

## A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE

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### Abstract

This project summarizes my doctoral dissertation concerning the South China Sea (henceforth SCS) dispute by utilizing a qualitative research design. The purpose of this study was to explore why the SCS dispute has long been regarded as one of the most complex and challenging ocean-related maritime disputes in Southeast Asia. This case study provides the opportunity for readers to examine whether this dispute has the potential of escalating into serious international conflicts because of its geographic position in major oceanic routes as well as for both tapped and untapped natural resources. The study is designed to create an understanding as to why this region is important not only to the regional claimants but also to global powers like India, and the United States. The sources of qualitative data collection and the data analysis are outlined along with a summation of the findings of the case study.

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this case, students should be able to

1. Identify the research problems clearly.
2. Understand to review and synthesize previously published literature associated with the research problem.
3. Identify the research questions central to the problem and explain how such data will be obtained.
4. Describe the methods of analysis to be applied to the data.
5. Understand the strengths and weaknesses of utilizing a qualitative case study.

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## **PROJECT OVERVIEW & CONTEXT:**

The project was designed to study the historical and contemporary South China Sea (SCS) dispute from geopolitical perspectives as well as to understand the dynamics of the evolving political powers in this highly contested area. The SCS is regarded as one of the most dynamic and controversial regions in the world. Multiple issues or matters of concern include territorial sovereignty; disputed claims to islands, rocks, and reefs; jurisdiction over territorial waters, exclusive economic zones, and the seabed; regional and international rights to use the seas for military purposes; maritime security; rapid economic development; and environmental degradation, etc.

The SCS dispute has long been regarded as one of the most complex and challenging maritime disputes in Asia, and recently it has become the locus of disputes that have the potential of escalating into serious international conflicts. The SCS has become a critical region among the disputing countries because of its geographic position in major oceanic routes used by crude oil tankers from the Persian Gulf to Asia; for transporting goods to the rest of the world, and for promising offshore oil and gas reserves. Hence, it has become quite impossible for the claimants to follow the “good fences make good neighbors” policy, at least regarding the SCS dispute.

No global maritime power can ignore the SCS since all maritime traffic traversing that sea passes between the Spratly and Paracels Islands. Hence, the importance of sovereignty and strategic control over these groups of islands is plainly apparent. As Mahan pointed out, sea power consists in the first place of a proper navy and a proper fleet; but in order to

sustain a navy, we must have suitable places where a navy can be protected. Seapower, it might be argued, is experiencing a major revival today and thus it is clear why the SCS in general, and the Spratly and Paracel Islands in particular, are strategically important. They offer the potential for a strong maritime presence as well as places to shelter and re-equip naval forces in the area. It seems that China is following its blue water strategy both to increase prestige and to support the pursuit of expanding national interests, much as the US did back in the early twentieth century.

China’s Mahanian navy may try to muscle out both the USN and its bordering countries, and there is no end to this race. For example, with China’s expanding naval capabilities, Beijing’s admirals have decided to work more closely with other countries. China has even started to cooperate with the Japanese and Indian navies in patrolling against piracy off the coast of Somalia. Experts hope that such cooperation will have a positive normative effect on civilian and military leadership. Beijing’s new move to “go along to get along” presents a picture of avoiding enmity and competition even while expanding its military might abroad. However, matters may be different with respect to China’s perceived core interests in waters closer to China. One interesting contribution of this research is that of determining whether the application of GIS or high-resolution observation satellites can help prevent conflict or even reduce the chance of possible miscalculations in the future.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

A research design is the first stage where the preplanning was done for the explanation of a problem. It is more like a guideline to conduct

the entire research. A study is usually conducted based on this research design. In fact, it helps students to understand how the research will be conducted further with objectivity, precision, and reliability. This qualitative study initially began with a selective review of the literature on the SCS dispute. Literature was included from various disciplines, including public policy, law, history, sociology, politics, geography, and economics, which led to the foundational understanding of the significance of maritime disputes in the SCS region. This project was based on an in-depth investigation of events that had happened in the past or might happen in the future in the SCS region.

The literature on the SCS is rich with descriptions of its resources as well as the importance of geopolitics in this region. Using a qualitative historical-comparative methodology, this study generated several qualitative research questions, reinterpreted data, and also weighed established explanations. From the knowledge generated by this study, other scholars were able to derive propositions, in addition to those formulated by the author for further theoretical refinement. The research is presented in order to share the challenges associated with the development of a doctoral dissertation proposal as well as the methodological challenges faced while conducting the research. The purpose of the case study is reported along with a summary of the practical steps involved while developing the dissertation proposal.

### **RESEARCH PRACTICALITIES**

The research reported here was derived from my doctoral dissertation proposal, which started taking shape by the middle of 2010. The study was first approved by the university dissertation review board. Then I started con-

ducting the literature review and interviews across the globe from September through December 2011. The final data analysis and study participant contacts were almost concluded by the end of 2012. In my doctoral program, I was able to form a dissertation committee with extraordinary expertise in research, qualitative methods, theory, and history, etc. This is one of the most important steps involved to have a committee aligning to my research goals and interests. While crafting my proposal, I had to encounter multiple practical issues such as institutional deadlines, expectations of my chair, conversation with other members of my committee, the knowledge building on the case study design; the process of building a feasible project amidst practical and personal constraints; time constraints in conducting interviews, funding, etc. I used to meet with my other cohorts regularly to review my personal progress and discuss other challenges/difficulties I was encountering in the process of data collection and analysis. This is called peer debriefing, which is considered a valuable tool in qualitative research. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) described qualitative research as “an interpretive naturalistic approach to the world.” This means that qualitative researchers study things in their own natural settings and attempts to make a sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. This research tool has helped me to stick to my deadlines and finally in finishing up the project. As we move further, a discussion follows the general steps taken in drafting the dissertation proposal and finally implementing the dissertation project.

## **DISSERTATION PROPOSAL**

The most important thing was to understand what is qualitative research and then spend hours in the library doing the literature review. It was essential for me to know what kind of information I can contextualize in my case study. And with this background knowledge, I was ready to formulate my own research questions. Hence, it is very important to understand these three simple steps while conducting qualitative research:

1. Understand what is qualitative research
2. Looking for a research idea and doing the literature review
3. Formulating a qualitative research question

The foundation of this study was established by the research questions, which I had crafted during the data collection process. Beyond this foundation, I learned during the proposal writing stage that there would be significant knowledge building on my part in three particular areas. Understanding the case study research design was the first area I needed to examine in order to learn what to consider when conducting a case study. Second, the choice to utilize a computer-based qualitative data management system in the study required additional time, training, and funds. Finally, at the proposal stage, I learned the potential value of utilizing a peer group strategy while conducting qualitative research.

As mentioned already, I worked with my professors and other classmates to establish a peer group for those doctoral students who were conducting qualitative research at our institution. The feasibility of the dissertation project

I was working on was an important signal in making several decisions down the road. The decision to limit the scope of the study from a comparative case study of two diverse maritime dispute situations to a single case study design was made weighing the feasibility of the project timeline. The proposal phase literally provided a glimpse into the efforts expected ahead of a sole researcher who is working on the case study design with the South China Sea region as the case.

## **DISSERTATION STUDY IMPLEMENTATION**

The implementation of the dissertation project led to varied activities starting from the formulation of research propositions, organizing the research framework, case selection, data collection and analysis, and finally the exit plan to defend.

Agreeing to conduct research interviews with experts around the world were critical to the research question as well as the methodology. The negotiated agreement included the definition of roles and expectations of myself and the interviewee. An agreement was reached with the committee as to how the study would be conducted and organized. Submission of a status report was essential to the committee at the end of each segment in order to maintain the time frame. Once the study was underway, I utilized the qualitative research group to consider alternative analysis tools to resolve challenges strategically and to maintain accountability to the dissertation process. I conducted data collection over a 3-month period using some major sources of evidence. The sources included interviews with experts, consulting ethnographies, digging archives, etc. Early in the case study implementation phase, I learned the steps of conducting qualitative research

amidst funding constraints, and the unwritten rules about space and time.

### **METHOD IN ACTION**

As mentioned in the beginning, the purpose of this study was to explore why the South China Sea dispute has long been regarded as one of the most complex and challenging ocean-related maritime disputes in East Asia using qualitative research methods. Below are the specific research questions that were explored during the process:

- What factors increase the probability of conflicts in the SCS region?
- What is the likely utility of other conflict prevention mechanisms in the SCS region?

A research design is different from the method by which data are collected. If one fails to distinguish between design and method then it might lead to poor evaluation of designs. At the very outset, it is essential to understand between design type (case study or experiment) vs. methods of data collection (interview or observation).

It is very important to understand that the research problem determines the type of design one should use and not the other way round. The methods used for this research varied widely, depending on the particular questions asked. Close analysis of collected data constituted a significant part of the research methods to evaluate critically the production and archiving of my sources. A qualitative historical-comparative methodology was well suited to a project of this nature that examines the nature of maritime disputes in the region. Published memoirs and ethnographies were consulted because they were potentially valuable

for understanding the history as well as the nature of the dispute. The variety of sources that were employed was one of the strengths of this project. Besides, this project has offered a current update of a rapidly evolving situation in the region and helped other readers for further systematic empirical research and theoretical refinement.

### **PRACTICAL LESSONS LEARNED**

The unique requirement as a doctoral candidate to conduct research of this nature alone had been one of the most important challenges. One of the major issues I have encountered in determining my research question was having too many questions that were too broad to answer. I had to narrow down my focus on a few of the important aspects. In fact, the amount of data that was available for my research was something that had to be carefully considered. In preparing the dissertation proposal, I devoted a significant portion of my time to speaking with scholars and digging through relevant texts to create the basic knowledge platform from which to conduct a case study. Another important lesson that I had learned while conducting this research was at the time of data analysis followed by the final drafting of the case study report for dissemination.

The novelty of the current manuscript lies in the fact that it is much more up-to-date in terms of providing data and other relevant information. Over time, the SCS situation has evolved rapidly, and this research had covered some of the most important and current aspects the region is facing today. One interesting contribution of this research is that of determining whether the application of GIS or high-resolution satellite imagery can help prevent conflict or even reduce the chance of pos-

sible miscalculations in the future. This project stood out in the sense that it helped readers to understand some of the range of possibilities and outcomes. Last but not least, this project had filled an important gap in the scholarly literature covering a comparative aspect of using mapping technology and conflict resolution mechanisms in this region.

### **CONCLUSION**

Social science research presents several challenges for researchers. Two important factors, which often act as a stumbling block are time and funding restrictions. In fact, issues such as funding, the importance of sources, allotted time frame are a few of them, which shapes the implementation of research and also decides the outcomes. Besides, in qualitative research, self-reflection about one's own role and position is vital. It is also very important to clearly identify and formulate the problem statement because it acts as a lens through which a researcher unfolds the reality. The lessons learned from this case study have evolved from the challenges experienced at each stage of the doctoral dissertation process.

### **EXERCISES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What is qualitative research and how can we define it?
2. Describe the strengths and weaknesses of utilizing a qualitative case study approach?
3. Why is it important to set boundaries at the beginning of research?
4. What are the important considerations in designing a qualitative case study and why?
5. What are the obstacles to conducting qualitative research?
6. Describe how qualitative data might be useful in a similar case study?
7. Utilizing (Roy's) South China Sea book, pick any other case study on maritime disputes and discuss the implications (constraints and opportunities) of qualitative research to that study.

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