Bachelor Thesis in Political Science

Chinese Expansionism

A case study on the Chinese expansionist initiative in the South China Sea during the last decade

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Abstract

The Asian renaissance in the twentieth first century, constituted by astronomical economic growth combined with the ambitious and authoritarian leadership of Xi Jinping's reign, has led China in the direction of proactive international policies. The South China Sea is one of the major arenas where such policies are taking place. This paper seeks to explain the case of the Chinese expansionist initiative in the South China Sea through a case study with the structure of a systematic textual analysis. The study will further adopt the international political theory of realism as an explanatory model, which is commonly referred to as the most suited international political theory in explaining expansionist state behavior. Further concepts within the theoretical lens consist of; balance of power, regional hegemony and elements of national power. This paper finds that China seeks to militarize the South China Sea as an act of power-balancing towards the military presence of the U.S. The end-goal of the Chinese initiative is to establish regional hegemony in the region, where China seeks to dominate the waters in competitions with ASEAN states through the means of their maritime militia. Towards the United States, the effort of regional hegemony is mostly in the phase of verbal prompts and to some extent threatening. The initiative in the waters further serves to extract national elements of power, such as oil, natural gas and fishery to secure maintenance and growth of the Chinese nation.

Key words; The South China Sea, Realism, Balance of Power, Regional Hegemony and Elements of National Power.

Abbreviations; SCS (South China Sea).
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1. Introduction

1.1 From Tao Guang Yang Hui To The Chinese Dream - From Patience to Action

During the last decade there has been a major shift in Chinese foreign policy through the whole scope of its implications. Most notably in Chinese security policy, with an extensive increase in military spendings,¹ precarious military actions in the South China sea,² and bold territorial claims in various international realms.³ Decades ago, previous Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping grounded the Tao Guang Yang Hui - strategy, and normalized a conscientious and discreet Chinese foreign policy. Deng’s China was patient, bided its time and stayed out of conflict.⁴ This notion seems to have become deserted, as China adopts a more proactive, provocative and aggressive approach to international affairs in recent times. China seems to have developed from a fairly introverted major state to an ambitious extroverted one, who seeks to dominate and influence the international scene.⁵ The Chinese era of patients and desire seems to have come to its end and entered the phase of self-realization.

Since Xi Jinping became the supreme leader and took office as President and the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party,⁶ his main political manifesto has surrounded the notion of the Chinese Dream. This comprehensive slogan has undinably an large extent of implications as any impactful political slogan, but its overall thesis signifies the great realization of the Chinese nation. And Xi expresses himself clearly;

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“Everyone has an Ideal, ambition and dream. We are now all talking about the Chinese Dream. In My opinion, achieving the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream of the Chinese people since the advent of modern times.”  

Xi Jinping's political manifesto has guided both domestic policy and international affairs. But perhaps for the outside observers, the international implications and effects of this are of a larger interest and concern. In this respect, the main factor to discern in relation to the Chinese Dream in an international context is the intentions and the meanings of the notion.

In the Chinese context, rejuvenation doesn't imply the rise of a new powerful nation, it means to regain China's previous international prestige. And in relation to territorial claims and the pursuit of international advantages, China doesn't see their strive as gaining the operhand over others, but as the reclamation of Chinese historical possessions regarding China's previous international status. In this context, China officially holds the position that their behavior which is seen by many observers as aggressive, as defensive commitments, which is fairly noticeable in their uttered defense policy. Especially in regards to Taiwan, where China is steadfast in reuniting the Island with mainland China. This argument further backcloths the recent release of China's new national map, published by The Chinese Ministry of National Resources, some months ago. The new national map includes Arunachal Pradesh and The Aksai Chin highland, which is strongly contested by its giant neighbor India. Hardly surprising, it also covers Taiwan. But most interestingly, it incorporates approximately the entire South China Sea with an additional 10th dash, to the historically infamous “Nine-Dash Line”.

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10 ZhenHua. 2023 Edition of National Map Released.
1.2 Nan Hai - The Nine-Dash Line and the South China Sea

The most illustrative notion of the Chinese expansionist initiative in the South China Sea, would be the nine-dash line. Which is by far the most controversial territorial claim made by any of the involved parties in the contested region.12 The infamous markings over the sea have appeared frequently in recent times, it even showed itself in the 2023 summer blockbuster “Barbie”, causing the film to be banned in Vietnam and the involved scene to be blurred in the Philippines.13 The bans related to the film are descriptive of just how tense the dispute really is.

The nine-dash line made its first substantive appearance in Chinese atlases in the early 1950s, which originated from several alternate versions of the prequel “The eleven-dash line” which was produced and published by Chinese officials in 1935. These markings surrounding the SCS are legitimized in China regarding its historical connections to Chinese culture, state apparatus and dynasties as far back as the third century AD. Chinese claims to its Islands and to the Nan Hai (Meaning: The Southern Sea in Chinese cultural context) has fluctuated vastly through its dynasties and governmental apparatuses ever since. Through bans of maritime trade, isolationist-policies and state-dissolutions.14 In regards, there is an immense cultural and historical connection between the notion of the Chinese state and the South China Sea, which could be historically perceived as the Chinese backwaters. When witnessing the tensions in the SCS in the modern era, aggressive behavior considered by most foreign observers, is in the Chinese context considered as a defensive demeanor to protect Chinese sovereignty and historical rights.15 At least, this is the Chinese official position on these matters.

It is in this light, the Chinese ambition in the SCS should be seen in relation to the Chinese Dream. Which indicates that a substantial component of the national rejuvenation of China,

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means to embody the waters back into Chinese authorization. The Chinese position in relation to the Nan Hai and its Islands-chains might be to protect and reclaim historical cultural matters of value to the Chinese people, in conjunction with the Chinese Dream. And there are gradations of this perspective, which must be taken into account. Even if International law rejects the nine-dash line and Chinese claims to the waters, and for instance ruled in the Philippines favor in clashes with China over the Scarborough Shoal, Second Thomas Shoal. Even so, Chinese arguments and claims must be studied and be taken into account. But one must not be mistaken. The Chinese interest in the SCS and its embedded Islands, are by all means geopolitical matters and power politics at its core. And it’s decisive to separate legitimate cultural assertions and strategic political demeanor, as it mainly seems to be a political strategy, as the official position regarding the international community.

1.3 Purpose, Demarcations and Research-question

The purpose of this study is to examine the Chinese expansionist initiative in the South China sea over the last decade. The Chinese claims and various editions of the nine-dash line has a long history, but it is primarily during the last decade China has truly reached the strength to pursue their claim and made substantive advances. To explain, the international political theory of realism will be adopted, as it is the most widely recognized international theory of explaining imperialist and expansionist state behavior. In doing so, this paper will shed some light on one of the world's most turbulent and contested regions, in times where the main western media is directed to other arenas; such as the Israeli and Hamas war and the battle of Ukraine.

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Chinese foreign policy overall has been well documented since the start of Xi Jinping’s reign as the country has developed more authoritarian.\textsuperscript{20} The world has observed China closely and discussed the implications of the Chinese rise and rejuvenation. Much focus has been directed on Taiwan and the great rivalry of the U.S. and China. There is also much written on the SCS disputes with China as the key-player. However, the SCS dispute is an ongoing, ever changing phenomena where new insights could be found at any time, which is the major interdisciplinary motivation behind this study.\textsuperscript{21} There might be similar studies to this one, but because of the ongoing status of the topic, it is highly probable that this study will process new empirical findings. The academic topic of the Chinese initiative in the SCS is highly relevant because of the recent publication of the new Chinese national map by the The Chinese Ministry of National Resources, which could be perceived as an extensive political statement.\textsuperscript{22} The topic is further relevant because of Xi Jinping and Joe Biden's recent meeting in San Francisco on the 15th of November in 2023. Where they both agreed on reopening high-level military dialog to avoid incidents or trigger a conflict, which mainly surrounds both parties' military presence in the Taiwan strait and the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{23}

The SCS has immense geopolitical value to all nearby states, but it is also an international arena. The sea carries one third of all maritime trade globally, which makes it one of the world's most extensive arenas for global commerce.\textsuperscript{24} The enormous political value of the sea is the major and obvious motivator behind the societal relevance of this topic.\textsuperscript{25} And as the world finds itself in a turbulent era in other regions of the globe, an examination of the Chinese initiative in one of the world’s most contested spaces seems to be at its place. By this background, the study's uttered research question is formulated as follows: \textbf{How can the Chinese expansionist initiative in the South China Sea be explained?}


\textsuperscript{22} ZhenHua. 2023 Edition of National Map Released.

\textsuperscript{23} Baldor C, Lolita. \textit{Biden and Xi agree to restore some military-to-military communications between the US and China}. The Associated Press. 16-11-2023. 
\url{https://apnews.com/article/us-china-military-relations-339980a0d494bcde92905411838808a4} [Accessed: 05-12-2023].


\textsuperscript{25} Esaiasson. Et al. \textit{Metodpraktikan: Konsten att studera samhälle, individ och marknad}. p. 34
1.4 Previous Research

1.4.1 The Grand Strategy and The Chinese Dream

To be able to understand Chinese initiative in the SCS during the last decade, one must understand the shift in Chinese foreign policy that took place as Xi Jinping rose to power. Zheng Wang’s article “The Chinese Dream: Concept and Context” written in 2014 in the Journal of Chinese Political Science/Association of Chinese Political Studies, examines this concept. The Chinese Dream could be described as a nationalist and patriotic notion which refers to the dream of achieving the rejuvenation of China, which Xi uses to intensify the Chinese will to maintain the momentum of the enormous development that China has experienced.26 Another great piece of similar matter is Bates Gill’s book; Daring to Struggle: China’s Global Ambitions under Xi Jinping, written in 2022. The book goes into deep detail of the concept of the Chinese Dream, both domestically and internationally. Gill describes how the slogan refers to deserting the old ways of Deng Xiaoping and Jinga Zemin and instead striving for international achievements.27

Another influential piece of work is Rush Doshi’s The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order, published in 2021. Doshi is trying to establish the Chinese grand strategy internationally as China is growing stronger and their struggle to replace America as the world's hegemonic power. In their effort, Doshi argues that China must build a foundation for regional hegemony in Asia.28 Further John J. Mearshimer’s “China’s Challenge to US Power in Asia” written in The Chinese Journal of International Politics in 2010, also discusses the rise of China and their pursuit to establish regional hegemony in the Indo-Pacific.29 China's ambitions and strategies to establish regional hegemony is something that this paper also will touch upon, and add further data to how it appears.

A further important feature to understand the initiative in the SCS is the bedrock behind the Chinese Dream. The recent proactive approach to international affairs is more than just about

the specific ambitious leadership of Xi Jinping. The Chinese Dream and the events in the SCS is further a result of the “Asian renaissance” which Kishore Mahbubani describes in his book from 2022, *The Asian 21st Century*, where he describes the advances of Asian states in the last decades and the decline of the west. The rise of Asian states such as China and India took its dawn in the early 2000s, and Mahbubani argues that the aftermath of the Convid-19 pandemic could mark the start of an Asian century. The fact that China used more cement during the years of 2011-2013 in diverse building projects, than the U.S. did during the entire twentieth century, is further descriptive to Mahbubani’s idea. The Asian global rise that Mahbubani describes, is the growth of power and wealth that further enables the Chinese Dream and China's vision for the South China Sea.

Another primary incentive behind the Chinese Dream and the proactive character behind Chinese foreign policy, which could be witnessed in the South China Sea, is the notion of “The Century of Humiliation”. As David Scott describes in his book from 2008, *China and The International System: Power, Presence and Perceptions in a Century of Humiliation*, the notion refers to the time between the Opium Wars to the birth of Communist China. The Chinese were taken advantage of and were beaten down by the imperial powers during the nineteenth and twentieth century, which damaged the Chinese identity as “Middle Kingdom” and as the world's major power. This Perception of history has very much guided Chinese foreign policy in the modern days. The steadfast ideas of integrating Taiwan and expansion in the South China Sea, could partly be seen as rebellious policies to repel the western-led world order.

1.4.2 The South China Sea

To further understand the topic of this study, one must be acquainted with the historical power dynamics of the South China Sea. Bill Hayton’s *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*, written in 2014, is a great book on this matter. The book breaks down the history of power dynamics in the region which is helpful to orientate in the complex disputed

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region of today. Hayton argues that before the imperial powers arrived in the region, there was no real sense of borders and territory. This is referred to as the *mandala system*, which is a term used to describe the rather diffuse power dynamics in the south-east Asian region before the Europeans arrived. The Imperial powers very much created the states and the borders which the post-colonial states live with today. The Vietnamese and Chinese border was determined by the French, and the Philippines territory was determined by the U.S. The dispute in the sea started along with the change to the *westphalian* thinking with fixed borders and sense of sovereignty, which previously did not really exist in the region.\(^{33}\) Another great piece of work of similar matter but with a more modern focal point is *The South China Sea Disputes: Past, Present and Future* by Nalanda Roy, published in 2016. This book outlines the tensions in the SCS with perspectives of all the major actors in the region.\(^{34}\)

Ketian Zhnag’s article from 2022, “Explaining China’s large-scale land reclamation in the South China Sea: Timing and rationale”, written in the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, has a Chinese focal point in the disputes. This article examines the strategic logic behind the Chinese land reclaims in the South China Sea, and more specifically the major ones that took place between 2013-2015.\(^{35}\) The land reclaims that Zhang describes are a substantive feature of the Chinese advances in the region over the last decade, and has since served as an springboard to pursue diverse expansionist projects in the region, which this study will examine.

1.5 Disposition
As contemplated in this chapter, this study seeks to examine the Chinese expansion in the South China Sea, with a primary focus on the last decade. The Sequel chapters of this study will process the methodological design, the material and further the theoretical framework with realist concepts. When these structural components have been dealt with, the empirical analysis will be presented as well as the conclusions.

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\(^{34}\) Roy, The South China Sea Disputes: Past, Present and Future. p. 3-8

2. Method and Material

The intention of this study is to investigate the Chinese expansion in the South China Sea during the last decade, which is a case of the Chinese expansion. To explain this matter, the study will adopt realism, which is the most suited school of thought to make sense of this type of phenomena and state behavior. Because of these intentions, the study will be designed as a theory consuming case study and apply various types of material to make the case. This chapter will clarify the methodical design of this study, problematize the given material and illustrate how the study intends to apply it.

2.1 Case study

The study seeks to explain the Chinese ambitions through realism, which labels it as a theory consuming study with explanatory ambitions rather than descriptive.\(^{36}\) The study does not have ambitions to develop the theory of this matter, but it intends to use well suited theory to explain and further develop the empirical field of Chinese global expansion. In this manner, the empirical findings of this study will contribute with a further layer of knowledge in the empirical domain of the Chinese rise and the SCS, which means that the study could be labeled as a building-block case study. A study as such, has an heuristic purpose to develop new insights in an already documented field, which could be both theoretical or empirical.\(^{37}\) In these circumstances, the study intends to seek new findings in the empirical field.

Even though this study will be labeled as a case study, it will have some comparative characteristics. The case of the SCS will be dissected in relation to the broader sense of Chinese expansionism and in doing so it will relate to other issues than solely the isolated case of the SCS in the given timeframe. Pure and strict single-case studies are rather unique and fairly uncommon in the scope of social science, and studies that are labeled as such, frequently do have comparative tendencies.\(^{38}\) In the same fashion, this study will have comparative nuances, but its central focal point will be directed at the South China Sea. The


case is an isolated phenomena with its own identity and special features, but it is pointing towards a larger context of Chinese global expansion.39

The structure of this case study is that of a systematic textual analysis, where the investigation seeks to observe and analyze various types of textual sources like diverse literature, documents, articles, speeches and think tanks from the given timeframe. To further thematically categorize its content in regards to the study’s theoretical framework, which serve as the study’s explanatory mode.40 The case of the SCS was chosen because of its major political value, strategic importance and contemporary relevance. Those who control the sea are the most advantageous in the pursuit to control the south-east asian region, and to utilize the enormous value it carries. This makes the SCS a formidable target to the Chinese. Because of this, an explanation of the Chinese expansion in the region could be an important factor in understanding the Chinese expansion globally. This makes the chosen case a formidable case of the bigger picture. Because of this study’s outlined ambitions, the chosen methodological design of a case study is well suited.

In most methodological designs, there is a trade-off in relation to the amount of exploratory factor and generalizability. Usually, the more the other is maximized, the other is minimized. In the effort of this research, the study will be able to reach high levels of explanatory factor, but in the making, sacrifice levels of generalizability to other cases.41 Case-studies are usually criticized for their lacking ability in empirical generalization.42 In the same fashion, this paper does not necessarily have any larger ambitions of generalization, but to deeply explain the specific initiative in the South China Sea. Despite this, certain elements of the research could be able to give insights in other areas of research, like the case of Taiwan, the East China Sea, the Yellow Sea, or other regions that fall under the Chinese sphere of influence.

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40 Esaiasson. Et al. Metodpraktikan: Konsten att studera samhälle, individ och marknad. p. 213-214
41 George and Bennet. Case studies and theory development in social science. p. 24-25
42 Alvehus. Skriva uppsats med kvalitativ metod: en handbok. p. 79-80
2.2 Validity and reliability

To be able to forge a complete study, a researcher must discuss the scientific concepts of validity and reliability. These concepts signifies the importance of using the right tools to dissect the formulated problem on the one hand, and the issue of to what extent the study has the ability to be replicated on the other. To be able to forge a complete study in these circumstances of a qualitative case study, the research must build a valid conceptual apparatus. Which involves a detailed discussion over contextual factors, because of certain concepts varying meanings in different times, places and disciplines. This is a fairly clear methodological advantage in regards to qualitative case studies, where quantitative methods would struggle and possibly over-stretch the concepts to fit a larger set of cases.

In the making of a valid conceptual-apparatus, the study must establish a functional framework for conceptual validity without systematic errors. In this case, with clear definitions of realism and the concepts embedded, which the study intends to use and transform into measurable tools to be applied onto the empirical material. To compose valid definitions of realism and well suited concepts, the definitions are being emulated from theory founding literature. If this is to be carried out carefully and precisely without randomized or sincere errors, the study will achieve a robust conceptual validity and reliability, which could generate a tenacious result in regards to scientific standards. This study intends to do so, and define the theory and the embedded concepts and in what way it will be operationalized to the empirical material through a schedule, (see chapter 3.3).

Questions of validity, reliability are always present in any realm of science, and especially in regards to qualitative research. Any study that is being labeled as qualitative, does naturally struggle with objectivity because of the subjective nature of qualitative academic designs. Even though the conceptual-apparatus is robust and durable, like in this case, the research will always be a matter of interpretation, which clearly problematizes the questions of

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44 Esaiasson. Et al. Metodpraktikan: Konsten att studera samhälle, individ och marknad. p. 59-65
45 George and Bennet. Case studies and theory development in social science. p. 20
46 Esaiasson. Et al. Metodpraktikan: Konsten att studera samhälle, individ och marknad. p. 64
validity and reliability. But to make sense of this study's chosen case, the inherent and underlying information in certain documents, articles or speeches by major actors, needs to be captured. This inherent and latent information, can not be seized in the same fashion with a quantitative oriented study, which arguably deals with scientific issues like the ones mentioned better. In regards to the objective of this study; which partly involves the capturing of deep meanings and hidden messages in certain parts of the material, the qualitative method is better suited.

2.3 Material

One of the most critical aspects of this paper, is the use of primary sources in relation to the positions and views of the different actors of this dispute. Examples of such would be *China's Military Strategy* published by the Chinese Ministry of National Defence in 2015, when analyzing Chinese security concerns. To understand the Vietnamese position on the dispute, Vietnam’s white paper on national defense is being referred to; *2019 Viet Nam National Defence* published by the Ministry of National Defence: Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. Authentic statements by officials or official agencies are immense to bring depth to the analysis through its own interpretation, in an analysis mostly conducted through secondary sources authored by western scholars. The use of primary sources in this matter excludes angled interpretations, but they could have opaqueness tendencies. The use of them excludes the risk of third party interpretations, and by the standards of authenticity, these sources are to be considered as originals, but they are obviously tendentious in themselves. Because of these aspects, it's critical to use the sources in a careful fashion, and exclusively to describe the outlined actors point of view and not use them to describe factual matters. In research involving disputes and contestations between several actors, the author is extremely likely to encounter tendentious and propaganda-like material. Awareness of source-critical aspects like tendencies and independence are in these circumstances especially important.

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49 Esaiasson. Et al Metodpraktikan: *Konsten att studera samhälle, individ och marknad*. p. 290-293
Other types of primary sources involve the literature that is being used in regards to defining the theory of realism and its concepts. For example Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace by Hans J. Morgenthau first published in 1948, or John J. Mershimer’s The Great Tragedy of Power Politics published in 2001. Kenneth N. Waltz Theory of International Politics from 1979, is another tremendously influential book on realism. These books and their immensely influential status, is optimal to establish valid definitions of the theory and the embedded concepts that is intended to guide the empirical analysis of this study. The books are crucial to build a solid foundation to the conceptual apparatus which will create scientific satisfaction in regards to standards of conceptual validity. In regards to source critical aspects, the literature is original in regards to theory. These books were authored decades ago, which raises questions of issues with simultaneity.\[51\] However, the primary use of them is to define theory, and to be able to make valid definitions the literature should be considered original.

The largest extent of the material in this study is secondary sources which contribute with data and analytical perspectives to the analysis. These secondary sources are constituted by newspaper articles, reports, statistics and academic articles. Examples of such would be; “China’s nine dash line, international law and the Monroe doctrine analogy” written by Shirley V. Scott in the Sage Journals in 2016. This article contributes with a realist perspective on Chinese regional dominance, which brings an analytical perspective on the idea of Chinese regional hegemony. Examples of websites contributing with data would be China Power Project, How is China feeding its Population of 1.4 billion? published by Center for Strategic and International Studies in 2023. This offers data on Chinese food consumption, which could be incentives behind the Chinese initiative in the SCS. Another website which offers both data and analytical perspectives is; Foreign Policy Research Institute Strategies Behind China and the Asia-Pacific’s Military Base Construction, authored by Chang K. Felix in 2022. This article outlines data on Chinese base construction in the SCS and analytical perspectives on strategic incentives. Most of these websites and articles could be western oriented in their analysis, which is essential to be aware of. But they are transparent, authentic and reliable in regards to data, which is why they are being used.

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51 Esaiasson. Et al. Metodpraktikan: Konsten att studera samhälle, individ och marknad. p. 294
The analysis in this paper will be driven by a cooperative approach between academic articles like the ones mentioned and factual matters from diverse websites and newspapers, to then be categorized with the theoretical concepts. In every case, it is essential to be aware of the source-critical standards and put them under source-critical examination, which involves; authenticity, independence, simultaneity and tendency.\(^{52}\) In some cases certain critical aspects are more relevant than others, like tendencies and authenticity in regards to official Chinese agencies or western oriented articles. It is all dependent on the context or in which fashion the source is intended to be used.

3. Theory

3.1 Theoretical choice

The theoretical choice as the explanatory model in this paper is realism. Other theoretical approaches in international relations could also be used or add further perspectives to the analysis. Examples of such theories would be social constructivism and liberalism. The focus of this study though, is heavily directed towards expansionism and international security issues. In this concern, realism would by most assessors be perceived as the most potent theory. There are certainly gradations of social constructivist theory in this matter. Like the historical and cultural connection between the Chinese state and South China Sea, which inevitably will be touched upon. But just as there might be genuine historic and cultural relationships, it is as much a strategic justification. It is vital to use the right types of theoretical tools to be able to grasp the explanatory factor in relation to the study’s formulated question. Using a constructivist approach to a matter mainaly embossed by security, power politics and expansionism, runs the risk of running off track.

3.2 Realism

Realism could be described as a family of theories rather than one isolated, and its main phalanxes is the classical school of realism and neorealism/structuralism, which was further divided into offensive and defensive realism. These different versions of realism are slightly different and encumber different aspects of the realist school of thought. This study will

\(^{52}\) Esaiasson. Et al. Metodpraktikan: Konsten att studera samhälle, individ och marknad. p. 288
define concepts through all of these different branches of realism, to bring perspectives to the analysis. The foundations of the realist idea could arguably be traced back centuries ago to philosophers such as Hobbes and Machiavelli. Realism as a more developed and processed political theory though, started to be sketched and taking shape through Edward H. Carr’s *The Twenty Years’ Crisis* first published in 1939, where he criticized optimism and utopianism in the interwar period.\(^53\) The more complete form of political realism in a modern sense, could be traced to Hans J. Morgenthau's ideas of realism from the mid twentieth century, which laid the foundation to classical realism.\(^54\) To be able to get a good idea of realism as an overall political theory, Morgenthau's ground principles of political realism is a decent start.\(^55\)

Political realism surrounds the assumption that politics is structured upon the objective realities of human nature, and to be able understand international relations and international politics, one must understand human nature.\(^56\) Which mostly surrounds the human nature of lust for power.\(^57\) Another bedrock idea is that all nations define national interest and means to defend them in terms of power. National interests which have no foundation in power are essentially illegitimate and only exist in illusion. National interests as a concept are unaffected by contextual matter and are always defined in terms of power, but the content within those national interests can in fact change and are dynamic through time and place. Another ground principal of realism is that diverse moral principles are inapplicable in international politics. Moral meanings in politics are obviously significant, but it can not be applied as an explanatory model to state-behavior. Morality is simply a small portion of influence but does not determine anything in the international realm. International politics is not about ethics and morals, it’s about securing national interests by means of power. Because of this, states uttered moral guidelines are really a matter of moral principles, and analysis conducted through them are doomed to be misleading. States' uttered policies are not

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\(^{56}\) Morgenthau. *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace.* p. 4  
\(^{57}\) Morgenthau. *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace.* p. 37
irrelevant, but they are not guided by them. And finally, political realism and international politics is its own demarcated political scientific discipline.\textsuperscript{58}

Kenneth N. Waltz, which could be labeled as the primary tinker behind defensive realism in the realm of neorealist theory, describes the world as a system embossed by anarchy where all states must administer their own security. There are no international governments and states must identify and fend off threats themselves, which creates a tense international environment. States do all they can to bolster their own security individually and enter alliances to deal with threats collectively. All states seek security, and one state's security might shrink the security of another, which creates the security dilemma in international politics and is the primary cause of war.\textsuperscript{59} The defensive neorealist thought doesn't differ too widely from the thinkers of offensive realism, but the incentives of what states strive for digresses. Where defensive neorealists see security as the incentive and power as the tool and offensive realists see power as the primary stimulus of all states.\textsuperscript{60}

John J. Mearsheimer, who should be characterized as the founder of the offensive realist idea, agrees with defensive realists upon the idea that the global system is characterized by anarchy and states see power as the primary tool to survive in such a world. However, Mearsheimer argues that offensive and defensive realists part ways in relation to how much power states want to pursue, whereas defensive realists believe that states wish to create power-balances and maintain statuesque. In contrast, offensive realists hold the argument that statuesque balances are rarely seen in international politics, and states have incentives to get the upper hand on their rivals rather than maintaining balance. State's primary goal is to seek hegemony.\textsuperscript{61} The classical view of realism that is closely associated with Moregenthau, mainly differs from offensive realism in the idea of where the strive for power derives from. The classical realm of realism believes that human beings have a power-seeking nature or a natural lust for power,\textsuperscript{62} whereas offensive realists propose that the strive for power really comes from fear and means to find security.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{58} Morgenthau. Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace. p. 5-16
\textsuperscript{60} Dunne and Schmidt. The globalization of world politics: an introduction to international relations. p.137
\textsuperscript{62} Morgenthau. Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace. p. 37
\textsuperscript{63} Mearsheimer. The Tragedy of Great Power Politics. p. 19-21
3.2.1 Balance of Power
The concept of balance of power is strongly associated with all of the different phalaxes of realism, but in defensive realism and Kenneth N. Waltz ideas the concept is placed at the center stage. The absence of an international government and the anarchic structure of the international system, means that the state of war could be the reality at any time. Where there is no authority, violence is always around the corner. To survive in such an environment, all states must be prepared to counter the military strength of their neighbors or international adversaries. States who do not prepare for the reality of war, or fail to do so effectively, will in the end ultimately suffer. The fear of this reality, leads states to act in ways which creates power balances, even if it is a conscious national strategy or not. Security is the highest end, and without international government or authority the balance of power and sense of mutual ability of violence could be the most potent structure of international security. Whenever the power of balance is disorganized by an external actor or by vast disruption within one of the units, the social equilibrium tends to be reestablished by a new such structure. The reason for this, is that the balance of power at least gives states the privilege of stability, in an environment embossed by uncertainty. Which is why states aspire to create power balances, because mutual strength at least ensures the maintenance of one's positions. To cope with the strength of others and balancing, the idea is to either reduce power on the one scale or to increase power on the other, which could be practiced in a number of different manners. The different strategies to pursue falls under two sections; internal efforts or external strategies. Internal efforts involve the strengthening of individual military and economic capabilities, and external efforts entails creation of or alignment to alliances, or perhaps efforts of weakening the adversaries coalitions.

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69 Morgenthau. *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace*. p. 191
3.2.2 Regional Hegemony

Regional hegemony is a realist concept primarily associated with the neorealist school of thought and more precisely offensive realism which is closely linked to literature associated with Mearshimer.\textsuperscript{71} The idea of offensive realism is that the global system is permeated by anarchy, self-help and fear which leads states to power maximization, as it is the only guarantee of security.\textsuperscript{72} The end-goal of power maximization is to reach the status of a global hegemon, which is a state of such power that the hegemon is uncontested through the entire global arena.\textsuperscript{73} The hegemonic international system is one where only one powerful state dominates all the lesser states.\textsuperscript{74} But to reach such dominance is arguably only theoretical, as no state in human history could truly be labeled as such. The United States was positioned very favorable after the cold war, but did not enjoy uncontested power in every region of the globe. The concept of regional hegemony is more realistic though, which implies the domination of a more specific geographical area. The United States is the only regional hegemonic power in modern history and completely dominates the western-hemisphere without competition, and has done so since the beginning of the twentieth-century. The status of regional hegemony is the best any state can hope for in terms of power, and it is certainly a rare achievement. There are several examples of states who pursued it but failed and collapsed in the making. Some examples would be Nazi-Germany, Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, Napoleonic France or the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{75}

Power is the ultimate means to security, and to reach optimal security states aspire to become the most powerful state in the system.\textsuperscript{76} Because of this, states tend to pursue regional hegemony if they can, and if they reach such status, they try to interfere if others seem to be able to reach the same status elsewhere. As an equal elsewhere could be a potential threat to one's own regional dominance.\textsuperscript{77} To reach regional hegemonic status, states can adopt several different strategies. Bait and bleed, is to entangle rivals into conflict while the baiter observes

\textsuperscript{71} Dunne and Schmidt. \textit{The globalization of world politics: an introduction to international relations}. p.136-137
\textsuperscript{72} Mearsheimer. \textit{The Tragedy of Great Power Politics}. p. 30-32
\textsuperscript{73} Mearsheimer. \textit{The Tragedy of Great Power Politics}. p. 40
\textsuperscript{74} Gilpin, Robert. \textit{War and Change in World Politics}. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. 1981. p. 29
\textsuperscript{75} Mearsheimer. \textit{The Tragedy of Great Power Politics}. p. 40-41
\textsuperscript{77} Mearsheimer. \textit{The Tragedy of Great Power Politics}. p. 140-141
their rivals weakening with its own capabilities intact. Bloodletting is another strategy of similar kind, which is to make sure that ongoing conflicts between rivals, turns as bloody and costly as possible. A third strategy could be blackmailing, which is to intimidate and threaten rivals into acceptance without the use of actual force. The most unpreferable strategy is war, where states can increase power by engaging in direct conflict.  

3.2.3 Elements of National Power

The concepts of Elements of power are strongly associated with all of the different branches of realism. Military power is the real sense of power among states, and could be defined in realism as the definition of true power. Economic wealth could be defined as latent power. Elements of national power however, are the large set of ingredients that lie beneath, which means that power represents the assets that are accessible to a state. Power can in this regard, be measured as an estimation of material capabilities between a number of units within the global system. And great powers are great because of their huge assets of resources which enables them to be powerful through all fields in the international scope.

Material resources are in this manner the bedrock behind power, and could be defined as elements of national power. Examples of such, would be geography, natural resources, industrial capacity and population size. Geography means that a state's geographic position on the globe is a major predictor of the amount of power a state possesses. The U.S. for example, has thousands of miles of water to both coastlines, which essentially means that it is impossible to invade, and can grow militarily and economically unbothered. Another major element of national power is natural resources, mainly meaning food, raw materials and energy resources like oil and natural gas. Those who control these natural assets, run tremendous advantages in the distribution of power among states and the lack of self sufficiency of them could be mortal in major conflicts. Industrial capacity relates to what extent a state is able to convert raw materials and resources into industrial products that

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82 Waltz. *Theory of International Politics*. p. 183
84 Morgenthau. *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace*. p. 124-130
enable power.\textsuperscript{85} Population relates to the share size of one's population, it is not a determinant of power but it is crucial to maintain a large population to be able to compete militarily and economically and reach great-power status.\textsuperscript{86} Elements of national power are more than just material aspects, material elements are only incentives or predictors and do not ensure power.\textsuperscript{87} The different realist authors define several non-material elements, such as power of opinion,\textsuperscript{88} national characteristics, national morale and diplomacy.\textsuperscript{89} But there is an overall united idea of material resources as the stable primary ingredient to power.

\textsuperscript{85} Morgenthau. Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace. p. 131-133
\textsuperscript{86} Morgenthau. Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace. p. 137-138
\textsuperscript{87} Waltz. Theory of International Politics. p. 183-184
\textsuperscript{88} Carr. The Twenty Years's Crisis, 1919-1939: an introduction to the study of international relations. p. 132
\textsuperscript{89} Morgenthau. Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace. 96-105
### 3.3 Definitions and Operationalization

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4. Empirical Analysis

4.1 Balance of Power - Countering the U.S. Military Coalition

It is fairly clear that China is starting to reach the political size and power to the extent that the enormous American military presence in the Indo-Pacific region is starting to become a serious international issue. There are numerous signs of this in numerous arenas, and one of the major ones is the South China Sea.

4.1.1 The Sino-American Rivalry - Militarisation of the South China Sea

The U.S. currently holds stable military stations all over South Korea and Japan, stretching down to the Island of Okinawa. The Americans also has a stable installation in Singapore, and numerous rotational stations all over the Philippines stretching as long into the SCS as the Balabac Island. The American military infrastructure is all over China, and their modern use is mainly to protect the sovereignty of the American alliance from transnational threats and to protect commercial interests, which are vital for numerous American national interests. Additionally it also serves to oppose the Chinese military growth in the region, and has done so since Mao Zedong and the Communist won the Chinese civil war in 1949.

This is also how it is perceived in China, which holds the position that the U.S. is the real threat in the region, and uses their patrols in the SCS with motives of protections of freedom of navigation as excuses to contain China and to undermine their sovereignty.

To counter the American presence in the South China Sea, with air and naval bases all over the Philippines, China took military control over several Islands between 2013-2015. These

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95 Zhang. Journal of Strategic Studies. [Table 1]. p. 7
operations served to further develop their military presence and to protect Chinese interests and sovereignty from foreign threats.\textsuperscript{96} Previously, the Chinese reach over the region was limited to the Islands of Hainan, which was too narrow to assert any larger control with continuous patrols or any kind of military operations. Land-occupations in the Islands-chains of the Spratly Islands and the Paracel Islands and constructions of artificial ones, dealt with those issues. Some of their installations on these Islands indicate preparations of nuclear-equipped submarines, which arguably serves a grander purpose than protecting Chinese sovereignty.\textsuperscript{97} To more potently be able to match the U.S. military capabilities in the region seems to be more likely. Previously nuclear submarines were isolated to China’s north sea fleet, but has now expanded to the south sea fleet,\textsuperscript{98} which cements Chinese power in the south.

As well as balancing towards the U.S. militarily, there was also a notion of scrutinizing the American international leadership, in a timeframe where China seized an opportunity where the U.S. had done little in relation to other conflicts far from their shores. The Obama-administration at the time, did not repel with force when China annexed the Scarborough ref in conflict with the Philippines, and did not intervene when the Syrian regime used chemical weapons in the Syrian war in 2013. There was a sense in the Chinese power booths that the Obama-administration was too concerned with domestic issues and cautious with the use of force abroad.\textsuperscript{99} In this light, the Chinese land reclamations could be seen as an external balancing effort,\textsuperscript{100} as it proved to U.S. allies that the American security-umbrella might be a pipe-dream, which in the long run probably weakened the U.S-Indo-pacific alliance.

Since 2015 and their land grabbings in the South China Sea, China has expanded their military strength rapidly. Frankly, it is the most rapid military build up since World War II,

\textsuperscript{96} Zhang. Journal of Strategic Studies. p. 12-13
\textsuperscript{98} Roy. The South China Sea Disputes: Past, Present and Future. p. 21
\textsuperscript{99} Zhang. Journal of Strategic Studies. p. 15-18
\textsuperscript{100} Waltz. Theory of International Politics. p. 118
and they are using the SCS as one of their primary arenas in this build up, with a vast expansion of the navy. The Chinese navy actually processed the American in number of combat ships, as early as 2015, and the trend is continuing. The American fleet should still be considered superior though, with 11 major aircraft carriers. Even thus, the Chinese military build up in the SCS could still reach the strength to match the U.S. capabilities in the specific region, as China enjoys the advantage of home ground. After the land reclamations in the early 2010s, China began the construction of seven air and naval bases located in the Spratly Islands, piercing deep into the SCS. As of now, according to U.S. commander John C. Aquilino, some of these Islands have been fully militarized and heavily equipped with air-fighter jets and anti-aircraft missile systems. The Chinese military strength has grown strong. And is now robust enough to successfully monitor and control the region, and would be a great military challenge even to the capabilities of the United States.

![Figure 1: U.S. and China, naval ships](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Poling_Written%20Testimony.pdf) [Accessed: 06-12-2023].

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In 2018 China conducted it largest ever naval-exercise in the South China Sea, with the personal of 10 000 onboard of 48 warships and 78 aircrafts,\textsuperscript{106} showing off its newly increased strength at sea. And through history, the one with the largest fleet in pure numbers tends to be victorious in warfare at sea.\textsuperscript{107} Even if the Biden-administration has worked to display commitment to the region,\textsuperscript{108} U.S. allies are worried about the fact that the American mainland is located at the other side of the Pacific and do not have a sincere will to stay committed.\textsuperscript{109} The Chinese run similar thoughts, as they view the U.S. as capable of being militarily involved far away from home, but not truly willing.\textsuperscript{110}

The struggle to establish regional power balance by the Chinese and the American struggle to ensure influence and contain China, has led to a vast militarisation of the south-east Asian region, let alone the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{111} A struggle where China is trying to reach a more pleasing balance of power mainly by internal balancing and increasing individual military strength.\textsuperscript{112}

4.2 Regional Hegemony and the South China Sea
The Chinese effort to establish regional hegemony currently seems to be in the phase of balancing regarding the American presence in the region. But there are numerous signs which suggest that China wants to take this further. Regarding China’s southern coastal neighbors, their pursuits are rather more direct and confrontational.

4.2.1 The Monroe Doctrine-Analogy
The Chinese claims of the SCS and the nine-dash line could be a matter to connect to the American “Monroe doctrine” in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{113} Just as the American growth in the americas sparked the project to box the European imperialists out of

\textsuperscript{108} Executive Office of The President. Indo-Pacific Strategy of The United States. p. 4
\textsuperscript{109} Walters. China’s military puts Indo-Pacific on edge.
\textsuperscript{110} Zhang. Journal of Strategic Studies. p. 17
\textsuperscript{111} Chang. Strategies Behind China and the Asia-Pacific’s Military Base Construction.
\textsuperscript{112} Waltz. Theory of International Politics. p. 118
\textsuperscript{113} Mearsheimer. The Chinese Journal of International Politics. p. 387-388
their nearby region, such as the Russian Empire and the Spanish.\textsuperscript{114} China is out to do the same in the south-east asian region in the modern era. In this regard, the nine-dash line could be more of an political expression of influence, and not the bases behind specific territorial claims, which they claim officially.\textsuperscript{115} Further, numerous assessors view the Chinese territorial claims to the SCS and its Islands as logically weak,\textsuperscript{116} which arguably could indicate an alternative idea behind it.

The U.S. saw the European presence in the Americas as threatening to the stability and peace in the region, which gave birth to the Monroe Doctrine; Europeans should stay out of the Americas just like the U.S. stays out of European affairs. The Europeans on the contrary, called the Monroe Doctrine illegitimate.\textsuperscript{117} In similar fashion China views the American presence in the region as problematic and threatening,\textsuperscript{118} and ensures that China themselves has no imperialist or colonial ambitions.\textsuperscript{119} And just as the Europeans viewed the American struggle as illegitimate, the international court The Hague has ruled the Chinese claims in the SCS as illegitimate.\textsuperscript{120} As Mearsheimer described, regional hegemons rarely want to see the rise of an equal elsewhere.\textsuperscript{121}

President Xi Jinping commonly stresses that China opposes the “cold-war mentality” of hegemonism and bloc-confrontations, which obviously is directed at the United States global efforts including the Indo-Pacific.\textsuperscript{122} Xi further once stressed that a wise man changes his ways as the circumstances change, referring to the United States as he proclaimed that Asia needs a new structure of security. Xi calls for an end to the American alliance with countries

\textsuperscript{115} Scott. \textit{China Information}. p. 301
\textsuperscript{116} Roy. \textit{The South China Sea Disputes: Past, Present and Future}. p. 4
\textsuperscript{117} Scott. \textit{China Information}. p. 302
\textsuperscript{120} The Hague. Press Release: The South China Sea Arbitration. \textit{The Republic of the Philippines V. The People’s Republic of China.}
\textsuperscript{121} Mearsheimer. \textit{The Tragedy of Great Power Politics}. p. 140-141
like Japan, South Korea and the Philippines, as it only offers security to some states and leaves others out. This could be interpreted as a prompt to the U.S. to leave Asian security to Asian states, and that China should instead be the main actor in such a security coalition. Xi Jinping further stated during the 100th year anniversary of the communist party, that China has never bullied any other people nor ever will. But then he added that China will never allow any foreign force to humiliate China again. This statement is probably related to the Chinese sense of being contained by the Americans.

Chinese “wolf-warrior diplomacy” has been the phrase to define Chinese diplomacy in recent years under Xi Jinping's reign. It is a confrontational, assertive and bold style of expression in the international realm and in diplomatic affairs, and is named after the Chinese film series with the same name. This style of diplomacy is used to frimley criticize the western led order in defense of their expansionist advances. In August of 2023, the newly reinstalled Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, havely accused the United States as the aggressor and troublemaker in the South China Sea, as he stated that the U.S. is sabotaging Chinese efforts to reach agreements with ASEAN countries over a code of conduct in the sea.

“... the United States and some other forces wish nothing but chaos in the South China Sea and keep stirring up trouble in this sea area. Recently, the United States fanned up the flames over the Ren’ai Jiao dispute, provoked discord and incited confrontation between China and the Philippines...”

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These types of statements are descriptive of how China views the U.S. presence in the region and serves to condemn international policing, to further add to the alternative picture of the American global peace effort, as dictatorial and revolting. Which further serves to make the U.S. hesitant, in their pursuit to contain the Chinese rise. The Chinese view the lack of leadership of the Obama-administration, the political tendencies of Brexit and the popularity of Donal Trump’s isolationist ideas as indicative of the American decline. This is formulated in the Chinese context as “great changes unseen in a century”. In this regard, the Monroe Doctrine analogy is interesting, which could mean that the nine dash-line is a political statement by a rising power towards the established world order, in the struggle to reach regional dominance.

Even though China mainly employs balancing and verbal expressions towards the Americans, there are increasing signs of more confrontational behavior. In October 2023, the Pentagon released previously classified video-evidence of hundreds of U.S-China air-related incidents. Whereas the U.S. Department of Defence states that the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has engaged in numerous high-stakes maneuvers to harass and intimidate U.S. airborne international patrols in the Indo-Pacific region, where a large portion took place over the South China Sea. These types of maneuvers could probably be categorized as blackmailing behavior, which serves to threaten and intimidate the U.S. However, blackmailing against powers with similar or exceeding capabilities are unlikely to produce major results. These issues and tension was one of the major topics of Xi Jinping and Joe Biden’s meeting in San Francisco some weeks ago. Where they both agreed to open the previously sealed military dialog between the two rivals, to avoid major incidents. As of now, it is neither in the American or the Chinese interest to engage in a major conflict. The Chinese probably view the U.S. as too strong to confront, and Biden is probably uncertain of the American willingness. This is probably why China mainly uses verbal expressions to prompt their desire and are cautious with the use of force towards the Americans.

128 Doshi. The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order. p. 264-265
130 Mearsheimer. The Tragedy of Great Power Politics. p. 152
131 Baldor. Biden and Xi agree to restore some military-to-military communications between the US and China.
4.2.2 Intimidating ASEAN neighbors into Acceptance

The U.S. is undoubtedly the largest threat to Chinese dominance in the SCS and the Indo-Pacific region as a whole. To counter the American presence, the Chinese are mainly in the phase of balancing, verbal blunting and to some extent blackmailing. In regards to the Chinese neighbors though, their efforts are more direct and confrontational. Possibly because strategies of blackmailing and threatening are way more effective where the strength-ratio is more favorable.\(^{132}\) The Chinese expansion has served to intimidate and out-compete adjacent powers, such as the Philippines and Vietnam. As the ASEAN countries have contested the Chinese nine-dash line, The former Chinese Foreign Minister, Yang Jiechi allegedly told his South East Asian peers during a conference in 2010, “China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that is just a fact”.\(^{133}\) This type of statement was probably alarming of what laid ahead, as China views the nine-dash line and their domination of their nearby region as natural. The Chinese land reclamations from the early 2010s were in this regard, to show strength towards neighboring states in the sense that China has the military and economic capabilities to develop and take control of the SCS themselves. As China was unhappy with projects of joint development in the sea,\(^{134}\) and cooperative commitments with ASEAN states.\(^{135}\) This could be seen as an act of strength and to establish regional dominance in relation to China’s neighbors, as their attempt of diplomatic joint efforts seemingly failed. To become a regional hegemon one must exercise control over others and assert authority, through one way or another.\(^{136}\)

Since China's land-reclamations and militarisation of the sea, China has mostly used their maritime fishing militia in dealings with adjacent actors, which could be categorized as a semi-militant fishing fleet. The means of the militia mostly constitutes harassment, intimidation and other types of gray-zone activities.\(^{137}\) The means of these gray-zone

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132 Mearsheimer. The Tragedy of Great Power Politics. p. 152
136 Doshi. The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order. p. 3
activities is very advantageous, as it obstructs the exposed from making valid decisions on how to respond properly. In fear of responding disproportionately harshly to a mightier power, the target probably tends to respond too softly if any.

Over the last decade there has been a vast deployment of these vessels, and after several constructions of ports and outposts in 2018, the size and number of Chinese militia vessels grew explosively. Which means that the Chinese militia outnumbers and outsizes all the other militia fleets of nearby states by margins. This has in turn, led to numerous incidents involving Chinese vessels, whereas they confidently with their size and number advantage, could ram, harass and intimidate Vietnamese and Filipino vessels into leaving areas of Chinese interests. The evidence of this is overwhelming, as diverse media platforms and newspapers report on Chinese vessels harassing other ASEAN states vessels frequently. Just weeks ago, the Philippines foreign ministry summoned the Chinese ambassador Huang Xiliang to protest and appeal Chinese harassment of Filipino vessels in the South China Sea.

The increasing threat of the Chinese maritime militia has become alarming to ASEAN states, especially to Vietnam and the Philippines. Vietnam’s uttered paper of National Defence in 2019, is clearly influenced by the increasing Chinese threat by sea. Especially in regards to their welcoming of international actors to use their naval facilities and their call for further military cooperation among ASEAN states. Which could be perceived as a call for aid, as Vietnam is trying to internationalize their dispute with China to involve more influential players.

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actors. Whereas China on the contrary, encourages ASEAN countries to enclose the SCS to international agents. Which obviously serves the Chinese agenda, as international actors led by the presence of the U.S. is the only genuine threat to Chinese regional dominance in the South China Sea.

4.3 Extracting Elements National of Power in the South China Sea

One of the primary elements of sustaining and developing power is energy resources, both through economically and military industrial aspects. The Chinese military apparatus and economic industry must be fed to maintain its size and be able to grow further. In this concern, one of the primary aspects behind the initiative in the SCS seems to be the extraction of energy resources.

4.3.1 The Hunt for Oil and Natural gas

Although China is one of the world's largest energy producers and currently the world's largest producer of coal, China is heavily dependent on imports to meet its energy demands. Currently China imports roughly 85% of its oil consumption, 40% of its gas and 7% of its coal. In this regard, China is mainly dependent on oil and gas, and is estimated to be the world's largest importer of crude oil. The vast majority of these imports originate from the Middle East and Russia, whereas large portions of the imports has to be transported through rocky, insatiable and contested areas. The Chinese oil tankers must first sail through the Hormuz strait or the Bab-el Mandeb strait in the Middle East, to then reach the Malacca strait. After reaching the Malaccas, tankers must further enter the heavily contested SCS to be

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Måns Nilsson, 2SK31E

able to reach the Chinese mainland. The Middle East tends to be a troubled arena and the U.S. has extensive naval presence all over the Indian Ocean. The U.S. also has a stable stronghold in Singapore, which surrounds the Malacca strait where a vast portion of the Chinese oil imports are transported. This constitutes that China is operating with dangerously high stakes, where the energy-flow could be strangled by foreign threats at any time. The Chinese military strategist has even openly described overseas interest concerning energy and resources as a major security concern. Xi Jinping also instructed Chinese oil companies such as CNOOC to drastically increase domestic exploitation offshore to enhance Chinese self-sufficiency in energy.

![Chinese supply chain](image)

**Figure 2:** Chinese supply chain. Accessed through Asia Times. Originated from the Department of Business Administration, National Taiwan University. 2017. p 14

In the quest to ramp up domestic oil and gas production, the SCS has become an immensely relevant arena to Chinese security. Partly to protect the oil tankers' routes in the sea, but

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149 CRS Reports. *U.S. Defense Infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific: Background and Issues for Congress.* [Figure: 2]. p. 13

150 Aluf. *China’s reliance on Middle East oil, gas to rise sharply.*


mainly because of the energy treasures that are estimated to lie beneath it. The SCS is estimated to contain 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas,\textsuperscript{153} which makes it a formidable target to the Chinese in the pursuit to secure energy supplies and tackle the security dilemmas of Malacca and the Middle East. One of the major incentives behind China’s land reclamations in several islands along the Spratly Islands and the Paracels between 2013-2015, was to support Chinese oil exploitation and fishing industry in the sea.\textsuperscript{154} Since Xi Jinping's call for increasing domestic energy production, and Chinese military campaigns in the South China Sea, oil drilling seems to have expanded to the mid-southern area in the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{155} In the last three years, Chinese state owned oil companies have deployed research explorations in the sea with allegedly record breaking drilling exercises.\textsuperscript{156} And in mid 2022, state owned CNOOC made discoveries of shale oil, which could be a great achievement in combating oil and gas dependence.\textsuperscript{157}

The Chinese militarisation of the SCS also contributes to shield constructions of maritime facilities in closer connection to the Malacca strait, which enables China to assert larger control in regards to oil imports. These facilities could support oil tankers and escorting warships to a larger extent with maintenance, fueling and repair.\textsuperscript{158} This strategy could be referred to as part of China’s “string of pearl strategy”, which constitutes an ambition to construct bases and diplomatic ties along import routes to assert control,\textsuperscript{159} as China frequently sends Chinese navy vessels to escort commercial ships through the Middle East, Indian Ocean and the Malacca strait.\textsuperscript{160}

\textsuperscript{154} Zhang. Journal of Strategic Studies. p. 13
\textsuperscript{159} Roy. The South China Sea Disputes: Past, Present and Future. p. 23
4.3.2 Supporting the Chinese Fishing-fleets

The Chinese economic growth in the last decades has sparked a humongous increase in meat consumption from 7 million tons of meat in 1975 to 87 million tons consumed in 2018. The vast increase could be attributed to the socio-economic growth of the Chinese middle class, which has constituted a shift from diets mainly composed of grains to meat-oriented diets. A large portion of that is the Chinese fish consumption which is by a margin the largest in the world, and the average Chinese citizen consumes double in comparison to the average citizen of the world.161 Some studies indicate that the Chinese fish consumption will continue to increase vastly in the next ten years, and the consumption could heavily surpass their production.162 Fish has always been an important cultural feature of the Chinese diet and the South China Sea has for long served as a fruitful bay to local Chinese fishermen.163 Nearly 12% of the world's fishing activity can be attributed to the waters and approximately half of the world's fishing vessels sail the waters.164 The historical Chinese fishing in the sea has further been the strongest cultural link between Chinese historical state-structures and the SCS. This cultural connection further backcloths the Chinese official position on the South China Sea and the nine-dash line today.165

Even though the nine-dash line and the Chinese claims to the sea have other motives than solely protecting Chinese historical maritime activities, it is still a strong incentive behind their initiative in the region. As the vast economic growth in the country has sparked vast increasings in seafood consumption and as the trend will likely continue, expansions in the SCS to more potently support the fishing industry was a must do to the Chinese. The land reclairations in the early 2010s would facilitate China's fishing-industry with constructions of fishing-ports further into the South China Sea. Previously, Chinese fishing vessels had to be

163 Gao and Bing B. *The American Journal of International Law.* p. 98
subject to control by Vietnamese and Filipino authorities when taking shelter in rough weather.\textsuperscript{166} This was fairly disadvantageous, as China and these states are bitter adversaries over the fishery in the sea.\textsuperscript{167} The Chinese expansion of fishing ports through the military land reclamations, would partly deal with that issue.

Other than solving these security issues regarding Chinese fishing vessels, China has used their expansion and militarisation as a springboard to enlarge their control over the waters to fend off fishing vessels of other states. As the SCS is subject to dangerous overfishing,\textsuperscript{168} and is of enormous value to the Chinese fishing industry, China probably wants to reduce competition over catches. Along this argument, one of the primary objectives of the Chinese maritime militia seems to be the denial of foreign vessels trying to reach fruitful fishing spots.\textsuperscript{169} In the same fashion, the Chinese expansion also contributes to more potently authorize their annual fishing bans, which they have announced for over 20 years, and is officially motivated by efforts of sustainable fishing.\textsuperscript{170} Some assessors, however, argue that the bans could have alternative objectives. With the sustainability argument, China is putting themselves in a win-win situation, as it justifies their patrolling of the sea and their condemnation of the Vietnamese and the Philippines as they neglect the Chinese bans. With the argument that they are jeopardizing environmental sustainability and putting their interests above, the Chinese bans are hard to dismiss.\textsuperscript{171}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
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\bibitem{Poling} Poling. Mallory and Harrison. \textit{Pulling Back the Curtain on China's Maritime Militia}. p. 13
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5. Conclusions

5.1 Results

In relation to the paper's formulated research question; *How can the Chinese expansionist initiative in the South China Sea be explained?*

The Chinese expansionist initiative in the South China Sea seems to be an effort to balance the American military presence in the Indo-Pacific region. The effort is seemingly successful as the Chinese naval might is reaching the strength to challenge the U.S. in the examined region. The end goal of this effort however, will be to push the American military infrastructure out of the region completely and reach regional hegemony. The evidence of this is mostly connected to verbal expressions and some nuances of threatening, as China neither has the military strength to confront nor wish to escalate. However, China is pursuing regional hegemony more direct and practical in regards to its southern neighbors, the ASEAN states. Most significantly with its semin-militarised fishing militia, as China is cautious with the use of full-scale military force, as this could escalate into confrontations with the U.S. There is also evidence which suggests that China's expansionist project in the sea is about extracting elements of national power. This mainly surrounds food supplies, oil and natural gas in de-risking strategies. As China must deal with issues of national security regarding self-sufficiency. The paper has not discovered anything that could be considered groundbreaking interdisciplinarily but has probably added new data to how certain Chinese initiatives are appearing.

5.2 Theoretical and Methodological Conclusions

One of the most important theoretical aspects of this paper is the conceptual apparatus, and the given concepts reached a satisfying amount of explanatory factor. It could be argued however, that the empirical findings of balance of power and regional hegemony regarding the U.S. was slightly overlapping at times. The militarisation of the SCS from the Chinese side, could be defined as both an act of balancing and to pursue regional hegemony, which naturally complicates the categorization. The concepts still serve their specific purposes though, and are both incentives behind the Chinese expansion regarding the Americans. Possibly, another concept should have been raised which better identifies some of the
findings. Another theoretical challenge was to categorize some strategies and behaviors, like the behavior of the Chinese semi-militarised fishing militia. Modern warfare is today mostly conducted through gray-zone activities, and probably way more so than at the time where the realist authors wrote some of their major theoretical pieces on some strategies to assert power. The whole point of acting though gray-zone activities is the complexity to categorize it by others, which naturally complicates the categorization.

Methodologically, one of the major challenges was to avoid political tendencies in the processing and assembling of the empirical data and the records. The issue is common in social and political sciences but especially involving ongoing tense conflicts like the SCS disputes. Using data and records associated with Chinese agencies is problematic in regards to transparency and reliability in certain aspects. This resulted in much use of data from western oriented agencies and organizations, which tends to paint an antagonistic picture of the Chinese. It has been this study's ambition to avoid these tendencies, but the features are problematic and probably influences the findings to some extent.

5.3 Further Research

The Chinese quest to establish regional hegemony and balance the U.S-Indio-pacific alliance, has led to the militarisation of the SCS we witnessed today. But there are several more cases where this is taking place. Another is the East China Sea, where China seeks to control the first and second Island chains in contest with the U.S. and their coalition with Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. The first Islands chain stretches from the Kuril Island to Taiwan and the second from Japan to Micronesia, which serves to contain China and protect the American allies in the region. A study on the Chinese quest and effort to counter this security dilemma, would be interesting, as it would be directed towards other powerful wester-oriented states in Asia which this study has not toucht much upon. The study also found that China is using the sea in their “string of pearl strategy” to assert more control over the vulnerable import routes through the strait of Malacca. Further research of this matter


would investigate how this appears in the Indian Ocean. Another finding of this study is that China uses the SCS as an arena of de-risking strategies to battle their energy-dependence. A further investigation of the Sino-Russian friendship would be interesting, as the Chinese aid to the Russians could be a similar de-risking strategy. Their aid to the Russians could also be a matter of “bloodletting”,\textsuperscript{174} whereas China is trying to make the battle of Ukraine as costly and long-lived as possible to weaken the west.

\textsuperscript{174} Mearsheimer. \textit{The Tragedy of Great Power Politics}. p. 154-155
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