

Chapter 6

The South China Sea in US–China Relations: Development Trends and Strategic Forecasts Toward 2028


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ABSTRACT

This chapter forecasts South China Sea (SCS) dynamics in US-China relations through 2028, employing qualitative document analysis to examine geopolitical trends, power balance shifts, and domestic policy drivers. Analysis reveals that while China's economic rise and military modernization enable greater SCS assertiveness, the US maintains technological superiority and alliance advantages. Under Trump's second administration, characterized by transactional diplomacy yet bipartisan anti-China consensus, Washington will likely deepen regional engagement through traditional allies and expanded partnerships. China is projected to intensify gray-

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zone tactics, maritime presence, and infrastructure development while pursuing economic diplomacy to fragment ASEAN unity. The study concludes that through 2028, the SCS will remain a contested flashpoint marked by persistent tensions and strategic competition, though direct military confrontation remains unlikely due to mutual restraint and crisis management capabilities between both powers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rivalry among great powers has long defined international politics throughout world history. In the twenty-first century, strategic competition between the US and China has emerged as the predominant characteristic of global affairs. As the two preeminent powers, Sino-American interactions profoundly shape the Asia-Pacific political landscape and regional order. Since 1972, the US has served as the principal architect of East Asia's political configuration. China, meanwhile, has emerged as a rising power seeking interests commensurate with its growing national strength, making conflicts with the US virtually impossible to avoid. Within this vortex of power competition, the South China Sea (SCS) has become the focal arena where US-China rivalry has reached unprecedented intensity. Samuel P. Huntington once suggested that the SCS may represent a potential flashpoint between two civilizations: one embodied by China—an ancient and once-flourishing civilization—and the other led by the US, representing Western civilization currently dominant on the global stage. Consequently, US-China competition plays a preeminent role in shaping SCS developments.

Since Donald Trump's re-election in early 2025, the world has witnessed assertive measures designed to reaffirm America's position as the foremost global superpower. The SCS has remained a critical testing ground—for China's determination to rise and for US efforts to uphold the existing regional order. Understanding the evolving dynamics of competition between these two major powers has become essential for formulating appropriate policy responses and strategic options, particularly for Vietnam amid ongoing US-China rivalry in this contested maritime domain.

This chapter, entitled "*The South China Sea in US-China Relations: Development Trends and Strategic Forecasts Toward 2028*," forecasts the likely trajectories of US-China interactions regarding the SCS during President Trump's current administration. The research employs qualitative and analytical approaches rooted in social sciences and international relations. Document analysis serves as the principal method, involving systematic collection and interpretation of secondary sources including academic works, policy documents, and official statements from Vietnamese and international scholars, joint statements, speeches by senior leaders, and verified online data from reputable institutions. The study integrates forecasting

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