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BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE: CHINA'S ASSERTIVENESS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA AND ITS CORRELATED SECURITY POLICY

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ABSTRACT

The objectives of this paper are to explore the changes in China's assertiveness as they are exemplified through its actions and narrative regarding the South China Sea (SCS). China's behaviour, in this context, is indicative of a new set of security policy drivers that will potentially affect regional and global power dynamics. The present analysis is conducted through an historical perspective of the SCS dispute, a definition of key relevant concepts, the conduct of a comparative analysis of changes in the narrative and finally the extrapolation of the associated security policy drivers. The primary component of this paper relates to a demonstration of variation in behaviour — marking degrees of assertiveness — via concrete examples and using elements from a baseline and enhanced narrative, using the PMESII (Political, Military, Economic, Social, Informational, Infrastructure) model. The main conclusion of this paper is that the SCS is a barometer for China's security policy narrative and that assertiveness is crucial for the credibility of its narrative.

INTRODUCTION

The People's Republic of China's (PRC) role in the world has gathered an increasing amount of attention since its creation in 1949, and even more so since the introduction of its economic reforms in 1978. China is undertaking transformation from a manufacturing nation to a consumer nation. It is also becoming an emergent actor in the security sphere with increasingly global reach. For this reason, the world has a stake in China's future. Failures or missteps in China's strategy — economic, social, military — would certainly 'cost' the world as well.

In the security sector specifically, many of the PRC's bordering maritime regions are worth watching carefully because of how they relate to other important stakeholders. The Yellow Sea, the East China Sea and the South China Sea (SCS) each deserve close attention for different reasons. Those reasons are not about current open conflict but the potential for it, and additionally, they demonstrate how important stakeholders relate to each other through high-level and deliberate narratives. Experts in Chinese foreign relations have expressed that there is no more important reason for the persistent "international uncertainty about China's approach to world affairs in the twenty-first century than the apparent disconnect between China's national development policy and China's national security policy."[1] This disconnect makes the present analysis particularly pertinent to understanding its security discourse.

Many have hypothesized reasons why the SCS could be of interest to China; hydrocarbons, securing sea lines of communications, fishing activities, and territorial

[1] Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy since the Cold War* (Fourth ed. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 101.

integrity and sovereignty[2]. Because of those reasons, and the underlying — sometimes complex — power dynamics that characterizes the region, other experts like Bill Hayton suggest that "in our era, what happens in the South China Sea will define the future."[3] Others argue that the actual reasons for China's interest in the SCS are not particularly beneficial to this discussion. However, China's behaviour — and what means it employs — to achieve its goals is most pertinent to this analysis. The shifts and variations in China's behaviour in this particular region will constitute the core of the present discussion. To characterize the nature of the behaviour, the word 'assertiveness' has been utilized frequently in recent publications. The meaning of the concept is key as "Chinese assertiveness represents a major and arguably long-term strategic shift in China's policy regarding the South China Sea, featured by the emergence of an increasingly proactive and purposeful approach to solidify Chinese claims."[4] Therefore, when it comes to 'assertiveness', it is important to study what it means and whether the path is irreversible. It is indeed worth looking at the concept through practical examples to better understand the Chinese narrative.

This paper will explore the following thesis: the change in China's assertiveness, as exemplified through its actions in the SCS, is indicative of a new set of security policy drivers that will potentially affect regional and global dynamics of power. China's assertiveness is not just a 'buzzword': it is a relatively new way for the PRC to behave in the international sphere in order to take what it considers is its rightful place. China's aim

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[2] Donovan Chau and Thomas M. Kane, *China and International Security: History, Strategy, and 21st-Century Policy*, (Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2014), 120.
[3] Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (London; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), xvii.
[4] Leszek Buszynski and Christopher B. Roberts, *The South China Sea Maritime Dispute – Political, Legal and Regional Perspectives*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 61.

does not appear to challenge the international order completely, as China still has quite a bit to gain from interdependencies. The SCS is figuratively a way for China to 'test the waters' in terms of international reactions to its engagements and also to send a clear message to regional stakeholders. The starting point has been for China to use a historical precedent set by the 'nine-dash line' to justify the legitimacy of its claims in the region. Because of this, China's behaviour is challenging the international order in a significant way and part of the argument of this paper will be that a new security narrative has arisen with the current Chinese leader Xi Jinping. This paper will show that a significant tipping point has been reached for China's security policy in its assertive nature. There seems to be no going back to the 'peaceful rise and development' type of rhetoric, or at least, not in the SCS. Because China is assertive in the SCS, and because the SCS dispute is indicative of all significant aspect of China's security policy, its behaviour in the SCS is suggestive of its future conduct in other spheres and regions.

Methodologically, this paper intends to keep a focused scope and arguments based on *variations* in state behaviour. Therefore, it is not a comprehensive analysis of power dynamics, especially relative to the United States, and does not discuss China's potential rise to superpower status. Those two connected topics are excluded, although they are both contemporary and relevant, in order to keep the focus on the SCS and what can be extrapolated from it in terms of security policy within the construct of foreign policy.

The structure of this paper offers aspects of an historical perspective, defines key relevant concepts, builds a comparative analysis of changes in the narrative and finally extrapolates on the derived security policy. The thread of the arguments follows in the

first chapter China's involvement in the SCS, then in the second chapter China's expanded assertiveness and then in the final chapter the drivers of security policy.

CHAPTER 1: DEFINING THE CONTEXT OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

In order to use the context of the SCS as a case in point for an analysis of China and its state behaviour in the international order, this chapter will review the regional history, offer observations about the contemporary situation in the SCS, and will summarize the key findings of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling. This chapter will therefore develop the context of the region and establish its contextual significance for Asia and the world.

Section 1: Focused historical background

To analyze a region, especially one as politically sensitive as the SCS, this section will develop an understanding of the relevant regional history. The importance of a focused historical review is especially relevant to identify contentious aspects of the SCS related to historical Chinese territorial claims.

The Concept of Borders

Concepts that are seemingly well-defined in contemporary terms can have diametrically opposed meanings when viewed from different historical and cultural perspectives. Concepts of nation and borders are some of those terms. Bill Hayton, a prominent writer on Southeast Asia, highlights the fact that "by the beginning of the nineteenth century, Europeans and Southeast Asians had radically different ideas about what constituted a 'country'. The traditional Southeast Asian political unit was defined by its centre: by the personal prestige of its ruler."[5] Therefore, that traditional view, translated in today's terms, would consider the centrality of nation's capitals and the

[5] Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (London; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 46.

prestige related with the ruling personality or party. This conceptual perception is still present in today's Southeast Asian political culture.

Also, the words 'border' or 'frontier' in Chinese language carry unique meanings. As Sebastien Colin explains in his book on China's frontiers, the notion of 'border' is defined by many words in Mandarin: among them *bianjie, bianjing* and *bianjiang*, as used in historical and geographical records. Those three words refer to two different categories of concepts; the line and the zone. The first two terms generally refer to the notion of limit of sovereignty while the third mostly refer to the notion of 'border region'. Over the ages, the meaning of those terms has also changed but it is interesting to note that the term *bianjiang* has been interpreted as "a territory more or less defined", which could be in the process of being acquired by the leading political entities in the region.[6] Notably, the relationship that Chinese people have toward the concept of border varies according to the level of integration of the territory to the central power. This perception is therefore important in the further analysis of discrete regions like the SCS, which could be considered a 'border region'.

Historically, boundaries in Southeast Asia have been fluid and maritime sovereignty vague. This ambiguity "allowed relations between rulers to evolve and frontiers to shift: sometimes peacefully, though more often violently."[7] By contrast, the legacy of the European system abhors gaps between sovereign territories and strives to delineate borders to all territory. The race to minimize ambiguity between borders has driven Southeast Asian states to assert their sovereignty.

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[6] Sébastien Colin, *La Chine Et Ses Frontières* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011), 44.
[7] Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (London; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 47.

The expansion and contraction of the Chinese Empire has led to the conceptual development of internal (*nei*) and external (*wai*) borders. The former represents the limit of intercultural contacts, and could be considered as the real border of the Empire. The latter only existed in periods of expansion and represents large areas, well beyond actual borders. Territorial size not only depends on the power of the military but also on the capacity of the state to maintain unification and stability within that border.[8] As a result, historical Chinese thinking was marked by this flexible perception of borders.

In the early 1600s, partly due to the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius and English lawyer John Selden, Western rulers reached consensus about extending definite boundaries into the sea. With the expansion of empires, this consensus travelled eastward and clashes of understanding of maritime boundaries resulted. Hayton concludes that "the transition from fluid frontier to fixed frontline laid the foundations for the current conflicts in the [SCS]."[9] The current Westphalian system insists on defined borders. As a result, border flexibility on land and sea has been supplanted by the rigid concept of a defined border, where conflict is more prone to occur.

A Focused Timeline

This focused history of China's SCS claim starts with the events preceding the most notable element of the dispute; the 'nine-dash line'. Exploration and fishing

[8] Sébastien Colin, *La Chine Et Ses Frontières* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011), 49.
[9] Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (London; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 47.

activities in the SCS dates back centuries but are not directly relevant for the purpose of this paper[10]. In January 1935, a Chinese government's *Review Committee on Land and Water Maps* drafted a list of Chinese names for 132 islands and islets in the SCS believed to belong to China. The list was not a collection of traditional Chinese names for the features but transliterations and translations[11] of the Western names printed on navigation charts[12]. According to Bill Hayton, British maps were often translated into Chinese, including many errors. The James Shoal is one such nomenclature error that resulted when the committee formed to produce this list named it *Zengmu Tan* (the transliteration of James) and the Chinese word for a beach or sandbank that sticks out of the water. However, in English nautical terminology a shoal is an underwater feature and James Shoal is 22 meters below the surface[13]. But because the committee was unfamiliar with the area, they declared it to be a land feature[14]. James Shoal is today considered to be China's southernmost point of territory in the SCS, "thus it would seem that China's

[10] To explore the wider historical context, Bill Hayton offers a well documented account of the history of the South China Sea in the second chapter of his book. See Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (London; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 29.

[11] "In the Spratlys Islands, for example, North Danger became Běi xiǎn (the Chinese for 'north danger'), and Spratlys Island became Si-ba-la-tuo (the Chinese transliteration of the English name) and in the Paracels, Antelope Reef became Líng yang (the Chinese word for antelope). Another island in the Paracels (the westernmost outcrop of the Amphitrite group), was called 'West Sand' in English and it seems likely that this name was given to the entire Paracels which became Xisha ('west sand' in Chinese). The Macclesfield Bank, in the centre of the sea, was named Nansha ('southern sand') and the Spratlys named Tuansha ('chaotic sand'). It's significant, of course, that at this juncture the Macclesfield Bank was regarded as 'southern'" in Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (London; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 55.

[12] Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (London; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 55.

[13] Ibid.

[14] This paper will later discuss the key difference — according to the law of the sea — in legal status of over and under water features.

claim in the South China Sea is, to some extent, based on a translation error."[15] This extensive list led to the creation, a year later, of a controversial legacy.

Discussion of the 'Nine-Dash Line'

The year 1936 marks the origin of the 'nine-dash line' concept, although it was initially a continuous line. Bai Meichu, one of China's most eminent geographers and an ardent nationalist, created a legacy that is still very much central today. In his *New China Construction Atlas*, he included for the first time the U-shaped line snaking around the SCS. This line was then copied by others: "between 1936 and 1945 versions of the line were published on 26 other maps. Some stretched down to the James Shoal, though most only included the Spratlys."[16]

In 1947, the Kuomintang (KMT) government — in an effort to recover islands from defeated Japan — "compiled a *Map of the Location of the South China Sea* for internal use."[17] On the map, a "U-shaped line consisting of 11 dashes was drawn to replace the previous continuous line."[18] To continue on defining this concept, in 1953, after Mao's decision to hand-over the Gulf of Tonkin to Vietnam, two dashes were dropped from that same 'U-shaped line'.[19] Therefore, the very same concept of definition of sovereignty through the use of a partial line in the sea was represented by continuous, nine, and 11-dashes lines. Beside the change in the number of dashes, it is important to note that in 2009, for the very first time in official diplomatic correspondence, the PRC

[15] Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (London; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 55.
[16] Ibid., 56.
[17] Leszek Buszynski and Christopher B. Roberts, *The South China Sea Maritime Dispute – Political, Legal and Regional Perspectives*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 70.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Leszek Buszynski and Christopher B. Roberts, *The South China Sea Maritime Dispute – Political, Legal and Regional Perspectives*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 70.

included the 'nine-dash line' in a diplomatic note to the United Nations Secretary General. This diplomatic note was sent in response to a submission by Vietnam to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. To enhance the PRC's narrative, a tenth dash was added in 2014 to ensure Taiwan, to which the Nationalists retreated in 1949, remains Chinese territory.[20]

The Post-Second World War Period and the Creation of the PRC

Many events related to Chinese territory followed the end of the Second World War and the later conclusion of the civil war in China. In 1946, the Philippines were granted independence and China claimed the Spratly Islands as part of Guandong Province.[21] In 1947, the Chinese parliament approved a motion to recover the Paracels from France. Once again, the "Geography Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs drafted a list of new names for all the islands in South China Sea."[22] Redefining borders on maps was easier than creating open conflict. This list was formally published in 1948 and the islands were all formally placed under the administration of the Hainan Special District. Along with the list, a map included the line originally drawn on Bai Meichu's map a decade earlier. In this case,

> "[no] official explanation of the meaning of the line was provided although one of its cartographers, Wang Xiguang, is reported to have said that the dashes simply indicated the median line between China's territory – in other words, each claimed island – and that of its neighbors."[23]

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[20] Harry Kazianis, "China's 10 Red Lines in the South China Sea," *The Diplomat* (1 July, 2014): 1, http://thediplomat.com/2014/07/chinas-10-red-lines-in-the-south-china-sea/
[21] Christopher L. Daniels, *South China Sea: Energy and Security Conflicts* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2013), 83.
[22] Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (London; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 58.
[23] Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (London; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 58.

That is an important statement, once again highlighting the vague nature of China's claim in the SCS. Again, the post Second World War and the birth of the PRC was a very sensitive moment for topics such as sovereignty and associated border discussion. Part of the mandate of the PRC, as promulgated in October 1949, was to reclaim its land sovereignty.[24] Newly in power, China's communist's authorities also began defining its maritime influence. In 1950, they established "maritime security zones" to interdict foreign vessels and ensure its fishing conservation area, in the Yellow Sea and the East China Sea using an 80 nm measure.[25] In September 1958, through a Declaration, Chinese authorities established a territorial sea using the 12 nautical miles standard for "Taiwan, Penghu, Dongsha (Pratas), Xisha (Paracel), Zhongsha (Macclesfield), Nansha (Spratlys) and other islands belonging to China"[26]. This could certainly be perceived as an antagonistic stance at the time, even a preamble to a more mature assertiveness developed later. Notably, the use of the words 'other islands' in the Declaration fomented additional ambiguity in a statement that would otherwise be regarded as precise and definitive from a Chinese standpoint.

Ambiguity on the Meaning of the 'Nine-Dash Line'

As previously noted, the concept of the 'nine-dash line' is veiled in ambiguity, though is the basis of China's large territorial claim in a highly-contested region. Some authors have said that "ironically, despite China's growing assertiveness, its claims in the South China Sea are ambiguous."[27] They postulate that without the 'nine-dash line'

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[24] Sébastien Colin, *La Chine Et Ses Frontières* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011), 62.
[25] Ibid., 79.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Leszek Buszynski and Christopher B. Roberts, *The South China Sea Maritime Dispute – Political, Legal and Regional Perspectives*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 67.

argument as it stands now, China has no claim. But, since China staunchly defends its interests in the SCS, the predicament remains. In order to deconstruct the ambiguity of the concept, we can break down the uncertainty in two categories: unreliability and contradiction.

First, the historical basis of the 'nine-dash line' concept is based on accounts that are deemed unreliable. "As Bill Hayton has demonstrated in his well documented research, much of the literature relies on historical accounts that 'use unreliable bases from which to write reliable histories.'"[28] China has used no basis other than the alleged historical rational formalised by the arbitrarily-drawn 1936 line. Recent researches by experts in the field also confirmed the huge gaps in reliable sources.

Second, there are numerous contradictions in the Chinese narrative as it relates to the legal use and definition of the concept. As many scholars note, "since 1949, China has never treated the areas [of the SCS] as internal waters, given its declaration of maintaining freedom of navigations for foreign vessels in the area."[29] Internal water status would have completely changed the dynamic of the region, which is not a position that China wanted to declare or enforce. Additionally, China does not treat the region as territorial waters either — certainly not as a whole — since it "would have been legally redundant or incompatible for China to publish the baselines for the Paracels in 1996"[30]. Rather, the baselines are used at the territory's edge to establish territorial waters and Economic Exclusion Zones (EEZ). These contradictions certainly create ambiguity.

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[28] Alexander L. Vuving, "South China Sea: Who Occupies what in the Spratlys?" *The Diplomat* (6 May, 2016): 17 February 2017, 7.
[29] Leszek Buszynski and Christopher B. Roberts, *The South China Sea Maritime Dispute – Political, Legal and Regional Perspectives*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 71.
[30] Ibid.

Even when officials attempt to clarify the issue of definitions, they further complicate the issue. In February 2012, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said that China does not claim the "entire SCS", but only the islands and adjacent waters[31]. This statement compliments the 'nine-dash line' concept, though the claims remain ambiguous. This paradox is further explored in Chapter 2.

Increased Space of the Maritime Domain

Still part of context definition, it is relevant to note that shortly after its creation in 1949, China realized that the most acute border issues were in the maritime domain. China's history with its borders — land and maritime — led to today's state of affairs. The main argument made here is that the PRC's current perception of its border is not a novel affair but an evolution. Indeed, "China considers today the sea like the main space where to manifest its power through an expansionist maritime strategy."[32] To truly manifest its maritime intentions, and to balance its national strategy, China has increased its diplomatic efforts in the 21st century. In November 2002, China signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The following year, Beijing signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) also with ASEAN.[33] In fact, since November 2002 and the Phnom Penh Declaration, China started to combine seduction (soft power) with coercion (hard

[31] Robert G. Sutter, *Foreign Relations of the PRC: The Legacies and Constraints of China's International Politics since 1949* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 240.
[32] Translated from Sébastien Colin, *La Chine Et Ses Frontières* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011), 75.
[33] Marc Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy: An Introduction* (Third, revised and updated ed. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 110.

power) to drive its strategy against the other claimants in the SCS[34]. This evolution of China's maritime ambitions brings us to the contemporary situation.

Section 2: Description of the contemporary situation

After describing some of the pertinent history related to the SCS, it is now important to describe interests in the SCS and contemporary events in the region. This section will cover the environment of the SCS, characterize important international legal agreements and treaties and mechanisms like the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) and finally discuss the contemporary strategic thinking about the SCS.

South China Sea's Stakeholders

The stakeholders in the SCS are represented by six nations with a territorial claim for the totality or part of it, including: China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei. The 'nine-dash line' also technically impacts Indonesia's EEZ but Indonesia is not currently considered a claimant in the SCS dispute. Many others could be considered stakeholders, but the United States is the non-claimant with the biggest strategic stake in the SCS. Today, China's claim is represented by the 'nine-dash line', but even that is still somewhat nebulous, as demonstrated earlier.

The SCS is the theatre of many territorial disputes but China is its most 'reactive' active claimant. It is reactive because in terms of official activities, China seems to react,

[34] "À partir du 4 novembre 2002, date de la déclaration de Phnom Penh, la Chine commence à allier moyens de séduction et moyens de coercition pour conduire sa stratégie à l'encontre des autres prétendants en mer de Chine du Sud." Translated from Daniel Schaeffer in Hugues Tertrais, "La Chine Et La Mer: Sécurité Et Coopération Régionale En Asie Orientale Et Du Sud-Est." (l'Harmattan, Paris, 2011), 192.

but in terms of actual actions in the SCS, China is extremely active, and the most prone to cause open conflict. The focus of this paper is China as it is the one nation claiming all of the SCS — since Taiwan possesses the same overlapping territorial claim (but with way less assertive expression). The many 'maritime disputes' relate to sovereignty and maritime entitlements[35], two different but also subordinate concepts.

Regional Importance

Acknowledging the number and nature of the stakeholders around the SCS, there are other reasons making this region worth discussing in the contemporary context. As summarized by Erickson:

> "the 36 nations comprising the Asia-Pacific region are home to more than 50% of the world's population. several of the world's largest militaries, and five nations allied with the U.S. through mutual defense treaties. Two of the three largest economies are in the Asia-Pacific. It includes the most populous nation in the world, the largest democracy, and the largest Muslim-majority nation. The region is also a heavily militarized region, with seven of the world's ten largest standing militaries and five of the world's declared nuclear nation."[36]

More specifically in terms of economic importance, the region including the SCS is critical to the world's economy. Hundreds of vessels navigate the SCS, from the smallest fishing boats to the largest crude carriers. Through the Straits of Malacca travels about half of the world's maritime trade[37], "along with half the world's liquefied natural gas and one-third of its crude oil. If the ships stopped moving, it wouldn't be long before

[35] E.g. 12 nm territorial waters and 200 nm EEZ

[36] Andrew S. Erickson and Joel Wuthnow, "Why Islands Still Matter in Asia," Princeton - Harvard, China and the World Program, Accessed 17 February 2017, 5/9, https://cwp.princeton.edu/news/why-islands-still-matter-asia-cwp-alumni-erickson-wuthnow.

[37] To also highlight the volume of maritime traffic, note that the region includes "nine of the ten largest ports." (Erickson, p.5/9)

the lights in some parts of the world started going out."[38] Access and control of the entry points and the sea itself is undoubtedly of vital importance to the above-mentioned stakeholders. For that reason, this paper makes the argument that the SCS is important for the output it creates but is fundamentally important because of the activities that it supports. If there was no 'sleeping dragon' around the SCS, it would only be a busy seaway. But because one of its key stakeholders is China and its actions in the SCS are somewhat contentious, the region now has an increased strategic appeal.

The United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea

Because the area under discussion is a body of water, one aspect of the regional strategic importance must relate to what drives interactions between the stakeholders, in the legal sense. The UNCLOS is what is conventionally referred to as the 'constitution for the oceans'. This Convention is the product of a series of United Nations conferences that led to the UNCLOS in 1982, occurring in the context of "maritimization of exchanges."[39] After 1982, it took an additional twelve years for the Convention to gain the sixty signatures necessary for it to become effective.[40] The Convention was adopted in order to "settle all issues relating to the law of the sea," and has been ratified by 168 parties.[41] It addresses a wide range of matters and includes a system for the peaceful settlement of maritime disputes. The Convention, however, does not address the sovereignty of States over land territory. The key point for context is that it is the main

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[38] Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (London; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), xvi.
[39] Sébastien Colin, *La Chine Et Ses Frontières* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011), 76.
[40] Christopher L. Daniels, *South China Sea: Energy and Security Conflicts* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2013), 3.
[41] Permanent Court of Arbitration, *Award; the South China Sea Arbitration - (the Republic of the Philippines v. the People's Republic of China)*, The Hague: 12 July 2016, 1, https://pca-cpa.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/175/2016/07/PH-CN-20160712-Award.pdf

referential document for activities in the maritime domain. China is a signatory to this Convention[42].

The Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf

A final element relevant to this analysis is the CLCS created under the authority of the United Nations, subordinate to UNCLOS. The purpose of the Commission was to facilitate the implementation of a portion of UNCLOS "in respect of the establishment of the outer limits of the continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles (nm) from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured."[43] Basically, states that possess continental shelves beyond 200 nm needed to make a submission to the Commission and attempt to scientifically prove their claim[44]. This then gives sovereign rights to explore and exploit all the resources of the sea-bed, the subsoil and of the water column within the defined zone[45].

Crucial to the contemporary context is that signatories had 10 years after the entry into force of UNCLOS for that state to submit their scientifically — and technically — substantiated claims. This was later revised to state that "May 13, 2009 was the deadline for all States Party who joined the LOS Convention prior to May 13, 1999."[46] Because of

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[42] The PRC ratified UNCLOS on 7 June 1996. (United Nations. "Table of claims to maritime jurisdiction.", p. 4)

[43] United Nations, "Maritime Space: Maritime Zones and Maritime Delimitation," Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea, Office of Legal Affairs, Accessed on 3 March 2017, http://www.un.org/Depts/los/LEGISLATIONANDTREATIES/introduction.htm

[44] Exact wording within the Convention: "Under article 4 of annex II to the Convention, a coastal State intending to establish the outer limits to its continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles is obligated to submit particulars of such limits to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf along with supporting scientific and technical data as soon as possible but in any case within 10 years of the entry into force of the Convention for that State." In United Nations, "Maritime Space: Maritime Zones and Maritime Delimitation," Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea, Office of Legal Affairs, Accessed on 3 March 2017, http://www.un.org/Depts/los/LEGISLATIONANDTREATIES/introduction.htm

[45] United Nations, "Maritime Space: Maritime Zones and Maritime Delimitation," Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea, Office of Legal Affairs, Accessed on 3 March 2017, http://www.un.org/Depts/los/LEGISLATIONANDTREATIES/introduction.htm

[46] Ibid.

this deadline, recent events are unquestionably linked to claimants positioning themselves in the SCS dispute. China, who always stood by its 'nine-dash line' concept, but was never openly challenged under the CLCS had to express itself officially in 2009. Directly linked to this submission process, when Vietnam made its submission, China produced its note verbale with the first ever external publication of its 'nine-dash line'.

As it relates to the CLCS, China therefore seems to be more reactive as it clearly does not want to submit its detailed submission on its own and publicly have to clarify its SCS claims. This aspect is certainly an element that explains why the SCS conflict is getting more attention.

This section established the importance of the region and why the SCS is worth considering from a strategic perspective. The importance of UNCLOS is clear and has a significant impact on the legal framework in which the SCS conflict is positioned. Therefore, the next section discusses the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling, putting the PRC in a difficult legal position.

Section 3: The 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling

In July 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, constituted under Annex VII to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, issued its 501-pages ruling on the matter of the SCS Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines v. The People's Republic of China). This ruling is pivotal in this analysis as it represents the only contemporary legal challenge to China's status in the SCS. The following section will consider the legal aspects of the recent judgments from the International legal body and extrapolate its meaning for China's legal perspective and claims in the region.

To summarize the ruling, the judgement overwhelmingly favors the Philippines for the matters under jurisdiction of the Tribunal. The Tribunal noted that no evidence was found that China had historically exercised exclusive control over the waters or their resources. It concluded that there was no legal basis for China to claim historic rights to resources within the sea areas falling within the 'nine-dash line' and that none of the Spratly Islands can generate extended maritime zones. It further found that China had violated the Philippines' sovereign rights by operating within its EEZ because it was interfering with Philippine fishing and petroleum exploration, constructing artificial islands, and failing to prevent Chinese fishermen from fishing in the zone.[47] Additionally, the arbitration clarified that "none of the Tribunal's decisions in this Award are dependent on a finding of sovereignty"[48]. Significantly, China dismisses the ruling on this very basis.

The Context of the Arbitration

The context of this arbitration is critical to understand its meaning. First, the basis for this arbitration is the 1982 UNCLOS, of which both the Philippines and China are signatories, the Philippines having ratified it in May 1984, and China in June 1996[49]. Initiated by the Philippines in January 2013, this arbitration:

> "concerned the role of historic rights and the source of maritime entitlements in the South China Sea, the status of certain maritime features and the maritime entitlements they are capable of generating, and the lawfulness of certain actions by China that were alleged by the Philippines to violate the Convention."[50]

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[47] Permanent Court of Arbitration, *Press Release; the South China Sea Arbitration - (the Republic of the Philippines v. the People's Republic of China)*, The Hague: 12 July 2016, 1-2.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., 1.
[50] Ibid.

Notably, this arbitration only pertains to a portion of the SCS; however, there is significant opportunity for legal precedence for other countries' similar claims. This situation potentially influences China's legal standing in other disputes. This paper will now look at each parties' view in the matter.

As explained in the Eleventh and final press release by the Tribunal, in initiating this legal process, the Philippines had asked the Court to rule on four legal considerations. First, the Philippines sought a ruling on the effects of UNCLOS on China's claims to historic rights within its 'nine-dash line'. Second, it sought a ruling on the characterization of claims as islands, rocks, low-tide elevations or submerged banks under the Convention — relevant under the convention as it establishes maritime zone entitlements. Third, it sought rulings on whether certain Chinese actions in the SCS violated the Convention, through construction and fishing activities that have harmed the marine environment. Lastly, the Philippines sought a ruling on actions taken by China to cause unlawful aggravation to the Parties' dispute.[51] Basically, the Philippines sought to use the arbitration mechanism of the Convention — a seemingly neutral legal process — to intervene against China for diplomatic legitimacy in its claim without expectation of resolution in the SCS.

China's perspective throughout the process has been one of diplomatic outrage for having had its position questioned. China claims that the tribunal has no jurisdiction since this dispute does not relate to UNCLOS; instead, it asserts that a dispute about

[51] Permanent Court of Arbitration, *Press Release; the South China Sea Arbitration - (the Republic of the Philippines v. the People's Republic of China)*, The Hague: 12 July 2016, 4.

sovereignty should be handled in a different forum. In a position paper submitted to the Tribunal, the PRC declared that:

> "it is a general principle of international law that sovereignty over land territory is the basis for the determination of maritime rights. Only after the extent of China's territorial sovereignty in the South China Sea is determined can a decision be made on the extent of China's maritime claims in the South China Sea."[52]

China has frequently dismissed the claims on the ground that this current dispute cannot be arbitrated under UNCLOS, and reasserts that a determination of sovereignty is a precondition to establishing maritime entitlements. However, China avoids opportunities to formalize its sovereignty claims in an international forum, other than using the legally vague 'nine-dash line'. China's repeated denial of jurisdiction influenced the Tribunal to apply additional due diligence to ensure its jurisdiction leading to an Award on Jurisdiction and Admissibility in October 2015. The Tribunal also made clear that "in light of limitations on compulsory dispute settlement under the Convention, the Tribunal has emphasized that it does not rule on any question of sovereignty over land territory and does not delimit any boundary between the Parties."[53]

Although it actively participated during the arbitration process by providing statements, position papers and note verbale, China reiterated that it was not officially participating. The Chinese Government also made clear that these statements and documents "shall by no means be interpreted as China's participation in the arbitral

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[52] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. *Summary of the Position Paper of the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Matter of Jurisdiction in the South China Sea Arbitration Initiated by the Republic of the Philippines*. 7 December 2014.
[53] Permanent Court of Arbitration, *Press Release; the South China Sea Arbitration - (the Republic of the Philippines v. the People's Republic of China)*, The Hague: 12 July 2016, 1.

proceeding in any form."[54] In that way, the PRC could reject the jurisdiction of the court following an unfavorable ruling.

In an early position paper, China advanced several arguments. First, the subject of the arbitration is the territorial sovereignty over several maritime features in the SCS, which is beyond the scope of the Convention. Second, China and the Philippines have agreed, through bilateral instruments and the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the SCS, to settle their relevant disputes through negotiations and therefore by unilaterally initiating the present arbitration, the Philippines had breached its obligation under international law[55]. The case can be made that it is because the negotiations were going nowhere that the Philippines, faced with more pressure from China in the SCS and no diplomatic resolution in sight, decided to initiate the arbitration process.

Arbitration Tribunal's Ruling

The Court's ruling in its entirety is very detailed and addresses every legal angle of this arbitration, using opinions and testimonies of multiples experts in different fields related to the law of the sea. Only the key aspects pertinent to this paper are explained below.

First, relative to historic rights and the 'nine-dash line', the Tribunal, after establishing jurisdiction, concluded that the UNCLOS comprehensively allocates rights to maritime areas and that protections for pre-existing rights to resources were considered during the negotiations, but not adopted in the Convention itself. "Accordingly, the Tribunal concluded that, to the extent China had historic rights to resources in the waters of the South China Sea, such rights were extinguished to the extent they were

[54] Ibid, 4.
[55] Permanent Court of Arbitration, *Press Release; the South China Sea Arbitration - (the Republic of the Philippines v. the People's Republic of China)*, The Hague: 12 July 2016, 6.

incompatible with the exclusive economic zones provided for in the Convention."[56] It also noted that although Chinese navigators and fishermen, as well as those of other states, had historically made use of the islands in the SCS, there was no evidence that China had historically exercised exclusive control over the waters or their resources. The Tribunal therefore concluded that there was no legal basis for China to claim historic rights to resources within the sea areas falling within the 'nine-dash line'[57]. Basically, Parties have no ground for historical rights because they willingly entered in the UNCLOS and ratified it. The Tribunal even closely examined the history of the Convention and:

> "concluded that the Convention was intended to comprehensively allocate the rights of States to maritime areas. The Tribunal noted that the question of pre-existing rights to resources (in particular fishing resources) was carefully considered during the negotiations on the creation of the exclusive economic zone and that a number of States wished to preserve historic fishing rights in the new zone. This position was rejected, however, and the final text of the Convention gives other States only a limited right of access to fisheries in the exclusive economic zone (in the event the coastal State cannot harvest the full allowable catch) and no rights to petroleum or mineral resources. The Tribunal found that China's claim to historic rights to resources was incompatible with the detailed allocation of rights and maritime zones in the Convention and concluded that, to the extent China had historic rights to resources in the waters of the South China Sea, such rights were extinguished by the entry into force of the Convention to the extent they were incompatible with the Convention's system of maritime zones."[58]

Therefore, in the case of its arbitration, the Court established that in the spirit of UNCLOS — an internationally binding Convention — historic claims cannot be used to achieve the same effect achieved by the Convention relative to maritime entitlements. On

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[56] Ibid., 1-2.
[57] Permanent Court of Arbitration, *Press Release; the South China Sea Arbitration - (the Republic of the Philippines v. the People's Republic of China)*, The Hague: 12 July 2016, 1-2.
[58] Permanent Court of Arbitration, *Award; the South China Sea Arbitration - (the Republic of the Philippines v. the People's Republic of China)*, The Hague: 12 July 2016, 8-9, https://pca-cpa.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/175/2016/07/PH-CN-20160712-Award.pdf

this note, authors like Bill Hayton also acknowledge the incompatibility between UNCLOS and the 'U-shaped line', but go further by saying that "it can still have a basis in other aspects of international law."[59]

Second, the Tribunal conducted a detailed evaluation of reefs claimed by China to establish if they were above water at high tide. This is not trivial as under UNCLOS, this type of feature generates an entitlement to at least a 12 nm territorial sea. Here, the Tribunal "noted that the reefs have been heavily modified by land reclamation and construction, [but] recalled that the Convention classifies features on their natural condition, and relied on historical materials in evaluating the features."[60] Having established that none of the features claimed by China can generate an EEZ, the Tribunal found that it could — without delimiting a boundary — declare that certain sea areas are within the exclusive economic zone of the Philippines, because those areas are not overlapped by any possible entitlement of China.

Finally, a note on the military nature of China's activities in the SCS and therefore jurisdiction. This part of the ruling is interesting for the purpose of the paper as it relates to China's official narrative about its activities in the SCS as perceived by international organizations. The Tribunal considered this point carefully as 'military activity' would represent an exception from compulsory arbitration and would therefore remove jurisdiction as per Article 298[61] of the Convention. For this reason, the Tribunal

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[59] Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (London; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 251.
[60] Permanent Court of Arbitration, *Press Release; the South China Sea Arbitration - (the Republic of the Philippines v. the People's Republic of China)*, The Hague: 12 July 2016, 2.
[61] "Article 298 provides for further exceptions from compulsory settlement that a State may activate by declaration for disputes concerning (a) sea boundary delimitations, (b) historic bays and titles, (c) law enforcement activities, and (d) military activities" in Permanent Court of Arbitration, *Award; the South*

concluded that it lacked jurisdiction over the stand-off between Philippine marines on Second Thomas Shoal and Chinese law enforcement vessels as it constituted military activities. But, while considering whether China's land reclamation and construction of artificial islands at seven features in the Spratly Islands constituted military activities, the Tribunal noted that "China had repeatedly emphasized the non-military nature of its actions and had stated at the highest level that it would not militarize its presence in the Spratlys." The Tribunal therefore decided that it would not deem activities to be military in nature when China itself had repeatedly affirmed the opposite[62]. That is key to the future analysis of China's narrative and counter-narrative.

The Meaning of this Ruling for the Future of the Disputes

This 2016 ruling is important as it establishes China's SCS legal paradigm within a context from which conclusions can be extrapolated. First, it demonstrates one example of the Chinese' perspective on the rule of law as it pertains to territorial disputes. In the wider context, the rule of law is crucial for China — for economic and other reasons — and is an important demonstration of the significance of a national narrative that contrasts a substantial legal ruling. China's dilemma between some historical claims and the importance of adhering to international law will be difficult to reconcile without some losses. Christopher Daniels summarizes this by saying that "China's case for ownership of the SCS is based on historical claims, which have very little weight in the international

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China Sea Arbitration - (the Republic of the Philippines v. the People's Republic of China), The Hague: 12 July 2016, 68, https://pca-cpa.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/175/2016/07/PH-CN-20160712-Award.pdf

[62] Permanent Court of Arbitration, *Award; the South China Sea Arbitration - (the Republic of the Philippines v. the People's Republic of China)*, The Hague: 12 July 2016, 8, https://pca-cpa.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/175/2016/07/PH-CN-20160712-Award.pdf

law. As a result, China views current international law as a threat to its cultural heritage and has made efforts to circumvent it."[63]

For cultural and legal reasons, it is logical to conclude that China cannot show weaknesses when it comes to territorial disputes due to its other unresolved claims (Tibet, Taiwan, Xinjiang, etc). The SCS offers an opportunity where China can trade some legal legitimacy for some other gains. Also, China's engagement seeks to prevent a 'China against all' outcome, preferring bilateral to multilateral negotiations. Stakeholders in the SCS expect China to attempt bilateral resolution through negotiation, by potentially using the "Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea", a mechanism that has not so far produced significant results.

The meaning of this 2016 Arbitration Tribunal is therefore significant as it raises many questions and brings a regional territorial dispute into the international sphere. Importantly, the ruling demonstrates how a rising power like China receives judgment and will engage in future disputes. This ruling is important from a legal perspective, not necessarily *for* the Philippines but certainly *against* China. China's narrative seems immovable which is something that will be analyzed further.

The debate over the SCS is not new, nor are latent and overt conflicts over its maritime boundaries. The contemporary situation has seen an increase in activities; diplomatic, political, military and economic. The 2016 Arbitration Tribunal decision is important and creates a precedent, but nevertheless China continues its course of rejecting other nations' claims and continuing its development of the region – with

[63] Christopher L. Daniels, *South China Sea: Energy and Security Conflicts* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2013), 3.

Chinese characteristics. All of this helps describe a Chinese narrative that seems to be changing. The next chapter will address this very subject.

CHAPTER 2: DESCRIBING THE CHINESE EXPANDED ASSERTIVENESS

This chapter will discuss Chinese security policy domain by defining its key concepts and then exploring the concept of assertiveness as it relates to any signs of alterations of a narrative. To accomplish this, a baseline security policy narrative will be demarcated and fluctuations of this narrative will be characterized.

Section 1: Key Concepts Definitions Related to Security Policy's Narrative

This section seeks to understand the Chinese security policy narrative and identify where the SCS question fits in. It will define the Chinese context of national security and will also describe both notions of 'core interests' and nationalism.

Unlike Western countries, the notion of national security in China encompasses both internal and external security, meaning that both domestic or internal security is intertwined with national defence. Therefore, the security narrative is much broader and therefore harder to deconstruct. Currently, the security narrative is represented by how Chinese leaders define it but is increasingly influenced by special-interest groups and popular opinion, which is somewhat new in the history of the PRC.

Also, very much present in security policy spheres in general, but specifically important in the SCS further analysis, is the perception of zero-sum game when it comes to security calculus. As explained by Ross, "despite the U.S.- China sensitivity to threat perception and to change in relative capabilities within regional bipolarity, each side's effort to enhance its security does not translate into an equal reduction of the other side's security."[64] This sensitivity in perception of gain and loss is very important in defining

[64] Robert S. Ross, *Chinese Security Policy: Structure, Power and Politics* (New York; London: Routledge, 2009), 9.

the quality of the narrative. Although it is not a zero-sum game, the narrative often expresses it that way for political expediency, which is at times perilous.

Concept of core national interests

'Core interests' are defined as elements that China will not compromise on. These must be taken at face value, as described by the PRC's leadership or spokespersons. China's 'core interests' can be summarized in three broad categories: political stability (keeping the Party in power), territorial integrity and sovereignty, and sustainment of its economic development. These interests are central to the security policy narratives so it is important to note that the three broad categories are all represented within the SCS dispute. Consequently, the SCS dispute is a great 'barometer' for the Chinese leadership in dealing with other stakeholders.

As it relates to the SCS, the region ambiguously entered the realm of China's 'core interest' in 2010. The story of how the term 'core interest' came to be associated with the SCS is somewhat complex[65]. Despite unofficial and indirect official messaging, the PRC does not state that the SCS is a 'core interest', but responds to it as one. China's ambiguity toward the SCS seems to be part of its strategy. Given that the SCS is associated with a 'core interest', China cannot confirm nor deny without making its intentions clear. In fact,

> "As a senior Chinese foreign policy official put it, once the story was out, the MFA [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] could not publicly say that the South China Sea was not a core interest — China does not want to preempt the possibility of making such a declaration."[66]

[65] For a great explanation of this official vs. unofficial accounts, I recommend reading pages 8 to 11 of Michael D. Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior – Part One: On "Core Interests"," *China Leadership Monitor*, (15 November 2010), 8-10.
[66] Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2013), 19.

Stating that it is not a 'core interest' weakens China's stance and may send signals of retreat from its sovereignty claims. Stating that it is might raise the issue and remove any space for negotiation, which China seems to desire keeping. Moreover, "confirming the association would signal a clear shift in position that would likely provoke an even stronger international reaction than has occurred thus far"[67]. In the end, China still demonstrates a high level of commitment to managing or resolving the SCS issue "on Chinese terms"[68], which is a great indicator of 'core interests' significance.

Nationalism

Nationalism plays an increasingly prominent part in the Chinese narrative and is therefore ever more present in the security policy narrative. Ping and McCormick summarize the rise of this element of Chinese narrative by saying:

> "Feeling of nationalism are heightened as communist doctrine no longer provides legitimacy to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rule and 'patriotic education' replaces Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought. China's discourse of a 'century of humiliation' still cast a shadow over Chinese, but China's rapid rise as a world power makes Chinese more confidently arrogant and assertive, and China's new leadership feels compelled to follow the prompt of public opinion."[69]

This rising sentiment of nationalism in the Chinese population is certainly an important factor in how the CCP formulates its policies as it is a key component of political security. The Chinese media also play a role in maintaining what has been labelled as a "strong sense of self-righteous nationalism" when Chinese leaders demonstrate assertiveness in advancing Chinese interests at the expense of neighbours

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[67] Michael D. Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior – Part One: On "Core Interests"," *China Leadership Monitor*, (15 November 2010), 10.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Jonathan H. Ping and Brett McCormick, *China's Strategic Priorities*, (Vol. 138. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 48.

and in opposition to the United States[70]. Moreover, "research shows why it makes rational sense for China to compromise on those interests [SCS], but it is nationalism that makes compromise on this issue akin to selling out."[71] That is the real challenge for the CCP, in a society where saving face is paramount. The pressures of nationalism certainly pose real difficulties in dealing with the SCS.

To conclude, the security narrative is pervasive in China, as it also relates to Regime stability. Furthermore, the SCS represents a great barometer of the PRC's leadership strategy and intents as it captures the concepts of 'core interests' and nationalism, which are essential for the further analysis of assertiveness.

Section 2: Assertiveness; Definitions and a Baseline Narrative

Under the assumption that there is a variation in the narrative, this section and the next will define the baseline assertiveness of China, then explore what the changes are and how much they weigh in the balance of the security situation.

After defining the concept of expanded assertiveness, this paper will study the perceived change in Chinese assertiveness using the model PMESII[72]comprising analysis of Political, Military, Economic, Social, Informational, and Infrastructure factors. While trying to define any component of change, the methodology employed must first define what is considered to be the steady state or baseline and then endeavor to qualify the

[70] Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy since the Cold War* (Fourth ed. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 330.
[71] Donovan Chau and Thomas M. Kane, *China and International Security: History, Strategy, and 21st-Century Policy*, (Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2014), 127.
[72] The concept of PMESII is a notion developed and used by the U.S. military to develop an understanding of an operational environment at the operational and strategic levels. It is a notion prevalent within all U.S. Services but mostly within the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army. Exact attribution cannot be made as exact origins of this concept are not captured in a public publication. Attribution will therefore be directed to the U.S. Department of Defense.

variation, if any. This model covers all key elements of the environment under examination.

Defining the Concept of Expanded Assertiveness

The concept of assertiveness has been closely associated to the SCS in recent years. It is because of China's assertive behaviour, a fertile source of controversy, that China's SCS policy has been subject of close international scrutiny[73]. For that reason, it is critical to first define the concept. While "today, there is still no consensus definition of "assertive" in the international relations literature on which to draw"[74] the concept can be used to refer to constructive activism in international life or it can be used to describe a behaviour — imperialistic, nationalistic, or anti-normative[75]. A clearer definition emerges from the use of the word, namely "a form of assertive diplomacy that explicitly threatens to impose costs on another actor that are clearly higher than before."[76] Assertiveness therefore means that consequences are now more significant, or that the actions taken are more consequential than before. Also, assertiveness relates not just to official communication, it is also encompassing official actions. Many research publications emphasize precise moments when certain key words entered the official sphere, as for the word 'assertiveness' for example[77]. Although this is important to the overall analysis of the narrative, assertive actions must also be carefully considered.

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[73] Zhou Fangyin, "Between Assertiveness and self- restraint: Understanding China's South China Sea Policy." *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (2016): 869.
[74] Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2013), 19.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2013), 10.
[77] Ibid.

In terms of shift in the overall Chinese narrative, some author like Alastair Johnston claim that the SCS is the only area where the diplomatic narrative shifted significantly, in a more hard-lined direction[78]. This supports the thesis of this paper in the sense that if China is going to modify the rest of its narrative in the future, the shift in the SCS narrative could be a good indicator. The opposite argument unquestionably is that the case of the SCS is unique and if it is the case, the significance of the SCS policy shift would be lessened.

A word of caution used throughout the next sections is the fact that "a historical analysis is the tendency to assume that what observers witness now is new, different, and unconnected to the past."[79] This paper does not claim to pursue a comprehensive historical analysis but notes biases brought forth by the analysis of change, and focus the scope on the PRC's behaviour in the SCS as a single trend issue. This paper will therefore be careful in characterizing the net value of the changes. Also, modern communications technology do have an impact in the study of change. Authors studied the rising role of emergent mediums and concluded that:

> "The newly assertive China meme and the problematic analysis on which it is based suggest that the nature of the media-blogosphere interaction may become an important factor in explaining the speed and intensity of future security dilemma dynamics between states, including those between the United States and China."[80]

The nature of the media environment and communication mechanisms influence the very nature of change in state messaging. The scope of this paper does not include historical trends in the use of the word 'assertive' but focuses instead on the elements

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[78] Ibid., 19.
[79] Ibid., 33.
[80] Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2013), 48.

portraying assertive behaviour. The sum of those actions and official declarations constitute the global narrative demonstrating that China wants to control the narrative of its policy and make progress on its own terms.

A Baseline Narrative

Baseline Narrative – Political

The baseline narrative from a political perspective can be characterized by four elements, two that are heavily reliant on history and two that are marked by the one-Party rule reality.

First, the baseline narrative is tainted with a lost-glory mentality. "Following thousands of years of development, China was a progressive civilization that most of the entities envied. In 1949, at the end of the Chinese Civil War, the West contributed to the decline and division of once a great China into two Chinas."[81] The Chinese national narrative often refers to the century of humiliation — 1839 to 1949 — and uses it to glorify the current state of affairs in China. This also helps explain the sensitivity about borders and sovereignty. In 1949, China was isolated and pursued an independent foreign policy. The "memory of the Qing regime's impotence in the face of industrialized European invasion still motivates China's leadership today."[82] In the late 1970s, China saw an opening to the world and its foreign policy became more global — through the development of its economy — and its diplomacy expanded.

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[81] Raoul-Thomas Câmpian, "China: Reasons Behind its Political and Military Expression in the South China Sea." *Conflict Studies Quarterly* no. 16 (July 2016), 52.
[82] Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (London; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 50.

The resurgence of that lost-glory mentality expanded when China changed its approach toward its neighboring states partly because of "the cold diplomatic environment in which it found itself after the 1989 Tiananmen Square Killings, and partly by a need to fill the vacuum left by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991."[83] China was on a path of natural progression in state growth toward becoming a superpower. At that point, the "maritime territorial disputes are often cited to illustrate the link between China's historical self and a new assertiveness in its foreign policy role behavior."[84] Therefore, the slow and steady realization of the maritime domain can be seen as a way to reconcile China's historical self with its future role in the world.

Second, China's history has seen a focus on the sea and a continual rise in maritime domain importance, though the SCS issue is quite recent and not deeply engrained in emotion. Avery Goldstein has argued that:

> "Relations with Taiwan and Japan are inextricably intertwined with historical grievances that touch the rawest nationalist nerves that limit policy flexibility. By comparison, the South China Sea issues are more recent vintage and have not triggered quite as broad or deep a visceral reaction in China."[85]

This emotional relation in some Chinese regions relates to history of invasion and political division, unlike more recent maritime disputes. The Chinese historical conception of national defence rested on positioning troops over its long land borders and they saw the sea as a "great natural wall".[86] In fact, the perception was that "water reduces threats of surprise attacks and of rapid defeat, thus minimizing pressure for crises

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[83] Stuart Harris, *China's Foreign Policy*, (Malden, MA; Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2014), 145.
[84] Sebastian Harnisch, Sebastian Bersick, and Jörn-Carsten Gottwald, *China's International Roles: Challenging or Supporting International Order?* (Vol. 5. New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 47.
[85] Avery Goldstein, "China's Foreign Policy and the Leadership Transition: Prospects for Change Under the 'Fifth Generation'", in *China's Foreign Policy: Who Makes it, and how is it made?* Ed. by Gilbert Rozman, (New York, N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 58.
[86] Translated from Baoyung Yang in Hugues Tertrais, "La Chine Et La Mer: Sécurité Et Coopération Régionale En Asie Orientale Et Du Sud-Est." (l'Harmattan, Paris, 2011), 56.

to develop and for rapid escalation of crises."[87] The recent use of the sea to serve national defence purposes represents a steady shift in perception. With reference to past Chinese practice, the 2015 Chinese white paper on defence claimed that "the traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests."[88] Some argue that the overarching turn to the sea "occurred over a period of nearly six decades and has resulted in China's greatly enhanced capabilities. The three phases of its development have been near-coast defense, near-sea active defense, and far-seas operations."[89] The main take away is that the Chinese narrative sees an increasing importance for the maritime domain.

Third, the reality of the CCP's requirement to firmly hold on to power impresses on the baseline narrative. Ideological sway represents a real security risk and will always be present in the undertone of any Chinese security policy. In fact, in recent years, "national security has in considerable measure become regime security, which means security of the Communist Party — 'political security.'"[90] Many analysts of the PRC cite this as evidence, careful not to neglect the quality of the narrative.

Fourth, continuity in the CCP leadership is an important factor of the political perspective toward the narrative's reference point. Chinese leaders are aware that any change in assertiveness must be done carefully. Indeed, Party leaders "do not rise to the

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[87] Robert S. Ross, *Chinese Security Policy: Structure, Power and Politics* (New York; London: Routledge, 2009), 9.
[88] Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy since the Cold War* (Fourth ed. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 109.
[89] Christopher L. Daniels, *South China Sea: Energy and Security Conflicts* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2013), 49.
[90] David M. Lampton, "Xi Jinping and the National Security Commission: Policy Coordination and Political Power." *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 95 (2015), 770.

top by being mavericks, but instead by signaling they can carry forward the current line."[91] Chinese leaders are aware that they must carry forward the final years of the development plan of the former generation's leadership. Goldstein has demonstrated that this was also true before the inauguration of the fifth-generation Chinese leadership[92], from which Xi Jinping emerged.

Finally, a demonstration of leadership's lenience toward continuity is the fact that from the CCP's perspective, political responsiveness to outside pressure looks more risky. "In the CCP's view, the Soviet Union unexpectedly unraveled when its last Communist Party leader lost control over a reform process that in part had been responding to long-standing political criticisms from the West."[93] This leads to the argument that Chinese leaders might be prone to assertiveness but will always be careful to do so with some respect paid to continuity, in a Party system that favors the status quo.

Baseline Narrative – Military

The main foundations of China's military narrative today include modernization, ambitions and resistance to containment.

First, the baseline Chinese reality when it comes to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the recognition that its force must be modernized if it wants to compete in the 21st century. To accomplish this, China is moving from a large number of soldiers using

[91] Avery Goldstein, "China's Foreign Policy and the Leadership Transition: Prospects for Change Under the 'Fifth Generation'", in *China's Foreign Policy: Who Makes it, and how is it made?* Ed. by Gilbert Rozman, (New York, N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 43.
[92] "The National People's Congress finalized the 12th Five-Year Plan this March, two years before the inauguration of the fifth-generation leadership. That means the new leadership is supposed to implement the remaining three years of the development plan of the fourth-generation leadership." (Goldstein, p.74)
[93] Avery Goldstein, "China's Foreign Policy and the Leadership Transition: Prospects for Change Under the 'Fifth Generation'", in *China's Foreign Policy: Who Makes it, and how is it made?* Ed. by Gilbert Rozman, (New York, N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 46.

legacy equipment to smaller numbers of better trained soldiers, using more modern equipment. On this path to modernization, the "annual real (inflation adjusted) growth in China's defense spending averaged 11 percent per year between 1996 and 2015."[94] The exact defence spending figure cannot be known with perfect certainty but low double-digit growth seems to represent the average communicated reality. This analysis focuses on the trend of significant spending in the last two decades.

Second, China has the ambition to build a powerful military and exert dominance[95]. The degree to which it wants to exert that dominance is debatable but one of the key indicators of this ambition aligns with the previously discussed 'turn to the sea'. Indeed, the real challenge that China faces is the integration of naval power projection capabilities. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) "is still more "green water", meaning designed for coastal defense, than "blue water", designed for use in the open seas, so Beijing began to seek ways of addressing this imbalance."[96] This general turn in the PLAN's strategic direction toward a navy with a increased reach is an important part of the narrative.

Third, China's resistance to containment from America is part of the continued narrative, one that has risen from the fall of the Soviet Union and that is now increasingly present. Goldstein has summarized this dynamic by saying:

> "The power of the United States and its allies presents China with a challenging military-security environment that its leaders cannot ignore. Moreover, it introduces a particularly tough set of considerations for Beijing because the most impressive aspect of American military strength in East Asia is its unrivaled naval

[94] Eric Heginbotham, *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996-2017*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015), xx.
[95] Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy since the Cold War* (Fourth ed. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 102.
[96] Marc Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy: An Introduction* (Third, revised and updated ed. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 112.

> capabilities, while many of China's major foreign policy concerns in the region have a maritime focus."[97]

The American naval presence creates a competing force ever-present in the Chinese narrative as a force to resist, and against whom the security policy must be considered. Chinese military thinking often refers to the 'islands chains concept', as a series of objectives for China to reach in its claims to control the sea but also as "barriers imposed by the United States that limit China's ability to evolve into a genuine maritime power with freedom of maneuver throughout the Western Pacific."[98]

One more consideration in the military narrative's resistance to containment is the steady state in the efficacy of China's nuclear deterrence. The SCS is particularly key to the freedom of navigation of the PLAN to project its nuclear triad, without direct American surveillance. It is expected that China possesses capabilities — at various degrees of technological advancement — for nuclear deterrence including land, sea and air-based launching mechanisms. The ability for the PLAN to send its submarines carrying strategic ballistic missiles is contingent on a complete control of the SCS, or at least on the presence of obstacles to other nations' navies' freedom of navigation— most notably that of America. These considerations are generally part of the baseline of China's military narrative.

Baseline Narrative – Economical

While looking at the recent economical elements that could have caused China to change its course, it must be acknowledged that the 2008 Economic crisis is a cause of

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[97] Avery Goldstein, "China's Foreign Policy and the Leadership Transition: Prospects for Change Under the 'Fifth Generation'", in *China's Foreign Policy: Who Makes it, and how is it made?* Ed. by Gilbert Rozman, (New York, N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 52.

[98] Andrew S. Erickson and Joel Wuthnow, "Why Islands Still Matter in Asia," Princeton - Harvard, China and the World Program, Accessed 17 February 2017, 4/9, https://cwp.princeton.edu/news/why-islands-still-matter-asia-cwp-alumni-erickson-wuthnow.

China's increased assertiveness, and forms the baseline narrative of modern times. The crisis is not a consequence but a cause. The crisis permitted China to change economical gears and reimagine its economic narrative. Any recent changes in the Chinese narrative must be gaged from this new starting point. Barry Buzan has remarked that:

> "Since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008, China's behaviour towards its neighbors has hardened considerably despite the continuation of 'peaceful rise/development' rhetoric. China has been more aggressive over asserting its position in a variety of territorial disputes in the South China Sea, as well as with Japan and India."[99]

This important economic fact — the 2008 crisis — marks a critical departure point for the PRC's narrative. This represents an aspect of causality that forms one of the foundation of China's narrative because of the enabling nature of this reality. The strength of China's economy is of course relative to that of others and the economic crisis of western nations gave the PRC increased confidence.

At a lower than strategic level, but also in terms of baseline economic narrative is China's heavy dependence on fishing activities. Any fluctuation in those activities must be closely considered in changes in narrative. "Accounting for around 10 per cent of the world's fishing catch per year, the South China Sea has been a historical fishing ground for Chinese fishermen from coastal provinces such as Hainan, Guangdong, and Guangxi."[100] A closer analysis of China's behaviour in this domain can represent a vector of change because of its importance.

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[99] Barry Buzan, "The South Asian Security Complex in a Decentring World Order: Reconsidering Regions and Powers Ten Years on," *International Studies* 48, no. 1 (2011), 12.
[100] Leszek Buszynski and Christopher B. Roberts, *The South China Sea Maritime Dispute – Political, Legal and Regional Perspectives*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 64.

Baseline Narrative – Social

This aspect is closely linked to the political reality of China. Defining this baseline narrative, to better understand the environment, is clearly a challenge. The discussion must lead to an understanding of the actors contributing to the public discourse in China, whether they are moving the narrative and in what direction, and what change parameters impact Chinese public opinion and interest groups. Johnston notes public opinion as it relates to political considerations by saying:

> "In a political system where there are no electoral costs to ignoring public opinion, it is unclear why China's authoritarian leaders would care much about public views. Nor is it clear that China's top leader would want public opinion to matter on strategically important questions — they prefer maneuverability not constraints."[101]

Although this has been the historical reality of the PRC, the rise of popular interjection in the policy sphere is worth considering. Recent increases in the presence of interest's groups have expanded their importance in China. Their ability to contribute to a new narrative will be analyzed in the corresponding section.

Baseline Narrative – Informational

In the informational environment, the key point of the narrative relates to the messaging of China's legal position. The PRC, as an exporting state, is heavily dependent on the outcomes of strong legal and commercial regulations. To support its economic growth, Beijing has placed a growing importance on international law, and had the intentions of building a stronger legal basis through various administrative and jurisdictional measures, especially to support its various maritime claims. This legal messaging from China has "led to a more proactive and assertive approach, raising

[101] Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2013), 37.

further tensions in the South China Sea and challenging the status quo."[102] The baseline narrative in this regard certainly reflects a desire "to employ legal, diplomatic and administrative measures to augment the basis of its claims to gain leverage in future diplomatic and legal negotiations."[103] From an outsider's perspective, the validity of China's legal narrative can be doubted, especially when considering the 2016 ruling previously discussed. What cannot be ignored though is the unwavering narrative held by China with regards to the legitimacy of its legal foundation.

Baseline Narrative – Infrastructure

The baseline value of infrastructure development in China is also closely linked to its economic growth. This paper will not attempt to define what this particular baseline narrative is as it is very specific in the maritime domain. Rather, the discussion of the new narrative will encompass the reality of land reclamation and the rationalization of administrative institutions, all is considered part of Infrastructure. The quantity and quality of physical or organizational infrastructure changes will serve to define the nature of variations in the narrative.

[102] Leszek Buszynski and Christopher B. Roberts, *The South China Sea Maritime Dispute – Political, Legal and Regional Perspectives*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 61.
[103] Ibid., 78.

Section 3: Assertiveness; A New Narrative

This paper has defined arcs for a baseline narrative relative to China's security policy. The analysis will now turn to what appears to have changed in the Chinese narrative generally and specifically as it relates to the SCS.

The timeframe for this new assertiveness is associated with a deliberate turn that occurred as the fifth generation of PRC leadership assumed power. The consequences on China of the 2008 economic crisis has already been discussed as it certainly affect the timeframe under analysis. In 2010, when the U.S. announced a new arms sale package for Taiwan, "U.S. officials were taken aback by the intensity of China's response."[104] While the year 2010 could mark the commencement of the rise of the Chinese enhancement of its assertiveness, Rozman claims that 2010 was connected to changes in China's foreign policy, where China's leaders revealed attitudes that had earlier been concealed. He also claims that:

> "The new narrative was a combination of more forthright expression of the views hidden earlier due to the duality of messages and the *neibu* system[105], and of the logical extension of arguments that earlier were tempered by Deng Xiaoping's clear advice to keep low profile until China's comprehensive national power had risen."[106]

This 'low profile' began to be superseded by a new profile, certainly as it directly relates to the SCS dispute. The escalation of the PRC's narrative appears to be incremental and calculated. Sutter discussed "heightened determination of the Xi Jinping government to advance China's disputed territorial claims" and advanced the concept of

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[104] Roger Irvine, "Getting Back on Track: China, the United States, and Asia-Pacific Security," *American Foreign Policy Interests* 35, no. 3 (May 2013), 138.

[105] "The word '*neibu*' means 'internal' and generally refers to a classification of official documents that are meant for circulation only within government and Chinese Communist Party organizations. This system was meant to keep the internal Party messaging clear and consistent while the government messaging might have communicated another message to the population or other governments.

[106] Gilbert Rozman, "China's Narratives regarding National Security Policy," *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (13 March 2011), 2/6.

"international activism"[107] to define the new Chinese position. In his analysis, Johnston also argues that "this new assertiveness reflects a fundamental shift in Chinese diplomacy away from Beijing's more status quo-oriented behaviour of the previous thirty years."[108] Since it is possible to acknowledge the departure from behaviour that marked the PRC's stance for decades, it is now important to qualify the signs of a new narrative using the SCS as a focused area of study. This paper now deconstructs the new narrative in its most insightful components, still using the PMESII model.

New Narrative – Political

This paper contends that there are three arguments supporting a change in narrative from a political perspective.

First, the current President of China and General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CCP, Xi Jinping is certainly a driver of this new assertiveness. His contribution to the overall diplomatic narrative and the way the new Chinese leader structured his power is very informative. Jakobson and Manuel conclude that Xi amassed more formal power than either of his two predecessors[109] and that he also appears to have taken a strong personal interest in foreign policy issues. They argue that "such a personification of policy has been rare in the Chinese system after Deng Xiaoping retreated into retirement some 25 or so years ago. In essence, Xi is now the sole coordinator of Chinese foreign and security policy."[110]

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[107] Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy since the Cold War* (Fourth ed. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 102.
[108] Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2013), 7.
[109] Hu Jintao (2002-2012) and Jiang Zemin (1989-2002)
[110] Linda Jakobson and Ryan Manuel, "How are Foreign Policy Decisions made in China?" *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016), 108.

It is important to understand the importance of the Leading Small Groups (LSG) structure in decision-making in China. The hierarchical position in the government, but more importantly in the CCP, of the members of each LSG demonstrates its implicit power. Once in power, Xi Jinping became the chair of many of the LSGs related to foreign policy. He effectively became the pivotal point for the cross-systems integrators, certainly making his leadership more individualistic and less collective than in the past[111]. While this positioning was for increased efficiency in policy,[112] it also achieved greater power and control on the assertiveness of the narrative. To show the preemption of his action, even before he ascended to the very top, "in mid-2012, he was reportedly put in charge of a new senior leaders group tasked to focus on maritime security — the Protection of Maritime Interests LSG."[113] This certainly shows an interest in the maritime domain from the top leadership. Centralizing more power, in an already highly centralized government apparatus shows a change in messaging, especially as it pertains to the SCS.

Second, changes in the diplomatic — almost ideological — narrative demonstrates assertiveness. With the arrival of the new leader in 2013, there appears to

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[111] "General Secretary and President Xi Jinping is the chair of all the relevant cross-system integrators (The leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform and the Central Military Commission, as well as the NSC, not to mention the Taiwan Leading Small Group and Others), which seemingly makes him the almost solo coordinator of Chinese foreign and national security policy. This conclusion was reinforced by almost every Chinese with whom the author spoke in the fall of 2014 — Xi is where the buck stops on foreign and security policy making. The implication of Xi holding the reins of almost all the cross-system integrator organizations is that his leadership is less collective than in the past (particularly under Hu Jintao)" in David M. Lampton, "Xi Jinping and the National Security Commission: Policy Coordination and Political Power." *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 95 (2015), 773.

[112] "One can presume that Xi's decision to take charge of all of these different small groups and offices at least in part reflects an acknowledgement that China needs to better coordinate its foreign policy decision making to ensure that implementation of agreed-upon policies is more consistent." in Linda Jakobson and Ryan Manuel, "How are Foreign Policy Decisions made in China?" *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016), 108.

[113] Linda Jakobson and Ryan Manuel, "How are Foreign Policy Decisions made in China?" *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016), 108.

be a change of perception of national accomplishment and its potential activism in contemporary history. Considering Deng Xiaoping's foreign policy mantra, 'hides one's capabilities and bide one's time', the main argument here is that there are signs that the present time is ripe for a new mantra that could read like 'display your capabilities because China's time has come.' One could argue that Deng Xiaoping's philosophy has served its purpose but China's place in the world has evolved. Chang-Liao has argued that "only when Xi Jinping came to power could it be said that Deng's guideline had finally run its course."[114] This overall perception is linked to the Chinese leader and direct actions, notably the actions in the SCS, which will be explored shortly. In official Chinese diplomatic terms, observers note that "since taking power, the new Chinese President Xi Jinping has talk to "striving for achievements," signaling a new theme in Chinese diplomacy."[115] This new theme in foreign affairs represents more involvement in the world and is also presented as a natural evolution of China's affairs, which demonstrate that the assertiveness is likely going to be part of the normal way of conducting national business.

Thirdly, a political exclamation of the importance of national security — and the increased sensitivity surrounding it — has been the creation of a National Security Commission (NSC). This is not specifically aimed at the SCS, but it does represent a mechanism toward security policy, including in the maritime domain. The creation of the

[114] Nien-chung Chang-Liao, "China's New Foreign Policy Under Xi Jinping." *Asian Security* 12, no. 2 (2016), 83.
[115] Ibid., 82.

NSC was first announced in late 2013.[116] Speaking at the first meeting of the NSC on 15 April 2014, Xi Jinping explained that:

> "The aim of the establishment of the Council [sic, Commission] is to better handle new developments and new tasks in the realm of national security, and build a national security system which is centralized, integrated, highly efficient, and authoritative, so as to improve leadership over the work of national security."[117]

The very creation of such an organization is a sign of assertiveness since China has never had such an integrated and centralized apparatus for its national security. Considering that this organization will play a role alike the National Security Council in the U.S. system, it is a sign that the PRC intends to play a larger role internationally.

New Narrative – Military

The increased assertiveness in the military sphere is marked by a shift in emphasis from land to maritime domains. This paper makes six arguments supporting a change of assertiveness while we consider the marked departure for the military aspects of the baseline narrative.

First, China's military role on the international scene has significantly changed since 2009 with operations far from China and a new and substantial participation on United Nations operations. Although this is not related to the SCS, it is certainly part of the new narrative and marks the turn from an inward-looking to an outside-interested[118] military. In early 2009, "Beijing agreed to send PLAN vessels to take part in an internal naval coalition designed to thwart pirate attacks, an event which marked the first time the

[116] David M. Lampton, "Xi Jinping and the National Security Commission: Policy Coordination and Political Power." *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 95 (2015), 759.
[117] Ibid., 769.
[118] Although this is an awkward choice of word, we are not at a point where the PLA is outside-focused yet, but it does demonstrate an interest.

country's vessels operated out of territory since modern China was founded 60 years earlier."[119] Moreover, China has recently started to send PLA troops on peacekeeping operations, which is a tradition that has continued under Xi Jinping. During a speech to the UN in September 2015, the Chinese president committed another 8,000 troops for peacekeeping missions. This larger commitment of PLA troops on the international scene does represent a change in narrative for the PRC.

Second, the 2015 Chinese White papers expand the mandate of the PLAN and start to open up the maritime mandate. Although the PLAN had a multi-decade development roadmap[120] linked to the islands chains projections, recent White papers are deemed more authoritative, giving clearer objectives to China's navy. "China's 2015 Defense White Paper urges the PLA navy to shift from only conducting "offshore waters defense" to also engaging in "open sea protection" to better safeguard the country's maritime and oversea interests."[121] The 2015 White Paper, while reaffirming promotion of "peace and development", also aimed at counterbalancing the U.S. and its regional allies' power position in Asia by giving "special emphasis on securing China's "maritime right and interests""[122] According to an authoritative Chinese military publication, and

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[119] Marc Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy: An Introduction* (Third, revised and updated ed. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 112.

[120] "In the first phase, by 2000, the PLAN was to extend its area of operations in the near seas as far as the so-called First Island Chain: the Kuril Islands, Japan, the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the Philippines, Borneo, and Indonesia's Nature Besar. In the second phase, by 2020, the PLAN aimed to project its operational reach to the so-called Second Island Chain: the Bonins, the Marianas, and the Carolines. In the third phase, by 2050, China would be global sea power on par with the U.S. Navy" in Andrew Scobell and Cortez Cooper, "Nascent Aircraft Carrier Program Reveals China's Grand Ambitions", *China, Inside and Out – A Collection of Essays on Foreign and Domestic Policy in the Xi Jinping Era*, RAND Corporation, (Santa Monica, California, 2015), 21.

[121] Timothy R. Heath and Bonny Lin, "The Chinese Dream : Strategic and Policy Priorities of the People's Republic", *China, Inside and Out – A Collection of Essays on Foreign and Domestic Policy in the Xi Jinping Era*, RAND Corporation, (Santa Monica, California, 2015), 5.

[122] Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy since the Cold War* (Fourth ed. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 109.

because of this requirement for assertive behaviour, "the [PLAN] is experiencing a "paradigmatic change" (*zhuanxing*) in naval thinking from the "near seas" (*jinhai*)-encompassing the East China Sea, Yellow Sea, and the South China Sea-to the "far seas" (*yuanchai*)."[123] Because this shift is policy driven, it also gives added legitimacy to the PLAN in its own enhanced assertiveness.

Third, in 2013, China reorganized its Maritime Law Enforcement (MLE) agencies to serve its maritime mandate[124]. Ping and McCormick[125] and Morris and Chase[126] all claim that before 2013, China's MLE agencies (sometimes referred to as the "five dragons") were decentralized and overly bureaucratic organizations with many overlapping missions, which created problems for Chinese officials. "The restructure was a major step towards China's longstanding goal of establishing a unified coast guard tasked with protecting the Chinese sovereignty claims and carrying out law enforcement activities along China's maritime periphery."[127] In addition to increased efficiency, the structural change sends a message that China is making its means of control over the water increasingly results-driven through proper resourcing and administration. The fact that it occurred under the Xi regime also reinforces the point made earlier under

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[123] Andrew Scobell and Cortez Cooper, "Nascent Aircraft Carrier Program Reveals China's Grand Ambitions", *China, Inside and Out – A Collection of Essays on Foreign and Domestic Policy in the Xi Jinping Era*, RAND Corporation, (Santa Monica, California, 2015), 19.

[124] The new China Coast Guard (CCG), formerly the maritime branch of the People's Armed Police, is now an aggregated organization, now falling under State Oceanic Administration. The aggregated organizations are: The China Marine Surveillance, the fisheries law enforcement command (Ministry of Agriculture), the maritime anti-smuggling police (General Administration of Customs) and the Maritime Safety Administration (Ministry of Transport).

[125] Jonathan H. Ping and Brett McCormick, *China's Strategic Priorities*, (Vol. 138. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 62.

[126] Lyle Morris and Michael S. Chase, "The Tip of the Spear : China's Coast Guard Takes the Lead in East and South China Sea Disputes", *China, Inside and Out – A Collection of Essays on Foreign and Domestic Policy in the Xi Jinping Era*, RAND Corporation, (Santa Monica, California, 2015), 14.

[127] Lyle Morris and Michael S. Chase, "The Tip of the Spear : China's Coast Guard Takes the Lead in East and South China Sea Disputes", *China, Inside and Out – A Collection of Essays on Foreign and Domestic Policy in the Xi Jinping Era*, RAND Corporation, (Santa Monica, California, 2015), 14.

'political' narrative. This new China Coast Guard, in which most vessels are now armed, aims to deter China's neighbors and assert sovereignty in the SCS, thousands of nautical miles away.

Fourth, China's aircraft carrier program, with the commissioning of the *Liaoning* in 2012 represents an important milestone in China's assertiveness through the projection of its military power, but more importantly through the incrementality it represents. Although the origin and the commissioning of the PLAN's first aircraft carrier[128] is not a great demonstration of assertiveness, the idea behind it certainly is.

The PLAN's first — and so far only — aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning* is not strictly about projecting the Chinese presence. The *Liaoning* will serve as a training platform for the first three-to-five years and will have very little operational impact initially[129]. It is combustion-powered, with limited range for its class and a requirement for various support vessels to achieve expeditionary mandates. Instead, the first aircraft carrier and the carrier program signals the "emergence of an increasingly global-oriented PLAN."[130] This further supports the PRC's narrative and sends signals of future intents. The aircraft carrier affirms China's assertiveness, not by the actual power it projects, as this is minimal in relative terms, but because of the future potential that it signals to the world. China is indeed on its way to develop more blue-water maritime assets. David Dewitt

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[128] The procurement of the Liaoning has a history of mixed messages, in fact "the *Varyag*, which became the *Liaoning*, was purchased by the Chong Lot Tourist and Amusement Agency, where several retired PLAN officers sat on the board of directors." From Andrew Scobell and Cortez Cooper, "Nascent Aircraft Carrier Program Reveals China's Grand Ambitions", *China, Inside and Out – A Collection of Essays on Foreign and Domestic Policy in the Xi Jinping Era*, RAND Corporation, (Santa Monica, California, 2015), 21. It represented a desire by the PLAN which acquired it through a series of parallels mechanisms, and it eventually became, after official state endorsement and refurbishment, an official PLAN capability.
[129] Andrew Scobell and Cortez Cooper, "Nascent Aircraft Carrier Program Reveals China's Grand Ambitions", *China, Inside and Out – A Collection of Essays on Foreign and Domestic Policy in the Xi Jinping Era*, RAND Corporation, (Santa Monica, California, 2015), 21.
[130] Ibid., 23.

mentioned in 2011 that the first Chinese aircraft carrier "remains an *incremental* change in China's overall strategic capability."[131] What is important for the impact on the narrative is the 'incrementality' of the PLAN's actions and the proven future developmental capabilities. It sends the message that the PRC will continue to spend on developing its military, and particularly its navy.

Why is a Chinese aircraft carrier more assertive than a carrier developed by other nations also building carriers, like India for example? The answer resides in China's potential for further development, where it has corresponding ambitions and scope for growth. Because of its claims in the maritime domain, China's carrier program is seen by stakeholders as a trend in a more assertive direction. Moreover, this future power projection — combined with other actions in the SCS — leads to a buildup of other nations' assets in the region. Bitzinger and Desker have argued that "as China becomes more aggressive militarily in the region, Southeast Asian nations have responded in kind, building up their armed forces."[132] The action-reaction process — in the form of military build-up — demonstrates assertiveness though China does, for the most part, control the tempo of this process. Potentially, the immediate impact of one Chinese aircraft carrier is limited and "should not, and need not, be perceived as a game changer."[133] It is indeed not a game changer in the nature of the PRC's military power, but China's assertiveness is reinforced by its new naval asset.

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[131] David B. Dewitt, "Game Changer in Global Security? China Launches its First Aircraft Carrier," *Centre for International Governance Innovation*, (23 August 2011), 1/4.
[132] Richard A. Bitzinger and Barry Desker, "Southeast Asia and Its Evolving Security Architecture", in *Rewiring Regional Security in a Fragmented World* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2011), 396.
[133] David B. Dewitt, "Game Changer in Global Security? China Launches its First Aircraft Carrier," *Centre for International Governance Innovation*, (23 August 2011), 1/4.

The last portion of this argument is that naval assets expansion combined with operations in the SCS enables the PLAN to stay involved as a navy of significance in Asia and this helps the Chinese leadership justify and empower the PLAN's growth potential. This allows the PRC to keep the PLAN busy, engaged and enables the potential for growth.

Fifth, the PLA's more present 'voice' in the security narrative helps support the assertive stance. Marc Lanteigne, in a book on China's foreign policy, remarked that:

> "the PLA's voice in foreign affairs is seen to be rising, partially as a result of the diversification of the decision-making process in Beijing. Unlike Mao and Deng, current Chinese leaders cannot claim personal ties to the military, and therefore they must cultivate relations with the PLA in order to maintain their positions. Compared with Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping has been more successful in this regard given his longer history of PLA relations, and the status of his late father."[134]

A concept which will be explored later is the enhanced community of interest, of which the military is an important component. Along with its professionalization, the PLA has developed its way of supporting the CCP's narrative while promoting its own growth. Whether the PLA's voice is dictated by the CCP or represents an internal initiative is not fully known, but since the CCP is directing either cessation or reduction in China's assertive narrative, there is an indication of intent or implicit support for the Party leadership. The very fact that the PLA has a louder voice that supports its modernization and ensures its growth, as exemplified by its support of military actions in the SCS, is a sign of assertiveness. The SCS represents an additional operational region that supports the PLA's requirements and aligns it with the national narrative.

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[134] Marc Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy: An Introduction* (Third, revised and updated ed. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 107.

In simple pragmatic terms, "the PLA is prone to exaggerate the tensions over maritime interests to ensure sufficient funding for new vessels and aircraft."[135] Of course, this self-serving narrative benefit both the PLA and its political masters, and helps define the security policy narrative.

Finally, the militarization of the SCS represents a concrete example of an assertive Chinese narrative. Even when the official message from Xi Jinping himself was to not militarize the SCS, "the Chinese message, in a Defense Ministry statement, suggested that China was further watering down a pledge made by its president, Xi Jinping, to not militarize the islands."[136] This is a way to say one thing officially while the reality on the ground is very different. The official message from the PRC is at least consistent — in its ambiguity — in the way that China does not intend to use the islands for military purposes, but self-defence of its territory will always justify pre-deploying military assets. The official transcript[137] from a press conference in late 2016 by a PRC's

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[135] Jesus Solé-Farràs, "A Discourse Called China and the PRC's Foreign Policy and Diplomacy," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 21, no. 3 (09, 2016), 106.

[136] Chris Buckley, "China Suggests it has Placed Weapons on Disputed Spratly Islands in South China Sea," *New York Times (Online)*, 2016, 1/5.

[137] Q: New satellite images released by a US think tank show that China is installing weapon systems on seven islands in the South China Sea. Can you confirm whether China is building these weapon systems there and what purpose do they serve?
A: I have seen relevant reports. I am not aware of the specific situation mentioned by this think tank.
I need to reiterate that these islands in the South China Sea are China's inherent territory. It's completely normal for us to build facilities and deploy necessary defense equipment there, a right of a sovereign state recognized by international law.
Q: If China maintains that it is not militarizing the islands, then why does China install anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems on them?
A: As I said, I am not aware of the specific situation referred to in the think tank report, nor do I know whether there are such systems on the ground as is suggested. But it is something within our sovereignty. China's deployment of necessary defense facilities on its own territory has nothing to do with the so-called militarization.
Q: Does China remain committed to its pledge of not militarizing the islands in the South China Sea? Is there a change in China's position?
A: China is committed to maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea with relevant ASEAN countries. At present, thanks to the concerted efforts of China and relevant ASEAN countries, the situation in the South China Sea has been stabilized and is improving. We hope that the relevant country can respect the efforts made by China and ASEAN countries and sustain the positive momentum in the South China

Foreign Ministry spokesperson is very telling and re-emphasizes the assertiveness of the narrative. Even when pressed to clarify the PRC's position, the same narrative of sovereignty and self-defence is used. In terms of actual militarization though, the reality is different. As of February 2017, U.S. officials noted that China appeared to have finished building about 24 structures on artificial islands designed to house surface-to-air missiles.[138] These are locations where China already has military-length airstrips and many other military-in-nature structures. In terms of impact, U.S. intelligence officials assessed that because of the visibility and vulnerability of the weapons systems, those new structures do not pose a military threat to American forces in the region. [139] Again here, this militarization is *not* about the military value of the weapons placement, it is all about the narrative that the PRC wants to convey.

To summarize the military driven changes in the narrative, it can be said that overt action by China to demonstrate its capabilities and its development of military capabilities represents a type of assertiveness. It serves to acknowledge that it is not necessarily a military threat, but that it is a recognition that China is ramping up its development of capabilities in the region. Chas Freeman, a China expert and former U.S. assistant Secretary of Defense, said that recent development in the SCS was an "unfortunate, but not unpredictable development."[140]

New Narrative – Economical

Sea. Besides, if China's building of normal facilities and deploying of necessary defense equipment on its own islands is counted as militarization, then how do you categorize driving fleets to the South China Sea. From Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference on December 15, 2016*. Accessed on 2 April 2017. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1424544.shtml

[138] Idress Ali, "China finishing South China Sea buildings that could house missiles - U.S. officials," *Reuters*, (23 February 2017). http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-usa-southchinasea-exclusive-idUSKBN161029

[139] Ibid.

[140] Ibid.

The economic narrative specific to the SCS could be covered by a distinct research altogether as it possesses far reaching implications. The two arguments made here will attempt to highlight the specific economical assertive nature of China and how it recently changed. Gilbert Rozman summarized this by describing the adoption of "a much more assertive posture, China was emboldened by […] increased economic leverage. Relevant too was a growing sense of entitlement, rooted in a national identity narrative that had been submerged to a degree, but finally was bursting forth."[141] This paper has looked at the baseline narrative and established that the 2008 Economic crisis was a cause of China's enhanced assertiveness as it gave the economic narrative an increased legitimacy. The 'bursting forth of China sense of entitlement' described by Rozman has led to increased Chinese economical activities in two major sectors: oil exploitation and fisheries.

If we look at the way China conducts fishing activities, it must first be acknowledged that feeding the largest population on Earth cannot be underestimated in terms of strategic level importance. Claiming the whole SCS through the use of the 'nine-dash line' does serve the purpose of ensuring access to the resources in the water column. For this reason, as an example of a manner of exerting influence, China showed a stronger resolve to exploit the fishing resources in the SCS, deploying the world's largest type of fishing vessel, a fish processing ship that,

> "[at] 32,000 tons, the *Hainan Baosha 001* is one of the world's four largest fish processing vessels, holding four processing factories, 14 production lines, and 600 workers to process and freeze the fish catch. This factory ship can operate at sea

[141] Gilbert Rozman, "China's Narratives regarding National Security Policy," *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (13 March 2011), 5/6.

> for nine consecutive months because it is supported by a 20,000-ton oil tanker and two 10,000-ton vessels."[142]

The message sent here is more than simply effectiveness of resources exploitation. It is a way to leverage China's economic power vis-a-vis the other "claimants which rely on smaller fishing vessels and traditional and artisanal fishing methods (notably Vietnam and the Philippines) [which] cannot compete with China's industrial fisheries."[143] China is claiming its place in the SCS through economic exploitation. The ratio of economic potential is significantly in favor of the PRC. China now has the economic means and resources to exploit the sea in a very assertive manner, which necessarily exacerbates tensions.

Also, the relations with regional neighbours because of economic weight has changed because of China's assertive behaviour. China sets an implicit economic choice for neighbours of the SCS, through power dynamics. Using a localized and recent economic example, it is possible to observe how until recently very adversarial claimants can change significantly in China's favor, because of the leverage that China demonstrates. In November 2016;

> "Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte announce[d] the establishment of a no-fishing zone and marine sanctuary at a lagoon in the Scarborough Shoal. The shoal has been a focal point of tensions between the Philippines and China, but Duterte has broken with his predecessor Benigno S. Aquino III's tough response to China's actions. Instead, Duterte has signaled a warming of ties between Manila and Beijing, preferring to boost economic links and to resume bilateral dialogue with China on disputed territories."[144]

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[142] Donovan Chau and Thomas M. Kane, *China and International Security: History, Strategy, and 21st-Century Policy*, (Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2014), 123.
[143] Donovan Chau and Thomas M. Kane, *China and International Security: History, Strategy, and 21st-Century Policy*, (Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2014), 124.
[144] Council on Foreign Relations, "China's Maritime Disputes – A CFR InfoGuide Presentation," Accessed on 23 February 2017. http://www.cfr.org/asia-and-pacific/chinas-maritime-disputes/p31345#!/p31345

The area in question, the Scarborough Shoal, was highly contested. The significant change by the Philippines can be seen as a direct impact of China's assertive behaviour toward its neighbours. How much of this new relation is due to coercion by China could be speculated, but the end result is that the assertive behaviour does start to benefit the PRC, and re-enforces its narrative.

New Narrative – Social

The social changes in the formulation of the narrative can find their sources in many aspects of Chinese society, but one telling aspect is the expanding community of interest which has had a disproportionate effect on the narrative. More groups of people in China's society now participate in influencing the narrative, something which is forcing the SCS dispute and indirectly increasing the assertive tone. In an article about China's foreign policy, the author argues that the increased level of influence of interest groups complicates policy formulation, but the main point is that this larger community does influence the narrative. It is stated that:

> "[an] expanding community of Chinese interest groups, including the military, local government officials, and state-owned enterprises, gradually came to exert influence over China's external relations, complicating the country's overall foreign and security policy structure. The result has been that China's assertiveness in foreign policy has been directed towards defending a somewhat narrowly conceived set of national interests, rather than addressing broader issues in a coordinated fashion. One illustration was the assertion by a number of officials that the South China Sea should be considered alongside China's "core interest" with Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. While this did not extend to national policy, Beijing's extensive and often hardline rhetoric toward relating countries further escalated tensions in the region."[145]

[145] Nien-chung Chang-Liao, "China's New Foreign Policy Under Xi Jinping." *Asian Security* 12, no. 2 (2016), 83.

The illustration given in this example supports the argument that foreign and security policy is changing because of the increased influence of interest groups which, in this case, focus on national interests, of which the SCS could be considered part of in the current narrative. The larger community of interests, through the effect of compounding of influential voices, will likely fuel assertiveness in the future, to a degree which the CCP cannot necessarily always control perfectly, which could bring some levels of 'unplanned' assertiveness.

New Narrative – Informational

The new PRC narrative about management of 'information' is about legitimacy and control. We have seen in the description of the baseline narrative a desire by China to leverage a strong legal foundation, a leverage which has been challenged by the 2016 Court of Arbitration ruling. To understand the change in China's assertiveness, we must look at how the informational arena has changed. What amounts to ignoring the Court of Arbitration's ruling represents an important indicator for a nation which attempts to build its legal legitimacy. The PRC's official response to the ruling[146] is unequivocal. The language is strong, stating that the "award is null and void and has no binding force" and "obviously errs in ascertaining facts and applying the law." The Chinese response came on the very same day of the ruling, which indicates that the statement in response was likely ready in advance since it was going to support the PRC's narrative, in contradiction of any legal arguments made. The strong language used also serves to undermine the very essence of the international Arbitration tribunal, contributing to raising China's relative

[146] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. *Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China on the Award of 12 July 2016 of the Arbitral Tribunal in the South China Sea Arbitration Established at the Request of the Republic of the Philippines*. 12 July 2016. Accessed on 15 March 2017. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1379492.shtml

legitimacy — or so appears to be the intent. In its response, the PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that:

> "[the] conduct of the Arbitral Tribunal and its awards seriously contravene the general practice of international arbitration, completely deviate from the object and purpose of UNCLOS to promote peaceful settlement of disputes, substantially impair the integrity and authority of UNCLOS, gravely infringe upon China's legitimate rights as a sovereign state and state party to UNCLOS, and are unjust and unlawful." [147]

This approach is certainly a way for China to develop a counter-narrative to an international legal discourse. Even in contradictions, China is perfecting the control of the message. The level at which the international community buys into the PRC's arguments is debatable, but rationality does not appear to be China's primary goal, only legitimacy of its own messaging appears to be. In the end, it could be argued that the SCS dispute is *not* about; maritime access, possession of island, military positioning, or oil and gas exploitation, it is only about power and what this power will allow China to accomplish into the 21st century. We have witnessed the incremental approach in developing a legitimacy of the narrative, by testing the 'legitimacy mechanisms'. Clearly China wants to know how to make anything legitimate, or make it appear so.

In terms of information management, because the SCS has been claimed as non-negotiable — if we accept the 'core interest' stance — walking this back is near impossible for Chinese leaders without damaging their position with national public opinion but also damaging their international credibility. We can argue that this has turned to internally-driven imposed assertiveness. Since the PRC has expanded its occupation of features in the SCS and has built a strong narrative to support its actions,

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[147] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. *Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China on the Award of 12 July 2016 of the Arbitral Tribunal in the South China Sea Arbitration Established at the Request of the Republic of the Philippines*. 12 July 2016. Accessed on 15 March 2017. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1379492.shtml

pulling back now, or in the near future, becomes near impossible. The only question now simply becomes: how is the PRC going to legitimize its claim? A multitude of partial answers could be fathomed but what is more pertinent for the purpose of this paper is that it leads to the argument that, as it relates to the SCS, China is on a path it must now walk, which only exacerbates the potentiality for increased assertiveness.

New Narrative – Infrastructure

China's land reclamation[148] activities and building of infrastructures in the SCS, when compared with previous infrastructure activities in the region, does represent a sign of an assertive behaviour. It is first important to acknowledge that although land reclamation is not new as "China's first land reclamation initiative in this area had begun in February 1988"[149], the speed and volume of reclamation has certainly increased. Also, China is not the only SCS claimant to conduct such activities, as others like the Philippines and Vietnam have engaged in development activities for a long time. What is different however with the Chinese land reclamation is the much larger scale and the much shorter period of time over which is has recently reclaimed large areas.[150] In May 2016, the Pentagon concluded that "China has reclaimed 3,200 acres in the South China Sea." [151] The 3,200 acres figure only represents China's reclamation in the Spratlys and does not include its activities in the Paracels. To illustrate the scale that this number represents, we must recognize that in the whole period prior to 2014, China had

[148] The exact terminology used is very informative as some of the literature sometime refer to 'island reclamation' which is not necessarily a good term to use. The words 'land reclamation' is better used instead to also include features that were under the water at low tide. For a good portion of the reclamation work in the SCS, there was no island — or above water features — before reclamation work in the SCS.
[149] Zhou Fangyin, "Between Assertiveness and self- restraint: Understanding China's South China Sea Policy." *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (2016): 887.
[150] Ibid., 876.
[151] Associated Press (author not specified), "China has reclaimed 3,200 acres in the South China Sea, says Pentagon," Accessed on 1 March 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/ world/2016/may/13/pentagon-report-china-reclaimed-3200-acres-south-china-sea

reclaimed a total of 12.3 acres.[152] This exponential amount of land reclamation is sending a message to ASEAN members and other claimants. This physical infrastructure expansion does represent a permanent presence of the PRC in the region, which is a strong indicator of an assertive narrative, as changing this line of policy development would be very difficult. The only way to demonstrate a reversal would be by abandoning its islands in the SCS.

Another example of significant infrastructure changes is the administrative structure now better formalized to manage the PRC's territory in the SCS. In July 2012, "China declared the establishment of a new city, Sancha which will have jurisdiction over the Paracels, Spratlys and Macclesfield Bank."[153] This action sends the message to other claimants that those islands are now administratively China's territory, strengthening the sovereignty narrative. This is a way for China to formally legitimize the islands into its own administrative system.

This section demonstrated a series of signs of China's new assertiveness in one particular region. As the author argued, the SCS is a key geopolitical experiential region for China to test the water of its future foreign and security policy and more importantly observe the reactions and future strategic positioning of other states. The examples presented range over the whole spectrum of security policy factors and are, to varying degrees, indicators of enhanced assertiveness.

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[152] International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS). "China's Land Reclamation in the South China Sea". 12 August 2015 [Accessed on 5 February 2017]. http://www.iiss.org/en/ publications/ strategic%20comments/sections/2015-1f4d/china-s-land-reclamation-in-the-south-china-sea-e557

[153] Leszek Buszynski and Christopher B. Roberts, *The South China Sea Maritime Dispute – Political, Legal and Regional Perspectives*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 66.

To conclude this chapter, it should be reiterated that China demonstrates a new assertiveness through its actions and rhetoric in the SCS. The next logical line of questioning should be about the conclusions that should be drawn for China's security policy in its wider context. Indeed, if China is willing to behave that way in one key region, how likely is it that this behaviour will be exported as the new PRC's diplomatic behaviour? The next chapter will explore the drivers of China's security policy, while considering them within the wider context of the PRC's grand strategy.

CHAPTER 3: UNDERSTANDING THE EXTERNAL SECURITY POLICY DRIVERS

Having acknowledged the situation in the SCS and China's assertiveness therein, this paper now turns to exploring what significance — in the context of security — it has for the region and the world. This chapter looks at identifying the drivers of China's security policy and their impacts.

Section 1: China's Grand Strategy

Considering that China is increasingly assertive, it is important to establish how the SCS narrative fits within the overall grand strategy, and how the SCS serves that strategy.

Before the discussion, a definition of grand strategy must be provided. Shih and Huang state that theoretically, the concept of grand strategy has three facets: "a state's pursuit of territorial/physical security, its status in the world, and its domestic economic and social development."[154] Those three facets make the analysis of the SCS very pertinent within the context as it encompasses all aspects. Additionally, grand strategy has also been defined as a way to bridge the gap between preferred and actual conditions, through the judgement of the proper role of the state[155]. In the Chinese context:

> "scholars have found Chinese grand strategy a difficult subject to study. Only over a longer time frame can the goal and logic of the Chinese grand strategy be

[154] Chih-Yu Shih and Chiung-Chiu Huang, "The Identity and International role of China," in *China's International Roles: Challenging or Supporting International Order?* Ed. by Sebastian Harnisch, Sebastian Bersick and Jörn-Carsten Gottwald (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 59.
[155] Ibid.

> grasped. Despite investigations taking this long-term perspective, the grand strategy of China remains vague."[156]

This vagueness can be explained by many factors: the secrecy of the regime (previously discussed *neibu* system) and the very procedural nature of defining its grand strategy. We can attempt to understand China's grand strategy by looking at one sliver of it, the SCS. The key here is that this particular sliver encompasses the complete range of security policy levers — and many other levers — that China can use.

In absolute terms, the SCS narrative marginally serves China's grand strategy. It could be argued that China's actions in the SCS, within the purview of its grand strategy, are a response to a threat while others could state that this is a calculated development strategy. If we only look at the external security sector growth in recent years, one must ask if this growth is a response to a threat, perceived or real. For example, Sutter has argued that "recent Chinese national security statements rarely highlighted the fact that Chinese defense policy was being formulated in an environment that was less threatening to China than at any time in the past 200 years."[157] Of course, the perception of threat is a state's prerogative and if the growth of the external security apparatus is not due to a response to a threat, it is likely part of a deliberate development strategy. This perspective provides a more complete view of China's contemporary security posture. The argument about the calculated nature of China's strategy is supported by Chinese scholars when it is stated that China "pursued a strategy of calculated moderation to achieve its balanced

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[156] Chih-Yu Shih and Chiung-Chiu Huang, "The Identity and International role of China," in *China's International Roles: Challenging or Supporting International Order?* Ed. by Sebastian Harnisch, Sebastian Bersick and Jörn-Carsten Gottwald (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 59.
[157] Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy since the Cold War* (Fourth ed. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 103.

interests in development, security, and sovereignty."[158] Considering this within its wider context, the calculated strategy constitutes part of the struggle of China as a nation-state to reconstruct its national identity, which is the ultimate goal of China's grand strategy. Rozman stated that "the recent security narrative is the culmination of an emerging narrative since the 1980s. It is part of a broader reconstruction of national identity by China's leaders."[159] China's leaders must show examples of success in its strategy, and deliberate, long-term development in the SCS represents a great area of demonstrable results.

Incremental Grand Strategy Narrative

While looking at the evolving grand strategy narrative, this analysis must consider the official messaging of the PRC. Using new diplomatic lines like 'striving for achievement', China overtly communicates its message to the world but also, more discreetly, tests its narrative by carefully calculating the reactions of stakeholders. The argument made here is that China needs a 'geopolitical test area' for its revisionist foreign policy, and the SCS is — within the confines of its grand strategy — that perfect 'test area'. This theory is supported by authors who state that:

> "from 2012 to the first half of 2014, the Chinese government was exploring the approach of 'striving for achievement', in part by testing it out in its handling of the South China Sea disputes. China's changing approach towards the South China Sea disputes, therefore, reflects a process of learning and accumulating experience"[160].

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[158] Li Mingjiang and Nanyang Technological University. S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. *Security in the South China Sea: China's Balancing Act and New Regional Dynamics*. Vol. no. 149. (Singapore, Nanyang Technological University, 2008), ii.
[159] Gilbert Rozman, "China's Narratives regarding National Security Policy," *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (13 March 2011), 1/6.
[160] Zhou Fangyin, "Between Assertiveness and self- restraint: Understanding China's South China Sea Policy." *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (2016): 874.

This therefore represents a deliberate and calculated way to advance its grand strategy objectives in an incremental manner.

Another important aspect of the contemporary grand strategy narrative is Xi Jinping's 'Chinese Dream', which is intended to be achieved by mid-century. This 'Chinese Dream' represents a vision which "essentially repackages in a more contemporary form the long-standing CCP goal of the 'rejuvenation of the Chinese people'."[161] This concept touches on many facets of China's development, especially its economical development. Initiatives include the Silk Road Economic Belt and *21*st Century Maritime Silk Road (Aka the "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiative), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and proposed regional free trade agreements[162]. As one portion of Xi's 'China Dream', OBOR highlights the importance of the SCS. Increased control of sea lanes in the SCS is considered to be one aspect of developing the OBOR, but it also demonstrates potential for achievements between those separate Chinese projects. Some have argued that Xi can achieve more during his 10-year tenure on the OBOR than on the SCS issue[163]. That is because the "OBOR is a project that is both feasible and practical"[164]. The SCS dispute is certainly not an easy issue to resolve but if we accept that it serves its purpose of 'geopolitical test area', it will likely serve China's objectives as well on the long term, even in contrast to other larger national endeavors.

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[161] Timothy R. Heath and Bonny Lin, "The Chinese Dream : Strategic and Policy Priorities of the People's Republic", *China, Inside and Out – A Collection of Essays on Foreign and Domestic Policy in the Xi Jinping Era*, RAND Corporation, (Santa Monica, California, 2015), 1.
[162] Timothy R. Heath and Bonny Lin, "The Chinese Dream : Strategic and Policy Priorities of the People's Republic", *China, Inside and Out – A Collection of Essays on Foreign and Domestic Policy in the Xi Jinping Era*, RAND Corporation, (Santa Monica, California, 2015), 3.
[163] Wenjuan Nie, "Xi Jinping's Foreign Policy Dilemma: One Belt, One Road or the South China Sea?", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* Vol. 38, No. 3 (2016), 430.
[164] Wenjuan Nie, "Xi Jinping's Foreign Policy Dilemma: One Belt, One Road or the South China Sea?", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* Vol. 38, No. 3 (2016), 432.

Major Themes in China's Grand Strategy

Acknowledging the place of the SCS within China's grand strategy, this analysis must now consider some of the major themes also influencing the security narrative: namely 'national identity', 'ideology' and 'international order'.

First, national identity is generally a driving force for security policy and that is increasingly so for the PRC. It represents a critical factor in shaping the grand strategy and operationalizing it. Scholars like Gilbert Rozman have argued that spikes in the intensity of national identity are an important factor behind China's assertiveness[165].

One recent example of this can be found in the 2008 Beijing Olympics. In fact, seen as more than a sporting event, "the Olympics, were approached as a coming out ceremony for a culturally proud, architecturally modern, patriotically unified city and state."[166] One could argue that this showcasing is often the case for nations hosting the Olympics but for China, these games were "designed to be the most extravagant, the most culturally redolent, and the most nationalistic in showcasing a state's arrival."[167] The key word is 'arrival', which represents a positioning on the world stage for a nation that desperately wants to increase its soft power in order to achieve its strategic objectives. The bottom line is that China's grand strategy counts on this national identity discourse.

Second, ideology, but more specifically those deep-rooted contradictions of ideologies within a nation, impacts the grand strategy discourse. Indeed, "ideology in China historically has played a role in mobilizing as well as unifying the country."[168] It

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[165] Gilbert Rozman, "Chinese National Identity and its Implications for International Relations in East Asia," *Asia-Pacific Review* 18, no. 1 (2011), 88.
[166] Ibid., 86.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Sujian Guo and Jean-Marc F. Blanchard, *'Harmonious World' and China's New Foreign Policy*, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), 5.

explains in part the very creation of the PRC while we consider its revolutionary roots. Although the internal ideological contradictions are hard to describe, the external ideological opposition — and the most relevant to China's grand strategy — can be summarized in an East-West dichotomy, indeed a Cold War legacy. This still-present ideological opposition cannot be ignored as it consistently occupies a large place in the Chinese discourse. Moreover, the "sustained ideological opposition to Western influences and a perpetuation of China's formidable military buildup [exists] to ensure that it will "never again" be subjugated to outside powers."[169] China's ideology is now increasingly confident in its self-building abilities and growing independence in the region. Therefore, this ideological opposition, generally framed in a China-U.S. antagonism represents an important factor in the grand strategy narrative.

The third aspect to consider is the impact of China's grand strategy regarding its level of integration toward the international system from a security policy perspective. The argument made here is that China is a calculated revisionist and not simply an integrationist. The evolving role of China in the international order could be summarized through two overlapping components: China does not want to yield — in appearance or reality — to the West, and China through its unique culture is leading an Easternization process of sorts. Those two important aspects help explain why China is testing 'alternatives' about its positioning in the international order.

The argument that China cannot 'yield' to the West comes from the fact that although China did not contribute to framing the international order, it must position

[169] William Tow and Richard Rigby, "China's Pragmatic Security Policy: The Middle-Power Factor," *China Journal, the* 65, no. 65 (2011), 159.

itself on the world stage as a rising power. For that reason, it cannot simply accept the international order as it is. There is an underlying belief in the West that long-term Western objectives and beliefs system are incompatible with China's, and vice versa. It has been argued that China, "shows little signs of wanting to move away from the existing international system or to change substantially the global order. This does not mean, however, that China wants to preserve the existing international system."[170] On the one hand, especially from an economic perspective, China "has put considerable effort into demonstrating that it is a responsible great power and that it has been a substantial rule-taker".[171] The change in China's economic positioning could therefore justify that now China will start imposing its own rules going forward, and not only in the economic realm.

On the other hand, the revisionist approach could be perceived as a natural evolution of China's affairs, in relation to its implicit critique of the Western ideologies. Rozman has argued that "China is leaving no doubt that it is a revisionist power impatient to change not only the existing order, but also the way the world perceives the recent centuries of Western ascendancy."[172] He also argued that China has no choice but to reject the integrationist notion of peaceful incorporation into the world order since it would mean changing the values and the ideology of China's political system. This could explain why China has sought a new international order.[173] A revisionist power must

[170] Stuart Harris, *China's Foreign Policy*, (Malden, MA; Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2014), 187.
[171] Ibid.
[172] Gilbert Rozman, "China's Narratives regarding National Security Policy," *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (13 March 2011), 5/6.
[173] Gilbert Rozman, "Chinese National Identity and its Implications for International Relations in East Asia," *Asia-Pacific Review* 18, no. 1 (2011), 87.

challenge the status quo and 'claim' different things, and land and maritime spaces represent tangible goals. 'Chinese characteristics' often come into play in seeking these goals.

To attempt to explain the 'calculated' revisionism, it could first be argued that China is confronted with the "West's venerated trio of democracy, freedom, and human rights"[174], a policy triad that challenges China's grand strategy. It deeply affects the core of Chinese society and any narrative would have to take this into consideration. The very nature of the argument put forward is representative of the:

> "two irreconcilable schools of thought [that] dominate the scholarly debate on China's integration into the international order. On the one side are scholars predicting "China's socialization into an existing, stable, and somewhat fixed institutional setting" (Christensen 2009; Johnson 2007; Kent 2002). On the other side, there are pundits who hold that China's current materiel or immaterial structure as an agent, i.e. its rising-power status or its history-stricken past as a victim of colonialism, will instigate China's dominance in a reconfigured international order of its own making (Jacques 2009; Callahan 2010; Callahan and Barabantseva 2012)."[175]

Because of the recent assertiveness demonstrated by China in its actions in the SCS, which is arguably an example of its modified grand strategy, this paper tends to favor the second school of thought, where China in its opposition to the established international order and integrates the system but imposes its 'Chinese characteristics'.

Additionally, the Easternization process promoted by China is part of a grand strategy putting China closer to the center of the international order. This can be explained by the recognition that the PRC has a unique culture which is worth a certain

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[174] Gilbert Rozman, "China's Narratives regarding National Security Policy," *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (13 March 2011), 3/6.
[175] Sebastian Harnisch, Sebastian Bersick, and Jörn-Carsten Gottwald, *China's International Roles: Challenging Or Supporting International Order?* (Vol. 5. New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 4.

polarization within the international order. This is a definite sign of perception of superiority. Supporting this view, observers note that,

> "[since] 2008, the case for a unique culture *(Zhongguo wenhua teshulun*) has advanced to the point that Easternization (*donghua*) is conceived as a trend that will surpass the outdated Westernization of the world. The idea of "harmonious society" helps to revive Confucian claims about superior social relations."[176]

These shifts or trends occurred fairly recently and can help explain the positioning — intended and actual — by China within the international order. To summarize the argument about the positioning of the PRC, it could be said that China is in a revisionist process but manages it in a calculated manner. For this reason, the PRC is not openly challenging the status quo but is indeed testing alternatives about its position in the international order. One way to achieve this is through variations of its narrative and incremental actions. Marc Lanteigne has summarized this process by saying that:

> "Beijing has done very well inside the global economic and governance system that was largely shaped by America after World War II. But we should have no illusions that China will simply accept this system in its present form forever. Indeed, China has been testing alternatives."[177]

Indeed, China's behaviour in the SCS is one example of testing alternatives, as it helps validate the policy modifications within the context of its grand strategy. China acknowledges the fact that it is where it is as a state because of the world order shaped by the West but its growth in power now gives it the ability to position itself to enable more growth in the future. This reality will therefore be part of China's actions and narrative.

This section served to demonstrate how the SCS narrative serves China's grand strategy, or certainly serves to fuel its narrative because of the critical grand strategy

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[176] Gilbert Rozman, "Chinese National Identity and its Implications for International Relations in East Asia," *Asia-Pacific Review* 18, no. 1 (2011), 91.
[177] Marc Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy: An Introduction* (Third, revised and updated ed. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 209.

aspects that it does affect. Those SCS specific examples could be considered as a series of minor signs of change, but a multitude of them make them increasingly significant.

Section 2: Findings; The Drivers of China's Security Policy

This section serves to identify certain important drivers of China's security policy. If we reconstruct the different aspects discussed earlier; the changes in the SCS narrative and the role of the overarching grand strategy, it is possible to delineate a few drivers of China's security policy. To accomplish this goal, this paper will look at: the concept of "China threat" and the constant equivalent reassurance by the PRC, the desire by China to sustain — i.e. not resolve — the SCS dispute, the positioning of China as a global player, the achievement of a tipping point and, the summarization of the drivers of security policy.

First, why is it valuable to delineate a certain range of security policy drivers? There is a view by western analysts that links the rise of China with the concept of a 'China threat'. For example, John Mearsheimer, the dean of American neo-realist scholars, insist that "China will try to push the Americans out of Asia and dominate the [Asia-Pacific] region".[178] He is one of the proponent of a conflictual rise of China. Therefore, because of this characterization of China's rise, it is always valuable to consider this perception of 'China threat' and therefore understand what those drivers of security policy are, hence confirming or disapproving this perception of threat. Moreover, it is important to extrapolate the security policy narrative from both actions and the reality behind the official Chinese narrative. To note, in response to this 'China

[178] William Tow and Richard Rigby, "China's Pragmatic Security Policy: The Middle-Power Factor," *China Journal, the* 65, no. 65 (2011), 160.

threat' the PRC has promulgated constant reassurance in official communications. In a recent article on "Xi Jinping's Big Power Diplomacy", the author highlighted the:

> "emphasis on the reassurance of China's peaceful rise. But this pacifying approach seems not to be working and to be unattainable for Xi Jinping today. China has turned to a hardline stance on maritime and territorial disputes, with the Philippines and Vietnam in the South China Sea and with Japan in the East China Sea. From day one in office, Xi has made it clear that China wants to maintain good neighborly relations but it cannot be at the expense of China's national interests."[179]

The official narrative seems to increasingly be less effective at countering the perception of a 'China threat'. This balancing act certainly influences the way China is managing the enhancement of its security policy.

Second, the perception of China's intentions toward a resolution of the dispute is equivocal. In fact, from a conflict-resolution perspective, China does not appear to want to resolve the SCS issue quickly. One of the main reasons to support this argument is the fact that the PRC has not, to this day, clearly established its position toward its claims in the SCS. It has, and continues to use vague arguments like the 'nine-dash line'. Scholars have concluded that "Beijing's continuing reluctance to clarify the nature and scope of its claims in the South China Sea further indicates its lack of intentions to resolve the dispute in the near future."[180] Also, Jian Zhang describes the Chinese conundrum toward any resolution in the SCS by the 'three cannots' saying that "it cannot reach an agreement with other claimants to resolve the dispute through diplomatic negotiations, it cannot afford to resort to force, and it cannot afford to follow the current situation to last

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[179] Hu Weixing, "Xi Jinping's 'Big Power Diplomacy' and China's Central National Security Commission (CNSC)," *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 98 (2016), 166.

[180] Leszek Buszynski and Christopher B. Roberts, *The South China Sea Maritime Dispute – Political, Legal and Regional Perspectives*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 61.

indefinitely."[181] Although faced with what seems to be limited possibilities, a resolution might not be what China wants in the short-term, because the SCS still serves many objectives. The SCS currently serves China's grand strategy and, as explained earlier, it represents a great 'geopolitical test area', with fairly limited risks.

Third, the positioning of China as a global player is entirely relative to its relationship toward the U.S. China's narrative is built on the assumption that the U.S. will not dramatically change its foreign policy toward Asia. This positioning acknowledges and responds to the typical economic competition which hinges on great interdependence. As Robert Ross has argued, "because the United States possessed the capability to derail China's economic growth and technological development, US-China cooperation remained China's dominant security imperative."[182] The PRC is therefore inclined to oppose the U.S. while constantly balancing its economic interest. Moreover, there is a meticulously planned great-power calculus in China's sphere of influence, to ensure a constant but not overpowered pressure against the U.S. Ross also concluded that:

> "[as] China comes to dominate security affairs on its periphery, the United States is consolidating its strategic authority in maritime East Asia. The combination of bipolarity with distinct continental and maritime theaters facilitates the development of a relatively stable great power competition. Bipolarity encourages clarity of threat and great power sensitivity to capability gains by potential challengers, thus eliciting rapid responses to small changes in relative capabilities. This effect is apparent in the U.S. sensitivity to the rise of China and its effort to strengthen its capabilities on China's maritime periphery. Despite the rise of China, the regional distribution of power continues to allow for great power stability."[183]

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[181] Ibid., 65.
[182] Robert S. Ross, *Chinese Security Policy: Structure, Power and Politics* (New York; London: Routledge, 2009), 6.
[183] Ibid., 9.

This conclusion is important in the security policy definition of both China and the U.S. as clearly demarcated bipolarity brings stability. It is generally the transitional phase that makes it more unstable. On that note, Roger Irvine concluded that "although China was seeking a 'proactive role' in international affairs, it recognized the constraints of U.S. unipolarity and would pursue "soft-balancing" rather than "hard-balancing"— provided the United States accommodated China's 'core interest.'"[184]

Fourth, when discussing positioning of great powers and the importance of security policy drivers, the concept of relativity is critical. One state's power must be defined relative to another. For this reason, Robert Sutter, an expert of Chinese policy, concludes that "the tipping point in the Asian order that many forecast with the United States in decline and China in ascendance was seen to have arrived."[185] This tipping point only serves to identify the direction of a trend and not a *fait accompli*. The very perception of this tipping point is a source of debate and also a trigger for positioning by China, the U.S. and other stakeholders, all of which want to inject their own agenda and official narrative in this important characterization of a trend. This also tells us that the security situation of the PRC is about relative positioning, which also explains the importance of controlling the narrative by incremental actions, which is a clear objective of the PRC in the SCS. As previously discussed, the SCS represents a good way to maximize the CCP's leadership control in an area where the risks are significant but manageable in their own terms. The SCS is considered China's backward in their own eyes so proximity plays a role in legitimizing and reducing the overall risks.

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[184] Roger Irvine, "Getting Back on Track: China, the United States, and Asia-Pacific Security," *American Foreign Policy Interests* 35, no. 3 (May 2013), 139.
[185] Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy since the Cold War* (Fourth ed. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 327.

Ultimately, after having defined the immediate context within which those drivers exist, it is now important to simply regroup those findings and label them within pertinent categories of drivers of China's security policy, as they were exemplified by China's conduct in the South China Sea. This last part is important as this paper does not claim to establish a comprehensive list of what drives China's security policy, but only those aspects relative to the SCS, acknowledging that they are significant enough to offer the potentiality of extrapolation. Therefore, this paper derives seven key findings. Those findings are direct conclusions derived from the discussion in the previous chapters.

Driver 1. China desires to *continue its assertive geopolitical positioning*, dealing with neighbors and the United States. China wants to create an international order with 'Chinese characteristics'. It wants to legitimize its claims in the SCS and attempt to display legal predominance. It wants to exert its influence and push the assertive dialogue, but not to the point where China would become completely isolated in the region, which does represent a fine line to walk.

Driver 2. China will *increasingly demonstrate its capabilities*: show of force, force projection, improvements of naval capabilities, increasingly professional military. All of those aspects demonstrate the attributes of a great power. China will no longer 'hide one's capabilities and bide one's time' as it recognizes that the quantity and quality of its enhanced capabilities can now serve to promote the PRC. Because China is able to balance its hard and soft powers into a smart power strategy, it will likely increasingly show its hard power to the world.

Driver 3. The PRC wants to continue a *narrative of deterrence* — preventative in nature — where China chooses the tempo. China sets the conditions for the future of the region through power relationships. Assertiveness could be a response to increased pressure because of the growing disconnect between China's claims and UNCLOS and other nations diplomatic pressures.

Driver 4. China's security policy must *serve its core national interests*. Economical rise must continue and territorial claims are of the highest importance since these are both legitimizing factors for the CCP. The narrative relative to core interests is very present in China, especially when it relates to 'real' core interests like Taiwan and Tibet. The fuzziness surrounding the concept of national interest for the time being serves the PRC's narrative so it will likely continue to employ it.

Driver 5. China will continue to reinforce actions and narrative that values and enhances *Regime legitimacy*. International disputes can distract from domestic problems, which is definitely useful for the leadership of the CCP. External disputes keep the narrative of the Regime focused on topics more easily controllable, where the CCP is able to retain the initiative. The SCS issue represents this perfect type of dispute.

Driver 6. Security policy must offer a *scope for investments* and long-term benefits for the PRC. Spending for the military and law enforcement fuels a portion of the domestic economy, and security policy drives the potential ability to expand the pool of resources critical for national development (fisheries and hydrocarbons).

Driver 7. *Ideological principles*, as driven by interest groups, will continue to influence and be fundamental to the narrative. National identity and nationalism will play an increasing part in the security policy narrative.

Finally, recognizing the seven security policy drivers above, it is possible to extrapolate one *overarching finding*: assertiveness has become China's strategic center of gravity in the SCS. In a non-conflictual context, if China loses its ability to be credibly assertive, its future security policy will not be effective. This concept of center of gravity (CoG) is used by many militaries and was first illustrated by Clausewitz, using comparable terminology. As this overarching conclusion is established within the larger security sphere and potentially more specific military sphere, this paper takes the liberty to use a military concept to explain the criticality of assertiveness as a concept that can be operationalized. U.S. Joint Doctrine defines center of gravity as "a source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act."[186] This same concept is what Clausewitz called "the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends…the point at which all our energies should be directed."[187] In the case of China's security policy, assertiveness could be considered to be the *strategic*[188] center of gravity as all of China's national strength, in the SCS context, is derived from this ability, which makes it the most crucial element of its security policy narrative. In other words, China's assertiveness represents its ability to communicate to other stakeholders in a certain way, and this particular ability is where China gathers its moral

[186] United States, Joint Chief of Staff, *Joint Operations Doctrine*, JP 5-0. Vol 1. (Washington, D.C.: Joint Chief of Staff, 11 August 2011), III-22.
[187] Ibid., III-22.
[188] In the interest of full CoG analysis, it could also be argued that the *operational* CoG — one level below strategic — could be considered as being naval and anti-access assets deployed in the SCS. Those assets represent physical assets that enable the affect intended by China.

strength and freedom of action in the SCS. Because of the fact that China is assertive, it enables a certain range of actions. If China would reduce its assertiveness relative to the SCS — especially after having ramped up its security narrative — it would lose significant credibility and its security policy would likely negatively suffer. Having arrived at that conclusion about the criticality of assertiveness in the SCS, this research can only hint at the wider implications of those security policy drivers in other parts of Chinese policy.

To conclude, this section has led to the identification of drivers of China's security policy, which are derived from its actions and narrative relative to the SCS. For further research, those drivers could be extrapolated more widely in other spheres of China's security. The overarching finding — assertiveness being the strategic center of gravity — is important as it represents an indicator of how China will likely continue to behave in the SCS and potentially start behaving in other areas.

To summarize the chapter, it must be said that the SCS, while being a small portion of the grand strategy, allows for geopolitical tests to be conducted and stakeholder's reactions to be measured. The PRC is certainly closely calculating how it will integrate the international order, or modify its role within it.

CONCLUSION

This paper offered an argumentative thread framed upon the key historical aspects relative to the SCS dispute, then built a comparative analysis of the variations in China's narrative highlighting examples of degrees of assertive behaviour. The discussion then moved toward extrapolating what those characterized changes meant for the PRC's security policy.

This analysis led to a number of meaningful findings. First, in relation to time, we have seen that many of the changes highlighting assertive behaviour are recent, mostly in the Xi Jinping era. Also, the origins and justifications of the SCS dispute — from the Chinese perspective — rest on an ambiguous 'nine-dash line' claim. The weakness of this alleged historical argument used by China makes the dispute difficult to rationalize. Therefore, the 2016 Court of Arbitration ruling is important from a legal perspective, not necessarily *for* the Philippines but certainly *against* China, and led to China's legal narrative which now seems to be immovable. Another finding relates to the notion of 'core interest'. In the end, China still demonstrates a high level of commitment toward managing or resolving the SCS issue "on Chinese terms"[189], with very little space for negotiation. The main take away is therefore that the Chinese narrative sees an increasing importance for the maritime domain, a narrative which will likely continue.

In terms of *means*, China is giving itself tools to become more assertive, or certainly to continue present assertiveness in the future. This was demonstrated through the; MLE reorganization, aircraft carrier program, creation of the NSC, large land reclamation and militarization of islands, etc. These tools of assertiveness also

[189] Michael D. Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior – Part One: On "Core Interests"," *China Leadership Monitor*, (15 November 2010), 10.

demonstrate that the SCS narrative fits neatly within China's grand strategy. The argument made here is that China needs a 'geopolitical test area' for its revisionist foreign policy. For this reason, a key finding is also the fact that the 'hides one's capabilities and bide one's time' rhetoric seems to have run its course and that there are signs that the present time is ripe for a new mantra that could read like 'display your capabilities because China's time has come.' The assumption that the 'peaceful rise' has run its course is brought forward by China as a global player, which insists on its own narrative, and tests it within the construct of the SCS. Having said that, because of the role within the international system, China does not indicate any desire for conflict but demonstrates that it must push its own security agenda more actively to achieve its objectives.

The findings and conclusions presented above enable a confirmation of the thesis statement, confirming that the change in China's assertiveness, as exemplified through its actions in the SCS, is indicative of a new set of security policy drivers that will potentially affect regional and global dynamics of power. This was proven through a demonstration of variation in China's behaviour — marking degrees of assertiveness — via concrete examples using elements from a baseline and enhanced narrative, through the use of the PMESII model. Because those elements of change do represent a certain permanence of state, the assertiveness is likely to become the new normal for the Chinese narrative. It offers China new ways to build or strengthen its security policy. Indeed, *the SCS is a barometer for China's security policy narrative and assertiveness is crucial for the credibility of its narrative*.

This research led to the confirmation of a series of security policy drivers likely to be persistent in China's security policy. How those drivers will affect global dynamics would require further research as the exact meaning of the drivers of security policy within the context of China's assertiveness in the wider regional and global context is still left to explore.

In order to examine a different angle in the meaning of this research, it would be possible to look at the security drivers and the underlying narrative explained in this paper to help define China's actions toward the 'space' domain in the future. 'Space' does represent the next frontier where, similar to the sea domain, sovereignty and the rule of law is ambiguous. It is also a domain where great development — in terms of technology and weaponry — can be accomplished. A rising great power will certainly want to define its role toward such an area in the future. China's behaviour in crucial but somewhat unchartered territory like the SCS will be important as an indicator to its behaviour in 'space'. The 2007 destruction by the PRC of one of its own weather satellite by a kinetic kill vehicle[190] is telling. The large debris field created will affect many other stakeholders and will impact future development of 'space' technologies for the global community. China's behaviour could also be seen as rising the level of risks in the security domain. One could argue that there are at the present time more pressing, security-related pressures that affect how China should and would react to regional security threats. Discussion about 'space' sovereignty is a way to see beyond the present and expand our questioning of how the PRC will deal with paradigm challenges of its security situation in the future.

[190] BBC News, "Concerns over China's missile test", (19 January 2007), Archived content accessed on 19 April 2017, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6276543.stm

ACRONYMS

ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CLCS	United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf
CoG	Center of Gravity
CPC	Communist Party of China[191]
KMT	Kuomintang
MLE	Maritime Law Enforcement
nm	Nautical Mile[192]
OBOR	"One Belt One Road" Initiative
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PMESII	Political, Military, Economic, Social, Informational, Infrastructure
ROC	Republic of China (also known as Taiwan)
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SCS	South China Sea
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea

[191] Both CCP and CPC are used depending of context but ultimately represents the same entity, the 'Party' ruling the People's Republic of China.

[192] Official abbreviation should be 'M' for nautical mile but it could be confused with 'Meters'. Many authors use the abbreviation 'nm' so it will be used consistently throughout this paper, unless directly quoted.

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