

Strategic Puzzle in the South China Sea: Perception, Power, and Money

Chinese Plans for Hegemony?

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Abstract:

The South China Sea is home to one of the world's most contentious territorial disputes. Sovereignty of overlapping parts of the Sea is contested by seven littoral states, and the United States maintains an influential naval presence. Rich in fish and hydrocarbons and militarily valuable for power projection, the South China Sea is strategically important. One-third of global trade passes through the South China Sea annually. This paper looks to uncover what the South China Sea conflict indicates about Chinese strategic outlook and approaches the topic through three theoretical lenses: *constructivism*, *realism*, and *disaggregation*. This paper concludes with an assertion that Chinese actions in and regarding the South China Sea are indicative of a strategic outlook based on the principles of offensive realism. Aggressive rhetoric, backed up by naval modernization, island building, a willingness to upset the status quo, and a lack of meaningful institutional cooperation indicate that Beijing is concerned primarily with accruing power and an eventual transition of power in the Asia-Pacific. Though offensive realism sees structural circumstances in the international system as the primary causal mechanism of this outlook, this paper sees national history and identity as factors that have made Beijing more inclined to adopt this offensive strategic viewpoint.

List of Acronyms and their Definitions:

A2AD	Anti-Access and Area Denial
ADIZ	Air Defense Identification Zone
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CMC	Central Military Commission
CNOOC	Chinese National Offshore Oil Corporation
DOC	ASEAN-China Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea
ECS	East China Sea
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
FONOP	Freedom of Navigation Operation
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NDL	Nine-Dash-Line
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAAF	People's Liberation Army Air Force
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PRC	People's Republic of China
SCS	South China Sea
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea



Introduction to the South China Sea Conflict

China's rise has been a point of contention among scholars of international political economy (IPE) and international relations (IR) for at least two decades. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has grown from a country of mostly poor peasants, to an economic powerhouse, central to the world's economy and second in size only to the United States (World Bank Group). When China's president Xi Jinping took office in 2013, he inherited the Presidency of a country that had GDP growth in the double digits for two decades with a formidable military and modernized nuclear forces (Bader 6). What was once a relatively small and scrappy army, the Chinese armed forces, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and its corresponding navy and air force, boast the world's second largest defense budget (ChinaPower Project, December 2015). Along with the growth of the state and its economic, political, and military functions, its goals, too, have grown. President Xi could not have been more clear when he said in his 19th Party Congress speech in October of 2017 that China would look to become a "leading world power" by 2050 (Chen).

The South China Sea territorial dispute and the conflict that surrounds it is a fascinating contemporary issue of international politics that has been a significant issue for Chinese foreign policy for decades. The Sea fits right in the middle of the Asian Pacific and is the center of a long standing and bitter territorial dispute that has important geopolitical ramifications for Asia and for the world. Maritime territory in the South China Sea is claimed by six states: the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, China, and Taiwan (BBC, July 2016). The PRC's claim is particularly aggressive: it claims an area referred to as the "nine-dash line" (NDL), which encompasses around 1.3 million square miles, or about 80% of the South China Sea (Jane's Navy International 1).

The conflict has been referred to as "the mother of all territorial disputes" (Beukel 8) and is often considered one of the world's more volatile flashpoints. There have already been a number of deadly conflicts in the South China Sea over the past few decades. It has been said that the dispute could lead to "the biggest war for many decades, and quite possibly the biggest since the Second World War" (White 126) and would involve two of the world's most commanding military forces: the United States and China.

The South China Sea is an extremely valuable territory for both economic and military reasons. Sitting in the middle in Asia, roughly one-third of annual global trade passes through the South China Sea, and \$3.7 trillion USD in 2014 (ChinaPower Project, 2017). The Sea is extremely rich in hydrocarbons and fisheries, making it of huge economic importance to littoral states. The South China Sea also contains an estimated 7 billion barrels of oil and 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014).

This paper will use the South China Sea conflict as a case study for understanding Chinese grand strategy. In order to approach the dispute from a variety of viewpoints, this essay will use three theories: *constructivism*, *realism*, and *disaggregation* as lenses through which to interpret Chinese actions in the South China Sea. Put extremely simply, each theory differs primarily in what factor is most important in explaining China's behavior: identity, power, and state-decentralization, respectively. This paper will outline all three arguments in detail, and

then make an argument as to why China's grand strategy is primarily influenced by the theoretically paradigm of offensive realism.

Constructivism

Identity, according to constructivist scholar of international relations Ted Hopf is "how one understands oneself in relationship to another" (Hopf and Allan 5). The constructivist viewpoint on the South China Sea emphasizes the role of identity and perception in shaping the actions and outcomes there. Constructivism is one of the most important theories in the study of IPE and IR. Constructivists point to the importance of China's perception of its own role in the world to explain its behavior and apparent strategy. In addition to its own role in the international system China's actions are shaped by national identity, history, and other social issues. For constructivists, China's actions in the South China Sea are bound to be socially constructed rather than shaped by inevitable structural circumstances that force it to act in a certain way. The concept of socially constructed perception of the world, and a state's needs and goals pushes back against the neorealist assumption that states are bound to act according to the structural allocation of relative power between states and that strategies in the international system are always first and foremost about survival. Despite the fact that security and power are always important in the decision making process for those within a state, the position from which one views the rest of the world is equally important. Social issues like pride and glory, concern for human rights, and nationalism are equally important factors in determining a state's grand strategy. Identity is an obvious and strong argument for war, peace, enduring competition and cooperation, and failure to reach agreements. Even Stephen Walt, one of IR's most prominent realists had to incorporate a role for a kind of state identity in his theory of international politics. Walt uses additional criteria in his "balance of threat" theory to identify when one state is a threat to another (Hopf and Allan Count 5).

In the SCS, evidence for a constructivist Chinese strategy comes in the form of rhetoric and action that hint at its behavior there being shaped by history and an understanding of a uniquely Chinese role to play in the Asian-Pacific and in the world. The nine-dash-line is the basis for the PRC's claim that the Chinese have a historical right to maintain sovereignty in the area. In 2015, China's foreign minister Wang Yi insisted that its island building there would not be scaled back because the country "would not be able to face [its] forefathers and ancestors" if it did so. Wang pointed to China's history with islands in the SCS going back more than a millennium (Panda, June 2015). Foreign minister Wang's insistence on continuing its risky and bold island building for the sake of ancestry indicates that China's concern over its control of the South China Sea is based at least in large part by its understanding of duty as a country.

While pushing back on the inevitability of competition purely on the basis of relative power, national identity helps to determine who a state finds an appealing or appalling security partner, and which geographical areas are most important to it. Although it may not be possible for even the staunchest of constructivists to deny that power plays at least some role in the South China Sea, there is certainly an argument that identity plays a crucial role in exacerbating aggression and tension there.

Though the SCS is a strategically important area, power alone doesn't explain why China forcefully asserted its right to the SCS even while it possessed only a pathetic military and struggled to raise living standards domestically. While Mao Zedong was still chairman of the CCP and long before China became a burgeoning power, Chinese forces occupied a western portion of the Paracel Islands and seized a South Vietnamese stronghold there (Lim 54). In 1988 China sank three Vietnamese vessels over conflict in the Spratly archipelago on Johnson South Reef, killing 74 sailors (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014). In 1996, the PLAN fought a gun battle with the Philippine Navy over a small area called Mischief Reef. These remain some of the most severe clashes to date in the SCS and came after Beijing established its presence on Fiery Cross Reef as part of a more assertive policy in Sea (Friedle).

The Battle of the Paracel Islands, Johnson South Reef Skirmish, and Mischief Reef Incident illuminate situations in which China was willing to take drastic action in the SCS to protect its claims there despite lacking a powerful military. It appears unlikely that these well known incidents were the result purely of power politics.

The purported use of the South China Sea by the Chinese people to fish for hundreds of years is likely to shape decision makers understanding of its importance as a national security issue and a territorial right of the state's.

The South China Sea's northern sibling: the East China Sea, home to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, is a case in point. Although of less strategic importance to the PRC than the South China Sea, the East China Sea is a flashpoint of huge magnitude and involves a dispute with Japan of hundreds of years (Dixon 1054). The tiny rocky pieces of land that make up the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands have little strategic value, yet Beijing still is willing to risk conflict with Japan and the United States to assert sovereignty over them. The East China Sea makes it obvious that China's ancient rivalry with Japan plays an outsized role in its decision making despite relatively little strategic imperative. In an article in *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* author Jonathan Dixon argues that the East China Sea and the South China Sea should not be viewed as isolated issues (1054). Rather than separate the two conflicts into distinct categories, analysts should look at the issues through the lens of the Chinese history and national myth.

Though the two seas are important in China's economic and military security, exclusive economic zones, air defense identification zones, and *realpolitik* do little to explain the fervor with which ordinary citizens (and CCP elite alike) assert their ownership over the tiny islands. Historical grievances at the hands of the Japanese play a role in China's irredentist claims to the East China Sea, just as ancient fishing rights and the struggle of weaker neighbors to accept China's rise in the South China Sea do. Nationalism and ideological factors still play an important role in the opinions of both everyday Chinese people and the elites in their understanding of both disputes (Dixon 1069).

Much of the anger over the SCS within China has to do primarily with China's perceived place in the international system, or its identity. Research by Nie Wenjuan in an article published in a 2018 issue of *The Pacific Review* indicates that China identifies primarily as a (newly) rising power, still not far from its days as simple a normal state, but on its way to an

even more prominent position in the world (199). According to Wenjuan the identity of rising power “refers to a state’s perception of its expanding power so that it has achieved secondary position in the international system” (194). However, there is still not a clear consensus as to the degree that the PRC may already be a regional power or still a normal state.

Through analysis of mass texts in China that include “political speeches, newspapers, high school history text-books, movies, and novels” Hopf finds in his book *Making Identity Count* that China sees itself in a position of “catching up” with the West, and, most interestingly, with and its former self (63). This is further evidence that the Chinese public see their country as rising from the ashes of a normal state and into the realm of a rising one.

Evidence for China’s ambiguity and changing understanding of its role in the world and in Asia can also be found in its diplomatic preferences. The PRC has for years preferred bilateral negotiations over multilateral forums, particularly on the grounds of territorial disputes (Kassim 104) (Beukel 14). Neighbors in Asia, such as Vietnam, argue that bilateralism allows Beijing to be more coercive and is a method for achieving their eventual submission (Blazevic 92) (Duong and Tinh). Although China may not fit the definition of a full regional power or be anywhere near great power status yet, it is without a doubt much more powerful than neighbors like Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia and has been for some time. Multilateral institutions like ASEAN only help smaller states band together to counter weight against China and increase their effectiveness in negotiations, sometimes even while joining forces with the United States.

A 2010 article in *Jane’s Navy International* stated that: “picking apart the ASEAN territorial claims ... may offer more hope of success for the Chinese negotiators and give Beijing greater influence in the region” (2). This strategy of engaging ASEAN states individually rather than ASEAN as a whole indicates that China seeks to use its coercive abilities to compel weaker states into accepting norms and policies that benefit Beijing, allowing the PRC to amplify its control across Asia envelop other countries into its hegemony.

According to Wenjuan bilateralism is generally a preferred tool of a self identifying normal state because it allows the state to maximize its political, economic, and military interests and its claims by any means (195). Some suggest that the SCS conflict should be resolved within ASEAN, but China is strongly opposed (BBC). Even the 2002 ASEAN-China Declaration on the Conduct of Parties In the South China Sea, which took three years to negotiate (and some might point to as growing acceptance of multilateralism), is only a *declaration* that says that states should resolve their territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means (Beukel 15). Because China would not agree to anything else, the ASEAN Declaration of Conduct is non-binding and relatively vague (Panda, August 2015). China’s resistance to a binding agreement and multilateral forums in the SCS indicates that China is resistant to a rules based international order, and is choosing its own strategic interests there over integration into the peaceful liberal international order.

China’s perception of itself as a newly rising state helps to explain its aggressive actions in the region. To constructivists this analysis of Chinese actions in the South China Sea is more useful than simply looking at its relative and absolute power there because it tells us to whom

China is most likely to be a threat to and what its policy prerogative in the South China Sea might be.

The PRC's identity as a rising state binds it to see its role in the South China Sea as one that revolves around the balance of and transition of power there and that it must one day tip the scales in its own favor. A state that possess as much relative power as China yet continued to hold a normal state identity would hold a fundamentally different strategy for security than a state with the rising or newly rising power identity. Japan possesses an economy that is the third largest in the world in terms of 2017 GDP (USD) behind only the United States and China (International Monetary Fund) but it does not identify as a continually rising power that needs to obtain regional preponderance in order to survive.

Even throughout its rise to one of the world's largest economies after the second World War, Japan since then has never looked to overturn the regional balance of power like China does now. Japan's national history since 1945 means that it identifies itself more as a "normal" state dependent on bandwagoning with a bigger power, and it has therefore pursued regional strategy based on maintaining the basic status quo in Asia. Japan's identity as such as been shaped and constrained by the political regime established since World War II and its security partnership with The United States (196). China, in the same period of time, has had no such constraints on its identity and so has been free to envision a world in which it revises the balance of power in Asia and controls a preponderant share of power there.

This difference in security strategy between two large and powerful Asian states is in line with Wenjuan's assertion that normal states seek to safeguard their interests but do not use them to establish hegemony like a rising power does (196). Chinese policy objectives in the SCS will seek to resolve the dispute not simply in its favor but in a way that enhances its rise to power as it seeks to challenge the dominant power (the United States) and to regional leadership and preponderance.

Realism

Power is defined as the ability of one actor to make another do something that it would not otherwise do. In realism, power is central to understanding every state's security strategy. The realist school of thought suggests that China's actions in the South China Sea are a function only or primarily of China's calculations regarding relative power and what is best for its own survival (Donnelly 7).

Realism (that is, neorealism) sees the nature of international relations as defined primarily by its "ordering principle," anarchy (Waltz 114) (Lobell). The absence of a superstate authority is akin to the state of nature that English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes refers to as "nasty, brutish, and short," which leads states to act self reliantly regarding their own security (Brown et. al. 337). The realists see a fundamentally different mechanism than constructivists see as the causes of conflict. Instead of conflict being shaped primarily by social factors, neorealists see conflict as the inevitable result of *structural* circumstances: international anarchy and power distribution (Waltz 83).

Two large ideas dominate discussions of realism today: offensive and defensive. Offensive realists agree with classical realists that states will take every opportunity to increase their power where the benefits outweigh the costs (although causes are different) (Lobell). In Thucydides's account of the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians put it simply as: "the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept" (Brown et. al. 54). A similar basic logic applies in offensive realism.

Offensive realists see security as highly scarce in the international arena and therefore states are incentivized to adopt aggressive security strategies because being the most powerful state in one's region or in the world is the best way to secure safety (Mearsheimer, 2002). Once a state has achieved preponderance in its neighborhood, weaker states will be unlikely or unable to challenge the hegemon in any meaningful way for fear of destruction.

The defensive realist understanding of states' behavior is somewhat less pessimistic. For defensive realists aggressive state behavior is rarely beneficial because it only provokes counterbalancing and results in overextension (Lobell). Aggression to a defensive realist can only be rationally justified when its positive outcome is near certain (Lobell). One state's attempt to increase its power will trigger a security dilemma for another state and can therefore push the other state to attack the first in an act of preemptive war. Thus, in defensive realist theory a state is more likely to be interested in maintaining the status quo of the balance of power (Lobell). Here, maximizing power is secondary to maintaining a secure and stable position in the system (Waltz 126).

Given the South China Sea conflict realists can expect that China's strategy in the region is based primarily on power dynamics. That being said, China's actions in the SCS lend themselves, superficially at least, more to offensive realist understandings of strategy.

A theory that China's strategy is based on offensive realism points to increasing presence of the PLAN in the South China Sea as part of an inevitable buildup in Chinese military capacity that will one day challenge the United States. Island building, the Navy's new *Liaoning* aircraft carrier, increased naval patrols, planting Chinese flags in remote parts of the Sea, and arrests of foreign fishermen all serve the purpose of Chinese expansion and collection of security resources so that Beijing can one day achieve regional hegemony. The PRC is bound to clash with the United States on its way to great power status and so the most important strategic function of the South China Sea to Beijing for the offensive realist is power projection. Control of the Sea would allow China to push its operational ability deep into the Asia-Pacific and past first island chain archipelagos, an important step in securing hegemony.

China can be expected to wield a heavy hand in Asia according to the founder of offensive realist and influential political theorist John Mearsheimer. Much the same way that during the Cold War the United States toppled leaders in the Western Hemisphere that it deemed to be anti-American or pro-Soviet Union, China has an incentive to keep Washington from being too influential within Asia, and even reverse US influence (Mearsheimer 2014, 370). Beijing is not expected or yet powerful enough to directly challenge the leverage of the US in Asia today, but aggressive actions and Chinese leaders' insistence that the US has no role in the dispute indicates that China is acting as an offensive realist state by taking steps towards regional

hegemony. Chinese hegemony would be all too familiar to Americans - not all that different from the Monroe Doctrine in the early 20th century or Imperial Japan in the 1930s (Mearsheimer 2014, 371). Basically, according to offensive realist principles the PRC can be expected to accumulate power resources in the South China Sea and in Asia indefinitely because, ultimately, there is no superior way to assure its safety (Blazevic 82) (Mearsheimer, 2002).

Defensive realism is more optimistic in its understanding of Beijing's posture in the SCS. Those who argue that China's actions in the Sea indicate a security strategy based on defensive realism point to China's diplomatic engagement surrounding the conflict (Klaus 10). China has shown its willing to use diplomacy in the South China Sea to work with other countries, the 2002 ASEAN-China Declaration of Conduct is a foremost example. From the perspective of defensive realism China has used diplomatic and political engagement in the South China Sea to *maintain* a stable position in the Asian balance of power, especially given that a large kinetic clash there is not viable for China at this moment in time (Foot 82).

The framework of defensive realism also highlights the role of the South China Sea as an important resource in self-defense. The South China Sea is a clearly important area in terms of its wartime importance, including those of self defense. In the past, Chinese strategists have calculated that the PRC will face significant danger of a surprise attack from the South China Sea in the early 21st century (Gurtov 117). A Chinese ADIZ in the South China Sea would imply a role for "anticipatory self defense" and would therefore be useful in protecting the Chinese homeland from neighbors that are sometimes hostile, especially those that are backed up by the United States (Almond). That being said, China's much smaller and less powerful neighbors would be delusional to attack it, so its worry is probably more of an attack from the US should its relationship dramatically deteriorate in the future.

Further evidence used by those who see China as defensive realist actor point to its increased understanding of the security dilemma: that its growth in power necessarily makes others in the region more vulnerable. For decades, since Deng Xiaoping, the PRC has increasingly incorporated itself in regional cooperation structures, most notably with the ASEAN Regional Forum, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Ross and Feng, 156) (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014). According to Tang Shiping of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, China's willingness to cooperate and engage in friendly political relationships with states in the region is a hallmark sign of defensive realism (Ross and Feng, 155).

Disaggregation

In this paper, the theory of *disaggregation* points to oscillations and inconsistencies in China's actions in the South China Sea. *Disaggregation* refers to the ways in which China's foreign policy apparatus is fragmented and decentralized and therefore leads to an oscillation in policy styles, strategic calculations, and their execution over time. The disaggregation theory points to the role of sub-state and non-state actions in foreign policy decision making and operationalization and their outsized role in this process.

Disaggregation means that even if those elites in geopolitical engineering craft a relatively cohesive strategy, that plan is not implemented accordingly because of the difficulty working with so many different actors *within* the state (Hameiri and Jones 73). These sub-state and transnational actors have access to how policy is implemented or created and but have immediate incentives in altering its implementation in their favor (Hameiri and Jones 91). In the words of Hameiri and Jones “quasi-market” actors who pursue their own benefit at the expense of the state’s intended policy outcome generate “conflict-ridden, incoherent policy output, often mistakenly interpreted as ‘grand strategy’ ” (73). Scholars who see the South China Sea conflict through the lens of disaggregation believe that China’s actions there are “consistently inconsistent” and swings quickly between provocation and reconciliation with other actors in the Sea (Santicola). This theory is notably different from most theories of international relations, which view the PRC at the higher levels of the state and see it as a relatively unitary institution. Disaggregation theory takes into account the extensive changes within China in recent decades and the role of non-state actors, making it an important lens of IPE.

In the South China Sea, incoherence in China’s actions there are affected in large part by the Sea’s richness in resources. With its wealth of fish and hydrocarbons, numerous agencies’ actions within the PRC have incentive to harvest the wealth of resources there for their own benefit, often when it may collide with their own government’s goals and intentions.

The South China Sea is technically administered within China by the local government of the Hainan province. Hainan was given administrative control of the Sea by the central government, as it is claimed a part of its sovereign territory (Zha 575). Although the SCS plays an important role in Chinese foreign policy, for the people Hainan province, it is first and foremost a resource that is used to make a living and put food on the table in their everyday lives. For the province as a whole, the Sea is seen as a crucial component of further economic development (Zha 588). Hainan, then, has the incentive to allow fishermen to use the Sea even though it may conflict with the central government or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ less provocative intentions in the Sea..

China’s Strategy: Power, Security, and Perception

China’s actions in the South China Sea indicate that its security strategy in Asia is informed primarily by the principles of offensive realism. Beijing’s goals in the South China Sea go beyond maintaining its position in Asia. The PRC seeks to set up regional hegemony, and use the SCS to project power deep into the Pacific. However, constructivist variables such as national history and state identity (the rising power identity) play a secondary role in shaping strategy as well. The rising power identity is part of what has increased China’s acceptance of offensive realist principles and its likelihood of acting on them. Factors like national history and strategic culture also play a role in exacerbating the conflict and its resolution. Although the execution of policy in the South China Sea is sometimes incongruent, the PRC’s actual strategy is not so. Though incongruences certainly exist in China’s actions in the SCS over recent decades, these are examples of the central government’s inability to fully control sub-state actors because of domestic political issues rather than incoherent strategic thinking.

The PRC's strategy in the Asia-Pacific generally looks to upset the balance of power there and indicates that its long run plan is likely to seek to revise the international system within Asia to better suit Chinese interests. In particular, there are a few main points that this paper finds that provide evidence of an aggressive Chinese strategy in the Asia-Pacific.

Firstly, the PRC in the SCS has shown itself willing to challenge the balance of power there. This is evidenced in China's tumultuous relationship with institutions (especially multilateral ones) even when examined across decades, and with the increasing outfitting of the Sea for military use.

Second, Beijing's claims that the SCS is a case of Chinese territorial integrity and historical imperative are not supported by the full history of PRC's relationship with its disputed territories. Chinese foreign policy has changed significantly since Xi's presidency began.

Although countervailing evidence to China's aggressive rise may not be incorrect, it is often based on outdated evidence that does not encompass fully up to date Chinese actions, policy, and rhetoric surrounding the South China Sea. This change is partially responsible for incongruences across time in Chinese actions in the Sea. The following section will provide a basic understanding of how the South China Sea is important to China in achieving regional hegemony, and the following sections will elaborate on why China's actions in the SCS indicate that this is its goal.

How the South China Sea Would Help the PRC Achieve Regional Hegemony

The South China Sea is a hugely valuable strategic resource, and despite technically being international water, its de facto possession would allow any state that possesses control of it to vastly increase its hard power, including access to natural resources and greater operational range of the military. For natural resources, the fisheries and hydrocarbon reserves in the SCS are among the most valuable and largest in the world. An estimate by the World Bank asserts that there are more than 7 billion barrels of oil and 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas that lay within the disputed SCS (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014). Energy security is a top priority of any wise state's security strategy — as it is China's.

According to the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) states have a "sovereign right" to resources within 200 nautical miles of their shores under an area called an exclusive economic zone, or EEZ (US Department of Commerce). Although anyone can sail through an EEZ, UNCLOS lays out that only the claimant of the zone is allowed to legally harvest its resources (US Department of Commerce). Claiming the entirety of the nine-dash-line as within China's EEZ would allow China to gather a huge amount of hydrocarbon resources over the next decades that would not only provide China with better access to vital oil in the event of an energy crisis or war elsewhere, but could also be a boon to China's economy. As China's economy has begun to slow from its sky high rate of growth over previous decades, China has increasingly seen possession of SCS hydrocarbons as a way to maintain economic growth and stability as it enters a time where it may desperately need to show economic prowess in order to maintain its domestic legitimacy (Yang and Zhao 82).

As China's population grows and its wealth continues to skyrocket, so will the country's demand for hydrocarbons. In fact, 90% of Middle East fossil fuel exports are projected to go to Asia by 2035 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). Controlling hydrocarbons in the South China Sea would help the PRC take advantage of this shift in oil demand by allowing Beijing to export more domestic oil to other Asian countries and increase their reliance on Chinese hydrocarbons for their economic and energy security. The PRC is now a hugely reliant on hydrocarbons for its own security and does not want to leave the protection of vital sea lanes to other the UN or other states, especially the Americans, who its relationship with is increasingly adversarial as China becomes a great power (Wong, 2010).

To President Xi and other elites in the CCP, economic growth is more than just a matter of economic stability. The Chinese regime maintains its legitimacy in part because of its ability to move so many out citizens of poverty, the state has created a vastly wealthier public than when Mao died (Yang and Zhao 65). Coined "performance legitimacy," maintaining three decades of double digit economic growth has helped keep the autocratic regime from falling to liberal, pro-democracy dissenters (Yang and Zhao 82, 65). In order to secure the longevity of one-party rule, Beijing feels that it must continue to provide deep economic growth on the basis of national security and to maintain the regime of Mao.

Through its construction of artificial islands, the PRC backs up its claim for control of the nine-dash-line. Beijing has been criticized by the international community for its island building in the South China Sea as US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter did when we condemned China for island building that was "out of step" with international rules and norms (Daugirdas and Mortenson 688). Though artificial islands in the South China Sea would help China assert control over an EEZ within the NDL and serve economic purposes, perhaps their greatest asset is the ability to project power far beyond China's coast and into the first island chain, including the Philippines, which has a mutual defense agreement with the United States and which Washington uses for forward basing in Asia (Friedle).

The rapid and continued construction of artificial islands in the face of international law indicates that China sees the physical possession of the SCS as a strategic imperative. Although officially claimed to be for civilian use only, military structures on islands like Fiery Cross Reef, Woody Island, and Scarborough Shoal, are clearly intended as bases for Chinese armed forces. Fiery Cross Reef, for example, already has a dozen protective shelters that include retractable roofs to make way for missile launchers (Center for Strategic & International Studies). Bases in the South China Sea could allow the PLA to extend its operation range there by up to 1,000 kilometers, according to the Council on Foreign Relations (2014). Given the relative weakness of China's navy, which only possesses a single (relatively outdated) aircraft carrier (Holmes), basing in the SCS would dramatically increase its ability to project power across and beyond the Sea, crucial for setting up and maintaining a sphere of influence and for coercing those who choose to cross it.

Island bases in the SCS give the PLA the ability to deploy "anti-access and area denial" (A2AD) tactics and weapons such as cruise missiles, surface to air missiles, and fighter jets across the sea even before it has developed fully operational carrier strike groups like those of

the United States Navy. Beijing has already declared an ADIZ in the East China Sea, where it contests the sovereignty of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands with Japan (Wenjuan 190). Use of A2AD tactics could one day allow China to make a claim to the SCS before its navy is fully modernized or formidable.

Aggressive Rhetoric Surrounding the SCS

In addition to its aggressive actions in the South China Sea, Beijing's rhetoric on the topic has been equally as provocative in recent years. The PRC's stance on the SCS and maritime disputes has shifted in significant ways in the decades since Mao as well.

Deng Xiaoping was the first Chinese politician to succeed Mao Zedong in leading the CCP. Deng was responsible for Chinese economic reform and opening and also took the PRC in a somewhat less hostile foreign policy direction with its neighbors (Deng). In the PRC's early days, the country was still quite vulnerable and the PLA was just getting its feet on the ground while the rest of the country suffered from economic, social, and political turmoil as the result of policies under Mao like the Great Leap Forward.

Beijing was forced to prioritize its most vital aspects of foreign policy because the state did not have the capacity to pursue issues like the South China Sea as aggressively as it now can three decades later. Under Deng and through the 2000s, China's position was one that favored the status quo more than it does now, and many China scholars assert that China acted as a defensive realist state (Feng and Ross 141). China was not yet in a position to challenge the status of the international system in Asia, let alone the world, especially given the bipolar nature of the international system in the Cold War before the fall of the Soviet Union.

During Deng's tenure as paramount leader of the PRC his rhetoric reflected a Chinese understanding that its interests would be best protected by maintaining its status in the Asia-Pacific and working towards more audacious goals only in the long run in the future. In classic Chinese fashion Deng expressed his understanding of Chinese position in dictums. Deng's well known dictum on Chinese foreign policy emphasizes "biding one's time" "keeping a low profile", and that China "should never take the lead, and . . . should seek achievements [when circumstances allow]" (Lam 190). Deng's position on the SCS reflected a strategic calculation based on long-term interests. Several decades later, the CCP's national security calculations have shifted.

Deng's dictum acted as a guiding principle of Chinese foreign policy and security strategy for the coming decades, just as many of his somewhat more liberal domestic policies did. The PRC continued to lack a menacing degree of state capacity through the 1990s and into the 2000s and so its offshore policy largely reflected this. China agreed to the Declaration of Conduct in the South China Sea with ASEAN in 2002, which provided some optimism among analysts that tension there could be alleviated. A skeptical view of the deal points towards the fact that it is non-binding and therefore was a sign that the Declaration would not be able to meaningfully de-escalate disputes there. China's willingness to take part in multilateral negotiations with ASEAN, though, was also seen by many as a powerful sign of cooperation there. As recently as 2009, then President Hu Jintao insisted that Beijing would stick to Deng's famous dictum in its foreign policy (Lam 190). Making a dramatic show of his control over the

CCP, now Chinese president Xi Jinping has shown himself to be vastly more aggressive in pursuing PRC interests in the SCS than his predecessors.

According to Willy Wo-Lap Lam of the Centre for China Studies in a book on Chinese Politics in the since Xi, the PRC has surged from being a status quo state to a power that is “bent on aggressive global power projection so as to safeguard its growing national interests” (Lam 190). President Xi has, in fact, never gone on record repeating Deng’s dictum (Lam 191). Xi made a small but significant change to this dictum when he said that it China’s foreign policy to “*enthusiastically* seek achievements,” while current Foreign Ming Want Yi echoed this by saying that that China should “seek achievements in a proactive manner” (Lam 192). Although Wang and Xi only altered Deng’s saying by a single word, the words “enthusiastically” and “proactively” dramatically change the meaning, intention, and the forthcoming policies.

The more assertive approach to the South China Sea correlates well with the second half of Hu’s presidency and with Xi’s rise in the Chinese Communist Party. It seems that the second half of the Hu administration is when PRC rhetoric regarding the SCS and other maritime disputes began to becoming more forward, a trend that Xi continued in full force. Hu declared in the 2012 18th Party Congress that China would one day become a “maritime power,” only a few days before Xi assumed office as the Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) (Lam 194).

Xi has continued this more assertive stance since he assumed the Presidency in 2013. Xi’s suggestion for how the SCS maritime disputes should be resolved is that claimant states should uphold that “the principle that sovereignty belongs to China, setting aside disputes and pursuing joint development” (Lam 194). Although Xi suggests cooperation and joint development, his insistence that sovereignty belongs exclusively to China breaks with previous PRC leaders’ relationships with maritimes disputes and suggests that other claimant states should simply put aside their claims and fold to China to resolve the dispute. For example, when President Deng met with Japan to discuss the Diyaou/Senkaku islands in 1978, he made no such reference to the imperative of upholding Chinese sovereignty there (Lam 194). This is despite the fact that islands in the East China Sea are much closer to China’s territorial waters, and perhaps even more viciously disputed given China’s ancient national antagonism with Japan.

Another sign of changing Chinese stance in the South China Sea is its designation as a core interest. The SCS was first referred to as a core interest by Beijing in 2010 in a meeting with Obama administration officials, and noted that China would not tolerate any US “interference” in the Sea (Wong, 2010). In the past, core interests have been used to refer to issues of sovereignty like Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang, areas that are much more directly related to PRC state integrity (Lam 193). Although the notion of the SCS as a core interest has still been somewhat fluid since it was first referred to as such, it has consistently been asserted as an issue of national sovereignty.

The words of CCP officials, just like the words of any political elite, for that matter, do not necessarily indicate real policy intentions. There is a substantial argument to be made that the rhetoric of policy makers in the CCP is intended for domestic audiences, perhaps to stir up nationalism or the “rally around the flag effect” in an effort to sure up regime legitimacy.

However, an analysis of the timing between aggressive rhetoric around the SCS and PRC actions there shows that the two are not unrelated. There is a correlation of between the last two years of Hu's administration, and the beginning of the Xi administration, with Chinese island building, most of which initiated in around the time of the beginning of Xi's presidency (Watkins).

The correlation of the increasingly hostile tone and the more aggressive actions indicate that the PRC is willing to do more than just talk about its SCS claims. Beijing obviously stands to benefit from some degree of nationalism directed against other states' territorial claims, but China's shift in rhetoric is not empty. The aggressive change in tone coincides with the designation of the SCS as a core interest in 2010, island building in 2012, PLAN build up including the launch of the *Liaoning* in September of that year, an ADIZ over part of the East China Sea in 2013, missiles deployed to the Paracel Islands, and of course, the 2012 Scarborough Shoal stand off. In a 2015 meeting with more than 200 senior military officials, Xi, as Chairman of the CMC, insisted that "national defense and military development are at a new and historic starting point" (Buckley). Xi also used the meeting to emphasize that China's armed forces should "focus on seizing the high ground of future strategy for military competition" and that the PLA would shoulder new responsibilities and seek to become more a more nimble and effective force (Buckley).

Beijing's Willingness to Upset Balance of Power

The PRC's actions in the South China Sea have reflected its leaders' rhetoric that it cannot sacrifice its — showing that the CCP's intentions there are more than just nationalistic bluster. Since the second half of the Hu administration years, and especially since Xi, China's actions in the South China Sea have become even more offensive. The most prominent example of China's increasingly forward intentions are its high profile artificial-island building operations in the South China Sea. Artificial Islands were first built by China in the Spratly Archipelago group in April of 2014. The islands were constructed so rapidly that many were finished in under a year (Ross).

The location of China's artificial islands is particularly significant. The Spratly Islands are located about 740 miles from Hainan, the province that maintains official administrative control of them within China (FreeMapTools.com) (Hameiri and Jones). Hainan is located just off shore of a large peninsula that juts out from the Chinese mainland. The Philippine province of Palawan, on the other hand, is very close to the Spratly Archipelago, only 195 miles away, this makes the Philippines almost four times closer to the Spratly Islands than China, yet China remains assertive in its territorial claims there (FreeMapTools.com).

Chinese island building, then, is unlikely to be for the purpose only of protecting the Chinese coast from attack, and instead must be about projecting power into the South China Sea, giving China greater coercive ability over sea lanes, flights, and the United States Navy 7th Fleet, which frequently operates in the South China Sea to protect freedom of navigation in international waters. Basing in the Spratly Islands, so close to the shores of the Philippines gives the PLAN the ability to deploy military force well into the Philippines where US soldiers are stationed, if it so chooses. China's artificial islands could also be used to shut down vital sea lanes through which a third of global GDP flows through annually and up to 50 percent of oil

tanker shipments, in the event of war (ChinaPower Project 2017) (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014).

The artificial-island building coincides with Xi's presidency, but was also initiated not long after the 18th Party Congress in which Hu asserted that China would become a maritime power, and a few years of more aggressive references to the Sea towards the end of the Hu years (Lam 194). Island building is, at the very least, a way for China to seize control of the SCS before it may be too late. With a Navy whose capabilities dramatically lags behind the United States', Beijing can use island basing as a relatively crude tactic to assert itself there until it completes a full modernization of its Navy and Air Force.

Island building and basing is a way in which the PRC is able to maintain its claims to the Sea without a modern navy. Island basing is a relatively cheap and effective way to secure the contested territory while it undergoes modernization of its armed forces. After all, if China's goals in the SCS go beyond defending the few rocky islands that it calls its own, it will need a powerful Navy that can challenge the US in order to one day tilt the regional balance of power in its favor.

Though island building is more outwardly provocative and novel, the PLAN has undergone a large modernization process. The most high profile example of this being the new *Liaoning* aircraft carrier. Although relatively outdated by the standards of the United States, the *Liaoning* is a first step in building a more modern Navy. The *Liaoning* serves mainly as a way for the Chinese Navy to train and gain familiarity with operating aircraft carriers, but a second carrier, that will have greater operational application, is already well underway (Holmes).

Beijing has also toyed with the idea of building truly artificial islands, like aircraft carriers, but actual floating island-platforms. The man-made islands would move extremely slowly but would allow the PLAN to further increase its operational ability in the SCS before it has fully capable aircraft carriers. Chinese armed forces have also been working on menacing new cruise missiles, such as the *Dongfeng* cruise missile which has the ability to challenge US ships in the area even despite the PLAN's relatively weak forces.

According to Mearsheimer, China does not need to pursue territorial expansion through invasion in order to dominate Asia (2002). The PRC is already the largest country in East Asia, and its sheer size puts it in an advantageous position in terms of power and security resources. China's actions do not fit a classical understanding of imperial expansion for the purposes of power, but given China's already huge size and the nature of modern warfare, it does not need to do so in order to challenge the status quo in Asia. SCS expansion also helps the PRC overcome the inherent "stopping power" of large bodies of water (Mearsheimer 2014, 84).

In light of Mearsheimer's claim that China need not acquire territory to establish hegemony, China's SCS claims look even more aggressive. Chinese actions in the SCS are not physically pushing into and invading another state's mainland, but its actions there are clearly designed to expand China's military sphere of influence in Asia, and its ability to operate in other countries territories if it so chooses to one day.

The *South China Morning Post*, a Chinese newspaper, reported that according to the PLAN China is preparing an ADIZ in the South China Sea in response to what it calls “provocative” freedom of navigation operations by the United States in the Sea. Creating an ADIZ in a highly traveled and contested ocean that includes an area hundreds of miles from the Chinese coast is highly inflammatory and would greatly aggravate other states, increasingly the likelihood of triggering the security dilemma.

An ADIZ would also be a huge block in building a Sinosphere in Asia. An ADIZ would curb US hard power and severely limit the ability of Washington operate its armed forces in the Sea, along with the militaries of other littoral states like the Philippines, Vietnam, or any other country who wishes to peacefully travel through the Sea. If China were simply looking to fortify its (already strong) coastal borders, or even to expand its claim to hydrocarbons, fisheries, and other valuable resources via an extended EEZ (one that encompasses the Spratly Islands), it need not make the volatile situation there even more so by establishing an ADIZ over virtually the entire Sea. China’s man made islands are clearly part of a plan for projecting hard further from China’s borders. These islands would be essential in establishing an ADIZ there, like it already has in the ECS.

Some critics who are skeptical that China’s approach is so outwardly offensive argue that the PLAN would not even be able to successfully achieve an ADIZ in the South China and suggest that Beijing would not be so reckless (Taylor 106). However, the PLAN’s use of man made islands and A2AD weapons are indicative of it using the South China Sea to establish an ADIZ in the not-so-distant future. Artificial islands and A2AD weapons also mean that the PLA could dominate the area without a high tech navy. Those who argue that China is not poised to fully dominate the South China Sea say that history suggests that China would need two things in order to effectively command the Sea: a monopoly or near monopoly of naval power, and a military presence on littoral territories (Beckley 1). Today, China only accounts for 30% of naval tonnage in Asia, while the US and Japan made up three times this much while naval super powers (Beckley 1). Although its accurate to say that China is far from achieving true naval superiority, its use of islands to host A2AD weapons along with attack aircraft, bombers, and surveillance aircraft could give it a distinct and unique method of dominating the South China Sea nonetheless. Though Chinese control of the SCS may not come in the form of true naval preponderance, the PRC could use island basing coupled with other military assets to establish itself as the de facto dominant power in the Sea before long it has the upper hand in naval technology or naval tonnage there.

According to Philip Reynolds in an article for *The Diplomat* “China is making the strategic calculation that the United States would not be able to sustain a war” (2016). The US and other states would be unlikely to risk their expensive navies and thousands of sailors against a “shooting gallery” of Dong Feng missiles, which have twice the range of US carriers’ attack aircraft and for which there is no ship defense (Reynolds). Weapons like these are clearly designed for the purpose of extending Beijing’s military influence and superiority far beyond its own borders and without modern warships.

By flying in the face of claims not only made by other states, but international law, Beijing has demonstrated through its actions in the Sea that it has little respect for the current

international liberal order, at least in Asia. Island building and CNOOC drilling in disputed territories then can be seen then as part of a new strategy to overturn the current balance of power in Asia without having to overtly wage war directly against neighboring states.

If China were acting as a defensive realist state in the South China Sea one would expect to see a greater concern for maintaining the status quo balance of power within Asia, and for China to work *within* the current state of affairs. Instead, the South China Sea dispute suggests that China is willing to threaten its neighbors and jeopardize their security and ability to peacefully and legally operate in the Sea off their coasts. China's reaction to US freedom of navigation operations (FONOP) also indicates that it sees US presence there as necessarily a threat to its own national interests.

In a hypothetically defensive realist China one would expect to see a less severe reaction to the peaceful and legal US presence in the South China Sea. Instead, China is acting towards the United States as offensive realism predicts a (rising) great power would with another great power: it sees it as a threat, one that it cannot bandwagon with (Mearsheimer 2002).

Defensive realism holds that states will only take outwardly aggressive action when its success is nearly certain to end positively (Lobell). Some argue that the SCS is an issue that Beijing has judged it can get away with, and thus explains its actions there and its strategy as based on the principles of defensive realism. In order for China to see the SCS in this light, it would have to be making a strategic calculation that is highly unlikely. It is well known that the United States' grand strategy has for decades been centered upon not letting any one state dominate its region (Council on Foreign Relations, October 2017). This, of course, is the primary reason for Washington's strong presence in Asia and Barack Obama's "pivot to Asia". In an October 2011 article, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton published a lengthy piece in *Foreign Policy* called "America's Pacific Century." In the article, Clinton she reaffirms the United States' more robust commitment to Asia, including freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, which she mentions multiple times.

The US' Pivot to Asia, formally announced in 2012, coincides with China's newly aggressive stance in the Sea. In light of Washington's the well known and decades old grand strategy, bolstered loud and clear by the "Pivot to Asia" regional strategy, the PRC's bid to control the SCS looks far from certain: putting Beijing in direct confrontation with its closest military competitor. Although there has been no kinetic clash between the US and China in the South China Sea to date, given the intensity of the both states' strategic interests in the SCS, it seems that avoiding armed conflict between the world's two best funded militaries there is unlikely in the long run. The PRC's bold and aggressive behavior in the SCS is difficult to explain using defensive realism, since China directly and aggressively challenges the some of the United States' most import strategic goals, making conflict there seem inevitable. Numerous freedom of navigation operations have already demonstrated that both powers are willing to take substantial risks to protect their interests in the Sea.

Preference for Bilateral Diplomacy, Coercion, and Co-Optation

The Chinese preference for bilateral negotiations in relation to the South China Sea indicates that the PRC's use of diplomacy is coercive and plays a role in establishing a dominant role in Asia for itself. China's neighbors argue that its choice to selectively choose bilateral diplomatic options over multilateral ones give it an unfair advantage (BBC). China is already much more powerful than other littoral states to the SCS like Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaysia, and it can easily intimidate or strong arm them. Multilateral institutions that exclude China such as ASEAN or the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) only help weaker states band together and balance against China, sometimes joining forces with the United States.

Although it has recently begun to warm to multilateral negotiations, it is meaningful that Beijing strongly rejects the idea that the South China Sea and other territorial disputes, such as the Taiwan situation, should be handled multilaterally (Beukel 14). Some suggest the South China Sea dispute should be resolved within ASEAN, but China is strongly opposed (Beukel 14). Even the 2002 ASEAN-China Declaration of Conduct, which took three years to negotiate (and some might point to as growing acceptance of multilateralism), is only a *declaration* that says that states should resolve their territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means (Beukel 15). Because China wouldn't agree to anything else, the Declaration of Conduct is non-binding and relatively vague (Panda, August 2015). Although China has shown some willingness to use multilateral forums, it rejects multilateral *decision making* for security affairs and territorial disputes (Beukel 14). A 2010 article in *Jane's Navy International* stated that: "picking apart the ASEAN territorial claims . . . may offer more hope of success for the Chinese negotiators and give Beijing greater influence in the region" (2).

China's relationship with the Philippines since its new president, Rodrigo Duterte, took office demonstrates that the PRC is also willing to co-opt less powerful states in order to tip the balance of power in Asia away from the US. Duterte has led the Philippines towards a closer relationship with China and away from the US. In a meeting with President Xi, Duterte openly called for a "greater separation from the United States" (Perlez, October 2016). China has proved to be receptive. Though not outwardly aggressive, its warm reception of Duterte shows that Beijing's main concern in the Asia-Pacific is the power of United States (and not weak regional states), just as offensive realism suggests. Already much stronger than any other Southeast Asian state, China is willing to make small diplomatic conciliations in order to help wean Manila out of its relationship with the US, and one day, hopefully, get it to scrap its security alliance with Washington.

China's focus and concern with the United States' military power in Asia shows that its viewpoint there is shaped *primarily* by realism, not its historical adversaries or even those who claim areas it also claims. Should China's motives in the SCS be based on constructivist principles, we would not see Beijing looking to improve relations with claimants that have challenged China's sovereignty with claims of their own, like Manila did with the Hague Tribunal. Capitalizing on the Philippines' new stance, China has agreed to let Filipino fishermen fish near Scarborough Shoal (Perlez, November 2016). Though a bit counterintuitive, the warming of relations with its SCS adversary shows that Beijing's security calculations are based on long term balances in power in Asia. If the Philippines, which has numerous joint bases and a security assurance with the US, can be co-opted and made to eventually push out Washington's

military bases and influence, China's small economic conciliations will be well worth eliminating US forward basing there.

According to Ashely Townsend, a research fellow at the United States Studies Center at the University of Sydney in Australia, "Beijing has played a clever diplomatic hand." It has cemented a big win in terms of public relations and forging tighter connections with its neighbors. Most importantly it has done so without sacrificing claims to sovereignty in the South China Sea or even removing its forces from Scarborough Shoal (Perlez, Nov. 2016). China's willingness to "permit" Filipino fishing boats the right to fish around Scarborough Shoal shows that its clear priority in the South China Sea is not fishing or even hydrocarbons. Beijing's interest is in maintaining control of the strategically valuable territory so that it can easily project power into and past the first island chain.

Reactions to Institutions

Another indication of China's strategic intentions in the South China Sea is its relationship with institutions there. A professor of politics and government at the University of Puget Sound, Seth Weinberger postulates that institutions can be used as a means to signal the intentions of a state (94). This basic logic — that states send signals through their reaction to institutions, can be applied to China in the South China Sea conflict.

There are two highly prominent cases of institutions which Beijing has been a key actor in related to the South China Sea. The first is the 2002 Declaration of Conduct with ASEAN and the second case is Beijing's reaction to and its role in the 2016 Hague Tribunal: *Philippines v. China*. In both of these cases China has demonstrated itself as, although potentially cooperative, generally hostile to accepting rules and norms that might help to de-escalate conflict in the Sea.

Negotiations between China and ASEAN regarding the SCS sparked hope that resolution might be possible and that the dispute would no longer be as intense. China's choice to participate in a multilateral forum suggested that it may seek a more peaceful stance in the dispute. However, high expectations around Declaration of Conduct fell flat after it was concluded. The declaration is just that, a declaration, meaning that there is no formal binding agreement on action in the SCS (Panda, August 2015). The DOC sets out the ways in which its signatories should resolve disputes in the SCS, but does not hold them to it.

China's full blown rejection of the Hague Tribunal's ruling in favor of the Philippines shows that in the SCS China's intentions are aggressive. If Beijing were interested in productive diplomatic engagement and resolution of the dispute, we would expect to at least see it recognize the tribunal. Instead, it took no part and refused to recognize its validity.

A Core Interest?

Beijing has claimed that the South China Sea is a core interest for Chinese national security. This core interest designation puts the South China Sea on par with territories like Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong. Areas which China will not even acknowledge that may not be part of it, and which it is willing to wage war over if it came to it. This is evidenced by Beijing's "One China Policy". The designation of the South China Sea of such supreme

importance to the PRC is problematic because it significantly limits the abilities of other states in the region for fear of provoking China and pushing it past the point of return by triggering a large scale conflict or even war.

Despite China's tough talk by calling the South China Sea a core interest, the history of the term indicates that China does not even fully believe its own stance that the SCS is worth waging war over. Originally, the term core interest was used only with regard to Taiwan, which is obviously one of the most high profile and intense territorial disputes in the world and a place that Beijing sees as absolutely essential to its sovereignty. In the late 2000s, China broadened the term core interest to include more areas, and used it to describe Xinjiang and Tibet (Board). Both areas, although obviously not of as crucial importance as Taiwan, are key territories in for China for both domestic control and strategic reasons.

The South China Sea, however, was not referred to as a core interest until March of 2010 and even since then has been less insistently considered such (Wong, 2011). China claims that its jurisdiction over the Sea to dates back thousands of years to the Xia dynasty (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014). If the South China Sea were really seen as a legitimate and indisputable part of China like Taiwan or a Xinjiang are, the Sea would not be referred to as such so late. The MFA's sidestepping around calling the SCS a core interest without readily acknowledging that it has been referred to as such indicates that the PRC acknowledges that its claims there are not fully legitimate, as they are based in power and not territorial integrity. This is another reason why the SCS conflict is best seen through the lens of offensive realism. Claiming an area based on its power resources would look hyper aggressive, and would be a violation of customary international law. Although it is impossible to know the nuances of Chinese *intentions*, the PRC's actions suggest that Beijing is pursuing the SCS first and foremost based on accruing power.

The Role of Chinese Identity

The correlation of Xi Jinping's rise with a more aggressive stance in the Sea also indicates that Xi's own vision for China has had a far reaching effect on its strategy. Xi has helped to shape the Chinese nation's perception of their role in the world into one with much greater ambitions. China now sees greater potential in itself and its ability to become a true peer of the United States' in the not so far off future. The "China Dream" is the most obvious example of Chinese ambition, but China's new perception of its ability to achieve great things has had a ripple effect in its actions elsewhere.

Recent quantitative research by Ted Hopf that indicates that the Chinese public generally identifies as a state with rising potential and increasing power, one that is looking to "catch up" with the West and with China's proper place in the world given its history (Hopf and Allan 64). "Mass texts" (such as newspapers, political speeches, history text books, movies, and novels) within China indicate that the country as a whole feels as if it is that has only relatively re-recently re-entered a role of international importance, but that it is making its way to rivaling the United States nonetheless (Hopf and Allan 63-64).

Wenjuan shows that the rising state identity increases the propensity that the PRC will pursue a more aggressive strategy abroad (194). In asserting the role of identity and perception

in Chinese foreign policy Wenjuan says that “more power brings about more appetite” for power (194). China’s growing relative power, and its correspondingly growing appetite create a positive feedback loop that leads to policy that in practice looks more and more like offensive realism.

Offensive realism holds that states will act to pursue gains in relative power due to *structural* circumstances in the international system. Though the identity based viewpoint is different in what it understands the causal mechanism of this behavior to be, Chinese history, identity, and perception, do play a role in making it more likely to view the international system in a way that offensive realism predicts.

To illustrate how differently China may perceive its role in the world, consider China’s position in the international system over the last few hundred years. In the year 1820, China’s economy made up an entire *one-third* of all the world’s economies in PPP (Stuenkel 38). Until the late 19th century, China alone made up 20 to 35 percent of total global GDP at PPP over the previous 1,800 years, a truly staggering number (Stuenkel 4). Though China’s importance has been hardly matched for hundreds of years, the one hundred before Mao took power were termed the “century of humiliation,” due to China’s loss of face on the international system at the hands of imperial powers. Given the scope of history and longevity of China’s power until the mid 19th century, it is not radical for China to believe that it deserves the status on the world stage that it held for almost 2,000 years.

To the modern Western observer, China has played a pretty normal role in the international system up until the 21st century, but China’s position as a “normal state” is truly a historical anomaly. The role of the “Middle Kingdom” as one of the world’s greatest powers is backed up by nearly 2,000 years of history. Humans may have short memories, but nations, and their national myths and identities, last a lot longer. Given its history it is no surprise that the Chinese feel that they are quickly catching up to their rightful position in the international system.

Conclusion

Chinese regional strategy, as indicated by its actions in the South China Sea, is based primarily on the principles of offensive realism. The PRC’s provocative actions in the face of international law and its willingness to upset the balance of power in the region indicate that Beijing’s strategic calculations there are based around accruing power and that Beijing’s goal is ultimately establish Asia hegemony.

Since Xi Jinping became the premier of the PRC, Beijing’s rhetoric around the South China Sea has become more forward and assertive. Xi emphasized that China would one day become a maritime power, breaking from the strategic stance set by Deng Xiaoping.

The PRC has shown through island building, naval modernization, and development of A2AD weapons, that it intends to use its military power to challenge the United States and the Asian status quo.

Despite the legal and peaceful use of the Sea by other states, China remains assertive, making eventual kinetic conflict seem likely. Though important institutional and legal breakthroughs have been made, the history of the 2002 ASEAN-China Declaration of Conduct has shown that China is not substantially willing to cooperate, and it has rejected the authority of international law in the 2016 *Philippines V. China* Hague tribunal, and the United States' right to perform freedom of navigation operations under UNCLOS.

Though there is no way to know the true intentions of decision makers in China, the PRC has indicated its goals through its aggressive rhetoric and its actions. Beijing, it seems, looks to put itself in a position where it can one day meaningfully challenge the status quo in Asia.

China's rise has been one of the most important issues for modern day scholars of international political economy and international relations. The South China Sea can serve as an indicator of Chinese strategy, and will continue to be one of the world's most important flashpoints. This paper makes an important contribution to an understanding of Chinese security strategy, but only looks at a single case study. State behavior is complicated, nuanced, and changing, and further progress can be made in understanding Beijing's strategic outlook through analysis of other case studies of Chinese foreign policy. Development policy, climate change, human rights, environmental problems, and economic issues are all important areas of Chinese foreign policy that this paper leaves untouched.

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