



2018

Strategic Nationalism: Deciphering Chinese Strategy in the South China Sea

William Levesque
Colby College

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Strategic Nationalism: Deciphering Chinese Maritime Strategy in the South China Sea



William M. Levesque

Submitted in partial fulfillment for the designation of Honors in the Government
Major, Colby College

Professor Walter Hatch
Principal Advisor,
First Reader

Professor Kenneth Rodman
Second Reader



*Strategic Nationalism: Deciphering Chinese
Maritime Strategy in the South China Sea*

William Levesque has completed the requirements
for Honors in the Government Department
May 2018

Professor Walter Hatch
Government Department
Thesis Advisor, First Reader

Professor Kenneth Rodman
Government Department
Second Reader

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest thanks to my principal thesis advisor, Professor Walter Hatch, for his advice, guidance, and hard work as the deadline to finish this project approached. This project is as much his as it is mine — his teaching over the last four years inspired this project, and his mentorship enabled it to come to fruition. Thank you, Professor Hatch.

I would also like to thank Professor Ken Rodman for his guidance and rigorous examination of my writing. His unending commitment to excellence significantly improved the quality of my work. Thank you, Professor Rodman.

In addition, I would like to express my most profound thanks to the Colby College Government Department. I would like to especially thank my academic advisor, Professor Sandy Maisel, for sparking my interest in political science and guiding me through college. I would also like to thank Professor Milan Babik and Professor Joe Reisert for their generous advice and assistance on this project. Lastly, I thank Professor Guilain Denouex — the lessons learned in his class have proved invaluable in my writing.

Finally, and most importantly, I cannot thank my family enough for the love and support they've given me through the course of this project. I would especially like to thank my grandfather, Lieutenant Paul J. Nolan, United States Navy, Retired. My interest in maritime and naval studies is a result of listening to his countless stories while growing up, and I cannot thank him, nor my whole family, enough.

Abstract

By

William M. Levesque

Over the last two decades, the South China Sea has become an international flashpoint and site of frequent Chinese aggression. Chinese naval, coast guard, and militia vessels frequently sail the natural-resource rich waters, and China has undertaken a massive campaign of island building to support its claims. The motivations behind China's aggression and their choice of strategy, however, remain ambiguous and the topic of major academic discussion. This Honors Thesis provides a new hypothesis, *strategic nationalism*, which is capable of explaining China's recent actions in the South China Sea.

Chapter I: Trouble in the South China Sea

On Saturday, March 19, 2016, a few kilometers off Indonesia's Natuna Island, Indonesian Maritime Affairs and Fisheries officials aboard a lightly armed patrol boat pursued the Chinese-flagged fishing vessel *Kway Fey 10078*, claiming it was illegally fishing in Indonesian waters.¹ As the vessel attempted to flee, a boarding party of three Indonesian sailors climbed aboard and promptly arrested the eight crewmembers.² However, this routine fisheries operation soon proved to be anything but, with the arrival of a much larger and well-armed Chinese Coast Guard cutter. The cutter rammed the *Kway Fey*, now under Indonesian control, and demanded the release of both ship and crew. The Chinese party-state soon supported this claim with statements declaring that the boat was operating in a "traditional Chinese fishing ground," sparking a minor diplomatic crisis with Indonesia.³

In May of the same year, the American guided-missile destroyer USS *William P. Lawrence* sailed within 12 nautical miles of Fiery Cross Reef, a once largely submerged island that China had been expanding into an artificial island airbase. In response, China scrambled two fighter jets and three warships, which began actively pursuing the American vessel until it had cleared the area.⁴

These incidents of Chinese maritime assertiveness, which occurred over a two-month span of 2016, are by no means isolated. They are indicative of a greater pattern of Chinese behavior that has emerged over roughly the past two decades. Since the turn of the millennium,

¹Haeril Halim, Angii M. Lubis, and Stefani Ribka. "RI Confronts China on Fishing." *The Jakarta Post*. March 21,

² Tri Listiyarini, "Indonesia to Summon Chinese Ambassador Over Natuna Islands Standoff." *Jakarta Globe*. March 20, 2016. <http://jakartaglobe.id/news/indonesia-summon-chinese-ambassador-standoff-natuna-islands>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Michael Martina, Greg Torode, and Ben Blanchard, "China Scrambles Fighters as U.S. Sails Warship near Chinese-claimed Reef." *Reuters*. May 11, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-usa-china/china-scrambles-fighters-as-u-s-sails-warship-near-chinese-claimed-reef-idUSKCN0Y10DM>.

China has been aggressively pushing its claim to what it calls the "Nine-Dash Line," a roughly U-shaped line⁵ throughout the South China Sea that China claims as its territory.⁶ Other countries — the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam, Indonesia and Taiwan, have all protested that such a claim in some way impinges upon their own waters, and some have taken action in response to China.



Image 1: Map of the South China Sea showing China's claimed "Nine-Dash Line."

And yet China remains undeterred. Chinese ships, be they military, paramilitary, or civilian, regularly sail the waters of the South China Sea (SCS), enforcing China's claims and exploiting the region's natural resources. But China's actions are by no means limited to only the sea — China has begun an expansive island-building campaign, dubbed the "Great Wall of Sand," turning tiny rocky islets into vast, fortified military bases.⁷ China's assertiveness has escalated far beyond the point that most maritime disputes go. China is literally creating "facts on the sea,"⁸ turning a maritime dispute into a territorial one by creating new land in open ocean.

All this has occurred against the backdrop of a "rising China." In less than four decades, China has evolved from a largely impoverished country into the world's second strongest

⁵ Image from: China's Nine-dash line. Digital image. Rfa.org. July 25, 2013.

<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/sea-07252013220917.html/SEA-ninedash600.jpg>.

⁶ M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea." 2017 *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33 (3): 295. doi:10.1355/cs33-3b.

⁷ Andrew Browne, "How China Upstaged U.S. With a 'Great Wall of Sand'." *The Wall Street Journal*. April 12, 2016. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-china-upstaged-u-s-with-a-great-wall-of-sand-1460439025>.

⁸ Shinji Yamaguchi, "Creating Facts on the Sea: China's Plan to Establish Sansha City." *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*. April 17, 2017. <https://amti.csis.org/chinas-plan-establish-sansha-city/>.

economy.⁹ China has also launched an unprecedented campaign to expand its military capabilities, especially in its navy.¹⁰ Twenty years ago, the Chinese Navy could barely operate beyond its shores; now it is rapidly catching up to the mighty United States Navy, both in size and technology.¹¹ Meanwhile, the Chinese Coast Guard, formed less than ten years ago, now represents one of the world's largest maritime patrol forces, regularly sailing the South China Sea to enforce China's claims against foreign fishermen.¹²

This situation generates a nagging question: *What is driving Chinese aggression in the South China Sea?* Two common answers have been proposed. The first, grounded in the realist school of international relations (IR), argues that China is simply doing what any other country in its position would do. Being a rational state, its actions driven by calculation, China recognizes the importance of controlling the waterways off its coastline. It also is increasingly able to exercise this power, so naturally it will. The South China Sea is a vital resource, and now with the means to control it, China has begun to do so.

Why is control of the South China Sea so vital? Fish, oil, shipping and a strategic location. Surrounded by some of the world's top consumers of seafood,¹³ the South China Sea provides a vital food resource. Meanwhile, estimates indicate up to 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas lie under the region's seabed, making its control invaluable

⁹ Malcolm Scott, and Cedric Sam. "Here's How Fast China's Economy Is Catching Up to the U.S." *Bloomberg*. May 12, 2016. <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2016-us-vs-china-economy/>.

¹⁰ Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2008: 60.

¹¹ Eric Heginbotham. *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996-2017*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015: 153.

¹² Andrew Erickson, "China's Three 'Navies' Each Have the World's Most Ships." *War Is Boring*. February 28, 2018. <http://warisboring.com/chinas-three-navies-each-have-the-worlds-most-ships/>.

¹³ United States. National Intelligence Council. Office of the Director of National Intelligence. *The Future of Indian Ocean and South China Sea Fisheries: Implications for the United States*. July 30, 2013. [https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/nic/NICR 2013-38 Fisheries Report FINAL.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/nic/NICR%202013-38%20Fisheries%20Report%20FINAL.pdf).

to any country.¹⁴ In addition, the South China Sea carries a third of global shipping,¹⁵ and is home to numerous strategic chokepoints integral to protecting China from foreign naval attack.¹⁶ With these facts in mind, many realists argue that it is only natural for China to try to control the SCS. What country wouldn't?

Other scholars do not adhere to such a mechanical approach. The school of constructivism offers a radically different view, seeing China's attempts to control the South China Sea as a result of a new wave of Chinese nationalism informed by a powerful historical narrative that calls for China to return to its former glory. There was a time, during what is referred to as the tribute system, in which China enjoyed near-total control of the SCS.¹⁷ However, during the "Century of Humiliation," from the mid-19th to mid 20th centuries, imperial Western powers and Japan took control of the SCS and the region as a whole, undoing centuries of Chinese rule.¹⁸

Due to this new wave of Chinese nationalism, promoted by the party-state, constructivist scholars argue that China's actions in the SCS are born from a new nationalist drive to reclaim China's "lost territories."¹⁹ China has not simply rationally calculated its position and seen the benefits of controlling the SCS; control of the sea means something greater to China. This

¹⁴ Robin Gonzales, "The Spratly Islands Dispute: International Law, Conflicting Claims, and Alternative Frameworks For Dispute Resolution." Undergraduate Honors Thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2014: 20. <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1094&context=award>

¹⁵ China Power Team. "How much trade transits the South China Sea?" China Power. August 2, 2017. Updated October 27, 2017. <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>

¹⁶ Clarence J. Bouchat, *The Paracel Islands and U.S. Interests and Approaches in the South China Sea*. Carlisle Barracks, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2014: 17. <http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pdffiles/pub1207.pdf>

¹⁷ David Kang, *East Asia Before the West : Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹⁸ A. A. Kaufman, "The "Century of Humiliation," Then and Now: Chinese Perceptions of the International Order." *Pacific Focus*, 25 (2010): 2. doi:10.1111/j.1976-5118.2010.01039.x

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

feeling, constructivist scholars argue, is driving China's new campaign to control the South China Sea.

The problem with these hypotheses, however, is that neither can totally explain China's actions. The realist argument focuses heavily on China's recent capabilities developments, especially in its navy,²⁰ and provides a somewhat vague notion that China will act "rationally." This is not to say that I reject the argument that China will behave rationally — I explicitly believe it will — but rather that ascribing all of a country's actions to "rationality" is overly simplistic and fails to account for the fact that cultural norms may influence what is perceived as rational. Constructivist arguments suffer from the opposite problem by portraying rampant nationalism as the primary driver of China's foreign policy. This leaves open the possibility that China is a non-rational actor, a reality that has never come to fruition. Given that China's policy tends to reflect its capabilities, there must be some merit in the presumption that China is a rational actor.

In light of these problems, I present a new hypothesis, *strategic nationalism*, which better explains China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. Shedding the constraints that come with rigorous adherence to a single school of IR thought, this hybrid approach applies the general principles of realism while still allowing for the possibility that political elites both learn from and use cultural norms, such as nationalism, in making their decisions.

First and foremost, China's assertiveness is made possible by its newfound economic²¹ and military²² powers that allow it to take control of the SCS. At the same time, the way in which China is seizing the sea (securing the waterways without occupying the countries themselves) is

²⁰ Heginbotham, 153.

²¹ Scott and Sam, "Here's how Fast China's Economy."

²² Heginbotham, xix.

modeled after China's successful control of the Sea during the tribute system prior to Western interference. Simultaneously, Chinese leaders have begun using a state-sponsored historical narrative to garner support for their assertive policies, promoting Chinese nationalism and a new conception of maritime sovereignty that treats the South China Sea as China's territory.²³

It is too simplistic to sum up China's SCS policy as solely a function of capabilities or of nationalism. Instead, I use my hypothesis to bridge the gap between traditional realist and constructivist arguments and thereby gain a deeper understanding of Chinese foreign policy. Demonstrating the validity of my argument will not be easy. Given that Chinese maritime policy is a national security issue, Chinese leaders do not exactly speak freely on the matter. As such, a careful comparative case study analysis is necessary to confirm my claims.

To this end, I will use the next chapter to carefully review literature published on China's SCS policy, and also to present the details of both the realist and constructivist arguments. Next, I will introduce my own *strategic nationalism* hypothesis, and explain it in full detail.

Following this, I will explain the method I will use – process tracing²⁴ – to test each hypothesis. I will then discuss some key factors that affect the entire South China Sea before presenting three case studies: the Spratlys, the Paracels, and Scarborough Shoal. Each location has witnessed heightened Chinese assertiveness, giving us the opportunity to trace the different ways in which Chinese capabilities and nationalist norms have shaped this behavior. Finally, I will conclude with a thorough analysis of the evidence.

²³ Hungdah Chiu, "Chinese Views on the Sources of International Law," *Occasional Papers/Reprint Series in Contemporary Asian Studies, University of Maryland School of Law*, 85 no. 2 (1988): 289.
<http://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1084&context=mscas>

²⁴ Derek, Beach. "Process-Tracing Methods in Social Science." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 2017, 1. Accessed March 26, 2018. doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.176.

Through this process, I contend that Chinese policy cannot be understood solely through the application of a single established theory. Understanding Chinese policy requires not only a full understanding of China's geopolitical situation, but of its history and the lessons its leaders have learned from it. From this careful understanding, the evidence demonstrates that a complex web of strategic calculations combined with an understanding of China's previous successes and failures in controlling the seas motivates China's new assertiveness in the South China Sea.

Chapter II: Competing Explanations of China's Assertiveness

There is no shortage of available literature attempting to explain China's behavior in the South China Sea. This chapter will provide an overview of other scholars' attempts to decipher Chinese assertiveness, their theoretical origins, and implications.

Realist Literature on China's Assertiveness

The first common hypothesis on China's assertiveness in the South China Sea is grounded in the IR school of realism. Realism typically paints a more pessimistic view of the world, one in which countries are constantly seeking to ensure their security. This quest for security, however, often leads to conflict.²⁵

Prominent realist scholar John Mearsheimer contends that realism is based on five core assumptions. First, the international system is "anarchic," meaning that states exist without any higher body capable of governing their actions, and are therefore free to carry out their will.²⁶ Second, states possess "offensive capabilities," that they will use to inflict harm upon other states in order to protect their interests, thus making states dangerous to one another. Third, states can never be certain of the intentions of another state, creating the potential that benign action can be viewed as aggressive. Fourth, states' primary motive for any action is their own survival. Fifth and final is the assumption that states act rationally. Although they can make mistakes, the majority of actions are the result of a calculated assessment of a situation.²⁷

These five presumptions generate a world view in which each country is fearful of others, resulting in a constant competition for survival. As a result, when studying an international

²⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions." *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994): 9. doi:10.2307/2539078.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 10.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 10.

system, realists focus on two key factors: order and capabilities.²⁸ Order is the manner in which the international system is organized (i.e., which state is most powerful), while capabilities are what make a state powerful. Capabilities can be military, economic, or diplomatic, and the comparison of capabilities between different states is key in determining the order of the system.

Realist scholars have written extensively about China's rise, providing a major body of literature upon which this thesis can draw. Mearsheimer himself has written on the subject, most notably in his seminal piece, "Why China's Rise Will Not Be Peaceful," he bluntly states, "If China continues to grow economically, it will attempt to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere."²⁹ In other words, as China gains greater and greater economic capacity, it will convert this into physical capabilities, and will go on to use these to exert its will over other states. It must be noted, however, that Mearsheimer does not predict that China will simply go on to engage in wanton warfare with other countries; rather, China will engage in calculated actions that maximize its power over other countries without risking its own security.

While Mearsheimer is arguably the most prominent realist scholar and has covered China quite extensively, he has not written specifically on the South China Sea conflict. But other scholars have, leaving us with a large body of realist literature on the matter. This literature primarily focuses on China's power relative to its neighbors, arguing that a growing capability gap in China's favor has motivated Chinese assertiveness. For example, in his work "Defensive Realism and Chinese Maritime Strategy," James Douglas contends that there is a correlation

²⁸ W. Julian Korab-Karpowicz, "Political Realism in International Relations", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/realism-intl-relations/>.

²⁹ John J. Mearsheimer, "Why China's Rise Will Not Be Peaceful." (September 27, 2004): 3. <http://mearsheimer.uchicago.edu/pdfs/A0034b.pdf>

between Chinese capabilities and Chinese assertive action to secure the SCS.³⁰ Other scholars expand upon this theme of capability-motivated conflict. Vitaliy Pradun, for example, writes, "China is pursuing an ambitious program of military innovation in air and naval warfare geared toward not harassment but paralysis and destruction of the adversary's forces."³¹ Thus, a common theme emerges in most of the realist literature — as China becomes stronger, China becomes more assertive.

Although realist literature focuses primarily on material capabilities, it does not do so exclusively. Rather, realist scholars also point to China's growing economic linkages with its neighbors as another source of Chinese power. Brahma Chellaney, a respected IR scholar, applies this principle directly to the South China Sea, contending that China exploits Southeast Asia's dependence on the Chinese economy, and that it has "weaponized" economic linkages to "punish countries that refuse to toe its line."³² In addition to Chellaney's work, there is a large body of literature dealing with China's ability to use economic linkages as leverage in the South China Sea,³³ treating economic dependence on China as another form of Chinese power.

³⁰ James Douglas, "Defensive Realism and Chinese Maritime Strategy." Master's thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2012: 3. <http://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10063/2511/thesis.pdf>

³¹ Vitaliy O. Pradun, "From Bottle Rockets to Lightning Bolts: China's Missile-centric Strategy and PLA Strategy against Military Intervention," *Naval War College Review*, 64 no. 2 (Spring 2011).

³² Brahma Chellaney, "China's Weaponization of Trade by Brahma Chellaney." Project Syndicate. July 26, 2017. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-weaponization-of-trade-by-brahma-chellaney-2017-07?barrier=accessreg>.

³³ Madhu Ravindran, "China's Potential for Economic Coercion in the South China Sea Disputes: A Comparative Study of the Philippines and Vietnam" *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 31 no. 3 (2012): 105.

A Realist Hypothesis on the South China Sea: Security Competition

Starting with Mearsheimer's assumption that "survival is a state's most important goal, because a state cannot pursue any other goals if it does not survive,"³⁴ realist literature also offers a specific hypothesis on the source of China's actions in the South China Sea, the *security competition* hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, China, like any power, is simply attempting to ensure its security. Given the economic and strategic advantages that control of the South China Sea would provide a country, the *security competition* hypothesis argues that China's push to control the South China Sea is the natural result of this inevitable quest for security.

This hypothesis is essentially an amalgamation of the various arguments put forth by scholars such as Mearsheimer,³⁵ Chellaney,³⁶ Pradun³⁷ and Douglas³⁸ that were laid out in the previous chapter. Proponents of this hypothesis look primarily towards the growing capability gap between China and its neighbors, and the shrinking military and economic gap between China and the US, as the main source of conflict, correlating China's capabilities with China's aggression.³⁹ As mentioned in the literature review, this hypothesis' proponents look not only to military capabilities,⁴⁰ but also economic ones, acknowledging that China's regional economic supremacy has given it power over its neighbors.⁴¹ Finally, in accordance with the realist presumption of the rational state, this hypothesis pays little if any attention to the role of Chinese nationalist norms in driving its foreign policy. Thus, the realist hypothesis predicts a positive

³⁴ Mearsheimer, "Why China's Rise," 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Chellaney, "China's Weaponization."

³⁷ Pradun, "From Bottle Rockets to Lightning Bolts."

³⁸ Douglas, "Defensive Realism."

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Pradun.

⁴¹ Chellaney.

correlation between a gap or shift in relative power and conflict, a positive correlation between institutional linkages and conflict, but no correlation between hawkish nationalism and power.

Xiaoting Li best summarizes this hypothesis' core argument: "as China's relative capabilities continue to grow apace, the local balance of power and geography will cease to pose insurmountable obstacles to the flexing of Chinese muscles,"⁴² allowing Beijing to eventually possess "great coercive means —economic, military, and diplomatic — to influence the foreign policy choices of its neighbors and to push harder for a distinct sphere of influence."⁴³ Eventually, as China's power continues to grow relative to other countries, the conflict in Southeast Asia will grow.⁴⁴ Thus, according to this hypothesis, the primary driver of China's assertiveness in the South China Sea is China's ability to control the South China Sea. China is a rational, calculating state that recognizes the strategic value of controlling the SCS, and with the means to do so now, will do so. Warren Cohen also uses this framework in his piece "China's Rise in Historical Perspective," writing, "As China regains its great power status, it can be expected to behave as all great empires have throughout history,"⁴⁵ arguing that China's actions are in no way unique — China is acting just as any country in its position would.

The realist *security competition* hypothesis generates a relatively simple three-step process, summarized in the following diagram. In the first step, China is a rational state seeking to enhance its security. In the second, China realizes that control of the South China Sea will increase its national security, and begins to increase its capabilities in order to secure the Sea

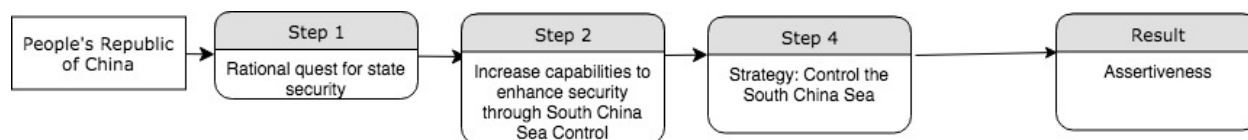
⁴² Li Xiaoting, "Applying offensive realism to the rise of China: structural incentives and Chinese diplomacy toward the neighboring states." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 16 no. 2, (1 May 2016): 248. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcv019>

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Mearsheimer, "Why China's Rise," 1.

⁴⁵ Cohen, Warren I. "China's Rise in Historical Perspective." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, no. 4-5 (2007): 683. doi:10.1080/01402390701431758.

Third, based on this recognition, it chooses to control the SCS, resulting in Chinese assertiveness. Importantly, this process does not include steps that allow for the influence of China's history or nationalism—China's policy is purely the result of rational calculation.



Constructivist Literature on China's Assertiveness

Constructivist scholars have also attempted to explain China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. Rejecting realism's emphasis on materialism, these scholars view cultural norms, ideas, and beliefs as the key drivers of international relations.⁴⁶ Whereas realism argues that international relations can be explained by a shared set of assumptions about all actors, constructivist literature argues that norms are the result of cultural socialization, and thus can vary across cultures. Whereas realism views the international system as anarchic, and therefore puts states into competition with one another, constructivism argues that "social interaction between states can also lead to more benign and friendly cultures of anarchy."⁴⁷ This is not to say that constructivism entirely rejects the possibility of a realist-style system of international relations; rather, each country's interactions within the international system are governed by unique cultural norms.

While national norms are most applicable to this thesis, constructivist norms are not exclusively national — they can also be local or global. There are multiple variants of constructivism that apply norms in different ways. Some constructivists, such as Peter Katzenstein, advocate for *constitutive norms*, arguing that we must recognize "identity as

⁴⁶ Robert Jackson and Greg Sorenson, *Introduction to International Relations Theories and Approaches*. 3rd ed. Oxford University Press, 2006: 162. https://e-edu.nbu.bg/pluginfile.php/147644/mod_resource/content/0/jackson_sorensen_Intro_in_IR_chap06.pdf.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 169.

important causal factors that help define the interests and constitute the actors that shape national security policies," contending that cultural identity shapes the choices of actors.⁴⁸ Others propose *utilitarian norm* that are used by actors. Frank Schimmelfennig, for example, proposes the concept of "rhetorical action," the strategic use of norm-based arguments," as a tool for states to achieve their aims.⁴⁹

It is important to acknowledge that constructivist literature does not simply intend to complement existing IR theories. Rather, it argues that states are not constantly in competition with one and other; security and power are not necessarily the final goal. Rather, the goals of the state, and the way the state uses its material power, are dependent upon norms set forth by the state's culture.⁵⁰

Constructivist literature on the motives behind China's assertiveness in the South China Sea pays particular attention to the role that history has played in Chinese politics. Most recognized among constructivist China scholars is David Kang, who argued, "when China was stable, the region was stable,"⁵¹ contending that China's dominance over East Asia has and will ensure regional peace. Kang goes on to argue that China's rise is not an attempt to "conquer" Asia, or necessarily challenge the U.S. as the hegemonic power, but rather to return to its position as the "center" of East Asia.⁵² While Kang's predictions of a relatively peaceful rise have seemingly failed to apply to the South China Sea in light of China's actions, he does touch on an important point: that China seeks to return to its former position of Asian preeminence.

⁴⁸ Peter J. Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996: 537.

⁴⁹ Frank Schimmelfennig. "The Community Trap: Liberal Norms, Rhetorical Action, and the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union." *International Organizations* 55 no. 1 (Winter 2001): 48.

⁵⁰ Jackson and Sorenson, 169.

⁵¹ David C. Kang, *China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010: 41.

⁵² *Ibid*, 71.

Other scholars have also invoked this theme that China's rise is an attempt to return to its former glory. Alison Kaufman, for example, points to the Chinese narrative of the "Century of Humiliation," a story that tells the fall of the once-great China at the hands of Western powers during the 19th and 20th centuries.⁵³ According to Kaufman, this historical narrative is ever present in Chinese politics, and "Chinese elites today use the memory of national humiliation to promote nationalism" in order to gain support for their assertive policies.⁵⁴

Other literature also examines how Chinese nationalist history has affected the leadership itself. For example, scholars such as Kim Shee Poon have pointed to the influence of Chinese Paramount Leader Deng Xiaoping on modern Chinese policy.⁵⁵ Kim contends that Deng's works, especially his *Eight Principles of International Strategic Thinking* have influenced China's leaders to view "hegemonism and power politics played by the West against the East [as] the root cause of international conflict," meaning that in order to ensure China's security, Western influence must be removed from Asia.⁵⁶ Thus, China must become the regional hegemon, a belief that has subsequently driven Chinese assertiveness.

Other scholars have argued that Chinese nationalism is not only elite-driven, but is also a bottom-up trend that has motivated the Chinese government to take a harsher line in the South China Sea. For example, Zhao Suisheng argues that China "has become more willing to follow the popular nationalist calls to take a confrontational position against the Western powers and to adopt tougher measures in maritime territorial disputes with its neighbors," as a result of China's

⁵³ Kaufman, 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Shee, Poon Kim. "The South China Sea in China's Strategic Thinking." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 19 no. 4 (1998): 372.

<https://colby.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/205216593?accountid=10198>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 373.

economic power and increased nationalist views within the government itself, contending that Chinese leadership is now pressured by the nationalist wave it helped create.⁵⁷

While the precise mechanism by which Chinese nationalism has influenced China's assertive South China Sea policy is still disputed, there is a common theme that a nationalist view of history has created a need for China to retake territories lost during the century of humiliation.⁵⁸ While the constructivist literature does acknowledge China's recent improvements in military and economic capabilities, it sees these not as a driven force behind Chinese assertiveness, but rather as a tool by which to carry out the goals set forth by nationalism.

A Constructivist Hypothesis: Historical Nationalism

Much like the *security competition* hypothesis, this hypothesis is an amalgamation of the most common constructivist-rooted arguments on China's actions in the South China Sea. Rather than seeing control of the South China Sea as simply a wise strategic move for China, this hypothesis argues that China's more vigorous exercise of its power in the area is primarily motivated by historically based feelings or ideas.⁵⁹

The *historical nationalism* hypothesis draws from both the top-down and bottom-up models of nationalism discussed earlier, contending that they have both played a role in shaping China's foreign policy. First, it argues that Chinese nationalism, rooted in a restorative and anti-western narrative⁶⁰ of history, has influenced Chinese policymakers to begin more assertive operations aimed at reclaiming the South China Sea. Second, it argues that the Chinese

⁵⁷ Suisheng Zhao, "Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited: the strident turn," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 22 no. 82 (2013), 553. doi: doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2013.766379

⁵⁸ *Ibid*

⁵⁹ Shee, 369.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*.

government is using nationalist policies as a way to legitimize the government to the Chinese population.

At the core of this hypothesis is the recognition of the widely shared perception that China suffered a "Century of Humiliation," from the 1830s to 1940s. During this century, "China's effective territorial control shrank by a third, its millennia-old imperial system collapsed, and the country was riven by internal uprisings, invasion, and civil war," allowing imperial powers, first European and then Japanese, to control the country.⁶¹ Proponents of this hypothesis argue China's strategic thought is motivated by a desire to return to the leadership status in Asia that predated this ignominious century. It thus posits that Chinese historical nationalism and its new assertiveness share a positive correlation, without specifying an exact correlation between relative power or institutional salience and conflict.

Although this hypothesis does find a connection between Chinese historical nationalism and a more aggressive posture in the South China Sea, its proponents are also careful to clarify that it is not an imperialist theory – China has no plans to take over Southeast Asia. Rather, China looks to overcome the losses it suffered during the "Century of Humiliation" and return to the system that it had previously used to rule over Southeast Asia – the tribute system. Through this system, China enjoyed a form of "informal empire" in much of Asia, including Southeast Asia, ruling via a tributary.⁶² China respected the sovereignty of other countries provided they paid tribute to China and did not interfere with Chinese aims. A cornerstone of such a system was Chinese maritime preeminence: China could do as it pleased in the South China Sea, while it still "exercised little authority over other states,"⁶³ remaining out of other states' domestic affairs

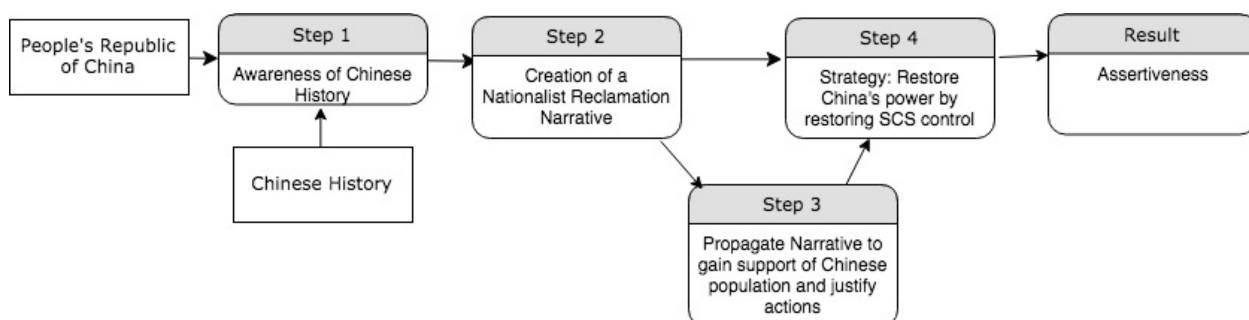
⁶¹ Kaufman, 2.

⁶² Kang, *East Asia Before the West*, 56.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 57.

provided they respected China's control of the region and cultural superiority. This hypothesis actually makes predictions similar to the *security competition* hypothesis: China will continue to act aggressively in Southeast Asia. The Historical Nationalist hypothesis, however, contends that such aggression comes from an entirely different source, a newfound sense of Chinese nationalism and a will to return China to its past position of preeminence. China's assertiveness is not so much a quest for power as it is a quest to return China to its position as the cultural and political leader of Asia.

The *historical nationalism* hypothesis generates a four-step mechanism that results in China's assertiveness, summarized below. In step one, China's leadership becomes aware of China's history, specifically its former power before the "Century of Humiliation." In step two, this history awareness evolves into a nationalist narrative that China needs to "reclaim" its "lost territories." Chinese leadership then seeks to implement a policy that allows the country to reestablish control of the SCS, and propagates historical nationalism to the population in step three in order to gain support for such a strategy. Finally, in step four, now with the support of the Chinese population, the leadership seeks to reestablish China's hegemony in East Asia, resulting in assertiveness. Notably, this mechanism does not leave space for strategic calculation—China's actions, are motivated by uniquely Chinese sentiments, not utilitarian calculation.



Other Theories on the South China Sea

Notably absent from the literature review thus far has been a contribution from liberalism, the other major school of IR theory. Arguing that humans, by nature, are more inclined towards cooperation rather than conflict,⁶⁴ liberal theory contends that peace can best be ensured through states building institutions with one another, be they economic, diplomatic, informal, or other.

While there is liberal literature about the South China Sea and China's rise in general, it does not specifically address my question: what is driving China's assertiveness in the South China Sea? According to most liberal theories, high economic interdependence, such as the situation in the South China Sea, should prevent conflict, essentially making it too risky for countries to combat each other. John Ikenberry, for example, argues that "turning economic gains into political gains is an old and well-established goal of rising great powers,"⁶⁵ and therefore China will favor engagement over assertiveness. Yet despite these claims, institutional, specifically economic, interdependence is at an all-time high in the South China Sea, and has done nothing to check China's assertiveness. Therefore, the apparent failure of this liberal institutionalist argument excludes it from consideration in my writing.

Some liberal scholars, for example Michael Weissman, have attempted to resolve this apparent failure by arguing that there is actually a "relative peace" in the South China Sea.⁶⁶ While Weissman highlights the level of institutional interdependence among the South China Sea states, I reject the premise, (as does the majority of the literature), that this has created some

⁶⁴ Edwin van de Harr, "Classical Liberalism and International Relations." *Policy*, 25 no. 1 (2009): 35-38. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost.

⁶⁵ John G. Ikenberry, "Between the Eagle and the Dragon: America, China, and Middle State Strategies in East Asia". *Political science quarterly*, 131 no 1 (2015): 29.

⁶⁶ Mikael Weissman, "Why Is There Relative Peace in the South China Sea?" Essay. In *Entering Unchartered Waters? ASEAN and The South China Sea Dispute*, 36. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014.

form of stable peace —China has undeniably grown more aggressive. Aside from this fundamental disagreement, Weissman's and other's works primarily focus on structural and regional questions, not the domestic-driven foreign policy question that this thesis asks. Thus, while a significant body of literature exists about the role of institutions in the dispute, it does not specifically address my question, and attempting to include a liberal hypothesis would either derail my paper's focus or result in the creation of a straw man argument that fails to truly represent liberal writing on the South China Sea.

A Dispute Within the Literature

The existing literature on China's motives in the South China Sea is both extensive and contentious. There is no shortage of material on the topic – hundreds of scholars have offered their opinions, most often grounded in the schools of constructivism and realism. These respective works, however, make little room for the presumptions made by the other: realists largely reject the role of historically derived cultural norms, and constructivists generally place more emphasis on the role of nationalist norms affecting China's actions. This dispute has therefore created two prevailing hypotheses, one based in realism and one in constructivism, that attempt to explain the source of Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. Having covered these hypotheses, I will use the next chapter to offer a detailed explanation of my own hypothesis, *strategic nationalism*, which better explains Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea.

Chapter III: An Alternative Hypothesis

As discussed in the previous chapter, two primary hypotheses, each drawing from a prominent school of international relations thought, have been put forward in an effort to answer this thesis' driving question: *what is driving increased Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea?* I wish to propose an alternative hypothesis, *strategic nationalism*, which compensates for the deficiencies inherent in each of these common hypotheses. This chapter will explain the details of my hypothesis and its application in explaining China's recent assertiveness in the South China Sea.

Strategic Nationalism

In explaining China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, I propose a hypothesis that bridges the gap between the realist and constructivist arguments. Importantly, my argument is a realism-based hypothesis. It adheres to all of the realist assumptions outlined in the previous chapter; that states are rational actors,⁶⁷ and make calculated decisions to maximize their power. I also make no claim that social factors will outweigh rational decision-making. Rather, I argue that China's leadership has used lessons learned its maritime history to craft their strategy, and implemented the propagation of the restorative narrative to gain support for their actions.

The basic realist presumption is correct: China is a rational state trying to ensure its security.⁶⁸ However, I reject the *security competition* hypothesis due to its excessive focus on material capabilities and the structure of the international system. In other words, structural realism and material analysis are not so much wrong as they are incomplete in predicting China's

⁶⁷ John J. Mearsheimer, "Reckless States and Realism." *International Relations* 23, no. 2 (2009): 242.. <http://mearsheimer.uchicago.edu/pdfs/A0048.pdf>

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

actions. If we approach the South China Sea using a very broad analysis, the realist predictions hold true: China is simply attempting to increase its security through control of the Sea. The realist arguments, however, are incapable of explaining the finer details of China's policy on the South China Sea – in order to do so, the influence of Chinese history must be incorporated.

I also reject the constructivist *historical nationalism* hypothesis on the premise that it fails to incorporate the realist concepts of state rationality and *security competition*. The *historical nationalism* hypothesis leaves open the possibility that China is a non-rational actor motivated by untamed hawkish nationalism; quite simply, there is little evidence to support this. While assertive, Chinese policy has not been excessively hawkish.⁶⁹ Realist assumptions must be incorporated in any attempt to explain China's actions, and therefore I consider *historical nationalism* to be an incomplete hypothesis.

Rather, I make an argument somewhere in the middle, essentially complementing the realist presumptions with the argument that China's leadership has used lessons learned throughout China's maritime history to craft their strategy, and has used the propagation of the restorative narrative to gain support for their actions. Thus, while China is a rational actor, history and norms have played a role in shaping Chinese policy towards the South China Sea.

Importantly, however, I argue that China's assertiveness in the South China Sea is motivated primarily by its newfound capabilities. As China has grown stronger, it has sought to maximize its security, with control of the South China Sea a natural way to achieve that aim. The way in which China will seek to ensure its security through the control of the South China Sea in a manner similar to China's tribute system, is a result of China's leadership learning the lessons of Chinese history.

⁶⁹ Weissmann, 3.

With regard to the evidence that supports the realist approach, I maintain that it is no coincidence that China has shown itself more willing to enforce territorial claims as it has become more powerful. The Chinese military, especially the navy has become a formidable, modern force,⁷⁰ giving China a new degree of capability in its SCS operations. There is also an undeniable correlation between such an increase in Chinese capabilities and the trend of China "actively asserting its claims against weaker neighbors."⁷¹ Simultaneously, China has gone through a period of incredible growth to become the world's second largest economy,⁷² with an average annual GDP growth of 10% annually. Even though China's GDP growth is now roughly 6% per year, it still has the potential to become the world's leading economy by 2025.⁷³ With this newfound power, there is every reason to expect China to seek to strengthen its claims in the South China Sea. I also maintain that China has used its asymmetric economic interdependence with other countries to its advantage, creating a system of economic coercion. Thus, I predict that both Chinese capabilities and institutional interconnectivity are positively correlated with Chinese aggression.

With regard to the constructivist side of my argument, I argue that China's nationalist sentiments, derived from both the "Century of Humiliation" and its antecedent centuries of preeminence,⁷⁴ have shaped China's strategic thinking and provided a previously successful model to which Chinese leadership seeks to return. As discussed earlier in this chapter, China once enjoyed control over the South China Sea through its tribute system, ensuring China's security and ability to control trade through the region. The tribute system, in which China

⁷⁰ Heginbotham, 31.

⁷¹ Yahuda, Michael. "China's New Assertiveness in the South China Sea". *The Journal of Contemporary China* (1067-0564), 22 no. 81 (2013): 450.

⁷² "China Overview." World Bank. March 28, 2017. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview>

⁷³ Malcolm and Sam, "Here's how Fast China's Economy."

⁷⁴ Kaufman, 1.

controlled the seas around its neighbors while largely staying out of their internal affairs (provided they affirmed China's preeminent status),⁷⁵ now serves as a model for the current Chinese leadership. Just as China was once able to control the region by focusing on maritime superiority rather than direct intervention in other countries, modern Chinese leaders seek to control the South China Sea without directly controlling their neighbors, using the tribute system as a model.

This study of Chinese history has also created an unusual concept of maritime sovereignty that Chinese leaders continue to propagate. Grounded in the doctrine of "historical right" instead of the "general principals of law" found in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), China promotes a view based on "historical right" that enables it to claim the South China Sea on the principle of historic control.⁷⁶ Furthermore, Chinese leaders have propagated the view that open water, such as the South China Sea, can be *part of a country's territory*, rather than the high seas as stipulated under UNCLOS.⁷⁷ These examples show that norms play a *utilitarian*, not *constitutive*, role in Chinese leadership, similar to Schimmelfennig's concept of "rhetorical action".⁷⁸ Accordingly, I argue that Chinese leadership is not so much motivated by history as they are using it —Chinese leaders are rationally applying the lessons from China's past victories and defeats to craft their current policy.

China now has the means to reclaim such status, and is beginning to use grassroots nationalism to propel its efforts to exert Chinese power in the South China Sea. Examples of this trend are abundant — China has instituted the "patriotic education campaign," a program designed to "boost the nation's spirit, enhance cohesion, foster national self-esteem and pride,

⁷⁵ Kang, *East Asia Before the West*, 56.

⁷⁶ Chiu, 289.

⁷⁷ Guang, Lei. "Realpolitik Nationalism: International Sources of Chinese Nationalism." *Modern China* 31, no. 4 (2005): 507. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20062622>.

⁷⁸ Schimmelfennig, 48.

consolidate and develop a patriotic united front."⁷⁹ These programs are part of a Chinese policy described by Zhao as "Pragmatic Nationalism,"⁸⁰ in which China's leaders use the appeal of nationalism to gain popular support against foreign threats. Chinese leaders themselves have also echoed these hawkish nationalist sentiments, with the Chinese Vice Foreign Minister claiming other Southeast Asian nations are "playing with fire."⁸¹ In light of this rising nationalism, I predict a positive correlation between Chinese nationalism and assertiveness in the South China Sea. This is not to say that nationalism run rampant is somehow driving the Chinese government to be more aggressive in the South China Sea; rather, it is evident the nationalist view of China's maritime history has influenced China's policy on the South China Sea.

My hypothesis generates a five-step mechanism that explains China's assertiveness, accounting for both the inherent realities of China's security situation and the influence of Chinese history and nationalism. In step one, China undertakes its rational quest to improve state security. In step two, China attempts to improve state security by increasing its material capabilities, both military and economic, in order to seize the South China Sea.

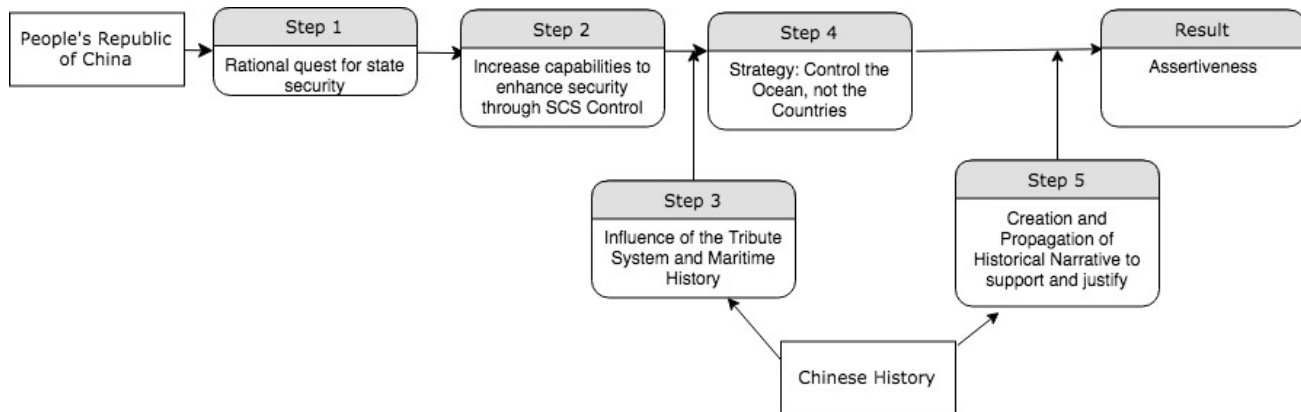
In step three, my argument deviates from the standard realist view, incorporating the influence of Chinese history to explain not only why China has chosen to seize the South China Sea, but to explain why it has pursued its chosen strategy. In this step, Chinese planners are aware of and influenced by China's history, especially China's past success at controlling the Sea through the tribute system. In step four, China pursues a strategy in controlling the Sea that is modeled upon the tribute system. Simultaneously, in step five, the Chinese government

⁷⁹ Wang, Zheng. "National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China." *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2008): 790. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29734264>.

⁸⁰ Suisheng, Zhao, "China's Pragmatic Nationalism: Is it Manageable?" *The Washington Quarterly*, 29 no. 1 (Winter 2005-2006): 139.

⁸¹ Yahuda, 455.

propagates a nationalist historical narrative and view of maritime sovereignty, using their assertive action to not only improve China's security situation, but also affirm regime legitimacy. From these five steps, China naturally pursues an aggressive policy in the SCS modeled upon the tribute system. The individual steps of my argument are outlined below.



Others have suggested hypotheses similar to mine: prominent scholar Michael Yahuda, for example, identified Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea as a result of "the growth of its military power, its 'triumphalism' in the wake of the Western financial crisis and its heightened nationalism,"⁸² proposing a similar realist-constructivist approach, albeit without giving a precise mechanism. Compared with the other hypotheses, I maintain that the *strategic nationalism* hypothesis best explains China's recent assertiveness in the South China Sea. I do not consider the *security competition* or *historical nationalist* hypotheses to be inherently wrong, but rather incomplete. The *historical nationalism* hypothesis fails to recognize that China is a rational state, and will only act in accordance with what its capabilities allow. Likewise, the *security competition* hypothesis falls short of acknowledging how China's leadership has learned from, used, and applied Chinese history in their quest to achieve greater security. Therefore, my

⁸² Yahuda, 446.

hypothesis bridges the gap, acknowledging China as a rational state seeking to improve its security while also acknowledging that Chinese norms have influenced China's strategy to ensure such security.

Chapter IV: Methodology

This paper explores a question of causality: what is causing China to become more assertive in the South China Sea? Given this, a methodology must be established that can both draw plausible causal connections and test hypotheses. By definition, my question is vexingly difficult to test. I lack access to unrestricted and entirely honest information from Chinese leaders, so any conclusions I make will rely upon a certain degree of inference. In order to overcome this obstacle and ensure the validity of my conclusions, I will apply a case study-based, hypothesis-driven variant of process tracing methodology in an effort to verify which hypothesis provides the most plausible explanation of China's assertiveness.

Variants of Process Tracing

While many definitions of process tracing exist, all include the same general principles — process tracing is a key tool of qualitative analysis that enables the researcher to evaluate casual mechanisms. For example, Berkeley's David Collier defines it as "the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analyzed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator,"⁸³ emphasizing its ability to allow the researcher to evaluate a hypothesis. Oxford's Derek Beach provides a slightly more expansive definition, describing process tracing as a "research method for tracing causal mechanisms using detailed, within-case empirical analysis of how a causal process plays out in an actual case," permitting the researcher to subsequently draw broader conclusions by applying the methodology across multiple cases.⁸⁴ Regardless of the unique differences in definitions, the purpose of such methods

⁸³ David Collier, "Understanding Process Tracing." *Political Science and Politics*, 44 no. 4 (2011): 823.
<http://polisci.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/people/u3827/Understanding%20Process%20Tracing.pdf>

⁸⁴ Beach, 1.

is consistent: "through seeking the key elements of a hypothesized causal mechanism within a case, it should be possible to identify whether the mechanism is operating," allowing a researcher to trace the process by which a cause creates an effect.⁸⁵

It is possible to apply process tracing with various levels of rigor. Beach, for example, identifies what he calls "minimalist" approaches which comprise three key steps: first, the presence of an "intervening" variable (IV) is hypothesized; second, a single case is broken down into multiple sub-cases (based upon temporal, spatial, or some other form of difference); and third, the outcome is compared to the presence or absence of the IV in each case.⁸⁶ While this method may have superficial appeal for use in this thesis (specifically in its ability to break down a single case into multiple case studies), its effectiveness presumes that individual sub-cases do not affect the outcome of one another.⁸⁷ However, given the nature of the South China Sea, in which the same participants are present across multiple sub-conflicts, this presumption cannot be made, and thus the methodology is ill suited. In addition, the "minimalist" approach only attempts to associate the IV with an outcome, but does not seek to provide a mechanism by which the variable creates such an outcome.⁸⁸ As I seek to provide a plausible mechanism through which the causes identified in the *strategic nationalism* hypothesis affect Chinese policy, such a "minimalist" approach is insufficient.

Beach, however, provides a more rigorous alternative which he terms a "systems understanding of mechanisms."⁸⁹ This methodology seeks to do more than simply identify the presence or absence of an IV; it attempts "to unpack explicitly the causal process that occurs in-

⁸⁵ Sharon Cransow, "Process Tracing in Political Science: What's the Story?" *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 62, (2017): 6. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/28583360>

⁸⁶ Beach, 3.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

between a cause (or set of causes) and an outcome and trace each of its constituent parts empirically."⁹⁰ The goal, then, is consistent with what I hope to achieve in this thesis.

Sharon Cransow also proposes a related methodology with a similar level of rigor. However, her methodology places more emphasis on the narrative element of case studies, advocating the researcher to actually tell a story rather than only highlight key points of evidence.⁹¹ Cransow argues that creating a narrative and painting the full picture "does cognitive work by both facilitating the consideration of alternative hypotheses and clarifying the relationship between evidence and explanation," strengthening the argument.⁹² Given that China's actions in the South China Sea form a compelling, even gripping, story, it makes sense to implement Cransow's emphasis on narrative. Therefore, I will draw heavily on both Cransow's and Beach's work.

There are, however, even more rigorous approaches to process tracing. Collier, for example, provides four types of tests that comprise his methodology, each relying upon intensive analysis of evidence and serving to either confirm, strengthen, weaken, or reject a hypothesis.⁹³ While Collier's methodology is impressive, I find that it would be impossible to apply in testing this thesis' competing hypotheses, due to its level of rigor and demands for evidence. Given the fact that indisputable evidence of China's strategy in the South China Sea is a matter of great importance to global security (and thus is not public information), and my status as an undergraduate researcher (without access to such non-public information), Collier's demands are impractical. While the variant of process tracing I choose to use is not necessarily the most rigorous available, it is *the most rigorous possible for this specific question*.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Cransow, 6.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Collier, 825.

The Methodology of Process Tracing

Given that my work seeks to assess the validity of multiple competing hypotheses, I will use an approach known as *Theory Testing Process Tracing*.⁹⁴ The first step of this method is to identify not only the competing hypothesis, but also the causal mechanisms by which they create an outcome.⁹⁵ In the previous two chapters, I have proposed multi-step mechanisms by which each hypothesis explains China's behavior.

- The *security competition* hypothesis contends that China's assertiveness has been caused by a rational and calculated recognition of China's capabilities and security situation by its leadership. Chinese leaders have realized they now have the ability to control the South China Sea, causing them to do so.
- The *historical nationalism* hypothesis argues that a patriotic view of China's glorious past during the tribute system and its more pathetic past during the "Century of Humiliation" has motivated Chinese leadership to focus on reclaiming "lost territories,"⁹⁶ causing China's assertiveness.
- The *strategic nationalism* hypothesis argues that China's leadership seeks to enhance China's national security, and has developed the capabilities to do so by securing the South China Sea. However, the specific means that China has chosen to go about securing the sea, controlling the waterways and islands but not the territories, is modeled after the Ming and Qing-era tribute system. The combination of capabilities expansion

⁹⁴ Beach, 18.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ William C. Callahan, "National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism." *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 29, no. 2 (March 2004): 211. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost.

and lessons learned from Chinese history has motivated China to become more assertive in the South China Sea.

Importantly, the causal mechanisms proposed by the first two hypotheses are exclusive. The *security competition* hypothesis pursues the traditional realist "billiard ball" model in which China's actions are caused solely by rational calculation, whereas the *historical nationalism* hypothesis sees Chinese nationalism as the sole cause of assertiveness. Thus, if the casual mechanism of one hypothesis is present, the other is automatically rejected. The *strategic nationalism* hypothesis, however, is non-exclusive, contending that both causal mechanisms are present.

The next step of process tracing is to identify a narrative, with both a start and end point.⁹⁷ The narrative should remain entirely relevant to the driving question, and allow the researcher to follow (or trace) the process throughout.⁹⁸ Luckily for my work, the South China Sea dispute has a natural narrative, beginning with the increase of Chinese assertiveness in the early 2000s, and ending in the modern day. While information from outside the narrative (especially the influence of Chinese history) influences the decisions made within the narrative, I only seek to examine causal mechanisms for decisions made within the narrative period.

The next step in process tracing is to identify the case studies based upon their relevance to the question. Relevant cases must: be contextually similar to one and other; possess the potential for the proposed causal mechanisms; and most importantly, possess the outcome that is being studied.⁹⁹ In this case, the outcome (or dependent variable) is Chinese assertiveness, while the key shared contextual feature is the participation of government-sanctioned Chinese forces in

⁹⁷ Cransow, 10.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Beach, 16.

territorial disputes. With these criteria, three natural choices for case studies arise: the Spratly Islands, the Paracel Islands, and Scarborough Shoal. Each of these island groups has been the site of heated and sometimes violent territorial disputes between China and other countries, satisfying the contextual similarities criteria. In addition, Chinese assertiveness has increased over the narrative period (early 2000s to present) in each case, satisfying the outcome-present criteria. Therefore, these three disputes will be used in my case study analysis.

Having identified the proposed causal mechanisms, narrative, and case studies, the final step of building a process tracing methodology can be taken: identifying evidence. The goal here is “to see whether the predicted evidence [is] present or not for each part of the mechanism,” thus allowing the researcher to draw conclusions.¹⁰⁰ The evidence chosen must support the causal mechanisms advocated in the hypotheses.

In order to accomplish this, I will first highlight key evidence apparent in each case study, then proceed to the comparative analysis portion of process tracing, drawing evidence from each case to reach a final conclusion.¹⁰¹ During this stage, I hope to display sufficient evidence to support each step of my hypothesis. For step one, I will show that China is a rational actor, and for step two, that China recognizes the value of controlling the South China Sea. For step three, I will present evidence that China's leadership is aware of and has been influenced by China's historical control of the SCS. To support step four, I will seek evidence that connects China's tribute system to its current strategy, and in step five I will look for evidence that shows China has propagated a nationalist historical narrative to support and justify its actions.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 17.

¹⁰¹ Beach, 15.

As Crasnow argues, given that process tracing must be understood as telling a narrative,¹⁰² the methodology outlined above is designed to break down my narrative into five more easily understood steps. Should there be insufficient evidence of any step (in any of the hypotheses), the argument is rejected. While there exists no single test that can "prove" my hypothesis, the methodology outlined in this chapter establishes a way of demonstrating its plausibility.

¹⁰² Crasnow, 14.

Chapter V: Unifying Factors in the South China Sea Dispute

Although this thesis examines the South China Sea dispute through a series of case studies, rather than as a single conflict, there are still a large number of facts, trends, and patterns of action that are common across the conflict as a whole. When these factors are relevant specific to a single case study, I will address them within that case study section. However, in an effort to reduce the redundancy that would come with repeating each relevant fact in each case study, this chapter will address factors that are found across every sub-dispute within the South China Sea dispute. This chapter is not a case study itself; the case study analysis methodology will not be applied. Rather, it is an overview that familiarizes the reader with key themes that are constant throughout the dispute, and serves as a reference for future chapters.

I have identified three core factors that appear across the conflict as a whole. The first is the expansion of the Chinese military, especially the navy. The second is the degree of institutionalism, especially economic interdependence, within the region. The third and last theme is Chinese historical nationalism, particularly its influence on China's understanding of maritime sovereignty. Before our case studies can be examined, each of these three factors must first be addressed.

Chinese Military Development

The Chinese military has played a significant role in the South China Sea conflict, spearheading China's island building effort, conducting patrols, and confronting neighbors with rival claims. This is largely a function of the PLA's newfound capabilities, which have expanded dramatically in a relatively short amount of time.

Only 20 years ago, China possessed a large, but poorly equipped military.¹⁰³ Although its Ground Force received the greatest investment, even that branch was primarily organized as a light-infantry force relying upon large units with limited heavy weapon capabilities.¹⁰⁴ Since then, however, the People's Liberation Army¹⁰⁵ has changed rapidly, with heavy investment and modernization.

China's Navy has been the largest beneficiary of this campaign. At one time largely a green-water force,¹⁰⁶ the PLAN has become a formidable opponent for any modern navy. While 20 years ago it hesitated to operate far from its own coasts, today's PLAN possesses a large fleet of modern destroyers.¹⁰⁷ All five classes of modern Chinese surface combatants (warships designed to engage in frontline combat) are equipped with anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), making them a significant threat to other warships in the region, especially highly-vulnerable carriers.¹⁰⁸ China has also heavily invested in the long-neglected South Seas Fleet (SSF), the regional command responsible for the South China Sea, equipping it with five of the newest class of destroyer and a 20,000 ton landing platform dock (LPD), giving the SSF expanded

¹⁰³ Heginbotham, 26.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 43.

¹⁰⁵ Please note: In the organization of the Chinese military, all units fall under the People's Liberation Army. Thus, the navy is the PLA Navy (PLAN), the air force the PLA Air Force (PLAAF), and so on. What we in the United States would understand as the regular "army" is called the PLA Ground Force (PLAGF). Other branches include the PLA rocket force (PLARF, responsible for ballistic missile operations) and the PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF, responsible for cyber, space, and electronic warfare operations). Information cited from: Anthony H. Cordesman, "China Military Organization and Reform." August 1, 2016. csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/160801_chinese_military_reform.pdf.

¹⁰⁶ Naval operations are generally split into three categories: brown water, referring to inland waterways, green water, the littoral zone close to the coast, and blue water, referring to long-range high seas operations.

¹⁰⁷ Goldstein, 60.

¹⁰⁸ Heginbotham, 30.

amphibious warfare capability.¹⁰⁹ In addition, China recently acquired its first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*.¹¹⁰

China has also heavily invested in its air force, the PLAAF. Originally possessing mostly second-generation fighters, the modernization program "has focused on the acquisition of modern fighter aircraft with advanced air-to-air missiles, glass cockpits, long-range SAMs, and precision air-to-ground munitions,"¹¹¹ creating a formidable fleet of both air superiority and strike fighters.¹¹² China has also invested in its air logistics program, acquiring air-to-air refueling capabilities and airborne early warning and control (AWACS) aircraft.¹¹³

China has made strides in other areas, most notably its missile and cyber-warfare capabilities.¹¹⁴ While an abundance of literature exists regarding the PLA's developing capabilities, I will refrain from engaging in a comprehensive analysis of such developments. Rather, the point I seek to make, and the one others have already made, is simple: the Chinese military is now better equipped, trained, and more capable than ever before. More importantly, however, it has a significant edge over any of its Southeast Asian neighbors due to the continued trajectory of its military capabilities expansion, one that shows no signs of stopping soon.

Interdependence and Institutional Interconnectivity in the South China Sea

The second key overarching trend relevant to China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea is regional interdependence and institutional interconnectivity. Institutions can

¹⁰⁹ Fravel, 313.

¹¹⁰ China Power Team. "How Does China's First Aircraft Carrier Stack Up?" China Power. August 09, 2017. <https://chinapower.csis.org/aircraft-carrier/>.

¹¹¹ Heginbotham, 31.

¹¹² Please note: Air superiority fighter refers to a fighter jet primarily designed to engage in air-to-air combat in order to control air space over a combat zone. Strike fighter refers to a dual-role fighter that is capable of both air-to-ground strike operations and air-to-air combat.

¹¹³ Goldstein, 59.

¹¹⁴ Heginbotham, 259.

be defined as a variety of longstanding policies and practices, both formal and informal, that — when firmly entrenched — may foster shared expectations.¹¹⁵ For the purposes of this thesis, however, I will focus on two key forms of institutions: economic (referred to as "interdependence") and diplomatic, which encompasses China's formal and informal diplomatic actions towards other nations.

Since the 1990s, trade between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries involved in the South China Sea dispute has increased fifteen-fold.¹¹⁶ China has surpassed the EU, U.S., and Japan to become the leading trade partner for most countries in Southeast Asia.¹¹⁷ It is also a critical source and destination for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the region. This trade and investment network was only strengthened in 2010 when the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) came into effect, making tariff free up to 90% of the goods traded between China and Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore.¹¹⁸

While intra-ASEAN trade is now substantial, China's trade with the ASEAN nations has become especially notable. Since CAFTA came into force, Chinese exports to ASEAN countries have skyrocketed, especially in the consumer goods sector.¹¹⁹ At the same time, China's imports from the ASEAN, especially in the intermediate goods¹²⁰ sector, have soared.¹²¹ The ability for

¹¹⁵ Robert O Keohane, "International Institutions: Two Approaches." *International Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (1988): 383. doi:10.2307/2600589

¹¹⁶ Weissman, "Why is there Relative Peace?" 12.

¹¹⁷ Kosandi Meidi, "Conflicts in the South China Sea and China-ASEAN Economic Interdependence: A Challenge to Cooperation" (ASEAN-Canada Working Paper Series no. 7, Singapore: RSIS Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies, 2014): 1.

¹¹⁸ Gregory Chin and Richard Stubbs. "China, regional institution-building and the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area." *Review of International Political Economy*. 18 no. 3 (2011): 278.

¹¹⁹ Li Qiaomin and Sholeh Maani, "Detecting positive effects of the ASEAN-China free trade agreement on foreign direct investment," *International Economics and Economic Policy* 15, no. 1 (2018): 74. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10368-016-0366-y>

¹²⁰ Intermediate goods refers to goods that are then incorporated into final products for sale to a consumer.

these goods to move between countries is largely dependent on the ability of merchant vessels to transit the South China Sea shipping lanes, which carry over one third of *global* shipping traffic.¹²²

This pattern of trade is defined by asymmetry. Simply put, China's neighbors rely far more on China than China does on them, in the realm of both imports and exports. An examination of the export and import shares between China and dispute-participants, below, highlights this fact.¹²³

2016 Exports to Dispute-Participants as a Percent of Total Exports by Country

	China	Malaysia	Philippines	Brunei	Vietnam	Indonesia
China	0	1.80	1.42	0.07	2.91	1.64
Malaysia	13.76	0	1.74	0.36	3.03	3.94
Philippines	11.00	2.11	0	0.01	1.33	1.12
Brunei	1.52	4.62	0.39	0	0.74	1.62
Vietnam	10.23	2.21	1.24	0.02	0	1.76
Indonesia	10.01	5.07	2.61	0.06	1.82	0

Table 1. Please note that countries from which exports originate are on the left side, and destinations across the top. Taiwan is excluded due to lack of available data.

2016 Imports From Dispute-Participants as a Percent of Total Imports by Country

	China	Malaysia	Philippines	Brunei	Vietnam	Indonesia
China	0	3.17	1.13	0.01	1.78	1.18
Malaysia	18.87	0	0.95	0.08	2.75	4.53
Philippines	16.36	4.71	0	0.01	1.81	4.43
Brunei	10.43	21.13	0.26	0	1.18	2.67
Vietnam	29.82	2.52	0.54	0.03	0	1.65
Indonesia	20.61	5.98	0.48	0.09	2.22	0

Table 2: Please note that countries to which imports are arriving are listed on the left side, countries of origin across the top. Taiwan is excluded due to lack of available data.

¹²¹ Li and Maani, 75.

¹²² China Power Team. "How much trade transits the South China Sea?" China Power. August 2, 2017. Updated October 27, 2017. <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>

¹²³ Trade statistics calculated from values found at "Trade Stats by Country." 2017. *World Integrated Trade Solutions*. World Bank Group. [://wits.worldbank.org/Default.aspx?lang=en](https://wits.worldbank.org/Default.aspx?lang=en).

Looking first at exports, the dispute-participant with the largest export market for Chinese goods is Vietnam, with 2.91%.¹²⁴ China, however, swallows up at least 10% of every country's exports, with the notable exception of Brunei. Malaysia, for example, sends nearly 14% of its exports to China. Imports present a similar story, with China receiving only 7.27% of its imports from dispute-participants.¹²⁵ The relevant ASEAN countries, however, import on average more than 19% of their goods from China.

As a result, China enjoys substantial ability to economically coerce its neighbors.¹²⁶ This potential is greatest in China's relations with Vietnam: while Chinese goods make up nearly 30% of Vietnam's imports, Vietnamese goods make up less than 2% of China's imports, in effect making Vietnam far more reliant upon China than China is on Vietnam. In some instances, this potential for trade coercion has evolved beyond the hypothetical to become painfully real, especially in the case of China and the Philippines. China has limited the import of fruit from the Philippines in response to a territorial issue.¹²⁷ While I will discuss the specific details of Chinese sanctions in the relevant case study sections, the point here is that China is willing to use economic interdependence as leverage over other countries.

From the data outlined in the preceding pages, two trends become evident. First, there is by no means a deficit of economic cooperation and interconnectivity in the South China Sea. China-ASEAN trade is at an all-time high,¹²⁸ and the pattern of regional economic integration shows no signs of waning. Second, the trade is highly asymmetrical, and China has proven

¹²⁴ See table 1.

¹²⁵ See table 2.

¹²⁶ Ravindran, 105.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 121.

¹²⁸ Wiessmann, 12.

willing to exploit this asymmetry as leverage. Thus, in effect, economic interdependence has not functioned so much as an institution as it has another form of power in the South China Sea; in essence, it serves as another tool in China's strategic toolbox.

But what about other forms of regional cooperation, such as diplomacy? Once again, the level of institutionalization is relatively high. China has, for example, engaged in the ASEAN +3 discussions,¹²⁹ which have created the relatively new phenomenon of regularized, interpersonal connections between Chinese and other Asian leaders.¹³⁰ In addition, Chinese engagement in track-two diplomacy with ASEAN nations is at an all-time high.¹³¹

But despite this apparent rise in diplomatic cooperation, China has largely shown itself unwilling to participate in multilateral negotiations on the South China Sea. It clearly prefers bilateral talks with other states over multilateral negotiations.¹³² For example, Chinese leaders regularly hold private meetings with their Malaysian counterparts regarding the dispute,¹³³ and have refused to participate in the Permanent Court of Arbitration's proceedings regarding the Philippines' disputes with China.¹³⁴

The one exception to this trend occurred in 2012 when China and ASEAN released a joint "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea," which called for all parties to "reaffirm their commitment to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United

¹²⁹ ASEAN+3 referring to the ASEAN Nations plus China, Japan, and South Korea.

¹³⁰ Weissman, 6.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Fravel, 300.

¹³³ Prashanth Parameswaran. "Malaysia's Approach to the South China Sea Dispute After the Arbitral Tribunal's Ruling." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 3 (12, 2016): 375.
<https://colby.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1857704887?accountid=10198>.

¹³⁴ Euan, Graham. "The Hague Tribunal's South China Sea Ruling: Empty Provocation or Slow-Burning Influence?" *Council on Foreign Relations*. Council on Foreign Relations. August 18, 2016.
https://www.cfr.org/councilofcouncils/global_memos/p38227.

Nations, the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea."¹³⁵ While signing a multilateral accord on the South China Sea was a deviation from the previous Chinese policy of only engaging in bilateral talks, the declaration was non-binding and lacked an enforcement mechanism.¹³⁶ As such, despite the declaration's call for countries to "undertake to exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes and affect peace and stability,"¹³⁷ there has been no evidence of a reduction of hostilities in the region.

These facts illustrate the same trend we observed with economic integration. First, the degree of diplomatic cooperation is, nominally, quite high. China and the ASEAN countries all share diplomatic ties, and participate in various forms of diplomacy. China's choice to primarily engage in bilateral negotiations gives it substantial diplomatic leverage. Being far more powerful than any of its neighbors, China preserves this disparity, and the leverage it gives, by refusing to engage with ASEAN as a whole, a move that could weaken its comparative advantage in negotiations. This policy has enabled China, backed by its economic and military advantage, to use regional diplomatic linkages as another source of coercion in the region.

In short, there is a high degree of economic and diplomatic communication, cooperation, and interconnectivity among China and the other participants in the South China Sea. Such mechanisms, however, have largely failed to blunt China's assertiveness, and in some cases have simply increased China's power relative to other countries. Thus, regional integration and interdependence have not posed an obstacle to China's assertiveness, a claim that will be confirmed in the case studies section.

¹³⁵ ASEAN. *Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea*. October 12, 2012. http://asean.org/?static_post=declaration-on-the-conduct-of-parties-in-the-south-china-sea-2.

¹³⁶ Ankit Panda, "China, ASEAN Come to Agreement on a Framework South China Sea Code of Conduct." *The Diplomat*. May 19, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/china-asean-come-to-agreement-on-a-framework-south-china-sea-code-of-conduct/>.

¹³⁷ ASEAN, *Declaration on Conduct*.

History, Memory, and Chinese Nationalism

The third key factor applicable to the South China Sea discussion as a whole, rather than a specific case study, is the growing sense of Chinese nationalism and its influence on Chinese foreign policy. The influence of Chinese nationalism is two-fold: first, the Chinese government propagates nationalism to garner support for its actions in the South China Sea. Second, nationalism, especially relating to the historical memory of the pre-19th century period when China dominated East Asia, has deeply influenced policy and provided a model for a regional order which modern China seeks to recreate.

China's sense of nationalism is largely rooted in a feeling of pride in China's successes during the Ming and Qing period, followed by a feeling of shame and humiliation when these successes were undone by the arrival of Western powers.¹³⁸ The desire to restore China to its previous position has then created the push to retake what the Chinese culturally regard as the nation's "lost territories."¹³⁹ As highlighted previously in chapter two, China was once the hegemon in East Asia. It had achieved regional hegemony through a tributary system in which petitioning states would recognize the supremacy of China in return for China's recognition of their sovereignty (and its willingness to engage in trade with the petitioner).¹⁴⁰ This reflected a regional order with China clearly on top due to its cultural and economic superiority rather than its military power.¹⁴¹ States within this system were considered part of the "civilized" world and incorporated elements of Confucianism into their culture, while states that operated outside of it

¹³⁸ Zhao, 535.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Kang, *East Asia Before the West*, 56.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

were "uncivilized."¹⁴² Thus, those within the system were culturally superior to those outside of it, with China, the hegemon, culturally superior to all.

In applying this system, China effectively “owned” the South China Sea, and became the “unquestioned center of international trade in early modern Asia.”¹⁴³ China viewed itself as the regional broker-in-chief, the rightful guardian of *tian xia*, which Howard French translates as “everything under the heavens.”¹⁴⁴ This was most evident in the field of commerce. By the 1670s, Chinese fleets effectively controlled the seas, and maritime trade, around East and Southeast Asia.¹⁴⁵ While Western sources sometimes portray China as “closed off,” the reality was quite different: China controlled the waterways and heavily engaged in trade with other nations *in the region*.¹⁴⁶ This system, in which China controlled and regulated the seas but largely did not interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries, persisted for centuries and elevated China to a hegemonic position.

All this came crashing down, however, during the “Century of Humiliation”, roughly 1840-1940. In this period, which began with Great Britain’s seizure of Hong Kong and ended with Japan’s all-out invasion, China’s territory shrank by one-third, its last imperial dynasty collapsed, and the country fell largely under the control of foreign powers.¹⁴⁷ Official historiography suggests that the Chinese revolution — a victory over foreign invaders and then *Guomindang* rivals – finally ended this period of humiliation, enabling China to begin resuming its traditional position of supremacy in the region.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 10.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 109.

¹⁴⁴ Howard W. French, *Everything Under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China's Push for Global Power*. New York: Vintage Books, 2018.

¹⁴⁵ Kang, 120.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁴⁷ Kaufman, 2.

While Maoism, a heterodox form of Marxism-Leninism, guided the PRC through its first 30 years, it eventually gave way to a new unifying ideology steeped in nationalism. Deng Xiaoping, who began to consolidate power after Mao's death in the late 1970s, was a pragmatic reformer, a modernizer who also believed in tradition. In his *Eight Principles of International Strategic Thinking*, he promoted a form of historical nationalism, arguing that China's peace and prosperity depended upon it returning to its previous hegemonic position.¹⁴⁸ Jiang Zemin, Deng's successor, pushed the new ideology even further by incorporating "cultural nationalism" into the country's official discourse.¹⁴⁹

In the 1990s, China launched a "patriotic education campaign" to foster greater nationalist pride among young people.¹⁵⁰ This program emphasized *guoqing jiaoyu* (国情教育), or "education in national conditions," insisting that China was unique and not ready to adopt Western ideas such as democracy.¹⁵¹ As a result, China developed a sense of nationalism based on two key factors: a "deeply rooted suspicion" of the West, and a sense of pragmatism.¹⁵² The pragmatic aspect is particularly notable because it is shared among both the country's leadership and population. The Chinese leadership pursued nationalism as it was a logical source of legitimacy, while the greater population supported the "dream of strong China," a somewhat vague concept that imagines a more robust nation without specifying the form the state should take to achieve that goal.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸ Shee, 369.

¹⁴⁹ Nicholas Dynon, "Four Civilizations" and the Evolution of Post-Mao Chinese Socialist Ideology." *The China Journal*, no. 60 (2008): 85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20647989>.

¹⁵⁰ Wang, 790.

¹⁵¹ Zhao, 537.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

This ideological transformation has helped to shape China's policy on the South China Sea in two important ways. First, the Chinese population has begun to express a greater sense of nationalism, which has put pressure on the government to act more aggressively.¹⁵⁴ Interestingly, however, this new nationalism does not follow the typically aggressive pattern of "hawkishness," but rather represents a trend that Christopher Hughes refers to as "*geopolitik nationalism*", when state-sponsored nationalism is used to gain support for rational, calculated foreign policy.¹⁵⁵ That is not to say that China is not assertive in its actions, but rather that it not engaged in an overly aggressive effort to forcibly retake the South China Sea, instead pursuing a more nuanced and at times moderate policy. In this nationalist view, Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea is actually viewed as defensive action against Western powers. In the face of what it perceives as Western aggression, China feels a need to secure its outer defensive perimeter, and must do so by controlling the South China Sea.¹⁵⁶

Implicit in this first point is the argument that the foreign policy options of Chinese leaders are constrained by the nationalistic will of the Chinese people. There is evidence to support this claim: as Chinese citizens have found more ways to make their voices heard, especially through the Internet,¹⁵⁷ the government has been forced to respond.¹⁵⁸ However, the reality is that the Chinese government controls virtually all of the country's media, and has a massive coercive apparatus with which it can influence the population's thinking, just as it did with the patriotic education campaign.¹⁵⁹ Thus, just as the party-state was able to promote

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Christopher Hughes, "Reclassifying Chinese Nationalism: The Geopolitik Turn." *Journal of Contemporary China* 20, no. 71 (2011): 605. doi:10.1080/10670564.2011.587161605

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Yahuda, 446.

¹⁵⁸ Zhao, 536.

¹⁵⁹ Kai Quek, and Alastair Iain Johnston. "Can China Back Down? Crisis De-escalation in the Shadow of Popular Opposition." *International Security* 42, no. 3 (2018). doi:10.1162/isec_a_00303.

nationalism, it is equally likely that it could restrain it. While Chinese leaders may be influenced by popular nationalism, they are not necessarily driven by it. Rather, popular nationalism is a tool that the Chinese party-state has used to legitimize its activities in the South China Sea.

Chinese historical nationalism offers another key point in China's claims to the South China Sea: a unique understanding of maritime law. Notable in its claim of sovereignty over the South China Sea is China's implied rejection of the Western, and now global, definition of maritime sovereignty. In the traditional Western model, finally codified in UNCLOS, states could claim control to waters a certain distance from their coast. The 1982 convention clarified this further by creating a tiered system in which a nation's ability to control waters diminished with each subsequent tier. According to UNCLOS, nations first enjoy 12 nautical miles of territorial water in which they may enforce laws and regulate entry, save for the right of innocent passage.¹⁶⁰ States then possess a contiguous zone out to 24 nautical miles, in which they may enforce customs regulations, followed by an exclusive economic zone up to 200 nautical miles offshore in which they may control all resource use.¹⁶¹ This Western model, then, is not designed to guarantee state sovereignty over far-reaching waters, but rather to preserve a country's right to exploit economic resources while also protecting the openness of the seas.

Although China has signed and ratified UNCLOS,¹⁶² many of its strategic thinkers and leaders appear to reject its basic tenets in favor of a conception of maritime sovereignty grounded in the idea of "historical right." Chinese legal scholars, for example, cite two sources of

¹⁶⁰ *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*, (Montego Bay, Jamaica: United Nations, 1982), 31.
http://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, 43.

¹⁶² "Chronological Lists of Ratifications." United Nations. November 6, 2017.
https://www.un.org/Depts/los/reference_files/chronological_lists_of_ratifications.htm.

maritime law: treaties (provided they were signed fairly and not under coercion) and customs.¹⁶³

Absent from most Chinese legal writing, however, is the role of "general principles of international law," which are frequently cited in Western literature.¹⁶⁴ By rejecting such principles, such as the principle that a governing body has the right to adjudicate disputes, Chinese scholars favor a model in which international law is negotiated, rather than arbitrated by a higher body. Thus, despite its status as a signatory to UNCLOS, Chinese scholars and leaders frequently reject the authority of international organizations in resolving territorial disputes.¹⁶⁵ The Chinese party-state also argues that countries enjoy a higher level of control in their exclusive economic zone (EEZ)¹⁶⁶ than UNCLOS typically allows for, rejecting the right for foreign warships to enjoy "innocent passage."¹⁶⁷

This different understanding of international maritime law, in which a country may claim exclusive and near-total control over large swathes of the sea based upon "historical right," has thus created the legal logic necessary for China to lay claim to the entire South China Sea. In China's view, the South China Sea represents part of the "lost territories" that were taken or even stolen during imperialism and invasion,¹⁶⁸ a theory that provides the necessary "historical right."

From the prevailing Chinese perspective, attempts to control the South China Sea are justified under international law. China is simply reestablishing the control to which it has a right by historical justification. Accordingly, it uses the pre-modern tributary system as a kind of model to follow in the modern day. This is entirely rational: control of the South China Sea

¹⁶³ Chiu, 293.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Philips, Holmes and Bowcott, "Beijing Rejects Tribunal's Ruling."

¹⁶⁶ EEZ refers to the area up to 200 miles from shore in which a country holds exclusive right over any natural resources.

¹⁶⁷ Franckx, Erik. "American and Chinese Views on Navigational Rights of Warships." *Chinese Journal Of International Law* 10, no. 1 (March 2011): 187. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost.

¹⁶⁸ Zhao, 537.

during the tributary system is the last truly successful example of maritime strategy. Therefore, Chinese control of the South China Sea in the distant past serves as both the justification for contemporary claims and the model that to which the party-state seeks to return.

There is a remarkable similarity between the borders delineated by China's "nine-dash line" and the effective limits of ancient Chinese maritime control. In addition, seemingly mirroring the traits of the tributary system, China has generally avoided interfering in its neighbors' domestic politics while still pursuing its claim, based on the right of "historical sovereignty", to the South China Sea.¹⁶⁹

"Sovereignty" is particularly important in Chinese statements regarding the South China Sea. Although China has failed to clarify exactly what the "nine-dash line" means,¹⁷⁰ it considers any intrusion of a foreign vessel into the South China Sea as a violation of Chinese "sovereignty." A prominent Chinese textbook offers perhaps the most clarity about this critical concept: "A country's sovereign territory consists of its primary land area, but also its oceanic territory."¹⁷¹ The book goes on to describe the South China Sea as a being "at the core of China's security interests."¹⁷² Thus, while its exact claim is somewhat ambiguous, China clearly claims a degree of control over the South China Sea that extends far beyond that allowed by any Western or UNCLOS-derived definition.

In effect, China's contemporary stance on the South China Sea is that it represents Chinese sovereign territory in a way that is highly similar to the pre-modern tributary system. China's recent assertiveness, then, may be potentially viewed as China making an effort to reclaim its rightful place as the regional hegemon that it lost to imperial invaders. China's

¹⁶⁹ Gonzales, 23.

¹⁷⁰ Fravel, 295.

¹⁷¹ Guang, 507.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

leadership itself has even publicly affirmed this. In a 2014 speech, for example, Xi Jinping recalled his country's experience with Western imperialism, when China "was poor and weak and suffered several hundred instances of foreign encroachment."¹⁷³ Having risen in power, distancing itself from those dark days, China, he declared, is now ready to "resolutely safeguard territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests," and in doing so build "an impregnable wall [literally, "a wall of copper and iron"] for border and ocean defense."¹⁷⁴ In this way, Chinese leaders not only use historical control of the South China Sea as a model for their current goal; they also openly exploit a nationalist narrative about the past to justify their ongoing strategic behavior.

Conclusion

This chapter addresses themes that are common to every one of the various disputes in the South China Sea conflict. It lays the analytical groundwork, but does not pretend to rigorously answer the question posed here. In the following case studies, I use process tracing to explain why China has begun to pursue a more assertive foreign policy in this important maritime region.

¹⁷³ Ryan D. Martinson, "PANNING FOR GOLD: Assessing Chinese Maritime Strategy from Primary Sources." *Naval War College Review* 69, no. 3 (Summer, 2016): 27.
<https://colby.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1807691760?accountid=10198>.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Chapter VI: Case Study I – The Spratly Islands

In July 2016, a Philippine activist group launched their third "patriotic voyage," intending to rendezvous with the Philippine Navy vessel BRP *Sierra Madre*.¹⁷⁵ The *Sierra Madre*, however, was far from a typical naval vessel. Rather, it was a rusted out, yet still commissioned shell of a Second World War-era landing ship, beached upon the disputed Ayungin shoal.¹⁷⁶ Crewed by eight Philippine marines, the ship is tasked with one role: providing a Philippine military presence on the reef to prevent it from falling into Chinese hands.

The Chinese response to the Philippine voyage was quick, as a small fleet of Chinese Coast Guard vessels sought to intercept the activists before landing.¹⁷⁷ Ultimately failing to stop the activists, the Chinese government issued a statement "that China has indisputable sovereignty" over the territory and reaffirmed the PLA's commitment to protecting China's sovereign territory.¹⁷⁸ Less than two weeks later and only a few hundred miles away, the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative published aerial photography showing that the runway on China's new militarized island at Fiery Cross Reef had been completed,¹⁷⁹ allowing for Chinese land-based aircraft operations in the region.

China is clearly pursuing an aggressive policy in the Spratly Islands, a series of islands, reefs, and rocky outcroppings in the central-Southeast area of the South China Sea.¹⁸⁰ Despite

¹⁷⁵ Anders Corr. "China Issues Threat After Philippine Activists Resupply the Sierra Madre in the South China Sea," *Forbes*. April 21, 2017. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/anderscorr/2016/07/06/china-issues-threat-after-philippine-activists-resupply-the-sierra-madre-in-the-south-china-sea/#121561352c82>.

¹⁷⁶ Jeff Himmelman. "A Game of Shark and Minnow," *New York Times*, October 24, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/newsgraphics/2013/10/27/south-china-sea/>

¹⁷⁷ Corr, "China Issues Threat"

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ Fiery Cross Reef." *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*. Accessed March 22, 2018. <https://amti.csis.org/fiery-cross-reef/>.

¹⁸⁰ Charles S Hutchinson and VR Vijayan, "What Are the Spratly Islands?" *Journal of East Asian Earth Sciences* 39, no. 5 (2010): 371, doi: 10.1016/j.jseas.2010.04.013.

claims by Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei,¹⁸¹ China has aggressively asserted its "sovereignty" over the Spratlys, seizing or when necessary, building, islands. China's actions, however, are often tinged with nationalist rhetoric,¹⁸² and accompanied by popular mobilization. China's aggression in the Spratlys has grown from two causes: first, the recognition of its material superiority and competitive advantage over its neighbors, and second, a nationalist goal of "reclaiming" the South China Sea. This case study aims to demonstrate that both pragmatic realism and historical nationalism have motivated China's actions, supporting the *strategic nationalism* hypothesis.

Dangerous Ground: A New Conflict

Recognizing the danger the Spratly's network of reefs, atolls, islands and rocks posed to navigation, most admiralty charts labeled the area as "Dangerous Ground."¹⁸³ Originally intended as a warning rather than a name, the moniker stuck, and the area around the Spratlys became known as the Dangerous Ground to generations of sailors who plied the waters. Throughout history, the Spratly Islands have found a way to live up to the name for a variety of reasons.

Roughly defined as the area between 7–12 °N and 112–116°E,¹⁸⁴ the Spratly Islands barely deserve to be called islands, with the largest natural island, the Taiwanese-controlled Itu Aba,¹⁸⁵ being only 0.4km² in area.¹⁸⁶ Named for British sailor Captain Richard Spratly,¹⁸⁷ the

¹⁸¹ John C. Baker and David G Wiencek, *Cooperative Monitoring in the South China Sea : Satellite Imagery, Confidence Building Measures, and the Spratly Islands Disputes* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002) 17.

¹⁸² Tom Philips, Oliver Holmes and Owen Bowcott, Beijing Rejects Tribunal's Ruling in South China Sea Case." *The Guardian*, July 12, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/12/philippines-wins-south-china-sea-case-against-china>.

¹⁸³ Hutchinson and Vijayan, 373.

¹⁸⁴ Hutchinson and Vijayan, 373.

¹⁸⁵ Note: Given that almost every geographical feature in the region possesses multiple names, this paper will use the most internationally well-known English name, except when citing original sources.

majority of the archipelago is made up of small coral atolls and guano-covered rocky outcroppings.¹⁸⁸ Aside from a few "larger" islands, these outcroppings have no natural source of fresh water, and are largely incapable of supporting human settlement.¹⁸⁹

Although Chinese nautical records from the Three Kingdoms Period (220-265 C.E.) contain reference to the Islands,¹⁹⁰ the area remained peaceful for most of its history.¹⁹¹ Evidence of limited human activity on the islands stretches back to the seventh century,¹⁹² and British and French records from the 1920s reported Chinese fishermen living in the Spratlys.¹⁹³ France then occupied the islands as part of French Indochina from 1932 to 1939, at which point they were taken over by Imperial Japan.¹⁹⁴

At the conclusion of the Second World War, control of the Spratlys was nominally handed back to the Republic of China, who dispatched troops to explore Itu Aba in 1947,¹⁹⁵ eventually establishing a permanent garrison in 1956.¹⁹⁶ Although the People's Republic of China claimed sovereignty over the area after the Chinese Civil War,¹⁹⁷ no attempts were made to physically assert this claim, and the Taiwanese settlement on Itu Aba remained the only permanent presence in the region. Aside from the 1956 attempt by Philippine businessman Tomas Cloma to establish the independent state of "Kalayaan," drawing the ire of China,

¹⁸⁶ Brian K Murphy, "Dangerous Ground: The Spratly Islands and International Law." *Ocean & Coastal Law Journal* 1, no. 2 (1995): 189.

¹⁸⁷ Hutchinson and Vijayan, 372.

¹⁸⁸ Murphy, 188.

¹⁸⁹ Baker and Wiencek, 17.

¹⁹⁰ Chang Teh-Kuang, China's Claim of Sovereignty over Spratly and Paracel Islands: A Historical and Legal Perspective, 403

¹⁹¹ Murphy, 189.

¹⁹² Chang, 404.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 406

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ Chang, 407.

¹⁹⁶ Murphy, 193.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

Taiwan, and Vietnam, no major attempts were made to change the status quo during this period.¹⁹⁸

The relative peace lasted until the Southeast Asian oil boom of the early 1970s, when oil was discovered off of Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam, and the Philippines, effectively encircling the Spratlys in a ring of successful oil strikes.¹⁹⁹ The Philippines occupied three more islands in 1968, while in 1973, South Vietnam attempted to reassert its claim to the islands, occupying five of the atolls.²⁰⁰ The dynamic was changed again in 1974, when Cloma formally relinquished his claimed islands to the government of the Philippines, which quickly annexed them as Philippine territory.²⁰¹ This was followed by a 1979 Malaysian government-published map depicting the islands as Malaysian territory, a statement backed up by the Malaysian military occupation of Swallow Island in 1983.²⁰²

The dispute came to a head in 1988 with an early instance of open conflict between China and Vietnam. Seemingly emboldened by the withdrawal of both Soviet and American forces in the region as the Cold War wound down, both China and Vietnam began campaigns to occupy and fortify the remaining islands.²⁰³ Eventually, the two forces met at Johnson South Reef, then a small rocky outcropping barely rising above the sea.²⁰⁴ While each side offers a different account of what occurred, the end result was a sweeping Chinese victory, with three Vietnamese ships

¹⁹⁸ Chang, 188.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*,

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 187.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, 194.

²⁰² Chang, 194.

²⁰³ *Ibid*, 195.

²⁰⁴ Mira Rapp-Hooper, "Before and After: The South China Sea Transformed," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. February 18, 2015. <https://amti.csis.org/before-and-after-the-south-china-sea-transformed/>.

sunk and 64 sailors killed.²⁰⁵ While the event drew the attention of the international community, no action was ever taken, and both sides began a tit-for-tat conflict known as the "Battle of the Lighthouses", in which one side would erect a barely-habitable lighthouse on a reef, prompting the other side to do the same on a different reef.²⁰⁶

While the 1990s were largely devoid of offensive conflict (in no small part because nearly every piece of land that could be occupied had been), there was still a series of major developments relevant to the Spratly conflict. First, China began to modernize and expand its long-neglected navy, giving the PLAN capabilities far beyond what it had previously enjoyed.²⁰⁷ The China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) also contracted with an American oil corporation, Crestone, to start drilling in the sea, beginning the process of petroleum extraction from the islands.²⁰⁸ In addition, by 1996, all parties in the dispute had ratified UNCLOS,²⁰⁹ the implications of which will be discussed later in this chapter. The final action of the decade came in 1999, when the Philippines Navy intentionally grounded the BRP *Sierra Madre*, discussed in this chapter's introduction, in an attempt to create a sort of artificial island in support of their claims.²¹⁰

The 21st Century Spratly Arms Race

The current situation in the Spratly Islands can perhaps best be described as an arms race among the participants, with each country seeking to outbuild and outmaneuver the other to

²⁰⁵ Reuters Staff, "Vietnam Protesters Denounce China on Anniversary of Navy Battle." *Reuters*. March 14, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-vietnam/vietnam-protesters-denounce-china-on-anniversary-of-navy-battle-idUSKCN0WG0C9>.

²⁰⁶ Murphy, 195.

²⁰⁷ Heginbotham, 75.

²⁰⁸ Murphy, 196.

²⁰⁹ "Chronological Lists of Ratifications." United Nations. November 6, 2017.

https://www.un.org/Depts/los/reference_files/chronological_lists_of_ratifications.htm.

²¹⁰ Himmelman, "A Game of Shark and Minnow."

whatever degree they are capable. This "arms race" has taken two forms: naval modernization and island building.

While every country in the Spratly dispute clearly has made a concerted effort to improve its naval capabilities, particularly in areas relevant to the Spratly conflict, these developments pale in comparison to the modernization of the PLAN.²¹¹ As discussed in the unifying factors chapter, China enjoys naval dominance in the region, even as other countries, namely Vietnam, pour resources into naval modernization programs in an attempt to provide some parity.²¹²

China's advantage in the Spratlys also comes in the form of air power, with the PLA Air Force enjoying near-total air superiority over the Spratlys. This dominance gives China a substantial edge in the event of conflict — a 2015 RAND study, for example, estimates that only a few sorties of Chinese land-based aircraft could wipe out the garrison on Thitu Island, the largest of the Philippine-occupied islands.^{213,214} Combined with China's array of modern anti-surface cruise missiles,²¹⁵ the other countries in the Spratly dispute possess little ability to successfully engage the Chinese military without outside intervention.

The most notable feature of the Spratly arms race, however, has come in the form of island building. Seeking to reaffirm their claims, and capitalizing on the reality that it is far easier to maintain a permanent presence on land rather than sea, all countries in the dispute except Brunei have sought to expand their military presence in the region, building their own islands when none was available. China has been at the forefront of these efforts, beginning significant

²¹¹ Goldstein, "Rising to the Challenge," 60.

²¹² Minh Vu Truong, "The Modernization of the Vietnam Peoples Navy: Grand Goals and Limited Options." Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. April 06, 2017. <https://amti.csis.org/modernization-vietnam-navy/>.

²¹³ Heginbotham, 75.

²¹⁴ Although the RAND study recognizes Chinese air supremacy over its neighbors, it also argues that this advantage may disappear if faced by the US military, a distinct possibility should open warfare ever erupt.

²¹⁵ Heginbotham, 176.

dredging operations in 2014 and continuing to build at least seven island bases in the Spratlys.²¹⁶

While all of these bases can now support helicopter operations, the three largest, Fiery Cross Reef, Mischief Reef, and Subi Island, now possess runways for fixed-wing operations and resupply.²¹⁷ Crucially, Fiery Cross Reef's runway is large enough to support fighter jet operations,²¹⁸ and is protected by an

array of radar systems and missile launchers.^{219,220} The expansion of these islands allows them to become part of China's "First Island Chain," providing a base from which the Chinese military can deny foreign naval forces operating capacity near China's coastline.²²¹

Although China has been the undisputed leader in island building operations, it is far from the only party engaged in the practice. Vietnam has long sought to reinforce its island claims by reclaiming the sea around existing



Image 2: Chinese developments on Fiery Cross Reef from 2006 to 2016.

²¹⁶ Michael McDevitt, "The South China Sea: Island Building and Evolving U.S. Policy," *American Foreign Policy Interests* 37, no. 5/6 (September 2015), 254.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ McDevitt, 254.

²¹⁹ "UPDATED: Chinas Big Three Near Completion." Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. June 29, 2017. <https://amti.csis.org/chinas-big-three-near-completion/>.

²²⁰ "Photos obtained from: Satellite Images of Fiery Cross Reef. Digital image. AMTI.org. January 1, 2018. <https://amti.csis.org/fiery-cross-reef/>.

²²¹ Bouchat, 17.

islands, most notably by expanding the runway and harbor on Spratly Island.²²² Vietnam also began reinforcing its islands with surface to air missile (SAM) launchers, prompting Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang to "strongly urge [Vietnam] to truly respect China's sovereignty and legitimate rights and interests, immediately stop its illegal occupation and construction, and withdraw their personnel and facilities."²²³

Although Taiwan has also sought to expand its presence on Itu Aba through the construction of an expanded runway, both Taiwanese and Vietnamese developments in the Spratlys pale in comparison to China's.²²⁴ Notably, China's developments are far more militarized than either its adversaries — while civilians live on the Taiwanese and Vietnamese held islands, China's operations on the islands are primarily military.²²⁵ By placing military assets, such as radar, fighter jets, and surface to air missiles on its Spratly islands, China has not only reaffirmed its own claims, but actively threatened others through the positioning of its vastly superior military.

Strategic Mistrust, Nationalist Tendencies, and Restrained Aggression

Although the Spratly Islands have experienced a significant, multilateral military buildup, there has not been a case of major armed combat between militaries since the 1988 Johnson South Reef Skirmish.²²⁶ This does not mean, however, that the tension surrounding the situation has diminished. Rather, China has continued to aggressively assert its claims in the Spratlys,

²²² "Spratly Island." Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. August 5, 2017. <https://amti.csis.org/spratly-island/>.

²²³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference on November 18, 2016." News release, November 18, 2016. fmprc.gov.cn. www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1416696.shtml.

²²⁴ Rapp-Hooper, "Before and After."

²²⁵ "UPDATED: Chinas Big Three Near Completion." Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative

²²⁶ Reuters Staff, "Vietnam Protesters Denounce."

prompting a response from other nations. Therefore, while the Spratly conflict is truly multilateral, almost all of the incidents involve China's presence and assertiveness.

China's assertiveness in the Spratlys is primarily paramilitary, following a greater trend in Chinese maritime policy discussed in the preceding chapter. The China Coast Guard (CCG), which serves as the primary response agency to non-military incursions in Chinese territorial claims, has adopted an aggressive policy towards foreign fishing vessels in the region, allegedly firing upon Philippine fishermen near Thitu Island in April 2017.²²⁷ Chinese civilian fishing vessels themselves have acted aggressively, at times sailing into other countries' claimed territory with the support of armed CCG vessels.²²⁸ In addition, Chinese fishing boats have been sighted intentionally revving their engines in an effort to destroy coral reefs near the Philippine's claim,²²⁹ or poisoning the water with cyanide to dissuade foreign fishermen from harvesting their catch.²³⁰

Although open conflict has not occurred, any military incursion into the disputed territory draws a robust Chinese response, making use of the PLAN and PLAAF's newfound capabilities. American destroyers on "Freedom of Navigation" patrols in both 2016²³¹ and 2017²³² were tracked and shadowed by PLAN ships, prompting China to issue a statement asserting that the

²²⁷ Anders Corr, "China Allegedly Shot At Philippine Fishermen, Challenged Defense Secretary: Hit Back Hard." *Forbes*. April 21, 2017. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/anderscorr/2017/04/21/china-allegedly-shot-at-philippine-fishermen-challenged-defense-secretary-hit-back-hard/#21e96e2d753a>.

²²⁸ Simon Denver, "'How Chinas Fishermen Are Fighting a Covert War in the South China Sea.'" *The Washington Post*. April 12, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/fishing-fleet-puts-china-on-collision-course-with-neighbors-in-south-china-sea/2016/04/12/8a6a9e3c-fff3-11e5-8bb1-f124a43f84dc_story.html?utm_term=.324d9f01b469.

²²⁹ Rupert Wingfield-Hayes, "Why Are Chinese Fishermen Destroying Coral Reefs in the South China Sea?" BBC News. December 15, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35106631>.

²³⁰ Himmelman, "A Game of Shark and Minnow."

²³¹ Jane Perlez, "U.S. Sails Warship Near Disputed Island in South China Sea, Challenging Chinese Claims." *New York Times*. May 10, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/11/world/asia/south-china-sea-us-warship.html>

²³² Kristen, Huang, "Beijing Sounds Warning over Latest US Patrol in South China Sea." *South China Morning Post*. August 11, 2017. <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2106370/beijing-protests-against-latest-us-navy-patrol-south>.

"US Navy violated International and Chinese Laws and breached Chinese sovereignty."²³³ In addition, China has shown itself willing to display its military might towards other disputing parties, launching military exercises within 50 miles of the Malaysian coast in 2013.²³⁴

Moreover, China's actions in the Spratlys are often tinged with nationalist rhetoric. As far back as the early 90s, in which the Spratlys were referred to as "naturally Chinese," evoking a theme of nationalist-humiliation to justify China's attempts to reclaim its territory lost to Western powers during the Century of Humiliation.²³⁵ Chinese literature on the matter is also quite blunt, stating that "the motherland is not yet completely unified; the struggle over sovereignty of the Spratlys, Diaoyutai and the Sino-Indian boundary still continues."²³⁶

Such nationalist sentiments have continued into the present day. As discussed earlier, although China refuses to clarify exactly what its famous "Nine Dash Line" means,²³⁷ it frequently refers to its "sovereignty" over the Spratlys whenever a foreign warship sails within the region.²³⁸ Interestingly, in its communications about the Spratlys, China only refers to the general concept of sovereignty, but never specifically references UNCLOS as a justification for its claims against foreign ships. This seemingly supports the idea that China uses a definition of maritime sovereignty conceptually different from the West, one in which a country enjoys total sovereignty over its oceans rather than the tiered-control system of UNCLOS. Chinese literature also supports the role of a nationalist understanding of maritime history in driving Chinese action — for example, a *People's Daily* article about the Spratlys argued that China was a "great

²³³ *Ibid.*

²³⁴ Brendan Taylor, "The South China Sea is Not a Flashpoint," *Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 104.

²³⁵ Callahan, 211.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 212.

²³⁷ Fravel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea," 295.

²³⁸ Perlez, "US Sails."

oceanic nation" whose borders began at the edge of its oceanic claims, rather than at its shores.²³⁹

In making this claim, the government-authorized publication essentially applied its own definition of maritime sovereignty to UNCLOS, contending that the sea *was itself part of China's territory*.²⁴⁰ This article serves as a specific example of the influence of the government-sanctioned²⁴¹ historical narrative in driving China's maritime claims.

Courts, Trade, and Economic Dependence

Although the situation on and around the Spratly Islands remains extremely tense, there have been a number of attempts to resolve the matter. Thus far, efforts at negotiation have largely failed to get off the ground, with China preferring bilateral talks with individual nations over negotiating with ASEAN as a whole or going to the UN.²⁴² China's preference is largely due to its comparative advantage over its neighbors – why negotiate with a stronger alliance of many countries when it can negotiate with a single weaker one? This has not, however, stopped other countries from going to the UN, with the Philippines bringing the Spratlys case before the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in 2013.²⁴³

The case proved to be a major victory for the Philippines, with the PCA issuing a 2016 ruling declaring that China's "Nine Dash Line" is inconsistent with the provisions stipulated by UNCLOS, and thus is illegal.²⁴⁴ The ruling also found that the primary Chinese evidence in its claims, "historical right," was "without legal foundation," and therefore null and void. The Court

²³⁹ Lei, 507.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁴¹ Meghan Kleinsteinber, Nationalism and Domestic Politics as Drivers of Maritime Conflict," *The SAIS Review of International Affairs* 33, no. 2 (Summer, 2013): 16.

²⁴² Fravel 300.

²⁴³ George K. Ndi, "Philippines v China: Assessing the Implications of the South China Sea Arbitration," *Australian Journal of Maritime and Ocean Affairs* 8, no. 4 (2016): 272. doi: 10.1080/18366503.2016.1244142.

²⁴⁴ Ndi, 273.

also ruled that the Spratly Islands were not islands, but rather "low tide rocks," and thus are entitled to no territorial waters or EEZ.²⁴⁵

While the ruling was celebrated in the Philippines, China, which had refused to take part in the proceedings, decried the Court's decision as "naturally null and void."²⁴⁶ China largely ignored the ruling, opting instead to continue its island building strategy while reaffirming that it is "committed to resolving disputes."²⁴⁷ Despite its rejection of the PCA's ruling, China has shown itself willing to commit to some negotiations with its opponents, most notably by engaging in bilateral talks with the Philippines in May 2017.²⁴⁸ Though the talks went smoothly, no formal agreements were made.

Despite the animosity between the various parties, there is still a high degree of interdependence and interconnectivity, especially economic, among China and its neighbors—China-ASEAN trade, for example, increased fifteen-fold between 1991 and 2015.²⁴⁹ In addition, the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement came into force in 2010, greatly increasing trade in the region.²⁵⁰ In short, the degree of economic interdependence among China and the other countries in the dispute is at an all-time high.²⁵¹

²⁴⁵ Graham, The Hague Tribunal's South China Sea Ruling: Empty Provocation or Slow-Burning Influence?"

²⁴⁶ Philips, Holmes and Bowcott.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁸ Benjamin Kang Lim, "China, Philippines to Start South China Sea Talks: Ambassador." *Reuters*. Thomson Reuters. May 14, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-silkroad-southchinasea/china-philippines-to-start-south-china-sea-talks-ambassador-idUSKBN18A07P>

²⁴⁹ Weissmann, 12.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ Trade stats calculated from: "Trade Stats by Country." 2017. *World Integrated Trade Solutions*. World Bank Group. [://wits.worldbank.org/Default.aspx?lang=en](http://wits.worldbank.org/Default.aspx?lang=en).

**2016 Exports to Dispute-Participants as a Percent
of Total Exports by Country**

	China	Malaysia	Philippines	Brunei	Vietnam	Indonesia
China	0	1.80	1.42	0.07	2.91	1.64
Malaysia	13.76	0	1.74	0.36	3.03	3.94
Philippines	11.00	2.11	0	0.01	1.33	1.12
Brunei	1.52	4.62	0.39	0	0.74	1.62
Vietnam	10.23	2.21	1.24	0.02	0	1.76
Indonesia	10.01	5.07	2.61	0.06	1.82	0

Table 1. Please note that countries from which exports originate are on the left side, and destinations are across the top. Taiwan excluded due to lack of available data.

**2016 Imports From Dispute-Participants as a
Percent of Total Imports by Country**

	China	Malaysia	Philippines	Brunei	Vietnam	Indonesia
China	0	3.17	1.13	0.01	1.78	1.18
Malaysia	18.87	0	0.95	0.08	2.75	4.53
Philippines	16.36	4.71	0	0.01	1.81	4.43
Brunei	10.43	21.13	0.26	0	1.18	2.67
Vietnam	29.82	2.52	0.54	0.03	0	1.65
Indonesia	20.61	5.98	0.48	0.09	2.22	0

Table 2: Please note that countries to which imports are arriving are on the left side, with countries of origin across the top. Taiwan is excluded due to lack of available data.

These trade relationships remain highly skewed in China's favor, with the other countries in the dispute relying far more on trade with China than China does on them. Tables one and two illustrate this; China's largest export market in the dispute, Malaysia, comprises only 1.8% of total Chinese exports, while China represents 13.76% of Malaysia's export market. The same is true for imports — both Malaysia and Vietnam rely heavily upon China.

Given the reliance of the other dispute participants, China has tremendous economic leverage in the dispute. This is particularly true should China seek to ban the export of a specific item, similar to its ban of rare earths exports to Japan during a 2010 territorial dispute.²⁵² China

²⁵² Keith Bradsher, Amid Tension, China Blocks Vital Exports to Japan." *The New York Times*. September 23, 2010 <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/23/business/global/23rare.html>

could easily exploit this economic asymmetry to coerce other nations — it could shut down entire Filipino industries should it choose to.²⁵³ The same is true with Vietnam, which exports nearly all of its rubber to China.²⁵⁴ Yet despite its advantageous economic position, China has refrained from using it as a tool as it has against Japan, or even against the Philippines in the Scarborough Shoal dispute (discussed in Chapter Eight). This is not to say that there have not been ample opportunities to do so; the Spratlys remain hotly contested to this day. Rather, China seems to have seized upon the success of its paramilitary operations and island building campaign, relying primarily upon such methods to achieve its goals in the Spratlys.

Case Study Analysis

Chinese assertiveness in the Spratlys is at an all-time high, effectively creating an armed standoff. With all inhabitable islands having been claimed, China²⁵⁵ and Vietnam²⁵⁶ have sought to build new ones, creating strongholds at sea. In addition, China's actions are rooted in a nationalistic conception of maritime sovereignty that treats the South China Sea as China's integral territory rather than the high seas. Given these realities, the following trends can be identified about China's actions in the Spratlys:

- **China is militarizing the Spratlys:** Be it island building or ship building, China's capabilities in the Spratlys far outweigh those of its neighbors. China has taken a dual-threat approach to this build up, expanding both its paramilitary and military capabilities.

²⁵³ Madhu Ravindran, "China's Potential for Economic Coercion in the South China Sea Disputes," 116.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 119.

²⁵⁵ McDevitt, "The South China Sea," 254.

²⁵⁶ "Spratly Island." Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

Chinese anti-access/area denial (A2/AD)²⁵⁷ capabilities pose a threat to virtually any ship in the South China Sea,²⁵⁸ while developments in the Chinese Coast Guard, such as the launch of the 12,000 ton cutter CCG 3901, give China the ability to conduct expansive patrols.²⁵⁹ Overall, these capabilities have given China new levels of both military and civil enforcement power, significantly outclassing any of their neighbors. While other countries in the region have attempted to keep up to whatever degree possible, China has become the preeminent power. Only Vietnam's military (especially its submarine force) could pose a short-term challenge to China, but the VPN's ability to operate in the Spratlys is limited by the lack of air cover due to the distance from Vietnam's coast. The only obstacle faced by China in controlling the Spratlys is its opponents' successful control of some of the islands. Despite this, China is still able to control the waters around the Spratlys, and could easily blockade or forcibly control its opponents' holdings if it chooses.

- **Chinese nationalism plays a role in the Spratlys:** Nationalist sentiments are readily apparent in the dispute, most prominently on the Chinese and Filipino sides. In addition to the popular nationalism evident among the Chinese and Filipino populations, historically informed nationalism has seemingly shaped Chinese thought, specifically with regard to what Chinese strategists see as *sovereignty*. Whereas most countries have accepted that sovereignty is not exercised over the oceans (that is, while they may still

²⁵⁷ Anti-Access/Area Denial capabilities refer to a military's ability prevent an enemy from entering or occupying a section of land, air, or sea; in effect, an "area defense" operation.

²⁵⁸ Heginbotham, 4.

²⁵⁹ Franz-Stefan Gady, China Coast Guard's New 'Monster' Ship Completes Maiden Patrol in South China Sea." *The Diplomat*. May 8, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/china-coast-guards-new-monster-ship-completes-maiden-patrol-in-south-china-sea/>

enforce laws, the area within their EEZs is not *sovereign*), China seemingly views the South China Sea as its sovereign territory through historic right.

- **China has continued economic engagement despite the dispute:** Interdependence and other international institutions have proven largely ineffective at preventing conflict in the Spratly Islands, and may actually provide China with a further competitive advantage. Although the PCA ruled on the Spratly Islands case,²⁶⁰ the ruling did nothing to change the actual reality of the situation. On the economic front, China has continued to engage in a high level of trade with its neighbors. This trade, however, is incredibly skewed in China's favor, with China often acting as one of the primary trading partners for each country,²⁶¹ similar to the tribute system. The economic interdependence of the South China Sea creates the potential for China to wage economic warfare in response to the dispute, essentially adding to China's power.

Considering all these factors, the realist-constructivist hybrid hypothesis, *strategic nationalism*, is the most plausible for explaining China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. Although the realist presumptions about the situation do hold true, with China's aggression corresponding to its capabilities, the influence of the nationalist Chinese maritime history narrative in shaping China's goals and conception of the South China Sea cannot be denied. Therefore, this case study supports the plausibility of the *strategic nationalist* hypothesis.

²⁶⁰ Ndi, 272.

²⁶¹ See Table 1.

Chapter VII: Case Study II — The Paracels

When it existed in its natural state, Woody Island, the largest of the Paracels, an island chain located in the western area of the South China Sea, was roughly 1.8 long and 1.1-1.2km wide,²⁶² with a total land area of roughly 2.16km². For centuries, the island's only inhabitants were Chinese and Vietnamese fishermen. Even they only lived seasonally on Woody Island, driven back to the mainland each year by the region's fierce monsoon season.²⁶³ Although Woody Island was occupied by Imperial Japan and used as a weather station during World War Two,²⁶⁴ the geography of the island itself was largely undisturbed. It was, for all intents and purposes, a tree-covered tropical island among the blue waters of the South China Sea.

The modern-day Woody Island bears little if any resemblance to its original state. The island now boasts a bustling harbor, with Chinese frigates and destroyers frequently docked at the 500m-long pier.²⁶⁵ Chinese aircraft, including modern Su-30MKK fighters and JH-7 bombers, take off and land on the island's 2,500m runway, their hangars on the ground defended by an array of HQ-9 surface-air missiles.²⁶⁶ The island also now hosts a PLA division-level headquarters,²⁶⁷ and the Chinese government has expressed interest in building a tourist resort on the civilian section of the island.²⁶⁸

²⁶² Stein Tønnesson, "THE PARACELS: THE "OTHER" SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE." *Asian Perspective* 26, no. 4 (2002): 146.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ Office of Naval Intelligence. 2018. *Disputed Island in the South China Sea, Part I. Disputed Island in the South China Sea, Part I*. 1952. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP08C01297R000300180027-3.pdf>.

²⁶⁵ Bouchat, 18.

²⁶⁶ "UPDATE: China's Continuing Reclamation in the Paracels." Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. August 9, 2017. <https://amti.csis.org/paracels-beijings-other-buildup/>.

²⁶⁷ Bouchat, 18.

²⁶⁸ Tønnesson, "The Paracels," 148.

Woody Island is by no means an outlier in the Paracels, but rather represents a growing trend of island building and fortification.²⁶⁹ In less than a century, the Paracels have evolved from a collection of small tropical islands to a series of heavily defended military installations within one of the world's key sea-lanes.²⁷⁰ China's aggressiveness, however, is no accident. It is a result of China's increasing willingness to exert the nation's newfound political and economic power, combined with strategy provided by a powerful rhetoric rooted in a nationalist view of Chinese maritime history. This evidence then supports the mechanisms proposed by my *strategic nationalism* hypothesis, taking both strategic calculation and nationalism into account.

The Paracels: A Century of Conflict

Located in the western South China Sea between 15° 46" and 17° 09" North and between 111° 11" and 112° 54 East, the Paracels are approximately equidistant from the shores of both China's Hainan Island and the coastline of Vietnam.²⁷¹ The islands are divided into two groups: the Crescent Group to the west and Amphitrite Group to the north, with all islands in the region possessing a total natural land area of only 7.75km².²⁷² The islands themselves are largely insignificant, with control of the surrounding waters' rich fisheries and important shipping lanes offering a more attractive prize.²⁷³

Although lacking an appropriate moniker such as the Spratly's "Dangerous Ground", mariners in the region have long been equally wary of the Paracels.²⁷⁴ While ancient charts do

²⁶⁹ Vietnam's Island Building: Double-Standard or Drop in the Bucket?" Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. May 11, 2016. <https://amti.csis.org/vietnams-island-building>.

²⁷⁰ Bouchat, 24.

²⁷¹ Tønnesson, "The Paracels", 148.

²⁷² "The World Factbook: PARACEL ISLANDS." CIA.gov. January 17, 2018. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/pf.html>.

²⁷³ Bouchat, 6.

²⁷⁴ Tønnesson, "The Paracels" 150.

mark the Paracels, the area within the archipelago was poorly charted, as mariners often sailed around, rather than through the islands. Similarly, evidence suggests that the primary pre-modern shipping route from the Luzon Strait to the Strait of Malacca was across the northern South China Sea, followed by a southward turn to take ships between the coast of Vietnam and the Paracels.²⁷⁵ Thus, even in ancient times, the status of the area as a highly important shipping route was widely acknowledged.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the primary inhabitants of the Paracels for centuries were seasonal fishermen with no permanent presence, creating a level of ambiguity with regard to formal control. Vietnam attempted to exert control from 1810-1830, claiming salvage rights to any ships wrecked on the Paracels and building a small pagoda, but did not go on to establish a permanent settlement.²⁷⁶ This ambiguity prevailed until the early 20th century, when the French colonial government recognized China's sovereignty over the Paracels, and did not go on to protest their annexation into Guangdong province in 1921.²⁷⁷ Then, as the Chinese state began to falter in the 1920s, the French colonial government asserted sovereignty over the Paracels, using Vietnamese actions a century earlier as a pretext.²⁷⁸ Subsequently, the French attempted to occupy the islands in 1937, largely in an effort to prevent Japanese operations in the area.²⁷⁹ However, the French expedition discovered that Japanese soldiers had already established a presence, resulting in the French and Japanese forces garrisoning separate islands and cohabiting the islands until the end of the Second World War.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ Stein, Tønnesson, "The South China Sea in the Age of European Decline." *Modern Asian Studies* 40, no. 1 (2006): 6.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ Tønnesson, "The Paracels," 150.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

After the war's end and Japan's withdrawal, France again initiated plans to secure the islands, but was unable to do so given the impending battle with communist forces on the Vietnamese mainland.²⁸¹ China capitalized upon French inaction to seize Woody Island, sparking a diplomatic crisis with France. Unable to find a solution, China occupied the Amphitrite Group, while French-Vietnamese forces took the Crescent.²⁸² Although France eventually withdrew, resulting in Vietnamese control of their section of the islands, this status quo largely remained until the 1970s.

In August 1973, South Vietnam seized six of the Spratlys, resulting in a Chinese response in the Paracels, dispatching two trawlers to the Crescent Group. The crews of these vessels landed on Vietnamese-claimed islands, planted flags, and set up a logistics base.²⁸³ By November, Republic of Vietnam Navy (RVN) ships had begun to ram Chinese fishing vessels, resulting in the capture of Chinese sailors. The conflict then further escalated in January 1974 when China established a seafood processing plant on Duncan Island and issued a statement proclaiming its "indisputable sovereignty" over the South China Sea.²⁸⁴

The Vietnamese response was swift. Five RVN ships rammed the Chinese fishing vessels, shelled the Chinese outposts, and landed commandos on the disputed islands.²⁸⁵ The PLAN's initial response was disorganized, with their ships, plagued by mechanical problems, sailing out of fighter-escort range.²⁸⁶ The PLA response eventually consolidated, with paramilitary militia from Woody Island landing in the Crescent Group while the PLAN engaged

²⁸¹ *Ibid*, 151.

²⁸² *Ibid*.

²⁸³ Yoshihara, Toshi. "THE 1974 PARACELS SEA BATTLE: A Campaign Appraisal." *Naval War College Review* 69, no. 2 (Spring, 2016): 47.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid*.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 47.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 48.

the RVN.²⁸⁷ This resulted in a 40-minute shootout²⁸⁸ in which the smaller, faster PLAN ships outmaneuvered their RVN adversaries, forcing a Vietnamese retreat.²⁸⁹ The battle's outcome was clear: fifty-three Vietnamese sailors were killed with many more were wounded, while Chinese losses numbered eighteen men and one ship.²⁹⁰ With the battle's conclusion, China established effective control over the Paracels.

The situation in the Paracels largely remained unchanged from 1974 until the early 21st century, save for limited Chinese efforts to increase their regional presence. By the mid-1990s, China had stationed at least 1,000 troops in the region, and expanded Woody Island's airstrip into a fully functioning airbase.²⁹¹ Vietnam generally took no action after 1974, leaving most of the Paracels in Chinese hands.

The Modern Paracels: Chinese Island Building, but No Arms Race

The 21st century has witnessed China pursue a strategy within the Paracels similar to its strategy in the Spratlys: island building. What differs in the Paracels, however, is that China faces little competition to its island building — as China effectively controls all islands within the chain, Vietnam has found itself unable to begin land reclamation without first directly engaging Chinese forces. In addition, although a claimant to the islands, Taiwan has remained virtually uninvolved in the dispute itself, pursuing little, if any, action.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 56.

²⁸⁸ Bouchat, 15.

²⁸⁹ Yoshihara, 56.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 57.

²⁹¹ Tønnesson, 152.

The lack of competition, however, has not meant a lack of Chinese activity. Woody Island, the base of Chinese operations in the area, has been at the forefront of such developments, with new hangars, surface to air missiles, and two sheltered harbors.^{292,293} Although the focus on Woody Island has been development rather than land

reclamation, this is largely because Woody Island was heavily expanded in the 1990s,²⁹⁴ one of China's earliest

forays into island building. China has, however, begun fairly recent efforts to expand other islands. Tree Island, for example, has nearly doubled in size since 2012, with a significant port facility added to the existing landmass.²⁹⁵ In addition, China constructed a causeway to link North and Middle Islands in 2016, but this project was abandoned after a storm wiped out the link.²⁹⁶

Despite the relative lack of conflict related to China's island building, the Paracels are by no means conflict-free. China aggressively patrols the waters and regularly confronts Vietnamese ships. For example, in 2013, Chinese vessels attacked a Vietnamese trawler with flares, then captured and beat its crew.²⁹⁷ In 2015, a Vietnamese fishing vessel was pursued and sunk by unidentified Chinese ships, resulting in the near drowning of 11 Vietnamese fishermen before



Image 3: Chinese base on Woody Island. Note two harbors to the left, major runway along length of island, and significant infrastructure.

²⁹²"UPDATE: China's Continuing Reclamation in the Paracels." Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

²⁹³ Image Citation: Satellite Image of Woody Island. Digital image. AMTI.org. January 25, 2018. <https://amti.csis.org/woody-island/>.

²⁹⁴ Bouchat, 16.

²⁹⁵ "Tree Island." Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. December 26, 2017. <https://amti.csis.org/tree-island/>.

²⁹⁶ "UPDATE: China's Continuing Reclamation in the Paracels." Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

²⁹⁷ Bouchat, 18.

their rescue by friendly vessels.²⁹⁸ In the same year, Chinese ships, reportedly military, confronted Vietnamese civilian craft, and in some cases forced them to turn over their catch.²⁹⁹ China has been highly consistent and deliberate in its enforcement of regulations in the Paracels, making Vietnamese fishing there near impossible.

In addition to the fishing incidents, the most notable incident within the Paracels dispute came in 2014 with the deployment of the state-owned Chinese drilling rig HD-981 to the southern Paracels, sparking a confrontation between Vietnamese and Chinese boats that resulted in six Vietnamese injuries.³⁰⁰ In response to the conflict, protestors in Vietnam rioted and attacked Chinese-owned businesses.³⁰¹ The rig eventually withdrew, albeit a few weeks earlier than planned, after Chinese officials claimed it had "completed its mission."³⁰²

Chinese Military and Economic Supremacy in the Paracels Conflict

Compared to the Spratlys conflict, the Paracels dispute is defined by a far greater degree of asymmetry in China's favor. As discussed in chapter five, the Chinese military has undergone a period of rapid modernization and expansion. While this expansion has targeted China's "formal" navy, the PLAN, it has also extended to China's "other navies"—the Coast Guard and the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM).³⁰³ By undertaking such a broad

²⁹⁸ Panda, "China Steps Up Harassment of Vietnamese Fishermen."

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ Ernest Z. Bower and Gregory B. Poling, "China-Vietnam Tensions High over Drilling Rig in Disputed Waters," Center for Strategic and International Studies. June 20, 2016. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-vietnam-tensions-high-over-drilling-rig-disputed-waters>

³⁰¹ Adam Taylor, "The \$1 Billion Chinese Oil Rig That Has Vietnam in Flames." *Washington Post*, May 14, 2014. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/05/14/the-1-billion-chinese-oil-rig-that-has-vietnam-in-flames/?utm_term=.c18200286c30.

³⁰² Jane Perlez, "Chinese Oil Rig Near Vietnam to Be Moved." *The New York Times*. July 15, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/16/world/asia/chinese-oil-rig-near-vietnam-to-be-moved.html>.

³⁰³ Andrew Erickson, "China's Three 'Navies' Each Have the World's Most Ships." *War Is Boring*. February 28, 2018 <http://warisboring.com/chinas-three-navies-each-have-the-worlds-most-ships/>.

modernization program, China has given itself an array of policy options in the Paracels that allow it to exert itself, sometimes violently, without engaging in a direct military confrontation with Vietnam.

Looking first to the actual militaries of each country, China enjoys a significant advantage. Helped in part by the Paracels' proximity to China's significant military installations on Hainan Island, China enjoys effective air superiority over the Paracels, while simultaneously threatening Vietnam's surface fleet with its modern anti-ship cruise missiles.³⁰⁴ Although Vietnam has struggled to keep pace with China, it has found some success, most notably by recently equipping its navy with six modern diesel-electric attack submarines³⁰⁵ and a Russian-built *Gepard*-class frigate.³⁰⁶ Despite these advancements, Vietnam's air force still relies upon Vietnam War-era craft, leaving its surface combatants vulnerable to Chinese forces.³⁰⁷

Where China significantly outclasses Vietnam, however, is in its paramilitary naval capacities. The CCG has launched dozens of new ocean-going cutters, at least two of which are over 10,000 tons, larger than American cruisers.^{308,309} The CCG is supplemented by the PAFMM, largely composed of civilian trawlers with varying degrees of armament under a dual civilian-military command structure.³¹⁰ While China has acknowledged that PAFMM has conducted training exercises in the Paracels, they are also suspected of involvement in numerous

³⁰⁴ Heginbotham, 30.

³⁰⁵ Minh Vu Truong and The Phuong Nguyen.

³⁰⁶ Defense Industry Daily Staff. "Vietnam's Restocking: Subs, Ships, Sukhois, and Now Perhaps F-16s and P-3s?" *Defense Industry Daily* May 02, 2017. <https://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/vietnams-russian-restocking-subs-ships-sukhois-and-more-05396/>.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁸ Michael McDevvit, *Becoming a Great "Maritime Power": A Chinese Dream*. Report, CNA Corporation. June 2016, 56.

³⁰⁹ Note: While these ships are larger than most naval vessels, they are by no means as well equipped, lacking the sensory capabilities and armament of a warship.

³¹⁰ McDevvit, *Becoming a Great Maritime Power*, 57.

incidents against Vietnamese boats.³¹¹ While the PAFMM has become increasingly involved in the conflict, it must be noted that the concept of using Chinese fishing vessels as a military asset is nothing new — the PLAN relied upon civilian boats for intelligence gathering during the 1974 battle.³¹² This situation represents the dual-threat advantage China possesses over its enemies. By using its extensive paramilitary forces to pressure its opponents, China effectively leaves Vietnam with two options: rely upon its inferior paramilitary forces, or deploy its regular military. Deployment of its military forces would amount to "firing the first shot", thus allowing a response from the superior Chinese regular forces. With this reality in mind, China not only enjoys a hard power advantage over Vietnam, but does so in a way that makes it extremely risky for Vietnam to respond.

China also enjoys another form of power over Vietnam—economic asymmetry. As discussed in both preceding chapters, Vietnam relies heavily upon China as a partner for both trade and investment.³¹³ China, however, does not share the same reliance upon Vietnam. While such asymmetry is not unexpected given China's much larger GDP, the situation is compounded by Vietnam's massive trade deficit with China, which reached \$17.7 billion USD by 2017.³¹⁴

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

³¹² Yoshihara, 52.

³¹³ Le Hong Hiep. "Vietnam's South China Sea Disputes with China: The Economic Determinants". *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 26, no. 2, (2014): 174.

Le Hong Hiep 185

³¹⁴ Van, Hai. "Vietnam Bridging Trade Deficit with China." *VnEconomicTimes*. September 29, 2017. <http://vneconomictimes.com/article/vietnam-today/vietnam-bridging-trade-deficit-with-china>.

2016 Exports to Dispute-Participants as a Percent of Total Exports by Country

	China	Malaysia	Philippines	Brunei	Vietnam	Indonesia
China	0	1.80	1.42	0.07	2.91	1.64
Malaysia	13.76	0	1.74	0.36	3.03	3.94
Philippines	11.00	2.11	0	0.01	1.33	1.12
Brunei	1.52	4.62	0.39	0	0.74	1.62
Vietnam	10.23	2.21	1.24	0.02	0	1.76
Indonesia	10.01	5.07	2.61	0.06	1.82	0

Table 1. Please note that countries from which exports originate are on the left side, and destinations are across the top. Taiwan excluded due to lack of available data.

2016 Imports From Dispute-Participants as a Percent of Total Imports by Country

	China	Malaysia	Philippines	Brunei	Vietnam	Indonesia
China	0	3.17	1.13	0.01	1.78	1.18
Malaysia	18.87	0	0.95	0.08	2.75	4.53
Philippines	16.36	4.71	0	0.01	1.81	4.43
Brunei	10.43	21.13	0.26	0	1.18	2.67
Vietnam	29.82	2.52	0.54	0.03	0	1.65
Indonesia	20.61	5.98	0.48	0.09	2.22	0

Table 2: Please note that countries to which imports are arriving are on the side line, countries of origin on the top line. Taiwan excluded due to lack of available data.

Tables 1 and 2 highlight the disparity — whereas Vietnam sends 10.23% of its exports to China, China only exports 2.91% to Vietnam.³¹⁵ A similar situation exists for imports, with Vietnam importing 29.82% of its goods from China versus China's 1.78% from Vietnam. In addition, whereas Vietnam has invested only \$12.5 million USD in China, China has invested \$4.3 billion USD in Vietnam, giving it significant power within the Vietnamese economy.³¹⁶

This reality gives China the significant potential to coerce Vietnam through economic means. Studies have shown that, should China implement sanctions, it could have a crippling

³¹⁵ Trade statistics calculated from values found at <https://wits.worldbank.org/Default.aspx?lang=en>

³¹⁶ Trade Statistic Tables Calculated from: "Trade Stats by Country." 2017. *World Integrated Trade Solutions*. World Bank Group. [://wits.worldbank.org/Default.aspx?lang=en](https://wits.worldbank.org/Default.aspx?lang=en).

effect on the Vietnamese economy with little damage to its own.³¹⁷ Despite this potential, there have been no recorded incidents of China using economic coercion as a tool to influence Vietnam in the Paracels dispute. This makes the Paracels somewhat of an abnormality in Chinese policy, which has exploited economic dependence in territorial disputes against Japan³¹⁸ and the Philippines,³¹⁹ the latter of which will be discussed in the next chapter. This anomaly, however, can be explained by the balance of power in the Paracels, which is tipped far further in China's favor than any of the other disputes. Simply put, why would China interfere in Vietnam's economy when it can already achieve its goals in the Paracels through hard power options?

History, Nationalism, and Annexation in the Paracels

The second defining determinant of Chinese action in the Paracels is historical nationalism, which plays a major role in shaping China's perception of and policy for the islands. As discussed in chapter five, the Paracels and the surrounding waters have historically been under Chinese control.³²⁰ Evidence suggests that China may have established some form of base on the Paracels as early as the Tang Dynasty (618-907 C.E.).³²¹ In addition, China formally annexed the Paracels into Guangdong Province in 1921.³²² Thus, the Paracels lie within an area that has historically been under Chinese control in one way or another, forming the basis of China's modern claims.

³¹⁷ Ravindran, 125.

³¹⁸ Bradsher.

³¹⁹ Andrew Higgins, "In Philippines, Banana Growers Feel Effect of South China Sea Dispute." *The Washington Post*. June 10, 2012. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-philippines-banana-growers-feel-effect-of-south-china-sea-dispute/2012/06/10/gJQA47WVTV_story.html

³²⁰ Kang, *East Asia Before the West*, 39.

³²¹ Chang, 404.

³²² Tønnesson, "The South China Sea," 3.

Without any doubt, control of the Paracels offers a major strategic and economic asset to China. Although not technically part of the "First Island Chain" strategy intended to keep foreign warships away from the Chinese coast,³²³ they nonetheless offer a strategic buffer against ships coming towards China from the south. There is evidence, however, that China's motivations towards the Paracels run deeper than simple use of capabilities to enhance security — the Chinese government is explicit that the Paracels are *part of China itself*.

Much as it does in other disputes, the Chinese party-state frequently references "sovereignty" when speaking about the Paracels. In June 2012, for example, when Vietnam issued a law claiming the Paracels, China called it "a serious violation of China's territorial sovereignty."³²⁴ A similar statement was issued in 2017 when an American destroyer sailed through the area, an action that "severely harmed China's sovereignty",³²⁵ again using the oft-repeated claim of "sovereignty" to the South China Sea.

But when compared with other territorial disputes, China's rhetoric in the Paracels has translated into an even greater degree of action. In 2012, China declared the Paracel Islands a prefecture-level city named Sansha, only one step below a province.³²⁶ Although this new city includes some of the Spratlys as well, its administrative headquarters lies on Woody Island, where much of the development has been focused.³²⁷ Notably, this development has been both

³²³ Bocuhat, 17.

³²⁴ Jane Perlez, "Vietnam Law on Contested Islands Draws China's Ire." *The New York Times*. June 22, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/22/world/asia/china-criticizes-vietnam-in-dispute-over-islands.html>

³²⁵ Liu Zhen, "China Protests over US Patrol near Paracel Islands." *South China Morning Post*. October 11, 2017. <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2114941/china-protests-over-us-navy-patrol-contested-south>.

³²⁶ Yamaguchi, "Creating Facts on the Sea."

³²⁷ *Ibid*.

military and civilian. In June 2017, for example, a cinema and other "community services" were built in an effort to make the island resemble a true settlement.³²⁸

In addition, the party-state began conducting a series of popular nationalist campaigns in an effort to rally the Chinese population behind the new city — in the fishing village of Tanmen, for example, government issued posters urged citizens to "Love Sansha City, [and] embrace China's blue-water territory!"³²⁹ In a similar vein, China has also launched a series of civilian tourist cruises to the Paracels. The cruises, which stop at a number of the islands, include recreational activities and screenings of patriotic films, and are open only to Chinese citizens.³³⁰ So far, the cruises have proven extremely popular with Chinese tourists.

The intent of these efforts is clear: by "normalizing" the islands from military outposts to actual settlements, China sends the message that the Paracels are not simply a strategic goal, but an integral part of China's national territory. These actions seemingly reflect the Chinese nationalist sentiment of "sovereignty" over the South China Sea. In other words, China is effectively creating new territory to shore up its claims. The Paracels have been at the forefront of these nationalist developments, becoming the new center of Chinese development in the South China Sea.

³²⁸ Pratik Jakhar, "China Opens First Cinema on Disputed South China Sea Island." *BBC*. July 24, 2017. <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-40704060>.

³²⁹ Lee Seok Hwai, "Island City of Sansha in South China Sea Claims Big Feat." *The Straits Times*. November 24, 2016. <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/island-city-in-south-china-sea-claims-big-feat>.

³³⁰ Laura Zhou, "Paracel Cruises an Undisputed Hit with Chinese Holidaymakers." *South China Morning Post*. October 23, 2017. <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2116629/paracel-island-cruises-prove-undisputed-hit-chinese-holidaymakers>.

Case Study Analysis

Tension in the Paracel Islands is extremely high, with China and Vietnam regularly confronting each other over their claims to the islands.³³¹ Unlike the Spratlys, however, China has established effective control of the Paracels, and is free to develop and exploit the area with little Vietnamese interference. In addition, China regularly challenges foreign naval vessels in the area, claiming that Chinese sovereignty has been violated.³³² Given these facts, the following trends can be identified in the Paracel Islands dispute:

- **China has effectively dominated the Paracels:** By controlling and developing all major islands in the Paracels,³³³ Beijing has essentially forced all rival forces out of the area. Although there are Vietnamese incursions, primarily by fishermen, these incursions are largely minor and are met with a significant Chinese response. In addition, China's rapid expansion of its Navy, Coast Guard, and Maritime Militia³³⁴ give it a range of hard-power options not available to Vietnam. By expanding and using its paramilitary and militia forces to enforce its claims, China forces Vietnam to either respond militarily and potentially face conflict, or essentially accept China's supremacy.
- **Economic interdependence is high, but economic coercion has not yet been employed:** Although China and Vietnam are economically linked quite heavily, Vietnam is far more reliant on China than China is upon Vietnam.³³⁵ Despite creating sizeable potential for Chinese economic coercion of Vietnam, China has not employed economic

³³¹ Peter Pham, "Why Is Tension Rising In The South China Sea?" *Forbes*. December 19, 2017. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/peterpham/2017/12/19/why-is-tension-rising-in-the-south-china-sea/#2eb8fd241fa4>.

³³² Zhou.

³³³ "UPDATE: China's Continuing Reclamation in the Paracels." Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative

³³⁴ Erickson.

³³⁵ Hiep, 185.

sanctions as a tool to force Vietnamese cooperation.³³⁶ However, rather than indicate that the economic linkages are somehow preventing conflict (the degree of conflict between Vietnam and China clearly disproves this fact), this is more an indicator of China's success at achieving its goals through hard power options. Vietnam remains largely incapable of challenging Chinese dominance in the Paracels, and the Chinese Navy, Coast Guard, and PAFMM have proven effective in nullifying any threats Vietnam does muster. Given the success of China's maritime forces, there is no reason to implement economic sanctions.

- **China is attempting to "nationalize" the Paracels:** Chinese efforts in the Paracels go beyond general territorial claims, and are actually efforts to annex the Paracels as Chinese territory. China is not simply establishing military outposts to support its physical claim, but also inviting civilian participation so as to make the Paracels indistinguishable from any other part of China. Such efforts fall in line with the nationalist view of the South China Sea as a "Chinese lake,"³³⁷ which claims the Sea and its territories as part of China. This effort to nationalize the South China Sea is supported by nationalist campaigns,³³⁸ statements of sovereignty, and attempts to normalize life on the Paracels through the introduction of civilian infrastructure.³³⁹

Given these facts, the *strategic nationalism* hypothesis best explains China's actions in the Paracels. China has long wished to formally incorporate the Paracels into Chinese territory, but

³³⁶ Ravindran, 125.

³³⁷ Simon Denyer, "By 2030, South China Sea Will Be 'virtually a Chinese Lake,' Study Warns." *The Washington Post*. January 20, 2016.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/01/20/by-2030-south-china-sea-will-be-virtually-a-chinese-lake-u-s-study-warns/?utm_term=.3e79d1542e15.

³³⁸ Hwai.

³³⁹ Jakhar.

was largely restrained by material concerns, especially its historical lack of an effective navy. Due to recent developments, however, China now has the capabilities to secure and develop the Paracels. Using the idea of historical Chinese sovereignty over the entire South China Sea as a model, China has used its newfound power to bring the Paracels into China proper, realizing a long-held ambition, justifying such actions under the claim of "historic right" rather than common international law. In essence, a historical nationalist view of the Paracels has provided a template that China can now recreate as a function of its increasing power compared to Vietnam. Therefore, this case study supports the plausibility of the *strategic nationalism* hypothesis

Chapter VIII: Case Study III – Scarborough Shoal

The third case study I will present in support of my *strategic nationalism* hypothesis focuses not on a group of islands, but upon a single point in the South China Sea: Scarborough Shoal. Though China refers to Scarborough Shoal as "Huangyan Island,"³⁴⁰ describing Scarborough as an "island" paints far too generous a picture of its actual geography. Rather, Scarborough is an atoll, a rough triangular-shaped collection of reefs and rocks surrounding a 150 square kilometer lagoon.³⁴¹ With its high point, a small collection of rocks jutting only three meters above the ocean at high tide,³⁴² Scarborough is essentially an uninhabitable reef, better suited to support marine life below the water than human life above it.

Despite its diminutive size, Scarborough has become one of the most hotly contested areas of the South China Sea, in no small part due to its rich fisheries and strategic position only 124 nautical miles from the Philippine coast.³⁴³ Since at least the mid-1990s, Chinese and Philippine ships have regularly landed and erected territorial markers on the rocks, only to have their markers destroyed and replaced by the other side.³⁴⁴ Naval vessels from both sides have regularly taken up positions in and around the reef, sparking a series of heated diplomatic meetings between Chinese and Philippine officials.³⁴⁵ Fishermen have been arrested, hundred-

³⁴⁰ Johnson, Jesse. "China Accuses U.S. of Sailing Warship near Disputed Scarborough Shoal in South China Sea." *The Japan Times*. January 21, 2018. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/01/21/asia-pacific/china-accuses-u-s-sailing-warship-near-disputed-scarborough-shoal-south-china-sea/#.WrELW1nwYcg>.

³⁴¹ Shawn Shaw-fawn Kao, "Scarborough Shoal Dispute, China's Assertiveness, and Taiwan's South China Sea Policy." *International Journal of China Studies* 5, no. 1 (04, 2014): 158 <https://colby.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1550134314?accountid=10198>.

³⁴² *Ibid.*

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁴ Daojiong Zha and Mark J. Valencia. "Mischief Reef: Geopolitics and Implications." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 31, no. 1 (2001): 89. <https://colby.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/194228447?accountid=10198>.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

ship flotillas deployed, and economic sanctions levied.³⁴⁶ In short, tension in Scarborough Shoal is higher than ever.

Looking at a map, China should seemingly have no business in Scarborough Shoal. It lies nearly 500 nautical miles from the nearest point on the Chinese coast, well within the Philippines' UNCLOS-stipulated EEZ.³⁴⁷ Yet this fact has entirely failed to stifle Chinese attempts to control the shoal, an area that it claims "sovereignty" over,³⁴⁸ supported by a near-constant naval or paramilitary presence. China's actions at Scarborough are by no means exceptional. They perfectly fall into the framework of the *strategic nationalism* argument, showing that China's actions are influenced both by calculation based on capabilities and nationalism based on historical memory.

Scarborough Shoal: China's New Target

Perhaps due to its status as an uninhabitable reef rather than a true island, the history of Scarborough is far more ambiguous than that of other disputed islands. China, for example, claims that it discovered the shoal and incorporated it into its territory as part of the Zhongsha Islands (referred to in the West as Macclesfield Bank).³⁴⁹ China supports this claim by pointing to historical documents from the 12th to 13th century Yuan Dynasty, maintaining that an imperial

³⁴⁶ Andrew Tafer, "State Strategy in Territorial Conflict: A Conceptual Analysis of China's Strategy in the South China Sea." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 37, no. 1 (04, 2015): 87. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1355/cs37-1d>.

<https://colby.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1686398229?accountid=10198>

³⁴⁷ Kao, 158.

³⁴⁸ Luis Martinez, "US Navy Ship Sails near Disputed Shoal Claimed by China." ABC News. January 20, 2018. <http://abcnews.go.com/International/us-navy-ship-sails-disputed-shoal-claimed-china/story?id=52484103>.

³⁴⁹ Kao, 159.

survey visited Scarborough and used it as a reference point in its surveys.³⁵⁰ This argument of historical discovery and subsequent claim form the basis of the Chinese version of the Shoal's history.

The Philippines, however, presents a radically different version of the Shoal's history. Old maps indicate that Spanish colonial authorities knew as early as 1734 that China claimed some level of sovereignty over Scarborough.³⁵¹ In addition, the Philippines maintains that it has claimed effective control of the shoal since at least 1946.³⁵² Despite this claim, little action was taken to actually control the islands until 1965, when the Philippine Navy built a small lighthouse on one of the rocks, intended as a navigational aid.³⁵³ After the lighthouse's rehabilitation in 1992, the Philippines reported the lighthouse to the International Maritime Organization for record in the List of Lights.³⁵⁴ Despite the competing claims, there is no evidence of significant diplomatic protest by China at the time.

Although Scarborough Shoal's history remained largely ambiguous for much of its history, it shot to the forefront of Sino-Philippines relations in the mid-1990s. After a series of disputes over Mischief Reef in the Spratlys, Philippine vessels sighted Chinese territorial markers on Scarborough Shoal in 1997.³⁵⁵ The Philippine Navy quickly destroyed the markers, resulting in a Chinese diplomatic protest that the Philippines had committed a "serious violation

³⁵⁰ Zheng Hua Han, "Nanhai, a Chinese Territory Boundary as Surveyed by the "Four Seas Sunshadow-lengths Survey" of the Yuan Dynasty Period." Translated by Guan Yio Wang. *In Collected Essays of Textual Research on the Historical Geography of South Sea Islands*. Zhonghua: Zhong Publishing, 1981.

³⁵¹ Department of Foreign Affairs. "Philippine Position on Bajo De Masinloc and the Waters within Its Vicinity." News release, April 19, 2012. Philstar.com. <https://www.philstar.com/breaking-news/798271/philippine-position?page=4231&nomobile=1>.

³⁵² Kao, 159.

³⁵³ Department of Foreign Affairs.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁵ Zha and Valencia, 89.

of Chinese sovereignty."³⁵⁶ The dispute was prevented from escalating into a major conflict through diplomatic mediation, with the island reverting to the previous ambiguous status quo.

Scarborough Shoal once again became a flashpoint in 2001, this time as a result of an incident between Chinese fishing vessels and Philippine Navy ships in which at least three warning shots were fired at the Chinese ships.³⁵⁷ China swiftly protested, claiming that the Philippines was illegally harassing Chinese vessels. The Philippines subsequently denied the allegations, claiming that China was illegally fishing, and a Philippine Coast Guard vessel went on to shoot a Chinese fisherman in the region later that year.³⁵⁸ Although this dispute sparked some debate over whether the United States should come to the Philippines' aid in the event of conflict with China, tensions eventually simmered.³⁵⁹ The following decade also brought little in the way of major disputes over Scarborough; fishing from both sides continued, and ambiguity remained.

Scarborough Shoal in the Modern Era: Standoffs, Courts, and Chinese Control

The status quo of ambiguity met its end in 2012 as the result of a standoff between China and the Philippines, culminating in Chinese control of the shoal. On April 8, a Philippine maritime patrol aircraft spotted five Chinese fishing trawlers in the lagoon, resulting in the dispatch of a frigate to investigate.³⁶⁰ Upon arrival, two China Maritime Surveillance (now China Coast Guard) vessels met the frigate, preventing it from boarding the trawlers.³⁶¹ Although the Philippines attempted to ease tensions by replacing the frigate with a Coast Guard vessel, a

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁰ Kao, 159.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

month-long standoff between the two countries persisted.³⁶² While Chinese paramilitary vessels, sometimes numbering in the hundreds, sailed into the lagoon, the PLAN staged warships just over the horizon, ready to act if conflict should erupt.³⁶³ During the standoff, China also levied numerous economic sanctions against the Philippines, the impact of which will be discussed later in this chapter.³⁶⁴

The standoff came to an end in June 2012, as both countries used an incoming typhoon as a pretext to withdraw while still saving face, agreeing to mediate the dispute diplomatically.³⁶⁵ However, China exploited the Philippine's trust in the agreement, dispatching a fleet of waiting Maritime Surveillance ships back to the shoal as soon as the storm passed. The ships quickly established a patrol perimeter and stretched a chain across the entrance to the lagoon, establishing Chinese control over Scarborough Shoal.³⁶⁶

The 2012 standoff and resulting seizure effectively established a new status quo that has remained ever since. Despite Chinese control, tensions remain high. In 2017, for example, the Philippines repeatedly accused Chinese vessels of firing upon fishing trawlers.³⁶⁷ While the situation within the shoal itself has remained fairly static, the Philippines has actively sought diplomatic and judicial resolutions to the issue, most notably a 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA). The court, responding to a case brought by the Philippines, ruled that China's claim to Scarborough Shoal had "no basis," and that the shoal was an uninhabitable

³⁶² Taffer, 95.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁴ Asia Sentinel Correspondent. "The China-Philippine Banana War." Asia Sentinel. June 06, 2012. <https://www.asiasentinel.com/society/the-china-philippine-banana-war/>.

³⁶⁵ Renato Cruz De Castro, "Facing Up to China's Realpolitik Approach in the South China Sea Dispute: The Case of the 2012 Scarborough Shoal Stand-off and Its Aftermath," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 3 no. 2 (July 2016): 174.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁷ "Philippine Fishermen Accuse China of Firing on Vessel in South China Sea." The Straits Times. April 21, 2017. <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/philippine-fishermen-accuse-china-of-firing-on-vessel-in-south-china-sea>.

rock that lies within the Philippine EEZ.³⁶⁸ Despite the Philippines' success in court, the Chinese party-state ignored it and kept vessels stationed within the shoal.³⁶⁹ As such, Chinese vessels maintain their continuous presence in and control of Scarborough Shoal to this day.

China's Advantage: Maritime Dominance and Economic Coercion

Scarborough Shoal represents the most recent example of China seizing a disputed geographic feature, rather than developing or protecting an existing claim. China's ability to seize Scarborough Shoal was the result of a capabilities gap between China and the Philippines, allowing the Chinese to essentially trick Philippine forces into withdrawing. What makes the Scarborough Shoal case different from the others analyzed here is China's exploitation of a dual hard and soft power strategy, leveraging economic and diplomatic advantages over the Philippines in order to secure the Shoal.

As was discussed in the preceding chapters, China enjoys naval dominance over the Philippines, largely due to its recent efforts to modernize and expand the PLAN.³⁷⁰ With a fleet of modern surface combatants armed with anti-ship cruise missiles,³⁷¹ the PLAN outclasses the Philippine Navy, which relies largely upon World War Two-era destroyers and repurposed US Coast Guard cutters. The Philippine Navy's complete lack of long-range weaponry further exacerbates this imbalance, as the Philippines' longest range weapon is a 3" naval gun with an effective range of approximately 20 km.³⁷² In the event of actual combat, this disparity would allow Chinese ships, armed with over-the-horizon missile technology, to engage Philippine ships

³⁶⁸ Philippines v. China (Permanent Court of Arbitration July 12, 2016).

³⁶⁹ Philips, Holmes, and Bowcott.

³⁷⁰ Heginbotham, 60.

³⁷¹ *Ibid*, 90.

³⁷² Pike, "Philippine Navy-Modernization."

from far beyond their effective combat range. China is acutely aware of this imbalance, and has exploited it to threaten the Philippines in the Scarborough Shoal. For example, as referenced earlier, the Chinese staged a flotilla of PLAN warships just over the horizon from the Philippines' dispatch of ships during the 2012 standoff.³⁷³

Similar to the situation in the Paracels and Spratlys, China's maritime advantage extends beyond the navy itself – the PLAN is complemented and supported by fleet of paramilitary and militia vessels.³⁷⁴ During the 2012 standoff, for example, the "frontline" Chinese unit was from neither the PLAN nor CCG, but from the Tanmen Maritime Militia Company based out of Hainan.³⁷⁵ Although the Philippine government is rapidly expanding its Coast Guard,³⁷⁶ it still pales in comparison to China's combined Coast Guard and naval militia, giving China the advantage both numerically and technologically. Similar to the situation in the Paracels, this disparity in paramilitary forces limits the Philippine's foreign policy options. Outclassed by the CCG and PAFMM, the Philippines can either accept the asymmetry or deploy its navy, changing the paradigm from a civilian to a military dispute and risking engagement with China's superior navy. Thus, China has readily exploited its power advantage relative to the Philippines, taking effective control of the Scarborough shoal.

Compared to the Paracels and Spratlys, China's position on Scarborough Shoal is somewhat weakened by its lack of a permanent, land-based presence. Despite concerns that China may undertake an island-building campaign in Scarborough, at this time there is no

³⁷³ Taffer, 95.

³⁷⁴ Erickson, "China's Three Navies."

³⁷⁵ Kennedy, Conor, and Andrew Erickson. "Model Maritime Militia: Tanmen's Leading Role in the April 2012 Scarborough Shoal Incident." Center for International Maritime Security. May 18, 2016. <http://cimsec.org/model-maritime-militia-tanmens-leading-role-april-2012-scarborough-shoal-incident/24573>.

³⁷⁶ "Japanese PM Confirms 10 Ships for Philippine Coast Guard." ABS-CBN News. October 09, 2013. <http://news.abs-cbn.com/nation/10/09/13/japanese-pm-confirms-10-ships-philippine-coast-guard>.

evidence of Chinese dredging or building operations on the shoal.³⁷⁷ This makes China's position somewhat more tenuous. Should Chinese ships be forced to leave the shoal for any reason, such as a major typhoon, the Philippines could attempt to reassert its control. Although such a possibility is unlikely given China's naval advantage, the fact that China does not have a true, permanent presence on Scarborough Shoal somewhat weakens China's position over the Philippines. Taking a Chinese claimed island in the Spratlys, for example, would require an armed, amphibious landing, almost guaranteeing wider armed conflict. But taking Scarborough Shoal from China remains a possibility, however slim, slightly weakening China's advantage.

Perhaps because of this geographical reality, China has pursued a far more aggressive economic policy over Scarborough than it has over other disputes. During the height of the standoff, for example, Chinese officials seized 1,200 containers of Philippine fruit arriving in Chinese ports under the pretext of "quarantine," creating an embargo on Philippine food exports to China.³⁷⁸ In response to China's action, the Philippine Banana Growers and Exporters Association warned that the loss of the Chinese market, which accounts for 70% of Philippine banana exports, could affect the livelihood of half a million Filipinos, and appealed to the government to resolve the crisis.³⁷⁹ Eventually, after the Philippines withdrew its ships, China immediately loosened restrictions on Philippine fruit imports, signaling that the embargo was in direct response to the crisis.³⁸⁰

³⁷⁷ "Scarborough Shoal." Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. February 27, 2016. <https://amti.csis.org/scarborough-shoal/>.

³⁷⁸ De Castro, 171.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁰ Oda Opda Zachrisen, "China's Political Use of Economic Ties in Territorial Disputes." Master's thesis, Trondheim, 2015: 92. <https://brage.bibsys.no/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2359406/Zachrisen,OdaOpdal.pdf?sequence=1>.

In addition to the banana import ban, China also blocked all tourist trips to the Philippines, intending to further show the Philippines' vulnerability to economic sanctions.³⁸¹ Estimates indicated that in May 2012 alone, cancelled bookings by Chinese tourists cost the Philippine tourism industry at least 1 million USD.³⁸² The ban went on to last for five months, resulting in a 30% drop in overall tourist visits to the Philippines during that time.³⁸³

Both the Philippines and China are acutely aware that the Philippine economy depends on China far more than China depends on the Philippines. As one Filipino official bluntly stated, "We have more to lose than them."³⁸⁴ The data supports this fact too; while China only sends 1.8% of its exports to the Philippines, the Philippines exports almost 12% of its goods to China.³⁸⁵ The story is similar for imports; only 1.3% of China's imports come from the Philippines, while the Philippines imports 16.3% of its goods from China.³⁸⁶

**2016 Exports to Dispute-Participants as a Percent
of Total Exports by Country**

	China	Malaysia	Philippines	Brunei	Vietnam	Indonesia
China	0	1.80	1.42	0.07	2.91	1.64
Malaysia	13.76	0	1.74	0.36	3.03	3.94
Philippines	11.00	2.11	0	0.01	1.33	1.12
Brunei	1.52	4.62	0.39	0	0.74	1.62
Vietnam	10.23	2.21	1.24	0.02	0	1.76
Indonesia	10.01	5.07	2.61	0.06	1.82	0

Table 1. Please note that countries from which exports originate are on the left side, and destinations are across the top. Taiwan excluded due to lack of available data.

³⁸¹ De Castro, 171

³⁸² Zachrisen, 95.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

³⁸⁵ All dated calculated from Trade Stats by Country." 2017. *World Integrated Trade Solutions*. World Bank Group. [://wits.worldbank.org/Default.aspx?lang=en](http://wits.worldbank.org/Default.aspx?lang=en).

³⁸⁶ See Table 2. All data calculated from Trade Stats by Country." 2017. *World Integrated Trade Solutions*. World Bank Group. [://wits.worldbank.org/Default.aspx?lang=en](http://wits.worldbank.org/Default.aspx?lang=en).

**2016 Imports From Dispute-Participants as a
Percent of Total Imports by Country**

	China	Malaysia	Philippines	Brunei	Vietnam	Indonesia
China	0	3.17	1.13	0.01	1.78	1.18
Malaysia	18.87	0	0.95	0.08	2.75	4.53
Philippines	16.36	4.71	0	0.01	1.81	4.43
Brunei	10.43	21.13	0.26	0	1.18	2.67
Vietnam	29.82	2.52	0.54	0.03	0	1.65
Indonesia	20.61	5.98	0.48	0.09	2.22	0

Table 2: Please note that countries to which imports are arriving are on the left side, countries of origin are across the top. Taiwan excluded due to lack of available data.

The sanctions levied against the Philippines in 2012 demonstrate that China is willing to exploit its advantageous economic position against the Philippines. Research has suggested that China could potentially damage specific areas of the Philippines' economy with little risk to itself.³⁸⁷ The Filipino metal industry is particularly vulnerable. Almost all of the Philippines' nickel exports go to China, while only 21% of China's nickel imports come from the Philippines.³⁸⁸ Additionally, 25% of the Philippines' copper exports go to China, while the Philippines does not even rank among China's top ten copper suppliers.³⁸⁹

In sum, China's power advantage in Scarborough Shoal is more diverse than in China's other disputes. While China still possesses an unparalleled military and paramilitary hard-power advantage, it has not yet established a permanent presence on Scarborough,³⁹⁰ making its position somewhat more tenuous than in the Paracels or Spratlys. Recognizing this, China has instead used the Philippines' economic reliance upon China as a form of leverage, reaffirming its supremacy over Scarborough Shoal.

³⁸⁷ Ravindran, "China's Potential," 116.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁰ "Scarborough Shoal." Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

Scarborough Shoal as China's National Frontier

China's actions at Scarborough Shoal cannot be explained only by reference to its essential strategic calculations. As in the other cases, these actions also are driven by Chinese nationalism, history, and an understanding of "sovereignty" that is different from the western legal definition enshrined in international law. China is not simply seeking to reinforce its geopolitical position in claiming Scarborough Shoal because it is capable of doing so; it is also trying to secure what it truly considers to be its border.

First, China's claim to Scarborough Shoal is largely based upon the principle of "historical right" to the South China Sea. This is reflected in China's choice of evidence for asserting its claim. As discussed earlier in this chapter, China uses a Yuan Dynasty survey as its historical justification.³⁹¹ In addition, China's national history has long considered the entirety of the South China Sea to be "Chinese," referencing the period when China had established effective control over the South China Sea prior to Western interference.³⁹² In the Chinese nationalist understanding of history, the South China Sea is an integral part of China, and Scarborough Shoal is its easternmost border.

As discussed in the unifying factors chapter, this understanding of the South China Sea's history has created a conception of "sovereignty" that is radically different from the western legal version that China seeks to enforce. We see this clearly evident in this case, especially in China's rejection of the PCA ruling based on UNCLOS. The court defined Scarborough Shoal as a

³⁹¹ Han, 2.

³⁹² Kang, *East Asia Before the West*, 120.

"rock," not an island,³⁹³ and cited Article 121(3) of UNCLOS: "[a rock] which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of [its] own shall have no exclusive economic zone or continental shelf."³⁹⁴ Thus, legally speaking, a rock does not possess territorial waters or imply an exclusive economic zone; nations do not have sovereignty over sea rocks. In this case, however, China has stated that it "has sovereign right and exercises jurisdiction over the Huang Yan Island,"³⁹⁵ clearly putting forth a different idea of "sovereignty" derived from Chinese history. China continuously uses this terminology with regard to Scarborough Shoal. When an American ship sailed near the shoal in January 2018, for example, China released a statement stating it would take "necessary measures" to "safeguard its sovereignty."³⁹⁶ Through these examples, the influence of China's nationalistic history on the Scarborough Shoal dispute is obvious. China is *not* claiming it has a right to Scarborough based on UNCLOS; rather, it is asserting its right based on a unique, radically different definition of sovereignty derived from Chinese history.

Nationalism as a motivating factor for Chinese assertiveness is also reflected in the Chinese media, which has taken a starkly hawkish attitude towards Scarborough Shoal. For example, a 2016 study of media coverage of the dispute discovered that while Filipino papers primarily painted a picture of China "bullying" fishermen and causing economic losses, Chinese papers primarily talked about "ancient historical rights" and "Chinese sovereignty."³⁹⁷ As

³⁹³ Philippines v. China, 232.

³⁹⁴ *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*, (Montego Bay, Jamaica: United Nations, 1982). http://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf

³⁹⁵ Jianming, Shen. "China's Sovereignty over the South China Sea Islands: A Historical Perspective." *Chinese Journal Of International Law* 1, no. 1 (January 2002): 152.

³⁹⁶ Johnson, "China Accuses US."

³⁹⁷ Christina Jayme Montiel, Alma Maria O. Salvador, Daisy C. See, and Marliune M. De Leon. "Nationalism in Local Media During International Conflict: Text Mining Domestic News Reports of the China–Philippines Maritime Dispute," *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 33 no. 5 (2014): 456.

Chinese media are state-controlled, the presence of such views is indicative of the party-state's nationalist stance on the matter.

Interestingly, participants in the dispute themselves also exhibit such historical nationalist motivations. The headquarters of the Tanmen Maritime Militia, the unit at the forefront of the 2012 standoff, is filled with artifacts such as ancient maps, navigation logs, and other historical items³⁹⁸ that play into the nationalist idea of "reclaiming lost territories" taken from China during the "Century of Humiliation."³⁹⁹ Given that the museum is run by the local militia, this fact is especially important because it not only supports the contention that the Chinese government is propagating the nationalist reclamation narrative, but also that the Chinese population is buying into it. With the example of the Tanmen Maritime Militia, we see the presence of historical nationalism across all levels of Chinese actors, from party leaders to the media to the militiamen themselves.

In short, Chinese nationalism plays a dual role in the Scarborough dispute. First, it serves as a motivating force for the population, with the Chinese historical nationalist sentiments being echoed through the press and propagated by the militia. Second, a Chinese nationalist view of the South China Sea's history, and the sense of "sovereignty" subsequently derived from it, have provided a model for Chinese leadership to follow. In essence, China's leadership seemingly wishes to recreate the era in which China dominated the South China Sea, and control of Scarborough Shoal is essential in that task.

³⁹⁸ Kennedy and Erickson, "Model Maritime Militia."

³⁹⁹ Zhao, 535.

Case Study Analysis

The Scarborough Shoal represents one of the most aggressive examples of Chinese policy in the last decade, with China violating an agreement with the Philippines to seize effective control in 2012.⁴⁰⁰ Since then, it has been a constant source of tension between the two nations, and the site of regular confrontations between military, paramilitary, and civilian vessels. Given this high level of Chinese assertiveness, the following trends can be identified.

- **China enjoys supremacy at Scarborough Shoal, but lacks a truly permanent presence:** China enjoys an unparalleled hard-power advantage over the Philippines at Scarborough Shoal, with the PLAN outclassing the Philippine Navy in nearly every respect. Should conflict occur, the Philippines would lack any ability to truly engage or threaten Chinese military forces.⁴⁰¹ In addition, China's well-developed paramilitary and militia forces⁴⁰² limit the Philippines' policy options to either military escalation or acceptance of the status quo. Despite this, China's hard-power advantage is slightly less significant compared to other disputes in the South China Sea. Scarborough Shoal is much further from Chinese air cover based at Hainan, and China has yet to establish a permanent immovable presence through island building.
- **China is willing to exploit the Philippines' economic reliance:** While China and the Philippines are major trading partners, the trade is heavily asymmetrical in China's favor. China has shown itself willing to exploit this reality, placing embargos on banana imports from and tourist trips to the Philippines in 2012, which resulted in millions of lost dollars

⁴⁰⁰ De Castro, 174.

⁴⁰¹ Pike, "Philippine Navy-Modernization."

⁴⁰² Erickson, "China's Three Navies."

to the Philippine economy.⁴⁰³ If China continues to pursue further economic sanctions, the Philippines could suffer significant consequences.

- **Nationalism is a powerfully salient force in the Scarborough Shoal dispute:** Much like the Spratly and Paracel disputes, China's actions at Scarborough Shoal heavily reflect a sense of Chinese nationalism rooted in patriotic history. China views Scarborough Shoal as the eastern border of its "sovereign" territory, and rejects UNCLOS' commonly accepted definition of maritime territory.⁴⁰⁴ In addition, nationalist sentiments about Scarborough are reflected in the greater Chinese population, through both the press⁴⁰⁵ and conflict participants themselves.⁴⁰⁶ This evidence supports the argument that China is using nationalism for two purposes, propagating the nationalist narrative to both justify its actions and gain the population's support.

Overall, the Scarborough Shoal dispute supports an explanation based on *strategic nationalism*. The realist presumption does hold true: increased Chinese capabilities correlate with increased Chinese assertiveness. At the same time, however, the constructivist claim also has explanatory power: China's unique sense of sovereignty and model of regional domination, both informed by the history of the tribute system, clearly propelled Chinese behavior. Thus, *strategic nationalism* offers the best explanation of Chinese actions in the Scarborough Shoal.

⁴⁰³ "The China-Philippine Banana War," *Asia Sentinel*.

⁴⁰⁴ Philips, Holmes, and Bowcott, "Beijing Rejects Tribunal."

⁴⁰⁵ Montiel et al., 456.

⁴⁰⁶ Kennedy and Erickson, "Model Maritime Militia."

Chapter IX: Analyzing, Explaining, and Predicting Chinese Behavior

Throughout the last three case study chapters, I have sought to examine the available evidence about Chinese behavior in different parts of the South China Sea. In this chapter, I will review the lessons learned from each case, highlight the trends, and use the process tracing discussed earlier to show that *strategic nationalism* (a combination of rational calculation and historical nationalism) best explains China's growing assertiveness in this maritime region. This chapter serves as a way to draw on all the cases, ultimately demonstrating the validity of my hybrid argument.

I have suggested, from the outset, that we cannot truly understand Chinese behavior by attributing it to either rational calculation (as realists do) or nationalism (as constructivists do). These approaches are thoroughly incomplete. Certainly, China is a rational actor, and pursues a rational foreign policy. But simple "rationality" can only go so far in explaining China's actions. The specific way in which China has conceived and pursued its rational objective, control of the South China Sea, has been influenced by Chinese history, or – to be more precise – by the memories Chinese policymakers have grasped about that history. If my hypothesis is valid, we should expect to see three key trends in the South China Sea discussion: first, a close correlation between China's actions and its capabilities; second, a salient role for Chinese history and nationalism in driving Chinese security strategy; and third, a rational application of this influence.

All of these trends are clearly apparent in each of the case studies, and across the broader South China Sea story. China has never attempted to act beyond what its capabilities realistically permit, and Chinese leaders have regularly used the lessons learned from history in crafting their policy while simultaneously using the nationalism generated by such a nationalist narrative to

gain support for it. The rest of this chapter will be devoted to highlighting these trends, and demonstrating that they validate my hypothesis.

Key Trend 1: When China can, China will.

The first key trend demonstrated in the case studies is that when China has the capabilities to reasonably achieve an objective, it will. This trend supports two basic tenets of realism: 1) states are motivated above all by an interest in enhancing their security; and 2) they will exercise whatever power they have to realize that interest.⁴⁰⁷ The South China Sea is an obvious asset to any East Asian country's security: it is home to some of the world's richest fisheries,⁴⁰⁸ a massive oil reserve,⁴⁰⁹ and one third of the world's maritime traffic.⁴¹⁰ The ability to control the sea is a massive step towards economic security for China. Beyond that, control of the South China Sea is integral to China's long term defensive plan; The Spratlys, Paracels, Scarborough, and the rest comprise the nation's "First Island Chain", and controlling the surrounding waters is seen as critical to keeping foreign warships away from China's shores.⁴¹¹ Leaders of the party-state believe they need to control the South China Sea to improve China's security. Thus, I argue that when its capabilities allow it to take steps towards such control, China will take them.

This trend is readily apparent both within and across each of case studies. China's physical aggression has been the most apparent example of this, with China now using the expansive naval and maritime enforcement capabilities it has built up since the 1990s to press its

⁴⁰⁷ Mearsheimer, "The False Promise," 2.

⁴⁰⁸ Office of the Director of National Intelligence. *The Future of Indian Ocean and South China Sea Fisheries*.

⁴⁰⁹ Gonzales, 20.

⁴¹⁰ China Power Team, "How much Trade?"

⁴¹¹ Bouchat, 17.

island claims. Barely able to conduct green-water operations only a few decades ago, China now possesses one of the world's most formidable navies, equipped with an array of modern technology, especially in the form of anti-ship missile technology.⁴¹² As discussed earlier, China has also invested heavily in its non-military options, creating the new China Coast Guard and equipping it with some of the world's most capable maritime enforcement vessels.⁴¹³

Yet has China actually used these newfound capabilities to achieve its goals? In short, yes. There is a direct correlation between China's capability to effectively control a disputed island, and its decision to do so. Building militarized islands, an obvious example of Chinese assertiveness, serves as a useful metric. Due to the nature of dredging operations, and the relative ease with which an enemy ship could disrupt them, they can only be conducted in situations where China knows it has the capability to protect them. Therefore, when China's capabilities have been the highest, it has been the most assertive.

This trend holds true throughout the case studies. In the Paracels case, China enjoys near-total dominance, helped in part by the fact that this is a bilateral, rather than a multilateral, dispute. Not only is China's military⁴¹⁴ and coast guard⁴¹⁵ vastly superior to Vietnam's, but the Paracel Islands are also only a short distance from its bases on Hainan Island, increasing its comparative leverage.⁴¹⁶ China has capitalized on this fact, and its effective control of the islands since the '70s, to build an extensive network of island outposts, with significant developments on Woody, Tree, and Duncan Islands.⁴¹⁷ Further capitalizing on its control, China's actions have expanded beyond the military realm, beginning the infrastructure necessary to sustain civilian

⁴¹² Heginbotham, 30.

⁴¹³ McDevvit, *Becoming a Great "Maritime Power*, 56.

⁴¹⁴ Truong and Nguyen, "Modernization of the Vietnamese People's Navy."

⁴¹⁵ McDevvit, *Becoming a Great Maritime Power*, 57.

⁴¹⁶ Heginbotham, 30.

⁴¹⁷ "UPDATE: China's Continuing Reclamation in the Paracels." Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

life in the Paracels, and declaring Woody Island the capital of the prefecture-level city Sansha.⁴¹⁸ In addition, China seemingly uses the relative security of its Paracel holdings as a sort of test bed for developments on less secure islands. New technologies are often tested on Woody Island, only to appear in the Spratlys months later.⁴¹⁹

China's control over the Spratlys is less guaranteed, with numerous other countries pressing claims. While still the dominant power, Chinese forces operating in the Spratlys also have to contend with opposition from Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Brunei, making this a complex, multilateral dispute as opposed to a simple, bilateral one. Vietnam and Taiwan have also undertaken island building projects of their own,⁴²⁰ making it difficult for China to establish total control without forcibly removing them. Lastly, the Spratlys' distance from China's coast makes operations there slightly more challenging than in the Paracels, albeit not to a significant degree.

China's island building in the Spratlys, while substantial, is notably different from that in the Paracels, being focused primarily on military capabilities. There have been no attempts to develop the Spratlys' civilian infrastructure, with China instead prioritizing new runways for fighter jet operations and SAM launchers.⁴²¹ If we treat island building as a proxy measure of assertiveness, then the Spratlys also follow the trend that China's capabilities correlate with assertive policy. In the Paracels, where China's capabilities are highest, it has gone so far as to develop civilian infrastructure, essentially incorporating the islands into China's territory. In the Spratlys, however, the islands function more as military outposts, representing China's slightly more tenuous position.

⁴¹⁸ Yamaguchi, "Creating Facts on the Sea."

⁴¹⁹ "UPDATE: China's Continuing Reclamation in the Paracels." Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

⁴²⁰ "Spratly Island." Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

⁴²¹ McDevitt, "The South China Sea," 254.

At Scarborough Shoal, the trend is yet again apparent. Located much further from China's coast and far closer to the Philippines, Chinese operations at Scarborough require greater logistical efforts than in the Paracels or Spratlys. Once again taking island building as a measure of assertiveness, we see that this lower capability (relative to China's capabilities on the other islands) translates to slightly lower assertiveness. China has only secured Scarborough with a chain across the lagoon entrance.⁴²² Instead of a well-defended artificial island, the party-state defends its claim with a fleet of patrol ships, sitting in what is effectively open, exposed ocean.⁴²³ With this, we again see the correlation between China's capabilities and its assertiveness — where China's capabilities are lowest within the South China Sea, so is its aggression.

Two events seemingly stand out from this correlation: the 1973 battle of the Paracels⁴²⁴ and the 1988 battle in the Spratlys,⁴²⁵ both of which came before China's significant build-up in capabilities. However, these incidents do not in any way invalidate the findings, given that both were responsive, rather than aggressive acts. The 1973 battle was a response to Vietnam seizing islands in the Spratlys, prompting China to fear the same in the Paracels.⁴²⁶ Additionally, Vietnam made the first deployment of armed ships in the Paracels, meaning that the incident can hardly be described as Chinese aggression. Meanwhile, the Spratly skirmish at Johnson South Reef was sparked by an unplanned encounter between Chinese and Vietnamese forces, not a calculated offensive.⁴²⁷

There is a clear correlation between China's capabilities in the disputed islands and its assertiveness, pointing to a broader connection between China's ability to ensure its national

⁴²² De Castro, 174.

⁴²³ "Philippine Fishermen Accuse China of Firing on Vessel in South China Sea." *The Straits Times*.

⁴²⁴ Yoshihara, 56.

⁴²⁵ Chang, 195.

⁴²⁶ Yoshihara, 47.

⁴²⁷ Reuters Staff, "Vietnam Protesters Denounce China on Anniversary of Navy Battle."

security and its willingness to do so. This empirical reality provides solid support for the realist presumptions in my *strategic nationalism* hypothesis. China, as a state motivated by the desire to ensure security, takes actions to do so when capable.

Key Trend 2: China's history is both learned from and used.

The second key trend apparent across the case studies is that China's leadership uses Chinese history for two purposes. First, there is evidence that China's past failures and successes, most notably in the tribute system, have influenced China's current plan to control the South China Sea. Second, China's party-state uses the narrative and norms generated by a nationalist retelling of this history to justify and gain support for its actions.

The similarities between China's control of the South China Sea during the tribute system and China's current attempts to control the Sea are too profound to ignore. Historically, China was strongest in the Ming and early Qing dynasties, when it ruled East Asia through the tribute system and dominated the South China Sea, largely without interfering in the domestic politics of neighboring countries.⁴²⁸ Provided each country respected its position as regional suzerain, China deigned to trade with these countries and permit them to run their internal affairs as they pleased.⁴²⁹

The tribute system appears to function as a model for China today as it pursues domination in this maritime region but does not interfere in the domestic politics of rival claimants. Chinese leaders consider the South China Sea to be part of national territory,⁴³⁰ but they still respect the internal sovereignty of their neighbors. China has gone so far as to formally

⁴²⁸ Kang, *East Asia Before the West*, 10.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid*, 56.

⁴³⁰ Lei, 507.

adhere to this principle of non-intervention, signing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2003.⁴³¹ This treaty required China to accept the mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity of all nations,"⁴³² turning China's hands-off practice into official policy.

There is no evidence in any of my case studies of China attempting to directly meddle in the domestic politics of its neighbors. While the U.S. regularly invaded countries and overthrew leaders in its attempt to secure the Caribbean, no such incidents have happened in the South China Sea. This pattern of respecting the sovereignty of other countries' land while claiming the sea as national territory is nearly identical to the pattern begun in the tribute era, pointing to the influence of history on modern Chinese policy.

There is also clear evidence that the Chinese party-state is propagating a nationalist narrative of maritime history in order to support and justify its claims. This can be seen throughout all three case studies: whenever another country violates China's claim, Chinese leaders protest that their nation's "sovereignty" has been violated.⁴³³ Meanwhile, they promote a version of maritime sovereignty that is radically different from the Western view, one that emphasizes "historical right" and rejects the "general principles of international law," as a source of authority.⁴³⁴ This, in turn, justifies the narrative that the South China Sea is China's "lost territory."⁴³⁵ Not only is China attempting to achieve a long-held national goal, but in the version of maritime law promoted by the party-state, it is also totally justified in doing so.

⁴³¹ ASEAN. *Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia*. Accessed April 13, 2018. <http://www.icnl.org/research/library/files/Transnational/1976Treaty.pdf>.

⁴³² *Ibid.*

⁴³³ Perlez, "Vietnam Law."

⁴³⁴ Chiu, 4.

⁴³⁵ Zhao, "Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism," 535.

All this is occurring against a backdrop of state-sponsored campaigns aimed at promoting nationalism, starting with the "patriotic education campaign" that began in the 1990s.⁴³⁶ The party-state has conducted similar campaigns to gain support for its actions in the South China Sea; for example, it installed banners in Tanmen that called for the population to support Sansha.⁴³⁷ Meanwhile, state-approved articles on the Spratlys have relied on such nationalist rhetoric, referring to China as a "great oceanic nation" with a duty to reclaim those islands.⁴³⁸ The role of state-sponsored nationalism is also apparent in the Scarborough case, with the maritime militias that operate on China's behalf running a museum themselves in support of the national reclamation narrative.⁴³⁹ This state-sponsored nationalism serves to re-affirm the party-state's right to rule. Having relied upon communist ideology (and sometimes economic success) as longtime sources of legitimacy, the Chinese Communist Party has now sought a new source.⁴⁴⁰ Nationalist sentiment, especially tied to the reclamation narrative, has provided this source, allowing China to both justify their assertive actions and cement the population's support.⁴⁴¹

Chinese leaders are clearly aware of China's history and the feelings it generates among the general population, and have used a historical narrative to gain nationalist support for their strategic goal of reclaiming the South China Sea. In addition, China's contemporary actions in the region bear remarkable similarities to its successful control of the South China Sea during the tribute system, indicating that the lessons learned from China's maritime history have influenced policymakers. Furthermore, by pursuing a strategy that mimics that of an old empire, even using

⁴³⁶ Wang, 790.

⁴³⁷ Hwai, "Island City of Sansha."

⁴³⁸ Lei, 507.

⁴³⁹ Kennedy and Erickson, "Model Maritime Militia."

⁴⁴⁰ Baalsrud, Ida Nerbu. "Chinese Nationalism and Regime Legitimacy." Master's thesis, Trondheim, Spring 2013: 55.

https://brage.bibsys.no/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/268660/645755_FULLTEXT01.pdf?sequence=1

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*

previous discourse, the Chinese leadership is further appealing to the growing nationalism of the people: not only is China pursuing a strategic goal, the message goes, but it is reclaiming what it rightfully owns. The obvious influence of the past on present policy, and China's use of the nationalist norms generated by such history, supports my second key argument – that Chinese nationalism has played a role in China's increased assertiveness in the SCS.

Key Trend 3: China has acted rationally.

While nationalism has influenced Chinese policy, it has not motivated policy-makers to behave unconsciously or without rationality. China is still a rational state driven by its quest to survive; it is buoyed by nationalism, but not consumed by it. The nationalist norms that emerge from the narrative of Chinese maritime history are *utilitarian*, not *constitutive*.⁴⁴² That is, the party-state has learned lessons from history and is using nationalist norms to generate public support for its foreign policy; it is not defined or compelled to act by those norms.

The best evidence for this may be China's use of force strategy against different opponents in the South China Sea. While the historical narrative would seemingly justify Chinese force against any ship that has violated its territory (the entire South China Sea), the party-state instead steers a careful course designed not to spark broader conflict. When dealing with Southeast Asian countries, for example, China is willing to use force, but often sends its Coast Guard or militia, rather than Navy, to do so.⁴⁴³ This strategy allows China to effectively enforce its claims without taking the risk associated with deploying military assets to a disputed area. It also has the advantageous side effect of appealing to the nationalist agenda that the party-state has promoted. If the South China Sea is Chinese territory, issues within it are

⁴⁴² Katzenstein, "Cultural Norms and National Security," 537.

⁴⁴³ Erickson, "China's Three Navies."

domestic, and should be handled by civil rather than military authorities. Deploying the Coast Guard instead of the Navy therefore represents China's pursuit of rational policy. Whereas the military might be more effective in physically securing the South China Sea, its deployment brings risks that China is unwilling to take.

China's dealings with U.S. ships in the region also point to its status as a rational, calculating country. If Chinese leaders were truly driven by runaway, hawkish nationalism, they would seek to forcibly defend the South China Sea against American patrols. However, China recognizes that firing upon U.S. ships would potentially spark an unwinnable war, and therefore takes a far softer approach to those ships than it does to those of its neighbors. Instead of forceful action, China opts to monitor U.S. ships and issue diplomatic protests,⁴⁴⁴ demonstrating that it rationally understands the risk of engaging the U.S. Navy.

China also exhibits rational behavior in its decision to propagate nationalist sentiments that support its claims, specifically the conception of maritime sovereignty discussed in the previous section.⁴⁴⁵ In all three case studies, the party-state has intentionally used patriotic rhetoric to generate public backing for its policy and to reaffirm regime legitimacy. China is not being pushed to aggression in this maritime region by its own nationalism – it is generating nationalism to support its assertive behavior.

Given these facts, it is clear that while Chinese history and nationalism have influenced China's policy of assertiveness in the South China Sea, they have done so in a way that is entirely rational. Nationalism is not driving China's leadership towards aggression. Rather, the party-state rationally uses nationalist sentiments to support its claims and a nationalist retelling of history to justify them. This trend supports the third key point of my argument: that while nationalism

⁴⁴⁴ Johnson, "China Accuses US."

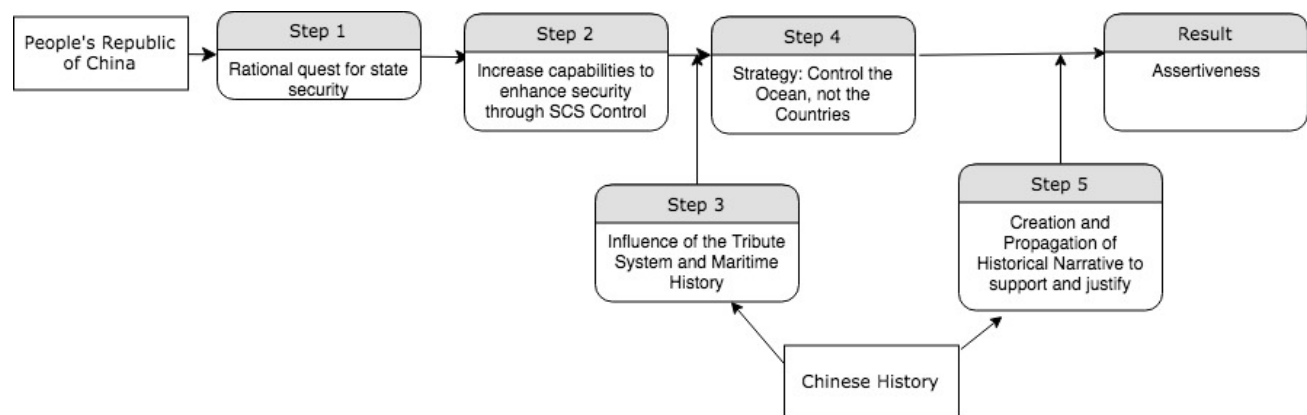
⁴⁴⁵ Chinese Views on the Sources of International Law, 4.

<http://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1084&context=mscas>

plays a role in China's motivations, it in no way trumps the presumption that China is a rational actor.

Tracing the Motivations of China's Assertiveness

While I have identified three key trends that support my argument, I must still apply the process tracing methodology and present the evidence that supports each individual step of my argument. As discussed in the methodology chapter, evidence must be present that supports each step of my proposed mechanism that drives Chinese assertiveness.⁴⁴⁶ For my *strategic nationalism* hypothesis to be plausible, I must identify that there is sufficient evidence to support the existence of each proposed step.



The five proposed steps of my mechanism are outlined above. For the entire mechanism to be true, each individual step must be well supported. However, the case studies and trends outlined earlier in this chapter have generated an abundance of evidence in support of each of the following steps:

⁴⁴⁶ Beach, 16.

Step One: China is a rational state that will attempt to enhance its security.

This step is essentially the basic realist presumption: China is a rational state that is motivated by its own survival.⁴⁴⁷ When China is capable of enhancing its security, it will do so, based on a rational assessment of its capabilities. This step is supported by the fact that in both the South China Sea and other theatres, China has broadly behaved according to realist presumptions, seeking to maximize its power and security.

There is substantial evidence to support the contention that China behaves as a rational state. The nationalist reclamation narrative does not drive its leaders' actions; Chinese policy is driven by calculation. For example, at the time when now-former Chinese premier Hu Jintao made a 2012 speech claiming "international forces are trying to westernize and divide us by using ideology and culture," most of the Chinese leadership's children were attending high school and college in the West.⁴⁴⁸ If the Chinese leadership were really motivated by nationalism, and not rational calculation, there would be no way to rectify this duality of condemning the West while simultaneously permitting their children to attend Western institutions.

There is also evidence that the party-state has restrained popular nationalist protests when the risks of such protests outweigh their strategic benefit. After a 2001 collision between an American surveillance aircraft and a Chinese fighter over Hainan Islands, authorities quickly moved to block mass student protests, recognizing that popular mobilization may further enflame tensions between China and the far more powerful United States.⁴⁴⁹ In addition, leaders in Beijing have recently become more concerned that nationalist protests over the South China Sea

⁴⁴⁷ Mearsheimer, "The False Promise," 6.

⁴⁴⁸ Yahuda, 455.

⁴⁴⁹ Jessica Chen Weiss, "Authoritarian Signaling, Mass Audiences, and Nationalist Protest in China." *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (2013): 22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43282151>.

may become too hawkish in their calls for action – as one anonymous senior diplomat remarked, "I'm worried. Public opinion is becoming more and more influential. There are too many irrational voices,"⁴⁵⁰ demonstrating that the leadership is concerned that nationalism might go too far and begin pressuring the party-state to pursue non-rational action. This awareness clearly demonstrates that China's decision makers are not driven by nationalist sentiments – their actions are calculated and rational.

Importantly, this step also rejects a singular embrace of *historical nationalism*, as it demonstrates that China is first and foremost motivated by a will to enhance its security, not by patriotism. The *historical nationalism* argument begins with the presumption that Chinese action is driven by nationalist sentiments, not rational calculation, and is therefore a nonrational actor. However, the evidence presented demonstrates that China is a rational state, rejecting *historical nationalism* as a sufficient explanation for Chinese assertiveness.

Step Two: Chinese has increased its capability to seize the South China Sea.

As China is a rational state seeking to maximize its security, it will attempt to expand its material capabilities in an effort to do so. China clearly recognizes that controlling the South China Sea is integral to its national security – control of the region's waterways is integral in China's "First Island Chain" defense plan for keeping foreign warships away from China's coast,⁴⁵¹ and China would immensely benefit from control of the sea's resources.⁴⁵²⁴⁵³

Over the last three decades China has succeeded in significantly expanding its capabilities, most notably in the areas required to achieve control of the South China Sea. China's navy has risen from a green-water patrol force to a modern, combat-capable outfit that outclasses

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵¹ Bouchat, 17.

⁴⁵² Gonzales, 20.

⁴⁵³ Office of the Director of National Intelligence. *The Future of Indian Ocean and South China Sea Fisheries.*

any opposition in the region.⁴⁵⁴ China has also sought to expand its coast guard and militia, forces that are key to establishing control over disputed islands without the risks that come with the deployment of military vessels.⁴⁵⁵ These improvements have made China a true naval power, and leave its leadership with an array of policy options for dealing with potential challengers.

It is an indisputable fact that China is far stronger today than it has been in previous decades.⁴⁵⁶ There is also no evidence that China intends to slow its efforts to become more powerful – the capabilities gap between China and the world's strongest powers continues to shrink.⁴⁵⁷ This reality supports the second step of my mechanism. Not only is China a rational actor pursuing state security, it has also undertaken the necessary actions to improve its security. Even more importantly, once China acquires these capabilities, they are used rationally. China has never attempted an action beyond what its capabilities allow for, and there is a clear correlation between Chinese capabilities and assertiveness across all three case studies. Therefore, the evidence of China's concerted effort to improve its capabilities, and its subsequent rational use of them, support the plausibility of *strategic nationalism's* second step.

Step Three: Awareness of Chinese history

Step three of my argument is that Chinese history provides a model for ruling the South China Sea. In the past, China used a distinctive strategy to successfully dominate the region; the party-state is now replicating that strategy. There is ample evidence, especially outlined chapter five, that China controlled the South China Sea during the tribute system.⁴⁵⁸ However, its control notably relied upon regional preeminence and control of the waterways, not domination

⁴⁵⁴ Goldstein, 30.

⁴⁵⁵ Erickson, "China's Three 'Navies.'"

⁴⁵⁶ Heginbotham, iii.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁸ Kang, *East Asia Before the West*, 10.

over the countries themselves. In fact, China took a largely hands-off policy towards other countries, staying out of their internal affairs provided they did not interfere with China.

Evidence suggests that Chinese leaders are clearly aware of the country's successful attempts at controlling those waters during the tribute system. Xi Jinping himself frequently has made reference to Imperial China's maritime preeminence, for example referencing Zheng He, the famous Ming explorer, in a 2017 speech.⁴⁵⁹ Furthermore, Wang Ying, a Chinese marine geographer, invoked China's tribute system and historic domination of the Sea when he spoke out against the 2016 PCA ruling. The jurists who sided with the Philippines over China, he groused, "didn't respect history."⁴⁶⁰ Additionally, in regularly invoking its "historical right" to the South China Sea, the party-state clearly represents that it is well aware of China's past control of the Sea, and is willing to use that as a justification for current policy.

These repeated mentions of China's past maritime successes serve to support step three of my argument: Chinese leaders understand China's historical domination of the region. It is no accident that China's modern actions bear striking similarities to their historical ones. Importantly, this step also militates against a singular embrace of the *security competition* hypothesis, showing that there is sufficient evidence to include Chinese history and nationalism as another key factor in explaining China's assertiveness. As I have argued before, this does not make the realist arguments inherently wrong, but rather incomplete, failing to explain the specific strategy that China has pursued. At this point, *strategic nationalism* deviates from *security competition* in not only explaining what China will do, but how China will do it.

⁴⁵⁹ "Full Text of President Xi's Speech at Opening of Belt and Road Forum." Xinhua Net. April 5, 2017. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136282982.htm

⁴⁶⁰ Hannah Beech, "South China Sea: Where Did China Get Its Nine-Dash Line?" *Time*. July 19, 2016. <http://time.com/4412191/nine-dash-line-9-south-china-sea/>.

Step Four: China's current strategy is modeled after the tribute system, and such modeling is rational.

Having demonstrated that China's leaders are aware of the tribute system, I now contend that China's current strategy is both rationally calculated and modeled after the tribute system. Given that China will never disclose the specifics of its strategy, this step is slightly difficult to prove. However, I maintain there is still enough evidence to support that China is pursuing a rational strategy influenced by an awareness of the tribute system.

First, through steps one and two, I have demonstrated that China is a rational actor, and that it is rational for China to attempt to control the South China Sea. This demonstrates that Chinese strategy is rational, and any influence an awareness of Chinese history has on it is also rational. This point is also important because I am not rejecting the idea that China is a rational actor; rather, I have explained the sources of the strategy it rationally chooses to pursue.

As discussed earlier, the similarities between the ancient tribute system and China's current strategy are simply too profound to ignore. Just as China attempted in the 15th century to control the waters around its neighbors without actually controlling the neighbors themselves,⁴⁶¹ it attempts to do so today. China has frequently referenced the South China Sea as its *territory*, treating it as if it were literally part of China's land rather than open ocean.⁴⁶² At the same time, China has not attempted to influence the domestic affairs of its neighbors, instead exerting its influence through its economic might⁴⁶³ and the constant presence of its vastly superior military, just as it did during the tribute system. In addition, the borders of China's "Nine Dash Line" carefully end just before the coastlines of its neighboring countries. Although China has not

⁴⁶¹ Kang, *East Asia Before the West*, 10.

⁴⁶² Lei, 508.

⁴⁶³ Ravindran, 105.

stipulated how far from the coast this border is, such delineation clearly demonstrates that China does not claim sovereignty over its neighbors, only the waters around them.

Both China's current strategy and the tribute system rely upon a respect for other countries' sovereign *land*, extensive economic linkages,⁴⁶⁴ China's position as the regional hegemon, and the overwhelming presence of the Chinese military⁴⁶⁵ to keep the region in check. The similarities between China's current and past strategies support step four of my mechanism: Chinese leaders modeled their contemporary approach on the ancient tribute system. History has therefore provided a strategy with which China seeks to achieve its security aim, control of the South China Sea.

Step Five: Use of the nationalist reclamation narrative to justify assertiveness

The final step of the process driving China's assertive policy is its use of historical nationalism to justify and gain support for its increased assertiveness. Just as the party-state has promoted nationalism to gain support for regime legitimacy, it links its actions in the South China Sea to the reclamation narrative in order to justify them to both the Chinese population and the international community.⁴⁶⁶

The party-state has repeatedly made efforts to promote nationalism, such as the patriotic education campaign.⁴⁶⁷ There have been further attempts to promote nationalism specifically related to the South China Sea, including Nansha Village.⁴⁶⁸ In addition, the state-sponsored

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁵ Heginbotham, iii.

⁴⁶⁶ Baalsrud, 55.

⁴⁶⁷ Wang, 790.

⁴⁶⁸ Hwai, "Island City of Sansha."

press has been involved in this effort, continuing to promote the idea that the SCS is Chinese territory.⁴⁶⁹

Importantly, these campaigns have worked – the Chinese population has become far more nationalistic in recent decades. This is especially apparent among China's youth, who frequently take to the Internet to express patriotic fervor.⁴⁷⁰ It is, then, *doubly* rational to try to dominate the South China Sea by using a strategy rooted in the tribute system: it not only appears to enhance Chinese security but also appeals to the growing nationalism of Chinese citizens, thereby providing a new source of regime legitimacy. There is clear evidence to indicate that China has promoted nationalism to its population, and that such promotion has worked. This then supports the fifth and final step of the mechanism, and shows that an assertive policy in the South China Sea is beneficial to the Chinese party-state on both the domestic and international levels.

In Summary: Strategic nationalism as the driver of China's assertiveness

Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated, using process tracing, that my *strategic nationalism* hypothesis is fully validated at each step. In step one, we see that China is a rational actor, and in step two, we see that it is rational to expect China to take the South China Sea. In step three, we see that China's leadership is aware of how China previously controlled the sea, and in step four we see that the current strategy is modeled after such previous efforts. Lastly, in the fifth and final step, we see that Chinese leaders have intentionally used a historical narrative

⁴⁶⁹ Lei, 507.

⁴⁷⁰ Yahuda, 455.

to gain the population's nationalist support for their efforts, making an assertive policy even more beneficial.

Through these steps, I have offered a new way of understanding not only why China has pursued an aggressive policy, but also why they have pursued the specific policy of island-building and military expansion with simultaneous economic engagement. The basic realist presumptions have held true – China is rationally pursuing its national security. Its specific policy choices, however, cannot be explained without acknowledging the influence of China's history.

Chapter X: A Better Understanding of China's Actions

If *strategic nationalism* is the best way to understand China's increased assertiveness in the South China Sea, what implications does this hold for the future, especially with regard to the United States' policy on China? What will the South China Sea look like five, ten, or twenty years from now? The lessons learned from *strategic nationalism* offer some insights into this matter.

The primary lesson is that China has behaved according to realist presumptions. Throughout the South China Sea crisis, China has attempted to increase its national security whenever it has had the capability to do so. Although much of the reporting from mainstream western media on the SCS has been written with an air of surprise at China's actions, the reality is that we all should have seen this coming. In what world would China, a country that relies upon maritime trade and has historically been brutalized by invaders from the sea, not attempt to seize on an imminently strategic sea lane directly off its coast? On the surface, China has acted just like any other rising power would.

Obviously, however, my argument goes deeper than toeing a simple realist line. Pure realism only goes so far in explaining China's actions. When it comes to explaining the finer points of a country's foreign policy – which actions they specifically pursue, the precise rhetoric they use – the influence of that country's norms cannot be denied. I have taken care throughout my work to not portray China's leadership as somehow being "driven" by historical nationalism; rather, they have *learned* from it and used it to their advantage

In the case of China, and I suspect for many countries, realism's utility in predicting actions diminishes as one's focus becomes narrower. This is not to say realism as an IR school is wrong, but rather that there is simply no way one could accurately predict a country's foreign

policy without understanding the national influences to which policymakers have been exposed. Standard realism can explain *why* China would feel emboldened to seize the South China Sea. However, my framework, which takes into account the specific information that Chinese decision makers have been exposed to, can help explain *how* China has chosen to do it. China's policymakers have been exposed to Chinese history their entire lives. This history shows China has successfully controlled the South China Sea through an informal system of maritime supremacy. Having seen the benefits that this system had for China, why would they not pursue such a system today?

As my argument illustrates, they have. China's strategy in the South China Sea almost perfectly mirrors the tribute system. China controls the oceans, acts as the regional hegemon, and engages in an extensive network of trade with its neighbors. Meanwhile, the immensely strong Chinese military remains on the sidelines, waiting in case somebody should step too far out of line and disrupt the system.

The foremost difference between the tribute system and the modern system is simple: the presence of the West. The tribute system existed because China was at the center, 中国 (*zhongguo*), literally "The Middle Kingdom." But unprepared for the arrival of European powers, as well as Japan, China soon lost its place, and fell into a "Century of Humiliation" that haunts national identity to this day.⁴⁷¹

With this in mind, I have struggled to believe that China would so passively accept Western influence today as it did in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The last time China allowed Western powers to end its Asian pre-eminence, the whole country suffered. I already have demonstrated that China learned from history in its plan to re-establish control over the South

⁴⁷¹ Kaufman, 3.

China Sea. Likewise, I now predict that it will learn from history and take a far less welcoming approach to Western influence in East Asia. Evidence shows it has already adopted such an approach. China today routinely challenges U.S. “freedom of navigation” operations,⁴⁷² and its Navy possesses some of the world's best anti-surface warfare capabilities, clearly designed to deter the U.S. Navy.⁴⁷³

So what happens next? First, save some intervention, China's assertiveness in the South China Sea will not end until it has established effective control. This does not mean China will totally conquer and seal off the sea — such a move would most likely lead to war. Rather, China will enforce a system in which it can do what it wants. And much like the tribute system, once it has achieved control, it will engage with its neighbors even further, establishing diplomatic links and furthering trade relations. This does not represent a less assertive policy for China. Instead, when it has achieved its goal of control, it will likely negotiate with its neighbors, having attained a far, far more advantageous bargaining position.

As I write this, the first signs of this Chinese engagement-upon-victory strategy are emerging. Brunei, long considered the “silent claimant” to the South China Sea, has effectively stopped pushing its claim at the same time that China has invested \$6 billion USD into the country's oil infrastructure, with more Chinese investment coming.⁴⁷⁴ In the tribute system, when a country adheres to China's rules, it is welcomed into its trade system. Is Brunei then the first modern vassal state for China?

⁴⁷² Idrees, Ali. “U.S. Destroyer Challenges China's Claims in South China Sea.” Reuters. August 10, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-southchinasea-exclusive/u-s-destroyer-challenges-chinas-claims-in-south-china-sea-idUSKBN1AQ0YK>.

⁴⁷³ Heginbotham, 30.

⁴⁷⁴ Luke Hunt, “Has China Bought Brunei's South China Sea Silence?” *The Diplomat*. February 14, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/has-china-bought-bruneis-south-china-sea-silence/>.

The unknown, however, is reached if, or when, China establishes effective control of the South China Sea. This, in truth, is where my model becomes more of a projection – China has never controlled the oceans beyond the South China Sea, meaning that further expansion would be without precedent. This is not to say it will not happen. China has already made plans for some further expansion, as evidenced by their "Second Island Chain" from the Kurile Islands to Borneo.⁴⁷⁵ However, without a historical precedent to follow, China's behavior becomes far more difficult to predict. We can still assume it will continue to attempt to enhance state security and power, but without a prior model, the exact strategy becomes vastly unpredictable.

What does this mean for the United States? Short of attempting to physically stop Chinese efforts in the South China Sea (an all-but-certain recipe for all-out war), the US will not be able to control the Sea. China will still let the U.S. Navy pass through on its typical patrols, because these patrols do not effectively change the status. American shows of force also become largely meaningless as Chinese capabilities catch up to the United States'.

The United States, however, must decide where it chooses to draw the line. What degree of Chinese influence is acceptable? The US is left with two options: stop China's rise and suffer the consequences of war, or accept the new bipolar reality that is rapidly approaching. Definitively stating which option the U.S. should pursue would require another research project entirely. In the meantime, China will continue to move towards some form of a modern tribute system in the South China Sea, as predicted by the *strategic nationalism* framework. *Strategic nationalism* has thus far explained China's strategy in the South China Sea and I expect it will continue to up until the borders of the sea are reached. What happens beyond the borders of the South China Sea, however, is entirely uncharted.

⁴⁷⁵ Bouchat, 17.

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