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Southeast Asia and the Militarization of the South China Sea

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Introduction

One of the greatest puzzles in the academic study and contemporary practice of international politics is whether the rise of China, as a re-emerging global power, would be peaceful amidst the perception of declining US dominance (Christensen 2006; Mearsheimer 2006; Starrs 2013; Monteiro 2014: 122–126; Regilme and Parisot 2017a; 2020; Regilme and Hartmann 2018). Considered as the “most important rising power” (Hameiri and Jones 2015: 3), China, with its expanding sphere of influence in world politics, will “undoubtedly be one of the great dramas of the twenty-first century” (Ikenberry 2008: 23). Despite the countervailing discourses from some Chinese political elites who advocate a more pacifist tone, some Western scholars, pundits, and policy makers warned that China’s political ascendancy is inevitably dangerous (Mearsheimer 2006; Regilme 2019; Regilme and Parisot 2020). This sense of insecurity is felt more increasingly in the Southeast Asian region, where many of the smaller countries have traditionally depended upon the US leadership and security guarantees. The South China Sea¹ (or the SCS hereafter)—a marginal sea area that is partially surrounded by Northeast (China and Taiwan) and Southeast (Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam) Asian countries—has become one of the most visible maritime geographic spaces of conflict in the region. In Southeast Asia, four out of ten countries therein are active claimants of a part of the SCS region: Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei.

As one of the world’s highly militarized site of inter-state territorial conflicts, the SCS is economically significant for the global economy

primarily because a large chunk of annual world trade output passes through this maritime area. The US interest in the dispute is discursively sold as about “ensuring freedom of navigation,” considering that “half the world’s commercial shipping passes through the SCS—\$5 trillion a year—and US warships regularly transit the region on their way to and from the Persian Gulf, Southwest Asia and the Indian Ocean” (Spitzer 2012: 8). The UN Conference on Trade and Development emphasizes the economic significance of the SCS, because nearly 60 percent of maritime trade comes through the Asia-Pacific, and at least one-third of the global trade needs to pass through the SCS (Jennings 2021: 6). The SCS is important also for Europe, because the disputed maritime region links Southeast and Northeast Asian markets to the Indian Ocean, which serves as the transit point for goods to Europe (Jennings 2021: 6). Due to its global economic significance amidst conflicting territorial claims, the SCS is described as a regional problem that could potentially result in a large-scale global conflict (Fravel 2014; Mastanduno 2014).

This chapter² addresses the following key puzzle: Why did claimant states, especially China, recently increase militarization activities in the SCS region, in unprecedented ways that were relatively absent in the previous decades? I offer three substantive propositions. First, the enduring Chinese military insecurity from American dominance in Southeast Asia has been recently amplified by the confluence of China’s economic rise, and more importantly, the domestic political considerations within the Xi Jinping-led regime. I offer a domestic politics-oriented approach in explaining the strategic resolve of Beijing to militarize the disputed SCS region. Second, although many countries in the region uphold a “hedging foreign policy strategy,” which refers to their strategic engagement “both” with China and the US, the Southeast Asian countries’ recent patterns of foreign policy behavior and perceptions suggest that the US remains the preferred security guarantor amidst the re-emergence of China as a regional power. Third, notwithstanding such a perception of Southeast Asian states toward the US, I demonstrate that Washington’s long-term commitment of upholding its security guarantees to its Southeast Asian partners is hindered by the US’s need to strategically engage with Beijing. Such a motivation for engagement stems from the need to protect broader American interests in global governance—or interests that are perceived to be much more consequential to its goal of maintaining its long-term position in the international system.

The SCS dispute is widely seen as part of the broader policy and scholarly debates on the US hegemony vis-à-vis rising or re-emerging powers, including China. As Michael Yahuda (2013: 446) argues, “China’s new assertiveness in the South China Sea has arisen from the growth of its military power, its ‘triumphalism’ in the wake of the Western financial crisis and its heightened nationalism.” Mainstream International Relations contributions

to the SCS dispute and the rise of China debates have always been driven by the deliberate use or defense of a (single) paradigm—including realism (Christensen 2006; Glaser 2011a; Kirshner 2012; Mearsheimer 2014; Regilme and Parisot 2017b: 5–6), liberalism (Hughes 1995; Buzan 2010; Ikenberry 2011) or even historical materialist orientation (Parisot 2013; Starrs 2013), among several dominant approaches or paradigms.

The goal herein is not to discredit those important works; rather, this chapter distinguishes itself from those mono-paradigmatic approaches by underscoring the role of various domestic factors within SCS claimant states as well as the broader transnational dynamics involving the US and its long-standing hegemonic influence in Pacific Asia. Recognizing the explanatory limitations of employing a singular International Relations paradigm, this chapter employs instead analytic eclecticism, which constitutes a “middle-range causal account incorporating complex interactions among multiple mechanisms and logics drawn from more than one paradigm” (Sil and Katzenstein 2010: 19; see also Cornut 2015; Regilme 2021). In that way, I acknowledge the complexity and confluence of various factors that can account for the sudden increase in foreign policy assertiveness and militarization activities of China and other Southeast Asian claimant states in the SCS maritime region.

Considering the Biden presidency’s divided policy attention, largely generated by intensified US involvement in Europe due to the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine amid the unstable domestic politics in the US, SCS claimant states’ tenacity to rely on the US security umbrella is likely to become weary over time. Thus, I underscore the explanatory power of examining the interactions between “ideas” and “material interests” in the study of international politics. Such interactions can be seen in two ways:

- how the Southeast Asians’ self-reinforcing positive “perceptions” of the US push for a balancing and hedging strategy toward China; and
- how the considerable limitations in the “material capabilities” and the “range of foreign policy concerns” (beyond Southeast Asia) of the US undermine the credibility of Washington’s commitment to its Southeast Asian partner states.

This chapter is organized as follows. I begin by characterizing the increasing militarization in the SCS maritime region, an outcome brought by strategic interests (material), yet smaller Asian states have renewed their strategic military ties to the US as a response to China’s land reclamation activities, a development triggered by those countries’ long-standing affinity to the US (ideational). Next, it discusses the causes and consequences of increased military and construction activities in the disputed maritime region and argues that strategic material interests and recent changes in domestic politics

in Beijing primarily shape the highly insecure security environment in East Asia, especially Southeast Asia. The third section discusses how and why the SCS dispute becomes a litmus test for the continuing rivalry for regional hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region between the US and China. I explain how domestic politics and economics, particularly in China, as well as public and elite perceptions (pro-US socialization of East Asian elites) play a crucial role in the patterns of inter-state diplomacy in regard to the SCS dispute. Finally, the chapter discusses the broader theoretical and policy implications of an analytically eclectic approach on the SCS dispute.

The recent militarization of the South China Sea

Many foreign policy observers and political elites in the Asia-Pacific region view the SCS to be in a precarious situation, compared to the last few decades. Whereas the territorial dispute during the last three decades or so largely focused only on marginal backlashes in inter-state public diplomacy, China today has aggressively implemented “dredging operations for land reclamation works ... at seven disputed reefs and shoals,” and the “naval and air force facilities are being established: new piers and wharves, extended airstrips, and military garrisons with radar installations and coastal artillery” (Yoon 2015: 1). In the Spratly Islands, several hundreds of miles from the Chinese mainland’s coastline, “Chinese dredgers are spewing up torrents of sand from the sea bed, turning reefs into new islands” (Marcus 2015).

As the US Pacific Fleet Commander Harry Harris stated, “China was using dredges and bulldozers to create a ‘great wall of sand’ in the South China Sea” (Brunnstrom and Takenaka 2015). In mid-June 2015, the Chinese foreign ministry reported that the land reclamation activities in the seven reefs in the SCS region would end soon and announced that it would begin establishing infrastructures in those reclaimed lands “for defence, but also maritime search and rescue, disaster relief and research” (BBC 2015a). Amidst the COVID-19 global pandemic on March 2022, US Indo-Pacific Commander John Aquilino confirmed that “China has fully militarized at least three of several islands it built ... arming them with anti-ship and anti-aircraft missile systems, laser and jamming equipment and fighter jets in an increasingly aggressive move that threatens all nations operating nearby” (Associated Press 2022: 1). In 2021, nearly 300 Chinese maritime militia vessels were found roaming and monitoring the Spratly Islands at any given time as a way of Beijing’s intensified territorial claims (Hale 2021: 1). According to the Pew Research Center, based on a cross-national survey of 15,313 respondents from ten Asia-Pacific countries (April 6–May 27, 2015), the majority of the respondents from the Philippines (91 percent), Japan (83 percent), Vietnam (83 percent), South Korea (78 percent), Australia (63 percent), Malaysia (45 percent), and Indonesia (41 percent) confirmed

that they are “very/somewhat concerned” about the territorial maritime disputes with China (Pew Research Center 2015). On July 28, 2015, the Chinese navy “conducted live firing drills” in the SCS, which involved “more than 100 naval vessels, dozens of aircrafts, several missiles launch battalions of the Second Artillery Corps, as well as unknown number of information warfare troops” (The Ministry of National Defense, People’s Republic of China 2015). In other words, “China’s growing naval power” facilitated the emergence of a perception of overwhelming “capability and evident willingness to enforce its claims more assertively” (Ciorciari and Weiss 2012: 63). Since the start of Xi Jinping’s leadership, China has demonstrated more confidently its military capabilities in the SCS region and expressed escalatory foreign policy rhetoric in ways that were not observable in previous years (Poh 2017: 158; see also Chang-Liao 2016).

Those unilateral actions by Chinese authorities have triggered serious complaints from other Northeast (particularly Japan and Taiwan) and Southeast Asian (especially Vietnam and the Philippines) states, many of them hinting that the probability of a military confrontation in the region are much higher than in previous decades. Even a non-claimant Southeast Asian state such as Singapore expressed its discontent over Chinese assertiveness in the SCS region; specifically, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong upheld the SCS ruling in The Hague in 2016 and called for freedom of navigation rather than Chinese control of the maritime area (Yahya 2018). Ann Marie Murphy clearly described the various remarkable ways in which Beijing has been vigorously undermining other Southeast Asian states’ activities in the SCS region:

China’s maritime assertiveness not only produces disequilibrium in the system but also directly threatens the national interests of four states under discussion. China has ousted Philippine fisherman from Scarborough Shoal and taken physical control of it. Beijing has denied Vietnam fisherman access to traditional fishing grounds, deployed an oil exploration rig to waters within Vietnam’s EEZ, and used force against Vietnamese ships sent to protect those waters. China has physically interfered with Indonesian efforts to arrest Chinese ships caught fishing illegally in Indonesia’s EEZ. China has made numerous incursions into Malaysian waterways and planted a Chinese flag in Malaysia’s EEZ. (Murphy 2017: 172)

In response to Chinese land reclamation projects, smaller SCS claimant states started to bolster their military defence capabilities and have welcomed an increased presence of US naval and other military forces in their own territories—a development that was markedly absent in the last 20 years since the end of the Cold War. The brewing anxiety among Asian states

over the recent Chinese activities in the SCS region is reflective of a much broader trend (Cheng and Paladini 2014: 187): “Since 2010, China has been perceived by the Western world as adopting an increasingly assertive posture in safeguarding its maritime interests.” In fact, Zhou Fangyin (2016: 869, 871), a prominent foreign policy strategist from the Chinese Academy of the Social Sciences, acknowledges that “since 2010 the situation in the South China Sea, which had been calm during the post-Cold War era, has become more volatile”—a transformation of Beijing’s earlier stance of “keeping a low profile” to a “striving for achievement” mode (2016: 871). Thus, the emergence of Chinese-made artificial islands in the disputed SCS region and the Chinese military build-up therein intensified a sense of insecurity among Southeast Asian states including two notable non-SCS claimant states in the broader Asia-Pacific region, particularly Japan and Australia.

The recent Chinese militarization of the SCS dispute is a quite unprecedented development in the US-dominated East Asian order. Minjiang Li (2015: 362–363) argues that the 2000s, or the pre-Xi Jinping era, witnessed a much more multilaterally engaged Chinese foreign policy even in regard to the SCS issue. In the 1990s, Beijing was generally “prepared to shelve the sovereignty issue, work towards a peaceful resolution of the dispute based on international law, and jointly develop the natural resources with other claimants” (Storey 1999: 99). For example, Beijing provided “consistent political support” to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), by active participation in its various regional security dialogues (Storey 1999). The Chinese government and the ASEAN member countries committed to the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the SCS (DOC), which contributed to the relative peace and stability in the disputed maritime territory (Li 2015: 363). In November 2011, during the ASEAN–China Summit in Bali, Indonesia, Beijing committed to providing RMB3 billion to establish the ASEAN–China Maritime Cooperation Fund for projects supportive of the DOC in addition to its participation in multilateral negotiations with the ASEAN claimant countries on drafting a Code of Conduct on the SCS (Li 2015: 363). Even as early as 2002, ASEAN and China “signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the SCS with a view to enhancing peace, stability, economic growth, and prosperity in the region,” and Beijing even “acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation one year later” (Thang 2011: 63). Indeed, the pre-Xi Jinping regime witnessed a more diplomacy-oriented approach to the SCS dispute, an observation that is also shared by prominent Chinese legal scholars (Shicun and Huaifeng 2003: 311), who enumerated various diplomatic instruments which China and ASEAN have used prior to 2010. Accordingly, all those instruments were “important contributions to maintenance and promotion of regional peace, security and progress,” and they “have set up a landmark in the history of Sino-ASEAN relations” (Shicun and Huaifeng 2003: 311).

There are three key domestic political factors that drove Chinese foreign policy strategy in the SCS region to a more assertive and militaristic stance. The first key factor refers to the broader domestic change whereby the politicians at the top of the Communist Party leadership have been experiencing fundamental challenges to their domestic legitimacy. As Kurlantzick (2011: 6) describes such a development, the death of Deng Xiaoping (China's top leader until the 1990s) witnessed the emergence of "successive leaders—who were younger or lacked military experience—who did not enjoy the same wide-ranging authority." Because of the increasing military capabilities of the Chinese military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) "has begun to view itself as the most important guarantor of China's safety and national interests" (Kurlantzick 2011: 7). In response, as early as 2010, top Communist Party officials began asserting Chinese interests beyond its territory, a strategy that could bolster their nationalist credentials and domestic authority. On July 2010, during an ASEAN summit in Hanoi, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi expressed his dissatisfaction with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's call for respecting the norm of "freedom of navigation" in the SCS region. Yang reminded ASEAN leaders that "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact," while he looked down on the foreign affairs minister of Singapore, which is one of America's closest allies in the Asia-Pacific region (Pomfret 2010: 9). This incessant desire for the Chinese Communist Party politicians to bolster its nationalist credentials, together with the increasing economic power and military capabilities of the Chinese state, facilitated the emergence of Chinese assertiveness in the SCS dispute.

The second factor pertains to the change in the top leadership in Beijing in 2012 and the internal political struggles within the Chinese state, both of which reinforced the increased military and political assertiveness of Beijing over the SCS issue. Indeed, Xi Jinping's ascendancy in 2012 to the top leadership of the state marked a transformative episode in Chinese foreign policy, especially in regard to the SCS dispute. The reliance on militarization emerged from Xi's instrumentalization of China's increasingly strong economic and military instruments as a way to influence global politics in a way that is attuned to perceived interests of Beijing (Lam 2014). Such a strategy was quite evident in regard to territorial disputes involving China. Although the SCS dispute has been an on-and-off episode, the SCS issue emerged as a critical juncture for Chinese foreign policy in regard to territorial disputes. In fact, the official Chinese government document called *Study Times* (released by the Central Party School, the top political academy of the Communist Party) specifically lauded President Xi for his policies in the SCS region:

[President Xi] personally steered a series of measures to expand [China's] strategic advantage and safeguard the national interests. ... On

the South China Sea issue, [Xi] personally made decisions on building islands and consolidating the reefs, and setting up the city of Sansha. [These decisions] fundamentally changed the strategic situation of the South China Sea. (Mai and Zheng 2017)

The increase in the number of military and civilian activities in the SCS reflected the core ideational foundations of Chinese foreign policy. For example, the Communist Party in 2012 “reclassified the South China Sea as a ‘core national interest’, placing it alongside such sensitive issues as Taiwan and Tibet”—which “means China is prepared to fight to defend it” (Marcus 2015: 6). Moreover, such a transformation in policy focus coincided with the naval doctrinal changes since Xi Jinping took power. According to the strategy document released by the Chinese navy in 2015, China “will shift its focus to ‘open seas protection’, rather than ‘offshore waters defence’” (BBC 2015b: 2). According to US intelligence sources, Chinese authorities have built around 800 hectares of dry land in the disputed Spratly Island region, which many suspected could be easily used for naval and military purposes. In addition, China’s PLA has commissioned “regular security patrols” in the SCS, “reflecting its increasing capability and the heightening concern of the Chinese leadership to strengthen China’s territorial claims in the area through a military presence” (Cheng and Paladini 2014: 193).

These political developments suggest that “the new Chinese leadership is widely seen to be more confident in handling major power relations and more inclined to assert China’s interests than its predecessors,” whereby the current Chinese leadership has assertively bolstered a foreign policy paradigm that emphasizes a “new type of great power relations” (*xinxing daguo guanxi*), where the aim is to put China at the center of global governance (Chan and Li 2015). Such a foreign policy agenda coincided with the 18th Party Congress Report in China that emphasizes the need of making the country a “maritime power” through several strategies:

(1) formulating an effective control, management and protection of previously neglected maritime domain, particularly the ECS [Eastern China Sea] and SCS; (2) exerting significant influence on regional and international maritime regulations and practices with assertive maritime diplomacy; (3) becoming a powerful maritime economy through effective use of maritime resources within and outside of China’s sovereign space. (Chan and Li 2015: 42)

The unprecedented framing of its assertive military strategy is motivated by Xi Jinping’s need for consolidating his power, especially by “demonstrating his image as a strongman, who is willing to take tough political and military action to protect China’s interests” and by paying “more attention to the

military than his two predecessors” (Chan and Li 2015: 43). Because of China’s economic slowdown, Xi Jinping’s regime has bolstered nationalist rhetoric in its SCS issue-oriented public diplomacy in order to divert the public’s attention from the regime’s recent failure to effectively sustain a high level of equitable economic growth, which is a crucial source of the Communist Party’s legitimacy (Nye and Ramani 2015). Consequently, the increasing militarization of the SCS and the intensification of public diplomacy disputes boosted Xi Jinping’s “prestige and authority for his domestic reform agenda, along with an assumption that the United States is extremely unlikely to intervene at this moment in time” (Sun 2014). China did not participate in the special arbitral tribunal constituted under Annex VII to the 1982 United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) proceedings in The Hague in the years 2015 and 2016, as initiated by the Philippine government—a policy option showing Beijing’s preference for unilateralism and remaking the status quo (Permanent Court of Arbitration 2015). The ruling intensified the political resolve of China to defend its territorial claims, while the specifications of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) judgment motivated the Duterte-led Philippine government to abandon the ruling and restart a clean slate in its negotiations and deliberations with Beijing (Zhang 2017: 441). When the PCA ruled in favor of the Philippines, Beijing openly defied the court judgment and expanded its militaristic footprint in the SCS through the “fortification of military outposts in the Spratly Islands ... constructed reinforced aircraft hangars on Subi, Mischief and Fiery Cross reefs,” thereby increasing “the PLA’s power-projection capability in the SCS” (Shah 2017: 6).

The third factor refers to Beijing’s disinterest in working with ASEAN, which could facilitate the resolution of disputes among member states and with external actors (Huan and Emmers 2016: 90). There are three factors that undermine ASEAN’s potential for facilitating effective dispute resolution mechanisms in the SCS issue. First, the Chinese government has prudently preferred to deal with each claimant state on a bilateral basis, as such a mode of diplomacy weakens the bargaining position of smaller states such as the Philippines and Vietnam. Second, because several ASEAN members are also SCS claimant states with conflicting and converging interests, it is difficult for the regional body to act as a neutral mediator. Finally, because China is not a member of ASEAN, any potential dispute mechanism emanating from ASEAN could be seen as illegitimate to the extent that it is likely designed to promote the interests of ASEAN member states. As such, Beijing exploited the absence of a shared position between ASEAN members in regard to the SCS, considering that generating a common ASEAN approach to the dispute is important in matching “Beijing’s ‘divide and conquer’ approach” (Jaknanihan 2022: 16). Meanwhile, it is very likely that China will continue to defy any form of institutionalized dispute resolution mechanisms,

especially in the context of ASEAN and the recently concluded PCA ruling in The Hague.

In recent years, the Chinese government has been committed to bolstering the rhetorical persuasiveness of its territorial claims, particularly the highly disputed “nine-dashed line,” which was an arbitrary demarcation line that Beijing refers to in its claims for large parts of the SCS. China’s PLA Deputy Chief of Staff General Wang Guanzhong made an exhaustive elaboration of the “nine-dashed line” during the 2015 Shangri-La Dialogue (Sun 2014). In recent years, Chinese military documents and officials’ speeches have framed China as a maritime power, although Beijing’s top diplomats have undermined the militaristic rhetoric surrounding the SCS issue. Ouyang Yujing, head of the Chinese foreign ministry’s department of boundary and ocean affairs, contended that the SCS issue and the recent construction of artificial islands must be seen in light of China’s role in “maritime search and rescue, disaster prevention and mitigation, marine scientific research, meteorological observation, ecological environment preservation, safety of navigation and fishery production” (Graham-Harrison 2015). Similarly, Chinese defense ministry spokesperson Yang Yujun argued that: “Looking from the angle of sovereignty, China’s development of construction on its islands is no different at all from all the other types of construction going on around the country,” and “island building” was “beneficial to the whole of international society” because of reasons pertaining to humanitarian and environmental protection purposes (BBC 2015b; see also BBC 2015a). Even China-based policy scholars supported Beijing’s recent foreign policy changes on the SCS issue, including the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ Xu Liping, who contended that “it’s obviously unfair for the West to question China’s intentions in its reclamation projects ... it shows that the West has willfully misjudged the situation in the South China Sea” (Graham-Harrison 2015). Yet the worrying trend about China’s claim in the SCS region is not only the ambitious territorial claims invoked in the nine-dashed line principle but also China’s strategic nuclear capabilities that could challenge American power in the region, especially in the control of sea lines of communications and the commercial routes in the SCS (Koda 2016: 93–96). In her systematic study of all public speeches of the 39 Politburo members of the Chinese Communist Party (2013–2018), political scientist Oriana Mastro (2021) shows that these highly influential political elites persistently invoked cooperative themes (“cooperation and political solutions”) in addressing their country’s claims in the SCS, while the statements of one lone member, Xi Jinping, constitute nearly half of the total number of statements construed with competitive themes (“sovereignty, military, freedom, tension, and non-regional countries/the United States”).

Consequently, Beijing’s assertive foreign policy likely facilitated a “rally ‘round the flag’” effect (Oneal and Bryan 1995), which increased domestic

nationalism in mainland China, thereby diverting the Chinese population's focus on the economic and socioeconomic problems at home. One likely factor for strategically increasing Chinese assertiveness in the SCS region is that the "the Communist Party of China (CPC) wants an external conflict to divert attention of the Chinese people from numerous domestic tensions," a goal that is inspired by the fact that "the large majority of [the] Chinese [population] are convinced that the SCS is indisputably part of China" (Meyer 2016: 7). To be exact, there are several principal domestic problems that the Communist Party is extremely concerned about: corruption within the government, economic slowdown, pollution in urban areas, economic inequality, and demographic imbalance, among many others (Laliberte 2016). Those problems undermine the Chinese state's legitimacy. While the Communist Party appears committed to address those problems head-on, diverting the population's attention toward perceived security threats abroad could somehow lessen the dissatisfaction with the problems at home.

The increased militarization of the SCS facilitated the prevailing perception of insecurity among smaller Southeast Asian claimant states' political elites. Indeed, "in recent years, China's ties with many regional countries have experienced a turn for the worse," which "was largely due to the fact that Beijing has demonstrated more readiness to utilize hard power in pursuit of its security interests in the South China Sea" (Li 2015: 360). Consequently, the Philippine government has vigorously welcomed increased US military presence within its territory. As one of the only two Mutual Defense Treaty allies of the US in Southeast Asia (the other is Thailand, a non-claimant state in the SCS dispute), the Philippines has reaffirmed its strategic military partnership with the US in November 2011 through the Manila Declaration, whereby increased "rotational deployment" of US naval surveillance in the archipelago and its nearby maritime areas has been welcomed. Such a demand for "rotational deployment" of US forces was fortified in the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement between the US and the Philippines, which is a ten-year pact that formally allows American forces to temporarily station military troops and resources within the archipelago (Agence France Presse 2014). In April 2015, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter announced that Manila and Washington will sponsor annual military exercises near the Spratly Islands in SCS, and he upheld America's "desire to ensure there were no changes in the status quo by force or that territorial rows were militarized" (Brunnstrom and Takenaka 2015).

Because of the emergence of assertive Chinese foreign policy rhetoric and actions in the SCS region, the other smaller countries in the region started to change their approach to the SCS dispute. It was in April 2012 when the Philippine navy dispatched BRP *Gregorio del Pilar*, one of the most modern warships in the region and a decommissioned ship from the US Coast Guard, in order to reprimand several Chinese fishing vessels that

were spotted in the Scarborough Shoal—a territory that is claimed by China, Taiwan, and the Philippines (Chan and Li 2015). For the Philippine navy, the goal was to arrest the Chinese fishermen. Yet, two powerful Chinese maritime surveillance ships eventually hindered the Philippine forces—an act that led to the Chinese state’s eventual control of the Scarborough Shoal. Since the takeover of the Shoal in 2012 by the Chinese authorities, the SCS region has been the source of various public diplomacy disputes, increasing military presence (China, the US, and other Southeast Asian claimant states), and the build-up by Chinese authorities of artificial islands and infrastructures in various reef regions in the SCS. As Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert Del Rosario (2011–2016) maintained at that time, China’s activities in the disputed maritime region are “threats to regional peace and stability” (Felongco 2013). Despite Philippine President Duterte’s (2016–2022) pro-China public pronouncements during the early years of his term, 3,800 Filipino and 5,100 US armed forces personnel initiated in March 2022 “large-scale military drills, in show of strength as China grows increasingly assertive in the disputed South China Sea and Russia’s war with Ukraine rages on” (Venzon 2022: 1–2).

Other Pacific Asian states have also fostered new (or renewed) strategic military partnerships in the aim of countering China. Although a non-SCS claimant state, but a Mutual Defense Treaty ally nonetheless of the US, Japan has recently fostered closer military cooperation with the Philippines in the wake of China’s assertiveness in the SCS and Senkaku territorial dispute with Japan. On January 2021, the Japanese government submitted a diplomatic note to the UN dismissing Beijing’s maritime baseline claims and condemning its attempts to constrain “freedom of navigation and overflight”—that protest emerged amidst other diplomatic condemnations in the UN issued by the UK, France, Germany, Australia, the US, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia (Haver 2021: 2–3). Earlier than that, under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the Japanese government has been busy garnering support from other non-Asian powers in order to undermine China’s attempts to change the status quo in the territorial boundary make-up of the region. Largely generated by Shinzo Abe’s lobbying during the 2015 G7 meeting in Germany, the G7 leaders issued a joint statement that advocated for “maintaining a rules-based maritime order and achieving maritime security,” and that the established powers “are committed to maintaining a rules-based order in the maritime domain based on the principles of international law, in particular as reflected in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea [UNCLOS]” (Panda 2015). The joint statement came as a remarkable development considering that many of the G7 countries’ leaders have, in the past, consistently avoided directly addressing the SCS dispute. The Philippines and Vietnam upgraded in January 2015 their bilateral ties in the form of a “strategic partnership” and advocated that “‘concerned parties’ should adhere

to the ASEAN-China Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, conclude a Code of Conduct, exercise restraint, and resolve disputes peacefully in accord with international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea” (Thayer 2015). Vietnam’s increasingly strained relationship with China began in June 2011, when Hanoi accused Beijing of “deliberately cutting the cables of oil exploration vessels in the western Spratly Islands, calling the second incident a ‘premeditated and carefully calculated’ attack” (Giorciari 2012: 61). The Philippines has also intensified its negotiations for strategic partnership agreements with South Korea, Japan and Vietnam, particularly in terms of military, political, and economic cooperation. Indeed, the “growing Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea in recent years has led to a growing convergence of strategic interests between Manila and Hanoi” (Thayer 2015)—a development that emerged amidst the deterioration of China–Vietnam bilateral ties (Amer 2014). Malaysia’s Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad planned for the government authorities to continue occupying a handful of islands in the SCS. He also recommended that “foreign warships” should be avoided in the SCS and should be replaced instead by smaller boats that are supposed to guard it from pirates (Jaipragas 2018; *The Straits Times* 2018). Amidst the increasing unilateral assertiveness of Chinese claims in the SCS, “the United States has moved to strengthen defense ties with ASEAN states that share concerns about China,” a strategy that even led the Obama administration to resume military ties with Kopassus, or the Indonesian special forces unit (Buszynski 2012: 148).

The South China Sea and the challenges to US–China bilateral relations

What makes the current SCS dispute fundamentally different in the way previous claimant and other stakeholder states approached such an issue in the past? I contend that the SCS dispute could be a possibly dangerous source of inter-state conflict among claimant states and great powers—a development that only emerged in recent years. Political elites within and far beyond the region perceive the current conflict “not” merely as an intra-Asian affair but as a critical issue on great power rivalry. That is the case because, as Buszynski (2012: 139–140) maintains, the SCS dispute “has started to become linked with wider strategic issues relating to China’s naval strategy and America’s forward presence in the area.” Similarly, arguing that the US and China are “caught in a security dilemma,” Adam Liff and G. John Ikenberry (2014: 89) maintain that “self-understood defensively oriented policies are generating insecurity and military responses on the other side that make both countries less secure and trigger new rounds of competition.” Hence, the SCS dispute demonstrates the strategic military competition and rivalry between the

US and China; yet the increasing economic links and deeply embedded identifications and affinity of secondary states in the Asia-Pacific region influence the patterns of their foreign policies.

There are several reasons for why many political elites in the region view the SCS dispute in the context of US–China rivalry. First, many smaller states in the region began viewing the increased Chinese activities in the SCS as part of Beijing’s unprecedented assertion of its influence in the region. For that reason, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter lamented the ongoing land reclamation in the SCS: “It is unclear how much farther China will go. That is why this stretch of water has become the source of tension in the region and front-page news around the world” (Graham-Harrison 2015). Carter further called on “China to limit its activities and exercise restraint to improve regional trust” (Brunnstrom and Takenaka 2015: 2). In May 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping introduced his “Asia for Asians” security framework (Ford 2015). Such a framework has been operationalized in two ways:

- China has made the SCS land reclamation project as a way to challenge US military primacy in the region; and
- China established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank with US\$50 billion initial capital as a way of undermining US leadership in regional economic governance in the Asia-Pacific.

Those patterns of foreign policy behaviour of Beijing demonstrate that its land reclamation activities in the region are just part and parcel of a broader global strategy that seeks to undermine US dominance, and quite possibly, to demonstrate to its Asian neighbors that its reliance upon the US for regional security is no longer tenable.

Second, the foreseeable future of US leadership is likely to encounter unprecedented challenges due to the increased dominance of China. Particularly because of China’s artificial islands, Washington DC would find it difficult to defend unconditionally US hegemony unless it opts to be susceptible to military confrontation and conflict with Beijing (Burgess 2016: 113). Whereas other influential scholars (Ikenberry 2001, 2011; Nye 2013) remain optimistic as to the continuity of America’s influence in Asia, rapid economic and political developments that are quite favorable to China are quite compelling, so much so that Beijing’s eventual hegemonic role in the Asia-Pacific region is possible. Economically, notwithstanding their political reliance on Washington, many Asia-Pacific countries’ largest trading partner in the last few years has been China. In fact, China was the biggest trading partner of ASEAN countries in 2013, with 14 percent of total trade within the region, while the US ranked only fourth with a meagre 8 percent (ASEAN 2014). Having China as its largest trading partner since 2012, the Philippines had to momentarily tone down its criticism of

Beijing in its land reclamation activities in 2012, amidst the deep setbacks in banana imports and local tourism (Higgins 2012). China's rapidly increasing economic power is likely to motivate Beijing to strongly pull Asian states away from Washington's sphere of influence. Consequently, the SCS dispute became a "material symbol of Southeast Asian uncertainties and insecurities vis-à-vis China" (Ba 2011: 279). Worried about US commitment in the region, Japan is forging much higher and unprecedented levels of security cooperation with two SCS claimant countries: the Philippines and Vietnam (Grønning 2017). Apparently departing from the hub-and-spoke system of US-led security alliances in the Asia-Pacific region, the Japanese government calls this renewed cooperation with the Philippines and Vietnam a strategic partnership. That partnership includes the establishment of intensive diplomatic exchanges, regularization of strategic security dialogues, intensifying the frequency of interactions and meetings of high-level executive government officials, diplomatic assistance in regard to territorial disputes with Beijing, support for maritime security, and intensive military training collaboration (Grønning 2017: 2).

Although Southeast Asian states are still likely to invoke primarily US security guarantees, that form of reliance is quite tenuous. Many Southeast Asian states still continue to "hedge" in this broader US-China rivalry. Evelyn Goh (2005: xiii) describes the key elements of hedging in the region as:

- indirect or soft balancing whereby the aim is to form a coalition that can undermine Chinese influence;
- complex engagement with China at various dimensions; and
- general strategy of engaging several great powers for them to engage in the Asian regional order.

Although Vietnam continues to be firm in asserting its territorial claims, the Philippine government under President Duterte (2016–2022) appears to be cautiously hedging by discarding the PCA ruling in The Hague and de-escalating blatant public criticisms of Beijing's foreign policy. The reinvigorated security cooperation of the Philippine government with the US and Japanese governments shows how Manila is carefully reaffirming its strategic interests in the SCS region without publicly undermining Beijing.

Why is it then that smaller Asian states continue to hedge in issues such as economic cooperation and trade but not fully rely on China for military security? First, it is likely that the entrenched pro-US norm socialization of political and military elites in the region might be driving hedging tendencies among states in the region. While states' intentions are quite hard to discern (Glaser 2011b: 3; Rosato 2015), identity politics is more likely to play a substantial influence in reinforcing the deep-seated biases of Southeast Asian political elites "who appear to see the United States in a relatively positive

light” (Hamilton-Hart 2012: 4). This apparently dominant pro-US sentiment among Asia-Pacific, especially Southeast Asian, foreign policy and political elites is prevalent despite the uncertainty of the general public on whether the demise of US dominance in the region is imminent.

The second reason is that the general domestic public within those hedging Asian states uphold a more favorable view of the US. Notably, the Pew Research Center notes that domestic publics in the broader Asia-Pacific region view increased Chinese economic investments as a prospective liability, granting Beijing too much power over their political economies (Silver et al 2019: 2). As the two largest economies in Southeast Asia, the Philippines and Indonesia both registered 49 percent and 48 percent of their surveyed domestic public, respectively, who viewed China as an overall threat despite increased economic opportunities (Silver et al 2019). In the same Pew survey, the large majority of respondents in the Philippines (84 percent) and Indonesia (67 percent) expressed their preference for the US over China as the core economic partner. In the *State of Southeast Asia 2022 Survey Report* with a total of 1,677 respondents from ten ASEAN member countries, 57 percent of the total number of respondents in the entire region preferred the US over China when asked this question (43 percent for China): “If ASEAN was forced to align itself with one of the two strategic rivals, which should it choose?” (Seah et al 2022: 32). In the same 2022 survey, respondents from three out of four Southeast Asia-based claimant states in the SCS dispute remarkably preferred US over China in terms of strategic alignment: 57 percent in Malaysia, 83.5 percent in the Philippines, and 73.6 percent in Vietnam (Seah et al 2022: 32). Only the tiny claimant state Brunei had 64.2 percent of the total surveyed respondents therein who preferred China over the US. Meanwhile, the Manila-based Social Weather Station confirmed that 70 percent of the total number of Filipino respondents asked in December 2016 confirmed that they had “much trust” in the US (ABS-CBN News 2017). That finding denotes those pro-American sentiments in the Philippines are likely to be more entrenched than fleeting, especially when one considers that the survey was conducted at the height of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte’s anti-US rhetoric and political uncertainties triggered by the 2017 election victory of Donald Trump in the US.

Third, the US has enduring and formal institutional and legal ties with many smaller Asian states involved in territorial disputes with China. To be sure, it is politically costly for high-ranking US government officials to publicly abandon supportive diplomacy toward its Asian allies, even though the US seems most likely unwilling to engage in a full-blown war against China very soon just because of the SCS dispute. As the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared in July 2010 during the ASEAN Regional Forum, “the United States has a national interest in freedom of navigation,

open access to Asia's maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea" (Landler 2010). US strategic relations with China's neighboring countries are even positively reinforced because, as Michigan-based scholar John Ciorciari (2015: 245–246) notes, "Beijing is encased by the spokes of the US-led alliance system and regional institutions designed partly to constrain rising powers." Those spokes are likely to persist, at least in the short term, especially under the Biden presidency that is publicly committed to constrain China's re-emergence as the dominant state actor in the Asia-Pacific.

The region is currently quite divided when it comes to fully depending on the US for security guarantees (Graham 2013). The US has remained to be the only great power that has formal military alliances with key Asia-Pacific nations (Thailand, the Philippines, South Korea, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand), positively unique bilateral relations with Taiwan, a beneficial security agreement with Singapore, and a productive relationship with Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam—in conjunction with a relatively long history of joint and regular military training exercises with military forces in the region (The Heritage Foundation 2015). Although Beijing lacks enduring formal and informal military and diplomatic agreements with Southeast Asian states in ways that Washington DC has, China has been consistently and vigorously intensifying its trade and economic cooperation with Southeast Asian countries (Ratner and Kumar 2017). Southeast Asian states may see Beijing's commitment in economic cooperation as favorable in the long run compared to the unpredictable foreign policy decisions of the regularly changing leadership in the White House.

The need for Washington to constructively engage with Beijing, especially in bigger issues of global governance, undermines a full and unconditional commitment of the US to its Asian allies. The future of the international financial system and global trade relations remains a core concern, which compels Beijing and Washington to engage with each other. As the IMF revealed in 2014, "for the first time in more than 140 years, the US has lost the title of the world's largest economy—it has been stolen by China" (Carter 2014). As the US became a debtor nation, China's "enormous currency reserves potentially convert China into a major global governance actor in the field of international financial markets" (Gu et al 2008: 277). It is possible that Washington DC could give up its hegemony in the Asia-Pacific, by strategic necessity, should Beijing strongly demand it as a condition for further engagement in issues of bilateral concerns as well as those that are global in scope. Beyond issues of global economic importance, one may take into account other compelling issues, including the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, economic crisis instigated by record-breaking inflation rate, domestic polarization within the US, and the COVID-19 pandemic—all of which are likely to divert Washington's supposedly full

and undivided attention in territorial disputes and quest for hegemony in the Asia-Pacific. Indeed, the sheer population and economic size of China, together with its ambitions for a more influential role at the global policy-making table, means that “many global problems will be insoluble without Chinese global engagement” (Gu et al 2008: 288). China may be a “partial power” in a broad range of global issues (Shambaugh 2013), and that makes it less likely that US security guarantees to its Asian allies are unconditional should the SCS dispute escalate to a military confrontation. In contrast to political elites in Washington, the American public, however, is quite likely to support the Philippines instead of China, primarily because of the former’s political identity as a democratic state; after all, “identity does play an important role in how security policy is constructed” in the US (Hayes 2009: 977). Of course, the conditions under which democratic identity plays a role vis-à-vis the long-term interest in engaging with China are open to further empirical scrutiny.

Although it is unlikely that China will soon overtake the US in global military dominance, Washington’s hegemonic leadership in the Asia-Pacific region is quite likely to be increasingly contested. The second largest in the world, China’s military defense budget has increased significantly in 2020, for the 26th consecutive year (SIPRI 2021). If such trends continue, then China is likely to push out the US from dominating the region, not only because of Washington’s divided foreign policy attention elsewhere beyond Asia but because of the projected military capacities of China that would continue to dominate the Pacific Rim. To be sure, the goal for China’s People’s Liberation Army Navy is “to dominate in contested territorial waters and to be able to push any hostile forces well beyond the ‘first island chain’—that is, beyond the Philippines, Taiwan and the Japanese archipelago” (*The Economist* 2014: 6).

Conclusion

What are the policy and political implications of the increasing militarization of the SCS dispute? The answer to that question depends on one’s positionality in this dispute, especially when one considers that “theory is always for someone and for some purpose” (Cox 1981: 129). Nonetheless, I provide herein some tentative recommendations on moving forward amidst rising tensions in the SCS region. It is very unlikely that China would give up its territorial claims, especially that the continued legitimacy and political survival of the Communist Party of China primarily depends on continued economic growth—and the SCS appears to be crucial to such growth due to its significance in world trade and the plausible natural resources that it could offer. In the short term, smaller SCS claimant states are likely to be better off by realizing that depending upon US security guarantees alone

would be a fatal option. The political uncertainty in American domestic politics vis-à-vis the growing demand for US military support for Europe amidst the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine suggest that the reliability of US foreign policy on the SCS is at best unclear. Instead of blatantly and persistently antagonizing Beijing through media tirades and military exercises in the SCS region, smaller SCS claimant states instead, at least in the next few years, may adopt a foreign policy hedging strategy in respect to the US–China rivalry. Smaller claimant states may find ASEAN and other regional multilateral forums as ways to find shared interests in ensuring freedom of navigation and demilitarization of the region, and in doing so, negotiating and bargaining with Beijing in a much better position than through a bilateral mode. Through these collective bodies, smaller claimant states could credibly advocate for a peaceful resolution of a long-running but now intensely militarized territorial dispute. That approach acknowledges two underemphasized yet important observations:

- all claimants seem to have legitimate material stakes in the SCS region; and
- that the SCS conflict is an asymmetric one, where it is unlikely that a small claimant state could make a credible stance against the growing military and economic influence of Beijing.

Most importantly, any potential conflict resolution framework should assess and prioritize the welfare of claimant states' marginalized populations, whose livelihood and wellbeing depend on free, responsible, and equitable access to the supposedly rich natural resources of the SCS region. After all, China's rapid economic growth strengthened its appetite for military control over the SCS region, which is a crucial gateway for the world economy as well as a hub for valuable maritime resources, while long-time US military dominance in the region has always aimed to ensure the interests of American capitalist hegemony.

Notes

¹ I use the term "South China Sea" only because this is the most widely known name for the region. It does not necessarily mean that I prefer China as the supposed rightful claimant.

² This chapter is an updated version of an earlier peer-reviewed, open-access article: Regilme, S.S.F. 2018. "Beyond Paradigms: Understanding the South China Sea Dispute Using Analytic Eclecticism." *International Studies* 55(3): 213–237. The earlier article was published in CC-BY license.

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