challenging states undergoing drastic developments. In this case, the decline of dominant power creates leeway for dissatisfied states to further their interests. In other words, if the dominant power remains in a preponderant position, challenging states have no incentive to counter the dominant state. Under the overwhelming power of the dominant state, those satisfied with the status quo, of course, follow the existing order to get security and economic benefits. Even if some states are dissatisfied with the status quo, they are usually too weak to counter the dominant state. In contrast, conflictual behaviors are more likely when the power of challenging states reaches that of the dominant state. Accordingly, the wax and wane of the dominant power followed by the rise of challenging states creates disorder among states.[22)]

There should be no exceptions on issues over the sea. A preponderant naval power creates and maintains order in the sea while other states follow and subordinate to the order forced by the dominant naval power due to considerable disparity in naval power. As Lake (2009) mentions, the hierarchal order in the system has been largely formed and maintained based on projectable military power. In the sea, naval power is the most appropriate type of military power that allows states to overcome obstacles to project military capability over the sea.

Since World War II, as the global leader, the United States has shaped the political and economic order in the sea based on its preponderant naval power.[23)] The United States Oceans Policy in 1983 states that

22) Robert Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 156-185; Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International Organization*, Vol. 39, No. 4(1985), pp. 579-614.

23) Martin Murphy and Toshi Yoshihara, "Fighting the Naval Hegemon: Evolution in French, Soviet, and Chinese Naval Thought," *Naval War College Review,* Vol. 68, No. 3(2015), p. 13.

> the United States has long been a leader in developing customary and conventional law of the sea…The United States will not, however, acquiesce in unilateral acts of other states designed to restrict the rights and freedom of the international community in navigation and overflight and other related high sea uses…The United States will continue efforts to achieve international agreements for the effective management of the sea.[24]

As part of these efforts, the United States has conducted the Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), which consists of (1) consultations and representations by the U.S. diplomats and (2) operational assertions by the U.S. military force. The FONOPs in the South China Sea conducted by the U.S. naval warships are recent examples. While it is difficult to find jurisdictional authority for the United States to urge peaceful settlements and management of South China Sea disputes, the United States has repeatedly argued that it will not tolerate any disruptions of sea traffic or free navigation.[25] As the dominant naval power, the objective of the U.S. policy in the South China Sea has been to maintain regional stability in Asia and to deter conflicts as an option for dispute management. Thus, the United States has deployed naval platforms in the South China Sea.[26] Compared to other regional oceans, the more frequent FONOPs have been conducted in the South China Sea. <Table 3> shows a list of the top 10 countries which have been the targets of the FONOPs from 1991 to 2021.[27] It shows that 149 FONOPs (28 percent) were conducted in the South China Sea, and six of the top 10 targets challenged by the United States are coastal states neighboring the South China Sea. It shows the great interest of the United States in the South China Sea.

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24) The full statement is available on the Web site at https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/143224.pdf.

25) Geoffrey Till, *Seapower A Guide for the Twenty-First Century, 2nd* Ed., p. 290.

26) Peter Dutton, "China's Maritime Disputes in the East and South China Seas," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 67, No. 3(2014), p. 16.

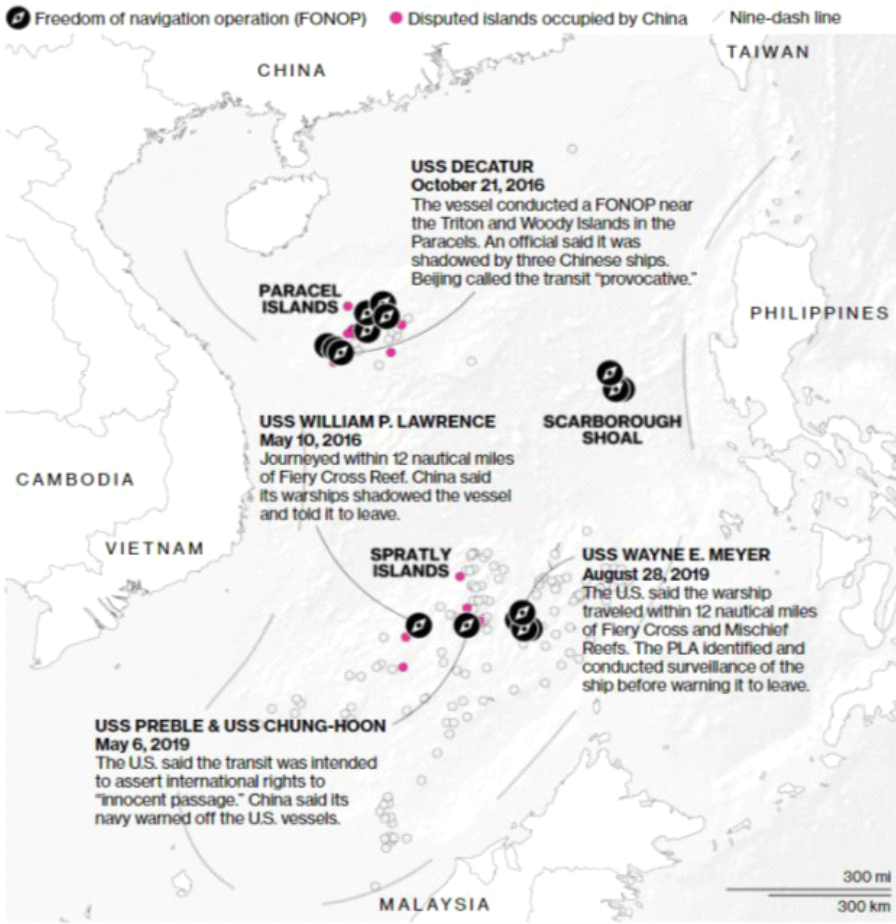
27) Since FY 1991, the U.S. Department of Defense has published an annual FONOPs report. Table 3 summarizes annual reports from FY 1991 to FY 2021. Each year's annual report is available on the U.S. Department of Defense website at http://policy.defense.gov/OUSDP-Offices/FON.

<Table 3> The top 10 targets of the FONOPs, 1991 ~ 2021

Rank	Country	Number of FONOPs	Remarks
1	China	47	South China Sea
2	Iran	32	-
3	Oman	25	-
4	Maldives	25	-
5	The Philippines	23	South China Sea
6	Malaysia	21	South China Sea
7	India	21	-
8	Cambodia	21	South China Sea
9	Vietnam	20	South China Sea
10	Indonesia	17	South China Sea
Total number of FONOPs		530	-

According to <Figure 1>, which shows recent FONOPs in the South China Sea, the recent FONOPs conducted by the U.S. naval platforms have concentrated on disputed islands occupied by China.

<Figure 1> FONOPs in the South China Sea since 2016



Source: U.S. Congressional Research Service, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress(2021).*

There is little doubt that the United States, as the dominant naval power, has played a role as a rule-maker and rule-enforcer to maintain stability in the sea. However, as the South China Sea disputes demonstrate, in tandem with the rapid naval modernization since the 1980s, China has excessively claimed its rights in the South China Sea and has expanded its influence on the regional maritime areas.

Until the 1980s, border threats from the North (the Soviet Union) were the most important security issue for China. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and successive territorial agreements with other states provided China with

opportunities to improve its economic development by focusing on maritime areas. Finkelstein (2007) mentions that under the stable strategic situation on the northern front since the 1990s, China could improve the strategic circumstances of the southern front by strengthening maritime defense, maneuvering on high seas, and maintaining maritime interests.[28)]

Based on the transition of strategic priority from the Soviet Union to the South China Sea, Indian Ocean, and other maritime areas in the late 1980s,[29)] the Chinese navy adopted "Active Offshore Defense" as its official naval strategy. This strategy went beyond its traditional "guerrilla war at sea." The adoption of Active Offshore Defense reflected China's changing priorities − especially Deng's focus on economic modernization and the realization of the increasing importance of maritime areas for China's future development.[30)] Along with the adoption of the new maritime strategy, China has modernized and has, since the 1980s, built up a powerful navy in order to maintain and control Chinese near-seas as well as offshore areas. The U.S. Congressional Research Service report in 2017[31)] mentions that

> Observers believe *China's naval modernization effort is oriented toward developing capabilities for doing the following*: addressing the situation with Taiwan militarily, if need be; *asserting and defending China's territorial claims in the South China Sea and East China Sea, and more generally, achieving a greater degree of control or domination over the South China Sea*; enforcing China's view that it has the right to regulate foreign military activities in its 200-mile maritime exclusive economic zone (EEZ); defending China's commercial sea lines of communication (SLOCs), particularly those linking China to the Persian Gulf; *displacing U.S. influence in the Western Pacific; and asserting China's status as a leading regional power and major world power* (emphasis added).

Relatedly, the U.S. Congressional Research Service report in 2015 describes that Chinese naval modernization can challenge the U.S.-led international order in the sea, especially in the Western Pacific.[32)] The U.S. Department of Defense also

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28) David Finkelstein, "China's National Military Strategy: An Overview of the Military Strategic Guidelines," in *Right Sizing the People's Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China's Military*, eds. Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell(Carlisle: SSI, 2007), pp. 91-93.

29) Ian Storey and You Ji, "China's Aircraft Carrier Ambitions: Seeking the Truth from the Rumors," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 57, No. 1(2004), pp. 77-93.

30) Office of Naval Intelligence, "China's Navy 2007," See https://fas.org/irp/agency/oni/chinanavy2007.pdf.

31) U.S. Congressional Research Service, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities - Background and Issues for Congress(2017)," See https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20171213_RL33153_f2d4205a10334bce2d0fcd608595af90da8a6b7d.pdf., p. 1.

32) U.S. Congressional Research Service, "Maritime Territorial and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)

mentions that the rapid military modernization in Asia, particularly Chinese naval modernization, has significantly increased the possibility of miscalculations or conflicts over maritime areas in Asia.[33] In addition, the 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance mentions that

> We must also contend with the reality that the distribution of power across the world is changing, creating new threats. *China, in particular, has rapidly become more assertive. It is the only competitor* potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained *challenge to a stable and open international system*(emphasis added).[34]

As the hegemonic stability arguments mention, the rise of challengers followed by a reduced power gap between the dominant power and challenging states increases uncertainty. Since the 1990s, China has dramatically modernized its naval forces by increasing the quantity and quality of naval warships. According to the U.S. Congressional Research Service, in terms of the number of principal naval warships, such as aircraft carriers, destroyers, and submarines, China became the largest navy in the world in 2015.[35] It does not necessarily mean that China has the strongest naval power in the world. However, it is difficult to deny that China has decreased the naval power gap with the United States and reduced the advantages and leverage of the United States in the sea. Some argue that in some maritime areas, such as the South China Sea, China's naval power already surpassed U.S. naval power.[36] China's dramatic naval modernization and the reduced naval power gap between the United States and China emboldened China to change the existing order forcefully and challenge the rules made by the United States. This changing distribution of capabilities, naturally, created more competitive and volatile environments that exacerbated insecurities and instability in the region.[37]

In response to these China's naval modernization and frequent deployments of naval platforms to the sea, the United States has shifted its focus to the Indo-Pacific area and assigned its most capable and modernized naval warships and aircraft to the

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Disputes Involving China: Issue for Congress(2018)," See https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42784.pdf.

33) U.S. Department of Defense, "Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy(2015)," See https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs.

34) The White House, *Renewing America's Advantage: Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*(March 2021), pp. 7-8

35) U.S. Congressional Research Service, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities - Background and Issues for Congress(2017)," p. 7.

36) U.S. Congressional Research Service, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities - Background and Issues for Congress(2017)," p. 39.

37) Adam Liff and John Ikenberry, "Racing toward Tragedy? China's Rise, Military Competition in the Asia Pacific, and the Security Dilemma," *International Security*, Vol. 39(fall 2014), p. 52.

Into-Pacific area. To be specific, since the United States Pacific Command was renamed to the United States Indo-Pacific Command in 2018, the U.S. Navy has deployed about 60 percent of naval forces in the area.[38] This naval modernization and militarization between the two great powers in the sea could increase the risk of miscalculation and misunderstanding that cause an escalation of tension or conflict.[39]

Not only for the United States, China's expansive actions in the East and South China Sea also cause the frequent deployment of neighboring states' naval warships, such as Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam to defend their sovereignty and sovereign rights over the disputed maritime areas. Similarly, these frequent deployments of naval warships over the disputed maritime areas could lead to a crisis or conflict between China and neighboring states as well as the United States due to the obligations of bilateral security treaties. In other words, China's assertive claims and behaviors in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, which violate international maritime law, lead to friction with the United States and other neighboring states in the region and increase the risk of inadvertent crisis.[40]

In sum, when Chinese naval power increases and approaches U.S. naval power in Asia, the former becomes dissatisfied with and questions the existing order formed by the United States, which increases uncertainty over the sea in Asia. In turn, this situation provides dissatisfied states with leeway to pursue their interests in maritime areas. Therefore, as China increases its naval power and decreases the naval power gap with the United States, China is more likely to challenge the order and stability, which can lead to more violent behaviors over the sea in Asia. So, the following hypothesis can be developed.

When the disparity of naval power between the United States and China decreases, the number of militarized disputes over maritime claims in Asia increases.

Research Design

Instead of estimating the entire ICOW Asian maritime claims time period (1900-2010),[41] this research focuses on maritime claims from 1989 to 2010. The

38) Krishn Kaushik, "60% Navy forces in Indo-Pacific region now: US Navy chief, *Indianexpress*, October 13, 2021.

39) U.S. Congressional Research Service, "U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress(2021)," See https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/RL42784.pdf, p. 44.

40) U.S. Congressional Research Service, "U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress(2021)," p. 54.

41) The current published version (1.10) of the ICOW project does not include maritime claims in Asia but only includes those in the Western Hemisphere and Europe. Thus, this research uses

main focus of this research is how a naval power gap between the United States and China influences conflictual behaviors over Asian maritime claims. Thus, there is no need to include the time period when China did not have the appropriate naval power to compete with the United States. As many scholars and research institutes analyze, Chinese naval modernization started at the end of the 1980s with the beginning of the end of the Cold War. There were several symbolic events that represent the end of the Cold War, including the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in 1991, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.[42] I estimated models from the start of these pivotal events at the end of the Cold War. Thus, the temporal domain of the analysis is 1989–2010. The spatial domain for the analysis is the states in Asia. <Table 4> summarizes the measurement of variables.

<Table 4> Measurement of variables

Variables		Measurement	Source
Dependent Variable		The number of Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs) over an Asian maritime claim dyad-year ※ Mean: 0.10 / S.D.: 0.31 / Min.: 0 / Max.: 2	ICOW maritime dyad-year data
Independent Variable	Relative Naval Power between the U.S. and China	$\frac{\text{Stronger naval power between the U.S.and China}}{\text{U.S.naval power + China's naval power}}$ ※ Mean: 0.91 / S.D.: 0.03 / Min.: 0.86 / Max.: 0.96	Crisher and Souva's naval data[43]
Control Variables	Strategic Location	Whether or not maritime claims occur in the vicinity of important international straits ※ 0: 305 obs. (37.2 %) / 1: 514 obs. (62.8 %)	ICOW maritime dyad-year data
	Migratory Fishing Stocks	Whether or not migratory fishing stocks are present over disputed maritime areas ※ 0: 190 obs. (23.2 %) / 1: 629 obs. (76.8 %)	ICOW maritime dyad-year data

preliminary data (which is underway) about the maritime claims in Asia, and preliminary data were used for the author's doctoral thesis (The Influence of Naval Power on the Militarization of Maritime Claims, the University of Iowa, 2019).

42) U.S. Congressional Research Service, "Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense—Issues for Congress(2022)," p. 29.

Variables		Measurement	Source
Control Variables	Other Issue Salience	The sum of the four remaining indicators of the issue salience variable ※ Mean: 7.18 / S.D.: 1.63 / Min.: 3 / Max.: 8	ICOW maritime dyad-year data
	UNCLOS Signatory	Whether or not at least one of the claimants signs the UNCLOS in a given calendar year ※ 0: 85 obs. (10.3 %) / 1: 734 obs. (89.7 %)	UNCLOS website[44]
	Relative Naval Power between Claimants	$\frac{\textit{Stronger state's naval power}}{\textit{Stronger state's naval power + Weaker state's naval power}}$ ※ Mean: 0.86 / S.D.: 0.15 / Min.: 0.5 / Max.: 1	Crisher and Souva's naval data
	Joint Democracy	Whether or not both claimants' POLITY IV index of democracy scores are six or higher ※0: 720 obs. (88 %) / 1: 99 obs. (12 %)	POLITY IV[45]

Dependent Variable

This research is mainly interested in the number of MIDs directly related to maritime.[46] The ICOW Asian maritime dyad-year data includes the number of MIDs directly related to maritime claims. The dependent variable (unit of analysis: a maritime claim dyad-year), *the Number of MIDs*, is measured by the total number of MIDs that begin in a given maritime claim dyad-year in Asia. The maximum number of MIDs is 2, and the minimum number of MIDs is 0. As <Figure 2> shows, the occurrence of MIDs over maritime claims is rare (approximately 89.9 percent is coded 0).

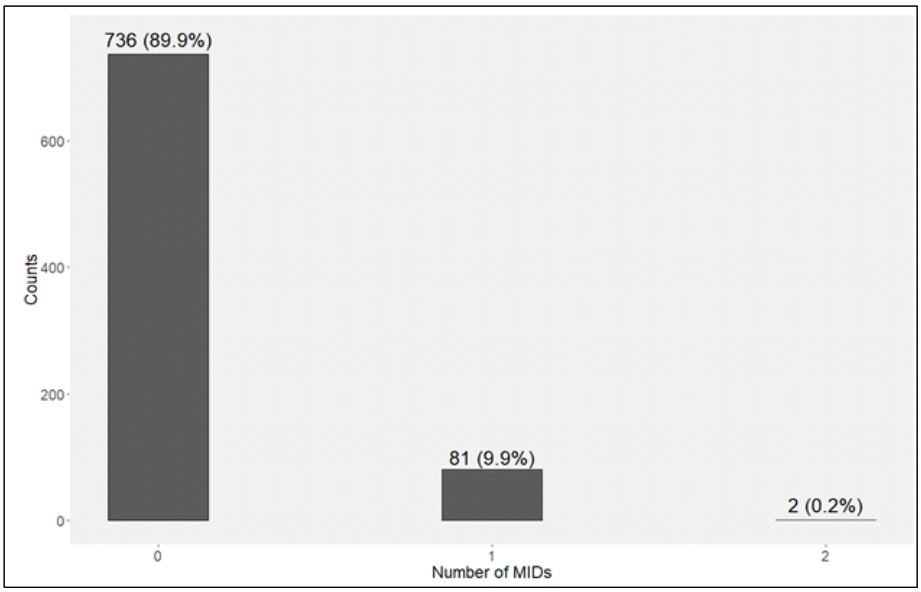
43) Benjamin Crisher and Mark Souva, "Power at Sea: A Naval Power Dataset, 1865−2011," *International Interactions*, Vol. 40(2014), pp. 602-629.

44) http://www.un.org/depts/los/reference_files/chronological_lists_of_ratifications.htm.

45) Monty Marshall and Keith Jaggers, *Polity IV Dataset*(College Park: Center for International Development and Conflict Management, 2009).

46) Claimants over maritime claims can experience MIDs other than maritime claims, but MIDs over other issues are not taken into account here.

<Figure 2> The Distribution of MIDs over Asian Maritime Claims



Independent Variables

The number and total tonnage of major naval warships have been commonly used to measure naval power.[47] Whereas the number of naval warships is a simple and easy way to measure naval power, it does not reflect the quality of naval warships, such as their offensive and defensive weapon system. Usually, heavier naval warships have better and more weapon systems and operate at sea for a longer period of time. Thus, to incorporate the quality dimension of naval power, I measure naval power based on the total tonnage of warships,[48] using Crisher and Souva's

47) Benjamin Crisher, "Naval Power, Endogeneity, and Long Distance Disputes," *Research and Politics*, January-March(2017), pp. 1-6.; Jonathan Markowitz and Christopher Fariss, "Power, Proximity, and Democracy: Geopolitical Competition in the International System," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 55, No. 1(2018), pp. 78-93; Jonathan Markowitz, Christopher Fariss, and Blake McMahon, "Producing Goods and Projecting Power: How What You Make Influences What You Take," *Journal of Conflict Resolution(*August 24, 2018), see https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0022002718789735.; Sean Bolks and Richard Stoll, "The Arms Acquisition Process: The Effect of Internal and External Constraints on Arms Race Dynamics," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 44, No. 5(2000), pp. 580-603.

48) Numerous other factors, such as the effectiveness of command and control, training, morale, and geography, are also important to determine naval power. However, when considering data

2014 naval data that contain the total tonnage of warships in 73 countries from 1865 to 2011. *Relative Naval Power between the United States and China* is measured by dividing the stronger naval power between the United States and China by the sum of U.S. naval power and China's naval power. It ranges from 0.5 to 1.0. 0.5 means perfect parity, while 1.0 signifies perfect disparity, which means a strong naval power overwhelms the other.

$$\text{Relative Naval Power between the Unites States and China} = \frac{\textit{Stronger naval power between the U.S. and China}}{\textit{U.S.naval power + China's naval power}}$$

Control Variables

The computation formula, source, and descriptive statistics of control variables are provided in <Table 4>. Thus, for this section, I briefly discuss the theoretical reason and expectation for each control variable based on the previous literature on maritime claims. First, as opposed to the presence of stationary natural resources, such as oil and gas, the presence of migratory fishing stocks within the maritime boundaries (*Migratory Fishing Stock*) can lead to a high level of uncertainty. In other words, by nature, migratory fishing stocks are transnational and fluid, which makes coastal states uncertain in determining how to allocate exclusive rights over straddling fish stocks. This situation can lead to intense competition for resources and, in turn, to conflictual behaviors.[49] Besides the distributional problem, in many cases, maneuvering fishing vessels involves maneuvering naval warships to protect fishing vessels and deter foreign poachers from illegal intrusions. Therefore, if migratory fishing stocks present near disputed maritime areas, it naturally leads to the maneuvering of fishing vessels to catch more straddling fishing stocks. This situation, in turn, results in the frequent maneuvering of naval warships to protect their fishing vessels over disputed maritime areas. In this case, the frequent maneuvering of naval warships from one claimant to protect their fishing vessels can lead to the movements of the opponent's naval warships. Ultimately, this situation can cause unnecessary encounters or militarization between two claimants' navies over disputed maritime areas. Thus, I expect that there will be more MIDs over maritime claims when the maritime claims are related to migratory fishing stocks.

Second, Strategic Location reflects whether maritime claims occur in the vicinity

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constraints and the importance of naval warships in explaining issues in the sea, the total tonnage of warships can be the best realistic indicator to measure naval power.

49) Victor Prescott and Clive Schofield, *The Maritime Political Boundaries of the World*, 2nd ed., p. 216.

of international straits. International straits play a central role in the movement of goods, energy, and service over the sea, which contributes to coastal states' economic development in the globalized world. Therefore, conflictual behaviors over maritime claims near international straits, which can hinder maritime trade, have been deterred by international efforts. Thus, maritime claims near international straits are less likely to experience militarized disputes.

Third, the ICOW maritime dyad-year data categorize maritime claims into six different types of issues. Since two indicators — migratory fishing stocks and strategic location — are already included as separate variables, *Other Issue Salience* is measured by the sum of the four remaining indicators: whether or not the maritime area is associated with claimants' homeland, whether or not the maritime area has fishing resources, whether or not the maritime area is connected to land territorial claims, and whether or not the maritime area has natural resources (oil and gas). A greater saliency of the issues is expected to escalate to more militarized disputes over maritime claims.[50)]

The fourth variable representing the effect of the international institution in the sea is *UNCLOS*, which provides procedures for the usage and peaceful management of maritime claims. UNCLOS not only defines the important concepts of maritime territories but also provides procedures for filing and managing maritime claims peacefully, such as a requirement to agree to third-party settlements when bilateral negotiations fail. Thus, the adoption of UNCLOS has a significant effect on alleviating militarized conflicts among disputants. I expect that if at least one of the claimants signed UNCLOS, they are less likely to initiate militarized disputes over maritime claims.

Fifth, when states implement conflictual options, they have no choice but to consider relative capabilities. As many proponents of the power transition theory[51)] argue, when two states are equally powerful, it is difficult to assess who would be superior in case of battles. This uncertainty increases the possibility of miscalculation about the outcome of conflicts. Thus, maritime claimants with a similar level of naval power are more likely to have militarized disputes over maritime claims. *Relative Naval Power between Claimants* is measured by dividing the stronger state's naval power by the sum of the stronger and the weaker states' naval power. In addition, 3.6 percent of observations (30 maritime claim dyad-years) in which both claimants are not listed on Crisher and Souva's naval data (2014) in a given calendar year[52)] are dropped because it is impossible to calculate relative naval

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50) Paul Hensel, Sara Mitchell, Thomas Sowers, and Clayton Thyne, "Bones of Contention: Comparing Territorial, Maritime, and River Issues," p. 136.

51) Douglas Lemke, Regions of War and Peace(New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 21-27.; Douglas Lemke and Suzanne Werner, "Power Parity, Commitment to Change, and War," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 2(1996), pp. 235-260.

52) Crisher and Souva's naval data(2014) adopts minimal criteria: (1) at least one frigate class

power when both claimants do not have naval power (the denominator of the following formula is 0)

$$\text{Relative naval power} = \frac{\textit{Stronger state's naval power}}{\textit{Stronger state's naval power} + \textit{Weaker state's naval power}}$$

Sixth, to examine the impact of claimants' level of democracy, *Joint Democracy* is included. As many scholars of the democratic peace theory[53] argue, the shared norm of democracy and structural constraints to initiate conflicts make pairs of democracies less likely to use militarized options to solve contentious issues. Thus, if both maritime claimants are advanced democracies, they are less likely to experience militarized disputes over maritime claims.

Method

Since the dependent variable is countable events, Poisson regression or negative binomial regression would be a good candidate for statistical models. Compared to negative binomial regression, Poisson regression requires a strong assumption that the conditional variance is equal to the conditional mean: equidispersion. Therefore, a test for this assumption can be a good criterion for choosing an appropriate model because a violation of this assumption has similar consequences to those for heteroscedasticity in linear regression.[54] The result of the overdispersion test ($p < 0.96$) shows a failure to reject the null hypothesis, which means the conditional variance is equal to the conditional mean. Thus, I use Poisson regression. In addition, a lack of appropriate error correction with dyad data can cause underestimated standard errors that lead to overestimated t-statistics. To avoid this problem, I use Poisson regression with cluster standard errors by dyad to alleviate potential

warship of 1,000 tons or (2) a submarine. Therefore, states which do not have at least a naval surface warship of 1,000 tons or submarine are excluded from this data.

53) Zeev Maoz and Bruce Russett, "Normative and Structural Causes of Democratic Peace, 1946-1986," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 87, No. 3(1993), pp. 624-638; Zeev Maoz and Bruce Russett, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations*(New York: W.W. Norton, 2001); Zeev Maoz and Nasrin Abdolali, "Regime Types and International Conflict, 1816-1976," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 33, No. 1(1989), pp. 3-35.

54) Colin Cameron and Pravin Trivedi, "Regression Based Tests for Overdispersion in the Poisson Model," *Journal of Econometrics*, Vol. 46, No. 3(1990), pp. 347-364

dependence across the years of a maritime claim as well as dependence between multiple maritime claims involving the same pair of countries.[55] Model 3 and Model 4 are for robustness checks. Model 3 generates the results of negative binomial regression to show the model selection does not change the results. In addition, I recode the dependent variable as a binary measure of MIDs and use logit regression because two MIDs are pretty rare (0.2 percent). The results of Model 3 and Model 4 are very similar to those of Model 2, which means the robustness of empirical analyses.

Empirical Results

I begin with a bivariate analysis involving the independent and dependent variables only to show whether or not model specifications influence the empirical results. In other words, to eliminate the possibility that combining the independent variable or the effects of control variables produces biased or artifact empirical results,[56] I estimate the bivariate model first. Thus, Model 1 in <Table 5> shows a core model with the independent variable, while Model 2 in <Table 5> represents a full model with control variables.

55) Sara Mitchell and Peter Trumbore, "Rogue States and Territorial Disputes," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 31, No. 3(2014), pp. 323-339.

56) Kelly Kadera and Sara Mitchell, "Heeding Ray's Advice: An Exegesis on Control Variables in Systemic Democratic Peace Research," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 22, No. 4(2005), pp. 311-326.

<Table 5> The Effects of Naval Power Dynamics between the U.S. and China on the Number of MIDs over Asian Maritime Claims (unit of analysis: a maritime claim dyad-year)

	Model 1 (Poisson)	Model 2 (Poisson)	Model 3 (Negative Binomial)	Model 4 (Logit)
Relative Naval Power between the U.S. and China	-10.40 *** (3.429)	-9.218 *** (3.286)	-9.218 *** (3.286)	-10.57 *** (4.058)
Relative Naval Power between Claimants		-3.343 *** (1.204)	-3.343 *** (1.204)	-3.863 ** (1.505)
Migratory Fishing Stocks		2.230 *** (0.703)	2.229 *** (0.703)	2.532 *** (0.811)
Strategic Location		-0.802 * (0.433)	-0.801 * (0.433)	-1.052 * (0.610)
Other Issue Salience		0.046 (0.173)	0.046 (0.173)	0.082 (0.208)
UNCLOS		-0.545 * (0.290)	-0.545 * (0.290)	-0.739 ** (0.334)
Joint Democracy		-0.296 (0.247)	-0.296 (0.247)	-0.497 (0.341)
Constant	7.210 ** (3.136)	7.654 ** (3.348)	7.654 ** (3.348)	9.302 ** (4.103)
LR chi2	8.25 ***	35.3 ***	26.3 ***	41.07 ***
N	819	789	789	789
Log Likelihood	-274.8	-242.8	-243.8	-228.9
AIC	553.6	501.5	503.5	473.7

* Note: Entries are coefficients followed by clustered standard errors by dyad, ***p < .01, **p < .05, *p < .1

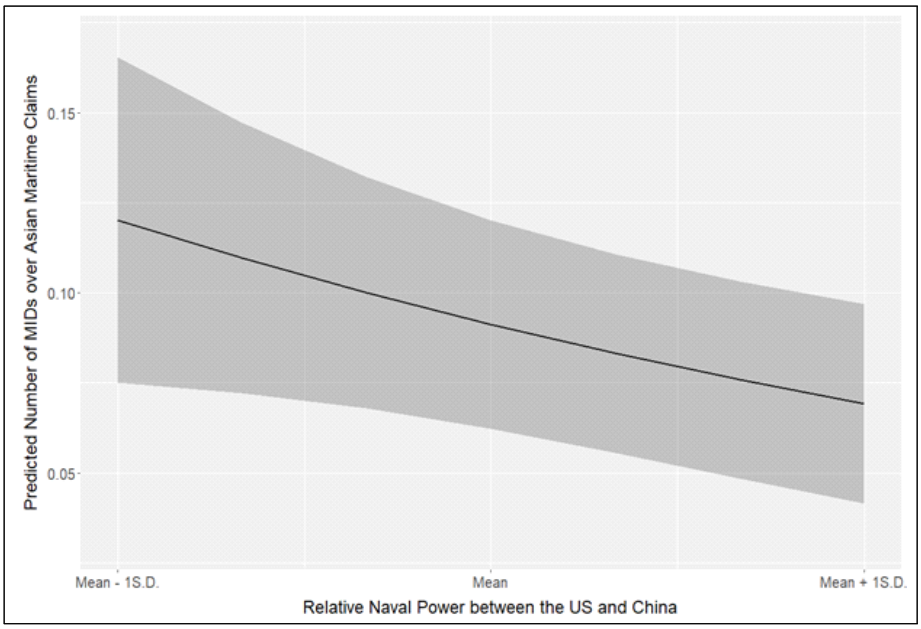
In Model 2, Relative Naval Power between the United States and China produces a negative and significant effect ($p < 0.006$). It means that the disparity of naval power between the United States and China leads to less militarized disputes over Asian maritime claims, which supports the hypothesis. In addition, Model 1, which only includes *Relative Naval Power between the United States and China*, also shows a similar result ($p < 0.003$), which indicates that the variable's effect is not artificial. These results reveal that if China's naval power reaches close to the level of the U.S naval power, China is more likely to challenge the order in the sea dominated by the United States, and such behaviors will likely result in more violent behaviors over maritime claims in Asia. In other words, more Chinese naval warships with the growing frequency and scope of infringing other states' sovereignty and sovereign rights in Asian waters worsen tensions and lead to more clashes or incidents over Asian maritime claims.[57]

<Figure 3> shows the substantive effect. To calculate the substantive effect (the predicted number of MIDs), all other variables are held at their means or modes in the case of dichotomous variables. The variation of Relative Naval Power between the United States and China from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean changes the predicted number of MIDs over Asian maritime claims from 0.12 to 0.069, which represents a 42.5 percent decrease. Due to a small substantive effect of the independent variable, it looks like that Relative Naval Power between the United States and China does not have a significant influence on the occurrence of conflictual behaviors. However, when considering the rareness of militarized disputes over maritime claims (10%), a small predicted number of militarized disputes are common in other analyses of international conflicts.[58]

57) Adam Liff and John Ikenberry, "Racing toward Tragedy? China's Rise, Military Competition in the Asia Pacific, and the Security Dilemma," pp. 56-57.

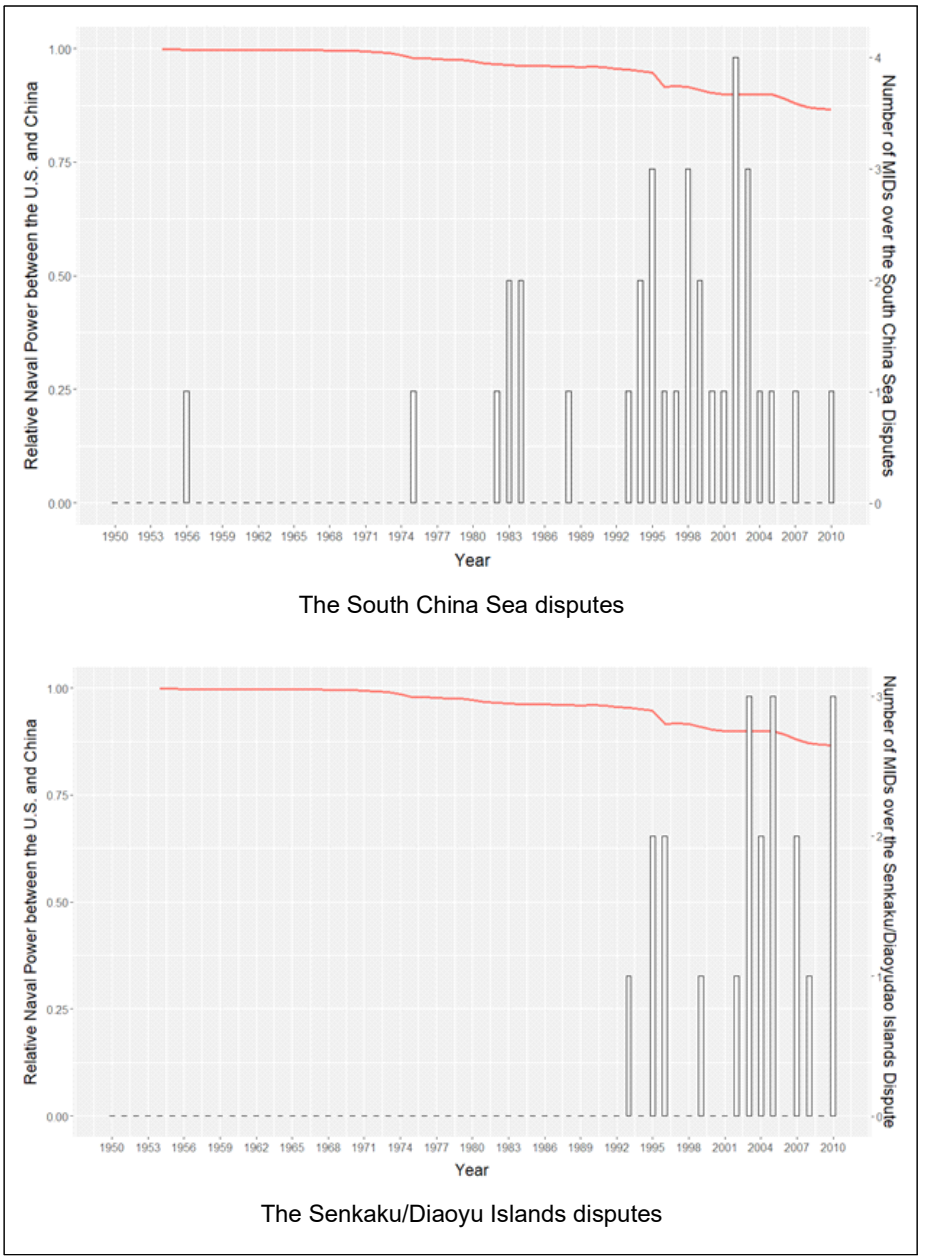
58) Mark Crescenzi, Kelly Kadera, and Sara Mitchell, "A Supply Side Theory of Mediation," p. 1084.

<Figure 3> Substantive effects for the Hypothesis



These results account for the frequent occurrence of conflictual behaviors over Asian maritime claims since the 1980s when China dramatically modernized its naval power. Figure 4 shows the number of MIDs in the South China Sea disputes and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands disputes along with relative naval power between the United States and China. The red line indicates the relative naval power between the United States and China. Bars display the number of militarized disputes in a given maritime claim dyad-year. As <Figure 4> clearly shows, the occurrence of militarized disputes over maritime claims is clustered since the 1980s when the relative naval power value between the United States and China decreased. To put it differently, more frequent conflicts over maritime claims occur as China's naval power reaches close to the level of the U.S. naval power.

<Figure 4> The Number of MIDs over Maritime Claims in Asia from the 1950s to the 2010s



In terms of control variables, first of all, *Strategic Location* ($p < 0.07$) and *UNCLOS Signatory* ($p < 0.06$) decrease the number of militarized disputes over maritime claims, while *Migratory Fishing Stocks* ($p < 0.002$) increases the number of conflictual behaviors over maritime claims as expected. In addition, *Relative Naval Power between Claimants* ($p < 0.006$) reduces the number of MIDs over maritime claims. In other words, the disparity of naval power between claimants deters the occurrence of MIDs over maritime claims as expected. *Joint Democracy* ($p < 0.3$) and Other Issue Salience ($p < 0.8$) do not show significant results.

Conclusion

This research focuses on relative naval power between two competing states in Asia, the United States and China, to explain militarization over Asian maritime claims. The empirical results support my theoretical arguments. As proponents of the hegemonic stability and international hierarchy argue, when China, the challenging state, enhanced its naval power close to the level of the naval power of the United States, the dominant state in Asia, the former was more likely to challenge the order and the rules formed by the latter, which leads to more conflictual behaviors over maritime claims in Asia.

When considering the trend of Chinese naval modernization, the gap between U.S. naval power in Asia and Chinese naval power is expected to continue to decrease. Thus, we can expect that militarization over maritime claims in Asian waters will be intensified. If more frequent militarized disputes over maritime claims in Asia are expected, how can we deter the occurrence of conflictual behaviors over Asian maritime claims? Based on the results that considerable naval power disparity between the United States and China reduces the number of militarized disputes over Asian maritime claims, maintaining overwhelming dominance of U.S. naval power in Asia against China can be one way to deter the occurrence of conflictual behaviors over Asian maritime claims. Relatedly, recent frequent FONOPs conducted by the U.S. naval warships near the Chinese artificial islands in the South China Sea might have been a clear signal the United States displayed to deter aggressive behaviors between claimants in the South China Sea. However, we should also consider the other side. In other words, we should not ignore another possibility that an increase in U.S. naval power in Asia could lead to unintended naval arms races between the United States and China that can lead to instability over Asian waters.

Although this research shows some meaningful results, it has some limitations. First of all, in order to explain issues in Asian waters, not only the naval power gap between the United States and China but also the relative naval power between China and the power next in rank should be considered.[59] In other words, naval power dynamics between China and Asian challengers also matter to explain

conflictual behaviors over maritime claims in Asia. Therefore, future research needs to examine how naval power dynamics between Asian naval rivals, such as Japan and China, influence the management of maritime claims in Asia.

Second, in terms of temporal scope, this research only covers Asian maritime claims from 1989 to 2010 due to the temporal frame of the main dataset, the ICOW data. However, when considering an increasing trend of Asian maritime claims in recent years, the temporal domain needs to be expanded to encompass the current maritime claims in Asia.

Third, while this research only focuses on how relative naval power between the United States and China affects the conflictual behaviors over maritime claims in Asia, peaceful settlements between claimants would be an intriguing topic to explore regarding the effect of naval power. As Booth in *Navies and Foreign Policy* (1979) and Cable in *Diplomacy at Sea* (1985) insist, naval power is a primary means of diplomacy, ranging from wars to cooperation between states. Thus, the United States and China, especially the United States, have deployed their naval power to coerce and encourage maritime claimants to conduct bilateral negotiations or accept third-party mediation to reduce tensions and to settle the issues peacefully. Therefore, how the naval power of the United States and China influences the occurrence of peaceful settlement attempts could uncover more about issues over maritime claims. I expect that including these factors in future research can enhance the understanding of various issues over maritime claims.

[Received: September 3, 2022; Revised: November 3, 2022; Accepted: November 24, 2022]

59) Øystein Tunsjø, "Global Power Shift, Geography, and Maritime East Asia," *In International Order at Sea How it is challenged. How it is maintained*, eds. Jo Inge Bekkevold and Geoffrey Till (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 49.

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