

Two Ways To Use IR Theory To Study China's Activities In The "South China Sea"

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In the last few years, the "People's Republic of China" has stunned the world with a significant expansion in geopolitical, military, economic, and cultural aspects as the PRC has expanded the \$5 trillion worth of transportation of goods through the channel of the "South China Sea". In this regard, the theory of realism under the umbrella of international relations focuses on warfare and security, which visualize international relations as a zero-sum game. Usually, China is analyzed and accentuated through the lens of realism when it comes to the PRC's role in the South China Sea. Contrary to realism, IR's theory of constructivism argues that interests and identities are socially constructed as they focus on norms, ideas, and social interactions. Therefore, China's constructivist engagement in the Sea has unprecedented significance when it comes to establishing China as the champion of free trade in the "South China Sea". This paper focuses on the theories of realism and constructivism under the umbrella of International Relations to study China's activities in the "South China Sea".

Application of Realism to China's Activities

The theory of Realism emphasizes the international system in terms of power, self-interest, and anarchic nature in order to maximize the security and survival of the territory (Weber, 2021). Realists regard the PRC's involvement in the "South China Sea" as driven by the PRC's pursuit of strategic dominance as China seeks control over critical sea territory, resources, and lanes to enhance its territorial security and influence. Furthermore, realists would analyze the PRC's military buildup on artificial islands adjacent to the "South China Sea", acting as a central mode to deter potential rivals like the United States and to assert its dominance in the global eye from challenging its claims. The rise of China shapes its behaviour as the growing power of the PRC within the international system has facilitated its assertiveness, and its territorial expansion through artificial islands reflects its strategic interests in land reclamation. China's revisionist intentions to assert control over the South China Sea reflect structural realists' argument that states seek to enhance and maintain their relative power within the geopolitical system, so with the alignment of this logic, China aims to secure its interests in the region while impacting further regional dynamics (Antunes & CAMISÃO, 2018). Moreover, the evolving relations between the United States and PRC influence the involvement and actions of the PRC in the "South China Sea", while the presence of the US in the region adds complexity with both powers competing for influence.

Application of Constructivism to China's Activities

The theory of constructivism sheds light on China's identity as a rising power in the world, as this identity shapes China's behaviour with other parts of the world. In the field of international relations, powerful states shape norms according to their shared ideas and values. In the case of China, it reflects that if it views itself as a rising power with revolutionist intentions, it may adopt an offensive realist strategy (Heywood, 2021). Applying the lens of constructivism to the PRC's measures in the "South China Sea", the PRC is more likely to seek peaceful solutions in the region if it perceives diplomatic dialogue as a norm. By studying China's behaviour and interaction with other parts of the world, individuals in view of constructivism could find and analyze how certain norms of the territory, such as territorial integrity, sovereignty, and cooperation, can influence PRC's activities in the "South China Sea" as well as with other states around the globe (*Introducing Constructivism in International Relations Theory*, n.d.). This would help constructivists examine how China assumes and perceives its distinctive role in the region and how its identity constructs its national interests for the promotion of the PRC as a moderate, dynamic, and progressive territory while keeping in view the international policies. For instance, in 1982, China rejected the "United Nations Convention" on the "Law of the Sea". This rejection reflects its unique interpretation of the PRC's sovereignty and territorial claims. Moreover, China's strong economic rise, nationalism, and regional interests grant it constitutive power to shape international norms by asserting militarizing the region and territorial claims (Naughton, 2018). China's strategic narrative, if it adopts a hybrid grand strategy for power and influence in the region, can foster a peaceful rise of China while combining selective engagement and cooperative security without compromising the strategic interests of the United States in the region. Constructivism, therefore, helps in the understanding of how narratives, norms, and power dynamics shape the PRC's interests in the "South China Sea", which requires recognition of shared norms and strategic finesse while balancing the interests of America with a peaceful rise of China as a superpower.

Conclusion

Concluding the discussion regarding the two approaches of international relations theory to build on the PRC's involvement and actions taking place in the "South China Sea", individuals in view of realism focus on the power dynamics of the country, whereas constructivism emphasizes social identity and contexts. The contested region of the PRC has become a focal point of geopolitical tensions; therefore, understanding the underlying dynamics is crucial. Combining both approaches to study the PRC's involvement in the "South China Sea" and its efforts to emerge as the champion of free trade, [realists' and constructivists' perspectives](#) offer an obvious and unambiguous agreement to the complex involvement of the PRC in the "South China Sea".

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