



The Panama Canal and the Resurgence of Great Power Competition

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Abstract

This article examines the current US rhetoric regarding the Panama Canal through the lenses of Structural Realism and Classical Realism, analyzing the resurgence of great power competition between the United States and China. Employing a comparative analysis with the Cuban Missile Crisis, the study investigates how the Canal reflects the dynamics of power and security in the international system. The objectives are to demonstrate the applicability of Structural Realism in understanding contemporary geopolitical challenges, analyze the Panama Canal as a microcosm of US-China competition, and warn of potential escalation while acknowledging mitigating factors. The analysis concludes that while a significant crisis is unlikely, the Panama Canal exemplifies the ongoing struggle for power and influence in the 21st century, underscoring the need for careful diplomacy and effective crisis management.

Subject Areas

International Relations

Keywords

Panama Canal, Cuban Missile Crisis, US, China, Rivalry, Competition, Structural Realism, Classical Realism, Analysis, Comparative, Great Powers

1. Introduction

A sophisticated web of interactions among various actors, including states, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and multinational corporations, characterizes contemporary international relations (IR). These actors interact within a global system shaped by various factors, such as power dynamics, economic interdependence, and cultural exchange. To understand states' behav-

ior, scholars' perspectives and approaches to interpret and explain global phenomena, such as war, cooperation, and globalization. As an early contemporary IR doctrine, Neorealism and structural Realism (SR) emerged into the IR discipline in the late 1970s of the twentieth century to revive Classical Realism (CR). Despite the fundamental mutual grounds between SR and CR regarding Power Politics, SR has worked on elevating classical realist focus from the domestic to the international arena (from the unit to the system level).

Structural Realism (SR) and Classical Realism (CR) share a common foundation, viewing the international system as anarchical and states as the primary actors. However, they diverge in their emphasis. CR, rooted in human nature and emphasizing the pursuit of power by individuals like politicians, views international relations as driven by the inherent lust for power within human beings. In contrast, SR focuses on the systemic constraints imposed by the anarchic international system, in which states, driven by the primary goal of survival, compete for power to ensure their security.

Accordingly, a neorealist lens dictates that President Trump's latest rhetoric regarding the Panama Canal mirrors US foreign policy in the coming four years. However, at the same time, Trump's rhetoric regarding the Panama Canal also reminds us of the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Bay of Pigs operation in April 1961, led by anti-Castro Cuban rebels with US support, failed disastrously. This failure intensified the arms race and damaged US credibility, leading the Soviets to conduct nuclear tests and deploy ballistic missiles in Cuba by 1962. President Kennedy issued an ultimatum demanding missile withdrawal to avoid nuclear war, considering actions like airstrikes and a naval blockade. The crisis concluded with the Soviets agreeing to remove the missiles in exchange for a US commitment to end the embargo and not invade Cuba, thus averting a nuclear catastrophe but highlighting Cold War tensions.

Donald Trump's remarks about reclaiming the Panama Canal and Chinese influence have sparked international concern. Panama rejects any threat to its sovereignty over the Canal, which accounts for 7.7% of its GDP and facilitates 5% of global maritime traffic. Constructed by the US (1904-1914) and returned to Panama in 1999 under a Carter-era treaty, the Canal symbolizes US engineering dominance. Trump's rhetoric echoes Reagan's 1970s strategy, exploiting the Canal as a symbol of American strength amidst anxieties over economic decline and global influence. Concerns over Chinese-operated ports and rising transit fees underscore ongoing regional geopolitical tensions.

Ultimately, this article shall argue the notion of state security from a Neorealist perspective by focusing on the relationship between the US political stance regarding the Panama Canal as a resonance of the Cuban Missile Crisis in the early 1960s. Thus, the article will bolster its argument with a comparative and analytical methodology. Therefore, this article will conclude that the Panama Canal is a microcosm of the US-China rivalry, with China's growing influence challenging US dominance. While the risk of a Cuban Missile Crisis-level confrontation is low

due to Panama's sovereignty and economic interdependence, the potential for unforeseen events and strategic miscalculations remains. The Canal exemplifies the ongoing struggle for power and influence in the twenty-first century, underscoring the need for careful diplomacy and effective crisis management.

1.1. Main Question

How does the current competition between the United States and China over the Panama Canal reflect the dynamics of power and security in the international system, as described by Structural and classical Realism?

1.2. Methodology

This article applies structural Realism (SR) and classical Realism (CR) as primary approaches to understanding the essential dynamics of current international relations among great powers, specifically the US-China rivalry. It then employs a comparative approach, comparing the current US rhetoric regarding the Panama Canal with the Cuban Missile Crisis, where the former serves as a current case study and the latter as a historical reference case, relying on a secondary data source, such as books, articles, and websites. The author has also relied on AI tools like Grammarly, Gemini, and ChatGPT to enhance its language quality and avoid unintended plagiarism.

1.3. Objectives

- Demonstrate the applicability of Structural Realism in understanding contemporary geopolitical challenges.
- Analyze the Panama Canal as a microcosm of the broader US-China competition and its implications for global power dynamics.
- Warn of potential escalation, drawing parallels to the Cuban Missile Crisis while acknowledging mitigating factors.

2. Theoretical Lens

A theoretical lens is a crucial tool in foreign policy analysis, offering a structured framework to navigate the complexities of international relations. It serves as a filter, directing researchers to focus on specific dimensions of foreign policy issues, such as power dynamics, economic priorities, or ideological motivations. By employing a theoretical framework, analysts can interpret past events, forecast potential outcomes, and uncover patterns in state behavior. Additionally, it enables case comparisons and enriches scholarly discourse by questioning established assumptions and introducing fresh theoretical insights. While no single theory offers a complete explanation, combining multiple lenses provides a more holistic and nuanced perspective on foreign policy decisions.

2.1. Defensive Realism

The SR's conceptual framework evolved in 1979 in Kenneth Waltz's book "Theo-

ries of International Relations,” where he highlighted the need for a system-level approach to distinguish perceptible trends at the system level. Waltz based his methodology in approaching the system level on the following principles: International politics is a bounded arena; recognition and explanation of law-like symmetries in international politics; identification of units in the system; comparative stipulation of systemic and sub-systemic weight permanence in the system; and, exposing the change of influences and outcomes from one system to another [1].

Thus, Waltz defined political structures through interaction between units, distribution of power, and allocation of functions [2]. Therefore, Waltz signifies a defensive Realism by suggesting that states seek to enhance their security to achieve survival [1]. He, nevertheless, argues that maintaining too much power might be imprudent, as the system will punish any state attempt to maximize its share of world power [3]. Accordingly, the Waltzian belief, in this concern, adopts the concept of “Balance of Power,” which consequently leads to polarity, where the system of international politics is anarchic. The state’s survival is a self-help function.

2.2. Offensive Realism

Mearsheimer’s “The Tragedy of Great Power Politics” outlined his approach to SR. Mearsheimer’s Offensive Realism recognized three key behavioral patterns that determine the states’ aggressive conduct against each other: Fear, power maximization, and self-help. For Mearsheimer, the system of international politics is anarchic; global politics is state-centric; states lack certainty about each other’s intentions; states are rational actors, and survival is their goal [1]. Thus, the more power a state gains, the better off it is in terms of security, as tremendous power is the best way to ensure a state’s survival [3]. Therefore, the impact of SR impositions on the perception of international cooperation leads to an atmosphere of relative gains interplay among states, where a state’s position is relative to its power. The anarchic nature of the system imposes severe restrictions on state behavior. Hence, the importance of relative gains in security matters will likely be more tangible [4]. To better understand the SR’s stance towards international politics, the following section will discuss the essentials of recognizing the key differences between SR and CR.

2.3. Structural (SR) vs. Classical Realism (CR)

Although the SR’s key foundations are rooted in CR, the former holds fundamentally contrasting views in certain areas. For instance, whereas CR assumes that leaders’ lust for power is a key motive for state behavior, the SR assumes little space for egoism, just as far as the extent related to state survival. Furthermore, the SR assumes that competition on the international level may produce state behavior, where states tend to follow the norms, mainly when these norms serve the state’s preferences. Thus, the SR suggests that universal practices produce similar outcomes in the international arena. In this concern, the CR suggests that ration-

ality is the leading producer of state strategies [5].

Moreover, both SR and CR agree on the notion of state-centrism, sovereignty, and the anarchic nature of the system. However, CR is attentive to the utilization of national power internationally, where “power politics” among nation-states is the central abstraction and the state’s character and relation with the society. On the contrary, SR has amalgamated the two notions of state and nation-state to bring the level of analysis from the domestic structure up to the international structure to demarcate international outcomes by international structures [6].

The “Hobbesian human nature” is also deeply rooted in the CR’s assumptions. At the same time, SR has not entrenched it. Contrary to CR, SR attributes less importance to the crafty and dexterous practice of state diplomacy spearheads [1]. In line with this comparative stream, it is helpful to spotlight the key inter-theoretical debate between defensive and offensive approaches to the SR. In general, the SR framework addresses state behavior on the system level. Therefore, systemic pressures determine state reactions, yet states vary in their reactions against similar systemic pressures.

In contrast, their responses might be less enthused by the systemic level than the national level. In this concern, defensive Realism assumes that states tend to avoid divergence that pours in their competitor’s interests. However, states are inevitably not keen to maximize divergence to their interest.

On the other hand, offensive Realism suggests that power maximization in an anarchic system is the state’s means to ensure survival [2]. These two extremes indicate that for defensive Realism, states lean to a “Balance of Power,” where states seek to maintain an apt amount of power and act rationally when restraint is required. Otherwise, irrational reactions may lead to war. In this context, offensive Realism assumes that states should seek maximum power and believes that hegemony creates peace. Thus, for defensive realists, bipolarity produces peace because war has less potential as states concentrate on one threat. As for offensive realists, a unipolar system with one superpower is less prone to war, as the superpower can prevent war if it disturbs the international order.

Moreover, SR thus seeks to define the influence of international structures on international outcomes, where state attributions are taken for granted. It suggests that changes in the system impact state behavior, while changes in the state’s internal attributes have no room in the SR explanations of system outcomes [6]. SR believes, like CR, that the sovereign state is the core actor that strives for survival in the anarchic system of international politics. SR has been co-approached by two significant paradigms: The Waltzian defensive Realism and Mearsheimer’s offensive Realism. The former defines political structures through interaction among states, power distribution, and apportionment of functions.

Thus, the state’s security for Waltz is achieved through the “balance of power” in a bipolar international system. Conversely, Mearsheimer attributes states’ aggressive conduct to their fear of other actors and uncertainty about others’ intentions. Thus, states strive to maximize their power to ensure survival. Accordingly,

Mearsheimer believes that absolute power in a unipolar system would lead to a peaceful international system.

Regarding international cooperation, SR assumes that the notion of “relative gains” dominates the interplay among states, where the question of “who will gain more?” is dominant in states’ calculations, especially in security matters. Hence, for SR, the system’s competition condition produces state behavior. Therefore, according to SR conceptions, the system is assumed to be in a regular state of zero-sum atmosphere, where the survival of one actor is deemed to be a threat to the survival of another [3]. To avail thorough insight, the following section of this essay shall discuss the projections of SR perceptions on a few contemporary world events.

3. Cuban Missile Crisis

Our contemporary world reflects the Structural realist views in the international political system. States are vividly striving to enhance and sometimes maximize their economic, technological, social, or military power. Such competition is a high potential for an insecure system of international politics.

Both communists and liberals were seeking victory in the long run. Thus, a communist regime on the tip of Florida was unacceptable to the American leaders. Eisenhower decided to counteract this communist threat in late 1960. The CIA provided training to the anti-Castro Cuban exiles for a later US-supported operation to overthrow Castro. Kennedy, in April 1961, decided to commence the operation, where American carriers landed the Cuban counterrevolutionaries on Cuban shores. Nevertheless, Castro was fully prepared and crushed the entire operation into a big failure for the Americans in the Bay of Pigs. The failure in the Bay of Pigs immediately preceded an unprecedented arms race that also compromised America’s moral integrity in the world and hindered the US Administration from protesting against any breach of the treaty by the communists.

Therefore, the Soviets had interpreted that the US aimed to achieve a first-strike capability, and the Soviets believed that they had to deal with an aggressive, outward-looking Administration. Therefore, the Soviets’ reaction was through the breach of a three-year Russian-American Moratorium through a series of nuclear tests in mid-1961. In mid-1962, the Russians started building mid-range ballistic missile sites in Cuba. Accordingly, Kennedy set an ultimatum goal of getting the missiles out of Cuba and avoiding nuclear exchange. To achieve this goal, a final list of options for action included a nuclear attack on the missile site, a conventional airstrike, and a naval blockade supported by further forceful action in case of non-compliance to the withdrawal of the missiles from Cuba. Finally, the crisis ended with the cease of Russian missile supply to Cuba and the destruction or withdrawal of the existing ones there. Besides, Americans had to promise to end the blockade and not invade Cuba [7].

A structural realist perspective on the Cuban Missile Crisis dictates that the US response to the rise of communism, exemplified by the Eisenhower and Kennedy

administrations' focus on countering the Soviet Union, aligns with this realist framework. The Bay of Pigs invasion, aimed at overthrowing the Cuban regime, reflects the US emphasis on projecting power and containing perceived threats. While the invasion failed, it underscored the US commitment to countering ideological challenges.

The Cuban Missile Crisis further illustrates the interplay of power and security concerns in US foreign policy. The US response, combining diplomatic efforts with a military buildup, highlights the importance of deterrence and crisis management in maintaining power. Ultimately, US foreign policy often reflects a balance between the pursuit of power, the need to address ideological challenges, and the pragmatic management of crises.

4. Panama Canal

More than sixty years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, President-elect Donald Trump's recent rhetoric has raised alarms over the sovereignty of the Panama Canal, which the US handed over to Panama 25 years ago. Trump has suggested reclaiming the Canal, claiming its strategic importance for US security. Panama's foreign minister firmly rejected such claims, assessing that the Canal's sovereignty is non-negotiable. Experts view Trump's remarks as part of his negotiating style rather than genuine threats to secure better terms in US relations with China and other global powers, particularly given China's growing presence at both ends of the Canal. However, Trump's unpredictability continues to unsettle global leaders [8].

The Panama Canal has re-emerged as a contentious issue in contemporary US politics, drawing parallels to the 1970s when it ignited heated debates during the Republican primaries. Ronald Reagan, then a rising political star, masterfully exploited the Canal as a potent symbol of American strength and sovereignty, rallying conservative support despite ongoing negotiations for its transfer to Panama. This strategy, echoing Trump's recent rhetoric demanding the Canal's return to US control, reveals a recurring pattern of leveraging symbolic issues to address broader national anxieties. Reagan and Trump capitalized on concerns about economic decline and perceived threats to American hegemony in their respective eras. The Panama Canal, a tangible manifestation of US engineering prowess and historical dominance, was a powerful metaphor for these anxieties. While public interest in the Canal's status may remain relatively low today, its re-emergence as a political battleground reflects more profound anxieties about America's diminishing global influence amidst contemporary challenges [9].

Trump's recent comments on the Panama Canal, focusing on transit fees and Chinese influence, have brought the Canal back into US strategic discussions. Chinese firms, like Landbridge Group and CK Hutchison Holdings, operate key ports at both ends of the Canal, raising concerns about dual-use infrastructure and China's growing influence in Latin America. The US has significant economic leverage over Panama, as its primary user and largest investor, but faces limited al-

ternatives to Chinese investment in the region. Rising transit fees, partly due to droughts, could lead to calls for a resurgence of the Roosevelt Corollary, justifying US intervention to ensure regional stability [10].

The Panama Canal signifies approximately 5% of the global maritime traffic that transits the Canal, remarkably reducing travel time by 11,000 km, a distance otherwise necessitating a perilous journey around the southern tip of South America. The head of the Panama Canal Authority stated on Wednesday that President Trump's proposal for preferential shipping rates for US vessels would create chaos. It denied any Chinese control over canal operations. Initially constructed by the US between 1904 and 1914 and leased to the US, the Canal was returned to Panama in 1999 under a treaty signed by President Jimmy Carter, ensuring its open access to all nations. The Canal accounts for 7.7% of Panama's GDP [11].

China has significantly increased its influence in Panama since establishing diplomatic relations in 2017. This diplomatic pivot has paved the way for a surge in bilateral cooperation across various sectors. Trade has become a cornerstone of this relationship, with Panama strategically positioned along the Panama Canal, a vital global trade route handling approximately 6% of international maritime traffic. As China's second-largest customer on the Canal, the country has invested heavily in Panamanian infrastructure, including container ports, railways, and air routes. Furthermore, Chinese financial institutions are expanding their presence in Panama, providing access to capital and facilitating economic growth. This multifaceted engagement demonstrates China's growing strategic interest in Panama and its commitment to strengthening economic and political ties in the region [12].

The Panama Canal, a critical conduit for global trade, serves as a microcosm of shifting economic dynamics. Its traffic patterns reflect the interplay of significant powers, global events' impact, and international commerce's resilience. Between 2018 and 2021, canal traffic experienced fluctuations, mirroring the impact of the US-China trade war and the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these challenges, the Canal demonstrated resilience, with traffic steadily increasing to a peak of 516.7 million tons in 2021. While the US remains the Canal's primary user, China's growing economic influence is evident in its solidified position as the second-largest user. China's strategic investments in Panamanian port infrastructure further underscore its ambitions, raising US concerns about growing Chinese influence in a region traditionally within its sphere [13]. Hence, The Panama Canal serves as a microcosm of US-China geopolitical rivalry, with Trump's advocacy for its "reclamation," ostensibly framed as safeguarding US strategic interests, primarily reflecting a response to China's increasing economic and political influence in Panama, mainly through its involvement in port operations and infrastructure development [14].

Thus, from a structural realist perspective, the Panama Canal exemplifies the enduring struggle for power and influence within the anarchic international system. This framework posits that states, driven by a primary goal of survival, act to

maximize their security and relative power in a competitive environment. Moreover, Trump's rhetoric about reclaiming the Canal reflects US anxieties stemming from a perceived decline in its global hegemony, mainly as China's regional influence grows. The Canal's critical role in international trade and China's strategic investments in regional infrastructure underscores how economic power translates into geopolitical leverage. For the US, maintaining dominance over such a pivotal asset aligns with its strategic interests to counterbalance China's rise.

China's expanding economic influence in Panama, particularly through its involvement in port operations and infrastructure development, carries substantial political and military threats. This growing presence triggers geopolitical competition with the United States, potentially leading to increased political tensions and strategic rivalries between the two global powers. China's investments may afford significant economic leverage over Panama, enabling the potential alignment of Panamanian policies with Chinese strategic objectives. Moreover, there are concerns regarding the dual-use nature of Chinese-controlled infrastructure, such as ports, which could be repurposed for military utilizations in the future. These developments have heightened security concerns, particularly for the United States, as they may alter the regional balance of power and strategic dynamics.

Therefore, the United States has adopted a multifaceted approach to counter China's increased presence in the Panama Canal, combining diplomatic, economic, and security strategies. For instance, the United States' diplomatic efforts have included high-level engagements and public statements emphasizing the importance of the Panama Canal's neutrality and security. Economically, the US has explored offering alternative incentives, such as increased trade opportunities and infrastructure investments, to counterbalance Chinese influence. Security cooperation has been strengthened through military exercises and intelligence sharing to enhance Panama's canal defense capabilities. Additionally, public diplomacy highlights the benefits of US-Panama relations while increased monitoring and surveillance track Chinese activities to assess potential risks and challenges.

Finally, China's growing presence at both ends of the Canal highlights its pursuit of regional footholds to challenge US influence, a typical pattern in great power competition. While Panama's sovereignty complicates direct US intervention, the Canal remains a flashpoint reflecting deeper concerns about shifts in the global balance of power.

5. A Comparative Reflection

The analysis explores the Panama Canal's geopolitical significance through Structural Realism (SR) and classical realism (CR) frameworks in international relations. Structural Realism emphasizes the systemic pressures of an anarchic international system, where competition for survival and power drive state behavior. In contrast, classical Realism highlights the role of human nature and individual leadership, emphasizing the intrinsic lust for power in shaping foreign policy de-

cisions. These perspectives offer a comprehensive lens to examine the Canal's enduring relevance in global politics.

The Panama Canal is an important trade route and a potent symbol of geopolitical influence. China's growing economic and political presence in Panama has heightened its strategic importance. China challenges traditional US dominance in the region through significant infrastructure investments and diplomatic ties. For the United States, the Canal represents a commercial asset and a strategic lever in its efforts to counteract perceived declines in global hegemony amid China's rise.

The analysis draws lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis and underscores the importance of power dynamics, security dilemmas, and effective crisis management in preventing escalation. While the Cuban Missile Crisis exemplifies how such dynamics can lead to confrontation, it also highlights the value of deterrence and negotiation in mitigating risks. These lessons are particularly relevant in US-China tensions over the Panama Canal.

Despite the competition, a crisis over the Canal escalating to the scale of the Cuban Missile Crisis remains unlikely. Several mitigating factors reduce the risk of confrontation. Panama retains sovereignty over the Canal and has firmly rejected external pressures, including US rhetoric about reclaiming control. Moreover, economic interdependence between the US and China ensures that a significant disruption to the Canal would have severe consequences for both countries. Diplomatic communication channels between the two powers further reduce the likelihood of miscalculation or escalation. The rivalry over the Canal is predominantly economic and diplomatic rather than military.

However, the world cannot entirely dismiss potential unforeseen events or strategic missteps. The ongoing US-China competition will continue to shape the geopolitical landscape around the Panama Canal, serving as a microcosm of the shifting global balance of power. While current dynamics favor economic and diplomatic maneuvering, the Canal remains critical in the broader rivalry between the two major powers.

6. Conclusions

This analysis examines the Panama Canal using Structural Realism (SR) and classical realism (CR) frameworks in international relations. SR focuses on systemic pressures and state competition for survival in an anarchic international system. At the same time, CR emphasizes the role of human nature and individual leadership in driving foreign policy decisions. These perspectives provide a nuanced understanding of the Canal's geopolitical importance.

The Panama Canal is a vital trade and symbol of global influence. China's expanding economic and political presence in Panama, marked by significant investments in infrastructure, directly challenges the United States' historical dominance in the region. For the US, the Canal represents a crucial commercial asset and a strategic tool in countering perceived declines in its global hegemony amid

China's rise as a competing power.

Lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis highlight the critical role of power dynamics, security dilemmas, and effective crisis management in avoiding escalation. The crisis demonstrates how these dynamics can lead to confrontation and underscores the importance of deterrence and negotiation in mitigating risks. These lessons are particularly relevant to understanding US-China tensions over the Canal.

Although competition between the US and China persists, a crisis over the Panama Canal escalating to the scale of the Cuban Missile Crisis is unlikely. Key mitigating factors include Panama's sovereignty over the Canal, the US and China's economic interdependence, and established diplomatic channels that help manage tensions. The rivalry over the Canal primarily manifests in economic and diplomatic arenas rather than military confrontation.

A sensible impact of President Trump's rhetoric on actual policy and shifts in international relations, mainly regarding the Panama Canal, was noticed immediately after the inaugural ceremony. For instance, in the first week, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced his inaugural international trip to Central America, underscoring the region's strategic importance to the administration. Rubio's visit to Panama and neighboring countries represents a critical step in fostering stronger bilateral relations and addressing shared concerns. Secretary Rubio is expected to articulate specific US grievances while exploring avenues for collaboration on canal operations, transit fees, and economic investment. Leveraging mechanisms such as the US International Development Finance Corporation could facilitate enhanced US investment and a more significant presence in Panama's canal infrastructure and associated operations [15].

However, politicians cannot entirely rule out unforeseen events or strategic miscalculations. The US-China competition will continue to influence the geopolitics surrounding the Panama Canal, representing a microcosm of the broader shifts in global power dynamics.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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