Constructing the South China Sea
A Pentadic Analysis of American Narratives, 2009-2016

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

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

Theory
This study develops a new longitudinal form of pentadic analysis, based on Kenneth Burke’s theory of dramatism, to study American narratives of the South China Sea. Pentadic analysis provides insight into how speakers:
• Attribute motive through selecting one of the five pentadic terms as dominant (scene, act, agent, agency, purpose).
• Ascribe significance via circumference (circumference defines the scope of the context in which the pentad operates).

Data

Discussion
Evidence Of A Dominant Narrative
In 2014, elements of a dominant American narrative emerged in regards to motive attribution (see Figure 2). This narrative’s features are as follows:
• In this narrative, “purpose” is the central source of motive that drives tensions in the South China Sea (see Figure 4).
• In particular, developments are portrayed as being driven by China’s purpose (namely, its revisionist desire to establish regional hegemony).

Policy Implications
The policy limitations imposed by the dominant American narrative were most visibly displayed during Secretary of State nominee Rex Tillerson’s confirmation hearing in January 2017:
• Tillerson (inadvertently) suggested that the United States should consider blockading the South China Sea.
• This suggestion was universally criticized and mocked across the political spectrum.
• His proposed policy was viewed as illegitimate because it did not address the “real” problem (China’s revisionist purpose), and because it conflicted with the United States’ purpose (protecting freedom of navigation).