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U.S. PERCEPTION AND POLICY ON SOUTH CHINA SEA PRE-COLD WAR

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Abstract

After World War II, the United States' South China Sea policy was formed based on its perception of the three before the Cold War. Through events such as France's occupation of nine small islands, Japan's occupation, and the struggle against Japan during the Pacific War, America has continuously deepened its cognition on the South China Sea and increasingly concerned its important value. With Japan's successive retreats in the later stages of World War II, America gradually gained control of the Sea and took a dominant position in the regional dispute. With the continuous deepening of the United States' appreciation and the changing of its identity, status, and the interests in this region, its policy has gradually taken shape.

Keywords

South China Sea, Cognition, Dominant Position, Identity

1. Introduction

The United States has been involved in the South China Sea (SCS) affairs since the 1930s and has become the most important extraterritorial country in SCS affairs. In the process of long-term involvement in Asian disputes and affairs, the interests of America have gradually integrated into the disputed region, so it will inevitably introduce South China Sea policies that are in line with its interests. The research on the US SCS policy mostly began after World War II, believing that the US policy was formed in the early stages of the Cold War. However, it has overlooked a basic fact that the decade before the outbreak of the Cold War was the origin period of US South China Sea cognition and policy, which had a significant impact on the formation of post-war US South China Sea policy. Although some scholars have conducted research on the US SCS policy before the Cold War from the perspective of policy origins, these preliminary research results only introduced the US response to the SCS crisis in different periods before the Cold War but ignored the changes in US cognition. At the same time, there is a lack of a clearer understanding of the relationship between the changes in America's perception, interests, and status on the SCS issue and its policy.

Based on existing academic research results and combined with historical materials such as declassified US archives, this article intends to focus on the perception of America towards the three SCS events before the Cold War, analyze the evolution process of US SCS cognition, and explore the origin of US policy and the impact on the formation of US SCS policy, pondering over the changes in US interests and roles in SCS during this period.

2. Before the 1930s, America was Outside the SCS Incident

From the late 18th century to the mid-19th century, and until the 1930s, to expand foreign commodity sales markets and raw material production areas, Western powers such as Europe and America aimed their aggression and expansion at the Asian region (Chemillier-Gendreau, M,2021). With the arrival of colonizers, the importance of the waters and islands as a maritime traffic hub in East Asia has increasingly attracted the attention of these colonial powers.

2.1 The Attention of Major Powers to SCS since the 19th Century

Western colonizers initially viewed SCS as a commercial gateway to East Asia. To facilitate navigation, as early as the 19th century, ships from Britain, France, Germany, America, and other countries began to investigate and measure topographic features, but such investigation and measurement activities cannot be regarded as an act of swearing sovereignty (Hayton, B, 2014). In addition, the Chinese government has intervened to stop these unauthorized surveys of Chinese territory (Shen, J, 2002). Although the main purpose of these exploration activities is to ensure navigation safety and convenience, indicating that Western countries are seeking to expand commercial connections with East Asia, this commercial connection is unequal and aggressive, marking the beginning of imperialist aggression in the Far East.

With the arrival of Western colonizers, the importance of SCS as a traffic hub has become increasingly prominent. A series of events indicate that imperialism's colonial expansion in East Asia is constantly deepening. In this process, the interests of the major powers in East Asia also expanded, and an uneven distribution of resources was formed among the major powers. To compete for resources such as colonies, markets, and raw materials, the contradictions between major powers are increasingly deepening. In order to protect their vested interests, the colonists began to realize the importance of SCS and the Islands and began to pay attention to it.

2.2 The Infringement to SCS by France and Japan

With the increasing importance of the waters, colonizers began to covet and occupy the islands in SCS. In 1898, the French colonial authorities learned of the existence of the the Paracel Islands during the exchange with the consul in Haikou, which was the first time that the the Paracel Islands were mentioned in the French government archives (Nguyen, T. L. A,2015). Since then, although France has been closely monitoring China's sovereignty management activities in SCS, it has been difficult to find evidence favorable to France. Even if France seeks evidence in Vietnamese history, it still lacks much persuasiveness. In the end, France can only place hope on seizing the islands in this important area by force.

Similarly, Japan has long coveted the islands in SCS. Before the 1930s, Japan's invasion of the islands was mainly conducted through private commercial activities. These commercial activities include stealing bird droppings, phosphate mines, and seafood from the vicinity of islands and reefs in SCS. To this end, the local government of China has formulated a lot measures,

including strengthening island management, attracting investment and mining, severely punishing contractors who collude with Japanese people to illegally exploit resources, and consulting with the navy to prevent Japanese people from illegally exploiting resources. These measures have largely safeguarded China's sovereignty in SCS.

2.3 America, Drifting outside SCS

The Spanish-American War was the most iconic event for **America** in SCS region. In 1899, the United States won the War against Spain, and the Philippines became a colony of US. Subsequently, It proposed an "open door" policy aimed at sharing its privileges in China with major powers. However, after entering the 20th century, unlike the active expansion of countries especially France and Japan, America once became conservative in East Asia.

Although America has not joined the competition in SCS, this does not mean that the waters and islands are of no value to America. The scattered islands and reefs in SCS may not have much significance for America, but as an important waterway, the overall navigation value and geopolitical significance of SCS cannot be ignored by America. Specifically, the importance of SCS to America is mainly reflected in its overall ocean expansion strategy. After defeating Spain, expansionist thinking flourished in America, and seeking to establish "Asian Monroeism" was also a long-standing aspiration of the Americans. In the situation where the old colonial powers Britain and France dominated East Asia, it was difficult to realize the American concept of "Asian Monroeism".

In short, at the beginning of the 20th century, America not only strengthened its commercial ties with East Asia, but also shared colonial interests with other powers. It is obvious that America is not satisfied with just occupying the Philippines, let alone stopping its expansion from the Pacific to Asia. As an important water area adjacent to the "new frontier" of the Philippines, America can no longer be indifferent to South China Sea affairs. Especially if there are changes in the situation in SCS, America is bound to pay close attention.

3. The United States' Perception of the Situation in SCS

Since the 1930s, the competition between France and Japan over SCS has become increasingly fierce, and America can no longer stand idly by. With the development of SCS

situation, while America is responding, its understanding of SCS and its importance is gradually deepening.

3.1 The "Nine Islands" Incident: America's First Perception of SCS Situation

In the 1930s, new and old colonial powers such as France and Japan competed to occupy islands and reefs in SCS. During this time, America is also constantly monitoring the development of SCS situation. It was not until 1933 when France occupied the nine small islands in SCS that SCS officially entered the public and official view of America (FRUS, 1935).

On July 25, 1933, while a large number of Chinese fishermen were returning inland, France disregarded China's historic sovereignty and occupied nine small islands in SCS by force (Tønnesson, S, 2002). In this incident, France not only seized the main islands and reefs but also gained an advantage in these golden waters.

After France occupied the nine small islands, American investigators investigated the waters at the request of the Philippines. The results show that the nine small islands are 200 miles away from Palawan Island, the westernmost point of the Philippine archipelago, thus ruling out the possibility of the Philippines having sovereignty over these islands (Probes Island Claims, 1933). This attitude seems to indicate that America does not intend to intervene in the incident. However, there were rumors at the time that France had informal communication with America before planning to formally annex the Nine Islands, and America had already noticed a dispute over sovereignty over these islands between France and Japan. Due to America being more inclined towards France, it secretly supports France's actions. US State Department officials denied this and stated that they were unaware of the French government's plans, and even heard about these islands for the first time in news reports about France's annexation. However, according to information from the US State Department, the French government had previously notified the US government of its sovereignty claims. However, due to the lack of more detailed information, it is impossible to determine when France notified America of its occupation of the Nine Islands, nor can it be determined whether America supported France's occupation actions. But from the results, America ultimately acquiesced to France's occupation of islands and reefs in SCS.

Obviously, France has long had the ambition to annex SCS, and the reason why America acquiesced to France's behavior should be a helpless move. Various signs indicate that before France took action, US officials paid little attention to SCS. Otherwise, they would not have waited

until France occupied the nine small islands before entrusting surveyors to conduct investigations. After investigation, America should be able to discover the significant value of SCS. There is a deeper reason why America tacitly accepted France's occupation behavior: firstly, at that time, France and Japan had long coveted SCS, and there was a dispute between the two sides over the ownership of islands. America was unwilling to get involved in disputes with overseas powers. Secondly, both America and the Philippines are unable to provide strong evidence for their claims in SCS. Thirdly, compared to Japan, America prefers to see France control SCS. However, America was not willing to take action against France's occupation of the Nine Small Islands. France plans to build military bases on these islands, which will cause confusion and unease for America. At that time, an analysis pointed out, "From an official perspective, the (US) State Department does not intend to discuss this matter with the French government. However, from an unofficial perspective, the US should receive a goodwill explanation within this month."

In short, the "Nine Islands" incident brought SCS and its affiliated islands into the public view of America. Although the official response from America to the situation was relatively lukewarm, even tacitly agreeing to France's occupation of SCS, domestic media in America are constantly paying attention to the situation in SCS. Americans have begun to realize the importance of the geopolitical location of SCS to America, which is also the first clear perception of the situation in SCS by America.

3.2 Japan's Occupation of Islands in SCS: An Escalation of America's Perception of The Situation

In the 1930s, Japan and France repeatedly negotiated with each other over the issue of the ownership of islands and reefs in SCS, resulting in constant conflicts between the two sides. In July 1933, France occupied nine small islands in SCS. France's move to control SCS through military force immediately aroused strong dissatisfaction from the later colonial country Japan. The Japanese government immediately protested through diplomatic channels, refusing to recognize France's ownership of these islands and reefs.

In March 1939, Germany intensified its attack on Czechoslovakia, and Japan took the opportunity to make its territorial claims to islands and reefs in SCS (Kathleen Barnes, 1939). The next day, Japan informed the US State Department of its annexation of islands and reefs in SCS. Although Hamilton, the Director of the Far East Affairs Department of the United States

Department of State, had almost no knowledge of the information and sovereignty disputes over the islands and reefs in SCS, he noticed that these islands and reefs were very close to the Philippines and stated that he would pay attention to and study this matter. In the following days, the United States conducted investigations by the Navy Department and diplomatic personnel stationed in Japan, France, and other places to gain a detailed understanding of the situation in SCS and its islands and reefs.

Japan's announcement of occupying islands and reefs in SCS has made countries such as Britain and France wary, and the US government has also shown strong concern for the first time. In his memoirs, the then US Secretary of State Hull wrote: "Japan has put forward a claim to a large area of sea, including the "The Spratly Islands", about 700 miles southwest of Manila, as well as a large number of other islands and coral reefs. The Spratly Islands are also claimed by France. The outline of Japan's expansionist ideology is becoming clearer and clearer. This is when Europe is preoccupied with Hitler's annexation of Czechoslovakia, and Japan continues to use Europe's troubles to increase its wealth (Cordell Hull, 1948)." Given this, after collecting information on various aspects of the islands and reefs in SCS, Hull sent a letter to Japan's ambassador to Washington on May 17 after France, Britain, and other countries successively issued protests. The letter clearly stated: "The United States Government believes that all islands and reefs within the area defined by the memorandum of Japan, especially those in a considerable area in the east and southeast of the region, cannot be properly regarded as an archipelago. The US government also believes that whether known or unknown, Japan's inclusion of these islands and reefs in Japanese territory has no international validity, and so far, the Japanese government has not taken any action that can be appropriately considered as establishing a basis for sovereignty claims.

Hull's reply can be seen as the beginning of the United States' formal attention to South China Sea affairs and the origin of the US South China Sea policy. This is the first official statement by the United States that it opposes Japan's occupation of islands and reefs in SCS and does not recognize Japan's sovereignty over these islands and reefs. The position of the US government was proposed on the basis of the first recognition of the importance of SCS region, as well as in the face of the possibility of the Japanese army's "southward advance" leading to SCS crisis and the increasingly severe international environment, especially in the context of the European war crisis.

Although the response of the US government to Japan's occupation of islands and reefs in SCS shows that the US has increased its awareness of SCS, this level of awareness is worth reminiscing about. Firstly, the United States still has insufficient understanding of SCS. In the beginning, Hamilton, the Director of the Far East Affairs Department of the United States State Department, knew very little about the information about these islands and reefs. Afterward, the United States instructed the Naval Department to conduct an investigation and transmitted relevant information through various foreign embassies. Until April 11th, Hamilton stated during a communication with the French ambassador that the US State Department had insufficient understanding of the facts and was still studying the matter (FRUS, 1931~1941). From the information transmitted from various regions, it seems that the United States is not aware of the basic fact that China has sovereignty over islands and reefs in SCS, and has not even noticed China's repeated protests against France, Japan, and other countries that have violated sovereignty in SCS. Secondly, America has realized the military strategic value of SCS. Although Hamilton did not yet have access to relevant information and intelligence on SCS during his communication with Mijiuro Sumo, he immediately became acutely aware that these islands and reefs were very close to the Philippines. If Japan occupies islands and reefs in SCS and uses them as military bases, it will threaten the Philippine colonies. Thirdly, the United States has noticed that there are complex sovereignty disputes over islands and reefs, but this awareness is based on the perspective of colonizers. The information transmitted back to Washington from various places made America believe that the SCS island and reef dispute only existed between France and Japan at that time, and the United States ignored China's reasonable sovereignty demands, which was a favor for the colonizers. Finally, after comprehensive consideration, America has decided to oppose Japan's occupation of the islands and reefs in SCS, which still tacitly acknowledges France's previous occupation of the nine small islands in SCS.

It should be emphasized that although America opposes Japan's expansion in SCS, it has only kept it in words and has not taken any practical action. The reason behind this is twofold: firstly, for most Western countries, including the United States at that time, the islands and reefs were almost unknown and of little value. Secondly, in the eyes of these countries, Japan's persistent "small actions" in SCS and even Southeast Asia are far less threatening than the situation of Germany occupying Czechoslovakia during the same period.

Therefore, the United States has not taken any substantive opposition measures against Japan's occupation of islands and reefs in SCS, which is another manifestation of European and American appeasement policies in Asia. Compared with the "Nine Islands" incident that occurred in 1933, although Japan's occupation of islands and reefs in SCS in 1939 did not lead to a substantial change in the interests of the United States in SCS, the threat from Japan objectively exists and is increasing day by day. In other words, the occupation of islands and reefs in SCS by Japan in 1939 triggered the United States' attention to SCS, further deepening the view of its importance.

3.3 Operation against Japan: A Deep Perception of the Situation in SCS of America

Japan's ambition to advance southward has undoubtedly been exposed with its occupation of islands and reefs in SCS, but for Western countries, the situation in Europe is crucial. Therefore, before the outbreak of the Pacific War, Japan's aggression and expansion around SCS had been very smooth. By July 1941, Japan had gained control of many strategic locations around SCS. In December 1941, the Pacific War broke out. While launching a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese army also began to intensify their attack on Southeast Asia along the east and west wings of SCS. After defeating the British navy, Japan quickly occupied Southeast Asia.

Japan's occupation of Southeast Asia was the first practical validation of the important value of SCS. Firstly, before the outbreak of war, Japan had controlled the transportation arteries in SCS, which provided great convenience for its subsequent military operations. Secondly, Japan has obtained a continuous supply of war resources through SCS. As a resource-poor island country, Japan's main resource supply during World War II came from plundering China and Southeast Asia, where resources such as oil and rubber were particularly essential for Japan to sustain the war.

After the outbreak of the Pacific War, SCS became an important area for the United States to fight against Japan. The reason is that SCS is an important maritime lifeline for Japan. Therefore, whoever controls SCS controls the transportation channels for strategic materials such as oil and rubber. In the counterattack against Japan surrounding SCS, the United States further explored the military value of SCS. Firstly, SCS is the core area of the US submarine warfare against Japan. Submarine warfare has seriously affected Japan's material supply. In addition, the US submarine fleet has formed a great deterrent force against the Japanese Navy in SCS.

In short, throughout the entire Pacific War, with the rapid changes in the situation, the United States personally participated in military operations in SCS, and its perception of SCS further deepened. During World War II, as there were no large-scale battles, SCS was an easily overlooked battlefield. However, it was precisely due to the submarine warfare and other actions of the US military in SCS that the US gained basic control over the waters of SCS in the later stages of the Pacific War, while also disrupting Japan's military transportation and economic supply lines, making important contributions to the Allied victory over Japan. In addition, the formal deployment of US military forces into SCS for combat has made the US feel the importance of SCS in practical terms, further deepening its understanding of SCS.

4. The Origin of the US SCS Policy

Since the 1930s, with the warming of the regional situation, the situation in SCS has also been constantly changing. During this process, the United States has been paying varying degrees of attention. Overall, the United States has the following characteristics in its cognition:

Firstly, with the development of the situation, the overall cognition of SCS by the United States is a gradual and passive process. From the reaction of the United States after the outbreak of the "Nine Islands" incident, it is evident that the United States was not aware of the specific situation of these islands and reefs at the time, and lacked a clear understanding of the geopolitical importance of SCS. Until Japan announced its occupation of the islands and reefs, the senior management of the United States still lacked sufficient cognition of the sea. It was only due to the development of the situation that they had to have a detailed understanding of the situation on these islands and reefs. While gaining a detailed understanding of relevant information in SCS, the United States has also noted the sovereignty dispute over the ownership of islands and reefs in SCS. In the process of passively responding to changes in SCS situation, the United States has gradually enhanced its understanding of SCS and increasingly valued its importance. It can be said that until the end of World War II, no foreign country had the same understanding of SCS and its affiliated islands and reefs as the United States.

Secondly, in the process of deepening understanding of SCS, the role and position of the United States in SCS issue have also undergone significant changes. Before the war, France and Japan were the main powers coveting SCS, while the United States was clearly detached from

SCS and had little interest in it. However, shortly after the outbreak of World War II, the United States had already played a crucial role in dealing with the SCS issue.

It should be emphasized that one of the reasons why the United States was unwilling to return the islands and reefs in SCS to China during the Cairo Conference is that it has already proposed preliminary ideas for the ownership of these islands and reefs. In fact, even before the Cairo Conference, relevant departments of the US State Department had already begun to study how to deal with SCS issues. The earliest arrangement was the International Trust Memorandum formed on April 15, 1943. The memorandum mainly emphasized that the “The Spratly Islands” must be separated from Japan, but did not mention specific trusteeship arrangements. Subsequently, during World War II, the US State Department successively formulated three documents to deal with the SCS issue, and domestic scholars have interpreted these documents in detail in recent years (FRUS, 1943). According to the recommendations of these documents, the United States initially had three main options for arranging islands and reefs in SCS: first, to return them to China; second to return France or French Indochina; and third to consider international trusteeship. The main purpose of the United States is to prevent SCS from being exploited by hostile countries, thereby threatening its interests. However, with the Japanese army's successive defeats on the battlefield, especially after the Battle of Wright Bay in October 1944, the Japanese army had lost control of the sea. In addition, with the gradual military advantage formed by the United States in SCS, handing over islands and reefs to any South China Sea claimant is no longer attractive to the United States. Therefore, by December 1944, the US State Department no longer considered returning the islands and reefs of SCS to any party, including China, in its policy documents on SCS.

In the middle and later stages of the Pacific War, the United States further reflected its dominant position in the SCS issue through a series of assumptions about its ownership of SCS, which were mainly based on the interests already formed by the United States in SCS. The United States does not care who exercises sovereignty over islands and reefs in SCS, but considering the important navigational value of the SCS waterway, the United States must ensure its commercial and even military convenience in SCS. In addition, the cruel memory of war also drives the United States not to let SCS fall into the hands of hostile countries again. Therefore, in the series of South China Sea documents issued by the US State Department, although the US has not reached a conclusion on the ownership of islands and reefs, they all emphasize that these islands and reefs

must be separated from hostile Japan. At the same time, the United States no longer only focuses on the marginal countries in SCS, including the Philippines. Therefore, the United States finally abandoned the issue of the ownership of islands and reefs in SCS. At the same time, the United States began to question the legitimacy of the "The Nansha Islands", which contains many shoals, reefs, and dark sands, as "islands". The purpose of the United States doing so is very clear, which is to ensure that it always has the voice in SCS dispute, and thus maintain its dominant position in SCS.

In summary, the three perceptions of the situation in SCS by the United States have promoted the formation of its perception. From the "Nine Islands" incident to Japan's occupation of islands and reefs in SCS, and then to the Pacific War, the United States has responded to the development of SCS situation in different periods to varying degrees, which has shaped the dominant position of the United States in SCS and clarified its interests. After the war, the United States' South China Sea policy was about to emerge.

5. Conclusion

By studying the United States' perception of the three South China Sea events, this article believes that the foundation and prototype of the post-war US South China Sea policy had already been formed before the Cold War. Due to the increasingly prominent geopolitical importance of SCS and the expanding interests of the United States in Asia, starting from the 1930s, the United States had to deal with the gradual escalation of the SCS issue and began to engage in South China Sea affairs. After more than a decade of perception, the United States' perception of SCS has greatly deepened, and at the same time, changes in identity and status have created conditions for the United States to dominate the situation in SCS. In the end, the United States gradually became clear about its interests in SCS, becoming an important basis for formulating its post-war South China Sea policy.

After the end of the Cold War, as the strategic focus of the United States shifted towards the Asia Pacific region, its attention and intervention in SCS continued to strengthen. Studying the origin of the US South China Sea policy helps to further grasp the background and true intentions of US intervention in South China Sea affairs. In the early post-war period, with the victory of the United States on the Pacific battlefield, the United States leapt to become the only superpower around SCS, and the fate of SCS began to be in the hands of the United States. As the United States

gradually dominates the situation in SCS, it disregards China's historic sovereignty over SCS and no longer acquiesces to France's previous claims. The ownership arrangement of the United States over islands and reefs in SCS in the early post-war period indicates that the United States must always maintain its voice and leadership in SCS. This kind of consideration by the United States has continued to this day, which is the crux of its continuous involvement in South China Sea affairs, provocation of South China Sea disputes, and disruption of SCS situation in recent years.

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