

## **Regional Security in the South China Sea: what are its Ramifications for Chinese National Security?**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores how the regional security framework of the South China Sea heavily influences Chinese national security concerns. The history of conflict between states in the South China Sea, coupled with the collective counterbalancing of ASEAN and the presence of the United States, has led to paranoia for the Chinese military and government. China's economic security, a major tenant of national security, is also directly tied to the region. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) has undermined Chinese claims to these contested islands through its creation of exclusive economic zones (EEZs), which pose as a direct legal challenge to Chinese historical claims to the islands. China's national security concerns are strongly influenced by the South China Sea's regional security framework, which includes China's ongoing aggression, the lack of cohesion of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and attempts by the United States to balance power. If China hopes to strengthen its economic and national security, it must acquire new sources of energy to sustain its industrial economy, which raises the question of what new developments will occur in the South China Sea if the nation decides to pursue its desires.

**Keywords:** South China Sea, Spratley Islands, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), regional security, nationalism.

## Introduction

The contemporary system of international politics is characterized by an array of unitary states loosely bound together through a plethora of bilateral, multilateral, and global structures. These linkages are established along militaristic, economic, and (occasionally) cultural lines with the purpose of symbiotically linking states together to mutually reinforce their security and sovereignty. A key area of alliance development is national security. National security, as depicted by renowned political theorist Barry Buzan *People, States & Fear* (2008), is orientated around the protection of the three most fundamental components of the state: the idea, the physical base and the institutional expression of the state (71). Any state with the goal to become – or maintain its status as – a “strong state” must ensure that both internal and external threats to the idea, physical base, and institutional expression of it as a state are at the very least controlled, if not prevented. The concept of national security exists as the subcomponent of a much greater theoretical framework within the discipline of international relations: the levels of analysis approach to security studies, postulated by Kenneth Waltz (1959).<sup>1</sup> The levels of analysis framework is utilized to study security at multiple levels, but maintains a focus on national security. The original levels of analysis framework consisted of three analytical levels: the individual, societal/state, and international tiers.

The theory has since been developed from its original conception to include an additional level of analysis, titled the “regional level” (Buzan 2012; Soltani, Naji & Amiri 2014).<sup>2</sup> The term “region”, as a security concept, is defined by Buzan as “... a distinct and significant subsystem of

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Waltz’s *Man, the State, and War: a Theoretical Analysis* (1959) created the “levels of analysis” approach to studying International Relations. Waltz postulated three images: images, states and the international system. These images were used to analyze patterns of war and conflict in and between human societies.

<sup>2</sup> In the original edition of Buzan’s *People, States & Fear* (1983), the Copenhagen School of International Relations was at its beginnings and was therefore theoretically underdeveloped. In later editions of *People, States & Fear* (see Buzan 2008, Lynne Reinner edition), a greater discussion of regional security is provided and the term itself is expanded upon.

security relations [that] exists among a set of states whose fate is that they have been locked into geographical proximity with each other” (Buzan 2008, 158). Through the adoption of the regional level of analysis, a security studies scholar can study how the specific geography of an area, including its natural resources, patterns of amity and enmity, and history, affect each states’ national security policy. Adopting the regional security level of analysis leads to the concept of the *regional security complex*: “... [a] set of [states] whose major processes of securitization, desecuritization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another” (Buzan 2012, 1). The regional security complex is a distinct phenomenon that affects many smaller states, such as those in East and Southeast Asia. These smaller states are not physically large enough, nor militarily or economically strong enough, to have a tangible impact on the international level. It is therefore difficult to study such states from at international level; instead, we must use the regional level of analysis to investigate these states’ security issues.

In addition to the smaller states within a region, there is also the possibility that larger and more powerful states may be a part of a regional security complex, such as China in Southeast Asia. Continuing with this vein, this paper will investigate the regional security complex of Southeast Asia, focusing on the South China Sea. Various attempts at power balancing have occurred in the South China Sea, primarily orchestrated by the smaller states of Southeast Asia in an effort to challenge the dominance of China, the regional hegemon. As of the past few decades, the United States (despite being geographically external to the region) has also occupied a position in the region, both for the purpose of checking China’s power and ensuring that international law is upheld (Buszynski 2012; Buzan 2012).<sup>3</sup> Through the investigation of the

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<sup>3</sup> “The Asian “supercomplex” has taken shape: this is evident within the crossmembership model to Asian intergovernmental organizations and through the appearance of political counterweights to China ... The United

regional security complex in the South China Sea, coupled with its ramifications for Chinese national security, this paper will argue that the most prominent threats to Chinese national security lie in the country's immediate regional vicinity. Chinese national security interests are inextricably linked to the contested islands of the South China Sea; these islands – the Parcel, Spratley, Zhongsha, and Pratas archipelagos – are a matter of economic security and national pride for China, making them extremely valuable to the Chinese state.

### **Regional Security in the South China Sea**

The South China Sea has an area of approximately 3.5 million square kilometers and is semi-enclosed by Brunei, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. It contains four major archipelagos: the Parcel, Spratley, Zhongsha and Pratas islands. There exists an abundance of natural resources in the region, including natural gas deposits, underwater oil reserves, and large fisheries (Petallides 2016). The following is but a single example of the immensity of natural resources found in the South China Sea: a series of exploration missions in the early 1990s, conducted by the Chinese and Vietnamese governments, found the equivalent to roughly 105 billion barrels of oil in offshore seabed deposits near the Spratly Islands. The Spratlys are only one of the four major archipelagos in the region, and all four archipelagos are expected to contain a large amount of oil in their surrounding seabeds (Guoxing 1998; Raine 2012). Additionally, the South China Sea forms an integral maritime trade route for its littoral (sea-bordering) states, granting East Asian and Southeast Asian states the ability to engage in cross oceanic trade with partners in Asia, Africa, and the rest of the world. This makes it an

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States' engagements in East and South Asia are also part of this supercomplex. The hardening of Beijing since 2008 has helped maintain U.S. influence in Asia, despite Washington's decline on the international stage" (Buzan, Barry. "Asia: A Geopolitical Reconfiguration." *Politique Etrangère* 77, no. 2 (2012): 1).

extremely important body of water in terms of the significance it has for international trade and commerce (Gao & Jia 2017).

Many of the islands and trade routes are located within the national boundaries of littoral states, giving these countries sovereignty over them. Sovereign jurisdiction was initially predicated on “acquisition by discovery”, meaning that whatever state found and laid claim to the island and its waters first was the rightful holder of its title (Guoxing 1998, 103). However, in 1982, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) was created. The purpose of UNCLOS is to provide a concrete framework for determining island/waterway claims and questions of ownership; it was an answer to the overly simplistic “acquisition by discovery” argument that was both outdated and unprovable (Lee 2017). UNCLOS seeks to remedy conflicting claims between states (UNCLOS 1982). UNCLOS determined that all littoral states have *exclusive economic zones* (EEZ), meaning that every littoral state has an undisputed and privileged access to the body of water immediately adjacent to its respective coastline for up to 200 nautical miles – this includes the continental shelf. EEZs gives states the right to unrestricted exploration within their EEZ, as well as the unilateral control of all natural resources within the 200 nautical mile radius (Buszynski 2012; Rosenberg & Chung 2008; Scott 2012).

EEZs differ from territorial waters and contiguous zones. In a state’s territorial sea (12 nautical miles from the coast), the state has complete sovereign rule and can apply maximum enforcement of its national law onto any actor. In contiguous zones, which are up to 24 nautical miles after the territorial sea, states can exercise a limited legal authority. By contrast, EEZs are not under the jurisdiction of the state; they are international waters, but states maintain control over underwater natural resources within their own EEZ (UNCLOS 1982). Any disputes that arise in an EEZ can be brought to The International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLS), an independent judicial body within UNCLOS that operates as a forum for conflicting states to

engage in arbitration (UNCLOS 1982). The ITLS prevents states from attempting to solve matters on a state versus state basis – a practice that oftentimes leads to greater security issues (Scott 2012).

### **Key Actors in the South China Sea Security Complex (China, ASEAN, & the United States)**

The regional security dynamic of the South China Sea is composed of a variety of actors: China, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the United States. The security complex of the South China Sea is labelled as a “high level security complex” by Buzan (2008) because of two reasons: 1) China, a global power, is part of the geography; and 2) the United States maintains a strong military presence in the region via its blue water navy.<sup>4</sup> ASEAN, created in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, is a conglomerate of smaller states in South China Sea that now includes ten countries. ASEAN occupies a power-balancing role in the region, providing a forum for the smaller Southeast Asian states to pursue mutually-benefitting policies in the South China Sea. At the same time, ASEAN acts as a unified body with the aim to counterbalance any aggressive policies of Beijing. For the smaller littoral states of the South China Sea, national security concerns are defined by the regional security complex of the South China Sea, and that alone (Buzan 2012). China, by contrast, has national security issues that stem from the region, but also has national security interests at the global level.

As with ASEAN, the United States plays an active role in balancing China in the South China Sea. The U.S. has specific alliances with the Philippines and Vietnam, but is also allied with ASEAN itself (Buszynski 2012; Buzan 2012). History has shown many different patterns of

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<sup>4</sup>A “high level security complex” contains great powers or states whose physical size may constitute a region in itself like Russia or China. This type of security complex intermeshes the regional and international levels, thus making it a regional security complex within the global context. The extent to which the regional complex may also have global implications depends on the ability of the great power(s) of the region to outwardly project their power beyond the immediate regional geography (Buzan 2008, 16).

amity and enmity in the South China Sea, including internal rivalries within ASEAN; countries such as Vietnam have also been anti-American in the past.<sup>5</sup> Despite these episodes of animosity, the smaller Southeast Asian states have engaged in alliance-building in order to have a more tangible impact on the security complex of the South China Sea. China has been the most consistent aggressor in the region for the last century. Because of this, the smaller littoral states have attempted to counterbalance China, in part by encouraging the involvement of the United States. China has made headway with ASEAN in recent years, especially at the expense of American interests, but the U.S. remains a key player in the region and cannot be removed from any discussion of South China Sea regional security (Valencia 2017).<sup>6</sup> The combination of the United States and ASEAN comprises a major national security concern for China, and this concern is amplified because of its proximity to Chinese territory.

The concept of regional security can be used to study China's national security concerns because China not only has to be aware of ASEAN in the South China Sea, but also has to be wary of the American presence in their geopolitical hemisphere. In particular, China must be vigilant of how their actions in the South China Sea may impact the Sino-American relationship. Therefore, the concept of regional security – in the South China Sea – offers a useful approach for analyzing Chinese national security issues, even though China's national security outlook is

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<sup>5</sup> Consider reading Zhiguo Gao, & Bing Bing Jia's article "The Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea: History, Status, and Implications" (2017) for a history of China's conflictual relations with other Southeast Asian states. Leszek Buszynski's "The South China Sea: Oil, Maritime Claims, and U.S.—China Strategic Rivalry" (2012) article also depicts a relevant account of historic and ongoing disagreements between China and other Southeast Asian countries in the South China Sea, centering on resource claims.

<sup>6</sup> In *People, States and Fear* (2008), Barry Buzan notes the following: "In Southeast Asia for example, the local dynamics have to compete with much more powerful outside pressures on the region than in the case in South Asia" (163). This quote refers to the presence of the United States in Southeast Asia. The smaller states of Southeast Asia consider a hegemonic China to be dangerous for their collective interests, so they encourage some form of American power projection into their midst in order to mitigate China's aggressive territorial claims and pursuits.

both regionally and globally-orientated. The succeeding paragraphs of this paper will depict how Chinese national security interests can be accurately examined through a regional lens.

### **Territorial Disputes in the Spratly and Paracel Archipelagos: Contested Waterways & Ownership Claims to Natural Resource Deposits**

States in the South China Sea have proposed serious problems for UNCLOS. Among these problems are the highly-contested Spratly and Paracel Archipelagos, as noted by David Scott (2012): “Vietnamese and Chinese claims are similar in nature: a continental shelf and a 200-nautical-mile EEZ, as well as historical control claims over two archipelagoes, the Paracel Islands (in Vietnam known as Hoang Sa; in China, Xisha) and the Spratly Islands (in Vietnam Truong Sa; in China, Nansha) in the South China Sea” (1028). China boasts historical claims to both island groups, premised on their nine-dash line. Vietnam, as a counter argument, claims the archipelagos under the UNCLOS EEZ proviso, seeing as the islands fall within 200 nautical miles of their coastline. The Philippines and Malaysia also stake similar claims to the Spratly Islands under UNCLOS.<sup>7</sup>

The Spratly and Paracel Islands are of strategic and economic importance to every littoral state in the South China Sea. The islands are positioned parallel to the sea lanes with the highest traffic in the South China Sea, acting as a gateway to the rest of the world. Furthermore, some of the larger islands are substantive enough to support infrastructure, thus providing land for whatever country claims sovereignty over them. This land can be used to build frontline military outposts, giving the occupying country an upper hand in any potential military conflict. Massive

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<sup>7</sup> The “nine-dash line”, originally published by the Chinese government as the eleven-dash line in 1947 (later redrawn and renamed), is a series of lines in the South China Sea that demarcate waters and islands believed to be under Chinese jurisdiction. The nine-dash line is embedded in “acquisition by discovery”, therefore making it contestable under UNCLOS. China has declared in official state policy that it has a historical right to all that lies within the nine-dash line, spanning downwards from the Paracel islands in a “U shape” towards the coast of Malaysia, then circling back up the coast of the Philippines upwards to Taiwan (Gao & Jia 2017).

oil and natural gas reserves have been found in the geographies of the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos, creating huge incentive for states to claim them as sovereign territory. Many of the islands also boast enormous fishing opportunities (Buszynski 2012; Guoxing 1998; Scott 2012). These islands pose a serious threat to regional security because no group of islands remain uncontested; competition for ownership of the islands (and their surrounding natural resource deposits) has led a constant struggle between littoral states in the South China Sea, creating the regional security complex (Kuok 2017). UNCLOS stipulates that developing states are to be prioritized over developed states in terms of their access to natural resources in contested areas (UNCLOS 1982).<sup>8</sup> This UNCLOS clause is specifically harmful to Chinese interests in contested areas of the South China Sea because it essentially forces China to cede disputed islands to other littoral states who are less developed; China, as the most developed state in the region, is the biggest loser of UNCLOS prescriptions regarding the South China Sea.

In the decade following WWII, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines all scrambled for islands in the South China Sea. In the next decade, Vietnam joined the race. This began the contemporary regional security dilemma in the South China Sea: states built up their respective navies, reinforced their defensive capabilities, and sought to acquire as much territory as they could. This decade preceded UNCLOS, but even since the convention's conception, these states continue to publish nationalist statements depicting their rights to certain islands, waterways, and territories. States have also conducted unsolicited exploration missions into contested areas and even (in the case of China) built infrastructure on contested islands (Buszynski 2012; Raine 2011). The regional security dilemma is perpetuated when one state

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<sup>8</sup> UNCLOS Part XI: Area, Section III: Development of Resources of Area, Article 150: Policies relating to activities in Area – specific UN policy that requires developed states prioritize the needs of less developed states in the region, seceding contested territories to developing states in order to promote economic and human development.

stakes a claim to an island. In doing so, they push neighboring states to act similarly. In the height of competition, states may vie for the same territory, resulting in either diplomatic or militaristic ends. Conflicts have occurred for multiple reasons that can be attributed to nationalism and historic entitlement; the desire for resources; and, for China, the need to reassert their dominance as the regional hegemon in the face of the United States.

### **The Implications of South China Sea Regional Security for Chinese National Security**

The regional security of the South China Sea is chiefly related to maritime security (Rosenberg & Chung 2008). More specifically, the security concerns of littoral states in the South China Sea are almost exclusively related to past and ongoing territorial disputes regarding the regions' contested territories. Territorial disputes are themselves a national security threat, regardless of whether or not the state is directly involved in the dispute: in such a semi-enclosed region as the South China Sea, any threat to regional stability translates into a national security issue. As discussed earlier, the Spratly and Paracel Islands (and to a lesser extent the Zhongsha and Pratas Islands) provide a considerable strategic vantage point because of their location to sea lines of communication (SOL). The islands also boast an abundance of natural resources that can be harnessed by their holders under the UNCLOS EEZ proviso (Guoxing 1998; Raine 2012; Rosenberg & Chung 2008). Each archipelago remains heavily contested by a contingency of actors, ranging from individual states to intergovernmental organizations (i.e. ASEAN). China, as the regional power and global superpower, has attempted to commandeer these islands many times, believing that it has a legal claim to the territories. China also feels as if it has – for the most part – operated within the confines of international law (Guoxing 1998; Scott 2012). These islands and their waterways are the main element of the regional security dilemma in the South China Sea, but they are also a primary national security interest for China.

China's national security concerns in the South China Sea stem from their history of invasion and occupation at the hands of foreign powers. Since the Han Dynasty over 2100 years ago, various external entities have attacked China from its South China Sea seaboard. Attackers included forces such as the British and French colonial fleets, the Japanese, and in earlier eras, rival warring empires. For as long as China has been threatened by actors in the South China Sea, they have also laid claim to the Spratly and Paracel Islands (Rosenberg & Chung 2008). There has been a Chinese presence on these islands since the Han Dynasty, even though fiscal and structural limitations prevented China from establishing permanent settlement on the islands at the time of their discovery. The Spratly and Paracel disputations undermine China's historical claims. As identified by Sarah Raine (2011), one of China's predominant national security objectives in the South China Sea is to use territorial issues as a method for the "...management of domestic nationalism ..." (77). Through an investigation into domestic issues in China, Raine (ibid) found a resurgence in Chinese nationalism, referring to this phenomenon as the rise of "angry young men".<sup>9</sup> The Chinese government, in order to prevent an internal revolution at the hands of its disappointed populace, has acted more aggressively in the South China Sea to appease its population. The Spratly and Paracel Islands are considered to be a part of Chinese heritage and must be protected; failing to do so could potentially result in an internal security crisis for the Chinese government. The connection between the Spratly and Paracel islands and Chinese heritage exemplify how the regional security of the South China Sea is intrinsically related to Chinese national security.

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<sup>9</sup> In Sarah Rain's "Beijing's South China Sea Debate" (2011), she accredits the resurgence of Chinese nationalism to an increasingly dissatisfied Chinese middle class. This trend exemplified by the fact that 92% of Chinese internet respondents on an internet survey in the *Global Times* said disputes in the South China Sea should be resolved militarily. Of this class of people, males in particular feel as if Chinese government is not doing enough on the international scene to put China's interests first. Furthermore, they believe that the Americans are exerting too much power over the Chinese and are embarrassing China; this plays into a long historical pattern of Western domination over China that many Chinese will not accept, especially given China's current position as a global power(81).

Far more tangible than an internal resurgence of Chinese nationalism is China's need for new sources of oil. China's national economic security is vital for the perpetuation of its great power status. China relies on its productive capacity and enormous amount of exportation to feed its economy. The nature of China's economy requires unparalleled amounts of oil for manufacturing and transportation purposes. China has already depleted a staggering amount of its national oil resources and, because of this, has become oil-dependent on the Middle East (Guoxing 1998). The regional security of the South China Sea is important for China's oil concerns on two fronts: 1) China needs to ensure that all incoming oil has a safe passage to its shores and 2) untapped and unclaimed oil deposits are located throughout the South China Sea seabed and are waiting to be drilled. The former front is a mere Band-Aid solution to China's oil problems, but still requires regional stability in the South China Sea. The latter, however, is much more enticing to China: if China were to be legally recognized as the sovereign of the Spratly and Paracel Islands, it could claim the surrounding oil as its own in accordance with UNCLOS EEZs, thus loosening China's dependence on foreign oil and making the country less prone to market fluctuations (UNCLOS 1982). Although progress has been made between China and conflicting states regarding EEZ disputations, China remains unrecognized as the sovereign of the Spratly and Paracel Archipelagos.<sup>10</sup> If China wanted the oil in the South China Sea, it would have to breach international law to extrapolate it. China's national economic security is therefore tied to the regional security of the South China Sea because of oil, both in terms of the safe passage of

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<sup>10</sup> Between the years of 2002-2005, two deals were made between PRC-Philippines and then PRC-Philippines-Vietnam about access to oil near the Spratly and Paracel Islands. The agreements were for each country's state-owned oil companies to operate joint business ventures in oil extraction from the contested deposits. As of 2008, these relationships ended and were not renewed. Since then, the relationships have soured (Scott, David. "Conflict Irresolution in the South China Sea." *Asian Survey* 52, no. 6 (2012): 1032)

foreign oil to Chinese shores, and because of the contested oil in the South China Sea that China believes is rightfully theirs.

Like oil, food security is also in the national security interests of Beijing. China's population is massive and demands unprecedented amounts of food to maintain its livelihood. As of 2014, over 40% of China's farmland has become damaged, some of it so unfertile that any meaningful agricultural production is impossible (Patton 2014). Despite these concerns surrounding food production, the Chinese population continues to grow. To avoid incurring the expenses involved with importing large quantities of food, Beijing has looked for solutions within the immediate vicinity of China. One possible solution, similar to the solution for China's oil shortages, is manifest in the Spratly and Paracel Islands: encompassing these islands are shallow waters with an abundant array of fish. The potential for industrial fishing is great; industrial fishing would help remedy Chinese food security concerns, while also providing jobs for Chinese citizens in the commercial fishing industry (Buszynski 2012; Gao & Jia 2017). Like the situation with oil, China would have to transgress international law and fish outside of their own EEZ. When countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines fish in the contested waterways of the region, Chinese food security, and therefore national security, is jeopardized.

#### ***Overlay in the South China Sea: the American Presence and ASEAN Cooperation***

Patterns of amity and enmity in the South China Sea have inevitably included a Chinese element to them because of China's status as the regional hegemon. In the years directly after World War II, as well as throughout the Cold War, the South China Sea regional security dynamic was greatly unstable. ASEAN in the 1960s and 70s was foremost an economic alliance, but at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> C., it became more militarized and defense-orientated (Buszynski 2012). ASEAN is not free of internal disagreement, but the general consensus of its members is that they

must balance China in the region. As a result, ASEAN can be considered as the catalyst for the internal transformation of the regional security dynamic in the South China Sea (Buzan 2008).<sup>11</sup> Coupled with the internal transformation of regional security by ASEAN is the increased activity of the United States in the South China Sea.

The U.S. presence represents what Barry Buzan (2008) calls an *overlay*: a situation where one or more external powers moves directly into a local security complex, suppressing the indigenous security dynamic (181). The contemporary climate of South China Sea regional security is one of security interdependence between ASEAN and the United States, counterbalancing the Chinese. The U.S. has renewed its interest in the South China Sea and acts as deterrent towards Beijing so as to dissuade the Chinese government from pursuing aggressive military action in the region. The U.S. has military ties to a host of Southeast Asian states (i.e. the Philippines and Vietnam) and has ensured these states that they will protect in conflict. The Americans also have a desire to ensure that all sea lines of communication in the South China Sea remain open, seeing as a large percentage of American imports travel through these waters. The U.S. needs to prevent conflict in the region because the American economy is heavily dependent on the international trade that runs through the South China Sea (Raine 2011).

America's re-emergence in the South China Sea has created a new security dynamic that places greater limitations on China's own policies, therefore implying that regional security has a direct effect on Chinese national security. Although China is a global power and has national security interests beyond the realm of the South China Sea, history shows that China's primary area of concern is in their local vicinity, particularly when it comes to military security

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<sup>11</sup> An *internal transformation* of a region's security complex occurs when there is a dramatic internal power shift or change in hostilities from parties within the given region. (Buzan, Barry. 2008. "Regional Security." In *People, States and Fear*, edited by Peter Kennedy, Ian O'Flynn, Alexandra Segerberg, & Laura Sudulic, 157-188. Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers.)

(Muscolino 2013). Not only is China's military security in the South China Sea under question, but so too is there energy and food security. Therefore, the combination of ASEAN and America in the South China Sea present a cause for worry in Beijing.

### **Attempts at Conflict Mitigation and Future Developments in the South China Sea**

Despite the high level of tension in the South China Sea, recent years have shown that Sino-American and Sino-ASEAN agreements are possible. China's foremost national security interest is premised on economic security, which can only be guaranteed through regional stability. Without stability, the importation of oil and exportation of Chinese-made goods would be severely hampered, resulting in major repercussions for China's economy. Therefore, China is somewhat obliged to coopt with ASEAN and the United States. In 2002, China and the ten ASEAN states signed the *Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea*, expressing commitment from each signatory state to work towards adopting a legally binding code of conduct in the South China Sea, while at the same time promising to refrain from any escalation in current territorial disputes (Raine 2011; Scott 2012). Like the *Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea*, The East Asia Summit, an annual forum since 2005, involves a host of countries from the South China Sea, but also expands outwardly to include countries from Central and South Asia. As of 2011, membership was expanded to 18 countries, including the United States and Russia (Buzan 2012). This forums provides an arena for conflict resolution and mediation, suggesting that the South China Sea is less hostile than in previous eras.

However, some scholars, such as Wei-Chin Lee (2017), maintain that "... the South China Sea disputes [should be] ... considered as a proxy for US-China strategic wrestling for power dominance, alliance realignment, and regional trade and economic rebalancing" (183). For

example, the U.S. has reignited the U.S.-Vietnam Strategic Dialogue, independent of ASEAN, to increase America's presence in the region. China considers this as an attempt to internationalize territorial conflict in the South China Sea by drawing on the U.S. as a counterbalance (Scott 2012). Although China and ASEAN have committed to reducing hostilities, China has steadily increased its naval forces, including the deployment of *Jin Class* submarines in 2004 (Buszynski 2012). Furthermore, China publicly declared in 2009 that they have "... indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters ..." and that any country seeking to contest this reality would be infringing upon Chinese sovereignty; the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia all responded to these claims with their own public statements, exacerbating tensions (Gao & Jia 2017, 106). In 2013, the Philippines initiated Article 287 and Annex VII of UNCLOS against China with regard to their maritime disputes in the South China Sea, resulting in a 2006 ad hoc Arbitral Tribunal that rendered China's nine-dash line as unlawful (Lee 179). It appears as if hostilities are being reduced in some areas while being ignited in others, resulting in little overall change to the regional security dynamic of the South China Sea.

### **Conclusion**

As discussed in the preceding paragraphs, the regional security of the South China Sea is turbulent. Efforts to bolster regional stability have had momentary effectiveness, but ultimately have been rendered futile. China's perpetual aggression, ASEAN's lack of cohesiveness, and America's attempts at balancing power have left the region as fragmented as ever. China's government is under increased internal pressure to pursue aggressive national security policy, while at the same time being kept under constant supervision by the international community. China's national security policy is in constant flux because of these dichotomous pressures, leading to a varied approach to territorial disputes and diplomacy in the South China Sea. The regional security of the South China Sea will always include a Chinese element because of the

country's great power status, thus creating the constant threat of resource wars in the succeeding decades. China's increased hegemony in the Asian Pacific may ultimately force the Americans out of the region, thus leaving a power vacuum in the South China Sea whereby China could oppress ASEAN and further stake its claims to the surrounding islands.

The advent of UNCLOS is a strong attempt at mitigating the possibility of conflict in the South China Sea, but as resources become scarcer while China's economy grows, the demand for access to the region's natural resources may become too strong for the Chinese government to ignore. The UNCLOS legal framework imposes a large degree of "soft power" deterrence on South China Sea states, but lacks the "hard power" to threaten China if the UNCLOS codes are breached. China, as one of the world's most productive countries, is crucial for the world economic system. The Chinese are wary of this and are therefore in a strong position to oppose UNCLOS because they know that the threat of economic sanctions is minimal. In order to sustain its growth, China must acquire additional resources to fuel its industry. The South China Sea region would provide ample resources for China without causing any fiscal burden to the Chinese state; if China were to pursue an alternative method of acquiring oil, it would most likely involve the purchase of oil from overseas, such as from the Middle East. The best option for the Chinese lies in their regional vicinity, implying that China's foremost economic security concerns lie directly at their doorstep.

Chinese economic security is paramount. While China values the region's islands for their natural resources, they also consider the islands to symbolic and nationally significant to China. Because of this, Chinese claims to the islands are not only economic in nature, but also cultural. The combination of state survival (in the form of economic security) and national pride has the potential to create a dangerously incentivized and impulsive Chinese government. The internal

and external forces that the Chinese state faces may prove to be overwhelming, thus compelling the Chinese government to disobey UNCLOS and pursue its claims to the contested islands. The ramifications of this would be manifold and uncertain. However, it is clear that the already unstable dynamic of the South China Sea region would be further destabilized if such a dramatic shift in Chinese governmental policy occurred.

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