

Constructing the South China Sea

A Pentadic Analysis of American Narratives, 2009-2016

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Introduction

From 2009 onward, the South China Sea territorial disputes have assumed greater importance in both U.S. foreign policy and the American public sphere. However, despite the newfound significance of these disputes, nobody has studied their discursive construction in the United States. In other words, we know that Americans care about the South China Sea, but not when or why these views developed.

Research Questions

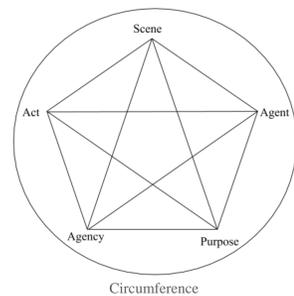
- Did a dominant American narrative of the South China Sea territorial disputes emerge at some point from 2009-2016?
- If so, why did this dominant narrative arise and how did it delimit the range of legitimate U.S. foreign policy?

Theory

This study develops a new longitudinal form of pentadic analysis, based on Kenneth Burke's theory of dramatism, to study American narratives of the South China Sea. Pentadic analysis provides insight into how speakers:

- Attribute motive through selecting one of the five pentadic terms as dominant (scene, act, agent, agency, purpose).
- Ascribe significance via circumference (circumference defines the scope of the context in which the pentad operates).

Figure 1: The Dramatistic Pentad



Research Design

Sources	New York Times (NYT), Wall Street Journal (WSJ)
Timeframe	2009-2016
Population	All editorials containing the phrase "South China Sea"
Sample	NYT: 42 editorials WSJ: 33 editorials
Blinding	Editorials were coded in a random order, with all identifying information (including title, date, and source) hidden.
Coding	For each editorial, I identified the circumference (local/regional/global) and each of the five pentadic terms. I then defined the ratios between terms and identified the editorial's selected dominant term.

Data

Figure 2: Average % Difference In Selected Dominant Term

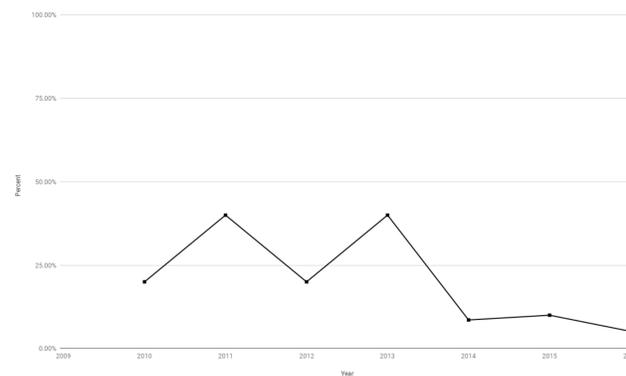


Figure 3: Average % Difference In Selected Circumference

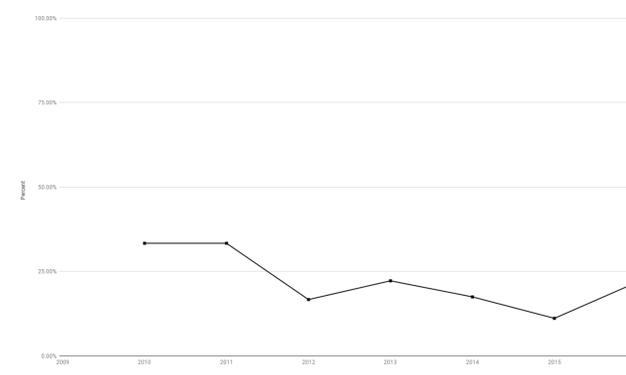
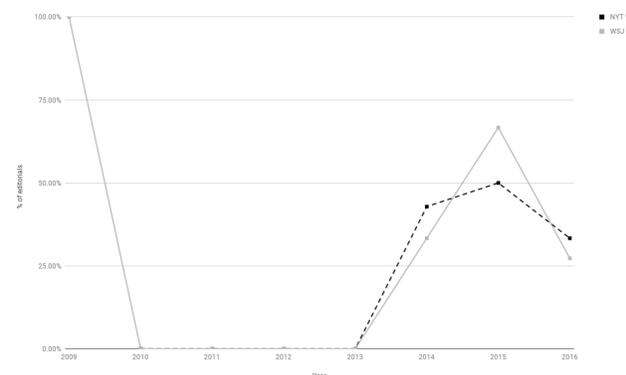


Figure 4: % Of Editorials That Select Purpose as Dominant Term



Discussion

Evidence Of A Dominant Narrative

In 2014, elements of a dominant American narrative emerged in regards to motive attribution (see Figure 2). This narrative's features are as follows:

- In this narrative, "purpose" is the central source of motive that drives tensions in the South China Sea (see Figure 4).
- In particular, developments are portrayed as being driven by *China's* purpose (namely, its revisionist desire to establish regional hegemony).

However, there is no evidence of a dominant narrative in regards to how Americans ascribe significance to the disputes via circumference (see Figure 3). In other words, after 2014, Americans agreed on what motivates tensions in the South China Sea, but did not agree on the scope of these disputes' implications.

Developments That Facilitated The Emergence Of A Dominant Narrative

- May 2014: China deployed an oil rig in waters claimed by Vietnam, sparking a standoff that continues until July.
- May 2014: First evidence of China's land reclamation in the Spratly Islands appeared in the American media.
- November 2014: CSIS launched the AMTI.
- 2014-2015: Institutionally empowered individuals in the U.S. government giving a number of speeches that harshly criticized China's behavior in the South China Sea.

Policy Implications

The policy limitations imposed by the dominant American narrative were most visibly displayed during Secretary of State nominee Rex Tillerson's confirmation hearing in January 2017:

- Tillerson (inadvertently) suggested that the United States should consider blockading the South China Sea.
- This suggestion was universally criticized and mocked across the political spectrum.
- His proposed policy was viewed as illegitimate because it did not address the "real" problem (China's revisionist purpose), and because it conflicted with the United States' purpose (protecting freedom of navigation).

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