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The Evolution and Root Causes of U.S. Policies Toward the East China Sea and Yellow Sea after the Cold War

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Abstract. With the implementation of the Asia-Pacific re-balancing strategy by the US, it has strengthened its involvement in east Asian affairs. The East China sea and the Yellow Sea have prominent geographical locations and rich resources, thus causing constant disputes, and they have become the focus of US's strategic deployment of the Asia-Pacific re-balancing maritime strategy. The U.S. policy in the East China Sea and the Yellow Sea reflects the U.S. strategic thinking and approach in the Asia-Pacific region to a certain extent, therefore, it is necessary to sort and analyze the policy evolution of the US in the East China Sea and the Yellow Sea after the cold war, in order to better understand the US's attitude over the East China Sea and the Yellow Sea. By sorting out the main disputes in the East China Sea and the Yellow Sea, and sorting out the East China Sea and Yellow Sea policies of the US Bush, Obama and Trump administrations after the Cold War, this paper believes that there are three major trends in the US East China Sea and Yellow Sea policies after the Cold War. That is, first, Cracks in the alliance have emerged, seeking multiple interests. Second, strengthening joint military exercises, besieging China with multiple parties. And third, strengthening security commitments and acquiescing to territorial control; the root cause of its policy evolution is not only the shift if strategic focus, but also the enormous pressure of China's rise and the United States its relative weakening.

Keywords: U.S. Policy on the East China Sea, U.S. Policy on the Yellow Sea, The Asia-Pacific Rebalancing

1. Introduction

With the implementation of the U.S. "Asia-Pacific rebalancing" strategy, the United States has continuously strengthened its involvement in East Asian affairs. As maritime disputes between China and its neighboring countries persist, U.S. attention to maritime security in the Asia-Pacific has increased significantly. In 2015, the U.S. Department of Defense released *The Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy*, which proposed maintaining U.S. strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific region by enhancing military cooperation with allies and partners, promoting the development of maritime rules, and improving regional security mechanisms [1].

The East China Sea and Yellow Sea are key areas of concern in the U.S. Asia-Pacific maritime strategy. Both seas not only possess important geographical locations and rich resources but also have long-standing complex maritime disputes. Taking the East China Sea as an example, it

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connects the Yellow Sea, Bohai Sea, and South China Sea, serving as a vital channel for north-south maritime traffic along China's coast. Meanwhile, the East China Sea is endowed with abundant oil, gas, and fishery resources. The waters near the Diaoyu Islands alone hold approximately 73.7 billion to 157.4 billion barrels of oil reserves [2] and contain several important fishing grounds [3]. The combination of resource competition and strategic value has kept the East China Sea and Yellow Sea in a state of long-term dispute. Disputes in the East China Sea mainly involve China-Japan relations, while those in the Yellow Sea primarily concern China-South Korea and North-South Korea relations. These disputes simultaneously involve China, Japan, South Korea, and North Korea—countries that the United States pays close attention to—thus making them an important component of the U.S. Asia-Pacific maritime strategy.

Changes in U.S. policies toward the East China Sea and Yellow Sea reflect, to some extent, the trajectory of its Asia-Pacific strategic adjustments. To better understand U.S. strategic logic in this region, it is necessary to systematically sort out the evolution process and internal motivations of U.S. policies toward these two seas after the Cold War. Based on this, this paper analyzes the main disputes in the East China Sea and Yellow Sea and the relevant policies of the George W. Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations, and explores the evolutionary characteristics and underlying driving factors of U.S. policies toward these regions.

2. Review of existing research

At present, there is relatively limited specialized academic research on U.S. policies toward the East China Sea and Yellow Sea, and relevant achievements mainly focus on the disputes themselves. Scholars such as Chi Chen [4] and Wang Bin [5] have conducted relatively systematic analyses of the formation background, main content, and development trends of maritime disputes between China and its neighboring countries. Research more closely related to the theme of this paper is mainly carried out from the perspective of U.S. Asia-Pacific strategy. Liu Fei analyzed the impact of the U.S. "Asia-Pacific rebalancing" strategy on China's surrounding maritime disputes in *The Impact of the U.S. Asia-Pacific Rebalancing Strategy on China's Maritime Disputes* [6] and *An Analysis of the Impact of U.S. Asia-Pacific Rebalancing on China-Japan East China Sea Disputes* [7], arguing that U.S. intervention has exacerbated regional tensions. Yuan Zheng pointed out in *The U.S. Return to Asia and the East China Sea and South China Sea Issues* that the United States uses regional disputes to expand its influence and contain China, while facing risks of relative power decline and being drawn into regional conflicts [8]. Liu Yuchen, from the perspective of sea power strategy, studied the adjustment process of U.S. East Asian sea power strategy after the Cold War and concluded that U.S. maritime power deployment in East Asia has generally shown an expansionary trend [9]. Foreign-related research mainly focuses on the South China Sea issue, with relatively limited attention to the East China Sea and Yellow Sea issues, and some studies usually incorporate the Yellow Sea into the framework of East China Sea issues for discussion.

Overall, existing research pays more attention to maritime disputes themselves or the impact of U.S. Asia-Pacific strategy on regional situations, but lacks a systematic sorting out of the evolution process and internal logic of U.S. policies toward the East China Sea and Yellow Sea after the Cold War, and the summary of policy evolution characteristics and development trends is also relatively insufficient. On this basis, this paper systematically analyzes the evolution and motivations of U.S. policies toward the East China Sea and Yellow Sea after the Cold War.

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3. Research significance and methods

From an academic perspective, existing research mainly focuses on the South China Sea issue, with relatively limited attention to U.S. policies toward the East China Sea and Yellow Sea after the Cold War, and a systematic research framework has not yet been formed. Although the South China Sea has received widespread attention due to its geostrategic status, the East China Sea and Yellow Sea also possess important strategic value. They not only contain rich oil, gas, and fishery resources but also involve important actors in Northeast Asia such as China, Japan, South Korea, and North Korea. As the United States continues to intervene in regional affairs relying on allies such as Japan and South Korea, its policies have had a significant impact on the regional security landscape and China's national interests. Therefore, studying the evolution and motivations of U.S. policies toward the East China Sea and Yellow Sea after the Cold War not only helps to fill relevant research gaps but also deepens the understanding of U.S. Asia-Pacific strategy and its regional impacts. This paper mainly adopts the literature research method, using research materials including U.S. government official documents and policy statements, reports on events related to the East China Sea and Yellow Sea, and domestic and foreign academic research achievements. Based on these materials, it analyzes the evolution process and internal logic of U.S. policies toward the East China Sea and Yellow Sea after the Cold War.

4. Disputes and current situations in the East China Sea and Yellow Sea

The United States generally regards the Yellow Sea as the northern extension of the East China Sea. A 2018 U.S. congressional document defined the Yellow Sea as "the body of water separating mainland China from the Korean Peninsula, which can be considered the northern boundary or extension of the East China Sea." [10] China, however, regards the East China Sea and Yellow Sea as two relatively independent sea areas. Based on this, this paper discusses the main disputes and current situations in the East China Sea and Yellow Sea separately.

4.1. East China Sea

The East China Sea has a superior geographical location, lying between mainland China and Japan's Kyushu and Ryukyu Islands. It extends north to South Korea's Jeju Island and the Korean Peninsula and south through the Taiwan Strait to connect with the South China Sea, covering a total area of 750,000 square kilometers. The East China Sea is a semi-enclosed sea surrounded by China, Japan, and South Korea, and its main disputes are between China and Japan.

4.1.1. China-Japan disputes

China-Japan disputes in the East China Sea have long centered on the Diaoyu Islands issue. Since the 1970s, Japan has continuously taken measures such as exploration and development, administrative management, and island-landing activities to strengthen its actual control over the Diaoyu Islands, and further promoted the so-called "nationalization" process after 2005. In response, the Chinese government has consistently reaffirmed that it has sufficient historical and legal basis for sovereignty over the Diaoyu Islands and opposes any unilateral actions by Japan to change the status quo. The Diaoyu Islands dispute not only involves territorial claims between mainland China, Taiwan region, and Japan but also intertwines with issues of maritime jurisdiction and maritime delimitation, making it the most complex and sensitive issue in the East China Sea situation.

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In addition to the Diaoyu Islands sovereignty dispute, there are also maritime delimitation differences between China and Japan. In accordance with the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*, both countries claim the establishment of exclusive economic zones, but due to different delimitation principles, the sea areas claimed by both sides overlap. China advocates the natural prolongation principle of the continental shelf, taking the Okinawa Trough as the natural boundary between China's East China Sea continental shelf and Japan's Ryukyu Island shelf; Japan, however, advocates delimitation according to the "median line principle" to expand its maritime jurisdiction.

Affected by territorial sovereignty and maritime delimitation disputes, China and Japan have had many frictions over the development of oil and gas resources in the East China Sea. In 2004, Japanese media began to hype the issue of China's "Chunxiao" gas field development. In fact, the "Chunxiao" gas field is located in undisputed waters, about 5 kilometers away from the "median line" even according to Japan's claim. However, some Japanese scholars put forward the so-called "straw pipe theory," arguing that China's oil and gas development near the "median line" might affect resource reserves on the Japanese side, and accordingly demanded the redistribution of relevant seabed resources.

4.1.2. China-South Korea disputes

China-South Korea disputes in the East China Sea focus on the territorial sovereignty of the Suyan Islet. The Suyan Islet is 132 nautical miles from the southernmost point of China's Zhoushan Islands, 151 nautical miles from Japan's Torishima Island, 150 nautical miles from the southern part of the Korean Peninsula, and only 82 nautical miles from South Korea's southernmost Marado Island. Therefore, South Korea claims sovereignty over the Suyan Islet. South Korea has attempted to obtain larger sea areas and rich surrounding natural resources by building artificial islands on the Suyan Islet. China has always held a firm position that the sovereignty of the Suyan Islet has nothing to do with South Korea.

4.2. Yellow Sea

The Yellow Sea has important geostrategic value, and its security is directly related to the security of the Liaodong Peninsula, Shandong Peninsula, Bohai Rim region, and the capital. Current disputes in the Yellow Sea mainly focus on China-South Korea maritime delimitation and North-South Korea western sea area disputes.

4.2.1. China-South Korea disputes

China and South Korea have long-standing differences over Yellow Sea delimitation. China advocates delimitation based on the natural prolongation principle of the continental shelf, while South Korea tends to adopt the median line principle under the 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone system. Due to the abundant oil and gas resources in the central Yellow Sea, different delimitation schemes will directly affect the ownership of the Yellow Sea Basin and related resources, making it difficult for the two sides to reach an agreement.

In addition to delimitation disputes, fishery conflicts are also an important manifestation of China-South Korea contradictions in the Yellow Sea. These disputes ostensibly revolve around fishing rights but essentially reflect the competition between the two sides for marine resources. In 2008 and 2009, South Korea seized 133 and 122 Chinese fishing vessels respectively. In recent years, law enforcement conflicts between the two sides have occurred from time to time, and the

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Yellow Sea fishery issue has continuously become an important factor affecting maritime relations between the two countries.

4.2.2. North-South Korea disputes

Maritime disputes between North Korea and South Korea mainly arise because the 1953 Armistice Agreement did not demarcate the sea areas between the two sides. The United States and South Korea subsequently set the "Northern Limit Line" to establish their own territorial sea jurisdiction, while North Korea correspondingly established the "Southern Warning Line" in 1976. These two lines overlap in some areas, and part of the western sea area of the Korean Peninsula involved belongs to the Yellow Sea. Therefore, disputes between North and South Korea over the western sea area have intensified tensions in the Yellow Sea.

4.2.3. U.S. actions intervening in the Yellow Sea

Affected by China-South Korea maritime delimitation disputes and North-South Korea western sea area boundary disputes, the United States has continuously intervened in Yellow Sea affairs through maritime surveillance, military deployment, and joint military exercises.

U.S. intervention in the Yellow Sea issue can be traced back to the 1994 North Korean nuclear crisis. At that time, the United States dispatched the aircraft carrier *Kitty Hawk* to enter the Yellow Sea to pressure North Korea, triggering a military confrontation between China and the United States in the Yellow Sea waters. Since then, the United States has continuously strengthened its military activities in the Yellow Sea. In 2009, the U.S. Navy surveillance ship *Impeccable* entered China's Yellow Sea exclusive economic zone; after the "Cheonan incident" in 2010, the United States took the opportunity to expand its military presence in the Yellow Sea, promoted U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises, and dispatched the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier *George Washington* to enter the Yellow Sea waters, significantly raising regional military tensions. After that, the Yellow Sea situation eased somewhat. China and South Korea reached relevant agreements on fishery issues, and North and South Korea also established buffer zones in the western sea area of the Korean Peninsula in accordance with the 2018 September 19 Military Agreement to restrict military activities and armed conflicts. However, as the United States continues to advance its Asia-Pacific strategy, its military activities in the Yellow Sea region have not weakened, and regional security competition still shows an intensifying trend.

5. Evolution process of U.S. policies toward the East China Sea and Yellow Sea after the Cold War

5.1. George W. Bush administration period

In the early 21st century, the United States paid limited attention to issues concerning the East China Sea and Yellow Sea. After the end of the Cold War, U.S. strategic focus gradually shifted to the Middle East. Especially after the September 11 attacks, counter-terrorism became the core of national strategy. The George W. Bush administration launched the Afghanistan War and the Iraq War successively, and the Asia-Pacific region was not its main focus. On the East China Sea issue, the United States generally maintained a cautious attitude. Then-U.S. Ambassador to Japan Walter F. Mondale once stated that the United States took no position on the sovereignty of the Diaoyu Islands and would not be forced to intervene in relevant disputes due to treaty obligations. This indicated

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that even in the face of China-Japan Diaoyu Islands disputes, the United States did not regard them as security issues requiring direct intervention. Judging from the annual *Freedom of Navigation Reports* of the U.S. Department of Defense, before 2007, the United States only once identified China as having so-called "excessive maritime claims," which involved Taiwan's delimitation issue. The 2007 report first proposed that China had two so-called "excessive claims" regarding airspace jurisdiction in exclusive economic zones and management of foreign survey activities [11]. Overall, during the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations, the United States did not regard the East China Sea and Yellow Sea as regions of important strategic interests and maintained a relatively restrained attitude toward relevant territorial disputes.

5.2. Obama administration period

During the Obama administration, U.S. strategic focus gradually shifted from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific. In 2009, it proposed the "Asia-Pacific rebalancing" strategy, relying on allies such as Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines to strengthen regional influence, and promoted the normalization of the "Rim of the Pacific" military exercises and the deployment of the THAAD system in South Korea. On maritime issues, the United States initially focused on the South China Sea. The 2010 *National Security Strategy* did not explicitly mention issues concerning the East China Sea and Yellow Sea, while the 2015 *National Security Strategy* emphasized strengthening the capabilities of Asian allies and partners to address North Korean threats and changes in the East China Sea and South China Sea situations [12]. Subsequently, the U.S. Department of Defense released the *Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy* white paper, which clearly put forward three goals: maintaining freedom of navigation, reducing the risk of regional conflicts, and promoting the implementation of international law. On the East China Sea issue, the United States recognized Japan's actual administration of the Diaoyu Islands but took no position on sovereignty, opposing any unilateral actions to change the status quo. The white paper also confirmed, for the first time in an official document, the Obama administration's commitment that "the Diaoyu Islands fall under Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty" and clearly stated that it did not recognize the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone established by China in 2013.

Although the Obama administration strengthened its intervention in East China Sea affairs, it still maintained limited cooperation with China. On the one hand, the United States continued its ambiguous position on sovereignty issues; on the other hand, it demonstrated its presence through military actions. After China established the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone, the United States dispatched B-52 strategic bombers to fly over relevant airspace in 2013 [13]. Subsequently, it deployed P-8A "Poseidon" reconnaissance aircraft to Okinawa and continuously carried out relevant flight activities [14]. The United States also included China's East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone in the *Freedom of Navigation Report*, identifying it as an excessive maritime claim [15]. At the same time, the United States did not completely interrupt military exchanges with China and still invited China to participate in the "Rim of the Pacific" military exercises in 2014 and 2016. Overall, the Obama administration strengthened its intervention in East China Sea and Yellow Sea affairs through the alliance system while maintaining strategic flexibility, and its policies had both competitive and cooperative characteristics. Analysis shows that during the Obama administration, U.S. strategic focus returned to the Asia-Pacific, and it strengthened intervention in the East China Sea and Yellow Sea by relying on the strength of regional allies, while continuing the U.S. practice of maintaining an ambiguous position on territorial sovereignty disputes in these regions, with flexible policies.

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5.3. Trump administration period

After taking office, Trump implemented the "America First" policy, placing greater emphasis on interest-cost accounting and demanding that allies such as Japan and South Korea bear more of the cost of U.S. military presence. In the early stage of his administration, he mainly focused on domestic economic development, and externally focused on the Iran nuclear issue, North Korean nuclear issue, and trade competition with China. On maritime issues, the 2017 *National Security Strategy* mainly focused on the South China Sea issue, emphasizing the maintenance of maritime freedom and the peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law [16]. During Trump's visit to Japan in February of the same year, the U.S.-Japan joint statement clearly pointed out that the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty applies to the Diaoyu Islands and opposed unilateral actions that undermine Japan's actual administration [17]. This was the first time a U.S. president had reaffirmed the relevant security commitment in writing, showing more explicit support for Japan's position. The 2018 U.S. Congressional Research Service document *China's Actions in the South China Sea and East China Sea* further clarified the basic U.S. position on the East China Sea issue: making no judgment on sovereignty but supporting the peaceful settlement of disputes; recognizing Japan's actual administration of the "Senkaku Islands"; opposing restrictions on foreign military activities in exclusive economic zones; adhering to the principle of maritime freedom and freedom of flight and navigation under the framework of international law. Compared with the Obama period, the Trump administration showed a tougher attitude toward China's surrounding maritime issues. In May 2018, the U.S. Department of Defense canceled China's qualification to participate in the "Rim of the Pacific" military exercises, indicating that the United States was willing to strengthen strategic competition with China at a certain diplomatic cost.

Overall, the Trump administration's Asia-Pacific strategic focus still centered on the Korean Peninsula and South China Sea issues, and it mainly exerted influence on East China Sea and Yellow Sea affairs through Japan and South Korea. Although U.S. alliance relations with Japan and South Korea experienced frictions due to military cost-sharing issues, its policies on China's surrounding maritime affairs were generally tougher than those during the Obama period, and the color of strategic competition with China was further enhanced.

6. Analysis of the causes of U.S. policy evolution toward the East China Sea and Yellow Sea after the Cold War

6.1. Trends in policy evolution

6.1.1. Emerging cracks in alliances and the pursuit of multiple interests

As scholars have pointed out, whether during the George W. Bush, Obama, or Trump administrations, the United States cannot exert influence in the Asia-Pacific region without the support of allies and partner countries such as Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines [18]. After the end of the Cold War, U.S. alliance relations with Japan and South Korea both faced transformation pressures. While continuing to rely on U.S. security guarantees, Japan and South Korea have also increasingly valued their own strategic autonomy. In particular, South Korea is more inclined to directly engage in dialogue with North Korea on Korean Peninsula issues. During the Trump administration, the practice of using troop withdrawals as leverage to demand increased military cost-sharing from Japan and South Korea further deepened internal contradictions within the alliances. At the same time, the United States has always been unwilling to be directly involved

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in territorial sovereignty disputes in the East China Sea and Yellow Sea. At U.S. congressional hearings on South China Sea and East China Sea issues, Senator Ben Cardin stated, "First and foremost, we need to avoid further escalation of the situation (Diaoyu Islands)." He advocated strengthening cooperation with ASEAN countries to jointly constrain China's unilateral actions through regional forces. This indicates that the main goal of U.S. intervention in East China Sea and Yellow Sea affairs is not to directly participate in disputes but to maintain regional influence and contain China through the alliance and partner system. As internal contradictions in alliance relations gradually emerge, the United States has begun to attach greater importance to cooperation with regional forces such as ASEAN, striving to achieve multiple goals of security, strategic, and political interests at a lower cost.

6.1.2. Strengthening joint military exercises to encircle China from multiple sides

The United States creates a sense of tension for China and compresses China's maritime activity scope through military exercises with countries such as Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and even Australia. Starting from the Obama administration, the "Rim of the Pacific" military exercises have been normalized. In 2010, the United States and Japan held joint exercises targeting the Diaoyu Islands with China as the imaginary enemy, aiming to deter China. Through frequent joint military exercises, the United States creates regional tensions, exacerbates the diversification and internationalization of maritime issues, and makes China exhausted from dealing with surrounding maritime situations, leaving it no time to focus on its own development, ultimately achieving the goal of inhibiting China's rise.

6.1.3. Reinforcing security commitments and acquiescing to territorial control

The United States continuously strengthens security commitments to allies and partners, and even to a certain extent, acquiesces in their control over territories with disputed sovereignty to enhance its influence in the East China Sea and Yellow Sea regions. During the George W. Bush administration, the United States was very ambiguous about whether the Diaoyu Islands fell under Article 5, while during the Obama administration, it began to clearly state that the Diaoyu Islands apply to Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, meaning that in the event of a military conflict with China, the United States has an obligation to participate in the defense of the Diaoyu Islands. Since taking office, Trump has re-emphasized this point in the statement reached during his visit to Japan, even without specifically marking the premise that the United States takes no position on sovereignty issues. He has not only continuously strengthened security commitments to Japan but also acquiesced in Japan's actual control over the Diaoyu Islands. In addition, the United States has always used the Japanese name for the Diaoyu Islands, the "Senkaku Islands." After the Cold War, the United States has intervened in East China Sea and Yellow Sea issues by emphasizing security commitments to allies and acquiescing in their actual control over territories.

6.2. Motivations for policy evolution

6.2.1. U.S. main interest considerations in the East China Sea and Yellow Sea

U.S. interest considerations in the East China Sea and Yellow Sea are mainly divided into the following four parts:

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First, maintaining the interests of regional allies and the existing security order. Disputes in the East China Sea and Yellow Sea involve important U.S. allies Japan and South Korea. U.S. intervention in relevant affairs is not only to consolidate alliance relations but also to maintain the regional security structure it dominates. Some scholars believe that China may use regional disputes to weaken the ties between the United States and its allies and expand alliance cracks. For the United States, fulfilling alliance obligations has important strategic significance. At the same time, the United States also attempts to avoid being caught in the "entrapment" situation discussed in Snyder's alliance dilemma, that is, being drawn into regional conflicts due to alliance treaties. Therefore, the United States tends to control regional contradictions within a manageable range by intervening in relevant affairs to reduce the risk of conflict getting out of control.

Second, promoting international norms and values advocated by the United States. For a long time, "resolving disputes without threat or use of force" and "maritime freedom" have been important principles of U.S. foreign policy. The 2017 *Freedom of Navigation Report* released by the U.S. Department of Defense discussed disputed sea areas by category for the first time, and pointed out in the East China Sea section that China had two behaviors that challenged U.S. freedom of navigation: "claiming jurisdiction over the airspace above exclusive economic zones and restricting foreign aircraft from flying over air defense identification zones without intent to overfly territorial airspace." [19] The United States uses the above principles to shape regional public opinion, on the one hand, strengthening the legitimacy of its intervention in East China Sea and Yellow Sea affairs, and on the other hand, promoting regional countries to identify with its values and international rule claims.

Third, safeguarding trade routes and energy interests. Compared with trade routes, energy factors have more practical significance in East China Sea and Yellow Sea issues. Disputing parties often promote energy development in disputed waters through international bidding. In the South China Sea, the U.S. oil company ExxonMobil obtained the oil exploration right for Block 119 off the coast of Da Nang, Vietnam through international bidding as early as 2008 [20]. As U.S. transnational energy enterprises gradually participate in resource development in disputed waters, the U.S. government has maintained continuous attention to relevant maritime disputes out of the need to safeguard overseas economic interests.

Fourth, responding to China's rise. This goal runs through the Obama administration's "Asia-Pacific rebalancing" strategy and the Trump administration's Asia-Pacific policy. After the end of the Cold War, the power structure in East Asia has changed, and China's comprehensive strength and regional influence have continued to increase. The United States prevents strategic changes unfavorable to its dominant position in the Asia-Pacific region by strengthening the alliance system, coordinating regional partnerships, and shaping the regional strategic environment.

6.2.2. Root causes of U.S. policy evolution toward the East China Sea and Yellow Sea

The evolution of U.S. policies toward the East China Sea and Yellow Sea has generally gone through a process of relative neglect during the George W. Bush period, active intervention during the Obama period, and further intensified competition during the Trump period. Although the adjustment of strategic focus is the direct cause of policy changes, its deep root lies in the strategic pressure generated by the combined effect of China's rapid rise and changes in U.S. relative power.

From the perspective of policy practice, U.S. policies toward the East China Sea and Yellow Sea have gradually exposed certain internal contradictions. First, the United States hopes to intervene in regional affairs with the help of allies such as Japan and South Korea, but is unwilling to have direct military confrontation with China; second, the United States promises to provide security support

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when allies are attacked, but at the same time emphasizes opposition to resolving disputes through force or threat of force in official documents such as the *Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy*. These contradictions reflect the U.S. dilemma between maintaining regional dominance and controlling strategic costs. The United States is well aware that maintaining strategic competition with China cannot be separated from the support of the alliance system, and consolidating alliance relations requires continuous investment of political, economic, and military resources. The Trump administration's demand that Japan and South Korea bear more of the cost of U.S. military presence reflects the practical pressure on the United States in the allocation of global strategic resources.

At the same time, long-term counter-terrorism wars and the international financial crisis have caused certain consumption to U.S. comprehensive strength. Faced with the continuous growth of China's strength, the United States relies more on the alliance system and regional partnerships to maintain strategic advantages rather than directly investing large-scale resources in containment. Therefore, the strengthening of U.S. policies toward the East China Sea and Yellow Sea actually reflects more the implementation of indirect checks and balances through the alliance system rather than comprehensive strengthening of its own investment.

Overall, although the United States has deepened its intervention in the East China Sea and Yellow Sea issues, its policies have always had the dual contradiction between maintaining regional dominance and controlling strategic costs. Fundamentally, this contradiction stems from the strategic pressure brought about by China's rise and the structural constraints formed by changes in U.S. relative power.

7. Conclusions and limitations

With the implementation of the U.S. Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy, the United States has strengthened its involvement in East Asian affairs. Due to the national disputes involved in the East China Sea and Yellow Sea, they have become spaces for the U.S. Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy to play out. U.S. policies toward the East China Sea and Yellow Sea reflect, to a certain extent, its strategic thinking and approach in the Asia-Pacific region, making the study of these policies very important. This paper sorts out the main disputes in the East China Sea and Yellow Sea, reviews the relevant policies of the George W. Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations after the Cold War, and finally identifies the characteristics and underlying causes of U.S. policy evolution. The following conclusions are drawn:

First, the United States is able to intervene in East China Sea and Yellow Sea issues because regional disputes involve many countries and are complex and difficult to resolve. The East China Sea involves China-Japan and China-South Korea disputes, and the China-Japan Diaoyu Islands dispute alone seems to be an unsolvable problem. The Yellow Sea involves China-South Korea and North-South Korea delimitation issues, and the unification of the Korean Peninsula and the North Korean nuclear issue have added difficulties to the resolution of regional disputes;

Second, after the Cold War, the United States only realized the importance of the Asia-Pacific region in the late George W. Bush administration. During the Obama administration, it began to attach importance to the East China Sea and Yellow Sea, intervening in relevant issues by strengthening alliance relations and security commitments. By the Trump period, although the United States had frictions with its allies, its policies toward the East China Sea and Yellow Sea remained tough;

Third, U.S. policies after the Cold War have shown three major trends: first, emerging cracks in alliances and the pursuit of multiple interests; second, strengthening joint military exercises to encircle China from multiple sides; and third, reinforcing security commitments and acquiescing to

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territorial control. The root causes of the evolution of U.S. policies toward the East China Sea and Yellow Sea, in addition to the shift of strategic focus, are mainly the enormous pressure brought about by China's rise and the relative decline of U.S. power.

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