



Degree Program in International Relations

Course of Asia - Pacific Security and Strategy

Assertive but Cautious: China's Strategy in the South China Sea Disputes

Prof.ssa Menegazzi

SUPERVISOR

Prof. Ferrara

CO-SUPERVISOR

Lucheschi Riccardo - ID 658072

CANDIDATE

Academic Year 2024/2025

Index

Introduction	2
1.1 - The relevance of the research	2
1.2 - Research question and Methodology	3
1.3 - Literature Review	5
1.4 - Outline of the thesis	7
Chapter 2 - Overview of the topic	9
2.1 - Geography and Actors	9
2.2 - The strategic relevance of the South China Sea	15
2.2.1 - Trade Routes	15
2.2.2 - Hydrocarbons.....	18
2.2.3 - Fish Resources	20
2.3 - Chinese Claims	22
2.4 - Theoretical Framework and Debate.....	26
Chapter 3 - Chinese Assertiveness	31
3.1 - How does China behave in the South China Sea?.....	31
3.2 - UNCLOS	40
3.3 - The disputes between China, the Philippines and Vietnam	47
3.3.1 - The dispute between China and the Philippines	48
3.3.2 - The dispute between China and Vietnam	55
Chapter 4 - Economic Relations, Diplomatic Initiatives, and External Presence.....	63
4.1 - Economic and Diplomatic Relations between China and the Involved Countries	63
4.2 - Code of Conduct.....	69
4.3 - United States' presence in the South China Sea	73
Conclusions	78
Bibliography.....	81

Introduction

1.1 - The relevance of the research

The South Chinese Sea today represents one of the most important maritime crossroads on a global level, a region that in recent years has attracted increasing attention from the international community for its economic, strategic and political weight. Its importance is not exhausted in a regional dimension, but touches on the economic, strategic, political and identity aspects of the contemporary international order. Situated between the Pacific and Indian oceans, this semi-closed sea is an important intersection for global peace and security as well as Asian economics. It encompasses economic concerns related to trade and natural resources, geopolitical dynamics between regional and global actors, and international law issues. Through these waters there are important trade flows: it is estimated that about one third of the world's maritime traffic passes through the South China Sea, operating as a bridge between East Asia, the Middle East and Europe. To this is added the presence of strategic natural resources, as fundamental fish reserves for the food security of the littoral countries and deposits of oil and natural gas that make the area a potential energy hub of global scope. The combination of trade routes, natural resources and geopolitical competition makes this basin one of the most contentious and unstable areas on the planet.

However, the reasons for the international interest, and in particular the Chinese interest, are not limited to economic and commercial aspects. In particular, for Beijing, the South China Sea is also a site of historical and identity claims, as the "nine-dash line", that will be later analyzed, represents a region as an integral part of the national territory, linked to the narrative of the "century of humiliation" and the need to reaffirm lost sovereignty. The historical and symbolic component is therefore another factor that explains the Chinese actions: beyond material resources, the control of the South China Sea is considered to be essential to consolidate the internal legitimacy of the Communist Party and to strengthen China's role as a regional and global power.

In this matter, territorial disputes directly involve several Southeast Asian countries, in particular the Philippines and Vietnam, and indirectly external actors such as Japan, South Korea and the United States. In this context, China's behavior emerges as a central factor: Beijing has progressively strengthened its presence through the construction of artificial islands, through the patrolling by the Coast Guard and through the deployment of military forces, even without an open conflict. This "assertive but cautious" strategy will be analysed in depth, as it reveals the logic behind the conduct of one of the greatest economic powers.

Understanding the reasons for this behavior is not only useful for interpreting Chinese policy in the South China Sea, but has wider implications. The analysis of how Beijing balances firmness and moderation provides reading keys for other future tension scenarios, inside and outside Asia. The study of this case allows to capture general dynamics of the behavior of a great power that, while pursuing ambitious goals, calibrates its moves according to the economic, strategic and reputational costs. Therefore, it is a problem that goes beyond the stability of the Indo-Pacific region and provides important insights into how China, a player that is increasingly influencing the global order, might operate in a geopolitical rivalry. In order to contribute to a more comprehensive analysis of the future of international relations and the global balances of the twenty-first century, it is necessary to examine Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea in order to throw light on a test that can predict Beijing's postures in other sensitive areas.

1.2 - Research question and Methodology

The research question is: *why does China avoid open conflict in the South China Sea despite growing assertiveness in the region?* In other words, the analysis focuses on the paradox of both aggressive and prudently limited Chinese behaviour, which translates into a strategy of gradual control of the area without exceeding the threshold of direct armed confrontation.

Despite the huge stakes in the South China Sea, from trade routes to natural resources, to the symbolic value of territorial claims, China, as the main player in the dispute, seems in fact to prefer for a limited tension management, preventing the dispute from escalating into an open confrontation. Understanding the reasons for this choice is important to assess how Beijing balances firmness and caution: an armed conflict would entail too high an economic, diplomatic and reputational cost, which would undermine its growth and international projection, particularly towards the ASEAN countries and the United States. The aim of the thesis is therefore to provide a reasoned answer to this question through an analysis of Chinese behaviour, examining both the pressure tools employed and the legal and political dynamics that help explain its strategy.

To answer this question, the methodological approach chosen is qualitative and comparative. Case studies on China-Philippines and China-Vietnam relations, the two ASEAN member countries most exposed to Chinese pressure and with strong economic constraints towards Beijing, will be used. Within each case, the process tracing will be adopted: the main phases of the events (naval incidents, diplomatic disputes, judicial interventions) will be reconstructed in order to identify how the Chinese actions have been calibrated to achieve precise objectives without exceeding certain thresholds of escalation. The analysis will be based on primary sources (official Chinese documents and Filipino and Vietnamese documents, government statements, international reports) and secondary sources such as academic studies, think tank reports and specialized journalistic news. In particular, UNCLOS documents and interventions by multilateral organisations will be examined to assess Beijing's respectfulness of international law. This qualitative approach, together with a theoretical framework drawn from International Relations, will allow to use empirical evidence with theoretical assumptions (specially realism liberalism) and to formulate conclusions based on comparison between different cases.

1.3 - Literature Review

The South China Sea is at the centre of a wide academic debate, which seeks to explain the nature and objectives of Chinese policy in the region. The main division relies on the Chinese behavior regarding the dispute, as on one side China appears as an increasingly assertive actor and willing to change the regional framework; on the other, its conduct seems directed towards avoiding a military escalation that would undermine the economic and diplomatic advantages achieved.

Firstly, a part of the studies analyse the gradual and low intensity strategies adopted by Beijing. Fravel describes the use of incremental and long-term strategies, based on administrative, military and diplomatic measures aimed at consolidating Chinese claims without prompting immediate reactions from opponents¹. This approach, although not defined by the author with the term, recalls closely the concept of salami slicing, which is a series of progressive actions that change the status quo while maintaining a low risk of escalation. Another example is represented by the author Thayer, who stresses the combined use of diplomatic and coercive instruments: on one side, there's the participation in multilateral negotiations with ASEAN, whereas on the other hand, there's the militarization of artificial islands, naval exercises and pressure on rival fleets. Following this perspective, it emerges that Chinese assertiveness should not be interpreted as direct aggression, but as a form of calibrated control².

A second group of contributions focuses on the legal dimension. Numerous studies have analysed the relationship between the international law of the sea and the claims made by Beijing, in particular with reference to UNCLOS and the arbitration judgment of 2016 promoted by the Philippines. Author Beckman, for example, highlighted the contradiction between the Chinese

¹ Fravel, M. Taylor. "China's Strategy in the South China Sea." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011): 293–319. <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs33-3b>.

² Thayer, Carlyle A., "ASEAN, China and the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea." *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 75–84, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.2013.0022>

historical narrative, based on the nine-dash line, and the international norms, showing how Beijing decided not to adhere to the arbitration³. Therefore, the literature in this field shows how China uses the right selectively, preferring the use of official statements and unilateral interpretations of the concept of maritime sovereignty.

A third approach concerns the regional geopolitical framework. Some realist authors, including Mearsheimer, identify Chinese behavior as an attempt to revise the Asian order and restrict the US presence⁴. In this key, Beijing's assertiveness would not be episodic, but part of a long-term strategy to acquire regional hegemon status. However, other academics who support the liberal approach, like Nye and Ikenberry, emphasize the significance of the limitations brought about by economic interdependence⁵. They believe that a strong trade integration between China and ASEAN, with the function of multilateral forums, would prevent escalation and make the use of force more costly than cooperative solutions.

Finally, some recent contributions analyse Chinese behaviour not really on the basis of rigid adherence to a theoretical paradigm, but rather considering the concrete costs and benefits that different actions can bring. As a matter of facts, Zhang and other authors note that Beijing's actions follow a practical logic of weighing the risks and benefits to its economy, diplomacy, and reputation rather than being entirely consistent with either the realist or liberalist framework⁶.

In summary, the literature converges in recognizing Chinese assertiveness as an obvious and growing phenomenon, but differs on motivations and outcomes: for some, it is a clear revisionist

³ Robert Beckman, “*The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea*” American Journal of International Law, 2013

⁴ Mearsheimer, J. J., “*The Gathering Storm: China’s Challenge to US Power in Asia*”, The Chinese Journal of International Politics, 2010

⁵ Nye, Joseph. 2015. “*Is U.S.–China Conflict Imminent in the South China Sea?*” The Huffington Post, June 3. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-nye/us-china-south-china-sea_b_7503966.html.

⁶ Zhang, Ketian. “*Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing’s Use of Coercion in the South China Sea*” International Security 44, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26777884>.

project of long term; for others, it is the result of a prudent strategy aimed at affirming the presence of Beijing without creating conflict. This research is part of this debate, proposing an integrated reading that takes together the logic of power and the constraints of interdependence.

1.4 - Outline of the thesis

The thesis is divided into five chapters, each of which deals with a specific aspect of research. After the introduction, the second chapter offers a presentation of the region, analysing the geography of the South China Sea and the actors involved in the dispute. It highlights the economic and strategic importance of the region, highlighting not only the value of trade routes and natural resources, but also the historical and identity motivations that fuel the Chinese interest. Lastly, the chapter introduces the theoretical debate as an interpretative framework.

The third chapter focuses on Chinese assertiveness, showing how Beijing pursues its interests through a combination of diplomatic instruments, coercive measures, and the construction of military infrastructure. A section focuses on the legal dimension, with particular attention to the role of UNCLOS and China's selective use of international law. The analysis culminates in two case studies, namely the relations with the Philippines and Vietnam, which, through the process tracing method, highlight how China uses gradual pressure, while avoiding crossing the threshold of a direct armed conflict.

The fourth chapter deals with the fragility of the regional situation, highlighting three central aspects. Firstly, the state of economic and diplomatic relations between China and the other countries involved, characterised by increasing interdependence that coexists with political and territorial tensions. Secondly, the analysis of the negotiation process of the Code of Conduct between ASEAN and China, conceived as a conflict management tool but still incomplete in its potential. Finally, the role of the United States is discussed as an external player capable of influencing regional balances both as guarantor of freedom of navigation and as deterrent to Beijing.

The fifth and final chapter collects the results of the analysis and responds to the initial research question. The conclusion is that China is pursuing a gradual, assertive and cautious control strategy: an approach that allows it to expand its influence in the South China Sea without flowing into an open conflict.

Chapter 2 - Overview of the topic

The South China Sea is one of the most significant and strategically important regions worldwide. Its uniqueness stems from a combination of various factors, including economic, geopolitical, and identity-based interests. Situated in a pivotal location between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, it results in a fundamental route for maritime trade and a reservoir of natural resources, including fisheries and hydrocarbon deposits. Meanwhile, the region has been an arena of territorial and maritime disputes involving different regional and international actors, emerging as a key hotspot in the global contemporary order.

This chapter aims to analyze in detail the geographical features of the region and the actors involved in the dispute. Specifically, this chapter will examine the physical geography of the South China Sea and the territorial claims of its littoral states, covering islands, rocks and low-tide elevations. It will then stress the economic and strategic importance of such an area and the roots of Chinese interests in it. In the final part of the chapter, the debate will be presented, presenting the theoretical frameworks that the thesis will draw on.

2.1 - Geography and Actors

Before analyzing the sovereignty claims in the South China Sea in detail, it is important to understand its geographical location precisely. First, the South China Sea is a marginal sea, not considered part of the Pacific Ocean, as it is partially closed or semi-closed at the margins of an ocean. As a matter of fact, marginal seas are usually separated from the oceans by archipelagos, peninsulas, or have a limited connection to the ocean⁷. The South China Sea is located between the southern coast of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the north, Vietnam to the west,

⁷ Meereisportal.de (n.d.) “*Marginal Sea*” Available at: <https://www.meereisportal.de/en/glossary/Marginal%20sea>

whereas its eastern and southern edges are located on the coasts of the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia and the Thailand Gulf (Figure 1).⁸

As the coastal landscape of the South China Sea is defined and made complex by the abundance of many small islands, islets, rocks, and reefs, features that are closely tied to the maritime claims of the surrounding states, there have been various interpretations as to what the actual size of the Sea is. According to the official analysis by the International Hydrographic Organization, the total surface area is estimated to be approximately 3 million square kilometers.⁹

As for the land features present in the South China Sea, they number more than 250, grouped into six larger clusters¹⁰: the Paracel Islands, the Spratly Islands, the Scarborough Shoal, the Pratas Islands, the Macclesfield Bank, and the Natuna Islands.



Figure 1, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2013

⁸ International Hydrographic Organization, Limits of Oceans and Seas, Special Publication No 23, 3rd edn (Monte Carlo: IHO, 1953), at 30.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Sacks, Benjamin J., “The Political Geography of the South China Sea Disputes”, Rand Research Primer, 2021, pag 3.

Authors and Institutions avoid calling the land features present in the South China Sea “islands”, since, based on the criteria defined by international law, an island is “a naturally formed area of land, surrounded by water, which is above water at high tide”.¹¹ This concept is key in the South China Sea dispute, as applying different definitions to the land features results in various approaches in the legal environment. As a matter of fact, those features that cannot sustain human habitation or economic life, and that are naturally formed, are usually considered "rocks".¹² Nonetheless, the thesis will explore this matter in the next chapter.



Figure 2, South China Sea. U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, Wikipedia Commons

Exploring the features of the different clusters in the South China Sea, three main groups stand out as the most subject to the territorial disputes, namely the Paracel Islands, the Scarborough Shoal, and the Spratly Islands. Paracel Islands count about 130 elements, which are between 300-350 kilometers away from the Vietnamese coast and the Hainan southern Chinese island, and are further divided into two main groups: the Amphitrite and the Crescent (Figure 2). Spratly Islands instead consist of over 100 elements, spread over 410 thousand km², are located on the southeastern edge of

¹¹ United Nations. (1982). *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (Part VIII, Article 121). Retrieved from https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/part8.htm

¹² Ibid

the South China Sea and several of them fall within the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of Brunei, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Despite the name, and unlike some of the Paracel Islands, “almost none of the Spratly Islands are thought to be able to naturally 'support habitation' without human alteration”¹³, and they therefore lack any non-military permanent population¹⁴. In addition, given the presence of many sunken reefs, coral atolls awash and islets that disappear in condition of high tide, this region of the South China Sea has also adopted the name of “Dangerous Ground”.¹⁵ Lastly, the Scarborough Shoal is a “small, high-tide elevation about 140 miles west of the Philippines”¹⁶ on the northeastern side of the Spratly Islands (Figure 2), and it represents one of the focal points of the dispute in the region. This location, too, has not been classified as an island.

Moving over to the state of the art of the current division of the islands and land features in the South China Sea, despite China claiming supremacy over the whole Sea through the Nine-Dash Line, which will be analyzed later in this Chapter, the southeast Asian countries associated to the dispute still hold authority over land features, yet China being “the largest and most active party in the South China Sea disputes”¹⁷. As a factual matter, the Paracel Islands are under the complete control of the PRC’s most southerly province, Hainan Island, notwithstanding the opposition and clamancy exerted by Vietnam, which lost control of the western part of the archipelago after a clash with the PRC in 1974. Moreover, PRC controls the Scarborough Shoal, which is one of the most prominent examples of the contemporary emergence of the dispute, specifically between China and the Philippines. On the other side, the control over the Spratly Islands is much more complicated, as their geographical features appear more scattered (Figure 3), to such an extent that this group of islands is nowadays considered the “most hotly contested part of the SCS (South China Sea), as

¹³ Sacks, Benjamin J., “*The Political Geography of the South China Sea Disputes*”, Rand Research Primer, 2021, pag 4.

¹⁴ “Spratly Islands,” The World Factbook, webpage, last updated July 15, 2025b. As of July 15, 2025:

<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/spratly-islands/>

¹⁵ *Sailing Directions (Enroute), Pub. 161: South China Sea and the Gulf of Thailand* (PDF). Sailing Directions. United States National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. 2017. p. 11-17.

¹⁶ Morris, Lyle J., A U.S. Option Playbook for Contingency Planning to Reclaim Scarborough Shoal, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-335-RC, 2019. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE335.html>

¹⁷ Ibid

China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam all occupy and effectively administer multiple islands and features in the group, each controlling a military landing strip”¹⁸. Furthermore, China, Taiwan, and Vietnam claim the totality of these islands.¹⁹

Vietnam currently occupies about 50 outposts in the Spratly Islands, which the country keeps improving through defensive positions and infrastructure²⁰. In addition, the country has 14 surveillance facilities known as “economic, scientific, and technological service stations” on submarine banks near the Spratlys, but these are not considered part of the islands themselves, and thus not considered by them as part of the dispute.

The Philippines controls nine features in the Spratlys. Among these, some islands are garrisoned by troops, while others are monitored by military ships without permanent structures²¹. In 1999, the Philippines also ran aground a military ship, the BRP Sierra Madre, on Second Thomas Shoal, using it as a base for eight troops tasked with “monitoring Chinese naval movements” and to defend the Philippines’ claims in the area²².

China has occupied six features in the Spratlys since 1988, plus Mischief Reef since 1995. All of the outposts have been transformed into artificial islands through massive land reclamation work since 2013; by extracting sand from the seabed and depositing it onto coral reefs, areas that would typically be submerged at high tide are converted into stable, above-water landmasses.²³ Besides these, the outposts on Mischief, Subi and Fiery Cross have been equipped with “air bases with

¹⁸ Rolf, S. & Agnew, J., 2016. Sovereignty regimes in the South China Sea: assessing contemporary Sino-US relations. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 57(2), pp.216–233.

¹⁹ EIA, U.S. Energy Information Administration, “*South China Sea*”, 2024

²⁰ “Spratly Islands,” The World Factbook, webpage, last updated July 15, 2025b. As of July 15, 2025: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/spratly-islands/>

²¹ Vuving, Alexander L., “South China Sea: Who Occupies What in the Spratlys?” The Diplomat, May 6, 2016.

²² Rolf, S. & Agnew, J., 2016. Sovereignty regimes in the South China Sea: assessing contemporary Sino-US relations. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 57(2), pp.216–233.

²³ Vuving, Alexander L., “South China Sea: Who Occupies What in the Spratlys?” The Diplomat, May 6, 2016.

helipads and aircraft hangers, naval port facilities, surveillance radars, air defense and anti-ship missile sites, and other military infrastructure”.²⁴

Malaysia officially occupies five features in the Spratly Islands, but some sources attribute eight to it. The three “extra” features are sparsely manned or not permanently inhabited, and often consist of beacons or occasional visits. Malaysia only recognizes five bases with permanent troops²⁵.



Figure 3: U.S. Department of State, 2015

NOTES: Red triangles represent the PRC, orange stars represent Malaysia, green diamonds represent the Philippines, blue circles represent The ROC, and purple squares represent Vietnam.

Brunei claims only one feature, Louisa Reef, and has a 2009 agreement (exchange of letters) with Malaysia that effectively recognizes Brunei's sovereignty over this area. Although Malaysia has not officially withdrawn its territorial claims over this feature, the deal weakens its position²⁶.

²⁴ Spratly Islands,” The World Factbook, webpage, last updated July 15, 2025b. As of July 15, 2025: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/spratly-islands/>

²⁵ Vuving, Alexander L., “South China Sea: Who Occupies What in the Spratlys?” The Diplomat, May 6, 2016.

²⁶ Ibid

Lastly, the ROC (Republic of China) controls the largest feature in the Spratlys, Itu Aba (Taiping), one of the few Spratly Islands that are potentially able to support human life naturally²⁷. The Pratas Islands, not belonging to the Spratly Islands but part of the South China Sea, also under ROC control, comprise the wedge-shaped Pratas Island itself and two largely submerged coral reefs some 140 miles southwest of Hong Kong in the northeastern South China Sea. The Pratas Islands also do not have a non-military permanent population²⁸.

2.2 - The strategic relevance of the South China Sea

The reasons why the South China Sea draws such considerable interest and serves as a source of heightened tensions are different, spanning from military to economic factors, which play an important role in making the Sea an epicenter of instability. In particular, these motivations can be traced back to three main directions: the essential trade routes that pass through the Sea, the supposed presence of deposits of hydrocarbons and fishing stocks within it. These three dimensions, individually significant, acquire even more importance if analyzed through the lenses of energy security, globalization, economic interdependence, and sustainability of the countries' food resources.

2.2.1 - Trade Routes

Among the reasons that make the South China Sea such a strategically relevant region in the world, the presence of major trade routes is arguably the most important²⁹. Nowadays, this vast maritime area represents one of the most congested aisles for shipping products, energy resources, and consumer goods, serving as a crossroads that links East Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and the United States. As a matter of fact, in recent years, the South China Sea has become one of the

²⁷ Sacks, Benjamin J., *"The Political Geography of the South China Sea Disputes"*, Rand Research Primer, 2021, pag 6.

²⁸ Rowan, Joshua P., "The U.S.-Japan Security Alliance, ASEAN, and the South China Sea Dispute," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 45, No. 3, May–June 2005, pp. 414–436.

²⁹ Rolf, S. & Agnew, J., 2016. Sovereignty regimes in the South China Sea: assessing contemporary Sino-US relations. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 57(2), pp.216–233.

global backbones of international trade, accounting for 3.37\$ trillion as of 2016, the latest year for which this data is available.³⁰ On a percentage scale, it has been analyzed that the Sea carries an estimated one-third of global shipping, much of which passes through the Strait of Malacca³¹. In 2016, China was the largest trading nation in the region, as a matter of both imports and exports, respectively 26% (874\$ billions) of the total Sea exports and 18% (598\$ billions) of the total Sea imports (2016), followed by countries as South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, Japan, and Vietnam. Indeed, countries as South Korea and Japan, despite not being littoral states of the South China Sea, still heavily rely on it, to ship and import their products (Figure 4).³²

Country	% Share of World GDP	Trade Value through South China Sea (USD billions)	South China Sea Trade As % of All Trade in Goods
United States	24.5	208	5.72
China	14.8	1470	39.5
Japan	6.53	240	19.1
Germany	4.58	215	9.00
United Kingdom	3.46	124	11.8
France	3.26	83.5	7.77
India	2.99	189	30.6
Italy	2.45	70.5	8.14

Figure 4: CSIS ChinaPower Project | International Monetary Fund, 2021

Delving deeper in the shipment of energy resources, in 2023, the South China Sea was one of the main transit routes: approximately 10 billion barrels of oil and oil products and 6.7 trillion cubic feet of liquefied natural gas (LNG) passed through this maritime area, which at that time accounted for 12,6% of the worldwide trade³³; as regards petroleum and petroleum products, “10 billion barrels ...passed through the South China Sea”, approximately 37% of the total, more than a half of them

³⁰ Jacque Schrag, “How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?,” ChinaPower Project, January 25, 2021.

³¹ United Nations Conference On Trade And Development, “Review of Maritime Transport”, 2016.

³² Jacque Schrag, “How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?,” ChinaPower Project, January 25, 2021.

³³ EIA, U.S. Energy Information Administration, “Global trade in liquefied natural gas continued to grow in 2023”, 2024

origin from the Middle East, specifically Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Iraq (Figure 5).³⁴

Considering the information on the trade of crude oil, condensate, and petroleum products across the South China Sea, this route carried almost half of the world's maritime oil shipments in 2023, with China, South Korea, and Japan the leading importers. As it turns out, the PRC, that is the world's largest consumer of oil and gas and is the world's largest petroleum importer³⁵, relies for most of its hydrocarbon deliveries from the Malacca Strait and South China Sea.³⁶ Lastly, the region was crucial to the flow of refined petroleum products, much of which was supplied and consumed by Asia-Pacific economies, especially those of Singapore and Malaysia.³⁷

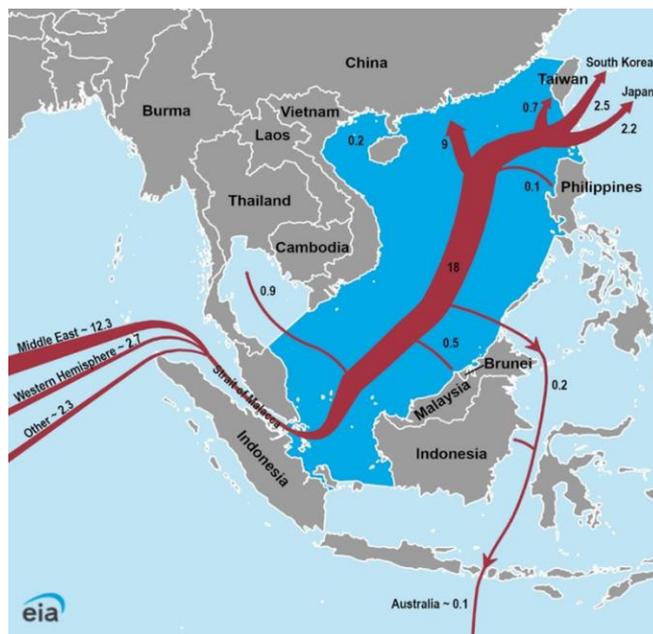


Figure 5: South China Sea crude oil trade flows in million barrels per day, 2023, U.S. Energy Information Administration

Thus, in this macro area, the security and freedom of navigation not only symbolize a regional necessity but an essential need for the global economy.

³⁴ EIA, U.S. Energy Information Administration, “South China Sea”, 2024

³⁵ Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), “Chinese Energy Transit and Resource Potential in the South China Sea”, 2019

³⁶ US Department Of Defense, “Military and Security Developments involving the People’s Republic of China”, 2024.

³⁷ Ibid

2.2.2 - Hydrocarbons

As the demand in the Asia-Pacific countries for liquid fuels and natural gas is projected to increase in the following years, at a rate of respectively 1.3% and 1.6% annually, accounting for share of global total consumption of 43% and 28% by 2050, South China Sea represents a huge opportunity to be able to satisfy the internal energy demands.³⁸ Due to the explorations undertaken since the beginning of the XXth Century, it has been indicated that the South China Sea is “one of the most prolific hydrocarbon producing regions of the World”³⁹. Current estimates suggest that natural gas accounts for approximately 70% of the total hydrocarbon resources, while oil makes up the remaining 30%. The latest analyses, each forecasting distinct values, show a considerable amount of the energy resources in the region, ranging from 3.6 billion barrels of petroleum and 40.3 trillion cubic feet of natural gas (Figure 6), to 213 billion barrels of oil predicted by a Chinese company, an amount that would make South China Sea compete with Persian Gulf countries (i.e. Saudi Arabia production amount to 265 billion barrels).⁴⁰

Country	Liquids proved and probable reserves (million barrels)	Natural gas proved and probable reserves (trillion cubic feet)
Indonesia	44	1.1
Philippines	17	0.4
Malaysia	1,284	28.9
Brunei	299	1.9
China	1,423	5.7
Vietnam	530	2.3
Total	3,596	40.3

Figure 6: Rystad Energy, CubeBrowser: South China Sea reserves by country, 2023

Anyhow, as of today, proven oil reserves in the South China Sea are estimated at approximately 7.5 billion barrels. In contrast, current production exceeds 1.3 million barrels per day and is gradually increasing, as littoral states continue to invest in infrastructure. However, much of the sea remains underexplored due to ongoing territorial disputes.⁴¹ An interesting factor when

³⁸ EIA, U.S. Energy Information Administration, “South China Sea”, 2024

³⁹ Mu Ramkumar, M. Santosh, “Hydrocarbon reserves of the South China Sea: Implications for regional energy security.” Energy Geoscience, 2020, 1 (1-2), pp.1-7.

⁴⁰ EIA, U.S. Energy Information Administration, “South China Sea”, 2024

⁴¹ Mu Ramkumar, M. Santosh, “Hydrocarbon reserves of the South China Sea: Implications for regional energy security.” Energy Geoscience, 2020, 1 (1-2), pp.1-7.

considering the hydrocarbons’ potential deposits in the South China Sea, especially within the broader concept of the regional dispute, is that the majority of these resources are believed to be found in uncontested areas, as they belong to clearly defined EEZs of northern Malaysia and Brunei, and southern Vietnam (Figure 7). Notably, these three countries have traditionally taken an active stance by investing in offshore extraction, such as pipelines, to harness their maritime resources, driven by their lack of significant domestic energy reserves.⁴²

To be more specific, through geologic analysis, a lack of a significant quantity of hydrocarbon was highlighted in the Paracel Islands; on the other hand, the Spratly Islands “may have significant deposits of undiscovered hydrocarbons. The Spratly Islands are in the South China platform, which the USGS estimates to have between 0.9 billion barrels and 3.0 billion barrels (mean 2.1 billion barrels) of petroleum and other liquids and between 0.0 Tcf (trillion cubic feet) and 16.2 Tcf (mean 8.0 Tcf) of natural gas in undiscovered resources.”⁴³



Figure 7: U.S. Geological Survey, World Bank, ESRI, and U.S. Energy Information Administration

South China Sea oil and natural gas basins

As regards the Chinese approach to the extraction, there has been an increase in the value of oil and natural gas production, mainly through the three companies China National Offshore Oil

⁴² EIA, U.S. Energy Information Administration, “South China Sea”, 2024

⁴³ Ibid

Corporation (CNOOC), China Petroleum & Chemical Corporation (Sinopec), and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC). The first one is the main player in the region, where its extractions account for 43% of its total oil production and 60% of its natural gas production.⁴⁴ Noteworthy is the fact that CNOOC can possibly satisfy 24% of the Chinese internal hydrocarbons demand, thus clearly symbolizing the positive impact the South China Sea has for energy resources.⁴⁵

Finally, a marginal resource that makes the region strategically relevant is the discovery of methane hydrate, or “fire ice”, a type of natural gas trapped in ice crystals on the ocean floor, made in 2017. From the Chinese standpoint, this marks not only another step towards a future energy autonomy⁴⁶, but also another step forward to intensify current disputes, as the resource has been found in contested waters.⁴⁷

2.2.3 - Fish Resources

Fishing stocks represent another important asset among the region’s resources. As of 2015, it has been estimated that 12% of the global fish catch (10 million tons) has been harvested in the South China Sea, making it one of the top five most productive fishing zones in the world, despite covering just 0,97% of the water surface.⁴⁸ Second, the fishing-based economy, in 2012, accounted for \$21.8 billion, and an estimated 3.7 million workers, of whom many more haven’t been accounted for due to illegal, unreported and unregulated activities. Thirdly, the historical high number of resources led to an increase in the number of fishing vessels, which a study estimated to be 55% of the world total.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ EIA, “China energy indicators 2023”, 2025

⁴⁶ BBC, “China claims breakthrough in mining ‘flammable ice’”, 2017

⁴⁷ Foreign Policy, “China Taps Lode of ‘Fire Ice’ in South China Sea”, 2017

⁴⁸ Center for Strategic & International Studies, “A Blueprint for Fisheries Management and Environmental Cooperation in the South China Sea”, 2017

⁴⁹ Rabbani A., “China’s Hegemony in the South China Sea”, 2019

Regardless of these indicators and the fact that the South China Sea is home to 3365 known species of marine life⁵⁰, there's an equally significant body of negative data suggesting that the situation is deteriorating. As the South China Sea Expert Working Group stated: "The entire South China Sea is teetering on the edge of a fisheries collapse, and the only way to avoid it is through multilateral cooperation in disputed waters."⁵¹ Indeed, the littoral countries might feel a bigger impact on fisheries' scarcity in the region, as they've historically relied more on fish as an economic source and as a source of nutrients, resulting in a high susceptibility in the event of a lack of resources.⁵²

Harvests in the last two decades have declined by 66 -75% percent, whereas the total fish stocks dropped by 70% to 95% since 1950.⁵³ This trend has been aggravated due to the adoption of harmful fishing techniques, such as dynamite and cyanide, which, taken together with the restructuring of the islands in the region, have also led to the decay of coral reefs "at a rate of 16% per decade".⁵⁴ The result is a Sea where most of the stocks have been severely exploited⁵⁵, as in the Philippines, where 80% of the fishing grounds have been almost emptied, reducing the fishermen's average daily harvest by 75% since the 1970s.⁵⁶ Moreover, two other reasons endanger the fishing activities: first, the disputed locations in the South China Sea, especially concerning China and the other Southeast Asia actors, have increasingly restricted access to contested areas, undermining the relatively peaceful coexistence that once prevailed;⁵⁷ second, the situation has also been exacerbated by the growing number of Chinese fleet called "maritime militia", supported by substantial state subsidies and driven by increasing domestic demand. As a result, incursions and arrests for "considered" illegal fishing are now frequent, as demonstrated by the March 2016 incident between

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Center for Strategic & International Studies, "*A Blueprint for Fisheries Management and Environmental Cooperation in the South China Sea*", 2017

⁵² Schofield C., "*Fishing, not oil, is at the heart of the South China Sea dispute*", 2016.

⁵³ Trajano, J., "*Resource Sharing and Joint Development in the South China Sea: Exploring Avenues of Cooperation*", Nanyang Technological University, 2019.

⁵⁴ Schofield C., "*Fishing, not oil, is at the heart of the South China Sea dispute*", 2016.

⁵⁵ FAO, "*World Review Of Fisheries And Aquaculture*", 2012.

⁵⁶ Schofield C., "*Fishing, not oil, is at the heart of the South China Sea dispute*", 2016.

⁵⁷ Trajano, J., "*Resource Sharing and Joint Development in the South China Sea: Exploring Avenues of Cooperation*", Nanyang Technological University, 2019.

Chinese and Indonesian vessels, which escalated to involve their respective patrol forces.⁵⁸ Lastly, owing to the willingness to keep the same harvest levels, the size of more undersized and juvenile fish has increased compared to the larger ones⁵⁹, a further condition that is starting to exert pressure on the littoral countries' governments to undertake shared decisions and to try to limit the contemporary reckless fishing activities.

2.3 - Chinese Claims

Chinese claims over the South China Sea, despite the prevailing Party's rhetoric, do not have deep historical roots. Before the 20th century, the region was mainly regarded as a trading hub, not as a region to be claimed, to the point that even historical maps produced by the Qing Dynasty portrayed the Chinese southernmost border at Hainan Island. Populations living close to the Sea and European countries, at the time colonizers, considered it as a passage rather than a location to be subject to a country's jurisdiction.⁶⁰

The turning point for the Chinese perception of the South China Sea occurred by the end of the 19th Century, when China was experiencing a severe geopolitical crisis. In fact, due to Japan storming into vast Chinese territories, the so-called "Sino-Japanese War" (1894-1895), combined with the intervention of European Countries to suppress the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901), a strong opposition against the Qing Dynasty was starting to take shape.⁶¹ This led Chinese people to recognize this period as "national humiliation", a reference to the demeaning acts inflicted by foreign power upon China, a feeling that continues to resonate strongly within today's population. This influenced China's transformation from a passive actor to an active one, specifically regarding its approach to the South China Sea. In 1909, following a Japanese expedition to Pratas Island intended for guano extraction, the governor of Guangdong Province dispatched naval vessels to the island to assert

⁵⁸ Schofield C., "*Fishing, not oil, is at the heart of the South China Sea dispute*", 2016.

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Hayton, Bill, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*, New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2014.

⁶¹ Ibid

Chinese sovereignty and reclaim it.⁶² This symbolized the first expansive behavior in this matter, since once the boats returned to mainland China, the Governor commissioned the first-ever map depicting a formal claim over territories in the South China Sea⁶³, converting this event “into a question of national pride for the first time”⁶⁴, notwithstanding the explicit lack of interest of both Qing and Ming in augmenting their empire’s size through new maritime frontiers.⁶⁵

Hayton B., writer of “The Modern Origins of China’s South China Sea Claims: Maps, Misunderstandings, and the Maritime Geobody”, believes that this event didn’t give birth to an ancient right, but was instead the intentional creation of a new claim.⁶⁶ Qing dynasty, aware of its fragile situation, took advantage of it to legitimize its ruling against the new revolutionary group, such as Sun Yat-sen’s Tongmenghui. After the collapse of the dynasty and the birth of the Republic of China (1912), interest in the South China Sea remained limited, by both the ROC and the other littoral and European countries.

Interestingly, in 1933, after an informal annexation of the Spratly Islands by France, which acted to prevent a supposed Japanese seizure, the latter and the Chinese government opposed the measure without taking any counteraction to reclaim the features. Hayton, again, justifies this behavior citing official ROC documents clarifying that what China considered as the southernmost boundary were the Paracels Islands.⁶⁷

It is in this period that the concept of "maritime geobody" emerges, that is, a symbolic construction that links national identity to territories never really controlled, the result of a cultural

⁶² Hayton B. “*The Modern Origins of China’s South China Sea Claims: Maps, Misunderstandings, and the Maritime Geobody*”, 2019.

⁶³ Sacks, Benjamin J., “*The Political Geography of the South China Sea Disputes*”, Rand Research Primer, 2021

⁶⁴ Hayton B. “*The Modern Origins of China’s South China Sea Claims: Maps, Misunderstandings, and the Maritime Geobody*”, 2019.

⁶⁵ Salmon, Claudine, “*Coastal maps from the beginning of the Qing dynasty, with special reference to the Qingchu haijiang tushuo*”, 2006

⁶⁶ Hayton B. “*The Modern Origins of China’s South China Sea Claims: Maps, Misunderstandings, and the Maritime Geobody*”, 2019.

⁶⁷ China Legal Science, “*The nature of China's nine-dash line in the South China Sea and the legal status of the waters within the line*”, 2019

and media mobilization.⁶⁸ In 1936, Bai Meichu, a regular citizen, published the "New China Construction Map", the first to introduce the famous nine-dash line, which would later become the symbol of Chinese maritime claims.⁶⁹ This line was officially adopted by the Republic of China in 1947, although it was not published for Chinese audiences until 1948.⁷⁰

The end of World War II carried a new activism. In 1947, after the loss of control by Japan, the Republic of China sent its marine to occupy the island of Itu Aba and officially claimed the Paracel and Spratly Islands.⁷¹ With the Communist victory and the escape of the Nationalist government to Taiwan, claims (Spratlys and Paracels) were resumed by the new People's Republic of China (PRC). In 1951, during peace San Francisco Peace Conference, Premier Zhou Enlai declared Chinese sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly.⁷² In 1958, the PRC issued a declaration extending maritime sovereignty by explicitly linking it to island territoriality for the first time.⁷³ Since then, the claims are no longer limited to the islands but extend to the surrounding seas, with a conceptual leap towards the control of "adjacent waters".⁷⁴ During the 1960s and 1970s, however, the dispute took a secondary role due to the Vietnam War and the Cultural Revolution in China.⁷⁵

With economic openness and increased international projection, China initiated a process of legal codification of its claims. In 1992, the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Area Act was enacted,

⁶⁸ Bill Hayton, "The Modern Origins of China's South China Sea Claims: Maps, Misunderstandings, and the Maritime Geobody," *Modern China* 44, no. 1 (2018): 1–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0097700418771678>.

⁶⁹ Benjamin J. Sacks, *The Political Geography of the South China Sea Disputes: A RAND Research Primer* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022), 8, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA2021-1.html>.

⁷⁰ Chris P. C. Chung, "Drawing the U-Shaped Line: China's Claim in the South China Sea, 1946–1974," *Modern China* 41, no. 1 (2015): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0097700415598538>.

⁷¹ Bill Hayton, "The Modern Origins of China's South China Sea Claims: Maps, Misunderstandings, and the Maritime Geobody," *Modern China* 44, no. 1 (2018): 1–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0097700418771678>.

⁷² M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011): 293, <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs33-3b>.

⁷³ Chris P. C. Chung, "Drawing the U-Shaped Line: China's Claim in the South China Sea, 1946–1974," *Modern China* 41, no. 1 (2015): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0097700415598538>.

⁷⁴ Statement of the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Territorial Sea (September 4, 1958), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/diaoyudao/chn/flfg/zcfg/201510/t20151009_8560578.htm#

⁷⁵ Benjamin J. Sacks, *The Political Geography of the South China Sea Disputes: A RAND Research Primer* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022), 8, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA2021-1.html>.

following the 1958 declaration⁷⁶; in 1996, the maritime baselines were published; and in 1998, the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and Continental Shelf Act was passed: “The EEZ law did not refer to the Paracels or the Spratlys, but, when combined with the 1992 law on territorial seas, it provides a basis for claiming maritime rights in the South China Sea.”⁷⁷

In parallel, in 2009, China sent the United Nations a map containing the "nine-dash line," reactualizing a legacy of the Republic of China and making the inclusion of that line mandatory in every official map and even in passports. This operation, which has been seen as part of a national project to overcome the "century of imperialist humiliations" and reaffirm an ethno-nationalist identity, is a case of "discursive use of historical remains," rather than a clear definition and conformity with international law.⁷⁸

However, the ambiguous nature of the nine-dash line remains clear: it does not define precise boundaries or clarify the legal regime of the waters included and is incompatible with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), as established by the Hague Court in 2016.⁷⁹ Interestingly, the Chinese government has released “a new version of its national map for 2023 to incorporate Taiwan and most of the West Philippine Sea in August 2023. Therefore, the nine-dash line has now become a ten-dash line.”⁸⁰

In recent years, China has included the South China Sea within its "core" national interests, although blurred: officially, the definition of "core interest" has been applied only to islands and adjacent waters, not to the whole sea.⁸¹

⁷⁶ M. Taylor Fravel, “China’s Strategy in the South China Sea,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011): 293, <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs33-3b>.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*

⁷⁸ Steven Rolf and John Agnew, “Sovereignty Regimes in the South China Sea: Assessing Contemporary Sino–US Relations,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57, no. 3 (2016): 300, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2016.1234403>.

⁷⁹ *ibid*.

⁸⁰ Pei-Shan Kao and Jenn-Jaw Soong, “China’s Marine Political Economy in the South China Sea and Its Development Strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities, Challenges, and Trends on the 14th Five-Year Plan,” *The Chinese Economy* 58, no. 2 (2025)

⁸¹ M. Taylor Fravel, “China’s Strategy in the South China Sea,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011): 293, <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs33-3b>.

The increasing economic, energy and strategic importance of the South China Sea is linked also to the initiative of the "Maritime Silk Road" and the 14th Five-Year Plan (14th FYP), which emphasizes the development of the marine economy, the security of the trade routes and the transformation of China into a global marine power.⁸² In addition to the military dimension, which remains crucial to ensuring access and projection of force, Chinese demands are now part of a broader framework of sustainable development, environmental protection and geopolitical role.⁸³

Concluding, as Pei-Shan Kao and Jenn-Jaw Soong stated, the South China Sea presents four main opportunities to the People's Republic of China, "firstly, by developing the South China Sea economy, China's influence in the South China Sea can be enhanced. Secondly, mastering the energy supply in the South China Sea will contribute to China's sustainable economic development. Thirdly, to maintain the safety of maritime trade and transportation in the South China Sea will help the development of China's trade and shipping, and even solve the security concerns of "Malacca dilemma" (referring to China's strategic vulnerability due to its heavy reliance on energy and trade shipments passing through the narrow Strait). Fourthly, more importantly, through the research and economic development of the South China Sea Ocean, the sovereignty of China's nine-dash line can be ensured."⁸⁴

2.4 - Theoretical Framework and Debate

The study of Chinese behavior in the South China Sea cannot be considered independently of the theoretical frameworks provided by the realm of the primary school of thought of International Relations. In particular, concerning this thesis, the academic debate is focused on the feasibility of the realist and liberalist paradigms, which offer two distinct approaches to the countries' behaviors

⁸² Pei-Shan Kao and Jenn-Jaw Soong, "China's Marine Political Economy in the South China Sea and Its Development Strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities, Challenges, and Trends on the 14th Five-Year Plan," *The Chinese Economy* 58, no. 2 (2025): 190, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10971475.2024.2384170>.

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Pei-Shan Kao and Jenn-Jaw Soong, "China's Marine Political Economy in the South China Sea and Its Development Strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities, Challenges, and Trends on the 14th Five-Year Plan," *The Chinese Economy* 58, no. 2 (2025)

and the international order. Choosing a theoretical framework is not only aimed at supporting a thesis's standing, but also to position it within the main academic interpretations.

Realism

Realism, which is furtherly divided into four main subcategories (classic, structural, offensive, and defensive), represents one of the main ways used to interpret China's behavior in the region. According to this paradigm, the international system is characterized by anarchy, construed as a condition in which there is a total lack of authority exercised by international organisms, unable to impose binding rules.⁸⁵ In this context, countries are considered to be individual and rational actors, and their primary concern is to ensure their survival while focusing on the power equilibrium and national security.⁸⁶

The application of this perspective in the South China Sea highlights how the increasing Chinese assertiveness could be interpreted as an attempt to maximize China's security and strengthen its status quo as a regional power, thus reducing the possibility of a military presence of the United States and its allies in the region.⁸⁷ Concepts that will be analyzed in the next chapter, as the artificial improvement of the islands, the naval drills, and official statements regarding Chinese sovereignty in the Sea, reflect, through this logic, the research of power and the control of strategic resources.

Anyhow, part of the realist literature underlines how China is not pursuing a conflictual strategy, but rather a "salami slicing" one, in other words, a series of incremental and calibrated actions aimed at modifying the status quo while not provoking a military reaction by the different regional actors, and, as the thesis will later analyze, the United States.⁸⁸ Thus, the current Chinese

⁸⁵ Waltz, K. N., *"Theory of International Politics"*, 1979

⁸⁶ Morgenthau, H. J., *"Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace"*, 1948; Mearsheimer, J. J., *"The Tragedy of Great Power Politics"*, 2001

⁸⁷ Mearsheimer, J. J., *"The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia"*, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2010

⁸⁸ Fravel, M. T., *"China's Strategy in the South China Sea. Contemporary Southeast Asia"*, 2011

posture could be considered, within the realist theories, as a combination between offensive realism and limited revisionism, the latter being a strategy adopted by a country seeking to change its status quo, while avoiding direct confrontation.

Liberalism

On the contrary, liberal theories focus on the possibilities for cooperation in an interdependent international order, where international organizations and economic ties between countries may work against a potential conflict.⁸⁹ Countries' behavior is therefore not only interested in seeking power or its security, but it also bases its decisions on the economic costs of potential conflict and the opportunities offered by potential cooperation. In the South China Sea dispute, liberal literature believes that China's economic interdependence with ASEAN countries and the United States symbolizes a restraining factor, inducing Beijing to avoid a military escalation that could threaten its trading, financial, and reputational interests.⁹⁰ The participation in multilateral forums, as the ASEAN Code of Conduct program, and its participation in bilateral dialogues represents a consistent behavior with liberalist theories.⁹¹

Therefore, this Chinese approach to foreign affairs highlights how it cannot be singularly categorized as a realist one, but it must be considered as a result of different structural factors and its willingness to keep a respectable reputation, especially in an environment characterized by increasing competitiveness with the USA.

⁸⁹ Keohane, R. O., *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* 1984; Nye, J. S., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* 2004

⁹⁰ Ikenberry, G. J., *The Rise of China and the Future of the West. Foreign Affairs* 2008, 87(1), 23–37.

⁹¹ Acharya, A., *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 2014

Debate

The debate between realist and liberalist approaches has produced divergent interpretations of Chinese behavior. On one side, analysts believe in a Chinese pursuit of a strategic expansion in the region, aiming at changing the regional order to its advantage, in line with the realist perspective. As Mearsheimer said, “If China continues its striking economic growth ... it is likely to act in accordance with the logic of offensive realism... China is likely to follow basic realist logic and attempt to become a regional hegemon in Asia”⁹², but adding “It is unlikely that China will go on a rampage... Instead, China will want to dictate the boundaries of acceptable behaviour to neighbouring countries, much the way the United States does in the Americas”⁹³. In his interpretation, China’s rapid economic growth has grown hand in hand with a strategic one, and with the uncertainty of the other countries’ intentions, it is rational to obtain regional control.

On the other hand, different researchers highlight the supreme relevance of the economic bonds and reputational aspects, which can moderate Chinese actions, avoiding therefore, a potential conflict. According to Joseph Nye⁹⁴, the economic interconnections and supranational institutions increasingly arbitrate relations between different countries, and he coined, helped by Robert Keohane, the concept of “complex interdependence”, describing a world where states and non-state actors are connected through multiple channels of interaction and where military force plays a reduced role. Others criticize Mearsheimer’s stand as he “exaggerates the fear that an uncertainty over China’s intentions causes and that he underestimates ways by which such uncertainty can be mitigated (for instance, through costly signaling and by increasing the cost of conflict). The assumption of uncertain

⁹² Maersheimer J., “*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (Updated Edition)*” 2003.

⁹³ Maersheimer J., Brzezinski Z., “*Clash of the Titans*, Foreignpolicy.com, 2022.

⁹⁴ Nye, Joseph. 2015. “*Is U.S.–China Conflict Imminent in the South China Sea?*” The Huffington Post, June 3. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-nye/us-china-south-china-sea_b_7503966.html.

intentions, therefore, does not, contrary to Mearsheimer's claims, make states assume that other states have the worst intentions."⁹⁵ Lastly, the presence of alternative regional powers, as Japan, suggests that a strategy of military hegemony may have a lot of risks and high economic cost for Beijing.

Research Standpoint

In this thesis, a mainly realist approach will be adopted, while also considering the liberalist theory. In particular, it will start from the hypothesis that China is pursuing a strategy of incremental control of the region, consistent with the typical realist logic of power and security, but that this strategy is moderated by the necessity to avoid conflict, whose costs, in an economically interconnected world, would be far higher than the actual advantages.

This hybrid approach will make it possible to grasp both the competitive and the cooperative dimensions of international relations in the region, providing a more complex and accurate interpretative framework of the dynamics. It will therefore adopt a realist lens, thus aiming to explain the infrastructures being built in the South China Sea, the military control, and the sovereignty claims, together with the liberalist one, that will analyze why and how China avoids an open conflict.

⁹⁵ Sverirr Steinson, "John Mearsheimer's Theory of Offensive Realism and the Rise of China", E-International Relations, 2014, <https://www.e-ir.info/2014/03/06/john-mearsheimers-theory-of-offensive-realism-and-the-rise-of-china/>

Chapter 3 - Chinese Assertiveness

The South China Sea is where power, law, and economics constantly intersect. In this setting, Beijing builds advantages step by step, relying on sub-threshold tools, such as coast guard units and the maritime militia, while keeping the armed forces largely in the background as deterrence. In the meantime, infrastructures and outposts on disputed features help turn presence into permanence. This approach is constantly tested against UNCLOS, which sets categories and constraints but leaves room for interpretation and legal sparring, as the debates and rulings of the past decade show.

Without anticipating any conclusions, the chapter follows these dynamics in practice: recurring frictions with Manila, from standoffs around shoals and reefs to recent tactics at sea, illustrate how low intensity pressure blends with legal argument and with the reactions of external partners. On the other hand, episodes involving Hanoi point to a calibrated assertiveness that stops short of open conflict while shaping offshore activity and Vietnam's strategic choices. The aim is to provide the reader with a compass to read behaviors, legal constraints and reactions from the main contenders, clarifying how the combination of grey instruments, contested legality and material infrastructure helps shape the balance of the region.

3.1 - How does China behave in the South China Sea?

The way China defends its interests in the South China Sea is the product of an incremental practice that, rather than aiming for a sudden turn, accumulates advantages over time: a mixture of small and medium sized administrative, diplomatic and "grey zone" moves (the latter defined by Ketian Zhang as the "physical violence by government agencies to force the target state to change its behavior... imposed by civilians and the instruments involve much smaller capabilities than those available to the military"⁹⁶), which together shift the balance without exceeding the limit of war. The basic idea

⁹⁶ Zhang, Ketian. "Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing's Use of Coercion in the South China Sea." *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 117–59. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26777884>.

is to delay the definitive settlement of disputes while consolidating their claims and dissuading others from strengthening their own: a long time strategy that combines rigidity and risk containment.⁹⁷ The entry into force of UNCLOS (1994), which has multiplied the legal and economic value of waters linked to islands, rocks and low tide elevations, and China's economic rise and its more active foreign policy, have contributed to making this theatre even more known: in this context the nine-dash line and the status of the features, natural or artificial, have become important parts of the dispute.⁹⁸ In practice, the competition runs not only on the show of power but on a plurality of factors, such as legal, administrative, economic, informative ones, used by China to increase its leverage on the field and at the table.

If we look at the history of accidents, a consistent pattern emerges. During the 1990s there have been military episodes; then, between 2000 and 2006, a relatively quieter phase (Figure 8)⁹⁹; and since 2007 a resurgence of non-militarized coercion, as diplomatic, economic, law enforcement, while military capabilities grow but remain in the background as deterrent.¹⁰⁰ The key, as the author Zhang explains in “Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing’s Use of Coercion in the South China Sea”, is a cost calculation: coercion is more likely when China feels high the need to assert a reputation for resolve and economic costs are low, while preference for non-militarized instruments increases when the risk of geopolitical backlash, as counter-alignments and external involvement, is high. This explains why Beijing, despite it became more powerful, often prefers limited instruments:

⁹⁷ Fravel, M. Taylor. “China’s Strategy in the South China Sea.” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011): 293–319. <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs33-3b>; Sacks, Benjamin J. *The Political Geography of the South China Sea Disputes: A RAND Research Primer*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA2021-1.html>. doi: 10.7249/PEA2021-1.

⁹⁸ Steven Rolf and John Agnew, “Sovereignty Regimes in the South China Sea: Assessing Contemporary Sino–US Relations,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57, no. 3 (2016): 300, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2016.1234403>.

⁹⁹ Andrew Chubb, “Dynamics Of Assertiveness In The South China Sea”, The National Bureau of Asian Research 2022, https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr99_dynamicsofassertiveness_may2022.pdf

¹⁰⁰ Zhang, Ketian. “Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing’s Use of Coercion in the South China Sea.” *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 117–59. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26777884>.

coast guard, maritime militia, selective pressures on trade and investment, administrative actions and legal arguments.¹⁰¹

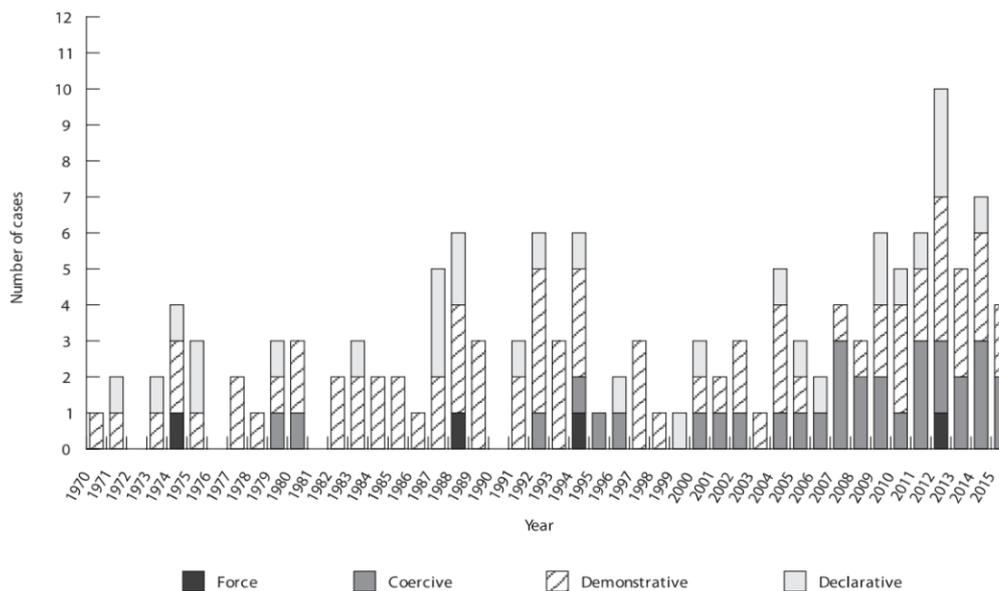


Figure 8: Dynamics Of Assertiveness in the South China Sea, The National Bureau of Asian Research
 PRC assertive moves in the South China Sea (1970–2015)

Within the Chinese behavior there are two recurring labels: salami slicing and cabbage tactics. The first makes the idea of the breakdown of change into "slices": small steps, each too limited to justify a drastic reaction, but which in series produce irreversible changes on the ground.¹⁰² It can be of repeated logistic obstacles, of small interdictions that make difficult the supplies to outposts of others, or of an increasingly dense presence of marine police unit that normalizes a certain operating order in the contested space. The second, called “cabbage tactics”, alludes to the layered surroundings of an area or a disputed relief: in the first fishing ring (often part of the maritime militia), then the China Coast Guard, and only further back, not always visible, the marine settings; the effect is that of a gradual siege that isolates the counterpart, rendering risky supplies and rotations, while not

¹⁰¹ Ibid

¹⁰² Darshana M. Baruah, “South China Sea: Beijing’s ‘Salami-Slicing’ Strategy, *The South China Sea Disputes*”. March 2017, 255-258

triggering the manifest use of military force.¹⁰³ Examples cited include “the 2012 encirclement of Scarborough Reef in the South China Sea, contested by the Philippines; the 2013 presence near Ayungin Island, also claimed by the Philippines; the installation of a CNOOC oil rig within Vietnam’s claimed Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ); and the 2019 activity near Pagasa Island in the South China Sea”.¹⁰⁴

This ecosystem rests on the synergy between maritime militia, coastguard and PLA. The militia, whose members are also called "little blue men", multiplies the civil presence and indeed serves for a double goal: first, “it is used as a show of force to deter rival fleets. Second, many of these vessels operate as proxies for the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and the PRC Coast Guard, serving as dual use military and civilian assets that monitor neighboring states’ activities”¹⁰⁵; moreover, it has been defined as a militia “that has a growing strategic purpose, what has been dubbed the “3Ds” of China’s SCS strategy: *declare* (Chinese claims), *deny* (other countries’ claims), and *defend* (those claims).¹⁰⁶ The consequence is that this "low force density" set-up is effective because it turns coercion into administrative routine: what yesterday appeared to be an accident today becomes a procedure, tomorrow a habit. The other pillar of the strategy is the creation of infrastructures. In the archipelagos Paracel and Spratly China has extended or created surfaces emerged by dredging and reclamation, and has built ports, runways, hangars, radar and missile installations; consolidated a presence on 20 outposts at Paracel and 7 at Spratly; and has permanently deployed earth-air systems in both.¹⁰⁷ Woody Island (Paracel)(Figure 9), in particular, has become a key node, with fighter jets, cruise missiles and radar systems making it a hub for surveillance and regional interdiction, evidence

¹⁰³ Richard A. Bitzinger, “China’s Militarisation of the South China Sea: Creating a Strategic Strait?”, RSIS Commentary, September 2016.

¹⁰⁴ Lorenzo Cappelletti, “The South China Sea: A Complex Historical and Geopolitical Landscape”, ESCP International

¹⁰⁵ Sacks, Benjamin J., “The Political Geography of the South China Sea Disputes”, Rand Research Primer, 2021

¹⁰⁶ Richard A. Bitzinger, “China’s Militarisation of the South China Sea: Creating a Strategic Strait?”, RSIS Commentary, September 2016.

¹⁰⁷ Kao, P.-S., & Soong, J.-J., “China’s Marine Political Economy in the South China Sea and Its Development Strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities, Challenges, and Trends on the 14th Five-Year Plan”, The Chinese Economy, 58(2), 2025.

of a shift from remote control to a permanent, armed, ground-based presence capable of sewing the western and eastern extremes of the basin into a kind of strategic strait under Chinese influence. In this context, all the artificial islands in the Spratly have the mirror function to the east: a fortified arch that, combined with Hainan and Paracels, strengthens the capacity for surveillance, interdiction and logistical support on one of the most trafficked routes in the world.



Figure 9: Woody Island (China), Google Maps

This clear plan, composed of long slopes, deep docks, radar domes, is accompanied, according to US defensive sources, by more discreet activities on unoccupied reefs, with physical changes of small scale but significant for the purposes of their legal status (eg. as high-tide elevations), to support related maritime claims.¹⁰⁸ As a matter of facts, the improvement of the islands through the use of increase sensors' covering, logistic autonomy and ability A2/AD (respectively anti-access/anti-denial), reinforces the gradual interdiction over the immediate perimeter of the features.¹⁰⁹

The leap in quality took place between the end of 2013 and 2015, when Beijing inaugurated an unprecedented program of transfers and construction. In about two years, China added about 13 km² of new surface on seven elements (a volume that shades the cumulative interventions of all other

¹⁰⁸ US Department Of Defense, “*Military and Security Developments involving the People’s Republic of China*”, 2024.

¹⁰⁹ Kao, P.-S., & Soong, J.-J., “*China’s Marine Political Economy in the South China Sea...*”, *The Chinese Economy*, 58(2), 2025; Trajano, Julius Cesar I. “Resource Sharing and Joint Development in the South China Sea: Exploring Avenues of Cooperation.” *RSIS Commentary*, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU, 11 March 2019

actors) and then stopped the massive claim and moved to a cycle of fortifications and minor additions on existing structures¹¹⁰. The decisive point is that this wave is explained with the alignment of three conditions: ability (technical and industrial availability), rational (military, administrative and logistic-economic) and opportunity (evaluation of the American resolve).¹¹¹

On the ability front, China has been working for years on reef engineering: several academics teams have been studying the geotechnical properties of Nansha corals (Spratly) since 2008, and in 2009 they began drilling on Fiery Cross to assess their transformability. In parallel, the large dredges were engaged until 2011-2012 in massive inland coastal projects, then gradually released and became available right for the works in the Spratlys. It is from this window, around 2012, that technological conditions, as machines and know-how, and regulations aligned, bringing the theme from the technical drawer to the political agenda.¹¹² As for rational, the provincial documents (Hainan) and the central directives of 2012-2013 make emergence a triple function: military, because the islands allow deterrence, alert and prohibition over a wider arc; administrative, because they support the governance of Sansha (new municipality charged with managing the island characteristics and the Chinese "maritime rights"); logistic-economic, because they transform distant and hostile platforms into refillable ports of call, reducing the operational bottlenecks linked to sea moss, distances and maintenance. The third leg, opportunity, concerns Beijing's perception of US determination in those years. Between 2012 and 2014, semi-official analyses of government think tanks and career diplomats recorded signs of US ambiguity: uncertainty about the application of the treaty with Manila during Scarborough (2012) occurrence, marked prudence on Syria and measured response to Crimea (2014)¹¹³. Thus, cumulative readings lead to a low risk of militarized backlash if China were to accelerate in that very time frame. The most eloquent detail is specular: Scarborough, under Chinese

¹¹⁰ Lorenzo Cappelletti, "*The South China Sea: A Complex Historical and Geopolitical Landscape*", ESCP International Politics, December 2024

¹¹¹ Ketian Zhang, "*Explaining China's large-scale land reclamation in the South China Sea: Timing and rationale*", Journal of Strategic Studies, 2022.

¹¹² Ibid

¹¹³ Ibid

control since 2012, was not transformed into an artificial island precisely because the American signals were perceived as clear; instead, China focused on Spratlys Islands, where the expected cost was considered manageable, thus confirming that assertiveness was there, but it was calibrated to cost and external actors, more than driven by an unconditional expansionist impulse.¹¹⁴ The outcome of the 2013-2015 wave is an arc of bases with differentiated functions that allows Beijing to switch from episodic projection to stationary. From that moment on, the prevailing trajectory is not a continuous "more islands, more land," but rather consolidation: additions and fortifications to existing outposts, but without replicating the scale of the transfers of the biennial 2013-2015, which remains an unrepeatable peak. It is consistent with the idea of saturation deterrence: once the essential (platforms, supplies, sensors) is achieved, the marginal value of another new land decreases relative to the political risk.¹¹⁵

In the life of daily interactions, diplomacy and economics complete the picture. Bilateralism is preferred to the multilateral frames, which China tends to discourage because they increase the political unpredictability and amplify the media visibility.¹¹⁶ In parallel, interdependence represents both incentive and leverage: market access, investment, tourism and infrastructure reward cooperative behavior; selective measures, as temporary restrictions on specific imports or tourist flows, signal the costs of a line considered hostile.¹¹⁷ In this context, diplomacy is marked by measures such as diplomatic sanctions, ranging from the short-term recall of ambassadors, to downgrades in diplomatic status, and even the closure of embassies, the latter considered the least severe¹¹⁸, as well as targeted economic actions. These tools reflect a deliberate effort to maintain a profile of non-militarized coercion, which Zhang identifies as the preferred strategy when the risk of strong counter-reactions

¹¹⁴ Ibid

¹¹⁵ Ibid

¹¹⁶ "A strategic analysis of the South China Sea territorial issues", Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2016, <https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/navcol/assets/pdf/topic04902.pdf>

¹¹⁷ Ibid

¹¹⁸ Ketian Zhang, "Explaining China's large-scale land reclamation in the South China Sea: Timing and rationale", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2022

is high. The objective, therefore, is not to impose punishment, but rather to shape the behavior of others while minimizing long-term costs.¹¹⁹

The chronicles of recent years, which are only mentioned here as examples as they will be analyzed furtherly in this chapter, reflect these approaches. In 2012 the stalemate on Scarborough Shoal between China and the Philippines is an emblematic case of prolonged management of the time and pace of escalation.¹²⁰ In 2014, the event of the oil platform in proximity of the Paracel highlights the speed with which the marine space can be saturated with dozens of escort ships and the difficulty for the opponents to find symmetrical answers without taking elevated risks.¹²¹ In 2016, the deployment of SAM system (Surface-to-Air Missile system) on Woody Island is read by several parties as a piece of increasing militarization, to which Beijing responds by claiming the right to defense over its considered to be sovereign territory.¹²² In 2019, the episode of the Philippine vessel hit by a Chinese unit and rescued by Vietnamese fishermen becomes an icon of the dispute where the border between accident and deliberate pressure becomes thin. In 2021, the concentration of about two hundred ships on Whitsun Reef demonstrated the saturation capacity of the maritime fleet; in 2023, the use of lasers against Filipino crews returns to discuss safety and responsibility at sea; in 2024, the collision at Second Thomas Shoal turns on the comparison on rules of engagement and risks of miscalculation.¹²³ All this happens while the United States and its allies support the capabilities of the littoral countries and reaffirm principles of freedom of navigation; the DoD (US Department of

¹¹⁹ Ibid

¹²⁰ Lorenzo Cappelletti, “*The South China Sea: A Complex Historical and Geopolitical Landscape*”, ESCP International Politics, December 2024

¹²¹ Ibid

¹²² Ibid & Pei-Shan Kao and Jenn-Jaw Soong, “*China’s Marine Political Economy in the South China Sea and Its Development Strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities, Challenges, and Trends on the 14th Five-Year Plan*,” *The Chinese Economy* 58, no. 2 (2025)

¹²³ Lorenzo Cappelletti, “*The South China Sea: A Complex Historical and Geopolitical Landscape*”, ESCP International Politics, December 2024

Defense), in its reports, frames many of these conduct as inconsistent with customary law as reflected by UNCLOS when they occur outside territorial waters.¹²⁴

An important aspect, to understand the reason behind this level of assertiveness but a lack of wars, concerns the threshold of escalation. As the author Sacks recalls, after the 1974 and 1988 episodes, Beijing avoided large scale armed clashes and often delayed negotiations on codes of conduct that could freeze its position, preferring to buy time to develop controlled features and strengthen claims.¹²⁵ The idea is not that China is moderate in the absolute sense, but that avoidance of escalation helps to its objectives: maintaining growth, reducing the risk of lasting hostile coalitions, preventing sanctions shocks, preserving internal and external flexibility.¹²⁶ Within this logic, assertiveness serves to discourage and model the behavior of others; law and administration serve to legitimize and institutionalize; the economy serves to reward or punish selectively; infrastructure serves to materialize control. And when backlash costs appear high, the non-militarized and grey area tools become the first choice.¹²⁷

By putting all the pieces together, the image that turns out is one of cautious assertiveness: China tries to maximize incremental gains and minimize the risks of an escalation out of control. This explains the centrality of strategic delay, the calibrated use of non-militarized coercion, the rarity of recent violent clashes despite high friction, the emphasis on UNCLOS and the status of the Sea's feature, the push on dual infrastructures uses and layered cabbage and salami tactics. In the broader framework, the US presence and the involvement of Japan and partners in regional maritime security,

¹²⁴ US Department Of Defense, “*Military and Security Developments involving the People’s Republic of China*”, 2024.

¹²⁵ Sacks, Benjamin J. *The Political Geography of the South China Sea Disputes: A RAND Research Primer*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA2021-1.html>. doi: 10.7249/PEA2021-1.

¹²⁶ Ibid & Fravel, M. Taylor. “China’s Strategy in the South China Sea.” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011): 293–319. <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs33-3b>; Zhang, Ketian. “Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing’s Use of Coercion in the South China Sea.” *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 117–59. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26777884>.

¹²⁷ Zhang, Ketian. “Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing’s Use of Coercion in the South China Sea.” *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 117–59. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26777884>.

works for Beijing as external constraint that suggests under-threshold and grey zone options as preferred activities, and for the other countries as political and operational parachute. It is on this mixture that daily action moves, by pushing enough to change reality in its own favor, without breaking the delicate balance that holds regional interdependence.

In the next parts of the chapter the thesis will firstly tie the instruments described here to the UNCLOS categories and to the contested practices (3.2), showing how the convention is a machine that produces constraints but also occasions of interpretation. Secondly, it will reconstruct the sequences of China-Philippines and China-Vietnam cases by process tracing method (3.3), where the thesis will analyze how the assertiveness has been modulated, what signals have turned the pressure on or off, and why, despite serious incidents, the threshold of escalation has remained invalid. Consistent with what has been discussed, the thesis will find a combination of economic incentives, administrative pressures, grey zone coercion and time management that confirms the central hypothesis of the thesis: China avoids war not because of lack of instruments, but because the strategic convenience today lies in the gradual accumulation and modeling of the regional environment.

3.2 - UNCLOS

The framework of international law, in particular the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), plays a central but controversial role in the South China Sea dispute. On the one hand, UNCLOS provides definitions and legal mechanisms for delimiting maritime areas and resolving disputes, offering littoral countries a legal instrument to claim their maritime rights. On the other hand, the inherent limits of this instrument have clearly emerged: UNCLOS cannot settle matters of sovereignty over contested lands (islands, rocks, benches) nor can it impose compliance with judgments on powers that reject them¹²⁸. This section therefore examines the relevance of UNCLOS

¹²⁸ Robert Beckman, "*China, UNCLOS and the South China Sea*", NUS Centre for International Law, 2011

in providing a legal framework for the South China Sea dispute and, conversely, highlights the practical limits in the effective resolution of the dispute.

The entry into force of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1994 has profoundly modified the legal framework of maritime disputes, introducing the principle of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 200 miles from the coasts and establishing precise criteria for sovereignty over insular formations (Figure 10).¹²⁹ On the basis of Article 121 of UNCLOS, in fact, an island is a naturally formed area of land, surrounded by water, which is above water at high tide, and only islands (not rocks) generate rights over EEZ and continental shelf.¹³⁰ Consequently, many of the small formations of the South China Sea, often emergent rocks or shoals, do not give entitlement to any EEZ, limiting themselves at most to a territorial sea of 12 miles if recognized as habitable “rocks”.¹³¹ This framework has imposed objective constraints on Chinese ambitions: a possible international recognition of a large part of the Spratly as simple rocks lacking autonomous life would nullify Beijing’s claim to exercise exclusive rights in the surrounding waters.¹³²

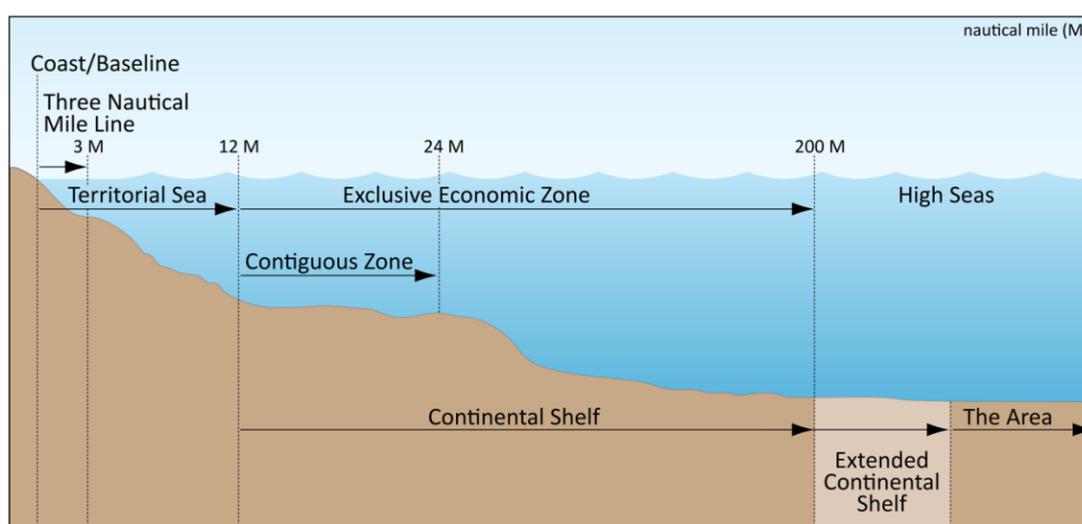


Figure 10: U.S. Department of State as modified by NOAA to add Three Nautical Mile, “Maritime Zones under International Law”

¹²⁹ Guy Standing, “Here’s why the UN’s law of the sea needs an overhaul”, World Economic Forum, 2022

¹³⁰ Robert Beckman, “The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea” American Journal of International Law 107, 2013

¹³¹ Ibid

¹³² Sardor Allayarov, “International Law with Chinese Characteristics – The South China Sea Territorial Dispute”, IIR Prague, 2023.

In fact, the arbitral verdict issued by the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague in July 2016, in response to the appeal initiated by the Philippines, confirmed precisely these principles. The tribunal established that no formation of the Spratly is legally an “island” under UNCLOS, thus denying that they can generate a 200 miles EEZ.¹³³ That pronouncement invalidated any Chinese historic claim over the waters included within the nine-dash line, insofar as it exceeds the maritime rights allowed by UNCLOS to coasts and to the real islands, even because a big portion of it falls into the EEZ of Vietnam and Philippines¹³⁴. The court also declared that some Chinese activities, for example the interference with traditional Philippine fishing at Scarborough and the construction of artificial islands on shoals, violated the provisions of the Convention.¹³⁵ In other words, the 2016 arbitration represented a strong reminder of the primacy of international law of the sea, underlining that claims must adhere to the legal categories of UNCLOS and not too vague historical titles.¹³⁶

The reaction of Beijing has however been intransigent: China has rejected entirely the arbitration, refusing from the outset to participate in the proceeding and defining the verdict “null and void”.¹³⁷ This position is based on precise legal and political arguments. On the technical level, China had already in 2006 deposited at the United Nations a declaration under art. 298 of UNCLOS to exclude disputes relating to maritime delimitations and territorial sovereignty from compulsory arbitral jurisdiction¹³⁸: “When signing, ratifying or acceding to this Convention or at any time thereafter, a State may, without prejudice to the obligations arising under section 1, declare in writing that it does not accept any one or more of the procedures ... relating to sea boundary delimitations,

¹³³ Robert Beckman, “The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea,” *American Journal of International Law* 107, no. 1 (2013): 142–63

¹³⁴ *Ibid*

¹³⁵ De Castro R., “*Blunting China’s Realpolitik Approach: Liberalism through UNCLOS Arbitration*”, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2015; The Guardian, “*Beijing rejects tribunal’s ruling in South China Sea case*”, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/12/philippines-wins-south-china-sea-case-against-china#:~:text=The%20tribunal%20also%20condemned%20China%E2%80%99s,depleted%2C%20threatened%2C%20or%20endangered%20species%E2%80%9D>

¹³⁶ Robert Beckman, “Game Changer in the Maritime Disputes,” RSIS Commentary, July 2016

¹³⁷ Swaine, Michael D., “*Chinese Views on the South China Sea Arbitration Case between the PRC and the Philippines*”. *China Leadership Monitor*, n. 51, 2016, Hoover Institution.

¹³⁸ 密晨曦, “《联合国海洋法公约》附件七仲裁评述——结合南海仲裁案的管” *国法研究* [Chinese Journal of International Law], n.3/, 2016

or those involving historic bays or titles.”¹³⁹ By virtue of such exception, according to Beijing the controversy with Manila would not have been arbitrable: Chinese leaders have accused the Philippines of having abused UNCLOS procedures to force a question of sovereignty that the Convention itself could not resolve. Moreover, all official Chinese sources reiterate China’s commitment to resolve disputes only through peaceful bilateral negotiations, refusing any intervention of external actors or binding international mechanisms.¹⁴⁰ This reflects a fundamental difference between the Sino-centric vision and the Western one: Beijing contests the application of international arbitrations on questions that it considers of national sovereignty, fearing that multilateral legal pressures could undermine what it defines vital interests.

In parallel with the rejection of unfavorable sentences, China has sought margins of interpretation of the law to support its own claims. Although UNCLOS does not contemplate the concept of “historic waters” in an extended way, semi-official Chinese sources insist on the existence of historical rights of exploitation within the nine-dash line.¹⁴¹ Scholars and commentators close to Beijing affirm that China would enjoy traditional privileged rights over natural resources (fishing, oil and gas) in those waters, basing themselves on a presumed long Chinese frequentation of the islands.¹⁴² Such arguments aim to carve out an alternative legal space within UNCLOS, asserting that the Convention would not have erased preexisting rights of China. The international community, however, tends to reject this reading: the 2016 tribunal explicitly clarified that UNCLOS replaces and supersedes any historical claims inconsistent with its norms.¹⁴³ The fact remains that Beijing’s ability to reinterpret the rules, for example qualifying its own activities as lawful defenses of sovereignty,

¹³⁹ United Nations, “*United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)*”, Montego Bay, 1982, un.org/depts/los/.

¹⁴⁰ Swaine, Michael D., “*Chinese Views on the South China Sea Arbitration Case between the PRC and the Philippines*”. China Leadership Monitor, n. 51, 2016, Hoover Institution.

¹⁴¹ Swaine, Michael D., “*Chinese Views on the South China Sea Arbitration Case between the PRC and the Philippines*”. China Leadership Monitor, n. 51, 2016, Hoover Institution.

¹⁴² Ibid

¹⁴³ Caroline Seil, “*Pragmatic Offensive Realism in the South China Sea*”, European Guanxi, 2024

constitutes for it an instrument to gain time and consolidate faits accomplis, despite formal legal constraints.¹⁴⁴

A crucial element is the differentiation of the legal status of the various formations and their physical transformation. China has extended and built infrastructures on many contested islets, in particular in the Spratlys, in the attempt to strengthen its own position on the ground.¹⁴⁵ As mentioned before in 3.1, between 2013 and 2015 Beijing has carried out a massive program of reclamations and expansions, creating about 13 km² of new emerged lands on seven reefs (among which Fiery Cross, Subi and Mischief Reef) in order to build there airstrips, ports and military installations. From the point of view of the law of the sea, these artificial islands do not however modify the pre-existing legal entities: UNCLOS clearly establishes that constructions and reclamations cannot generate their own maritime zones.¹⁴⁶ Therefore, for example, transforming a submerged coral platform into an air base does not attribute to it an EEZ or a greater territorial sea. Nonetheless, China considers these installations as an integral part of its own territory and has declared straight baselines around some islands (such as the Paracels) in support of its sovereignty.¹⁴⁷ Such unilateral administrative moves are contested by the other states and go beyond what is allowed by UNCLOS, but Beijing continues to claim their legitimacy in the name of the principle of territorial integrity.¹⁴⁸

An emblematic case of legal clash is the affair of the 2016 arbitration on Chinese activities at Scarborough and in the Spratly. While Manila has successfully used international legal instruments to assert its own rights, China opposed to it a legal and propaganda wall, publishing for example in

¹⁴⁴ M. Taylor Fravel, “China’s Strategy in the South China Sea,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3, 2011, 293, <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs33-3b>.

¹⁴⁵ Kao, Pei-Shen & Soong, Jenn-Jaw, “China’s Marine Political Economy in the South China Sea and Its Development Strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities, Challenges, and Trends on the 14th Five-Year Plan”, *The Chinese Economy*, vol. 58, n. 2, 2025.

¹⁴⁶ United Nations, “*United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)*”, Montego Bay, 1982, un.org/depts/los/.

¹⁴⁷ Ministry of Defense of Japan, “*A Strategic Analysis of the South China Sea Territorial Issues*”. Japanese Ministry of Defense, 2016, mod.go.jp/msdf/navcol/assets/pdf/topic049_02.pdf.

¹⁴⁸ Cappelletti, Lorenzo, “*The South China Sea: A Complex Historical and Geopolitical Landscape*”. ESCP International Politics Society, 2024. pppescp.com/2024/12/09/the-south-china-sea-a-complex-historical-and-geopolitical-landscape/.

2014 a detailed “position paper” of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to justify the refusal of the arbitration: “China believes that the nature and maritime entitlements of certain maritime features in the South China Sea cannot be considered in isolation from the issue of sovereignty”.¹⁴⁹ This position highlights how international law, for China, is a flexible instrument and subordinate to state interests: on the one hand UNCLOS is invoked when it supports some Chinese instances (for example the right of defense in the territorial waters around the occupied islands), on the other it is reinterpreted or ignored when it limits national ambitions.¹⁵⁰ The legal constraints, as the definition of island, the limits of the EEZs, the obligation of peaceful settlement of disputes, have so far prevented China from legitimizing internationally its own expansionism; yet, the interpretative folds and the gray areas of the law (for example the lack of a coercive mechanism of enforcement of sentences) offer Beijing margin to persevere in its own contested practices, trusting to consolidate de facto positions that de iure remain weak.¹⁵¹

China has, in fact, integrated the internal legal and administrative dimension into its overall strategy in the South China Sea. Legal instruments are used to legitimize and institutionalize the results obtained on the ground: examples are the creation in 2012 of the prefecture-level city of Sansha (settled on Woody Island in the Paracels) to administer all the claimed islands, the issuance of regulations on fishing in the contested waters and the declaration of maritime interdiction zones around the reclamation yards. These moves aim to normalize the Chinese presence, transforming what to others appeared as aggression into an internal administrative routine.¹⁵² For example, armed patrols of units of the Coast Guard or of the maritime militia are presented by Beijing as legitimate

¹⁴⁹ Position Paper of the Government of the People’s Republic of China on the Matter of Jurisdiction in the South China Sea Arbitration Initiated by the Republic of the Philippines, https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/press_briefing/2014/12/07/content_281475020441708.htm, 2014.

¹⁵⁰ Swaine, Michael D., “*Chinese Views on the South China Sea Arbitration Case between the PRC and the Philippines*”. China Leadership Monitor, n. 51, 2016, Hoover Institution.

¹⁵¹ M. Taylor Fravel, “*China’s Strategy in the South China Sea*,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3, 2011, 293, <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs33-3b>.

¹⁵² Sacks, Benjamin J., “*The Political Geography of the South China Sea Disputes: A RAND Research Primer*”, RAND Corporation, 2021. DOI: 10.7249/PEA2021-1.

police activity in its own jurisdictional waters, although they take place well beyond the 12 miles from Chinese coasts.¹⁵³ According to the U.S. Department of Defense, many of these conducts (such as forcibly obstructing the fishing or drilling activities of other countries in their EEZs) are incompatible with customary international law reflected in UNCLOS when they occur outside territorial waters.¹⁵⁴

In conclusion, China's position on UNCLOS and on the disputes of the South China Sea is characterized by a strategic ambivalence. On the one hand, Beijing formally recognizes UNCLOS (which it ratified in 1996) and seeks to invoke it when it can serve its own interests, for example to claim rights over the 200 miles around the islands it occupies or to justify the construction of defensive installations.¹⁵⁵ On the other hand, however, China rejects the shared interpretation of UNCLOS where this limits its claims (as in the case of the nine-dash line) and hinders the application of binding international mechanisms, preferring negotiated solutions where its geopolitical weight can prevail.¹⁵⁶ International law, in theory a great leveler between large and small states, is thus bent by China in a direction favorable to the status quo that it has created on the ground. However, the combined action of the other actors, who resort to the courts, strengthen their alliances and keep international attention high, has so far prevented Beijing from obtaining a broad legal recognition of its claims. The conflict in the South China Sea can be read as a clash between realpolitik and rule of law. On the one hand, there are those who, like China, adopt a power line (strong with ships, aircraft and bases built on the sea) and aim to change the facts on the ground (or rather, on the water) to their advantage; on the other hand, there are those who, like the Philippines, supported by various nations,

¹⁵³ US Department of Defense, “*Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2024*”, U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2024.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid

¹⁵⁵ De Castro R., “*Blunting China’s Realpolitik Approach: Liberalism through UNCLOS Arbitration*”, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2015; The Guardian, “*Beijing rejects tribunal’s ruling in South China Sea case*”, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/12/philippines-wins-south-china-sea-case-against-china#:~:text=The%20tribunal%20also%20condemned%20China%E2%80%99s,depleted%2C%20threatened%2C%20or%20endangered%20species%E2%80%9D>

¹⁵⁶ Swaine, Michael D., “*Chinese Views on the South China Sea Arbitration Case between the PRC and the Philippines*”. China Leadership Monitor, n. 51, 2016, Hoover Institution.

seek to blunt China's realpolitik approach by resorting to multilateralism and UNCLOS arbitration.¹⁵⁷ The ultimate effectiveness of the liberal approach, however, depends on the willingness of major players to respect legal decisions: the 2016 case shows that without enforcement mechanisms, a power can ignore an unfavorable verdict. Anyhow, the persistence of smaller actors in drawing law and international attention may increase the political cost of noncompliance for China, perhaps leading it to compromise in the long run.

3.3 - The disputes between China, the Philippines and Vietnam

As anticipated, the analysis of the bilateral relations between China and the Philippines and between China and Vietnam makes it possible to understand how China puts into practice its cautious assertive strategy towards its neighbors, modulating pressures and concessions to maximize its own advantages without spilling over into a war. Adopting an approach of process tracing, one can follow the sequences of key events in these disputes to identify recurring patterns: Beijing alternates coercive moves (often non-militarized) and phases of relative deterrence, sending calibrated signals that turn on or turn off pressure depending on the contexts.¹⁵⁸ In particular, China tends to intensify coercive actions when it perceives a strong need to affirm its own determination, for example in response to challenges to its claims, and when it estimates low the economic or diplomatic costs of such assertiveness.¹⁵⁹ On the contrary, when the risk of a geopolitical backlash increases (for example due to greater U.S. or regional involvement in support of the other country), Beijing prefers instruments of non-military and low intensity pressure. In the two cases examined, we will see how this logic has guided Chinese actions: through economic incentives, administrative moves, employment of the

¹⁵⁷ De Castro R., “*Blunting China’s Realpolitik Approach: Liberalism through UNCLOS Arbitration*”, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2015; The Guardian, “*Beijing rejects tribunal’s ruling in South China Sea case*”, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/12/philippines-wins-south-china-sea-case-against-china#:~:text=The%20tribunal%20also%20condemned%20China%E2%80%99s,depleted%2C%20threatened%2C%20or%20endangered%20species%E2%80%9D>

¹⁵⁸ Zhang, Ketian, “*Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing’s Use of Coercion in the South China Sea*”, pp. 117-159, 2019, DOI: 10.1162/isec_a_00354.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid

militia and of the coast guard, China has pursued its own territorial objectives while avoiding however crossing the threshold of the use of force on a large scale.¹⁶⁰ Below the dispute between China and the Philippines and that between China and Vietnam will be analyzed in detail, highlighting for each the salient episodes and the conduct of the parties.

3.3.1 - The dispute between China and the Philippines

The Philippines represent one of the actors most directly involved in the disputes of the South China Sea, in particular because of the overlap of the reciprocal claims over the Spratly islands (which Manila calls Kalayaan) and over Scarborough Shoal (Bajo de Masinloc in Filipino). The Sino–Philippine confrontation emerged clearly in the mid 1990s, when China began to extend its own military presence in the area. An inaugural event was the discovery, in 1995, that Chinese forces had occupied Mischief Reef, a coral reef situated within the Philippine EEZ to the west of Palawan (Figure 11).¹⁶¹ The episode caught Manila by surprise, that at the time was lacking a powerful ally because of the exit of the United States from the bases from its territory, and marked the beginning of a more assertive Chinese strategy towards the archipelago.¹⁶² In the preceding decades, the Philippines had occupied some islets of the Spratly and proclaimed sovereignty over them, but the action on Mischief Reef revealed the will of Beijing to challenge on the ground such claims.¹⁶³ In response, Manila initiated diplomatic protests and sought support in ASEAN, obtaining in 2002 the signing of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), a political agreement in which China and ASEAN countries committed to avoid destabilizing actions and to resolve disputes peacefully.¹⁶⁴ The DOC, though lacking enforcement mechanisms, initially represented a brake on

¹⁶⁰ Sacks, Benjamin J., “*The Political Geography of the South China Sea Disputes: A RAND Research Primer*”, RAND Corporation, 2021. DOI: 10.7249/PEA2021-1.

¹⁶¹ De Castro, Renato Cruz, “*The 2012 Scarborough Shoal stand-off: From stalemate to escalation of the South China Sea dispute?*” in *Security and International Relations in the Asia-Pacific*, Routledge, 2014.

¹⁶² Ibid

¹⁶³ M. Taylor Fravel, “*China’s Strategy in the South China Sea*,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3, 2011, 293, <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs33-3b>.

¹⁶⁴ Cappelletti, Lorenzo, “*The South China Sea: A Complex Historical and Geopolitical Landscape*”. ESCP International Politics Society, 2024. pppescp.com/2024/12/09/the-south-china-sea-a-complex-historical-and-geopolitical-landscape/.

escalation: in the subsequent years (2002–2006) the area experienced a relatively calm and cooperative phase.¹⁶⁵



Figure 11: Business Insider, Before and after satellite images of Mischief Reef in 2004, top, and 2022, bottom.

However, starting from the end of the 2000s tensions resumed growing. China, encouraged by rapid economic and military development, began to increase its own naval presence in the contested zones and to react with greater firmness to Philippine activities. Already in 2010, Beijing conducted a series of large navy exercises in the Spratly area as a demonstration of its own capabilities and of the “indisputable sovereignty” claimed over those waters.¹⁶⁶ Meanwhile, the Philippines denounced repeated intrusions of Chinese ships into their exclusive economic waters: for example, between the end of 2010 and the start of 2011, Manila recorded at least seven incursions of Chinese units in the waters claimed by the Philippines, accompanied by a noticeable increase of the Chinese naval presence around the Spratlys. Such developments fed in Manila the perception of a growing

¹⁶⁵ M. Taylor Fravel, “China’s Strategy in the South China Sea,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3, 2011, 293, <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs33-3b>.

¹⁶⁶ De Castro, Renato Cruz, “The 2012 Scarborough Shoal stand-off: From stalemate to escalation of the South China Sea dispute?” in *Security and International Relations in the Asia-Pacific*, Routledge, 2014.

threat, leading the Philippine government to intensify appeals to the international community and to strengthen ties with the United States.¹⁶⁷



Figure 12: Oxford Analytica, Chinese and Philippines claims in the South China Sea.

The turning point arrived in 2012 with the standoff at Scarborough Shoal, considered one of the most emblematic episodes of the Sino–Philippine dispute. In April 2012 a ship of the Philippine Coast Guard surprised Chinese fishing boats inside the lagoon of Scarborough, which is an atoll about 120 miles from the Philippine coasts, claimed by both parties, and attempted to arrest the crews for illegal fishing. Beijing reacted by sending to the spot various units of maritime surveillance (China Marine Surveillance) and ships of its own coast guard, effectively preventing the Filipinos from carrying out the arrests.¹⁶⁸ A prolonged arm wrestling followed: for over two months Chinese and Philippine ships faced off in the waters of Scarborough, accusing each other of violation of sovereignty.¹⁶⁹ The crisis ended in June only thanks to U.S. diplomatic mediation, with an agreement of reciprocal withdrawal of the ships, an agreement that however Beijing did not respect fully, since

¹⁶⁷ Ibid

¹⁶⁸ De Castro R., “Blunting China’s Realpolitik Approach: Liberalism through UNCLOS Arbitration”, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2015

¹⁶⁹ Cappelletti, Lorenzo, “The South China Sea: A Complex Historical and Geopolitical Landscape”. ESCP International Politics Society, 2024. pppescp.com/2024/12/09/the-south-china-sea-a-complex-historical-and-geopolitical-landscape/.

its units remained near the shoal effectively preventing the Filipinos from returning there. From that moment, Scarborough Shoal passed under constant Chinese control: while not occupying the atoll with troops or permanent installations, China has continuously patrolled the area and denied access to Philippine fishermen, consolidating de facto its own presence.¹⁷⁰ The outcome of the standoff, that resulted in a Chinese tactical victory without direct use of military force, highlighted the disparity of power between the two countries and Beijing's capacity to exploit gray-zone tactics, such as the employment of civilian or paramilitary ships, to obtain territorial advantages without unleashing an open conflict.

For Manila, the loss of control over Scarborough represented a serious setback and a strategic risk: the shoal is in fact located at the entrance of Manila Bay and is essential for local fishing.¹⁷¹ Unable to counter China on the military plane, the Philippines then chose the legal route: in January 2013 the Philippine government initiated an international arbitral proceeding against China under the UNCLOS Convention, contesting the legitimacy of the Chinese claims¹⁷². This decision, the first of its kind among the claimants of the South China Sea, marked an alternative strategy of Manila: to shift the dispute onto the legal plane, where China would be forced to defend its own position before a neutral tribunal. Beijing, as seen before, refused to participate and rejected the arbitral jurisdiction, but the case went ahead unilaterally. In July 2016, the court gave reason in large part to the Philippines: it confirmed that the nine-dash line has no legal basis, that Scarborough (a simple rock) generates no EEZ and that Chinese activities had violated Philippine sovereign rights on several occasions. For Manila it was a moral and diplomatic triumph, but China, as already underlined,

¹⁷⁰ Ibid

¹⁷¹ De Castro R., "*Blunting China's Realpolitik Approach: Liberalism through UNCLOS Arbitration*", Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2015

¹⁷² Swaine, Michael D., "*Chinese Views on the South China Sea Arbitration Case between the PRC and the Philippines*". China Leadership Monitor, n. 51, 2016, Hoover Institution.

ignored the verdict, continuing to interdict access to Scarborough and accusing the Philippines of having aggravated the dispute.¹⁷³

The election in the Philippines in 2016 of President Rodrigo Duterte brought a temporary adjustment: Duterte chose to set aside momentarily the arbitration, seeking a pragmatic rapprochement with Beijing in exchange for investments and economic aid. This reduced diplomatic tension for some years, without however resolving anything on the ground.¹⁷⁴ China has never abandoned Scarborough, nor renounced its own claims over the Spratly. Periodically, indeed, episodes of friction resumed, as proof that the dispute remained latent. For example, in June 2019 a Philippine fishing boat was rammed and sunk by a Chinese fishing vessel (presumably belonging to the maritime militia) near Recto Bank (Reed Bank), within the Philippine EEZ in the South China Sea. The 22 Philippine fishermen shipwrecked were rescued by a passing Vietnamese boat, while the Chinese unit moved away without providing assistance, unleashing general indignation in the Philippines.¹⁷⁵ Beijing denied any intentionality in the incident, speaking of it as an accidental collision, but Manila interpreted it as an intimidating signal aimed at dissuading Philippine activities of fishing or exploration in zones claimed by China¹⁷⁶.

Another striking episode was the massive presence of Chinese ships at Whitsun Reef (Juan Felipe Reef) in the first quarter of 2021. On that occasion about 200 Chinese fishing boats, suspected of being part of the maritime militia, stayed for weeks around the reef, situated in the Philippine EEZ west of Palawan, with the pretext of sheltering from bad weather.¹⁷⁷ The Philippine authorities

¹⁷³ Ibid & De Castro R., “*Blunting China’s Realpolitik Approach: Liberalism through UNCLOS Arbitration*”, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2015

¹⁷⁴ Sarang Shidore, “*Defending Without Provoking: The United States and the Philippines in the South China Sea*”, Quincy Institute Brief, 2025

¹⁷⁵ Stashwick, Steven, “*Chinese Vessel Rams, Sinks Philippine Fishing Boat in Reed Bank*”, The Diplomat, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/06/chinese-vessel-rams-sinks-philippine-fishing-boat-in-reed-bank/>

¹⁷⁶ Zhang, Ketian, “*Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing’s Use of Coercion in the South China Sea*”, pp. 117-159, 2019, DOI: 10.1162/isec_a_00354.

¹⁷⁷ Cappelletti, Lorenzo, “*The South China Sea: A Complex Historical and Geopolitical Landscape*”. ESCP International Politics Society, 2024. pppescp.com/2024/12/09/the-south-china-sea-a-complex-historical-and-geopolitical-landscape/.

denounced that in reality it was an operation to occupy a maritime space and intimidate Manila, since the vessels appeared inactive and probably with paramilitary personnel on board¹⁷⁸. After strong diplomatic protests and an involvement of the United States alongside Manila, the Chinese craft finally dispersed, but the episode again demonstrated Beijing's "cabbage" strategy: to surround a disputed area with successive layers of civilian and para-public vessels (fishing boats, then coast guards, then eventually warships in overwatch), so as to prevent others' access without resorting to a direct armed clash.¹⁷⁹

Sino–Philippine tensions returned to intensify with the advent of the administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in 2022, more inclined to re-evaluate the alliance with Washington.¹⁸⁰ In 2023 new incidents occurred: in February, the Philippine Coast Guard denounced that a Chinese ship used a high-powered laser to temporarily blind Philippine sailors engaged in a resupply mission to the troops stationed at Second Thomas Shoal.¹⁸¹ This hostile behavior, relighted the debate on the safety of navigation and on the possible consequences of such provocative acts. The situation around Second Thomas Shoal is particularly delicate: on this shallow feature occupied by the Philippines (who have intentionally beached there an old warship, the BRP Sierra Madre, using it as an outpost), China has exerted strong pressures for years so that the vessel would be removed. The culmination was reached in June 2024, when a ship of the Chinese Coast Guard collided with a Philippine's vessel that was carrying supplies to the detachment of marines on the Sierra Madre, risking to cause its sinking. Despite the seriousness of such confrontations, both governments so far have kept cool heads: no one

¹⁷⁸ Ibid

¹⁷⁹ Bitzinger, Richard A., "China's Militarisation of the South China Sea: Creating a Strategic Strait?" RSIS Commentary, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 2016.

¹⁸⁰ Paola Morselli, "Cina–Filippine: acque agitate", ISPI, 2023, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/cina-filippine-acque-agitate-182604#:~:text=biodiversit%C3%A0%20marina,Corte%20Permanente%20di%20Arbitrato%20dell%E2%80%99Aia>

¹⁸¹ Cappelletti, Lorenzo, "The South China Sea: A Complex Historical and Geopolitical Landscape". ESCP International Politics Society, 2024. pppescp.com/2024/12/09/the-south-china-sea-a-complex-historical-and-geopolitical-landscape/.

really wants to unleash an armed conflict, and each crisis is calibrated to apply pressure without reaching the point of irreversible rupture.¹⁸²

Analyzing the evolution of the Sino–Philippine dispute clearly brings out the paradigm of Beijing’s limited assertiveness. China has obtained significant tactical advantages, such as the de facto control of Scarborough and the neutralization of any Philippine activity in the contested Spratly, through a constant but calibrated use of the range of sub-belligerent instruments: maritime militia, armed coast guard, implicit economic sanctions and propaganda campaigns.¹⁸³ For example, after the 2016 arbitration, Beijing allowed Philippine fishermen to return (in limited number and under Chinese control) to fish at Scarborough as a gesture of good will, within the framework of a political agreement with Duterte, without however renouncing its own naval presence around the shoal. This shows how China knows how to combine pressures and tactical concessions to limit temporarily crises to its advantage, while keeping intact the progress made on the ground.¹⁸⁴ For their part, the Philippines, despite its militarily being much weaker, have tried to resist leveraging law and alliances: the international arbitration won in 2016 and the renewed support of the United States (which in 2023–2024 have increased joint exercises and the defensive deployment in the Philippines) act as a political shield for Manila, dissuading Beijing from undertaking extreme actions.¹⁸⁵ Ultimately, the China–Philippines dispute confirms that Beijing pursues its own territorial objectives one step at a time, seeking to shape reality on the ground (practical control of the contested zones) before on the legal plane, and that so far this gradual approach has allowed it to avoid both war and any substantial renunciation of its claims.

¹⁸² Paola Morselli, “*Cina–Filippine: acque agitate*”, ISPI, 2023, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/cina-filippine-acque-agitate->

¹⁸³ Sacks, Benjamin J., “*The Political Geography of the South China Sea Disputes: A RAND Research Primer*”, RAND Corporation, 2021. DOI: 10.7249/PEA2021-1.

¹⁸⁴ Sarang Shidore, “*Defending Without Provoking: The United States and the Philippines in the South China Sea*”, Quincy Institute Brief, 2025

¹⁸⁵ Ibid

3.3.2 - The dispute between China and Vietnam

As has already been analyzed, Vietnam also claims sovereignty over archipelagos and waters of the South China Sea, and its dispute with China is in part earlier and even more bloody than the Philippine one. The Sino–Vietnamese confrontation sinks its roots in the Cold War: already in 1974 there occurred a direct armed clash, when China took advantage of the final phase of the Vietnam War to militarily occupy the Paracels archipelago, until then in the hands of South Vietnam.¹⁸⁶ In that operation, known as the battle of the Paracels, the Chinese Navy attacked the South Vietnamese forces stationed on some islands, namely in the Crescent Group, causing dozens of deaths and taking possession of all the main Paracels.¹⁸⁷ Since then, Beijing controls the entire Paracels archipelago, although Vietnam (unified under the government of Hanoi since 1975) continues to claim sovereignty over it. A second military confrontation occurred in 1988 in the Spratly: near Johnson South Reef (southern part of the Spratly) Chinese and Vietnamese ships collided when China sought to occupy some vacant reefs; the clash ended with the sinking of Vietnamese units and the death of over 60 sailors of Hanoi, allowing China to seize Johnson Reef and other adjacent formations. These episodes, 1974 and 1988, mark the only true battles so far fought in the South China Sea, and in both cases, Vietnam suffered territorial losses in favor of China.

After such conflicts, paradoxically, Hanoi and Beijing initiated a rapprochement. In 1991, with the end of the Cold War, the two countries normalized diplomatic relations, driven also by the isolation that Vietnam was facing (having exited the Soviet orbit) and by the Chinese interest in stabilizing the southern front.¹⁸⁸ In the framework of this détente, Vietnam and China signed in 1999–2000 a treaty to resolve peacefully the disputes on the land border and on the Gulf of Tonkin,

¹⁸⁶ Cappelletti, Lorenzo, “*The South China Sea: A Complex Historical and Geopolitical Landscape*”. ESCP International Politics Society, 2024. pppescp.com/2024/12/09/the-south-china-sea-a-complex-historical-and-geopolitical-landscape/.

¹⁸⁷ M. Taylor Fravel, “*China’s Strategy in the South China Sea*,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3, 2011, 293, <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs33-3b>.

¹⁸⁸ Le Thu, Huong, “*Rough Waters Ahead for Vietnam–China Relations*”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020, https://viet-studies.net/kinhte/Thayer_ReviewLeThuHuong.pdf.

delimiting the territorial waters in that area.¹⁸⁹ It was an important negotiating success, often cited as a model of cooperation: for a moment it seemed possible to apply the same spirit to the far more complex disputes over Paracels and Spratly. However, on the latter no substantial agreement was reached. The 2002 Declaration on Conduct (DOC), also signed by Vietnam, in theory froze provocations, but did not resolve the question of sovereignty. Thus, while political–economic relations between Hanoi and Beijing improved (especially on the commercial and ideological plane, given the common socialist regime), at sea tensions remained latent and ready to reemerge.¹⁹⁰

Starting from 2007–2008, with the growth of Chinese power, there was a new wave of assertiveness in the South China Sea that also involved Vietnam. Minor but significant incidents dotted the subsequent years: for example, in 2011 Chinese ships cut the seismic cables of a Vietnamese oil research vessel operating in contested waters, provoking strong protests from Hanoi.¹⁹¹ But by far the most serious episode is the already mentioned crisis of the oil platform of 2014. In May 2014 the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), Chinese state oil giant, positioned a large drilling platform, the Haiyang Shiyou 981, in an area of about 120 miles from the Vietnamese coast, in the waters south of the Paracels. The area fell within the EEZ that Vietnam claims from its mainland, but China maintained that it was within the waters adjacent to the Paracels of its property. The unilateral initiative of Beijing unleashed the furious reaction of Hanoi, which sent to the spot dozens of Coast Guard ships and of the fisheries service to obstruct the operations of the platform. A standoff prolonged for over two months followed: over 40 Chinese ships, between coast guards and navy units, escorted and defended the platform from the Vietnamese craft that tried to approach, giving rise to numerous incidents.¹⁹² The reports speak of intentional ramming and use of

¹⁸⁹ Ibid

¹⁹⁰ Ibid

¹⁹¹ Ministry of Defense of Japan, “*A Strategic Analysis of the South China Sea Territorial Issues*”. Japanese Ministry of Defense, 2016, mod.go.jp/msdf/navcol/assets/pdf/topic049_02.pdf.

¹⁹² Huong Le Thu, “*China’s Incursion into Vietnam’s EEZ and Lessons from the Past*”, AMTI Update – CSIS, 2019, <https://amti.csis.org/chinas-incursion-into-vietnams-eez-and-lessons-from-the-past/#:~:text=Positive%20developments%20may%20also%20come,also%20contribute%20to%20building%20an>

water cannons by Chinese ships against Vietnamese ones, which caused various damage and the sinking of at least one Vietnamese fishing boat.¹⁹³ Anti-Chinese demonstrations exploded in Vietnam, showing the level of tension reached. Nevertheless, Hanoi maintained military calm, avoiding deploying the war navy and limiting itself to means of the coast guard in order not to let the clash degenerate.¹⁹⁴ In the end, in July 2014, China announced the early withdrawal of the platform, despite officially stating that it was for the imminence of typhoon season and the conclusion of the research. This Haiyang Shiyou 981 crisis thus subsided without combat, but left deep scars: on the one hand it highlighted the Chinese will to saturate the maritime space with its own presence to impose a fait accompli (the drilling operation), on the other it cemented in Vietnam an even greater distrust towards Beijing, pushing Hanoi to strengthen its own defensive capabilities and strategic partnerships with other countries.¹⁹⁵

After 2014, Sino–Vietnamese relations at sea have gone through ups and downs. In some junctures a relative containment prevailed: the leadership of Hanoi, though under pressure from internal public opinion strongly nationalist, sought to avoid a frontal confrontation with China, aware of the power gap and of Vietnam’s economic vulnerability.¹⁹⁶ This did not prevent the occurrence of new episodes of tension. A notable case was the confrontation off Vanguard Bank in 2019, considered the worst Sino–Vietnamese clash at sea since 2014¹⁹⁷. In July 2019 China sent the research ship Haiyang Dizhi 8, escorted by Coast Guard ships and fleets of militant fishing boats, to conduct seismic surveys in an undersea energy block at the south-western end of the Vietnamese EEZ.¹⁹⁸ The place, near Vanguard Bank, in the southern stretch of the Spratly, coincided with an area where a

¹⁹³ Ministry of Defense of Japan, “*A Strategic Analysis of the South China Sea Territorial Issues*”. Japanese Ministry of Defense, 2016, mod.go.jp/msdf/navcol/assets/pdf/topic049_02.pdf.

¹⁹⁴ Lye, Liang Fook & Ha, Hoang Hop, “*The Vanguard Bank Incident: Developments and What Next?*”, ISEAS Perspective n. 69/2019, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid

¹⁹⁶ Le Thu, Huong, “*Rough Waters Ahead for Vietnam–China Relations*”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020, https://viet-studies.net/kinhte/Thayer_ReviewLeThuHuong.pdf.

¹⁹⁷ Lye Liang Fook & Ha Hoang Hop, “*The Vanguard Bank Incident: Developments and What Next?*”, ISEAS Perspective, 2019

¹⁹⁸ Ibid

Russian-Vietnamese joint venture (Rosneft) operated for gas extraction, authorized by Hanoi. The Chinese move was interpreted as a clear attempt to intimidate Vietnam and sabotage its offshore energy projects. For weeks, Chinese and Vietnamese ships chased and faced each other in the waters in question: at each Vietnamese attempt to disturb the research ship, the Chinese escort increased in number, coming to involve up to 80 units between coast guards and auxiliary military ships. Reciprocal rammings and use of water cannons between craft of the two countries were recorded, while diplomatically Hanoi protested energetically accusing Beijing of violating its own sovereignty.¹⁹⁹ Unlike 2014, however, in 2019 both parties showed a certain moderation: despite the gravity of the standoff, neither China nor Vietnam employed major warships or aircraft, and the crisis did not precipitate into direct armed clashes. After about three months, the Haiyang Dizhi 8 left the area, probably following international pressures and the risk of American sanctions on Chinese energy companies involved. The 2019 confrontation thus resolved without obvious winners but reaffirmed the Chinese capacity to project paramilitary forces into the heart of others' EEZs and the Vietnamese determination not to yield in the face of incursions, even at the cost of prolonged tensions.²⁰⁰

In parallel with the clashes at sea, Vietnam has put in place a response strategy on multiple levels. On the one hand, it has sought to keep open bilateral dialogue with Beijing to prevent the maritime disputes from completely contaminating the overall diplomatic relationship. Despite moments of strong friction, the official rhetoric between the two Communist Parties insists on socialist brotherhood and on the will to resolve divergences peacefully.²⁰¹ Even during the 2019 crisis, Hanoi continued high level diplomatic exchanges with China, a sign of the will to compartmentalize the maritime dispute within certain limits.²⁰² On the other hand, however, Vietnam has undertaken a decisive strengthening of its own deterrent capabilities and has expanded its own international

¹⁹⁹ Huong Le Thu, “*China’s Incursion into Vietnam’s EEZ and Lessons from the Past*”, AMTI Update – CSIS, 2019, <https://amti.csis.org/chinas-incursion-into-vietnams-eez-and-lessons-from-the->

²⁰⁰ Ibid

²⁰¹ Ibid

²⁰² Lye Liang Fook & Ha Hoang Hop, “*The Vanguard Bank Incident: Developments and What Next?*”, ISEAS Perspective, 2019

relations to balance Chinese power. In recent years, Hanoi has modernized naval and air forces, purchasing for example submarines and coastal missiles from Russia, to be able to inflict high costs in case of conflict.²⁰³ Moreover, it has developed strategic partnerships with powers such as India, Japan and above all the United States, though without formally allying. This policy, known as of the “three no’s” (no to military alliances, no to allowing foreign bases on Vietnamese soil, no to aligning with one country against another), aims to maintain Vietnamese strategic autonomy while diversifying external supports to face China. The 2014 tension pushed for example Vietnam to an unprecedented rapprochement towards Washington and Tokyo, which offered assistance in strengthening the Vietnamese coast guard. At the same time, Hanoi intensified cooperation in ASEAN to present as united a front as possible on the South China Sea, although with results sometimes limited due to internal divisions within ASEAN.²⁰⁴

Despite these efforts, Vietnam remains in a vulnerable position in the face of the giant neighbor. Beijing has continued to consolidate its positions: in the Paracels, for example, the Chinese island of Woody has become a true forward military base, with missiles and combat aircraft stationed on a permanent basis a few hundred kilometers from the Vietnamese coasts.²⁰⁵ The Chinese militarization of the contested islands is seen by Hanoi as a direct threat, since it allows Beijing to project power deep into the South China Sea, shortening military reaction times.²⁰⁶ Faced with this, Vietnam has for now avoided provocative reactions, choosing instead to internationalize the question. Hanoi has strongly supported the validity of the 2016 arbitration initiated by the Philippines, declaring itself in agreement with its outcome and asking China to respect it, and has repeatedly urged the

²⁰³ Le Thu, Huong, “*Rough Waters Ahead for Vietnam–China Relations*”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020, https://viet-studies.net/kinhte/Thayer_ReviewLeThuHuong.pdf.

²⁰⁴ Ibid

²⁰⁵ Kao, Pei-Shen & Soong, Jenn-Jaw, “*China’s Marine Political Economy in the South China Sea and Its Development Strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities, Challenges, and Trends on the 14th Five-Year Plan*”, *The Chinese Economy*, vol. 58, n. 2, 2025.

²⁰⁶ Bitzinger, Richard A., “*China’s Militarisation of the South China Sea: Creating a Strategic Strait?*” RSIS Commentary, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 2016.

acceleration of negotiations for a binding Code of Conduct (COC) between China and ASEAN.²⁰⁷ Beijing, however, is in no hurry to conclude a stringent COC: as some observers note, China has delayed over time these negotiations precisely so as not to tie its hands while it strengthens its presence. From 2002 to 2023, repeated rounds of talks on the COC have not yet produced a definitive agreement, in part due to Chinese obstructionism on key points such as the geographic scope and the legally binding character of the code.²⁰⁸

In summary, the China–Vietnam dispute reflects dynamics similar to those seen with the Philippines, albeit in the context of a different bilateral relationship (also marked by ideological ties between the two ruling parties). Beijing has again shown a salami slicing approach: it seized favorable opportunities to gain ground (1974, 1988), then proceeded gradually to consolidate and normalize its own conquests through military presence and administrative activities. After the conflicts of the ’70s–’80s, China has avoided further direct wars with Vietnam, preferring in recent episodes to employ non-belligerent coercion (coast guard, armed civilian ships, economic pressures) to pursue its own objectives. This has allowed Beijing to increase its influence in the South China Sea (preventing for example Vietnam from freely developing offshore resources) without unleashing the intervention of third parties or compromising the regional stability from which China itself benefits.²⁰⁹ From the Vietnamese point of view, this means undergoing a constant erosion of the status quo, facing a neighbor that bites in small mouthfuls (the salami metaphor) difficult to counter individually, but which overall change the situation to the detriment of Hanoi.²¹⁰

²⁰⁷ Sacks, Benjamin J., “*The Political Geography of the South China Sea Disputes: A RAND Research Primer*”, RAND Corporation, 2021. DOI: 10.7249/PEA2021-1.

²⁰⁸ Cappelletti, Lorenzo, “*The South China Sea: A Complex Historical and Geopolitical Landscape*”. ESCP International Politics Society, 2024. pppescp.com/2024/12/09/the-south-china-sea-a-complex-historical-and-geopolitical-landscape/.

²⁰⁹ Zhang, Ketian, “*Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing’s Use of Coercion in the South China Sea*”, pp. 117-159, 2019, DOI: 10.1162/isec_a_00354.

²¹⁰ Bitzinger, Richard A., “*China’s Militarisation of the South China Sea: Creating a Strategic Strait?*” RSIS Commentary, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 2016.

And yet, also in this case, Beijing has had to self-limit its own assertiveness in order not to trigger undesirable consequences. For example, the choice to withdraw the HYSY-981 platform in 2014 was probably due not only to the technical factors declared, but also to the growing risk of diplomatic isolation: the United States and other actors were harshly denouncing Chinese behavior, and Vietnam showed signs of possible strategic alignment with Washington. Similarly, in 2019 China did not push the Vanguard Bank clash to the extreme consequences, avoiding provoking an irreparable rift with Hanoi that could have pushed it into a formal military alliance against Beijing. In essence, Chinese behavior toward Vietnam confirms the rule: assertiveness yes, but cautious. The threshold of escalation is calibrated carefully. After the bloody clashes of the '70s–'80s, China understood that a hostile Vietnam could become a pawn of external powers (as happened in the '80s with the USSR) and disturb the realization of the Chinese objectives by concentrating on economic development. Better therefore to keep it under constant but controlled pressure promises of economic cooperation and ideological commonality on the one hand, and tangible warnings on the other, as if to say that China can punish but prefers to shape others' behavior without resorting to war.²¹¹

In perspective, the Sino–Vietnamese dispute remains unresolved and potentially dangerous, but the balance of mutual deterrence and economic interdependence will probably prevent its degeneration into open conflict. As in the Philippine case, here too the United States and other regional partners act as an external balancing factor: though not an ally, Vietnam has benefited from the increased American strategic interest in keeping navigation free and in supporting the countries of Southeast Asia in the face of coercions.²¹² This helps to keep China under observation, suggesting to it not to cross certain red lines (for example the sending of troops onto contested islands already occupied by Vietnam, or a total naval blockade of Vietnamese coasts). At the same time, for Hanoi the involvement of external actors is a guarantee but also a risk: an excessive reliance on the USA

²¹¹ Zhang, Ketian, “*Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing’s Use of Coercion in the South China Sea*”, pp. 117-159, 2019, DOI: 10.1162/isec_a_00354.

²¹² Le Thu, Huong, “*Rough Waters Ahead for Vietnam–China Relations*”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020, https://viet-studies.net/kinhte/Thayer_ReviewLeThuHuong.pdf.

could irritate Beijing and trigger aggressive reactions. Faithful to its historic search for balance, Vietnam is therefore trying to navigate in very rough waters, maintaining the assertion of its own rights without openly provoking China, and hoping for a long-term diplomatic solution perhaps through a regional Code of Conduct.²¹³

²¹³ Lye, Liang Fook & Ha, Hoang Hop, “*The Vanguard Bank Incident: Developments and What Next?*”, ISEAS Perspective n. 69/2019, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019.

Chapter 4 - Economic Relations, Diplomatic Initiatives, and External Presence

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, China has established a practice of pressure "under threshold" in the South China Sea, relying on the coast guard, the marine militia and other methods to gradually change the status quo without crossing into open conflict. This chapter analyzes how the US presence and its regional partners impose political and operational constraints on Beijing, suggesting that "grey zone" tools are better than kinetic options. The chapter will also show how the close economic ties with ASEAN nations, which result in immediate costs for any crisis, form the basis of this delicate balance in which these two factors act as a brake on escalation.

Starting from here, Chapter 4 shifts the focus from the dynamics of incremental coercion to the elements of fragility and containment that, in the short term, hold together cooperation and rivalry: the economic and diplomatic ties between China and Southeast Asia, the (still incomplete) function of the ASEAN-China Code of Conduct, and the role of reassurance and deterrence exercised by the United States.

4.1 - Economic and Diplomatic Relations between China and the Involved Countries

During last years, economic relations between China and ASEAN countries have reached levels without precedent, which consolidated a significant interdependence despite the geopolitical tensions in the South China Sea. As a matter of facts, since 2009, China has become the first commercial partner of ASEAN²¹⁴. China-ASEAN trade's volume has more than doubled during the last decade, going from \$235.5 billion in 2010 to \$722 billion in 2022, almost a fifth of ASEAN's total trade, to almost \$982 billion dollars in 2024. This exponential increase in trades has been favored by free trade agreements as the ACFTA (ASEAN – China Free Trade Area) and the more recent RCEP (Regional

²¹⁴ ASEAN, "ASEAN-China Economic Relations." ASEAN, asean.org/our-communities/economic-community/integration-with-global-economy/asean-china-economic-relation/.

Comprehensive Economic Partnership), that have both reduced tariffs barriers and integrated regional chains.²¹⁵

From the economic standpoint, China and ASEAN show a high reciprocal dependence. China absorbs a substantial share of ASEAN's exports and represents the biggest origin of import for ASEAN (around 23% to 24% of total imports in 2023). To these countries, Beijing mainly ships machineries, electronic goods, chemicals and raw industrial materials, essentials for the production regional chains²¹⁶. In particular, over 80% of the ASEAN imports from China are made of intermediate goods (like electronics, machinery, chemical products, plastic), proving the Chinese role of "factory" and key supplier for the manufacturing industry of Southeast Asian countries. Meanwhile, many ASEAN countries export to China natural resources (as palm oil, coal, minerals) and electronic components: the ASEAN exports toward China have reached 290 billion dollars in 2022, pushed above all by electronic components (almost 90 billion, +60% from 2019) and metals²¹⁷. This integration has made so that today China and ASEAN are the respective first commercial partners, connected by shared value chains and trade flows of great importance.

Within the South China Sea dispute, Vietnam and the Philippines deserve a particular attention for both the economic weight and for the political relations with Beijing. Vietnam has emerged as the biggest commercial partner of Beijing of the ASEAN countries: in 2023 the Sino–Vietnamese trades have reached 223.2 billion dollars, representing itself one third of the total ASEAN–China trade. According to 2022 data, 32% of Vietnamese imports originated in China, amounting to 117 billion dollars. On the export side, China represents the second aborber of Vietnamese products (after the United States), mainly through the acquisition of of agricultural and mining products and parts of

²¹⁵ Shay Wester, "Balancing Act: Assessing China's Growing Economic Influence in ASEAN", Asia Society, 2023, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/balancing-act-assessing-chinas-growing-economic-influence-asean#:~:text=Over%20the%20past%20decade%2C%20ASEAN%27s,each%20other%E2%80%99s%20largest%20trading%20partner>

²¹⁶ Xinhua News Agency, "China remains ASEAN's largest trading partner for 16 consecutive years", Macaobusiness.com, 2025, <https://www.macaobusiness.com/china-remains-aseans-largest-trading-partner-for-16-consecutive-years/#:~:text=China%20remains%20ASEAN%27s%20largest%20trading,year%20on%20year%20and>

²¹⁷ Shay Wester, "Balancing Act: Assessing China's Growing Economic Influence in ASEAN", Asia Society, 2023.

electronic devices²¹⁸. This relationship has created a Vietnamese deficit toward China, the latter having 44 billion dollars surplus in 2023, reflecting the former dependence on the Chinese inputs. Nonetheless, both countries reciprocally benefit from this situation: the widespread presence of Chinese companies in Vietnam, especially after the RCEP introduction in 2023, have contributed to the growth of the Vietnamese industrial sector, whereas China benefits from Vietnam as it has become a strategic trade ally and an assembler of its products that will eventually be sent to other countries.²¹⁹

On the other hand, the Philippines, that have a similar economic strength as Vietnam (GDP 461 billion dollars for Philippines and 476 billion dollars for Vietnam²²⁰), show also a strong economic tie with China, however intertwined with a worse diplomatic relation. China is the first origin of imports for Manila, as in 2022 almost 30 billion dollars of Chinese goods flowed into the Philippines, equal to 20.4% of all Philippine imports²²¹. Considering the Philippines' exports, China is the fourth main absorber (after the United States, Japan, Hong Kong), accounting for 13% of the total (11 billion dollars). As in the Vietnamese case, Philippines mainly export to China electronic equipment, minerals (mainly copper), and ores, slag and ash, and the country experiences a trade imbalance in favor of Beijing, signaling a possible dependence on Chinese goods and investments. However, China is also seen as an important investor and financier. During the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte (2016–2022), Philippines sought Chinese capital for infrastructure in the frame of “Build, Build, Build”. Duterte “had pursued a determined rapprochement toward China, bigger economic partner of the country”, putting slightly aside the maritime disputes in favor of promises of

²¹⁸ TrendEconomy. “Vietnam – Imports and Exports | World | ALL COMMODITIES | Value (US\$) and Value Growth, YoY (%) | 2011-2022.” TrendEconomy, 2024, trendeconomy.com/data/h2/Vietnam/TOTAL.; Vietnam Export Data, “What Vietnam Exports the Most: Top Vietnam Exporters & Trade Partners in 2025”, 2025, <https://www.vietnamexportdata.com/blogs/vietnam-exports-top-exporters-trade-partners-2025#:~:text=Major%20Vietnam%20Trade%20Partners%3A%20Vietnam,2>

²¹⁹ Arendse Huld, “China-ASEAN Trade and Investment Relations”, China Briefing, 2024, <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-asean-trade-and-investment-relations/#:~:text=As%20a%20bloc%2C%20ASEAN%20is,year>

²²⁰ World Bank, “GDP (current US\$) - Philippines, Viet Nam”, 2024, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=PH-VN>.

²²¹ World Integrated Trade Solutions (WITS), “Philippines monthly trade data”, 2025, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountrySnapshot/en/PHL#:~:text=Exporter%20Trade%20,64>

investments and Chinese loans. This brought to the memorandum of understanding with Beijing for infrastructure projects and to a temporary pro-Chinese attitude, in clear contrast with the historical alliance between Manila and Washington²²².

Nonetheless, despite the size of these economic interests, the South China Sea dispute constitutes a constant source of friction that complicates the reciprocal political trust. As direct claimants of islands and disputed waters (such as the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos, Scarborough Shoal, etc.), Vietnam and the Philippines in particular live in a state of conflict between geopolitical tension and economic cooperation. Vietnam's relations with Beijing vacillate between historical rivalry and pragmatic cooperation: on the one hand, high-level and party ties visit frequently (the Vietnamese Communist Party regularly engages in dialogue with the Chinese CCP), while on the other, there are still deep-seated mistrusts. Critical episodes, as the crisis of the Chinese oil platform in the contested waters of 2014, which triggered anti-Chinese protests in Vietnam, have shown how tensions can rapidly spill into the economy: Chinese investments were suspended and some Chinese factories in Vietnam were attacked, ending temporarily to slow down cooperation. In the same way, the Chinese behavior in the contested areas with the Philippines has constantly exacerbated the political clash²²³. As a consequence, such events fuel the anti-Chinese sentiment in the Philippine public opinion and put under pressure the ASEAN leaders, forced to react for reasons of national sovereignty.

It is evident that the South China Sea represents the primary obstacle of the relations between China and its neighbors, casting a shadow on the economic partnership²²⁴. As Ahmad Anwar noted,

²²² Osservatorio di Politica Internazionale, “*Cina e Indo-Pacifico*”, 2025, <https://www.parlamento.it/application/xmanager/projects/parlamento/file/repository/affariinternazionali/osservatorio/focus/PI0008ISPICIP.pdf#:~:text=e%20Cina,un%20lato%20a%20consistenti%20promesse>

²²³ Reuters, “*Philippines, China trade accusations over South China Sea collision*”, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-says-china-rammed-water-cannoned-resupply-vessels-2023-12-10/#:~:text=BEIJING%20MANILA%20Dec%2010%20%28Reuters%29%20,in%20the%20vital%20waterway%20escalate>

²²⁴

“the problem of the South China Sea has cast a persistent shadow” on the otherwise positive economic cooperation China–ASEAN²²⁵. From an ASEAN perspective, the assertive actions of Beijing undermine political trust and push the local governments to adopt a more cautious approach toward China. For example, the Philippines have reduced some exchanges in 2023: in the first seven months of the year the Philippine trade with China has decreased by 14%, reducing the share of Manila on the total China–ASEAN interchange from 15.8% to 14%, illustrating how the disputes can damage trade cooperation. Moreover, there is the widespread fear that Beijing may use its economic weight as leverage of geopolitical pressure (for example by limiting imports or investments in countries that openly challenge its claims), as it has done through the boycott of tourism toward the Philippines in 2012, or the restrictions on imports of Vietnamese tropical fruits during period of tensions, all made to persuade neighbors to assume more accommodating postures²²⁶.

Despite these contrasts, it is important to underline that the economic ties have not broken: on the contrary, China and ASEAN countries continue to show a fragile but resistant balance. The reasons are evident. First, both sides draw enormous reciprocal economic benefits: the growth of Southeast Asia is linked to the Chinese markets and investments, while China counts on ASEAN both as supplier of strategic raw materials (for example almost all the palm oil imported by China comes from Indonesia and Malaysia²²⁷) and as expanding market for its industrial and infrastructural products. The economic stakes are too high for a territorial dispute, however heated, to lead to a sharp cut in relations. A simulation of the National Bureau of Economic Research has estimated that the closure of the maritime corridors and the blockade of exchanges would cause welfare losses of about 11% of GDP in Southeast Asia on average (with peaks over 20% for Singapore and 13% for Vietnam

²²⁵ Anwar, A., “*Economic Relations Between China and ASEAN: The Shadow of the South China Sea Issue*”, *Köz-Gazdaság - Review of Economic Theory and Policy*, 23-37, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.14267/RETP2024.01.03>

²²⁶ Ibid

²²⁷ Arendse Huld, “*China-ASEAN Trade and Investment Relations*”, China Briefing, 2024, <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-asean-trade-and-investment-relations/#:~:text=As%20a%20bloc%2C%20ASEAN%20is,year>

and Thailand)²²⁸. Similarly, China would also be severely impacted by a clash in the region, given its dependence on maritime trade transit and on energy resource imports from the region.

Thus, a conditioned cooperation takes shape: ASEAN nations, even if firmly contesting the Chinese claims *ultra vires* (for example through diplomatic protests or recourse to international arbitration, as in the Philippine case of 2016), try to separate the maritime dispute, preventing it from completely affecting the general economic and political relations with Beijing. In other words, there exists a tacit agreement whereby the clash over the South China Sea is limited to the military-diplomatic plane, while on the other fronts (trade, investments, development cooperation) collaboration continues for mutual interest. This requires great balance: on one side, ASEAN countries increase the economic ties with China (as seen, trade continues to grow and China invested with a presence in key sectors²²⁹); on the other hand, ASEAN countries strengthen alternative alliances, as the United States, Japan and India), aiming to limit their excessive dependence on China and to foster strategic options²³⁰.

Concluding, China–ASEAN relations live in a precarious game of balance: on one side the extremely intense economic integration and the pursuit of shared prosperity, on the other the challenges to sovereignty and the nationalisms fueled by the territorial dispute. This complex coexistence has been described as a “delicate diplomatic balance”, in which ASEAN opts for a cautious and pragmatic approach toward Chinese activities in the South China Sea, avoiding extreme provocations but at the same time without giving up on its own claims²³¹. Such balance is fragile because subject to possible sudden crises (as a serious naval incident or a unilateral Chinese decision

²²⁸ Anwar, A., “*Economic Relations Between China and ASEAN: The Shadow of the South China Sea Issue*”, *Köz-Gazdaság - Review of Economic Theory and Policy*, 23-37, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.14267/RETP2024.01.03>

²²⁹ Arendse Huld, “*China-ASEAN Trade and Investment Relations*”, *China Briefing*, 2024, <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-asean-trade-and-investment-relations/#:~:text=As%20a%20bloc%2C%20ASEAN%20is,year>

²³⁰ Shay Wester, “*Balancing Act: Assessing China’s Growing Economic Influence in ASEAN*”, *Asia Society*, 2023, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/balancing-act-assessing-chinas-growing-economic-influence-asean#:~:text=Over%20the%20past%20decade%2C%20ASEAN%27s,each%20other%E2%80%99s%20largest%20trading%20partner>

²³¹ Joanne Lin, Pou Sothirak “*The Elusive Code: Why ASEAN Needs a New Playbook for the South China Sea*”, *Fulcrum Analysis Of Southeast Asia*, 2025, <https://fulcrum.sg/the-elusive-code-why-asean-needs-a-new-playbook-for-the-south-china-sea/#:~:text=While%20China%20is%20often%20seen,For%20China%2C%20it%20is>

to further militarize the islands), but until now it has held thanks to the shared will to preserve regional stability. As noted by an Italian analysis, even a leader inclined to economic understanding like Duterte had to change tone in front of Chinese aggressiveness, marking “the limits of a foreign policy based exclusively on economic pragmatism”²³².

As a consequence, ASEAN and China have implemented unique diplomatic channels and confidence building measures to address this conflict between possible collaboration and confrontation. A crucial tool of stabilization is the “Code of Conduct” (CoC) for the South China Sea, currently under negotiation. This code aims to institutionalize shared rules and to prevent military incidents, acting as a diplomatic “safety valve” able to keep tensions under control and to avert the outbreak of open conflicts that would put at risk the common economic interests. In the closing of this section, it is therefore natural to connect to the CoC as evolution of the diplomatic framework: it represents the attempt to transform the fragile balance mentioned above into a more structured and predictable peace.

4.2 - Code of Conduct

The Code of Conduct (CoC) in the South China Sea is a diplomatic project, conceived with the goal of regulating the behaviors of the parties in the disputed areas and avoiding dangerous military escalations. The origins of the CoC go back to the early 2000s: in 2002 China and the ASEAN countries signed the Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (Declaration on Conduct, DOC), a non-binding political agreement that stated general principles (commitment to solve the disputes peacefully, abstention from provocations, cooperation in areas such as scientific research and emergencies at sea). The 2002 DOC represented an important step, being it the first time that Beijing accepted a common multilateral text on the subject, but its declarative nature and the

²³² Osservatorio di Politica Internazionale, “*Cina e Indo-Pacifico*”, 2025, <https://www.parlamento.it/application/xmanager/projects/parlamento/file/repository/affariinternazionali/osservatorio/focus/PI0008ISPICIP.pdf#:~:text=e%20Cina,un%20lato%20a%20consistenti%20promesse>

absence of enforcement mechanisms limited its effectiveness. In fact, in the following years the situation on the ground continued to deteriorate: as the thesis has analyzed, there have been the construction of Chinese military outposts on reefs and atolls, naval clashes (for example the Sino-Vietnamese clash of 2014 around an oil rig, or the Scarborough Shoal incident of 2012 with the Philippines), and finally China's refusal to recognize the arbitral ruling of 2016. These events marked the need of a stronger and binding political tool, capable of preventing crisis and handling the activities in the region in an organized way.²³³

The proposal of a proper Code of Conduct was therefore born as an evolution of the DOC. Already in 2013–2014, ASEAN began to push to start negotiations on a CoC, finding a general agreement with Beijing²³⁴. However, only in 2018 the formal ASEAN–China negotiations on the CoC officially started, on the basis of a zero draft agreed the previous year (the Framework Code of Conduct adopted in 2017). Since then, the negotiation process has been slow and bumpy. Despite frequent optimistic declarations, China and ASEAN initially had imagined to conclude the CoC by 2021, then the objective was postponed, and to this day (end of 2025) the code has not been finalized. The talks have gone through various phases, as after the first full reading of the draft text in 2019, they arrived in 2023 at the second reading of the document, signaling an acceleration during the ASEAN chairmanship of Indonesia (which proposed to conclude it by 2026)²³⁵. Nevertheless, substantial differences still exist, that so far have prevented reaching a definitive agreement.

However, formal negotiations between ASEAN and China since 2018 have encountered many obstacles. The first problem is to the legality of the Code of Conduct (CoC). China continues to favor a low-key political agreement, despite pressure from other ASEAN nations, particularly Vietnam and the Philippines, for the Code to be a treaty with legal force. While a successful agreement for

²³³ Thayer, Carlyle A., “*ASEAN’s Code of Conduct in the South China Sea: A Litmus Test for Community-Building?*” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 10, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466012032998>

²³⁴ Joanne Lin, Pou Sothirak “*The Elusive Code: Why ASEAN Needs a New Playbook for the South China Sea*”, *Fulcrum Analysis Of Southeast Asia*, 2025, <https://fulcrum.sg/the-elusive-code-why-asean-needs-a-new-playbook-for-the-south-china-sea/#:~:text=While%20China%20is%20often%20seen,For%20China%2C%20it%20is>

²³⁵ *Ibid*

ASEAN's coastal nations involves specific commitments and sanctions for any wrongdoing, Beijing is concerned that a binding CoC may limit its freedom of maritime action and legally commit it to abandoning historical claims that are difficult to negotiate²³⁶. Concerning the procedures for resolution, as to, for example, whether to incorporate independent infringement monitoring organizations or international arbitration provisions, there is currently no consensus²³⁷. As of today, China has been reluctant to accept any form of external supervision that might judge it in the event of non-compliance, making it difficult to find a ground for compromise.

A second controversial point is the geographical scope of the CoC. Since the different parties involved claim overlapping maritime areas, the debate remains open whether the Code should concern only the currently contested areas (around some islands or rocks) or all the space unilaterally delimited by China with the nine-dash line. The ASEAN littoral countries insist that a good CoC should in no way implicitly legitimise such extensive claims by Beijing on international waters. This discrepancy of views is particularly sensitive because on the one hand ASEAN wants to avoid any implied granting of Chinese sovereignty over contested areas, on the other hand China tends to consider the entire sea as its historical space, further complicating the negotiation.²³⁸

A third factor is the involvement of external actors. The Chinese project includes the proposal to include clauses in the CoC that exclude interventions by extra-regional powers (as by banning military exercises with non-ASEAN countries such as the United States, Japan or Australia).²³⁹ However, many ASEAN states perceive this as an attempt to limit their strategic autonomy. They do

²³⁶ Roberts, Christopher B., “*ASEAN, the ‘South China Sea’ Arbitral Award, and the Code of Conduct: New Challenges, New Approaches.*” *Asian Politics & Policy*, 190–218, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12391>

²³⁷ Thayer, Carlyle A., “*ASEAN, China and the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.*” *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 75–84, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.2013.0022>

²³⁸ Roberts, Christopher B., “*ASEAN, the ‘South China Sea’ Arbitral Award, and the Code of Conduct: New Challenges, New Approaches.*” *Asian Politics & Policy*, 190–218, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12391>; Joanne Lin, Pou Sothirak “*The Elusive Code: Why ASEAN Needs a New Playbook for the South China Sea*”, *Fulcrum Analysis Of Southeast Asia*, 2025, <https://fulcrum.sg/the-elusive-code-why-asean-needs-a-new-playbook-for-the-south-china-sea/#:~:text=While%20China%20is%20often%20seen,For%20China%2C%20it%20is>

²³⁹ *Ibid*

not want to renounce the external security partnerships they consider useful, both military and diplomatic.²⁴⁰

Finally, conflicts arise over the type of activity to be regulated in the CoC. ASEAN would like to include confidence-building measures to prevent accidents: for example, mandatory warnings of naval and air exercises, common rules for meetings at sea between ships and military aircraft (to avoid collisions), protection of the marine environment, prohibitions on illegal fishing in contested waters and an embargo on the construction of new civilian or military installations on the claimed artificial islands²⁴¹. On these points, however, there are profound disagreements. For example, ASEAN raises the issue of militarisation of the disputed islands: several countries call for a ban on the installation of new offensive weapons on occupied sites, but China already hosts anti-ship missiles and airstrips and does not intend to give up these defensive capabilities. Each technical clause of the CoC thus becomes the subject of lengthy negotiations.²⁴² It should also be remembered that the internal perimeter of ASEAN has uneven positions: members not directly involved in disputes (such as Cambodia, Laos or Myanmar) tend to align more easily with Beijing or view the problem as secondary to economic relations, weakening the compactness of the common front²⁴³. In summary, the technical problems relating to the CoC text are combined with political and tactical differences between ASEAN and China and within ASEAN itself.

Politically and diplomatically, the CoC is conceived as a tool for regional stabilisation and the prevention of military escalation. However, many observers note that by the end of 2025 the CoC "remains more aspirational than operational."²⁴⁴ In practice, although the parties repeatedly reaffirm

²⁴⁰ Thayer, Carlyle A., "ASEAN's Code of Conduct in the South China Sea: A Litmus Test for Community-Building?" *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 10, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466012032998>

²⁴¹ Thayer, Carlyle A., "ASEAN, China and the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea." *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 75–84, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.2013.0022>

²⁴² Thayer, Carlyle A., "ASEAN's Code of Conduct in the South China Sea: A Litmus Test for Community-Building?" *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 10, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466012032998>

²⁴³ Joanne Lin, Pou Sothirak "The Elusive Code: Why ASEAN Needs a New Playbook for the South China Sea", *Fulcrum Analysis Of Southeast Asia*, 2025, <https://fulcrum.sg/the-elusive-code-why-asean-needs-a-new-playbook-for-the-south-china-sea/#:~:text=While%20China%20is%20often%20seen,For%20China%2C%20it%20is>

²⁴⁴ Ibid

their willingness to reach an agreement within the agreed deadlines, the negotiations are going through strategic and legal difficulties. The effective value of the CoC will therefore depend on its concreteness: a legally binding agreement would require all signatories to comply with defined rules and create predictability in a disputed sea. On the other hand, a purely declarative text would risk being ignored at the first convenience and reduced to a mere facade exercise. Faced with these difficulties, several analysts suggest considering the CoC not as a definitive arrival point, but as a dynamic tool in the future.

In summary, the CoC's journey demonstrates the goals for regional collaboration as well as the limitations of merely diplomatic talks in easing tensions in the marine domain. Maintaining the idea of international free navigation while preventing outside forces from subtly turning their "home yard" into a battlefield is ASEAN's fundamental dilemma. The United States' external role is now the focus of this similar dilemma. In the next part (4.3), we will look at how Washington's employment of deterrence fits into the intricate chessboard of unstable security.

4.3 - United States' presence in the South China Sea

In recent years, the United States has significantly strengthened its presence in the South China Sea in the face of growing tensions in the region. According to Indo-Pacific Command commander Adm. Charles Paparo, the allies' joint operations are "vital to maintaining peace and stability" in the region and are an integral part of a "comprehensive approach to deterrence"²⁴⁵. Following this approach, the U.S. conducts regular naval and air patrols in those waters, also through Freedom of Navigation operations, reaffirming international law and countering Beijing's excessive claims. As reminded by the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, the U.S. and allies "uphold the right of freedom of navigation,

²⁴⁵ Paparo, Samuel J., "Statement of Admiral Samuel J. Paparo, Commander, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command: U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Posture", U.S. Indo-Pacific Command 2025.

overflight and other legitimate uses of the sea”, a clear signal that reinforces the security of the sea route and helps deter aggressive actions²⁴⁶. At the same time, bilateral agreements and naval visits confirm the strategic reconciliation with regional actors: as mentioned, for example, in the Philippines, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has moved the country closer to Washington precisely in response to Chinese pressure in the South China Sea²⁴⁷. This has led to increased joint activities: the U.S. and Philippine sailors jointly patrol disputed waters and carry out annual naval exercises (such as the Balikatan exercise) with increasing frequency²⁴⁸, and, most importantly, the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) of 1951 ensures that any armed attack on either nation in the Pacific is considered an attack on both, obliging each country to come to the aid of the other, thereby formalizing the security commitment and reinforcing deterrence against external aggression.²⁴⁹

Enhanced cooperation agreements with Manila have been extended to new sites, pushing for joint military infrastructure. According to an analysis of the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (CSIS), the USA has allocated 11 million dollars for projects near the base of Fort Magsaysay, a key area of the Philippines that is used to train the forces and host Balikatan²⁵⁰. Furthermore, other coastal republics have also strengthened their connections with Washington. In 2023, the US carried the aircraft carrier USS Reagan to Da Nang and the USS Blue Ridge to Cam Ranh Bay (Vietnam), which was the ship's first port of call in the last 50 years.²⁵¹ These missions symbolize the state of a U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership established in 2023, entailing regular naval exchanges

²⁴⁶ Yao, Kevin. 2025. “China’s Military Warns Philippines Against Provocations in South China Sea.” Reuters, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-military-warns-philippines-against-provocations-south-china-sea-2025-09-14/>.

²⁴⁷ Morales, Neil Jerome, Karen Lema, Mikhail Flores. 2024. “Philippines Says China Tails Multi-Nation Sea Exercises.” Reuters, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-us-australia-canada-hold-first-joint-exercises-south-china-sea-2024-08-07/>.

²⁴⁸ Gomez, Jim, “Philippine Forces Deliver Supplies and Personnel to Disputed South China Sea Shoal Despite Tensions.” Military.com, 2025. <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2025/09/05/philippine-forces-deliver-supplies-and-personnel-disputed-south-china-sea-shoal-despite-tensions.html>.

²⁴⁹ U.S. Department of State, “Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines”, Avalon Project, 1951, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/phil001.asp

²⁵⁰ “More Than Meets the Eye: Philippine Upgrades at EDCA Sites.” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (CSIS), 2023, <https://amti.csis.org/more-than-meets-the-eye-philippine-upgrades-at-edca-sites/>.

²⁵¹ Strangio, Sebastian. 2024. “US Warship Makes Rare Call at Vietnam’s Cam Ranh Bay Port.” The Diplomat, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/07/us-warship-makes-rare-call-at-vietnams-cam-ranh-bay-port/>.

to increase interoperability and discourage clashes; on the other hand, Indonesia and Malaysia also welcome closer cooperation with Washington to balance China. As the Council on Foreign Relations observes, Washington's fear is that a failure to reassure American engagement could cause allies to rush to rearm themselves or meet Chinese demands, thus undermining regional stability.²⁵²

Besides bilateral ties, joint exercises and minilateralities involving Washington have grown: at trilateral and quadrilateral level, the US has stepped up cooperation with Japan, Australia, India and other allies. As a matter of facts, the last few years have been carried out to rotation joint naval exercises USA-Philippines-Japan-Australia, all having the stated purpose of "remembering the right of navigation and free overflight" and strengthening the international order of maritime law²⁵³. These multilateral initiatives which often see US ships, submarines and military aircraft operating alongside regional counterparts, have the goal to raise the cost of any unilateral military action by Beijing²⁵⁴. The alliance system known as Quad (USA, Japan, Australia, India), although a largely diplomatic forum, now plays a central role in the American approach of regional deterrence by facilitating joint exercises and defensive cooperation to show unity against possible Chinese aggressions. In parallel, the AUKUS (US-Britain-Australia) alliance, based on the transfer of nuclear submarines to Australia, "strengthen its closest allies ... and helps stabilize the region," according to strategy experts²⁵⁵. Several commentators highlight how AUKUS, if brought under regime, sends a very strong "deterrent message" to Beijing and helps stabilize the region by hindering Chinese military ambitions²⁵⁶. Overall, the Quad joint exercises and the new architectures like AUKUS integrate the US military

²⁵² Council on Foreign Relations "South China Sea." <https://www.cfr.org/south-china-sea>.

²⁵³ Morales, Neil Jerome, Karen Lema, Mikhail Flores. 2024. "Philippines Says China Tails Multi-Nation Sea Exercises." Reuters, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-us-australia-canada-hold-first-joint-exercises-south-china-sea-2024-08-07/>.

²⁵⁴ Vivek, N. D., "Balancing Deterrence and Reassurance." SOAS China Institute Blog, 2024. <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/china-institute/2024/12/03/balancing-deterrence-and-reassurance/>.

²⁵⁵ Ibid

²⁵⁶ "More Than Meets the Eye: Philippine Upgrades at EDCA Sites." Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (CSIS), 2023, <https://amti.csis.org/more-than-meets-the-eye-philippine-upgrades-at-edca-sites/>.

presence providing the allies practical guarantees on the American will to intervene in case of crisis, and making more complex for China a possible blockade or annexation of territories.

All these joint military and diplomatic activities help to stabilize the region by assuring the minor allies that the United States will maintain a role as guarantor of regional security. Therefore, an explicit demonstration of U.S. military determination forces Beijing to consider aggressive moves twice, so limiting unilateral ambitions to change the status quo and point out that to discourage China it is essential to "convince Beijing that the United States and allies have the will and ability to resist" any attempt to alter the existing balance²⁵⁷. In addition, strengthening military and surveillance capabilities (by for example sharing satellite data among Quad members), will improve early regional warning and make it more difficult for Beijing to exploit gray zone actions without being discovered. In this way, the constant American presence in fact lessens the risks of an escalation: according to the Council on Foreign Relations, if the littoral countries would lose confidence in the US as the main regional guarantor, they should undertake costly rearmament or compromise with China, things that are both dangerous scenarios²⁵⁸, whereas joint American and partner engagement strengthens collective defenses and deters unilateral maneuvers, while keeping major international maritime routes free from coercion.

Concluding, the growing projection of US power into the South China Sea, throughout joint naval exercises and new multilateral alliances (Quad and AUKUS), acts as an active deterrent against any possible Chinese escalation. However, it is clear that the military deterrent model poses a fundamental dilemma for China, as on the one hand, short term restrictive measures discourage military confrontation, whereas on the other, they risk further isolating Beijing diplomatically and strengthening the cooperation of indopacific states with Washington. This tension between the need

²⁵⁷ Ibid

²⁵⁸ Ibid

for immediate deterrence and the danger of long-term isolation is in fact a crucial node in China's strategy.

Conclusions

The thesis confirms that Beijing pursues a strategy of gradual control, assertive but cautious, which allows it to expand its influence in the South China Sea without leading to an open armed conflict. This happens as China exerts incremental pressure, especially, as the thesis has analyzed, through Coast Guard, popular navy and non-military forms of coercion, to gradually change the status quo, but without crossing the threshold of direct use of force: this grey zone approach keeps open channels of dialogue and negotiation with the littoral countries, allowing China to claim their maritime rights progressively.

First and foremost, Beijing steers clear of open conflict for economic reasons. A military conflict between China and ASEAN would result in significant costs for both parties due to the extent of their trade interdependence. According to the research cited in the thesis, China depends on the import of strategic raw materials and the exports to the area, while Southeast Asia's economic growth is mostly dependent on Chinese markets and Beijing's investments. A simulation of the National Bureau of Economic Research estimated that the closure of the southern maritime routes would involve an average loss of 11% of the GDP of Southeast Asia (with peaks above 20% for Singapore and 13% for Vietnam).²⁵⁹ Likewise, China would suffer serious economic damage due to its dependence on naval transit and supplies from this region. The immediate cost of military escalation would be so high as to act as a powerful brake on warlike ambitions. This reciprocal economic ties leads both ASEAN countries and China to compartmentalise the conflict: maritime disputes are limited to the diplomatic-military plan, while trade relations and economic cooperation continue almost normally. The result is a delicate diplomatic balance in which the states of Southeast Asia take a cautious approach to Beijing, avoiding extreme provocations but without giving up their sovereign

²⁵⁹ Anwar, A., “*Economic Relations Between China and ASEAN: The Shadow of the South China Sea Issue*”, *Köz-
Gazdaság - Review of Economic Theory and Policy*, 23-37, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.14267/RETP2024.01.03>

demands. This fragile coexistence balances intense economic integration with sovereignty challenges, prompting the ASEAN States to diversify their strategic partners (e.g. by strengthening ties with the US) so as not to be overly dependent on China.

Alongside these economic reasons, the US presence in the Indo-Pacific is also crucial. Washington is both a guarantor of freedom of navigation and a deterrent to Chinese excesses. As the thesis points out, the historic alliance with the Philippines and Vietnam and the constant American military activities in the region constitute a political and operational constraint for Beijing. The author Weissmann notes that the same possibility of US military intervention acts as a brake on Beijing's foreign policy options. In this context, China has learned to prefer "grey" instruments to open force: for example, in recent disputes Beijing has often avoided deploying its traditional Navy, instead employing civilian patrol vessels or armed vessels. In the case of the Scarborough Shoal stalemate, despite the mobilization of many surveillance units, the Chinese government stopped before bringing into play the military fleet, thus signaling its intention not to turn the dispute into an open naval conflict.²⁶⁰

There is also the internal strategic dimension of Beijing. According to Weissmann, the Chinese leadership recognizes the importance of maintaining peaceful relations to create a benevolent external environment in which to pursue internal economic development. The doctrine requires in fact not to force too much limits and to avoid that maritime claims undermine China's internal stability and international image, so that the national rhetoric and calls to defend sovereignty coexist with a substantial caution in the practical application of claims: China tends to progress by degrees (as the salami slicing tactics) and to use pressure measures that can be withdrawn without suffering a humiliating defeat, rather than seeking a final military victory that it would risk precipitating an uncontrollable conflict.

²⁶⁰ Mikael Weissmann, "The South China Sea: Still No War on the Horizon, Asian Survey", 596–617, 2015, DOI: 10.1525/as.2015.55.3.596

International and multilateral regulatory constraints are no less relevant: from the ASEAN-China Regional Cooperation Agreements to the Code of Conduct in the SCS, international legislation and diplomatic pressure require the parties to exercise self-restraint in order not to complicate disputes. Although Beijing has not always fully complied with these rules, the awareness of breaching them puts at risk the confidence accumulated over the years and still leads to a peaceful appearance of commitment. The importance of the United States also emerges in terms of negotiating power, as the American military presence strengthens the ASEAN countries' contractual weight vis-à-vis Beijing, forcing it to take into account the alternative options of those governments and discouraging moves that could motivate further US-regional rapprochement.²⁶¹ Thus, China openly avoids a military clash in the South China Sea because the costs of such a conflict would far outweigh the expected benefits. The economic ties with the coastal states would force an immediate price in the event of an open crisis, whereas the US presence works as a guarantee of stability and deterrent, making the hypothesis of direct challenge less attractive. In addition, reasonings about its international image and domestic political continuity prompt Beijing to balance its moderation.

In conclusion, Chinese assertiveness is therefore accompanied by pragmatic reasoning on risks: the awareness that an open conflict would threaten Beijing's enormous economic development effort and international trade relations leads to a strategic self-restraint, makes China seek to maximise political and military control in Southeast Asia while keeping open the areas of economic cooperation and multilateral diplomatic channels that have been key elements of regional stability in recent decades. This dynamics explains why, despite an increasing regional role, China consciously avoids open conflict in the South China Sea.

²⁶¹ Ibid

Bibliography

“*A strategic analysis of the South China Sea territorial issues*”, Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2016, <https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/navcol/assets/pdf/topic04902.pdf>

Acharya, Amitav. *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*. 3rd ed. New York: Routledge, 2014. <https://www.routledge.com/Constructing-a-Security-Community-in-Southeast-Asia-ASEAN-and-the-Problem-of-Regional-Order/Acharya/p/book/9780415747684>.

Andrew Chubb, “*Dynamics of Assertiveness in the South China Sea: China, the Philippines, and Vietnam, 1970–2015*”, NBR Special Report no. 99, The National Bureau of Asian Research, May 17, 2022, https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr99_dynamicsofassertiveness_may2022.pdf (accessed August 16, 2025).

Anwar, A., “*Economic Relations Between China and ASEAN: The Shadow of the South China Sea Issue*”, *Köz-Gazdaság - Review of Economic Theory and Policy*, 23-37, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.14267/RETP2024.01.03>

Arendse Huld, “*China-ASEAN Trade and Investment Relations*”, China Briefing, 2024, <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-asean-trade-and-investment-relations/#:~:text=As%20a%20bloc%2C%20ASEAN%20is,year>

ASEAN, “*ASEAN-China Economic Relations.*” ASEAN, asean.org/our-communities/economic-community/integration-with-global-economy/asean-china-economic-relation/.

Baruah, Darshana M. “South China Sea: Beijing’s ‘Salami-Slicing’ Strategy.” *The South China Sea Disputes*, January 19, 2017, 255–58. https://doi.org/10.1142/9789814704984_0060.

Bitzinger Richard A., “*China’s Militarisation of the South China Sea: Creating a Strategic Strait?*”, RSIS Commentary, September 2016. <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.7014>

Brzezinski, Zbigniew, and John J. Mearsheimer. “Clash of the Titans.” *Foreign Policy*, October 22, 2009. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/22/clash-of-the-titans/>.

Cappelletti Lorenzo, “*The South China Sea: A Complex Historical and Geopolitical Landscape*”, ESCP International

Caroline Seil, “*Pragmatic Offensive Realism in the South China Sea*”, European Guanxi, 2024

Chung, Chris P. C. “Drawing the U-Shaped Line: China’s Claim in the South China Sea, 1946–1974.” *Modern China* 41, no. 1 (2015): 1–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0097700414564762>.

Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook: Spratly Islands*. Washington, DC: CIA, updated July 31, 2025. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/spratly-islands/>.

Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). *A Blueprint for Cooperation on Oil and Gas Production in the South China Sea*. Washington, DC: CSIS, July 2018. <https://amti.csis.org/a-blueprint-for-cooperation-on-oil-and-gas-production-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

Council on Foreign Relations “*South China Sea.*” <https://www.cfr.org/south-china-sea>.

De Castro R., “*Blunting China’s Realpolitik Approach: Liberalism through UNCLOS Arbitration*”, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2015

De Castro, Renato Cruz, “*The 2012 Scarborough Shoal stand-off: From stalemate to escalation of the South China Sea dispute? in Security and International Relations in the Asia-Pacific*”, Routledge, 2014. DOI: 10.4324/9781315858029-6

Denmark, Abraham M., e Charles Edel, “*The AUKUS Inflection: Seizing the Opportunity to Deliver Deterrence*”, CSIS, 2025. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/aukus-inflection-seizing-opportunity-deliver-deterrence>.

Department of Defense, U.S. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China, 2023*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2023.

Electric Power & U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA). “South China Sea.” *EIA International Analysis*, 2024. https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/regions-of-interest/South_China_Sea.

Energy Information Administration (EIA). “Global Trade in Liquefied Natural Gas Continued to Grow in 2023.” *Today in Energy*, July 11, 2024. <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=62464>.

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2012*. Rome: FAO, 2014. <https://www.fao.org/3/a-i3720e.pdf>.

Fravel, M. Taylor. “China’s Strategy in the South China Sea.” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011): 293–319. <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs33-3b>.

Foreign Affairs (Ikenberry). Ikenberry, G. John. “The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?” *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 1 (Jan./Feb. 2008): 23–37. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20020265>.

Foreign Policy (Gramer). Gramer, Robbie, and Keith Johnson. “China Taps Lode of ‘Fire Ice’ in South China Sea.” *Foreign Policy*, May 19, 2017. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/19/china-taps-lode-of-fire-ice-in-south-china-sea/>.

Gomez, Jim, “*Philippine Forces Deliver Supplies and Personnel to Disputed South China Sea Shoal Despite Tensions.*” Military.com, 2025. <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2025/09/05/philippine-forces-deliver-supplies-and-personnel-disputed-south-china-sea-shoal-despite-tensions.html>.

Hydrographic Organization, International. *Limits of Oceans and Seas, Special Publication No. 23*. 3rd ed. Monte Carlo: IHO, 1953.

Huong Le Thu, “*China’s Incursion into Vietnam’s EEZ and Lessons from the Past*”, AMTI Update – CSIS, 2019, <https://amti.csis.org/chinas-incursion-into-vietnams-eez-and-lessons-from-the->

Ikenberry, G. John. *The Rise of China and the Future of the West*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2008.

Jia Duqiang, “*China-ASEAN cooperation rising to higher level*”, China Daily, 2025, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202504/14/WS67fc46f7a3104d9fd381f010.html#:~:text=China%20and%20ASEAN%20have%20economic,three%20trading%20partners%20within%20ASEAN>

Joanne Lin, Pou Sothirak “*The Elusive Code: Why ASEAN Needs a New Playbook for the South China Sea*”, Fulcrum Analysis Of Southeast Asia, 2025, <https://fulcrum.sg/the-elusive-code-why-asean-needs-a-new-playbook-for-the-south-china-sea/#:~:text=While%20China%20is%20often%20seen,For%20China%2C%20it%20is>

Kao, Pei-Shen & Soong, Jenn-Jaw, “*China’s Marine Political Economy in the South China Sea and Its Development Strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities, Challenges, and Trends on the 14th Five-Year Plan*”, The Chinese Economy, 58(2), 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10971475.2024.2384170>

Ketian Zhang, “*Explaining China’s large-scale land reclamation in the South China Sea: Timing and rationale*”, Journal of Strategic Studies, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2022.2040486>

Keohane, Robert O. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Le Thu, Huong, “*Rough Waters Ahead for Vietnam–China Relations*”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020, https://viet-studies.net/kinhte/Thayer_ReviewLeThuHuong.pdf.

Lye, Liang Fook & Ha, Hoang Hop, “*The Vanguard Bank Incident: Developments and What Next?*”, ISEAS Perspective n. 69/2019, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019.

Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001 (updated 2003).

Mikael Weissmann, “The South China Sea: Still No War on the Horizon, Asian Survey”, 596–617, 2015, DOI: 10.1525/as.2015.55.3.596

Ministry of Defense of Japan, “*A Strategic Analysis of the South China Sea Territorial Issues*”. Japanese Ministry of Defense, 2016, mod.go.jp/msdf/navcol/assets/pdf/topic049_02.pdf.

Morales, Neil Jerome, Karen Lema, Mikhail Flores. 2024. “*Philippines Says China Tails Multi-Nation Sea Exercises*.” Reuters, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-us-australia-canada-hold-first-joint-exercises-south-china-sea-2024-08-07/>.

“*More Than Meets the Eye: Philippine Upgrades at EDCA Sites*.” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (CSIS), 2023, <https://amti.csis.org/more-than-meets-the-eye-philippine-upgrades-at-edca-sites/>.

Morgenthau, Hans J. *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. 6th ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948.

Mu, Ramkumar, and R. Santosh. “Hydrocarbon Reserves of the South China Sea: Implications for Regional Energy Security.” *Energy Geoscience* 1, no. 1–2 (2020): 1–7.

National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. *Sailing Directions (Enroute): South China Sea and the Gulf of Thailand*, Pub. 161. Bethesda, MD: NGA, 2017.

Nye, Joseph S. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2004.

Nye, Joseph. 2015. “Is U.S.–China Conflict Imminent in the South China Sea?” The Huffington Post, June 3. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-nye/us-china-south-china-sea_b_7503966.html.

Philippine Statistics Authority, “*International Merchandise Trade Statistics of the Philippines, July 2025 (Preliminary)*”, Republic of the Philippines, 2025, <https://psa.gov.ph/statistics/export-import/monthly>

Position Paper of the Government of the People’s Republic of China on the Matter of Jurisdiction in the South China Sea Arbitration Initiated by the Republic of the Philippines, https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/press_briefing/2014/12/07/content_281475020441708.htm, 2014.

Osservatorio di Politica Internazionale, “*Cina e Indo-Pacifico*”, 2025, <https://www.parlamento.it/application/xmanager/projects/parlamento/file/repository/affariinternazionali/osservatorio/focus/PI0008ISPICIP.pdf#:~:text=e%20Cina,un%20lato%20a%20consistenti%20promesse>

Paparo, Samuel J., “*Statement of Admiral Samuel J. Paparo, Commander, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command: U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Posture*”, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command 2025.

Steven Rolf and John Agnew, “*Sovereignty Regimes in the South China Sea: Assessing Contemporary Sino–US Relations*,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57, no. 3 (2016): 300, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2016.1234403>.

Reuters, “*Philippines, China trade accusations over South China Sea collision*”, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-says-china-rammed-water-cannoned-resupply-vessels-2023-12-10/#:~:text=BEIJING%20FMANILA%20Dec%2010%20%28Reuters%29%20,in%20the%20vital%20waterway%20escalate>

Robert Beckman and Chrstine Sim, “*Implications of the Philippines v. China Decision on Jurisdiction and Admissibility*”, NUS Centre for International Law, 2016, <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Beckman-Sim-Hanoi-EU-DAV-June-2016-v2.pdf>

Robert Beckman, “*The Philippines v. China Case and the South China Sea Disputes*”, NUS Centre for International Law, 2016, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9781137463685_

Robert Beckman, “*Game Changer in the Maritime Disputes*”, RSIS Commentary, 2016, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CO16180.pdf>

Robert Beckman, “*The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea*” *American Journal of International Law*, 2013

Roberts, Christopher B., “*ASEAN, the ‘South China Sea’ Arbitral Award, and the Code of Conduct: New Challenges, New Approaches*.” *Asian Politics & Policy*, 190–218, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12391>

Rowan, Joshua P. “The U.S.-Japan Security Alliance, ASEAN, and the South China Sea Dispute.” *Asian Survey* 45, no. 3 (May–June 2005): 414–436. doi:10.1525/as.2005.45.3.414.

Sacks, Benjamin J. *The Political Geography of the South China Sea Disputes: A RAND Research Primer*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA2021-1.html>. doi:10.7249/PEA2021-1.

Salmon, Claudine. “Coastal Maps from the Beginning of the Qing Dynasty, with Special Reference to the Dutch East India Company.” *Imago Mundi* 44 (1992): 47–60. doi:10.1080/03085699208592852.

Sarang Shidore, “*Defending Without Provoking: The United States and the Philippines in the South China Sea*”, Quincy Institute Brief, 2025

Sardor Allayarov, “*International Law with Chinese Characteristics – The South China Sea Territorial Dispute*”, IIR Prague, 2023.

Schrag, Jacque. “How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?” *ChinaPower Project*, CSIS, January 25, 2021. <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>.

Schofield, Clive H., Rashid U. Sumaila, and William W. L. Cheung. “Fishing, Not Oil, Is at the Heart of the South China Sea Dispute.” *The Conversation*, August 16, 2016. <https://theconversation.com/fishing-not-oil-is-at-the-heart-of-the-south-china-sea-dispute-62711>.

Shay Wester, “*Balancing Act: Assessing China’s Growing Economic Influence in ASEAN*”, Asia Society, 2023, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/balancing-act-assessing-chinas-growing-economic-influence-asean#:~:text=Over%20the%20past%20decade%2C%20ASEAN%27s,each%20other%E2%80%99s%20largest%20trading%20partner>

Standing Guy, “Here’s why the UN’s law of the sea needs an overhaul”, World Economic Forum, 2022, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2022/12/here-s-why-un-law-sea-overhaul/#:~:text=UNCLOS%20might%20need%20an%20overhaul,to%20catch%20the%20%22surplus%22>.

State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture, FAO, 2012, <https://www.fao.org/4/i2727e/i2727e.pdf>

Stashwick, Steven, “*Chinese Vessel Rams, Sinks Philippine Fishing Boat in Reed Bank*”, The Diplomat, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/06/chinese-vessel-rams-sinks-philippine-fishing-boat-in-reed-bank/>

Strangio, Sebastian. 2024. “*US Warship Makes Rare Call at Vietnam’s Cam Ranh Bay Port*.” The Diplomat, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/07/us-warship-makes-rare-call-at-vietnams-cam-ranh-bay-port/>.

Sverrir Steinsson, “John Mearsheimer’s Theory of Offensive Realism and the Rise of China”, E-International Relations, 2014, <https://www.e-ir.info/2014/03/06/john-mearsheimers-theory-of-offensive-realism-and-the-rise-of-china/>

Swaine, Michael D., “*Chinese Views on the South China Sea Arbitration Case between the PRC and the Philippines*”. China Leadership Monitor, n. 51, 2016, Hoover Institution. <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/clm51ms.pdf>

Taejun Kang, “*China, ASEAN ‘committed’ to having legally binding sea code by 2026: Manila*”, RFA, 2025, <https://www.rfa.org/english/southchinasea/2025/04/25/south-china-sea-code-of-conduct/#:~:text=China%2C%20ASEAN%20%27committed%27%20to%20having,China%20Sea%20by%20next%20year>

Thayer, Carlyle A., “*ASEAN, China and the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea*.” SAIS Review of International Affairs, 75–84, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.2013.0022>

Thayer, Carlyle A., “*ASEAN’s Code of Conduct in the South China Sea: A Litmus Test for Community-Building?*” The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus 10, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466012032998>

The Guardian, “*Beijing rejects tribunal’s ruling in South China Sea case*”, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/12/philippines-wins-south-china-sea-case-against-china#:~:text=The%20tribunal%20also%20condemned%20China%E2%80%99s,depleted%2C%20threatened%2C%20or%20endangered%20species%E2%80%9D>

Trajano, Julius Cesar I. “Resource Sharing and Joint Development in the South China Sea: Exploring Avenues of Cooperation.” *RSIS Commentary*, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU, 11 March 2019.

TrendEconomy. “Vietnam – Imports and Exports | World | ALL COMMODITIES | Value (US\$) and Value Growth, YoY (%) | 2011-2022.” TrendEconomy, 2024, trendeconomy.com/data/h2/Vietnam/TOTAL.

United Nations. *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982)*, Part VIII (Archipelagic States) and article 121. New York: United Nations, 1982. https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/part8.htm.

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). *Review of Maritime Transport 2016*. Geneva: United Nations, 2016. https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/rmt2016_en.pdf.

US Department Of Defense, “*Military and Security Developments involving the People’s Republic of China*”, 2024.

U.S. Department of State, “*Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines*”, Avalon Project, 1951, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/phil001.asp

Vietnam Export Data, “*What Vietnam Exports the Most: Top Vietnam Exporters & Trade Partners in 2025*”, 2025, <https://www.vietnamexportdata.com/blogs/vietnam-exports-top-exporters-trade-partners-2025#:~:text=Major%20Vietnam%20Trade%20Partners%3A%20Vietnam.2>

Vivek, N. D.. “*Balancing Deterrence and Reassurance*.” SOAS China Institute Blog, 2024. <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/china-institute/2024/12/03/balancing-deterrence-and-reassurance/>.

Vuving, Alexander L. “South China Sea: Who Occupies What in the Spratlys?” *The Diplomat*, May 6, 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/05/south-china-sea-who-occupies-what-in-the-spratlys/>.

Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979.

World Bank, “GDP (current US\$) - Philippines, Viet Nam”, 2024, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=PH-VN>.

World Integrated Trade Solutions (WITS), “*Philippines monthly trade data*”, 2025, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountrySnapshot/en/PHL#:~:text=Exporter%20Trade%20.64>

Xinhua News Agency, “*China remains ASEAN’s largest trading partner for 16 consecutive years*”, Macaobusiness.com, 2025, <https://www.macaobusiness.com/china-remains-aseans-largest-trading-partner-for-16-consecutive-years/#:~:text=China%20remains%20ASEAN%27s%20largest%20trading,year%20on%20year%20and>

Yao, Kevin. 2025. “*China’s Military Warns Philippines Against Provocations in South China Sea*.” Reuters, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-military-warns-philippines-against-provocations-south-china-sea-2025-09-14/>.

Zhang, Ketian. “Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing’s Use of Coercion in the South China Sea.” *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 117–59. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26777884>.

密晨曦, “《联合国海洋法公约》附件七仲裁评述——结合南海仲裁案的管” *国法研究* [Chinese Journal of International Law], n.3/, 2016