Wei’s

Realism, one of the foundational theories of International Relations (IR) [1], offers a framework for understanding the dynamics of the Spratly Islands dispute. This theoretical approach emphasizes the anarchic nature of the international system and the relentless pursuit of power and security as the means of survival for states. In the absence of a global governing authority, states operate in a self-help system where they must prioritize their interests and ensure their security independently. The ongoing crisis in the Spratly Islands—a region of immense strategic and economic significance—presents a textbook case for analysis through the realist lens.

The anarchic structure of the international system is evident in the Spratly Islands situation, as there is no overarching authority to mediate or enforce rules governing the territorial disputes. With the Vietnamese Coast Guard’s sinking of a Chinese fishing vessel, followed by China’s deployment of marines and Vietnam’s swift occupation of additional features, the principle of self-help is unambiguously illustrated. Each country is acting unilaterally, seeking to assert dominance and control over these strategically vital land features. The lack of binding international arbitration or enforcement mechanisms leaves states to rely on their own capabilities and strategies to secure their interests [2].

China’s deployment of marines and Vietnam’s corresponding actions align closely with realism’s emphasis on power as both a means and an end. These maneuvers aim to establish physical control over disputed territories, granting the occupying states economic benefits such as fishing rights and potential energy resources, as well as strategic military advantages. In particular, China’s actions reflect its broader geopolitical strategy of extending influence and control over the South China Sea—a region vital for trade routes and resource extraction [2]. Similarly, Vietnam’s rapid response underscores its determination to counterbalance Chinese moves and safeguard its territorial claims.

The historical animosities and overlapping territorial claims between China and Vietnam exacerbate mutual suspicions, making cooperation or compromise unlikely [3]. Realism assumes that states view international relations as a zero-sum game, where one state’s gain is inherently another’s loss [4]. This mindset is vividly reflected in the aggressive territorial grabs and military buildups in the Spratly Islands. Each country perceives control over these features as essential not only to its own security but also to preventing regional adversaries from gaining a strategic upper hand.

The actions of other regional players, such as the Philippines and Taiwan, further highlight the principles of realism and the zero-sum game concept [4]. As they prepare to occupy additional features in response to China’s and Vietnam’s escalations, these states are also getting ready to seek its own national interest. The theoretical foundations of realism provides a robust framework for analyzing this scenario. The primary factor influencing state behavior is the pursuit of national interests, particularly in areas of security and power [4].

From a professional standpoint, my military background underscores the relevance of realism's perspectives on state behavior in security-sensitive areas. The strategic actions of Chinese marines exemplify the realist concept of preemptive measures. These operations aim to secure key positions, deter potential threats, and establish leverage for future negotiations. In contested regions, physically occupying strategic locations serves not only to assert sovereignty but also to demonstrate resolve and capability. This aligns with my observations of how states prioritize vital assets to preserve or strengthen their strategic standing in competitive settings.

In summary, the Spratly Islands dispute highlights the anarchic, competitive, and power-focused character of international politics. The claimants' actions, motivated by self-interest, distrust, and the pursuit of dominance, demonstrate realism’s ability to explain state behavior. The region's escalation, characterized by assertive territorial claims and military buildups, underscores the ongoing relevance of realist theory in analyzing the complexities of international relations.

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