



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY  
JOURNAL OF POLITICS & SOCIETY  
PUBLISHED BY THE HELVIDIUS GROUP

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Source: *Journal of Politics & Society*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 139-164

Published by: [The Helvidius Group](#)

Stable URL: <https://www.helvidius.org/pham>

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# GONE ROGUE?: CHINA'S ASSERTIVENESS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

*Derek Pham*

Despite China's efforts in the past decade to implement a "good neighbor" policy with surrounding states, in the past two years this foreign policy has been seemingly compromised by China's aggressive tactics in the contested South China Sea (SCS), including its imposition of unilateral fishing bans, arrests of foreign fishermen, and increased coastal patrols. China's supposed private declaration this past March to American officials that the South China Sea constituted a "core interest" appeared to affirm a newfound and unconventionally aggressive commitment to the question of sovereignty in the SCS.\* This pattern of assertiveness was further apparent in China's vehement response to U.S. intervention in the dispute. Media reports attempting to interpret the change in posture concluded that there was still much uncertainty associated with China's ascendancy in the international system.†

Impassioned rhetoric might obscure the more interesting question at hand: why has China now chosen to assert its interests in the South China Sea through the use of aggressive tactics? For the past ten years, China had been remarkably successful in pur-

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\* For a comprehensive assessment and refutation of the "core interest" argument, see Michael Swaine's piece for the Carnegie Endowment, "China's Assertive Behavior, Part One: On Core Interests," *China Leadership Monitor* 34, Fall 2010. The paper argues that changes occurred in the strategic environment, and cites the "core interest" statement as perhaps the most notable example.

† Extensive media attention has been given to this perceived "new form" of Chinese assertiveness. For a select but diverse sample, see Vaudine England, "Why are South China Sea tensions rising?" *BBC News Asia-Pacific*, September 2, 2010; Peh Shing Huei, "Nations eye China's rise nervously," *The Straits Times*, September 30, 2010; Joshua Kurlantzick, "A Beijing backlash: China is starting to face consequences for its newly aggressive stance," *Newsweek*, October 4, 2010.

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suing a policy of “shelving disputes [and] joint development” with the other claimants. As Daniel Blumenthal of *Foreign Policy* writes: “The Chinese were supposed to be using their deep reservoirs of ‘soft power’ and practicing a highly skilled diplomacy at assuring all that China is rising peacefully. But over the past year, Beijing has been [clumsy].”<sup>1</sup> Other commentators noted that “China’s actions in the region have led to unease over what was perceived as its increasing assertiveness, and caused [questions over] its commitment to a peaceful rise. [China] took on a menacing visage. Its diplomacy seemed reactive rather than proactive.”<sup>2</sup> These comments underscored a change in the status quo which was highlighted at the July 2010 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in Hanoi where the United States departed from its previous neutrality on sovereignty issues in the contested sea and declared a “national interest” in the sea and a “maritime commons,” challenging China’s claim to the entire SCS.<sup>3</sup>

The following analysis examines China’s changing stance on sovereignty and concludes that Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea is in fact a natural consequence of an unfortunate intersection between growing Chinese naval capacity and other states’ misunderstanding of China’s strategic outlook. The combination of these factors resulted in a security dilemma, but China has been held solely responsible for the resulting crisis. Eager to confirm the reality of an “aggressor China,” media reports and other commentary have neglected to provide critical insights into China’s strategic behavior and the rationale behind its “assertiveness.” Instead, the tendency has been to ascribe China’s actions to the “maritime threat theory,” which claims that China’s naval forces are developing with the sole aim of “threaten[ing] U.S. security and interests” and must therefore be deterred.<sup>4</sup>

This analysis first examines two alternative explanations for China’s changed posture—resource politics and nationalism—and argues why both have inadequately addressed the tensions behind the recent situation. It then shows that although China’s strategic view of the SCS and its broader goals of naval development helped fuel the security dilemma, China was by no means the sole perpe-

trator of the breakdown in cooperation. It concludes by positing a function that may explain Chinese behavior in which, all other things being equal, enforcement or deterrence, credibly leveraged by growing naval capacity, is the response to provocation.

## RESOURCE POLITICS, AGAIN

One argument explaining China's growing assertiveness in the SCS concerns resource politics, which posits China's need to meet energy demands as the primary driver behind the country's recent aggressive behavior. Ian Storey and Clive Schofield believe that China's "insatiable demand for energy is an important driver of the [recent dispute]"<sup>5</sup> and Bruce Stokes has observed that "Chinese analysts have dubbed the South China Sea the new Persian Gulf, and Beijing wants to solidify its dominion over potential oil and natural-gas reserves there."<sup>6</sup> China is attracted by the prospects of lessening its dependence on foreign imports of oil and gas, and as a result has acted abrasively in the SCS. As evidence of this notion, proponents have cited the growing role of the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) in sea exploration and joint development agreements. Despite the popularity of this viewpoint, the resource politics explanation has several shortcomings in the context of the recent dispute.

Beijing's interest in the sea as a source of oil is not recent news. In fact, Beijing has long persisted in claiming that oil and gas deposits exist in large quantities and has provided generous estimations of the resource potential of the sea.<sup>7</sup> China estimates that 34.97 billion tons of petroleum reserves remain to be drilled, in addition to the 1,182 billion tons of oil and 8,000 billion cubic measures of gas already discovered.<sup>8</sup> Though the U.S. Department of Energy has declared that "there is little evidence outside of Chinese claims to support the view that the region contains substantial oil resources,"<sup>9</sup> China maintains that these reserves exist and has commenced several exploration projects with various foreign companies from other claimant states and the United States. In 2006, for example, CNOOC partnered with the American company Husky

International to conduct explorations in the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea and claimed that four to six trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves existed near the archipelago.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, though China is a major oil consumer, it also uses coal, natural gas, hydroelectric, and nuclear power to meet its energy needs. Imported oil currently makes up only around 10 percent of China's overall energy usage,<sup>11</sup> and the ratio of petroleum in China's energy consumption structure is around 24 percent.<sup>12</sup> Coal, not oil, accounts for the majority of energy consumption at 71 percent.<sup>13</sup> Roughly 85 percent of China's oil production capacity is located onshore, while only 15 percent is located offshore.<sup>14</sup> Offshore oil may help to ease Chinese oil consumption demands, but it has yet to replace onshore production as the main source of crude oil production. As one Chinese scholar has suggested, "China, at least, is not focusing on the SCS for its future energy sources."<sup>15</sup>

If resource politics is the issue, what explains China's unusually cooperative behavior towards some of the claimant states in the period before relations deteriorated? Observers have noted that the escalation of tensions in the SCS has grown in tandem with increasing energy needs. But China is not alone in its hunger for resources; other claimants also view the sea as a resource prize. This view overlooks China's position on joint development, which has been for the most part cooperative. In the early 1980s, Deng Xiaoping called joint development "one of the...most important peaceful means for international dispute resolution."<sup>16</sup> Joint development was first proposed by Chinese premier Li Peng in 1990 when he "called upon claimants to set aside sovereignty to enable joint development to proceed."<sup>17</sup> The 2003 and 2005 joint development programs with the Philippines and Vietnam are two occasions when China promoted this strategy to rein in sovereignty contests and further enhance its image as a cooperative regional actor. Thus, if resource politics induced a change in China's posture, the argument must also explain why China has altered its stance concerning resource cooperation, despite accommodating and even initiating

joint development on several occasions in the past decade.\*

## NATIONALISM OVERUSED

China's assertiveness in the SCS has also been attributed to nationalism. Growing nationalistic sentiments in the party have placed pressure on the leadership to act assertively in order to re-inforce legitimacy and project the image of a capable China. Although this argument is often used retroactively to explain China's foreign policies, it offers little authoritative analysis of the origins of the current tensions. Blumenthal cites author Christopher Ford, who argues that China's bullying behavior in the South China Sea was a direct result of its "hardwired cultural conditioning"; Chinese leadership has been conditioned for "imperious behavior" and possesses "the mind of an empire."<sup>18</sup> Ott backs these sentiments, claiming, "Powerful emotions are at work. China has become convinced that it is ready to replace the United States as the global power... the Chinese let their pride get out of control."<sup>19</sup>

Observers examining the increased tensions between China, the other claimants, and the United States have been *reactive* to China's actions in the SCS, interpreting China's assertiveness to be the result of a rising tide in public nationalism. Yet, while nationalism is inextricably linked to the escalation of tensions, it does not reflect China's motivations for assertiveness in the SCS. A useful case study is the 1995 Mischief Reef incident in the SCS, which at the time was a sore spot in Sino-Southeast Asian relations. China's actions during that conflict led its neighbors to believe that it harbored a nationalist ambition to re-establish hegemonic power in the region.<sup>20</sup> As Mark Valencia argued at the time, "China's actions in the South China Sea are the result of a rising tide of nationalism that seemed to be replacing socialism as the preferred societal

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\* This topic is beyond the scope of this paper. For an overview of some examples of Chinese cooperation over fisheries management and joint oil and gas development, see David Rosenberg, "Fisheries management in the South China Sea," 61-79, at 70-72; Zou Keyuan "Cooperative development of oil and gas resources in the South China Sea" 80-92, at 85-87; Li Mingjiang, "China's South China Sea dilemma: balancing sovereignty, development, and security," 140-54, at 148-51.

glue.”<sup>21</sup> Likewise, Gerald Stegal stressed the point: “The Chinese regime copes with the internal consequences of reform by taking a tough stand on nationalist issues, hence Beijing’s active and vigorous pursuit of claims in the South China Sea.”<sup>22</sup>

Both the 1995 Mischief Reef incident and the subsequent flare-up of the same crisis in 1997 were eventually defused. No direct linkages were made between rising nationalism and the reasons for China’s actions during that period; rather, nationalist rhetoric inflamed the debate *after* the crises came to light. In periods of controversy or high crisis, nationalistic sentiments were mobilized only to immediately evaporate when the crises subsided. However, it seems possible that nationalism is an effect rather than a cause of aggression, crippling its persuasiveness as an explanation. In authoritarian states like China, nationalism is a legitimating device. But in pursuit of legitimacy, did the regime “fan the fire” to stir up support for its actions in the SCS, or did nationalistic pressures force the regime to act aggressively in the SCS? By extension, why did the regime stir up support for such actions, or contrarily, why did nationalists need to pressure the regime to act? The causality is unclear. The nationalism argument ultimately fails to explain China’s behavior. As Stenseth has argued, “The regime may use nationalism to bolster legitimacy, which in turn can easily reflect back on the elite and force it to behave more aggressively than it would otherwise have done.”<sup>23</sup> The role of nationalism in igniting the SCS dispute is at best ambiguous, though it is clear that once the dispute garnered attention in Chinese and Western media, nationalism naturally reinforced the intractability of the sovereignty question and obscured its causes, as nationalist responses to tensions in the SCS might have come from either the public or the regime.

## A FRAMEWORK

Given these unsatisfactory explanations, a more plausible reason is needed for China’s behavior in the past two years, which has been noticeably different from the previous

period of cautious optimism. From 2002 to 2008,<sup>\*</sup> China persisted with its strategy of joint development as the principle dispute resolution strategy. However, in the past two years, China has grown increasingly unsure of the sustainability of such a strategy. Analysis demonstrates that its assertive rhetoric, matched with tangibly aggressive actions in the disputed seas, were a response to a rapid change in the security environment brought on by the actions of the other claimants. A convergence of factors contributed to China's perception of a threat that, *inter alia*, included "arms modernization" in Southeast Asia, the internationalization of the dispute under Vietnam's ASEAN chairmanship, harassment of Chinese fishermen, and repeated violations of China's maritime laws. Through the framework of a security dilemma, these were legitimate reasons for China to respond, but only if its navy or maritime forces had the capacity to do so effectively and credibly.

Since the culmination of the dispute this past July at the ARF meeting, China has felt the ripple effect of its actions. Storey and Schofield have claimed that "China's behavior sets the tone of the dispute, and since 2007-2008, its behavior has become more assertive."<sup>24</sup> With the focus on China's reactive behavior, little attention has been given to China's strategic perspective on the sea and its connection to national security interests, the role of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in preserving those interests, and the combination of these three elements in guiding and justifying China's actions in the SCS. These are important factors that must be examined in order to understand China's seemingly irrational actions. Although this discussion inevitably gives rise to a "battle of perspectives," it helps to inform the rationale behind China's actions.

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\* I use this time period for the purposes of this analysis, using the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of States in the SCS as the starting point and the 2008 completion of Hainan naval base as the ending point of China's active pursuit of cooperation in the SCS. However, other analyses might note the period after the 1997 Asian financial crisis as the beginning of the positive shift in relations between China and Southeast Asia.



## CHINESE PERSPECTIVES ON NAVAL POWER, NATIONAL SECURITY, AND THE SCS

China is a geopolitically vulnerable country that for much of its history has faced real and imagined threats from both land and sea. During the Cold War, efforts were made to modernize China's defenses, but naval development was delayed as a result of the government's emphasis on modernizing a land force capable of deterring continental threats.<sup>25</sup> The end of the Cold War brought changes to China's traditional threat environment. With the exception of India and Bhutan,<sup>26</sup> China resolved all outstanding land disputes along its terrestrial periphery.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, in the 1990s, China refocused its attention on the sea—an area that it had been unable to effectively control during the Cold War. A common strategic view took shape, which predicted that “challenges to China's territorial integrity and sovereignty [would] mostly come from the ocean, including the South China Sea.”<sup>28</sup> To hedge against these threats, China focused its efforts on naval modernization.

Even before the force's modernization in the 1990s, China maintained a fairly formidable maritime fleet relative to its neighbors. However, this force, mainly comprised of World War II-era Russian naval craft, was fairly inexpensive and expendable.<sup>29</sup> These weapons acquisitions were the products of naval developments begun earlier during the 1970s and 80s when China was attempting to modernize its amphibious forces to respond to contingencies that could arise during a China-Taiwan conflict.<sup>30</sup> Aside from Taiwan, the perception of coastal threats gave way to a strategy that linked China's security with its interests in the Yellow Sea, the East and South China Seas, and the island chains that served as a “perimeter” separating Chinese claims from Japan and Russia.

Accelerated naval modernization came only after the tense Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995-1996.<sup>31</sup> During that incident, China recognized that it did not have the naval capacity to deter the United States. The Strait Crisis thus set off a continuing effort to modernize China's navy, which has encompassed a broad range of

weapon acquisition programs, including anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs), anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs), surface-to-air missiles, submarines, destroyers, patrol craft, and amphibious ships.<sup>32</sup> Rapid naval modernization reflects the government's focus on maritime security, which has been given equal or greater priority compared to continental security.

China's rapid naval modernization program is undeniably the result of the navy's growing strategic importance. According to then-Director of the PLA's General Equipment Department, General Cao Gangchuan, "The [PLAN] shoulders the important mission of safeguarding the security of the territorial sea and is placed at the forefront of military [engagements]."<sup>33</sup> Former USN Naval Attaché to China Brad Kaplan agrees: "Such support by senior PLA leadership has resulted in the PLAN being allocated a higher proportion of the defense budget in recent years, allowing it to pursue force modernization aggressively."<sup>34</sup> The real strategic shift, however, came in a December 2006 senior navy officers' meeting where Chairman Hu Jintao declared China a maritime power and called on the PLAN to develop a powerful People's Navy that would "adapt to its historical mission during a new century and a new period."<sup>35</sup> The PLA newspaper *Jiefangjun Bao* published a piece which extolled China's status as a self-declared maritime power.<sup>36</sup> These views seem to corroborate the perception that PLAN's maritime mission had evolved from "static coastal defense" to "active offshore defense"<sup>37</sup> and that the enforcement of national interests relied on the accelerated development of a modern force capable of asserting China's interests in the "deep seas."<sup>38</sup>

How does one make sense of China's aims regarding the rapid modernization of its maritime and naval capabilities? One common view holds that China's naval modernization is meant to challenge the American presence in the region and that the PLAN will continue to act as an anti-access force that could deter U.S. intervention in any potential dispute with Taiwan.<sup>39</sup> Although China may be enhancing its naval capacity to safeguard its territorial claims from other claimants and to ensure maritime rights against what

it sees as an overbearing U.S. presence near waters it claims as its own,<sup>\*</sup> these factors do not necessarily make China unreasonably aggressive. Realists would endorse China's attitude towards national security because Beijing's perception of threat, which often includes U.S. naval presence during tense periods, is important to its strategic calculations and greatly influences the pace of China's military modernization programs.

Scrutinizing its actions through a prism other than security, China's motivations for naval modernization are varied. Ralf Emmers has argued that "the Chinese military build-up in the South China Sea goes beyond avoiding, by force if necessary, any violations of its sovereign rights in the disputed areas. Other factors that drive the Chinese naval build-up include guaranteeing China's maritime security...economic prosperity and energy supplies."<sup>40</sup> In the Chinese strategic view, the sea has always been important for purposes beyond naval defense, even if it remains the most important consideration.<sup>†</sup> Increasingly, China needs the ability to respond to issues that threaten coastal security such as piracy, resource exploitation, and territorial claims. The navy aside, other maritime fleets like the coastguard and fisheries patrol<sup>‡</sup> help respond to emergencies and enforce China's maritime laws.

Naval modernization has its benign elements. A Congressional Research Service report found that China's pursuit of naval modernization serves a range of goals, including the ability to regulate foreign military activities in its 200-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ), protect its sea lines of communication, and enhance

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\* See, for example, the view of an "aggressor" China (rising in tandem with growing naval capacity): Abraham Denmark, "China's Navy Gets its Act Together, and Aggressive," Center for New American Security, April 26, 2010.

† Mao Zedong in 1952 declared "we must build a powerful navy against aggression by imperialism."

‡ Bonnie Glaser. Personal Interview. Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC: October 21, 2010. For example, the South China Fishery Administration dispatches ships to "protect China's national maritime interests and safeguard Chinese fishing fleets' safety. [Other goals include] standardizing fishing activities, strengthen conservation efforts, and provide Chinese fishing fleets with rescue services." [Wang Tong and Youwei Suo, "To Fight Piracy and Protect Fishing Fleets, Spratly Islands Patrol Flotilla of Chinese Fishery Administration Left Sanya." *Zhongguo Xinwen She*, April 6, 2010].

its prestige on a global scale.<sup>41</sup> Even the U.S. Department of Defense noted in their report to Congress that, apart from “challenging” the United States, the Chinese navy has demonstrated the capability to conduct limited deployments to support counter-piracy operations, and has acquired new classes of ships to support humanitarian and disaster relief missions.<sup>42</sup>

Aside from such humanitarian missions, strategic calculations for force modernization also involve strategies to sustain China’s long-term role as a “maritime power.” The Defense Department report states that “in response to the 2004 articulation of the PLA’s ‘New Historic Missions,’ China’s senior military leaders began developing concepts for an expanded regional maritime strategy and presence ... PLA Navy Commander Wu Shengli called for a ‘powerful navy to protect fishing, resource development and strategic passageways for energy.’”<sup>43</sup> The report further notes that “many of [Wu Shengli’s] ideas echo the debates in the late 1980s and early 1990s over building PLA naval capabilities. However, the rise of Taiwan contingency planning as the dominant driver of PLA force modernization ... largely sidelined these discussions.”<sup>44</sup>

These observations imply that concern over China’s naval modernization has generally focused on the “aggressiveness” of the modernization effort, but China’s naval development aims also include objectives unrelated to deterrence capacity against the United States in a dispute with Taiwan. For example, in their response to Ross’s assertion that China’s more aggressive naval development is connected to its decision to develop a “carrier-centered navy” with the wherewithal to challenge the U.S. Navy, Saunders and Glosny argue that the PLAN is “much more likely to develop a limited power-projection capability that increases China’s ability to defend regional interests in contingencies not involving the United States, to protect expanding overseas interests, to perform nontraditional missions, to conduct military diplomacy, to demonstrate international responsibility, and to increase China’s prestige.”<sup>45</sup> Their argument underscores the fact that though China is undeniably interested in balancing the American naval presence in the region, China is also developing its navy for many other purposes that do

not involve confronting the United States, and in areas that do not explicitly challenge the 7th Fleet of the U.S. Navy.

The South China Sea is uniquely important to China as a natural shield for security in the south. Stability in this region is critical for China's national security because an undisturbed periphery is a precondition for peaceful development.<sup>46</sup> Ever cognizant of the need to achieve this goal, Beijing clashes with the other claimants in order to increase its control over the "near seas."<sup>47</sup> The occupation status of the claimant countries illustrates the significance of control. Though China may be the strongest of the claimant states, it is Vietnam that occupies most of the land features in the SCS. This struggle for control has roots in the history of SCS tensions that characterized Sino-Southeast relations until 2002. China twenty years ago was in no position to enforce its claims to the sea. While it has been argued that China's show of military force during the 1974 and 1988 clashes with Vietnam over the Paracel and Spratly Islands in the SCS clearly indicated its enforcement ability, those cases reflect Chinese opportunism more than assertions of power. In 1974, capitalizing on the imminent collapse of South Vietnam and the unlikelihood of U.S. intervention, China seized the Paracel Islands from Vietnam. The brief naval clash was an "uncomplicated military maneuver that did not require deploying significant naval forces, which China did not then possess."<sup>48</sup> China acted because of low opportunity costs, and not necessarily the ability to project sustained naval power. The post-Cold War threat environment led China to enhance its navy's power projection capabilities, acquire new and advanced weapons systems, and modernize its South Sea Fleet (SSF).<sup>49</sup> Of the three fleets under the command of the PLAN, the SSF was the weakest in the 1970s, but it now rivals and perhaps surpasses the North and East Sea Fleets.<sup>50</sup>

Chinese claims to the sea encompass four different perspectives, all equally valid in the Chinese legal sense, which inform China's rationale for assertiveness. First, China has always viewed the South China Sea, one of its "near seas," as "a region of core geostrategic interest and part of a great defensive perimeter established on land and at sea to protect China's major population and economic

centers along the coast.”<sup>51</sup> But the nature of China’s claim over the waters, islands, shoals, and rocks found within the 1947 U-shaped territorial boundary has never been clarified,<sup>52</sup> leading to several different and at times, politically convenient interpretations.

According to Peter Dutton, the U-shaped line may be interpreted as denoting China’s sovereign waters, and is subject to the government’s jurisdiction. If this were the case, the waters would be seen as China’s territorial seas. Under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), this designation has several strategic implications for claimant states, the most important being that the term “territorial” gives China complete jurisdiction over those waters. As identified by Dutton, this view helped inform the passing of the 1992 Law of the PRC on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone, which essentially claims all the island groups in the South China Sea and promotes the U-shape line as a “zone of sovereignty.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, this law gives Beijing the right to use force to protect the islands.\*

Another interpretation of the 1947 line claims the sea as historic waters, premising China’s claim on historic rights. Chinese law incorporated historic rights in the 1998 Law of the PRC on the Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf, and has used historic rights to argue for “administrative responsibilities” over the islands.<sup>54</sup> This argument has helped justify Chinese claims to broad jurisdictional authority over the islands in the SCS, and in combination with China’s “sovereign waters” perspective, it explains China’s rationale “for increased activities in the sea by the vessels of China’s Maritime Surveillance Service, Fisheries Service, Coast Guard, and others.”<sup>55</sup>

A third view argues that the line simply claims the land features† that are found within those waters. However, this implies that UNCLOS allows coastal states to claim sovereignty over the land features and the adjacent waters surrounding those land features. Since China claims all of the land features within the U-

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\* See Article 14 of the Law, which states that the PRC has the right to exercise “hot pursuit” when foreign vessels enters the PRC’s waters.

† Land features, inter alia, include islands, rocks, sand bars, and coral heads.

shaped line, it has also argued for its right to the entire sea surrounding those features.\* This perspective contributed to China's decision to pass the 1992 and 1998 laws, which first claimed island groups in the SCS and then claim the accompanying territorial seas, exclusive economic zones, and continental shelf associated with those land features.<sup>56</sup>

One final perspective contends that China's assertiveness about its claims in the waters of its near seas has grown in tandem with the size of its navy and maritime services. Therefore, "the U-shaped line reflects China's long-standing maritime security interests in the South China Sea, and they should have legal protection."<sup>57</sup> The view suggests that China's maritime security interests are closely linked with the boundaries of the U-shaped line, and threats posed by other claimants to these security interests would result in a show of force, contingent on a capable maritime force credibly asserting control. The four perspectives provide critical insights into the Chinese strategic and legal perspective on the disputed sea, and explain in some detail how China's "law-based" view of the sea has led it to promulgate laws that guide and justify its aggressive actions in situations where those laws are violated.

The role of the Chinese navy in assuring China's national security and defining the threat environment helps to elucidate China's understanding of its claims to the disputed sea, and its motivations in forcefully asserting its claim. Naval development, prioritized under the national security strategy, has affected China's position in the South China Sea. It makes China more confident in its ability to deter other claimants from violating Chinese maritime laws concerning the disputed sea. Over the past two years, China's naval and maritime forces have played a role in this dispute by carrying out activities such as arrests, patrols, and fines, which align with the national interest. But with force projection secured, what of the catalysts that moved China to respond to other SCS

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\* This interpretation is contrary to existing international definitions of what constitutes an island, but for the purposes of this paper, I examine the Chinese view of these claims.

claimants? The following analysis turns to the roles of those states whom the Chinese have dubbed the “true provocateurs” in the dispute.\*

## PROVOCATEUR OR VICTIM? – THE SECURITY DILEMMA IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Emmers argued, “Beijing is not solely responsible for the rise in tension in the South China Sea.”<sup>58</sup> Likewise, Storey and Schofield have admitted that “the activities of other claimants have led China to pursue a more hard-line policy [in the SCS].”<sup>59</sup> Having examined the Chinese strategic view of the SCS and its relationship to broader goals in naval development, this analysis now turns to the more controversial question behind the dispute: what caused China to act in a manner that elicited worldwide criticism? Underlying this analysis is the classic security dilemma, in which disputant states acting rationally in their own interests misperceive each other’s intentions and collectively produce a suboptimal outcome.

Chinese sources point to several actions undertaken by the Southeast Asian claimants that intensified the security dilemma to the point of “forcing” China’s hand. President of the National Institute for South China Sea Studies Wu Shicun has claimed, “The direct cause to the Nansha [South China Sea] dispute is the encroachment of the four countries Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei on the rights and interests of China’s Nansha Sea areas. [C]laimant countries concerned in the Nansha dispute and seeking to capture sea areas by ‘force’ have triggered an arms race.”<sup>60</sup> What were these “encroachments”?

As even some Western scholars have suggested, the first “provocation” to trigger an “aggressive” response from China resulted from tensions over the Philippines’ 2009 Baselines Law. However,

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\* Many online commentators have argued that the provocations have become unbearable to the extent that China’s problem is no longer Taiwan, but Vietnam. Though questionable in their objectivity, they offer a glimpse into what some Chinese believe regarding the present dispute. See “Courageous attack: China’s objective is not Taiwan but Vietnam and the Nansha Sea” (大胆进攻：中国目标不是台湾而是越南是南海), <http://www.1n0.net/Article/jqcb/77061.html>.



Emmers notes that China was already incensed by the Philippine Parliament's decision to pass the 2007 Maritime Boundary Act, which incorporated parts of the disputed Spratly Islands into Philippine territory. Fueling the fire, the Philippine military announced in 2008 it would repair and lengthen the airstrip at Kalayaan Island, the largest island occupied by the Philippines, and upgrade troop quarters.<sup>61</sup> Thus, when the Philippines passed the Baselines Law in 2009, which essentially claimed sovereignty over the contested Huangyan and some reefs and islands in the Spratly Islands, China's embassy in Manila lodged a complaint and vehemently criticized the law. China "made strenuous attempts to dissuade the Philippines from enacting [the 2009 law] but was ultimately unsuccessful."<sup>62</sup> As a result, Chinese naval analysts predicted China would seek to safeguard the country's maritime rights and interests by speeding up the demarcation of China's territorial waters, tightening administrative control of the islands, and intensifying naval readiness by adding training on operating weaponry.<sup>63</sup> This response elicited regional concern that China was taking a notably "aggressive" stance in the dispute.

A second "trigger," according to Sam Bateman, was Malaysia and Vietnam's joint submission in May 2009 to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS).<sup>64</sup> The submission, which followed the Philippines Baselines Law, was regarded as highly provocative because it not only claimed the entire southern part of the contested seas but also internationalized the dispute,<sup>65</sup> challenging China's attempts to keep the conflict on a bilateral level. China's response was to submit a protest note that included the uninterrupted U-shaped line map, therefore "reviving old suspicions in Hanoi, Kuala Lumpur and Manila."<sup>66</sup> To show its displeasure, Beijing also established a new Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs and "enhanced patrolling capabilities in an attempt to further assert its sovereignty."<sup>67</sup> As Bateman notes, Malaysia and Vietnam's persistence in keeping the submission on the table despite China's protestations "[was] seen as a political gesture that only served to inflame the situation."<sup>68</sup>

A third factor of China's aggressive actions in the SCS was

Vietnam. As ASEAN Chair for 2010, Vietnam was well positioned to accord the SCS dispute a high priority on the ASEAN agenda.\* According to one Chinese commentary in the daily newspaper of the CPC Central Committee *Renmin Ribao*, Vietnam's persistence in internationalizing the issue was like "playing with fire," and it warned that Vietnam needed to "constructively respond to China's consistent good-neighbor policy on its periphery."<sup>69</sup> Indeed, from China's perspective, Vietnam had been opportunistic, denying China's attempts to be a good neighbor and encouraging members to unite against China. Vietnam's success was evident during the ARF meeting when, in an unprecedented move, twelve of the 27 ARF members voiced support for Clinton's demand that China respect the maritime commons.<sup>70</sup> Both Glaser and Ott argue that China was surprised and shocked by the show of unity and consensus that had grown around this issue, further provoking China to continue its sea strategy of arrests and patrols.<sup>71</sup> As Glaser has also suggested, Clinton had been prepared to make such a statement only with the backing of others in the region. The Chinese media interpreted this cooperation as an attempt by the United States and Vietnam to drive a wedge between China and the other claimants.

Aside from the actions criticized by China, other incidents have also exacerbated the security dilemma. The PRC-owned press agency *Zhongguo Tongxun She* reported that "in addition to dealing with the SCS issue by political and diplomatic means, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia have repeatedly taken military actions...to capture 'sea areas' by force."<sup>72</sup> Predicting the tensions that would come in 2010, another Chinese analyst pointed out in 2009 that "the navies of countries in the South China Sea areas have developed very rapidly in recent years...The weapons that

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\* For examples of "internationalization" of the issue, see speeches from Secretary Gates at the Shangri-La Dialogue 2010 (IISS) and Secretary Clinton's remarks at the ARF 2010 forum. Robert Sutter in a *Comparative Connections* Report also claimed that "Vietnamese officials visiting Washington were unusually direct in complaining about what they depicted as escalating Chinese military actions in the area and seeking support from [Washington]." [Senior Officials Visit; South China Sea Tensions." *Comparative Connections* 12 (2): 69-76.] Also see Richard Weitz in "Why US made Hanoi Move" who claims that the US was "under pressure" from ASEAN countries to step up over the South China Sea [The Diplomat, August 18, 2010].

the [non-Chinese claimants] have purchased...includes U.S.-built Hornets and the Russian-built MIG-29s and Su-27s. We cannot afford to be optimistic over the situation in the South China Sea. While China will neither take part in [an] arms race nor threaten other countries with force, China must consider its own security."<sup>73</sup> The sentiment echoed Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi's remarks in a statement refuting the media fallacies over China's position on the SCS. In a response to China's aggressive patrols, Yang stated that "China, being a big country, also has its legitimate concerns. Is this expression of one's legitimate concerns coercion? That is not logical."<sup>74</sup> In the framework of the security dilemma, China reacted to something that may not have been a tangible threat, but was certainly perceived as such.\*

Besides the perceptible arms buildup, China also considered skirmishes between fishermen and patrol boats in the SCS to be "illegal activities"<sup>75</sup> on its waters and responded accordingly under the provisions of its maritime laws. The literature has pointed to Vietnam, but other claimants also played a role in the tensions. In June 2009, China protested Indonesia's arrest of seventy-five Chinese fishermen who were accused of fishing illegally in Indonesia's EEZ.<sup>76</sup> This past June, Chinese fishermen were arrested and their fishing boats detained by both Philippine and Indonesian authorities on charges of illegal fishing.<sup>77</sup> According to an IISS report,<sup>78</sup> another serious incident came in March 2010 when Chinese fishing trawlers reported that the Vietnamese coastguard was harassing them, and it was only when the Vietnamese heard that a Chinese flotilla of six ships from the North Fleet was headed towards the SCS that they dispersed.<sup>79</sup> As the IISS report suggests, the Chinese flotilla was sent as a warning to the Vietnamese.<sup>80</sup>

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\* The traditional argument that China is the biggest actor in the region and most militarily powerful, so it feels less constrained to act within the realm of established law.

## ENFORCEMENT: A FUNCTION OF PROVOCATION AND CAPACITY

This analysis, premised on the assumption that states are rational actors operating under a security dilemma, asserts that the security dilemma has been a significant cause of China's aggressive behavior. This assertion relies on two analyses, the first establishing the framework for China's strategy regarding naval development and the second detailing provocations that may have led China to act assertively on the sea. Combining both analyses yields a simple function that describes China's muscular behavior. *Enforcement* response is the function of the level of *provocation* and *capacity*. The first analysis suggested that when China's naval capacity increases, its enforcement capacity grows as well. If provocations persist, China feels obligated to defend and assert itself, but only with sufficient naval capacity. When combined into a function stripped of its spatial and temporal elements, these two analyses provide a critical insight: regardless of the situation in the South China Sea, China's view of its naval power, coastal defense obligations, and claims to other disputed seas remain essentially the same. The U.S. naval presence, Taiwan, and the Yellow or the East China Seas also present potential threats to China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In light of China's broader strategic goals and its security dilemma-induced environment, it may be asserted that China's naval modernization, while condemned by both the United States and the other claimants, will proceed irrespective of any disputes over the SCS. Admittedly, the naval build-up has formed and intensified one dimension of the security dilemma, provoking strong reactions from the non-Chinese claimants. But this has led to increased emphasis on China's assertiveness as indication of its recalcitrance, and distorted to some degree the cause of this dispute: a spillover in the security dilemma.

Together, the two previous analyses make it clear that although Beijing may still be regarded as a perpetrator, it is not the only perpetrator, despite portrayals of a rogue China that has finally "risen" and now must be deterred. Indeed, while attempts have

been made to depict China as a regional bully, it would be unfair to ignore the fact that China was responding to what it saw as an imbalance in the status quo, in which the other claimants engaged in threatening activities. As one commentator notes, Beijing's position on the SCS prior to the recent flare-up had been one of pained flexibility:

Beijing may not be happy about the fact that it still has the smaller presence in the South China Sea and that it has not been able to dictate recent developments on the South China Sea. Instead, Beijing has often found itself on the defensive. China has scrupulously accepted those declaratory, moral, political, and even legal commitments on the premise that those commitments should not fundamentally challenge the bottom line of Chinese sovereignty in the South China Sea.<sup>81</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Though responsibility for the SCS tensions remains disputed, it is clear that tensions have escalated in the past two years, and the list of confrontations continues to point to China—the biggest, strongest, and most vocal of the claimant countries—as the aggressor. An examination of the dispute dynamic shows that an unfortunate security dilemma has arisen as a result of misperceptions of Chinese naval capacity, goals, and strategic outlook. For their part, the Southeast Asian claimants have had similar experiences, and their own motivations and rationales for action deserve attention as well. However, in seeking to understand the other claimants' perspectives it is helpful to elucidate the problems of a security dilemma in the context of China's position.

This analysis surely has its own shortcomings, and leaves unanswered several issues for future research. It has not devoted sufficient attention to the role of the United States, instead emphasizing China's strategic view and its perspectives on provocation. Future research might consider to what degree the United States has influenced tensions, as it only recently articulated its position

on the status of the sea as “a maritime commons.” One other critique of this analysis will inevitably be the appearance of lenience in its interpretation of the Chinese view of the sea and of its naval capacity. China’s claim that its four legal perspectives legitimize its sovereign contests is easily countered by contrasting interpretations from Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. Which interpretation is superior? While the use of these perspectives to defend China’s actions fuels a conflict over semantics, law, and historical interpretation, the introduction of these four perspectives helps to establish a rationale for Chinese action, and need not preclude the basis of any other claim. This analysis has sought to show that China’s motivations are underscored by four interpretations that help to explain the legitimacy of its actions. Observers are not privy to Chinese leadership decisions, but it is reasonable to assume that in the world of rational players, distorted by a security dilemma, reasons to act aggressively—often justified by domestic law and corroborated by existing international law\*—help, ironically, to frame rational choice.

Despite its shortcomings, the present analysis does clarify the complex issue of perception, its relationship to the security dilemma, and its potential to distort the dynamic and variable dimensions of the dispute. At the time of this writing, China and the involved member states of ASEAN have begun a dialogue to establish a legally binding code of conduct. The prospects for success of such an endeavor may depend on the legacy of past actions. Regardless, China will continue to face a dilemma of its own creation. Though it has begun a process of damage control with its southern neighbors, it would weaken its position by admitting to being the perpetrator of conflict or by seeking any accord that undermines its claims. The outcome of the drama in the South China Sea remains uncertain. It seems that for China, no matter the maneuver, being perceived as a “good neighbor” has not

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\* For example, China subscribes to the UNCLOS as legitimizing its claim (historical, sovereign, etc), although the premise of its claim has ironically been questioned by UNCLOS.

been enough.

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