



CHINA-US MILITARIZED INTERSTATE DISPUTES (2001-2022): THE ESCALATION OF THE GREAT POWER RIVALRY

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Acknowledgment

The study is funded by the VNU University of Social Sciences and Humanities within the project of CS.2022.31

Abstract

Since the late 1990s, studying great power rivalry based on the approach from militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) has become increasingly prevalent. Also since the beginning of the 21st century, the competitive relationship between the US and China, the two leading great powers in Indo-Pacific, has become a focal point of studies in international relations. The escalation of the conflict is apparent in the economic realm and expanding into the security realm. To prove the increase of MIDs in China-US relations is to shed light on the escalation of this great power rivalry. It is argued in this article that the two sides have obviously engaged in a great power strategic rivalry since Obama's adjustment of policy priority towards Asia-Pacific. Militarized disputes become increasingly frequent, displaying forces is the regular way the two leading great powers compete with each other, and the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait are the two points of tension.

Keywords

China-US rivalry, militarized interstate disputes, great power conflict, China-US relations

Introduction

Great power conflict is among focal points of studies in international relations. When great power rivals engage in a military confrontation, it is a destructive conflict that can cause huge casualties and damages to either all sides to conflict or other nations in the region and world. Each conflict has its own trajectory. Initial contradictions can be expanded into new and more complex ones, and restrained behaviors can also escalate into an armed conflict. Grasping the pattern of each conflict, including its early signals is always a necessity. Many studies show that militarized interstate disputes (MIDs) with various levels of intensity include, or relate to war (Gochman & Maoz, 1984) (Jones & Singer, 1996). Some argue great power rivalries contain a certain number of MIDs (Goertz & Diehl, 1992) (Thompson, 2001). MIDs, therefore, is a prominent approach to understanding the pattern of a great power conflict. Data sets with different coding rules varied, basing on different perspectives.

From the beginning of the 21st century, China-US relations gets attention of scholars due to the conflicting interests, values, and visions between the two world largest economies. It can be clearly seen that this great power competition is expanding beyond economic domain. They have been engaging in an increasing number of militarized interstate incidents and disputes, reflecting the escalation of this great power conflict. When the United States implemented its "rebalancing" and "pivot to Asia" strategy in the second decade of the century, many hypotheses claimed it as the start of a great power rivalries. In fact, under George W. Bush administration, the US had seen China as its number one foe (Kettle, 2001). The main research question of whether and how China and the United States are approaching to the great power military confrontation through the case of MIDs in the 22-year period of 2001-2022 can be splitted into two main groups of sub-questions as follows:

- (i) What can militarized interstate disputes be defined? How many levels of MID are there? How can MID be perceived? To answer these question is to form a theoretical framework and data selection for MID;
- (ii) How often have MID between China and the United States occurred? in which level? Do the frequency and level of MID increase or the other way round? To unlock the frequency, the level of MID between the two shows the pattern of this great power conflict.

Theoretical framework for militarized interstate disputes

The concept of Militarized Interstate Disputes

The two definitions of MID in the studies of Gochman and Maoz (1984), and Jones et al. (1996) are the two most influential definitions. Gochman and Maoz (1984) define a MID as “a set of interactions between or among states involving threats to use military force, displays of military force, or actual uses of military force. To be included, these acts must be explicit, overt, nonaccidental, and government sanctioned.” (Gochman & Maoz, 1984, p. 587). Jones et al. (1996) shares the common understanding of the nature of MID but their definition is narrower than the previous one while war is excluded from a type of MID. They argued:

“The term “militarized interstate dispute” refers to united historical cases in which the threat, display or use of military force short of war by one member state is explicitly directed towards the government, official representatives, official forces, property, or territory of another state. Clearly, this purposively excludes interactions in disputes that did not become militarized, but this does not suggest that this type of state behavior is unimportant or that non-militarized disputes are over trivial issues.” (Jones et al., 1996, p. 168)

The exclusion of war in the category of MID makes sense because it is needed to distinguish different types of international conflict. Moreover, due to the connection between MID and wars, to clarify the correlates between the two and to identify which MID easily evolves into a war and which does not are the two tasks that require a separation. A MID, therefore, is a situation that have following characteristics:

Firstly, states are the actors participating in MID. Despite an acknowledgement of the existence and importance of other actors, studies in MID put state actors as “national political entities that qualify as members of the interstate system” (Gochman & Maoz, 1984, p. 587) under their consideration. State actors were characterized by its diplomatically recognized status in the international system, which implies that non-recognized states and non-state actors are not examined. Indeed, only recognized states have the legitimacy to possess, develop and use of military force. It is also appropriate to the primary concern of these studies, how diplomatic interactions between/among states escalate into interstate war.

Secondly, a MID are constituted by a series of interrelated militarized interstate incidents (MIIs) which involve “a common set of participants of issues” (Gochman & Leng, 1988, p.160). It cannot be denied that in a great power conflict, the two (or more) sides often engage in numerous militarized disputes. Each militarized dispute includes a sequence of militarized incidents, in which an incident is perceived as a response, even a retaliation to the previous one. Aggregating incidents in a disputes is a daunting task when it involves many parties. Within the same multi-party dispute, a party can take multi-actions, which targeted another party in one case, and a group of many parties in another case. Because the actual situation is more complicated, an acts targeting one party might be considered as either a response in a multi-party dispute or an initiative of a dyadic dispute. The case of MID between China and the United States in the South China Sea is the dyadic ones. China and the United States can switch the role between an initiator and a target in different disputes.

Thirdly, militarized interstate incidents included in a MID should be explicit and non-routine. In various cases, the target(s) of militarized acts such as the threat to use force or the display of force might not be clear in diplomatic discourses, which generates challenges in placing it in which disputes. The target and the conflicting issue in MIIs constituting a MID, therefore, should be explicit. Moreover, there are also militarized actions which is regular or within an official agreement. These acts, which do not show a dispute, are also excluded from the category of MIIs.

To conclude, a militarized interstate dispute is an aggregation of interrelated incidents in which diplomatically recognized states threaten, display, or actually use military forces short of war directing towards the government, forces, property, or territory of another, or other state(s).

Level of Militarized Interstate Incidents

Militarized Interstate Incidents (MIIs) are depicted as “the threat, display or use of military force short of war” (Jones et al., 1996, p. 163). This implies three categories of MIIs – the threat of force, the display of force and the use of force. The definitions of each category are unanimous, but the titles of these acts included vary. Gochman & Maoz (1984) shows 14 types of military acts while Jones et al. (1996) lists 20 types. It is argued in the article that

some types of acts should be supplemented, and some types of acts should be grouped. Three categories and acts are as follows:

The threat of force.

The explicit threat of force posed by a state is perceived by the statements, or discourses of the governments of the possibility of deploying and using forces against another state. Different acts should be arranged in the order of increasing levels of intensification.

1. Threat to use force: the one state's act of declaring the use of military forces to fight against the military forces, or violate the territory of another state.
2. Threat to blockade: the one state's act of declaring the use of military forces to seal off a part or the whole territory of another state, preventing both entry and exit.
3. Threat to occupy territory: the one state's act of declaring the deployment of military forces to occupy a part or the whole territory of another state
4. Threat to declare war: the one state's act of declaring to issue an official declaration of war on another state.
5. Threat to use nuclear weapons: the one state's act of declaring to use nuclear weapon against another state's forces or territory.

The display of force

The explicit display of force is perceived by the actual non-routine increase or the deployment of military forces short of a combat, directing to another state. Different acts should be arranged in the order of increasing levels of intensification.

6. Alert: the one state's reported act of increasing the readiness of regular military forces, directing to the forces, the border, or the territory of another state.
7. Mobilization: the one state's reported act of activating a part or the whole of its previously inactive military forces, directing to the forces, the border, or the territory of another state.
8. Show of forces: the one state's non-routine act of demonstrating its military forces short of engaging in an actual combat, directing to another state.
9. Nuclear alert: the one state's reported act of increasing the readiness of nuclear weapons, directing to the forces, or the territory of another state.
10. Border violation: the one state's reported act of deploying its military forces to cross another state's recognized land, sea, or air boundary short of firing upon the forces, property, or population of the targeted state.

The use of force

The explicit use of force is perceived by one state's actual deployment of military forces to block, or fire upon another state's forces, property, or territory, and the armed conflict short of war, which was defined as an armed conflict between two sides "resulting in 1000 or more battle fatalities" (Gochman & Maoz, 1984, p.589). The difference from Gochman & Maoz (1984)'s category is that the declaration of war is purposely removed in the following one. Although Maoz (1982) suggested that this act is second only to war and it should be included in the category due to its level of severity, the declaration of war, not followed by an actual war, should be considered as the threat of force. In case of an actual war following the declaration of war, it often occurs rapidly, so it should be considered as the category of war, which is excluded from MID lists. Different acts should be arranged in the order of increasing levels of intensification.

11. Blockade: the one state's act of using military forces to seal off a part or the whole territory of another state, preventing both entry and exit.
12. Occupation of territory: the one state's act of using military forces to occupy a part or the whole territory of another state for more than twenty-four hours. This type of act does not include the act of occupation in the aftermath of the previous agreement.
13. Seizure: the one state's act of using military force to capture another state's property, personnel of forces, or citizens in the contested territory for more than twenty-four hours.
14. Clash and Raid: the outbreak of military hostilities between parties' military forces. The situation happens when an initiator fires upon the forces, property, or territory of the targeted state and has the response of the other, or when both sides engage in an armed conflict of conventional weapons and the initiator may not be clearly identified.
15. Use of CBR weapons: the one state's act of using chemical, biological or nuclear weapons against another state's forces or territory resulting in less than 1000 battle fatalities.

These fifteen intensification of MIDs show the theoretical pattern of an armed conflict, or war. A conflict does not have to go through all levels, but the greater the extent of the conflict, the greater the likelihood of armed confrontation. Especially for great power competition in the post-Cold War period, the threat of force and the show of force have become more common. Despite possessing high-tech weapons of great destructiveness and even nuclear weapons, the great powers avoid going to armed confrontation with each other due to the fear of the possible consequences of using such weapons. Therefore, the way states use force in rivalry reflects the level and the escalation of conflict.

China-US militarized interstate incidents and disputes (2001-2022)

It is recognized that the escalating interstate rivalry comes along with the increasing number and density of MIDs as well as MIIs between the two rivals (Goertz & Diehl, 1992). Overall, there is an upward trend in MIDs between the US and China over the 22 years, although the MII figures show its fluctuation. As shown in the chart 1, it can be divided into three sub-periods: the US and China have a seven-year period without MID, following by eight years of intermittent disputes from 2009 to 2017, and five years of a constant as of 2017. As to the level of intensification, the highest acts of hostility, at the level of seizure in the category of actual use of forces, are employed by both sides in 2001. The highest acts of hostility in all other disputes stand at the level of showing forces. It can be implied that the use of forces is irregular while showing forces becomes increasingly common in this great power rivalry. When it comes to the issues provoking MIDs between China and the US, the Taiwan Strait, and the South and East China Sea are the two hotspot of the rivalry.

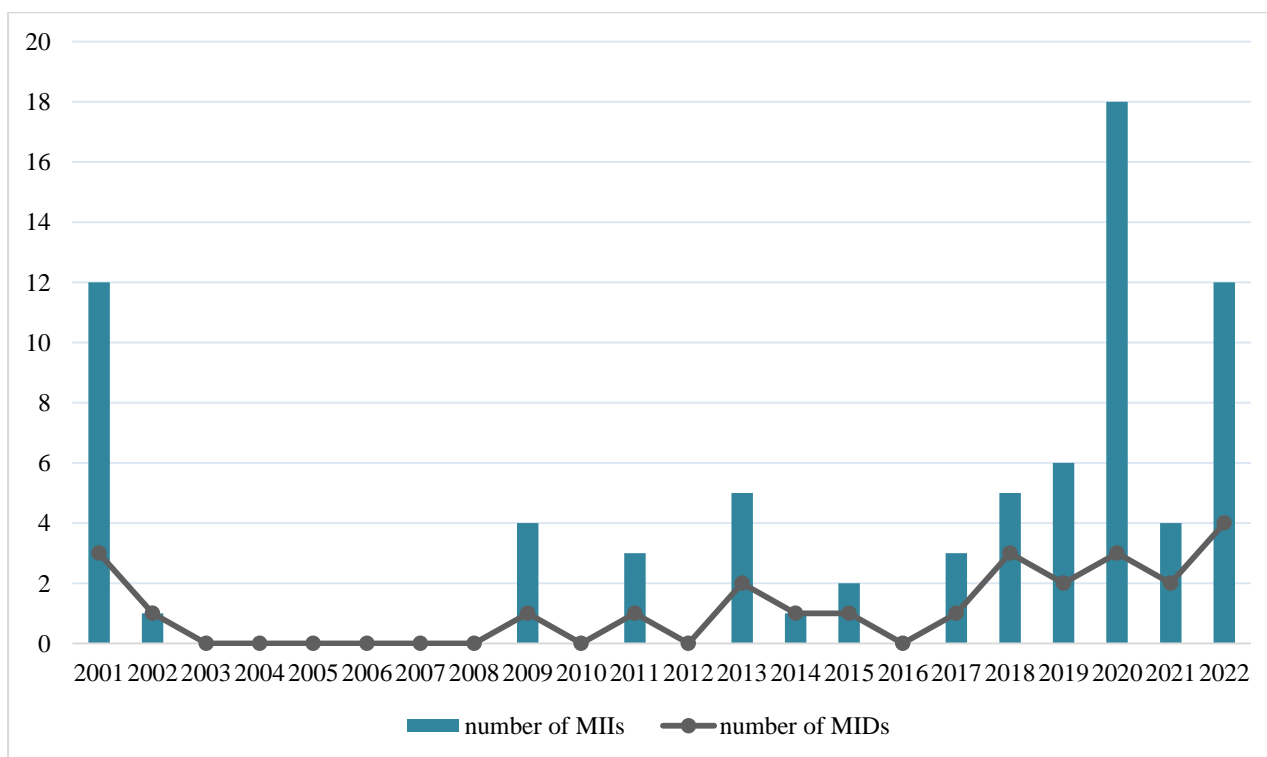


Chart 1. Number of Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs) and Militarized Interstate Incidents (MIIs) between China and the United States (2001-2022)

Source: Data generated by the author, using the dataset of Correlates of War project’s dyadic MIDs version 4.02 for the period of 2001-2014 and collecting information based on this dataset’s coding rules for the period as of 2014.

The period of 2001 to 2008

The MIDs between the US and China in this period are generally not as many as the others, and tend to decrease, but the level of intensification in acts is the highest in the total of the 3 periods.

There are four MIDs in total with three disputes with 11 incidents in total that took place densely during the first half of 2001, and one dispute consisting of only one incident in which Chinese forces challenged American surveillance activities in 2002. The three disputes in 2001 related to the disputed water in the South China Sea, and Taiwan had happened before the outbreak of the terrorist attack of 9/11/2001. This destructive attack led to the U.S. adjustment of its strategic concentration towards the War on Terror when the Middle East became the focal point. This is the underlying cause to the no-MID situation for the following seven years until 2009 despite the U.S. perception of China as its number one foe. Another reason might be that China’s capabilities at this time is not great

enough to create an urgent threat to the US superiority. In 2001, China officially became a member of the WTO, which helps its economy grow rapidly. It was not until 2010 that China officially surpassed Japan to become the second largest economy in the world; hence the disputes between the US and China were isolated on a case-by-case basis.

As mentioned above, the acts of highest hostility from both the US and China lied in the dispute happening on 1 to 5 April 2001 when the actual uses of force were conducted. This dispute involving five incidents arose when an American spy plane crash-landed on China's Hainan Island after colliding with a Chinese fighter over international waters, in which the Chinese pilot was killed. This led to the China's seizure of both the U.S. crew and plane. The U.S. responded by deploying three destroyers to the waters off China to require China to release the crew and return the plane. In the most long-lasting dispute of the period, from 25 April to 17 August 2001, it was Taiwan the main target of China's largest exercises ever around Dongshan Island, which involved 100,000 personnel. However, the US threatened to use force if Taiwan was attacked. Following this threat of force, the US actually conducted naval exercises in the South China Sea as a show of force. Although the exercises occurred in the South China Sea, they were the U.S. response to China's aggression towards Taiwan.

The period of 2009 to 2016

Since the U.S. announced its policy of "Rebalancing" and "Pivot to Asia" under the Barack Obama administration, the interstate rivalry between the established power and the rising one has been intensifying. The number of MIDs and MIIs within each MID increases, but shows the restraint and stability of rivalry. No more than two disputes happened in each year, and the distribution of MIDs by year is uneven when there is no MID existed in 2010, 2012, and 2016. The number of MIIs per year does not exceed 5. In total, there are six disputes, including four disputes in the South China Sea, one in the Taiwan Strait, and one in the East China Sea. The South China Sea, therefore, remained the focal point of MIDs in the period. This can be interpreted when looking at the overall militarized disputes of China in this period, not only with the US, China has many different MIDs with the coastal states in the South China Sea, leading to the growing concern of the US on the the freedom of navigation, maritime security and its presence in the region.

All acts of highest hostility in each dispute from both sides reach the level of showing forces in the display-of-force category. In four over six disputes in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, China was the primary initiator. In the case of the ten-day dispute in March 2009, the U.S. firstly accused China of harassing its oceanographic survey ship, which was finally admitted by Chinese officials (Branigan, 2009). This prompted the US to deploy a destroyer to escort and protect its ship. In response, China deployed several warships to both follow the US vessels and patrol the larger South China Sea. On 29 June 2011, Chinese fighters flew to meet a United States surveillance plane flying along the Taiwan Strait. In 2013, there are two disputes in which China was the initiator in the dispute over the South China Sea, and the US and its East Asian allies – Japan and Republic of Korea- were the initiator in the one over the East China Sea.

The period of 2017 to 2022

The escalation of the great power conflict become more obvious. The number of MIDs and MIIs in just 5 years is greater than the the total number of those of both previous periods. Instead of being sporadic as in the previous period, the MIDs in this period occur every year with an average of 3 MIDs, and more than 9 MIIs per year. The highest level of MIIs is 18 in 2020 within the context of Covid-19. Especially, the number of MIDs tends to grow over the years, and the highest number of MIDs is 4 in 2022.

It can be seen that since President Donald J. Trump took office, the US has declared and implemented much tougher and assertive policies towards China, making the US-China relationship increasingly competitive, and its contradiction less restrained. The trade war in 2018 pursuing the US goal of reciprocal trade, mainly targeting China is showing the severity and obviousness of the rivalry. Pursuing a free and open Indo-Pacific strategy, the United States has also affirmed its strategic goal of "freedom of the seas" (Pompeo, 2019, 4). Although the U.S. government emphasized the economic aim at promoting regional prosperity, strategic orientation of implementation implies that regional security concerns should be addressed at first; and the defense and security cooperation with its traditional allies should be enhanced.

"...the United States is implementing a whole-of-government strategy to champion the values that have served the Indo-Pacific so well: (1) respect for sovereignty and independence of all nations; (2) peaceful resolution of disputes; (3) free, fair, and reciprocal trade based on open investment, transparent agreements, and connectivity; and (4) adherence to international law, including freedom of navigation and overflight (...) The United States is strengthening and deepening partnerships with countries that share our values. Our alliances with Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand have helped sustain peace and security for generations. ASEAN sits at the geographical center of the Indo-Pacific and is central to our vision." (U.S. Department of State, 2019, 6)

China and the US, who have different values, and competing visions for the region are apparently coming closer to great power conflict. This strategic goal and major strategic orientation has continued up to Biden administration.

The acts of highest hostility remain in the level of showing force, and the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait are the two points of tension. In the case of Taiwan Strait crisis related to 2022 visit by the U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, China has actually deployed its forces to round up Taiwan for a week. This act can be seen as blockade- the first level within the category of using force. However, the main target of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China is the US and China did not encircle U.S. territory, so this act is the show of force in China's dispute with the US over Taiwan. Although the highest level of hostility during this period was less than that of 2001-2008, the 2001 incident was irregular. This implies that (i) displaying forces is the regular way the two leading great powers compete with each other, (ii) militarized disputes become increasingly frequent, causing the escalation of conflict between the two, and (iii) the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait are the two points of tension.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the militarized disputes between the US and China during 22 years of 2001-2022, it can be concluded that despite the perception of threats from the other side, the two sides have practically and obviously engaged in a great power rivalry since 2009 due to the U.S. policy adjustment after the 9/11 terrorist attack and China's limited capabilities compared to the U.S. The density of MIIs and MIDs over the years has increased when Obama administration stressed the importance of Asia-Pacific as the U.S top priority and more sharply when Trump administration took a tougher moves against China. The U.S. policy has focused on open seas and freedom of navigation, which makes the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait the two most intensive points of rivalry. Although the great power rivalry tends to escalate, the acts of highest hostility in this great power rivalry remain stable at showing forces. It is apparent that the stronger and more balanced the forces of both sides, the less likely they use forces and enter into a military confrontation.

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