

**A Constructivist Approach To  
Great Power Maritime Relations in the South China Sea**



# REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

*Form Approved*  
*OMB No. 0704-0188*

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. **PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.**

<b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b> 27-03-2022		<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> FINAL		<b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b> N/A	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> A Constructivist Approach to Great Power Maritime Relations in the South China Sea				<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b> CDR Jon D. Harbaugh, USN				<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>  Writing & Teaching Excellence Center Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207				<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>  N/A				<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b> N/A	
				<b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b> N/A	
<b>12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Distribution Statement A: Approved for public release; Distribution is unlimited.					
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b> A paper submitted to the faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the curriculum. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.					
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> United States-China (hereafter 'great power') realist competition in the South China Sea (SCS) fails to inhibit growing military capabilities, give cause for de-escalation, and harmonize China's integration into the established order – the time is ripe for new approaches. The author analyzes realist and liberalist ineffectiveness and argues that a constructivist approach can achieve a better state and dampen great power competition extremes in the SCS. Lessons garnered from constructivism's role in ending the Cold War and misperceptions underpinning the Vietnam War can be reflected upon current SCS great power struggles. Constructivist processes could dampen mutually harmful SCS competition extremes if the United States and China can find areas to establish 'new identities and interests' to institutionalize positive security identifications. Events such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2011 Japan tsunami, and recurrent typhoons exemplify the significant environmental vulnerabilities surrounding the SCS and illuminate practical issues constructivism can address while establishing shared great power interests. This constructivist strategy can be operationalized through recurring great power maritime humanitarian exercises, which would also synchronize Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR) responses.					
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS (Key words)</b> United States, China, Great Power Competition, Navy, Maritime, South China Sea, Constructivism, Realism, Liberalism, Humanitarian Cooperation, USINDOPACOM, PLAN, Peaceful Norms, Understandings					
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b>  N/A	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b>	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b> Director, Writing Center
<b>a. REPORT</b> UNCLASSIFIED	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b> UNCLASSIFIED	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b> UNCLASSIFIED			<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code)</b> 401-841-6499

*“Peace cannot be kept by force. It can only be achieved by understanding.”*  
-Albert Einstein

## INTRODUCTION

United States-China (hereafter ‘great power’) realist competition in the South China Sea (SCS) fails to inhibit growing military capabilities, give cause for de-escalation, and harmonize China’s integration into the established order – the time is ripe for new approaches. The SCS is primarily defined by the international relations theory of realism and its accompanying tribulations – while liberalism’s counterbalance wanes, a constructivist approach could underlie positive transformation.<sup>1</sup> Under realism, peace is achieved through the balance of power, the goal of foreign policy is to maximize national security, and military capabilities and economic resources define success. Realist theory’s main rival is liberalism, which espouses collective security, international law, democracy, and interdependence as the guardians of peace.<sup>2</sup> Liberalism falters under realist pressures in the SCS, as institutions, agreements, and international norms fail to maintain order. As liberalism ebbs and realism’s machinations grow, the threat of conflict from operational miscalculation or strategic brinkmanship expands in lockstep.

Constructivism illuminates a path forward. Under constructivism, relations are shaped through shared interactions, and individuals can think, adapt, and influence the environment to build peace by establishing common values and peaceful norms.<sup>3</sup> The military exists as a primary instrument of realism and must maintain this assigned post, or the stability sustained through the balance of power may falter. However, while maintaining order through strength, can militaries concurrently function as tools of constructivism? While balancing adversarial might, can they also dampen competition, if only in small strides, by serving as agents of shared values and common security discourses, steadily laying a foundation of peaceful norms? The

author analyzes realist and liberalist ineffectiveness and argues that a constructivist approach can achieve a better state and dampen great power competition extremes in the SCS.

### **THE RISING TIDE OF GREAT POWER REALISM IN THE SCS**

Realist friction grows as great power actions traverse the competition continuum in the SCS. This continuum begins with cooperation, which involves security cooperation, exercises, exchanges, and engagement. Beyond cooperation, nations pursue increasingly antagonistic competition, where diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments of power are applied towards objectives contradictory to an adversary's ambitions while attempting to avoid military combat. Competition in certain spheres does not preclude cooperation around mutual interests. Treading past competition accelerates nations towards armed conflict and war. Great power relations press the continuum's competitive limits in the SCS, flirting with the boundary where interactions can inadvertently escalate beyond either nation's intentions.<sup>4</sup>

Decades of great power interests, objectives, and actions coalesce to display realism's dominance over the modern SCS. China has adopted a realist approach towards the SCS, gaining national strength through resource acquisition, coercion towards neighboring nations, attempted Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) expansion, potential Taiwan Maritime Exclusion Zone enforcement, power projection, and domestic legitimacy.<sup>5</sup> Recent United States' actions opposing China's SCS assertiveness include public criticism, reaffirmation of positions, targeted economic sanctions, Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS), overflight of claims, bolstered presence, strengthened regional security ties, and responsive allied and partner coordination.<sup>6</sup>

The SCS is also a microcosmic reflection of broader United States' global realist interests, including sustaining regional security architecture, maintaining international non-coercive dispute settlement norms, freedom of the seas and international trade, limiting China's

revisionism of the international order, and stability of relations.<sup>7</sup> China's expansion into the SCS negatively impacts the United States' abilities to limit China's hegemonic ambitions, support Taiwan in a crisis, fulfill treaty obligations with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines, and transit forces.<sup>8</sup> While the SCS encompasses only 0.7% of the Earth's surface, its great power contests showcase a growing rivalry, previewing its potential global implications.<sup>9</sup>

China's quest for enhanced influence in the SCS clashes with the United States' drive to preserve existing national interests, evidenced in respective defense strategies. Based upon its 9-dash line, China believes the features in the South China Sea "are inalienable parts of the Chinese territory. China exercises its national sovereignty to build infrastructure and deploy necessary defensive capabilities on the islands and reefs in the South China Sea."<sup>10</sup> The United States fundamentally disagrees with these assertions, stating that "China's use of military presence in an attempt to exert de facto control over disputed areas, [...] endanger the free flow of trade, threaten the sovereignty of other nations, and undermine regional stability."<sup>11</sup>

Divergent great power viewpoints on coastal nations' restriction of military activities within Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) underpin another realist struggle for sea denial and control. The United States does not recognize military EEZ restrictions, while China asserts that foreign military EEZ activities require a coastal state's permission.<sup>12</sup> The United States conducts FONOPS around reclaimed features and in response to EEZ prohibitions, to which China responds aggressively with an assortment of maritime forces, creating proven flashpoints. Sovereignty and EEZ regulation intertwine because China's claimed sovereignty over SCS features is likely accompanied by foreign military EEZ restrictions around them, in stark opposition to current norms and United States' power projection interests.<sup>13</sup> These disagreements are symptomatic of realist great power dynamics and the high stakes at play in this heavily contested domain.



Figure 1: China's 9-dash line (red) vs. United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 200 nautical mile EEZs (blue).<sup>14</sup>

While the great powers are vested in realist approaches to achieve national objectives in the SCS, they share a strategic interest of constraining the upper boundary of competitive outcomes, which can become mutually harmful across the diplomatic, economic, and national security domains. The 2001 EP-3 and USNS *Bowditch* (T-AGS-62) and 2009 USNS *Impeccable* (T-AGOS-23) incidents demonstrate the consequences of power dynamics in contested environments.<sup>15</sup> For instance, the 2001 United States' EP-3 and Chinese F-8 accidental collision resulted in the F-8 pilot's death, 24 American crew members' detainment for 11 days, significant diplomatic fallout, and negative implications for broader national agendas.<sup>16</sup>

Unadulterated realism in the SCS also threatens shared great power economic interests. One-third of global shipping or \$3.4 trillion in maritime trade, comprising 40% of China's total trade, or \$1.47 trillion, and nearly 6% of United States' trade, or \$208 billion, passes through the SCS annually.<sup>17</sup> In comparison, only 12% of global trade passes through the Suez Canal; if the six-day blockage by the *Ever Given* to the Mediterranean persisted in 2021, it could have resulted in weekly economic impacts of \$6 to \$10 billion and decreased annual trade growth

between 0.2% to 0.4%.<sup>18</sup> A similar blockage of the SCS from competitive escalation is neither in the United States' nor China's core economic interests. Diplomatic and economic fallout, although serious, are two lesser outcomes that would be vastly overshadowed by the consequences of limited or total great power conflict over this increasingly volatile domain. What says liberalism, realism's constraining companion?

### **EBBING LIBERALISM IN THE SCS**

The liberal international order has shown substantial effectiveness at balancing the forces of realism, as economically interconnected nations have worked through institutions to solve modern global challenges. However, in places such as the SCS, where core national interests, revisionism, multilateral contention, and great power dynamics collide, liberalism breaks down, abruptly ceding the stage to realist power projection realities. The United States, China, and many other regional actors, including the nations surrounding the SCS, have signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, agreeing to "settle differences or disputes by peaceful means."<sup>19</sup> Persistent escalatory dynamics demonstrate this treaty's ineffectiveness to maintain order in the SCS. Additionally, in 2016 the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled against China and in favor of the Philippines' SCS territorial claims, to which "China adopted a position of non-acceptance and non-participation in the proceedings."<sup>20</sup> China's rejection of liberalist mechanisms further highlights their ineffectiveness in governing state actions in the SCS.

Liberalism's shortcomings are also apparent in the failures of bilateral and international agreements to prevent contentious SCS maritime encounters. The agreements and institutions attempting to mitigate unsafe maritime acts include the 1972 International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (COLREGS), the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the 1998 Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA), the 2014 Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES), and a 2014 United States-China bilateral Memorandum of

Understanding.<sup>21</sup> Vice Admiral Xu Hongmeng of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) noted that CUES "will not influence" interactions in the South China Sea.<sup>22</sup> The Congressional Research Service describes eighteen follow-on encounters since 2016, including a particularly contentious interaction between a PLAN destroyer and USS *Decatur* (DDG-73).<sup>23</sup> Enduring SCS confrontations bring to question any agreement's efficacy since they are astutely summarized by the *Diplomat* as "'unfriendly' acts in response to what is perceived as 'unfriendly' behavior."<sup>24</sup> If realism presents a path towards potential mutual devastation, and liberalism's effectiveness wanes in the SCS, can constructivism provide an answer?

### THE UTILITY OF CONSTRUCTIVISM

Lessons garnered from constructivism's role in ending the Cold War and misperceptions underpinning the Vietnam War can be reflected upon current SCS great power struggles. Wendt highlights how constructivism can incrementally harmonize adverse international norms. The first step is intentional transformation to eliminate consensus. This shift allows for the assessment of self and the structures of interaction. Introspective examination leads to new practices that change "the identities and interests of the others that help sustain those systems of interaction."<sup>25</sup>

In the case of the Soviet Union, Wendt outlines how a breakdown in a consensus of Leninist thought was partially enabled through understood reassurances that the West would not invade the Soviet Union, which reduced the price of formulating a new identity. This trust enabled the reassessment of self and structures of interaction. Under these altered structures, Gorbachev overcame the preconceived Leninist notion that socialism and capitalism were destined for conflict and acknowledged the centrality of Soviet antagonism in perpetuating hostilities.<sup>26</sup>

A commitment to constructivist principles is required from both actors in this transformational process and requires enduring efforts. Wendt highlights how adversarial security structures are enabled by actions that instigate division and suspicion, while transformational approaches instill mutual trust and common security norms. Gorbachev provided reassurances through de-escalation; however, both sides must reward such actions through institutionalizing a positive identification between the security of the self and the other to generate a common foundation of “new identities and interests.”<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, a lack of constructivist understandings can have significant realist consequences. Robert McNamara, the U.S. Secretary of Defense from 1961 to 1968, reflected upon the strategic effects of adversarial misunderstandings and the resulting false assumptions that underpinned the Vietnam War:

In the Cuban Missile Crisis, at the end, I think we did put ourselves in the skin of the Soviets. In the case of Vietnam, we didn't know them well enough to empathize. And there was total misunderstanding as a result. They believed that we had simply replaced the French as a colonial power, and we were seeking to subject South and North Vietnam to our colonial interests. [...] We saw Vietnam as an element of the Cold War. Not what they saw it as: a civil war.<sup>28</sup>

This basis of mutual misperception exemplifies how entire wars can be conducted under false assumptions when realism becomes the singular lens of strategic perception.

## **GREAT POWER MARITIME CONSTRUCTIVISM**

Constructivist processes could dampen mutually harmful SCS competition extremes if the United States and China can find areas to establish ‘new identities and interests’ to institutionalize positive security identifications. The great powers attempted maritime constructivism in the mid-2010s, including anti-piracy operations and the 2014 and 2016 Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercises. RIMPAC seeks to “foster and sustain cooperative relations that are critical to ensuring the safety of sea lanes and security of the world’s oceans.”<sup>29</sup> Redden highlights how the Cold War lacked modern great power constructivist maritime endeavors such

as counter-piracy operations, exercises, exchanges, and ship visits, which could be foundational to mitigating tensions in other policy areas.<sup>30</sup>

A great power constructivist maritime transformation could take root through bilateral confidence-building measures. Cheng notes that United States-China realist cooperation constraints stem from divergent governance norms, China's expanding maritime capabilities and assertions, and strategic opacity, but recurring military exercises can mitigate tensions through establishing operational trust and habitual rules.<sup>31</sup> Confidence-building mechanisms could establish shared values and peaceful norms as a constructivist counterbalance to unbridled realism in the SCS.

Constructivism must flow around realism's dominance until it can acquire sufficient gravity to alter the overall relationship, as it did during the time of Gorbachev. Great power maritime constructivist initiatives of the 2010s exemplify this principle. After participating in RIMPAC's 2014 and 2016, China was disinvited in 2018 due to the "militarization of features in the South China Sea."<sup>32</sup> Additionally, critics such as Werner believe China disproportionately gained operational intelligence from RIMPAC.<sup>33</sup> Finally, RIMPAC's centrality to United States' multilateral maritime relations created too many realist geopolitical costs for this constructivist initiative to endure as a net-positive mechanism. These setbacks indicate attempted constructivism through RIMPAC was not designed to avoid realism's preeminence in great power relations. A feasible constructivist approach requires the establishment of bilateral trust in a realm removed from multilateral warfighting. Great power joint maritime humanitarian exercises could most effectively circumnavigate realism's primacy.

## **TANGIBLE HUMANITARIAN CONSTRUCTIVISM**

Events such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2011 Japan tsunami, and recurrent typhoons exemplify the significant environmental vulnerabilities surrounding the SCS and

illuminate practical issues constructivism can address while establishing shared great power interests. United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) outlines humanitarian challenges faced across the Pacific, including potential annual economic impacts of \$160 billion by 2030, climate change threats, pandemics, and economic sustainability uncertainties.<sup>34</sup> Keohane highlights how climate change will exacerbate humanitarian response requirements as 500 million people could be displaced by rising seas, particularly in Asia.<sup>35</sup> Wu describes how climate change will demand coordinated efforts to ensure environments, economies, and societies remain stable around the Pacific, particularly in the SCS, which will require collaboration across governments, institutions, organizations, and actors.<sup>36</sup>

Conversely, realist competitive responses to environmental phenomena could have dire consequences. The Center for Climate Security asserts that climate change can quickly alter contentious areas like the SCS; if nations respond in competitive, militarized manners, local tensions could ignite into international conflicts.<sup>37</sup> Realist power plays into the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR) domain could vent volatile pressures within devastated communities, create incompatible great power responses, and further destabilize vulnerable post-disaster environments.

The United States and China have complementary humanitarian response objectives, supporting constructivist HA/DR synchronization. USINDOPACOM's strategy outlines a lack of large-scale disaster response capacities by nations in the region and its underlying strategy of "building capacity with our allies' and partners' militaries to improve their resilience capability to conduct their HA/DR."<sup>38</sup> Likewise, China's Defense Strategy proclaims dedication towards "building the South China Sea into a sea of peace, friendship and cooperation."<sup>39</sup> China's strategy further advertises its international HA/DR efforts in which its "military professionals are dispatched to conduct disaster relief operations in affected countries, provide relief materials and medical aid, and strengthen international exchanges in this respect."<sup>40</sup>

The United States and China approach multi-national operations from different perspectives that constructivism could target for synchronization to develop collaborative maritime architecture before a major joint humanitarian response is required. Cheng outlines how China's counter-piracy approach was to operate separately, defining distinct areas of responsibility under the United Nations Resolution, while the United States promoted a joint coordination approach that integrated actors across the operating area.<sup>41</sup> Conducting iterative exercises to synchronize divergent great power multilateral operational approaches before the onset of humanitarian disasters would increase effectiveness and save lives during an actual incident to which both actors respond.

Great power maritime HA/DR interactions previously exhibited constructivist tendencies, which could be rekindled through engagement. The United States, China, and other nations shared joint maritime HA/DR capabilities during RIMPAC 2014.<sup>42</sup> Vice Admiral Nathan, the U.S. Navy Surgeon General in 2014, stated, "the sea can bring tremendous damage to a country and its people, but it can also bring amazing ships like the [Chinese Hospital Ship] *Peace Ark* and the [USNS] *Mercy* to people to help make a difference."<sup>43</sup> In 2016, prior to recent bilateral setbacks, Secretary of Defense Carter stated, "America wants to expand its military-to-military agreements with China to focus not only on risk reduction, but also on practical cooperation."<sup>44</sup>

Despite China being disinclined to RIMPAC 2018, an annual United States-China Disaster Management Exercise (DME) was held in Nanjing, continuing through 2020 – highlighting HA/DR cooperation's endurance amidst increasing contention in other policy areas.<sup>45</sup> Following the 2018 Nanjing drill, Qin Weijiang, deputy commander of the PLA's Eastern Theater Command, stated, "Only through more contacts, more exchanges and cooperation in areas of common interest can we effectively increase mutual trust and effectively reduce misjudgments."<sup>46</sup> Maritime HA/DR cooperation already fits the constructivist mold and could be

reconstituted, synchronized, and directed towards the SCS to lay a mutual foundation of great power maritime trust.

Complementary great power disaster response capabilities also support developing a constructivist HA/DR partnership in the SCS. The United States has a global military supply network to flow relief into the region and economy of scale capabilities such as hospital ships and other large HA/DR capable vessels. China is centrally located in the Western Pacific and able to position supplies closer by land. In addition to the hospital ship *Peace Ark* (T-AH-866), China has numerous closer smaller ships with different access capabilities that could be leveraged if major ports are destroyed within an impacted nation. Constructivist efforts could synchronize these complementary capabilities for synergistic operations, primed to respond to catastrophic disasters for expeditious regional re-stabilization.

### **A PLEA FOR GREAT POWER MARITIME HUMANITARIAN CONSTRUCTIVISM**

Gorbachev and McNamara discovered constructivism's value after respectively living through decades of Cold War tensions and overseeing a costly conflict, executed under false assumptions. While great powers must protect core realist mechanisms to maintain stability through the balance of power, they can simultaneously choose to constructively shape the security environment where peripheral opportunities emerge. The realist would call for HA/DR's exertion as another tool of endless competition, in which the United States and China should leverage aid to gain influence, adding small relative gains to their competing spheres of prestige and power. The constructivist would advocate HA/DR's application as a precious opportunity to seek great power maritime unity and establish peaceful norms to help harmonize China's rise. While both arguments have distinct advantages, wouldn't granting humanitarian constructivism a voice to speak of great power maritime commonalities outweigh modest realist competitive gains?

Realist approaches are ever-present, direct, habitual, and foundational to military dominance. Constructivist opportunities are fleeting, dynamic, require reason, and are necessary for lasting peace. In the first, our reality is shaped by primal instinct; in the second, we are empowered to virtuously transform our collective human experience. By vesting in the race of realism, nations barter short-term security for long-term instability from incremental capability escalations, attempting to equalize the balance of power. History shows this equilibrium will eventually falter, often with catastrophic outcomes.

As in Gorbachev's time, constructivism may require specific environmental conditions to flourish. How do we know we are not missing emergent, fleeting constructivist opportunities while lacking enduring avenues to regularly test the waters? It is in the United States' and China's mutual interest to create lasting measures to capture transient constructivist opportunities where common maritime understandings can emerge. This constructivist strategy can be operationalized through recurring great power maritime humanitarian exercises, to also synchronize HA/DR responses.

### **A GREAT POWER CONSTRUCTIVIST MARITIME ENDEAVOR**

Two hospital ships, USNS *Mercy* (T-AH-19) and China's *Peace Ark* (T-AH-866), depart Hong Kong harbor in formation. Delegates from USINDOPACOM and the PLAN completed an opening ceremony on USNS *Mercy*'s flight deck the evening prior. The bridge teams are prepared for the pending confidence-building drills between the ships. Following this series of joint signaling, maneuvering, and coordination drills, both ships will transit in formation through the South China Sea.



Military Sealift Command hospital ship USNS Mercy (T-AH 19) and the People's Republic of China, People's Liberation Army (Navy) hospital ship Peace Ark (T-AH 866) transit the Pacific Ocean during Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) Exercise 2014.

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During this great power constructivist endeavor, Chinese planners embarked on USNS *Mercy* meet with their American counterparts to plan the next phase of the exercise - a synchronized humanitarian response to a hypothetical tsunami that decimated Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea.<sup>48</sup> During the week moored together in Port Moresby, both nations conduct joint community relations events and provide humanitarian assistance to the local populace, including surgeries, dental procedures, and other needed medical services. Planners from both nations seek to understand the other's maritime HA/DR procedures and capabilities. Upon this basis, the United States' cooperative model and China's coordination model are synchronized and tailored to the SCS and its peripherals, primed for coherent mutual responses to the next catastrophic natural disaster.

The final leg takes the formation to Guam for debrief, exchanging of lessons learned, and a closing ceremony. The understandings and shared experiences provide constructivism a potential vector of growth between the U.S. Navy and PLAN, establishing shared norms while practically improving great power humanitarian synchronization. Would this unprecedented joint venture be an act of naive optimism or a sound strategy in which constructivism is given the

opportunity to take root and grow to mitigate the unforeseen, mutually destructive outcomes appearing at the cutting edge of realist great power competition? Only USINDOPACOM and its PLAN counterparts can answer.

Appendix 1: International Relations Theories. <sup>49</sup>

Theory	Realism and Its Neovariants	Liberalism and Its Neovariants	Constructivism
Principal Concern	Power where the strong dominate the weak	Order and justice regardless of relative position in the international system	Shared ideas continuously shape interactions between humans and institutions
Theorists	Thomas Hobbes Niccolò Machiavelli Kenneth Waltz John Mearsheimer	Immanuel Kant John Locke Joseph S. Nye G. John Ikenberry	Sigmund Freud Michel Foucault Alexander Wendt Martha Finnemore
View of Human Nature	Individuals are greedy, aggressive, and will seek power	Individuals are social and perfectible through learning, and will seek cooperation	Individuals are thinking, adaptable, and will create environments to suit their needs
Goal for Foreign Policy	Maximize national security	International peace and justice (or prosperity)	Mutually determined by society
Means to Survival	Military and economic power used to reward or coerce other states	International order through non-coercive diplomacy and economic cooperation	Shared values to enhance the well-being of all
Primary Actors	States	States in intergovernmental organizations (e.g., United Nations) and non-state actors	Individuals and groups
Antagonists	Great powers (regardless of type of government)	Non-democracies (according to "the Democratic Peace Theory")	Policy entrepreneurs who shape norms
Measures of Power	Hard power: military capabilities and economic resources	Hard and Soft power: appeal of political, economic, and cultural norms	Pervasiveness and acceptance of ideas
Worldview Metaphor	Jungle: international system is anarchic; strong governments make the rules and dominate weak governments	Country club: international system is constrained by rules so strong and weak governments have more equal access	Blogosphere: density of connections and prevalence of transnational ideas matter
Causes of War	Anarchic international system; all states amass power as they fear for their survival. For Thucydides, causes are fear, honor, and interests	Misperception among states; the absence of enforceable international law to punish aggressor states and wrongdoers. Democracies do not go to war with each other	Enabling security discourse where government leaders can manipulate populace to adopt aggressive behavior toward other peoples
Path to Peace	Balance of power; powerful states constrain one another from going to war	Collective security, international law, democracy, and economic interdependence	Liberalization of thought; shared human rights and values and peaceful norms

Appendix 2: Excerpt From:

*“The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara.”*<sup>50</sup>

**McNamara:** “I am more and more convinced that we ought to think of some action other than military action as the only program here. I think if we do that by itself, it's suicide.

“I think pushing out 300,000 - 400,000 Americans out there without being able to guarantee what it will lead to is a terrible risk at a terrible cost.

“Let me go back one moment. In the Cuban Missile Crisis, at the end, I think we did put ourselves in the skin of the Soviets. In the case of Vietnam, we didn't know them well enough to empathize. And there was total misunderstanding as a result. They believed that we had simply replaced the French as a colonial power, and we were seeking to subject South and North Vietnam to our colonial interests, which was absolutely absurd. And we, we saw Vietnam as an element of the Cold War. Not what they saw it as: a civil war.

“There aren't many examples in which you bring two former enemies together, at the highest levels, and discuss what might have been. I formed the hypothesis that each of us could have achieved our objectives without the terrible loss of life. And I wanted to test that by going to Vietnam.

“The former Foreign Minister of Vietnam, a wonderful man named Thach said, ‘You're totally wrong. We were fighting for our independence. You were fighting to enslave us.’ We almost came to blows. That was noon on the first day.

"Do you mean to say it was not a tragedy for you, when you lost 3 million, 4 hundred thousand Vietnamese killed, which on our population base is the equivalent of 27 million Americans? What did you accomplish? You didn't get any more than we were willing to give you at the beginning of the war. You could have had the whole damn thing: independence, unification."

"Mr. McNamara, you must never have read a history book. If you'd had, you'd know we weren't pawns of the Chinese or the Russians. McNamara, didn't you know that? Don't you understand that we have been fighting the Chinese for 1,000 years? We were fighting for our independence. And we would fight to the last man. And we were determined to do so. And no amount of bombing, no amount of U.S. pressure would ever have stopped us."

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Appendix 1 outlines the international theories of realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Reveron and Kathleen Mahoney-Norris, *Human and National Security: Understanding Transnational Challenges*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 2019), 7.
- <sup>2</sup> Mahoney-Norris, *Human and National Security*, 7.
- <sup>3</sup> Mahoney-Norris, *Human and National Security*, 7.
- <sup>4</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Doctrine Note 1-19: Competition Continuum*, (Washington, DC, Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2020), 2-3, [JDN 1-19, Competition Continuum, 3 June 2019 \(jcs.mil\)](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/0/2020/06/03/JDN-1-19-Competition-Continuum-3-June-2019.pdf).
- <sup>5</sup> Ronald O'Rourke, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in the South and East China Seas*, CRS Report No. R2784 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2021), 2-3, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42784.pdf>.
- <sup>6</sup> O'Rourke, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition*, 31.
- <sup>7</sup> O'Rourke, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition*, 2-8.
- <sup>8</sup> O'Rourke, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition*, 25.
- <sup>9</sup>  $0.7\% = (\text{SCS} \sim 1.35 \text{ million miles}^2) / (\text{World} \sim 1.969 \text{ million miles}^2)$
- <sup>10</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in the New Era* (Beijing, China: Foreign Languages Press Co. Ltd., 2019), 7, [https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2019/china-national-defense-new-era\\_20190724.pdf](https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2019/china-national-defense-new-era_20190724.pdf).
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