



Source: LSE US Centre

# Reluctance of a super power: the role of the US in the scramble for territory in the South China Sea and the Arctic region

Frederieke Dijkhuizen

Thesis  
MA International Relations – Global Conflict in the Modern Era  
Universiteit Leiden

---

Date:	21 December 2019
Thesis supervisor:	Dr. Cusumano
Second reader:	Dr. Gawthorpe
Student number:	s2052423
Student e-mail:	<a href="mailto:f.p.dijkhuizen@umail.leidenuniv.nl">f.p.dijkhuizen@umail.leidenuniv.nl</a>
Word count:	15.620

# Table of contents

- 1. INTRODUCTION ..... 4**
  - 1.1 RESEARCH QUESTION ..... 5
  - 1.2 RELEVANCE ..... 5
  - 1.3 STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER ..... 6
- 2. METHODS ..... 7**
  - 2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN ..... 7
  - 2.2 DATA COLLECTION ..... 8
- 3. LITERATURE REVIEW ..... 9**
  - 3.1 SEA POWER AND THE US AS MARITIME NATION ..... 9
  - 3.2 MILITARISATION OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA ..... 10
  - 3.3 THE SCRAMBLE FOR THE ARCTIC ..... 12
- 4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ..... 15**
  - 4.1 JUSTIFICATION OF THE THEORIES ..... 15
  - 4.2 DEFENSIVE REALISM ..... 15
  - 4.3 LIBERAL INSTITUTIONALISM ..... 17
  - 4.4 CONSTRUCTIVISM ..... 18
- 5. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS ..... 21**
  - 5.1 THE MILITARISATION OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA ..... 21
    - Policy* ..... 21
    - Strategy documents* ..... 22
    - Actions and statements* ..... 23
    - Conclusion* ..... 25
  - 5.2 THE SCRAMBLE FOR THE ARCTIC ..... 26
    - Policy* ..... 27
    - Strategic documents* ..... 28
    - Arctic Council chairmanship* ..... 31
    - Actions and statements* ..... 31
    - Conclusion* ..... 31
- 6. CONGRUENCE ANALYSIS ..... 33**
  - 6.1 DEFENSIVE REALISM ..... 33
    - The militarisation of the SCS* ..... 33
    - The scramble for the Arctic* ..... 34
  - 6.2 LIBERAL INSTITUTIONALISM ..... 35
    - The militarisation of the SCS* ..... 35
    - The scramble for the Arctic* ..... 36
  - 6.3 CONSTRUCTIVISM ..... 36
    - The militarisation of the SCS* ..... 37
    - The scramble for the Arctic* ..... 37
  - 6.4 CONCLUSIONS CONGRUENCE ANALYSIS ..... 38
  - 6.5 SYNTHETIC PERSPECTIVE: THEORETICAL COMPLEMENTARITY ..... 41
- 7. CONCLUSIONS ..... 42**
  - 7.1 ANSWER TO THE RESEARCH QUESTION ..... 42
  - 7.2 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS ..... 42
- BIBLIOGRAPHY ..... 44**

List of tables

**TABLE 1. FINDINGS CONGRUENCE ANALYSIS..... 40**

List of figures

**FIGURE 1: THE SOUTH CHINA SEA WITH TERRITORIAL CLAIMS..... 12**

**FIGURE 2: TERRITORIES IN THE ARCTIC REGION. .... 14**

## 1. Introduction

As long as mankind has known the concept of the nation state, states have been in disagreement over the possession and control of certain areas of sea, belonging to one state or the other. Ever since, these territorial disputes have been a source of conflict. Still today, economic, political and security interests lead to rising tensions in areas with disputed territories. To date, two of these hot areas are the South China Sea (SCS) and the waters of the Arctic region.

The SCS is an area that has been troubled by territorial disputes for ages. Although multiple states lay claims on parts of the area, Chinese claims and activities stand out. In the past years, China has not only continued its, by the international society regarded unlawful, claims of waters, islands and reefs in the area, it has also started to build islands on which it engages in military activities. Fears are that China might limit the entrance to the SCS and constrain free navigation (Bouchat, 2014). Initially, the United States (US) was not keen on getting involved in the numerous disputes over territory and adopted a policy of refusing to comment on or participate in any of the clashes. Lately however, the US has expressed its disapproval of Chinese activities and it has transferred vessels to the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) states to contain the Chinese threat in the area (Yoon, 2015). Also, the US is patrolling the sea in cooperation with these states. Free access to the SCS is of high importance to the US, both economically as well as geopolitically (Bouchat, 2014), and it considers the respect for international law a national interest (Landler, 2010; Lajeunesse & Huebert, 2019).

In addition to the SCS, the Arctic region too has been the scene of controversy for the states surrounding it (Birdwell, 2016). Due to the effects of climate change, the Arctic is now an area with ample opportunities and potential for the winning of natural resources (Conley & Kraut, 2011). Gas, oil, minerals and fish stocks that have been inaccessible for years, have now come within reach as a result of receding sea ice (Conley & Kraut, 2011). Moreover, melting ice sheets may open up new sea routes, which can drastically change the character of international trade (Conley & Kraut, 2011). Clearly, high economic and strategic interests are at stake in the changing polar region. These opportunities translate into a growing interest of a number of states to develop the Arctic and multiple states try to lay claim on the Arctic territories, resulting in several territorial disputes, in some of which the US is involved (Konyshv & Sergunin, 2012; Birdwell, 2016). The effects of climate change have

made the Arctic Circle into a centre of geopolitics and territorial disputes with direct implications for US security. Despite these high stakes, the US has mostly lagged behind on other states.

The position of the US in the disputes in these highly strategic areas is noteworthy. It raises the question why the hegemon of this current, unipolar world, does not take on a more active and assertive role. If it wants to maintain its unique position, why does it seem as if it has been reluctant to address these possible threats to its position?

### 1.1 Research question

Both the SCS and the Arctic region are of significant economic and strategic interest to the US. Nonetheless, the US has not responded in an assertive manner to the developments. This is noteworthy, not only because of the US interests, but also because of the role the US normally claims. One may have expected that, as the sole superpower in the international order, the US would have acted more strongly. Consequently, it is worthwhile to study the US response in order to find explanations for its behaviour. Thus, the research question is formulated as follows:

*If the US wants to maintain its unique position, why has it been reluctant to address the Chinese militarisation of the South China Sea and the scramble for territory in the Arctic?*

To answer this research question, three different international relations theories are examined in order to assess their explanatory power. These theories are defensive realism, liberal institutionalism and constructivism. The method employed for this is congruence analysis. I apply process tracing for each case in order to examine US actions as well as US rhetoric in its responses to the events. The aim of this research is not to identify a 'winning' theory among those three that is best able to explain the American position, but rather to reveal explanatory strengths and weaknesses of each of the theories, using a synthetic perspective to reach a comprehensive explanation of the US role in the SCS and the Arctic.

### 1.2 Relevance

This study is socially relevant as it considers the scramble for territory in two areas of high strategic and economic relevance. Seas and sea lands that, in hands of certain powers, may contribute to maintaining or challenging the current world order. As Becker states, "the

oceans of the world at once separate and connect us” (2015, p. 131). More specifically, this study examines the role of the US in these situations, which has been the hegemon in a unipolar world for years and is until this day still the most powerful state on the international stage. Although other powers have been rising in the past years, it is valuable to consider and research the US position in these important and characterising areas.

China is often said to pose a threat to the US, as due to its economic and following military rise, it may be able to challenge the US as the sole superpower in the international system (Turner, 2009). Moreover, according to the US government, the Asia-Pacific region is becoming increasingly important to global security and requires commitment of the US to ensure stability in the region (Department of the Navy, 2015). Thus, Chinese military activities in the strategically important SCS should be of concern to the US (Bouchat, 2014).

Besides the SCS, the Arctic Circle is a region of high strategic importance too. The developments in this region may have an influence on international trade and geopolitics in the years to come, and thus accurate action of the states involved is required. Studying the reasons that compelled the US to react in particular ways to these two events is relevant because it may shine a light on future US responses in and to territorial disputes. Furthermore, this study is scientifically relevant as, on a more general level, it contributes to the scientific discussion on possibly passive behaviour of the hegemon in a more or less unipolar world. Finally, this study shows how theories can work complementarily when a single theory is not wholly satisfying.

### 1.3 Structure of the paper

This paper is structured as follows. In the next section, I will discuss the methods and research design chosen for this study. The third section covers the relevant literature on the events in the SCS and the Arctic. Then, in section 4, three international relations theories that provide possible explanations for US behaviour are addressed. Chapter 5 kicks off my own research with an empirical analysis, followed by a congruence analysis in section 6. The paper ends with a concluding chapter in which the findings are discussed, and the research question is answered.

## 2. Methods

This part of the paper elaborates on the design chosen to conduct my research, after which the data collection is discussed.

### 2.1 Research design

As previously stated, this study aims to answer the research question:

*If the US wants to maintain its unique position, why has it been reluctant to address the Chinese militarisation of the South China Sea and the scramble for territory in the Arctic?*

To execute this study, I conduct a qualitative comparative analysis to compare the cases of the US response to the Chinese militarisation of the SCS and the US position in the scramble for the Arctic, and for each case I apply congruence analysis. Congruence analysis allows me to see how the theories fit the events in either case as it “focuses on drawing inferences from the (non) congruence of concrete observations with predictions deduced from theories to the relevance of these theories” (Blatter & Blume 2008, from Sinkler, 2011, p. 13). In this study, defensive realism, liberal institutionalism and constructivism will be tested against the two cases. Following the logic of Blatter & Haverland (2012), I examine whether my findings are in line with the theory, are contradictory to the theory or go beyond the expectations based on the theory for each expectation. Then, I apply a synthetic perspective to show that not one theory is able to explain American behaviour in the two cases. Rather, I argue that the different theories contain different factors relevant for a comprehensive explanation. By proving that theoretical logics are complementary, I aim to advance the theoretical debate on the causes of US behaviour in the SCS and the Arctic region. To be able to conduct this research, I first formulate expectations based on the theories used in this paper to predict what happens in the cases according to the specific theories. Then, I analyse the empirical evidence following the logic of these different theoretical models. Thirdly, I present a theoretical synthesis for the cases discussed in this paper. This type of research fits within the idea of ‘analytic eclecticism’ as defined by Rudra Sil and Peter Katzenstein, as it searches for “theoretical arguments that potentially speak to concrete issues of policy and practice” (2010, p. 412). Moreover, it touches upon complex, real-world situations and finally, it aims to capture different types of causal mechanisms (Sil & Katzenstein, 2010). The structure of the

paper is based on the work of Andreas Kruck (2014), *'Theorising the use of private military and security companies: a synthetic perspective'*.

Within the two case studies, I apply process tracing as to examine the sources of the US policy. As Collier states, process tracing is "the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analysed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator" (2011, p. 823). In other words, process tracing is a method used for within-case research that focusses on observable implications of theory, causal mechanisms and sequence and timing. Through process tracing, observable implications based on theory are identified and a causal chain of variables can be established that lead to the outcome that is being scrutinised within a specific timeframe. Process tracing fits my research as it considers the historical narrative and considers content and discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is defined by Loomba as: "discourse analysis ... makes it possible to trace connections between the visible and the hidden, the dominant and the marginalized, ideas and institutions. It allows us to see how power works through language, literature, culture and the institutions which regulate our everyday lives" (2005, p. 45). Thus, I analyse the US actions and US rhetoric in response to the events, which includes scrutinising documents and statements published by the US government in response to both the Chinese militarisation of the SCS and the developments in the Arctic Circle.

## 2.2 Data collection

Before collecting data, a timeframe for the two case studies should be set. For the SCS case, I start examining US behaviour from January 2013 onwards, after the Philippines instituted arbitral proceedings against China. For the Arctic case, I start examining US policy from 2 August 2007 onwards, the date that Russia planted a flag on the seabed of the North Pole, as this is often seen as an important symbolic event in the scramble for the Arctic (Potts & Schofield, 2008). For both cases, the timeframe lasts until the end of 2018, as to examine as much material as possible and thus to contribute to the validity of my arguments.

To execute my research, I make use of both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources that I examine include statements of the American administration, speeches of government officials and other documents published by the US. Clearly, actions of other relevant, involved actors will have to be assessed too in order to obtain a complete image of the case studies. Additionally, relevant literature may serve as secondary sources.



### 3. Literature review

Abundant academic literature exists on the US as a naval power after the WWII when it took over that role from the UK. Also, in recent years numerous works on China as a rising sea power have been published. Moreover, articles address the tensions this may cause between the US and China and the consequences for the world order this may have. As for the Arctic situation, this development has received quite some attention from scholars, which is logical given its relevance for the world order and the potential the region possesses for those who may lay claim on it. According to existing theories, the US should be keen to reap the fruits of this region and would thus approach the situation with assertiveness. However, the US response to the Chinese militarisation of the SCS and the US position in the ongoing scramble for territory in the Arctic region are telling examples of the hegemon's reluctance to interfere in naval disputes that may affect its position in the world order. Combining the militarisation of the SCS and the scramble for territory in the Arctic presents an interesting case that existing literature fails to address. This study aims to fill this gap in the research and to find a theoretical explanation for the lack of assertiveness of the US to these events. In this section, relevant literature on China's militarisation of the SCS, the scramble for territory in the Arctic and the American response to these events is discussed. It sets the stage for my own research.

#### 3.1 Sea power and the US as maritime nation

Due to its geography, the US is relatively safe from land invasion on the one hand, and highly dependent of the oceans for its economy on the other hand (Hoyt, 2007; Murphy & Yoshihara, 2015). Following from this, safe navigation of the seas is indispensable. After the Spanish-American war in 1898 and the decline of the British empire, the US has assumed global naval hegemony (Mead, 2002). This hegemony entails the possession of sea power, which constitutes the ability of a nation to make use of the seas and covers political, economic and military aspects (Levy & Thompson, 2010; Vego, 2008). In a narrower sense, naval power refers to a nation's military power at sea (Vego, 2008). Through its sea power, the US is able to control sea lanes and shape the economic order of the world (Murphy & Yoshihara, 2015). In its position as the world's leading maritime nation, the US considers it a task to "secure and share the benefits of the global commons" (Hoyt, 2007, p. 577). According to the US Department of the Navy (2015), the US performs five functions on the world's seas: deterrence, sea control, power projection, maritime security and all domain access. Despite

technological development, the US remains a maritime nation and both for security as well as economic reasons, the oceans are of vital importance to the state (Hoyt, 2007).

### 3.2 Militarisation of the South China Sea

The SCS is one of the busiest sea lanes in the world (Gao, 1994; Rustandi, 2016). Its importance is illustrated by Robert Kaplan describing it as “the throat of global sea routes” (Kaplan as cited in Rustandi, 2016, p. 1). Not only are the waters extensively used for trade, they also harbour a large amount of natural resources such as gas, oil and fish stocks. As a consequence of the significance of the waters, they have been subject to a number of territorial disputes among coastal states who each claim sovereignty over the SCS islands (Gao, 1994), earning it the label of ‘troubled waters’ (Rustandi, 2016). A visual depiction of these claims can be viewed in Figure 1. Apart from China, these states include Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam (Rustandi, 2016). Claimant states could potentially get strategic control of important shipping lanes. In addition to this, claimant states are eager to exploit the oil and natural gas deposits present (Gao, 1994). It is not hard to image that the issues surrounding the SCS have broad implications for stability in the region, as well as maritime security and peace (Rustandi, 2016).

Although land reclamation is nothing new in the SCS, China has been especially active with this lately, both in size, pace and nature of its projects (Department of Defense, 2015). China made its first territorial claim in 1951 (Rustandi, 2016; Yahuda, 2013) but since 2004, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has shown increased assertiveness in the SCS (Yahuda, 2013). Furthermore, through the construction of facilities on man-made islands, China caused tensions to rise, especially when word came out these reclamations are being militarised (Rustandi, 2016). China is the only state in the SCS to undertake these kind of reclamation activities (Rustandi, 2016). The reasons for China’s activities could be numerous, but Zhiguo Gao (1994) argues, although his work is not very recent, that Chinese assertiveness can be explained by the economic interests China has in the SCS, which is supported by Michael Yahuda (2013).

The situation is further complicated by China’s ‘nine-dash line’ (NDL), a line that appears on Chinese maps and that covers nearly 80 percent of the SCS (McDevitt, 2014). Although the line was first used already in 1947, China now actively uses it as an argument for its entitlement to the territory and the resources that fall within the area of the NDL (McDevitt,

2014). The way China goes about in claiming territory is often referred to as 'salami slicing tactics': "it continues to take small, incremental steps that are not likely to provoke a military response from any of the other claimants, but over time gradually change the status-quo regarding disputed claims in its favour" (McDevitt, 2014, p. 33). By doing so, China gradually obtains greater control over areas in the SCS (Dolven, Elsea, Lawrence, O'Rourke & Rinehart, 2015).

Important in these disputes is the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS). This international agreement lays out the legal rights and responsibilities of states with regard to the world's oceans (Conley & Kraut, 2011) and is sometimes referred to as "the constitution of the seas" (Hossain & Barala, 2017). Initially the US was hesitant to engage in the disputes surrounding the SCS, as is illustrated by Gao, who finds that the US position at his time of writing was that it "makes no judgment on the merits of the claims, wants freedom of navigation to be preserved, and supports a peaceful solution of disputes" (1994, p. 355). However, due to China's increasing assertiveness and its militarisation of islands in the SCS, the US became more critical. If successful, China's claims on the islands and waters would provide the state with significant leverage on the global stage (Murphy & Yoshihara, 2015). Free access to the SCS is of high importance to the US, both economically as well as geopolitically (Bouchat, 2014). It considers the respect for international law a national interest (Landler, 2010). It criticised the reclamation projects, as it considers these to be a destabilising activity (Rustandi, 2016). Moreover, it demands freedom of navigation (Rustandi, 2016) and transferred vessels to the ASEAN states to contain the Chinese threat in the area (Yoon, 2015). Also, the US is patrolling the sea in cooperation with ASEAN states.

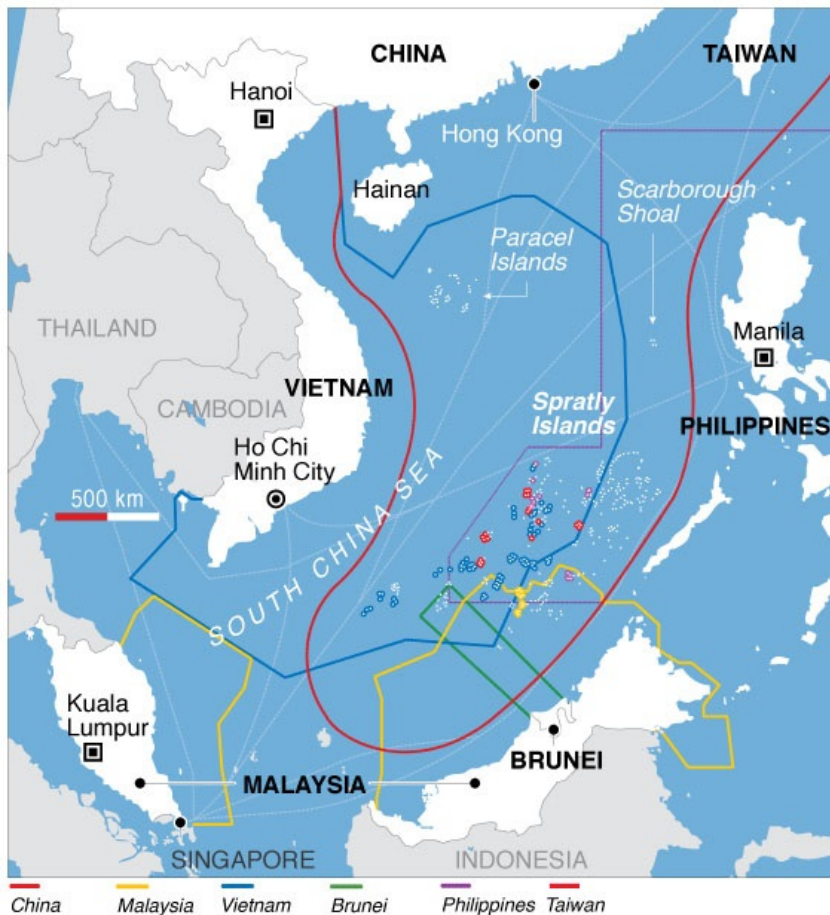


Figure 1: The South China Sea with territorial claims.  
 Source: Hoskin, Maritime Executive.

### 3.3 The scramble for the Arctic

Not only the SCS has been the centre of territorial disputes. For years, the Arctic region has been the scene of controversy for the states surrounding it (Birdwell, 2016). In this paper, the Arctic region is defined as the area north of the Arctic circle, which includes all territory, sea and ice sheets in the area. With a surface of more than 30 million square kilometres, the region encompasses one-sixth of the world’s landmass, and thus the importance of the Arctic is obvious. Secretary of State Pompeo phrased the situation in the region accurately: “do we want the Arctic Ocean to transform into a new South China Sea, fraught with militarization and competing territorial claims? ... I think the answers are pretty clear” (Shea & Palu, 2019). During the Cold War, the region was subject to the acts of the two superpowers, with strategic bombers and nuclear submarines crossing the polar region (Conley & Kraut, 2011). Today, the Arctic once again is a hot issue, albeit in a different way (Conley & Kraut, 2011). Due to the effects of climate change, the Arctic is now an area with ample opportunities and potential for the winning of natural resources (Conley & Kraut,

2011). Gas, oil, minerals and fish stocks that have been inaccessible for years, have now come within reach due to the receding sea ice (Conley & Kraut, 2011). Estimates are that a quarter of the world's undiscovered hydrocarbon reserves are to be found in the Arctic region (Konyshev & Sergunin, 2012). Moreover, melting ice sheets imply that new sea routes can be pursued, which can drastically change the character of international trade (Conley & Kraut, 2011). The Northern Sea Route would be shortest route from Europe to East Asia (Konyshev & Sergunin, 2012). Clearly, high economic interests are at stake in the changing polar region.

These opportunities translate into a growing interest of a number of states to develop the Arctic (Konyshev & Sergunin, 2012). Besides economic gains, receding sea ice results in new maritime security issues, especially for the states surrounding the Arctic, as it is an important location for ballistic missiles, missile defence systems and strategic deterrence (Konyshev & Sergunin, 2012). While the ice on the north pole diminishes, Arctic states try to lay claim on the Arctic territories (Birdwell, 2016). Additionally, not only the so-called five Arctic states with territorial borders in the Arctic, being the US, Canada, Russia, Denmark and Norway, but also other states angle for access to the region (Hong, 2012). In the Arctic region, the UNCLOS has been used as a tool to lay claims on territories now that ice sheets are receding (Birdwell, 2016).

Due to its Alaskan coastline, the US is considered an Arctic state. Where other states, both Arctic and non-Arctic, have been actively pursuing their interests, the US has mostly lagged behind (Huebert, 2009). Even China has declared itself to be a "near-Arctic state" (Shea & Palu, 2019). According to existing international law, only bordering Arctic states may exploit the region (Konyshev & Sergunin, 2012). The lack of American interest in the Arctic is noteworthy, given the state's interests in the region. These are not only economic, but also include strategic interests. Despite its apparent disinterest in the region, the US has been involved in a number of territorial disputes. Examples include the maritime boundary in the Beaufort Sea and the Dixon Entrance (Conley & Kraut, 2011). Of the five Arctic states, the US is the only one that has not yet ratified the UNCLOS (Konyshev & Sergunin, 2012). To deal with Arctic issues and to coordinate cooperation in the region, the Arctic Council was established in 1996. The Council convenes twice a year and consists of eight primary members, being the United States, Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark (Greenland), Norway, Russia, Finland, Sweden, and Iceland (Conley & Kraut, 2011 Miller, 2016). Moreover, eleven

non-governmental organisations, twelve non-Arctic states participate as observer members. Its work has mainly focused on science and generating knowledge. The council has proven rather incapable of addressing security matters given its limited mandate and a lack of regulatory authority (Huebert, 2009, Conley & Kraut, 2011).

The effects of climate change have made the Arctic Circle into a centre of geopolitics and territorial disputes with direct implications for American security. Thus, it is worth comparing the Arctic to the situation on the other side of the world that may have implications for US national security, being the Chinese militarisation of the SCS.



Figure 2: Territories in the Arctic region.  
Source: Repkina, Eurasian Business Briefing.

## 4. Theoretical framework

This section discusses the three international relations theories that will be examined to explain the behaviour and attitude of the US. It starts with a justification for the three theories chosen.

### 4.1 Justification of the theories

The three theories selected for this study are defensive realism, liberal institutionalism and constructivism, which are the three mainstream, problem-solving theories in the field of international relations. According to Blatter & Haverland (2012), one should start a congruence analysis with the dominant theories in the field. Logically following from this is the choice for defensive realism as the first theory to be addressed. It is the largest stream within international relations and has a significant influence on both foreign policy as well as scholarly literature. Secondly, I discuss liberal institutionalism. This school of thought shares some of the notions of defensive realism but is notably more optimistic about the nature of states and the potential for interstate cooperation. Lastly, I address constructivism, which can be seen as a response to the flaws of defensive realism.

### 4.2 Defensive realism

After the end of the Cold War, many argued that structural realism was on the decline, since democracy was spreading across the globe and international institutions seemed to possess the capacity to influence and contain the behaviour of states (Mearsheimer, 2007). As General Colin Powell stated, he was “running out of enemies” (US News and World Report, as cited in Waltz, 2000, p. 29). This notion was proved to be untrue by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which caused structural realism to make a comeback as a popular stream of international relations. Structural realism consists of different strands, of which defensive realism is the most established one. Thus, this work focuses on defensive realism.

Defensive realism views the international system as an anarchic self-help system in which states compete with one another to ensure their survival, or at least the prevention of loss of power (Mearsheimer, 2007). Within this system, it is a state’s military strength which determines its patterns of relations with other states in the system (Friedberg, 2005). This military strength is “a function of the tangible military assets that states possess, such as armoured divisions and nuclear weapons.” (2007, p. 72). Besides military power, Mearsheimer argues, “states have a second kind of power, latent power, which refers to the socio-economic

ingredients that go into building military power” (2007, p. 72). Defensive realists believe that a state’s power pursuance is limited by structural factors, and that it is unwise for a state to pursue hegemony. In the eyes of defensive realists, international politics is to a large extent power politics.

Important to defensive realism is the concept of the balance of threat. The theory of the balance of threat came from Stephen Walt (1985) and is based on the idea that states will form alliances with other, relatively weaker, states to counterbalance an existing threat from another state. It is contrary to the idea that states may ally with the threatening state, so-called bandwagoning. It is different from the balance of power theory in the sense that it is not only about superior power of the stronger state, but rather about the threat that goes out from that power (Walt, 1985). In line with this theory, is the idea that maritime powers form a smaller threat to the territorial integrity to other states than do land-based powers (Levy & Thompson, 2010). The same proposition holds the other way around. Growing sea power may influence the relations between states and alter the balance of threat. With regard to territorial disputes, realists argue the following: territory may yield economic and strategic benefits for states, and as for all other behaviour of states, states engage in territorial disputes for selfish reasons (Forsberg, 1996). Power-political interests and favourable power relations may give rise to territorial disputes. However, defensive realists also argue that states may not wish to risk a possible escalation of conflict when actions of the other state are not perceived as a threat to their security and other interests or when this threat is not existential. Defensive realism considers the rise of China to be of utmost importance to the US (Friedman, 2005). The interaction between the two states is determined by the power dynamics and resulting threat perceptions between the two states, and China’s power and behaviour is unfolding as a consequence of its economic growth. Given the strategic potential of the Arctic, realists would argue that this region is of high importance to the US. However, neither assumption explains the reluctance to intervene in the SCS conflict and the apparent initial lack of interest in the Arctic. Consequently, I formulate the following expectation:

*Expectation 1: the US response to the Chinese militarisation of the South China Sea and the scramble for territory in the Arctic can be explained by the US perception that these events are not existential threats to US security.*



In this expectation, 'the US perception that these events are not existential threats to US security' is the independent variable that influences the dependent variable 'the US response to the Chinese militarisation of the South China Sea and the scramble for territory in the Arctic'.

### 4.3 Liberal institutionalism

Liberal institutionalism is based on the idea that institutions can support states to cooperate with one another (Grieco, 1988), and thus these institutions play an important role in international affairs (Weiss & Wilkinson, 2014). An institution is "an enduring and stable set of arrangements that regulates individual and/or group behaviour on the basis of established rules and procedures" (Heywood, 2000, p. 100). Central to liberal institutionalism, in contrast to realism, is the idea that institutions actually matter and that "they make a difference in the behaviour of states and in the nature of international politics" (Stein, 2008, p. 212). They make a difference because they not only reflect interests of states, but also "shape those interests and the practices of states" (Hellmann & Wolf, 1993, p. 6). However, these institutions only develop when states foresee benefits from cooperation and there are sufficient common interests (Keohane & Martin, 1995). According to liberal institutionalists, it is in the interest of states to adhere to international law (Jackson, Sørensen & Møller, 2016). Thus, liberal institutionalism has a more optimistic view on world affairs and international cooperation and is less focused on conflict between states. Conflict is not inevitable and "cooperation based on mutual interests will prevail" (Jackson et al., 2016, p. 98). In particular, this theory emphasises cooperation in economic issues and it considers non-aggression, human rights and peaceful relations to be of high importance in the international social structure (Weiss & Wilkinson, 2014).

Nonetheless, liberal institutionalism recognises the realist assumption that this international cooperation is hampered by the anarchic structure of the international system (Grieco, 1988). Likewise, it considers states to be rational egoists (Keohane & Martin, 1995; Hellmann & Wolf, 1993). Where realists argue that territorial disputes are solved through power-politics, liberal institutionalists argue that disputes are solved through "negotiation, bargaining, adherence to international norms or law, and debates that promote problem solving" (De Castro, 2015, p. 74). Liberal institutionalism is relevant for security issues as it considers the information provision function that international institutions can have, which

can reduce fear member state's experience towards one another (Keohane & Martin, 1995; Jackson et al., 2016).

In this study, the adherence to the UNCLOS will be of particular importance, as this convention governs the legal rights and responsibilities of states with regard to the world's oceans (Conley & Kraut, 2011). Moreover, common interests that states share influence their behaviour. These interests can for example include economic interdependency, security cooperation in one part of the world or another, or a shared aim to promote human rights. Following this discussion of liberal institutionalism, one can conclude that the US behaviour is dependent on the international institutions present in each case and the common interests that the US shares with the parties involved. Thus, I formulate the following expectation:

*Expectation 2: the US response to the Chinese militarisation of the South China Sea and the scramble for territory in the Arctic can be explained by the impact of existing institutions and shared interests with the states involved.*

In this second expectation, 'the impact of existing institutions and shared interests with the states involved' is the independent variable that influences the dependent variable 'the US response to the Chinese militarisation of the South China Sea and the scramble for territory in the Arctic'.

#### 4.4 Constructivism

Constructivism emerged in the US in the 1990s and provides alternative explanations for international relations concepts such as anarchy, the balance of power, state identities and possible changes in the system (Hopf, 1998). The theory is defined by Adler as "the view that the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world" (1997, p. 322). Thus, all international relations between states are socially constructed and influenced by the interpretations states hold of one another, so called identities (Adler, 1997; Friedberg, 2005). Identities are important because they say something about a state's preferences and actions (Hopf, 1998). According to constructivists, a state's territory can be part of its identity, which in turn explains why states engage in territorial disputes (Forsberg, 2010). Based on these socially constructed identities, states are able to derive some sort of

predictability in the behaviour of other states and of the international order (Hopf, 1998). Consequently, constructivism is different from realism in that it considers not only the material world, but also the subjective and intersubjective worlds, and how these interact in what constructivists call the 'social construction of reality' (Adler, 1997). Because of this, constructivism understands power differently from defensive realism (Hopf, 1998; Weiss & Wilkinson, 2014). According to constructivism, not only material power matters in world affairs, but also discursive power (Hopf, 1998). This is power that is embedded in social understandings and practices (Weiss & Wilkinson, 2014). Discursive power is required to produce the intersubjective meanings that constitute both the social structures in the international order as well as the actors involved in it (Hopf, 1998).

How actors in international relations deal with the structures in the system is called strategic culture (Friedberg, 2005). It is a "distinctive body of beliefs, attitudes and practices regarding the use of force, which are held by a collective and arise gradually over time, through a unique protracted historical process" (Toje, 2009, p. 4). This body of beliefs happens to be persistent throughout time and indicates what behaviour to expect from actors (Toje, 2009).

A last important concept in constructivism are norms. Norms constitute beliefs about behaviour of certain actors that is considered right or appropriate (Friedberg, 2005). These "shared ideas, expectations, and beliefs about appropriate behaviour are what give the world structure, order, and stability" (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 894). Actors may adhere to these norms, or they may behave differently. If behaviour by a certain actor is not in line with what the community considered to be appropriate, we speak of norm-breaking behaviour (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). However, when the norm itself changes, we speak of a norm shift (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

All of the three subjective factors discussed – identities, strategic cultures and norms, are "strongly shaped by the prevailing interpretations of a society's shared historical experiences" (Friedberg, 2005, p. 34). Based on these factors, one can predict state behaviour. In case of the US for the scramble for territory in both the SCS and the Arctic, I argue that three concepts are of particular importance. The first concept is the American identity as super power. Although this time knows a number of rising states, the US is still considered to be the current superpower. Secondly, the US strategic culture with regard to maritime issues has been heavily influenced by its perception to be the safe guarder of international maritime trade by protecting international waterways. Because of this duty, the US has historically been

concerned about situations where international maritime trade was threatened. A norm that is closely related to this is the norm of freedom of navigation. John Noyes defines this norm as “the right to send ships across the oceans unimpeded by other states, subject only to limited exceptions in a coastal state’s maritime zones and even more limited exceptions of the high seas” (2005, p. 11). The US Department of Defense (DoD) defines it as “all of the rights, freedoms, and lawful uses of the sea and airspace, including for military ships and aircraft, recognized under international law” (US Department of Defense, 2015, p. 2). This norm and the adherence to international law is central to US foreign policy (Noyes, 2005), as is clear from the discourse used in this field. Throughout the years, in both policy documents and speeches, the importance of freedom of navigation is stressed.

Then, why has the US not responded more strongly to the developments in both the SCS and the Arctic? From a constructivist point of view, I argue that the US behaviour as a sea power is influenced by the three factors addressed above. Given the importance of both regions for international trade and commerce, is it possible that the US is moving away from a strategic culture of safeguarding international waterways? I formulate the following expectation:

*Expectation 3: the US response to the Chinese militarisation of the South China Sea and the scramble for territory in the Arctic can be explained by a changing strategic culture in which the US wishes to be less involved in protecting international waterways.*

In this expectation, the dependent variable ‘the US response to the Chinese militarisation of the South China Sea and the scramble for territory in the Arctic’ is influenced by the independent variable ‘a changing strategic culture in which the US wishes to be less involved in protecting international waterways’.

## 5. Empirical analysis

This section addresses the policies, statements and actions of the US government in both the SCS and the Arctic region. Analysing these allows me to identify elements of the theories scrutinised in this study.

### 5.1 The militarisation of the South China Sea

As discussed before, the SCS is a heavily contested region, and neighbouring states depend on the US for its regional stability (Bouchat, 2014). Furthermore, in multiple policy documents the US claims to be the guardian of the global commons (Dantzler, 2016), although with the arrival of President Trump in the White House this may be less so the case now (Ikenberry, 2017). Nevertheless, it is still worth considering Clarence Bouchat's observation that precisely the dependency of Asian-Pacific states on the US "could make the South China Sea a convenient arena for a rising China to test US political will and dominance through increasingly assertive incidents to which the United States must respond to protect partner and American security and economic interests" (2014, p. 25). David Gombert (2013) compares the current situation in the SCS with the rivalry between Anglo-German forces in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and American-Japanese relations after WWI, which both resulted in violence, despite the common Sino-American interests and cooperation in other waters. He finds that the regional dependency on the US to face Chinese claims complicates the situation and will contribute to growing rivalry in the years to come.

#### Policy

Unlike for the Arctic region, the US government has not produced specific policy documents on the SCS. Rather, the US policy is made up of policy statements in which the US position is laid out. These statements are based on the guidelines of international law, the stressing of diplomacy instead of coercion and the US wish to remain neutral in territorial disputes (Fravel, 2014), although it somewhat let go of that last premise throughout the years. On the other hand, Washington maintains relations with some 'strategic partners' in the region which it provides with military support. Until 2012, the US supported the facilitation of dialogue among states in the region, and although it became less active in this field (Fravel, 2014), it is still a proponent of dialogue. In the last few years, Under President Trump, Washington seems to continue the policy laid out by the Obama administration (Cai, 2017; Valencia, 2017).

## Strategy documents

In the 2015 National Security Strategy, President Obama mentions the following about China:

*“The scope of our cooperation with China is unprecedented, even as we remain alert to China’s military modernization and reject any role for intimidation in resolving territorial disputes... American leadership will remain essential to shaping the region’s long-term trajectory to enhance stability and security, facilitate trade and commerce through an open and transparent system, and ensure respect for universal rights and freedoms”* (Office of the President of the United States, 2015, p. 24).

Concerns about Chinese activities is for example expressed in the 2015 Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy and in strategic documents of the US Navy, although language about concrete American action is absent. The discourse in the Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy focuses on deterring conflict and the promotion of international law and standards. According to this document “US allies and partners are seeking US leadership and engagement in maritime Asia” (Department of Defense, 2015, p. 10), while it also states that it does not wish to take a position in the different maritime and territorial disputes that trouble the region, as long as these claims are based on international law.

In the 2015 strategic document of the US Navy, when listing allies in the Pacific, China is not mentioned: “Based on shared strategic interests, the United States seeks to strengthen cooperation with long-standing allies in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region—Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, and Thailand—and continues to cultivate partnerships with states such as Bangladesh, Brunei, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Micronesia, Pakistan, Singapore, and Vietnam” (Department of the Navy, 2015, p. 3). A separate paragraph is dedicated to China, in which the challenges related to a more assertive China are laid out. Despite this, no concrete action other than ‘patrolling the SCS’ is mentioned in ‘A Cooperative Strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Seapower’ (CS21R) to halt the Chinese militarisation of that area. The importance of adherence to international law is reiterated in numerous US government documents and statements and is said to guide the US in ensuring peace and preventing conflict in the SCS (Bouchat, 2014). One could also argue that by publicly denouncing the Chinese activities and stressing the importance of freedom of navigation, the US aims to “solve” the situation peacefully.

Also, in the National Security Strategy for 2015, a peaceful approach is stressed: “[The US] ...will continue to promote rules for responsible behaviour while making sure we have the

capability to assure access” (Office of the President of the United States, 2015, p. 12). In the National Military Strategy of that same year, the intention to enhance alliances with a number of states in the Pacific region is expressed (Dantzler, 2016).

The 2017 National Security Strategy discusses China’s military activities and the direct consequences these have for the American access in the region. As part of the pillar ‘preserve peace through strength’, the strategy strongly condemns Chinese actions in the SCS: “Contrary to our hopes, China expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others “(The White House, 2018, p. 25). Maintaining sovereignty of South Asian states is one of the priority actions of the strategy. The strategy pays ample attention to China, and portrays the country as a threat to the US position in the Indo-Pacific region, but it also contains opportunities for cooperation with China. In the accompanying National Defense Strategy, China is called a ‘strategic’ competitor that seeks regional and global pre-eminence. In doing so, it is “undercutting its principles and rules of the road” (Department of Defense, 2018, p. 2). This competition requires additional investments to ensure US security and prosperity (Department of Defense, 2018).

A red line throughout different strategic documents is the US presence in the region (for example, CS21R). For years, the US navy has maintained a near constant presence in the SCS (Dantzler, 2016). According to the Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy published by the US DoD, US presence is a way to protect national interests and to deter any potential threats (Department of Defense, 2015). In CS21R, the Department of the Navy even talks about “that unique capability: presence” (Department of the Navy, 2015, p. i).

### Actions and statements

Three things are clear from US statements: the US wishes to establish a rules-based order, adherence to international law is central and a non-coercive solution to conflicts is vital. Knowing this, in what way are the Chinese activities viewed by American government officials? Some have expressed “strong concerns about China’s land reclamation activities on the grounds that they are destabilizing and inconsistent with commitments China has made under the non-binding 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and have also asked China to halt the activities” (Dolven et al., 2015, p. 21). Chinese actions in the SCS since 2013 have led to US government statements that these are meant to strengthen Chinese maritime territorial claims (Dolven et al., 2015). In 2015, the Congressional Research Service

pointed out that these activities could have an impact on US policy in the region (Dolven et al., 2015). Clearly, some Chinese claims are not in line with international law. Nonetheless, the US seems to stick to statements as: “territorial disputes should be resolved peacefully, without coercion, intimidation, threats, or the use of force” (O’Rourke, 2014, p. 22). With regard to hard-power matters, the US has been concerned about the militarisation of the reclaimed islands. These concerns mostly relate to the ideas behind the Chinese activities, the powerplay in the Pacific and maritime freedoms in general (Morton, 2016). In 2015, the US Department of State claimed to take “effective and appropriate action” as a result of the militarisation (Shear, 2015). The question is however, how the US government responded to Chinese activities and what strategy was employed. Likewise, the US sent vessels to the SCS to patrol the waters. Moreover, the US has suggested that ASEAN countries engaged in joint patrols (Chen, 2015). In 2015, the US increased budgets for partner capacity building and security cooperation (Dolven, et al., 2015). In that same year, the US started to provide support to states in the region to enhance their maritime capabilities which include the provision of equipment and infrastructure support to Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia (Dolven et al., 2015).

In a speech at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, then Secretary of Defense Carter justified American involvement in the SCS:

*“As a Pacific nation, a trading nation, and a member of the international community, the United States has every right to be involved and concerned. As it is central to the regional security architecture, ASEAN must be a part of this effort: the United States encourages ASEAN and China to conclude a Code of Conduct this year. And America will support the right of claimants to pursue international legal arbitration and other peaceful means to resolve these disputes, just as we will oppose coercive tactics. Second, the United States will continue to protect freedom of navigation and overflight ... There should be no mistake: the United States will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows, as U.S. forces do all over the world.”* (Secretary of Defense Carter, 2015).



In that same year, in response to continued reclamation activities, the US executed a 'Freedom of Navigation Operation'<sup>1</sup> (FONOP) around one of the Chinese manmade islands (Dantzler, 2016; Cai, 2017). According to Adam Lajeunesse and Rob Huebert these exercises present a strong political statement, as they are normally reserved for only the "highest priority maritime disputes" (2019, p. 226). Throughout Obama's presidency, the US has stepped up this kind of operations, both on water and in the air (Lendon, 2019). Despite this, the Chinese too have increased their activities for claiming sovereignty over islands and reefs in the SCS in the same period (Cai, 2017). These include patrols of their Coast Guard and fishing boats, military support for activities in the region and large-scale military exercises (Penhong, 2017).

The sceptical attitude of president Trump towards American involvement in the rest of the world leaves more room for uncertainty on the American course in the SCS (Kaplan, 2018). In 2017 and 2018, US government officials denounced Chinese activities (Al Jazeera, 2019). Secretary of State Rex Tillerson even told Congress that the current Chinese policy in the SCS "will bring us into conflict" (Valencia, 2017). On the other hand, Defense Secretary James Mattis stressed the focus on diplomatic means in American approach towards the SCS conflict (Xiaohui, 2018).

Nevertheless, one should also recognise that there has been some cooperation in the Asia-Pacific between the US and China. For example, both states contributed to a Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES), which was later signed by 21 Pacific nations (Morton, 2016). Katherine Morton (2016) also mentions the establishment of a mechanism to enhance strategic communications, meetings between high ranking military officials and "the fact that US and Chinese interests in safeguarding global maritime stability are increasingly aligned" (2016, p. 930), although this alignment is unlikely to be sufficient to offset the tensions in the SCS.

## Conclusion

At his time of writing, Ronald O'Rourke (2014) finds that a coherent US strategy to respond to developments in the SCS is lacking and that a visible response to China's salami slicing strategy is lacking. Dolven et al. (2014) agree with this and find that it is difficult to signal whether real actions are being taken by the US.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Freedom of Navigation Program was established by the Carter administration in 1979 and aims to challenge 'excessive maritime claims' of any state in the world in order to ensure freedom of navigation (Xiaohui, 2018).

When analysing the US policy towards the disputes in the SCS, one can signal a trend from language of de-escalation and the aim to prevent the use of force towards growing military involvement in the region. However, US military actions in return have been answered by Chinese military actions, China's reclamation activities have not been halted and numerous territorial disputes have not been solved (Xiaohui, 2018). Thus, one can wonder why the US has not responded more assertively, and if it appears that its current course of action has been ineffective, why hasn't the US chosen a different path? In a press report published in 2014, it seems as if the US has been asking itself the same questions. This report states that despite the attention the US has given to the region, Chinese expansion has continued as US efforts have only had limited effect (O'Rourke, 2014). The report recognizes that Washington has been focusing on the wrong areas, and it seems that the salami slicing tactics employed by the Chinese administration has not sufficiently raised concern within the US government. As Gompert states, "US strategy toward China is fraught with dilemma" (2013, p. 83). It has to balance its relations with China in collaborating on the world stage, while at the same time protecting US interests in the SCS. Should it confront China in East Asia, with the risk of further pushing China to challenge the US or should it hope that Chinese activities in the SCS will not destabilise the region in order to avoid a confrontation (Gompert, 2013)? Moreover, it has to maintain its credibility as a security partner, which it will not be able to when its challenge against China is not effective (Xiaohui, 2018).

## 5.2 The scramble for the Arctic

Following the end of the Cold War, the Arctic lost its major geostrategic importance. However, the planting of the Russian national flag on the Arctic seabed once more turned the area into a hot topic. The planting of the flag on 2 August 2007 does not have any legal meaning but was a strong political statement to stress the Russian claim on that area nonetheless (Matz-Lück, 2009). Immediately after the news came out, Canada condemned the act, who's foreign minister stated that "this is not the 15<sup>th</sup> century" (Chivers, 2007). The response of the US was rather cool, simply stating that the flag has no legal effect (State Department Deputy Tom Casey to NBC News, 2007). This rather reluctant attitude is reflected in the policies of the US, and still to this day Washington is said to lag behind on other states in the ongoing race for the Arctic (Shea & Palu, 2019). Given the fact that the US is an Arctic state, is it not strange that an overarching national approach towards this economic and strategically relevant region

is published for the first time only in 2013? And, despite the strategies laid out by the administration, why is the US still lagging behind other Arctic states?

### Policy

Following increased activity from other states, the US established a policy for the Arctic region in 2009 (Conley & Kraut, 2011). The so called 'National Security Presidential Directive 66/Homeland Security Presidential Directive 25 (NSPD 66/HSPD 25)' contains policy on economic activities, scientific research, maritime cooperation as well as security issues such as governance and shelf and boundary issues and is the basis of the US approach towards the Arctic and activities in the region (Conley & Kraut, 2011).

The policy states to be consistent with international treaties and to respect international law, including UNCLOS. The reasons for the new policy are listed as follows: "altered national policies on homeland security and defense, the effects of climate change and increasing human activity in the Arctic region, the establishment and ongoing work of the Arctic Council, a growing awareness that the Arctic region is both fragile and rich in resources" (The White House, 2009, p. 2). The policy aims, among other objectives, to "meet national security and homeland security needs relevant to the Arctic region" and to "strengthen institutions for cooperation among the eight Arctic nations". To secure its security interests, the directive states that "The United States ... is prepared to operate either independently or in conjunction with other states to safeguard these interests" (The White House, 2009, p. 2). It discusses hard-power capabilities, deterrence and the prevention of terrorist attacks. Moreover, freedom of the seas is mentioned as a top national priority. By implementing the policy, the US wishes to develop the necessary capabilities to protect American borders in the region, to protect maritime trade, ensure freedom of mobility for US vessels and aircrafts, project sovereign US maritime presence in the region and support the peaceful resolution of regional disputes (The White House, 2009). Regarding boundary issues, it says to act according to international law. Economic activities are to be carried out while accounting for the Arctic environment. A separate paragraph is dedicated to international governance, in which the important but limited mandate of the Arctic Council is stressed, and the Senate is urged to ratify the UNCLOS. The directive acknowledges that ratification of the Convention is vital for international recognition of American claims on its continental shelf. The ratification of UNCLOS has been a delicate matter in US politics, as some conservative senators continue to

be concerned about the impact of the Convention on national sovereignty, as power may be transferred to international authorities (Roston & Migliozi, 2017; Hossain & Barala, 2017). Both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations have supported ratification of the UNCLOS, but it has not been adopted to this date (Roston & Migliozi, 2017). So far, the Trump administration has not pushed the Senate to move forward on this matter. The directive only briefly speaks of US leadership in the Arctic when the necessity to “assert a more active and influential national presence to protect its Arctic interests and to project sea power throughout the region” (The White House, 2009, p. 3) is mentioned. However, neither the role the US should take on in case of tensions or disputes in the region nor specific threats are addressed. These are discussed in a number of strategy documents published by the American government, which will be addressed in the following section. Worth noting is that this policy was published only after the EU published its Arctic strategy. The fact that this body, which is not an Arctic state and does not have observer status in the Arctic Council, published an Arctic strategy before the US created a comprehensive policy, is illustrative for the situation.

### Strategic documents

In 2013, the White House published, for the first time, a separate document on the national strategy for the Arctic region. In the preface, then president Obama states that “The Arctic region is peaceful, stable, and free of conflict (The White House, 2013, p. i). The strategy is built on three pillars: advance US security interests, pursue responsible Arctic region stewardship and strengthen international cooperation (The White House, 2013; Altunkaya, 2019). For all objectives and activities discussed in this strategic document, the importance of the role of international law is mentioned more than once. It also mentions the US aim of peaceful resolution of disputes without coercion. To achieve the three priorities set out in the strategy, the US will depend on “a combination of independent action, bilateral initiatives and multilateral cooperation” (The White House, 2013, p. 6). It does not speak about any territorial claim or dispute in the Arctic region. In the 2014 implementation report following this strategy, US commitment to cooperate with the international community is once more stressed, despite an extensive chapter on the development of hard-power capabilities such as the development of Arctic communication infrastructure and maritime operations. Initiatives such as the establishment of the Arctic Executive Steering Committee following the Executive Order on Enhancing Coordination of National Effort in the Arctic were executed (Executive

Office of the President of the United States, 2015). This Committee aims “to provide guidance to executive departments and agencies and enhance coordination of Federal Arctic policies across agencies and offices (Office of Science and Technology Policy, the Council on Environmental Quality, the Domestic Policy Council and the NSC)” (President, 2015, p. 4191). Also, a US Special Representative for the Arctic region was appointed. Additionally, the US considers having executed the strategy in accordance with the UNCLOS while ensuring its interests related to freedom of navigation. In 2016, a new implementation framework for the strategy was published which is based on a “commitment to leadership in adapting to changing Arctic conditions” (Executive Office of the President of the United States, 2016, p. 3).

In 2013, the US DoD published an Arctic strategy too. This document acknowledges the importance of the Arctic to the international security environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Department of Defense, 2013). It is optimistic in the sense that it considers a “relatively low level of military threat in a region bounded by nation states that have not only publicly committed to working within a common framework of international law and diplomatic engagement but have also demonstrated the ability and commitment to do so” (Department of Defense, 2013, p. 4). This statement refers to the 2008 Ilulissat Declaration in which the five Arctic states commit themselves to the settlement of territorial disputes following the guidelines of the UNCLOS. According to Conley & Kraut (2011), this illustrated the nations’ intention to maintain the Arctic as an area of peace and cooperation. The last section of the document covers challenges and risks to the American strategic approach, and specifically mentions that “political rhetoric and press reporting about boundary disputes and competition for resources may inflame regional tensions” (Department of Defense, 2013, p. 13). It furthermore touches upon the risk of an ‘arms race mentality’ when guarding against future security threats militarily. To mitigate this risk, the DoD aims to build upon collaborative security approaches and transparency about its military activities. In 2016, an update of the 2013 DoD Arctic strategy was published, with increased attention for freedom of the seas in the Arctic, deterrence, US forces to defend the homeland and for exercising sovereignty (Department of Defense, 2016). It is in this document that disputes with other states are first explicitly mentioned in official US policy. It states that the US disagrees with territorial claims made by Canada and Russia, as these are not in line with international law (Department of Defense, 2016). Moreover, where the 2013 report concluded relatively little threat to be

present, the 2016 version states that “threats in the North are evolving” (Department of Defense, 2016, p. 15) and plans for enhancing capabilities and training in the Arctic are discussed. A second update on the strategy was published in 2019. The central strategic aims are building strategic awareness, enhancing Arctic operations and strengthening the rules-based order in the Arctic (Department of Defense, 2019). Its structure and content are comparable to the previous strategies published. However, the 2019 strategy is more explicit on threats and strategic development in the Arctic than were previous documents:

*“The network of U.S. allies and partners with shared national interests in this rules-based order is the United States’ greatest strategic advantage in the Arctic region, and thus the cornerstone of DoD’s Arctic strategy. DoD cooperation with Arctic allies and partners strengthens our shared approach to regional security and helps deter strategic competitors from seeking to unilaterally change the existing rules-based order.”* (Department of Defense, 2019, p. 2).

From the DoD’s strategy it is clear that the US views Russia as its greatest threat in the Arctic region and it recognizes that both Russian and Chinese activities in the Arctic may pose a threat to the American homeland. According to the DoD, both are challenging the rules-based order in the Arctic by undermining international law (Department of Defense, 2019). Based on its analysis, the DoD puts forward three objectives: defending the homeland, competing when necessary to maintain favourable regional balances of power and ensuring common domains remain free and open (Department of Defense, 2019).

Apart from the DoD, the US coast guard published a 10-year Arctic strategy in 2013. This CS21R discusses the Arctic too, but only briefly addresses the enhanced maritime activity that will result from the changing climate in the region (Department of the Navy, 2015). It furthermore stresses the need for cooperation to ensure regional security and required enhanced American capabilities. Nonetheless, in general, Geoffrey Till (2015) finds that the strategy puts more emphasis on hard-power capabilities and reasoning that did its predecessor. This, combined with the fact that the strategy has been published in a number of different languages, including Mandarin, may imply that the US is flexing its muscle when it comes to seapower. Both the 2015 and 2017 version of the US National Security Strategy have little attention for the Arctic region, which can be explained by the separate strategy documents published on the region. The US is not alone in its Arctic strategy. The other four littoral Arctic nations have published strategy documents too, all focusing on “on a peaceful and prosperous

region, international cooperation, environmental protection, and scientific research” (Miller, 2016, p. 2).

### Arctic Council chairmanship

In April 2015 the US assumed the two-year rotating chairmanship of the Arctic Council. Main points of focus during its time as chair of the Council were the improvement of economic and living conditions of Arctic communities, Arctic ocean safety, security and stewardship and lastly the impacts of climate change on the region (US Department of State, n.d.). As particular successes of the US during its chairmanship, Hossain and Barala (2017) mention the conclusion of the third legally binding agreement of the Arctic Council and the development made on Arctic maritime cooperation. Under US leadership, the Council defined specific challenges and identified mechanisms to address them.

### Actions and statements

Konyshev & Sergunin (2012) find that throughout the years, American military presence has expanded throughout the years, similar to other states’ presence. This fits the US acknowledgement of the importance of the Arctic for the international security environment. In 2015, Obama became the first sitting president to visit Alaska (Hossain & Barala, 2017), illustrating the enhanced attention the administration had gained for the Arctic region. In 2018, Secretary of the Navy Richard Spencer made clear the Navy was playing with the idea to engage in FONOPs in the Arctic, similar to the SCS (Lajeunesse & Huebert, 2019). This is in line with statements by Secretary of State Pompeo, who, in a speech during a visit to Finland, departs from previous courses by stating that “America could do more” (2019) in the Arctic and expresses the administration’s intention to uphold international law and respond to Russia’s destabilising activities. Furthermore, he takes a clear stance on Chinese involvement in the region: “... the shortest distance between China and the Arctic is 900 miles. There are only Arctic States and Non-Arctic States. No third category exists, and claiming otherwise entitles China to exactly nothing” (2019).

### Conclusion

US Arctic policy has developed throughout the years. While it first lacked a cohesive strategy and command authority in the region (Robbin, 2011), it later developed specific Arctic strategies and created bodies to oversee them. The Arctic gained importance throughout

Obama's presidency, although some components of it seem to be discontinued under President Trump (Altunkaya, 2019). Nonetheless, the US has been less active in the region than other Arctic states. Still in 2017, Russia's Arctic infrastructural supremacy was indisputable (Hossain & Barala, 2017). According to Colonel Joseph Miller, Washington has a number of steps to take to ensure an efficient Arctic policy to guarantee "U.S. access to the strategic Arctic area and its resources, contribute to US energy independence, and ensure peace in the region with partnerships favourable to U.S. national interests" (2016, p. 3).



## 6. Congruence analysis

In this section the findings of the empirical analysis are connected to the theories as discussed in chapter 4. Their explanatory weaknesses and strengths will be assessed, and a synthetic perspective is presented at the end of the chapter.

### 6.1 Defensive realism

The expectation formulated to test the explanatory power of defensive realism is:

*Expectation 1: the US response to the Chinese militarisation of the South China Sea and the scramble for territory in the Arctic can be explained by the US perception that these events are not existential threats to US security.*

#### The militarisation of the SCS

The presence of the US in the SCS makes for a special case: the US has near-constant presence in the SCS, is important to the regional balance of power and exerts FONOPs. Still, it seems unable to contain Chinese activities. A relevant question is thus, why has the US not been successful in this? Has it failed to halt China or was this never the intention because it does not view the Chinese activities as existential threats? Or, as Forsberg (1996) argues, may the current power relations be not favourable enough for the US to engage in a hard-power territorial dispute to defend its strategic and economic interests? As is clear from the empirical analysis in the previous chapter, the US views China with growing suspicion as years pass by. In strategic documents and statements, Chinese activities in the SCS are increasingly described as a threat to American interests, and language of de-escalation is slowly exchanged for stronger military presence. In a 2019 Report to Congress the DoD addresses its “eroding competitive edge against China and Russia” (2019, p. 2), and states that “developing a more lethal, resilient, agile, and ready Joint Force will ensure that our military sustains its competitive advantages” (2019, p. 2), from which a possible threat from the Chinese rise is clear. Nonetheless, earlier on the US chose a path of de-escalation to ‘solve’ the situation and created a network of strategic partners. From its FONOPs in the years of the Obama presidency one could conclude that these norms are more important to the US than its hard-power, hegemonic position in the region. Chinese activities have not ended and Beijing’s “peacefully coercive” salami slicing tactics seem to be successful (McDevitt, 2014). It appears that Washington is not willing to risk an escalation of the conflict to ensure the continuation

of its regional position. This troubled US position can be explained by the fact that China is never going to accept American sea denial (Gompert, 2013), and thus a more assertive US position to defend its position in the region may lead to a military confrontation. Nonetheless, Gompert argues that the opposite is equally true, and that “assured access of US shipping and naval forces to East Asian waters is as important as it has ever been” (2013, p. 5). If that assumption is true, the findings by Morton should be troubling to the US. He notes that “the Chinese leadership is predominantly concerned with achieving hegemony in the South China Sea at any cost” (2016, p. 910), at odds with the rules-based order the US is so eager to sustain.

### *The scramble for the Arctic*

Does the US perceive the developments in the Arctic as a threat to the existing balance of power? In the documents and statements analysed in this study, the US government more than once expresses the increasing security threat following from, mostly Russian, activities in the region. Although most of the capabilities Russia is developing in the Arctic are defensive, they should be viewed from a broader context with the events in Crimea in mind (Pezard, 2018). As for the SCS, one can identify a trend of stronger language related to threats in the Arctic region throughout the years, although the language used is less concrete in the latter case. Significant parts of its strategic documents on the Arctic are dedicated to topics that can be related to defensive realism, such as preparation for increased activity in the maritime domain, development of aviation requirements and enhancement of domain awareness. The DoD’s Arctic strategy explicitly states that both China and Russia “are also pursuing activities and capabilities in the Arctic that may present risks to the homeland” (2019, p. 6), from which a perceived threat is clear. However, does the US consider this threat strong enough to challenge the balance of power? The fact that it is trying to build up its forces in the Arctic also points towards a growing threat perception, illustrated by the DoD’s expressed need for “developing a more lethal, resilient, agile, and ready Joint Force will ensure that our military sustains its competitive advantages” in areas of strategic competition (2019, p. 2). However, experts are still critical on the US Arctic strategy and find that the US “should develop a comprehensive strategy for advancing these interests” (Altunkaya, 2019, p. 184). Moreover, inter-state cooperation through international institutions and the importance of a rules-based order is at the centre of the US Arctic policy, and this cannot be explained by defensive realism. As the US has lagged behind and has acted so much later than other Arctic and even non-

Arctic states, and has still not formulated a comprehensive strategy, I conclude that the US does not consider the developments in the Arctic as an actual threat to the existing balance of power.

## 6.2 Liberal institutionalism

The expectation formulated based on liberal institutionalism is:

*Expectation 2: the US response to the Chinese militarisation of the South China Sea and the scramble for territory in the Arctic can be explained by the impact of existing institutions and shared interests with the states involved.*

### The militarisation of the SCS

In the SCS, competing interests between China and the US are present. China wishes to claim sea lanes and exploit the resources and fish reserves. The US on the other hand, is heavily dependent on free navigation in the SCS for its economy and the defence of strategic interests. With its aggressive behaviour, China shows it has a different interpretation of international law (Pezard, 2018) and to a large part of the of the US administration, China present an obstacle to the rule-based order in the SCS (Cai, 2017). Morton (2016) supports this view, stating that the Chinese narrative focusses on achieving SCS hegemony 'at any cost' and a reluctant stance towards third-party adjudication. Nonetheless, some cooperation has taken place throughout the years (Morton, 2016). Furthermore, outside of the SCS the shared interests of the US and China and mutual dependence and interconnectedness are not hard to think of. Despite rising tensions in the SCS and disputes over sea lanes and reclamation activities, the two states have other affairs to deal with on the international stage in which they are dependent on one another. According to Michael McDevitt (2014), this broader context is the reason that the US wishes to prevent the SCS from becoming the defining strategic element in the bilateral relation. In contrast to this, Su Xiaohui (2018) finds that the US is likely to give presence to its interests in the SCS instead of trying to obtain Chinese support for some its other interests. However, from this analysis I find that that is not the case.

To conclude, the US seems reluctant to enforce adherence to international law in the SCS. Interesting for both the SCS and the Arctic is the fact that the US is one of the only states that has not ratified the UNCLOS. Thus, it talks about adherence to international law without having adopted the law itself. Does the fact that the US still hasn't adopted this piece of

legislation mean that there a clash between what it claims and its actual behaviour? Already in 2009, the US Arctic policy finds that ratification of the Convention “will give the United States a seat at the table when the rights that are vital to our interests are debated and interpreted” (The White House, 2009, p. 4), and still this has not happened.

### The scramble for the Arctic

As discussed earlier, the national strategy for the Arctic contains realist components. However, some parts can be related to liberal institutionalism. In line with the expectation, the US uses the Arctic Council to push forward its interests, although it considers it to have a limited mandate. Likewise, international cooperation is important for the US: “the network of U.S. allies and partners with shared national interests in this rules-based order is the United States’ greatest strategic advantage in the Arctic region, and thus the cornerstone of DoD’s Arctic strategy” (Department of Defense, 2019, p. 2). Yet, one could argue that some of these interests of states may also be competing, such as the exploitation of minerals and resources below the seabed. However, liberal institutionalism is not able to explain why the US has not been more assertive in pursuing these competing interests as the theory would expect the US to exploit economic opportunities, like those that are present in the Arctic region. Similar to the SCS, the US stresses the importance of international law, as expressed in the implementation report on the national strategy for the Arctic (2015). Nevertheless, only in 2016 territorial claims by Canada and Russia are first named in official policy documents and mentioned as conflicting with international law.

The outcomes for liberal institutionalism for the Arctic region are thus conflicting. On the one hand, institutions and international cooperation play a large role, but on the other hand the theory would expect the US to put more emphasis on its economic interests in the region.

### 6.3 Constructivism

To test the explanatory strengths and weaknesses of constructivism, I formulated the following expectation:

*Expectation 3: the US response to the Chinese militarisation of the South China Sea and the scramble for territory in the Arctic can be explained by a changing strategic culture in which the US wishes to be less involved in protecting international waterways.*

### The militarisation of the SCS

Does the US behave as a leading super power, does it present itself as guardian of the global commons and does it ensure freedom of navigation? Initially, the US remained aloof to the disputes in the SCS and it wished not to take a position. Later, the US showed its leadership in the SCS by providing states in the region with military support, upon which some of them depend heavily and it condemned Chinese expansion and reclamation activities. Moreover, 'US leadership' is a term often used in policy and strategy documents. However, the US has not particularly acted as a super power pushing forward its interests in a way that forces China to follow its lead. American action in the region has not prevented China from continuing its activities and claims. Since no strong US military response has followed, one could argue that the US hopes the dispute can be solved peacefully or that it does not attach sufficient value to the SCS to engage militarily. This all may indicate a US wish to be less involved in the affairs surrounding the SCS, although clear evidence is missing. The importance of freedom of navigation is emphasized in policy and strategic documents and American FONOPs and Carter's statement that "The United States will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law will allow, as we do all around the world" (Carter, 2015) reflect adherence to this norm. Despite this and its near-constant presence in the SCS, the US has not been willing to enforce freedom of navigation as costs may be high, and even though this could be an indication of a changing strategic culture, this policy is likely to be informed by other considerations.

### The scramble for the Arctic

In contrast to what one might expect from the US, it is not actively exercising its power in the Arctic region and it is lagging behind other states in the region. It is important to realise that the Arctic region is not just any type of international water, but it is a strategically relevant region including US territory. Thus, besides the general idea of freedom of the seas, the Arctic region should also be important to the US because of direct homeland security reasons, which would be all the more reason to take on an assertive, leading position. However, apart from any possible change in the US strategic culture, the US was very late with paying attention to and producing policy on the Arctic, and it thus has for sure not been a leader in that sense. Even after the US started to make explicit policy and strategies on the Arctic, US leadership is was not an important part of its policies and strategic documents. Rather, it spoke almost exclusively of national interests, and not the role it should fulfil. Only in the strategy published in 2016, a commitment to leadership is expressed explicitly. Freedom of the seas is mentioned

as a top national priority in the Arctic policy, and by implementing the policy the US aims to ensure this freedom. Even though the US Navy spoke of possible FONOPs in the region, concrete US leadership is absent. In the Arctic, the US strongly adheres to the norm of freedom of navigation, but this is neither reflected in its strategic culture as safe guarder of international waters nor in its identity as a super power. This finding is in line with Till's work, who analyses the US CS21R and finds that there is "now much less direct emphasis than there was in 2007 on the role of the U.S. maritime forces in contributing to the defense of the global sea-based trading system" (2015, p. 36). Although the intention is still present, the focus has moved to international cooperation for international stability and an enhanced emphasis on a muscular approach towards protecting US interests (Till, 2015).

#### 6.4 Conclusions congruence analysis

Based on the congruence analysis, I can examine whether my findings are in line with the theory, are contradictory to the theory or go beyond the expectations based on the theory for each expectation. The findings of this are presented in Table 1. I find that certain elements of the US policy towards fit nicely with the ideas of defensive realism. In the case of the SCS, it is clear that the US increasingly perceives Chinese activities as a threat to US interests. The fact that the US has not strongly responded to these activities is thus not due to a lack of threat. Rather, it seems as if it is troubled on how it should respond to these assertive Chinese activities. It appears that the US is unwilling to risk an escalation of the conflict to ensure its hegemonic position in the region. In the Arctic region, the fact that the US has been lagging behind shows a certain reluctance to the developments there. After all, it is now preparing for increased activity in the maritime and recognises that activities of other Arctic states may present a risk to the US homeland. Nevertheless, it seems that the US does not see the developments in the Arctic as existential threats to its security, since if this would be the case, a stronger response would be expected. Similar to the SCS, the US does not view its interests as important enough to risk triggering a regional conflict.

Considering the centrality of the liberal world order in US foreign policy, the focus international law as an institution in many of its strategic and policy documents is not surprising. The impact of existing institutions and shared interests with other states is further clear from American statements on the importance of the Arctic Council and from the fact that the DoD identifies US allies and partners as the "cornerstone" of its Arctic strategy.

Nonetheless, liberal institutionalism would expect the US to be more proactive in pursuing its economic interests in the Arctic region. Two factors possibly complicate a liberal institutionalist explanation of the situation. The first is the fact that, although it claims to adhere to international law, the US is one of the only states in the world that has not ratified the UNCLOS. Secondly, the current President Trump is less keen on international institutions and focuses less on international law than did his predecessors. In documents of previous administrations, the importance of adherence to international law was stressed continually.

The evidence for a change in the American strategic culture as possible explanation is mixed. In the SCS, the US was reluctant to become engaged initially, and despite its freedom of navigation exercises, it has proven unwilling to enforce freedom of navigation in the region. However, discourse on the importance of the freedom of navigation is persistent. Also, one should not forget that the US still has a near-constant presence in the Asia-Pacific and that it is still involved through support to a number of states in the region. However, in the Arctic, the US surely has not taken on a leadership role. On the contrary, it was very late to act at all. In general, it seems that nowadays there is less direct emphasis on the role of the US in the defence of the global sea-based trading system than there was before.

Based on the above analysis, it is evident that all of the theories discussed provide conditions and mechanism relevant for explaining US behaviour, but none of them has sufficient comprehensive explanatory power on its own.

	<b>Observations in line with expectations</b>	<b>Observations contradictory to expectations</b>	<b>Observations beyond expectations</b>
<b>Defensive realism</b>	China not contained by US military presence in the SCS but not further response from US	Growth in threat perception in policy documents and strategic documents on China and developments in the Arctic	Focus on the freedom of navigation norm
	Late development of Arctic policy and lagging behind on other states in the region	Military presence in SCS	International cooperation through the Arctic Council in the Arctic
		Network of strategic partners in the SCS	
		Build-up of capabilities in the Arctic	
<b>Liberal institutionalism</b>	Emphasis on importance of international law	Non-ratification of the UNCLOS	Reluctance of the to pursue its interests in the Arctic
	Shared interests with China beyond the SCS	Conflicting interests with China in the SCS	
	International cooperation through the Arctic Council in the Arctic	Importance of the SCS and Arctic region for international trade and commerce	
<b>Constructivism</b>	US wished to not get involved in the SCS dispute initially	Central role for importance of freedom of navigation in policy documents and strategies in both SCS and Arctic	
	No enforcement of freedom of navigation in the SCS	Freedom of navigation and aviation exercises in the SCS	
	Wish to solve SCS conflict peacefully	Support to states in the SCS	
	No leading role in the Arctic, late to act	Near-constant presence in the SCS	
	Focus on national interests instead of overall situation and order in the Arctic		

Table 1. Findings congruence analysis



### 6.5 Synthetic perspective: theoretical complementarity

Following from the conclusions of the congruence analysis, I suggest a synthetic perspective that combines different explanatory factors from the different theories discussed. It is clear that the US is troubled on how to halt Chinese reclamation activities without risking triggering an escalation of the conflict. This fits into defensive realist thinking. Although surprising, the slow development of Arctic policy can most logically be explained by a low threat perception of the developments in the Arctic. Apparently, these are not considered existential by the US government. However, it is clear that a defensive realist explanation alone does not suffice. To fully cover the causes of US behaviour, the defensive realist logic should be enriched with liberal institutionalists ideas. As for defensive realism, this theory alone is not able to explain the US behaviour, but I find that international law is an important explanatory factor for the US policy. The interactions between states are not only determined by their actions and threat perceptions but are constrained by international law. More specifically, the US aims to force other states to abide to this law. Thus, American policy is not only guided by their perception of the balance of threat but also by international law, the adherence and promotion hereof. This is both the case in the SCS and the Arctic and appears to be present throughout US foreign policy generally. In fact, for Washington, international law is a way to stabilise the anarchical environment that it operates in, as recognised by liberal institutionalism. The expectation based on constructivist theory is harder to fit into this picture. In policy documents on the Arctic, the focus is increasingly on US national interests, although freedom of navigation is still a top priority. As for the SCS, the near-constant presence in the area, the freedom of navigation exercises and the support for states in the region speak against a changing strategic culture. In order to prevent simply listing “a multitude of (more or less disconnected) reasons or drivers” (Kruck, 2014, p. 113) of my object of study, I do not include the possible explanatory variables of constructivism. To this extent, I agree with Kruck, who finds that “different and largely independent explanatory factors grasp different aspects of a phenomenon under study” (2014, p. 132).

## 7. Conclusions

In this paper, I aimed to uncover the theoretical causes of the American behaviour in the SCS and the Arctic and the role the US took on following the events there. I formulated expectations on the US behaviour based on defensive realism, liberal institutionalism and constructivism, the three major streams in international relations. I empirically analysed policy documents and actions to assess the explanatory strengths and weaknesses of each of the theories. As none of the theories is able to offer an inclusive explanation for the US policy and behaviour, I used a synthetic perspective to combine explanatory factors from different theories to arrive at a comprehensive explanation for the US behaviour in the two cases.

### 7.1 Answer to the research question

The research question of this paper is:

*If the US wants to maintain its unique position, why has it been reluctant to address the Chinese militarisation of the South China Sea and the scramble for territory in the Arctic?*

US reluctance to address Chinese militarisation of the SCS and the scramble for territory in the Arctic can be explained using a combination of defensive realist and liberal institutionalist frameworks. Both theories have explanatory strengths as well as blind spots, and combining certain explanatory factors allows me to draw a comprehensive conclusion. Growing power of other states in both the SCS and the Arctic increase the costs for the US to maintain its hegemony and come with rising risks of escalating conflicts. The developments in the SCS and the Arctic are currently not seen as existential threats to national security by the US government and Washington is thus not willing to risk an escalating conflict to ensure its position in the two regions. However, American behaviour is also informed by the liberal institutionalist concept of international law, which the US uses to navigate through the anarchic environment and to stabilise the balance of threat.

### 7.2 Discussion of findings

Studying the role of the US in the SCS and the Arctic is of great relevance as it covers the behaviour of the world's greatest power in two highly significant regions, both economic and strategic. What happens in those regions may have an impact on, and alter, the division of power in the world in the years to come. For a start, the US has to deal with the knowledge

that the Asia-Pacific will no longer be an arena of American hegemony. Moreover, it has to refocus towards the Arctic as strategic interests in this region will grow with the diminishing of sea ice. The fact that the US has not taken on an assertive, leading role in the Arctic is especially surprising as the Arctic is a strategically important region with US territory. It would be relevant to gain further insights on how the US deals with this. Moreover, if the trend of focusing on US interests rather than on being the guardian of the global commons, as identified in the Arctic, continues and spreads to other regions, this will have an impact on future international affairs. Another term of President Trump and his 'America First' approach would only strengthen this tendency.

A possible limitation of this specific research is the fact that the timeframes chosen for my case studies cover multiple US administrations that do not necessarily make choices similar to the administration before them and may each have their own reasons for acting in the way they do. Thus, despite the continuity that exists in American foreign policy due to the so-called deep state, it may be a risk to group together different administrations and argue that they have similar ideas, preferences and perceptions of events in the world. Moreover, the timeframes of the two case studies are not perfectly aligned, as this is not the case for events in the SCS and the Arctic region.

Conducting this study based on the idea of analytic eclecticism fits into a larger movement within social science, based on the recognition that the world may be too complex to be explained by single theoretical models (Sil & Katzenstein, 2010). Even though the policies of the US in the SCS and the Arctic are widely studied, this research fills a gap in the existing literature by using a synthetic perspective to see how multiple theories can work complementary to explain actual behaviour of the US. Future research may want to focus on a more in-depth analysis of US behaviour to further advance the theoretical debate on how theories can be complementary rather than rival. Additionally, it may want to empirically test the conclusions drawn in this and other papers that apply a synthetic perspective to international relations.

## Bibliography

- Adler, E. (1997). Seizing the middle ground: Constructivism in world politics. *European Journal of International Relations*, 3(3), 319-363.
- Al Jazeera (2019, November 4). *US envoy decries Chinese 'intimidation' in South China Sea*. Retrieved on 14 November 2019 from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/envoy-decries-chinese-intimidation-south-china-sea-191104050635259.html>
- Altunkaya, E. (2019). US and the Arctic region in the era of climate change: A brief analysis of the evolution of US Arctic foreign policy since 2000s. *Istanbul Gelişim Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 6(1), 183-199.
- Birdwell, I. (2016, August 15). Rival claims to a changing Arctic. *The Maritime Executive*. Retrieved on 9 September 2019 from: <https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/rival-claims-to-the-changing-arctic>
- Blatter, J., & Haverland, M. (2012). Congruence analysis. *Designing case studies* (pp. 144-204) Springer.
- Bouchat, C. J. (2014). The Paracel Islands and US Interests and Approaches in the South China Sea. *U.S. Army War College*. Retrieved on 7 September 2019 from: <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a603627.pdf>
- Cai, P. (2017). The South China Sea: Troubled waters in China-US relations. *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, 3(02), 283-298.
- Carter, A. (2015). IISS Shangri-La Dialogue: "A Regional Security Architecture Where Everyone Rises". *Department of Defense*. Retrieved on 22 October 2019 from: <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Speeches/Speech/Article/606676/>
- Chen, S. (2015, March). U.S. Navy Urges Southeast Asian Patrols of South China Sea. *Bloomberg*. Retrieved on 4 October 2019 from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-03-18/u-s-navy-urges-joint-southeast-asia-patrols-of-south-china-sea>
- Chivers, C. J. (2007, August). Russians Plant Flag on the Arctic Seabed. *The New York Times*. Retrieved on 9 October 2019 from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/03/world/europe/03arctic.html>
- Collier, D. (2011). Understanding process tracing. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 44(4), 823-830.
- Conley, H., & Kraut, J. (2010). US strategic interests in the Arctic. *Center for Strategic & International Studies*.
- Dantzler, H. (2016). *United States Naval Strategy in the South China Sea to Ensure International Freedom of Navigation*. Retrieved on 7 September 2019 from: <https://apps.dtic.mil/docs/citations/AD1037673>
- De Castro, R. (2015). The Philippines confronts China in the South China Sea: Power politics vs. liberalism-legalism. *Asian Perspective*, 39(1), 71-100.
- Department of Defense. (2013). *Arctic Strategy*. Retrieved on 17 October 2019 from: [https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2013\\_Arctic\\_Strategy.pdf](https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2013_Arctic_Strategy.pdf)

- Department of Defense. (2015). *Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy*. Retrieved on 17 October 2019 from: [https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/NDAA%20A-P\\_Maritime\\_Security\\_Strategy-08142015-1300-FINALFORMAT.PDF](https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/NDAA%20A-P_Maritime_Security_Strategy-08142015-1300-FINALFORMAT.PDF)
- Department of Defense. (2016). *Report to Congress on Strategy to Protect United States National Security Interests in the Arctic Region*. Retrieved on 17 October 2019 from: <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2016-Arctic-Strategy-UNCLAS-cleared-for-release.pdf>
- Department of Defense. (2018). *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*. Retrieved on 11 October 2019 from: <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>
- Department of State (no date). U.S. Chairmanship of the Arctic Council. Retrieved on 22 October 2019 from: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/e/oes/ocns/opa/arc/uschair//index.htm>
- Department of the Navy. (2015) *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*. Retrieved on 11 October 2019 from: <https://www.navy.mil/local/maritime/150227-CS21R-Final.pdf>
- Executive Office of the President of the United States. (2016). *Implementation framework National Strategy for the Arctic Region*. Retrieved on 17 October 2019 from: [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/documents/National%20Strategy%20for%20the%20Arctic%20Region%20Implementation%20Framework%20\(Appendix%20A\)%20Final.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/documents/National%20Strategy%20for%20the%20Arctic%20Region%20Implementation%20Framework%20(Appendix%20A)%20Final.pdf)
- Finnemore, M., & Sikkink, K. (1998). International norm dynamics and political change. *International Organization*, 52(4), 887-917.
- Forsberg, T. (1996). Explaining territorial disputes: From power politics to normative reasons. *Journal of Peace Research*, 33(4), 433-449.
- Fravel, T. (2016). US policy towards the disputes in the South China Sea since 1995. *Power politics in Asia's contested waters* (pp. 389-402) Springer.
- Friedberg, A. L. (2005). The future of US-China relations: Is conflict inevitable? *International Security*, 30(2), 7-45.
- Gao, Z. (1994). The South China Sea: From conflict to cooperation? *Ocean Development & International Law*, 25(3), 345-359.
- Gompert, D. C. (2013). *Sea Power and American Interests in the Western Pacific*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.
- Grieco, J. M. (1988). Anarchy and the limits of cooperation: A realist critique of the newest liberal institutionalism. *International Organization*, 42(3), 485-507.
- Hellmann, G., & Wolf, R. (1993). Neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, and the future of NATO. *Security Studies*, 3(1), 3-43.

- Heywood, A. (2015). *Key concepts in politics and international relations*. Macmillan International Higher Education.
- Hong, N. (2012). The melting Arctic and its impact on China's maritime transport. *Research in Transportation Economics*, 35(1), 50-57.
- Hopf, T. (1998). The promise of constructivism in international relations theory. *International Security*, 23(1), 171-200.
- Hossain, K., & Barala, H. (2017). An assessment of US chairmanship of the arctic council. *Arctic Centre University of Lapland*. Retrieved on 22 October 2019 from: <https://lauda.ulapland.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/62823/Assessment-of-US-Arctic-Council-Chairmanship-ArCticles-2017-2.pdf?sequence=5>
- Huebert, R. (2009). United states Arctic policy: The reluctant Arctic power. *University of Calgary, the School of Public Policy—University of Calgary Publications Series*, 2(2).
- Ikenberry, G. J. (2017). The plot against American foreign policy: Can the liberal order survive. *Foreign Aff.*, 96, 2.
- Jackson, R., Sørensen, G., & Møller, J. (2016). *Introduction to international relations: Theories and approaches*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Kaplan, R. D. (2018, October 9). How President Trump is helping China win in the South China Sea. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved on 15 November 2019 from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/10/09/how-president-trump-is-helping-beijing-win-in-the-south-china-sea/>
- Keohane, R. O., & Martin, L. L. (1995). The promise of institutionalist theory. *International Security*, 20(1), 39-51.
- Konyshov, V., & Sergunin, A. (2012). The Arctic at the crossroads of geopolitical interests. *Russian Politics & Law*, 50(2), 34-54.
- Kruck, A. (2014). Theorising the use of private military and security companies: A synthetic perspective. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 17(1), 112-141.
- Lajeunesse, A., & Huebert, R. (2019). Preparing for the next Arctic sovereignty crisis: The northwest passage in the age of Donald Trump. *International Journal*, 74(2), 225-239.
- Landler (2010, July 23). Offering to Aid Talks, U.S. challenges China on disputed islands. *The New York Times*. Retrieved on 13 December 2018 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/24/world/asia/24dipl.html>
- Lendon, B. (2019, May). Rival South China Sea vision in spotlight as Washington, Beijing front Shangri-La Dialogue. CNN. Retrieved on 23 October 2019 from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/05/30/asia/us-south-china-sea-shangri-la-intl/index.html>
- Loomba, A. (2007). *Colonialism/postcolonialism*. Routledge: London.

- Hoskin, M. (2019). Historical support for China's South China Sea territorial stance. *Maritime Executive*. Retrieved on 7 December 2019 from: <https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/historical-support-for-china-s-south-china-sea-territorial-stance-1>
- McDevitt, M. (2014). The South China Sea: Assessing US policy and options for the future. *CNA Occasional Paper*, 1-92.
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (2007). Structural realism. *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 83
- Miller, J. C. (2016). *The Arctic: America's oldest and coldest new frontier*. US Army War College.
- NBC News. (2007, August). *Russia defends North Pole flag-planting*. Retrieved on 4 October 2019 from: [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/20169307/ns/world\\_news-world\\_environment/t/russia-defends-north-pole-flag-planting/#.XepgjS1x\\_Vp](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/20169307/ns/world_news-world_environment/t/russia-defends-north-pole-flag-planting/#.XepgjS1x_Vp)
- Noyes, J. E. (2005). The United States, the Law of the Sea Convention, and freedom of navigation. *Suffolk Transnat'l L.Rev.*, 29, 1.
- O'Rourke, R. (2014). Maritime territorial and exclusive economic zone (EEZ) disputes involving China: Issues for congress. Retrieved on 4 October 2019 from: <https://apps.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA604215>
- Pezard, S. (2018). The new geopolitics of the Arctic. *RAND Corporation*. Retrieved on 11 October 2019 from: [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT500/CT500/RAND\\_CT500.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT500/CT500/RAND_CT500.pdf)
- Pompeo, M. R. Looking North: Sharpening America's Arctic Focus. *Department of Defense*. Retrieved on 22 October 2019 from: <https://www.state.gov/looking-north-sharpening-americas-arctic-focus/>
- Potts, T., & Schofield, C. (2008). Current Legal Developments: the Arctic. *International Journal of Marine & Coastal Law*, 23, 151.
- Repkina, A. (2015). Arctic Territories. *Eurasian Business Briefing*. Retrieved on 7 December 2019 from: <https://www.eurasianbusinessbriefing.com/russia-renews-claims-to-arctic-territories/arctic-territories/>
- Robbin, D. (2011). Arctic defense concerns reorganizing US defense structure to meet threats in the changing Arctic. *Arctic*, 2011, 04-22.
- Roston, E. & Migliozi, B. (2017, May) How a Melting Arctic Changes Everything. Part II: The Political Arctic. *Bloomberg*. Retrieved on 4 October 2019 from: <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2017-arctic/the-political-arctic/>
- Rustandi, C. A. (2016). The South China Sea dispute: Opportunities for ASEAN to enhance its policies in order to achieve resolution. *Canberra: Center for Defence and Strategic Studies*.
- Shea, N. & Palu, L. (2019, May 8). Scenes from the new cold war unfolding at the top of the world. *National Geographic*. Retrieved on 9 September 2019 from:

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2018/10/new-cold-war-breeds-as-arctic-ice-melts/>

- Shear, D. (2015). *Statement of David Shear, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations*. Retrieved on 11 October 2019 from: [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/051315\\_Shear\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/051315_Shear_Testimony.pdf)
- Sil, R., & Katzenstein, P. J. (2010). Analytic eclecticism in the study of world politics: Reconfiguring problems and mechanisms across research traditions. *Perspectives on Politics*, 8(2), 411-431.
- Sinkler, A. (2011). Retroduction, congruence analysis, and causal inference in case study research. *Congruence Analysis, and Causal Inference in Case Study Research (March 25, 2011)*. Retrieved on 13 December 2018 from: <https://poseidon01.ssrn.com/delivery.php?ID=053002104002072116009005018088081125051050049050065025125085064031073107010007082110057117049061018023008101019094007012000110016012037013093014118099069108103073037039043009089067105109124123101026118118113006126116096075116010007121029073104127029&EXT=pdf>
- Stein, A. (2008). Neoliberal institutionalism. *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, 201-221.
- The President (2015). Enhancing coordination of national efforts in the Arctic. *Presidential Documents*. Retrieved on 11 October 2019 from: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/21/executive-order-enhancing-coordination-national-efforts-arctic>
- The White House. (2009). *National Security Presidential Directive (NSPD-66) and Homeland Security Presidential Directive (HSPD-25)*. Retrieved on 4 October 2019 from: <http://polarconnection.org/national-security-presidential-directive-66homeland-security-presidential-directive-25-january-2009/>
- The White House. (2013). *National Strategy for the Arctic Region*. Retrieved on 17 October 2019 from: [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/nat\\_arctic\\_strategy.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/nat_arctic_strategy.pdf)
- The White House. (2015). *National Security Strategy*. Retrieved on 11 October 2019 from: [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015\\_national\\_security\\_strategy\\_2.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf)
- The White House. (2015). *National strategy for the Arctic region implementation report*. Retrieved on 17 October 2019 from: <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=764770>
- The White House. (2017). *National Security Strategy*. Retrieved on 11 October 2019 from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>
- Toje, A. (2009). Strategic culture as an analytic tool. *Western Balkans Security Observer-English Edition*, (14), 3-23.
- Turner, S. (2009). Russia, China and a multipolar world order: The danger in the undefined. *Asian Perspective*, 159-184.
- Valencia (2017, June 24). Trump's South China Sea policy taking shape. *The Globalist*. Retrieved on 15 November 2019 from: <https://www.theglobalist.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/0624p07.pdf>



- Waltz, K. N. (2000). Structural realism after the cold war. *International Security*, 25(1), 5-41.
- Weiss, T. G., & Wilkinson, R. (2014). Global governance to the rescue: Saving international relations? *Global Governance*, 20(1), 19-36.
- Xiaohui, S. (2018). Dynamics of the Trump administration's policy on the South China Sea. *China Int'l Stud.*, 69, 168.
- Yahuda, M. (2013). China's new assertiveness in the South China Sea. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 22(81), 446-459.
- Yoon, S. (2017). Why is China militarising the South China Sea? *The South China Sea disputes: Flashpoints, turning points and trajectories* (pp. 311-314) World Scientific.