

# Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea

## Implications for Security in Asia and Beyond

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### Abstract

The growing tension between China and a number of countries in Southeast Asia over the contested waters of the South China Sea has become one of the biggest potential flashpoints in the region—thus, a good indicator to use in testing the “China threat.” Concurrently, America’s handling of this “Asian problem” is becoming a litmus test for the future status of US primacy as the nation faces crucial opportunities to prove its hegemonic resilience as well as its military and diplomatic skills to protect its allies and friends while navigating through its rivalry with a rising China. This research analyzes the changes and continuities in China’s policy toward territorial disputes in the South China Sea, the prospect for peaceful conflict resolution, and the greater security implications of this issue for Sino-US relations and the future of American supremacy in Asia.

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### Introduction

In recent years, there have been some alarming views that China’s great power potential, combined with its latent expansionist ambitions and increasingly assertive foreign policy stance, could be a threat to regional and global security as it might trigger major power realignments in East

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Asia and beyond, which would, in the end, challenge US predominance in the post–Cold War international system. Among a number of pressing security issues facing Asia, maritime and territorial disputes over the contested waters of the South China Sea have become among the biggest potential flashpoints amid Beijing’s military modernization in conjunction with Washington’s “pivot” or “rebalancing” to Asia.<sup>1</sup> Given China’s ongoing territorial disagreements with a host of its neighbors, including Japan, the South China Sea dispute is not just an isolated issue for Chinese leaders in Beijing. Rather, it is an important part of the overall process of China rising, with broader implications for demonstrating the nation’s capabilities to protect its interests, sovereignty, and image as a great power. Meanwhile, the China threat has led most Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries to support Washington’s renewed efforts to “return” to Asia and revitalize the US security ties with allies and friends in the region. This trend transformed the South China Sea into “a focal point for big power rivalry, thus complicating the issues” with potentially wider regional repercussions.<sup>2</sup> This does not necessarily mean China’s assertive territorial claims will make war inevitable. Instead, it implies “China’s dispute behavior bears directly on the future of peace and stability” in the region. Its handling of the issue reveals whether it is seeking status quo or revisionist foreign policies as its power rises.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, the South China Sea dispute is a good indicator to use in testing the China threat theory. In addition, this is a very useful gauge that measures the limits and potential of America’s power when it comes to dealing with Asian problems. It is also a glimpse at the prospect for cooperation between China and the United States and the future direction of Sino-US relations in general.

This article will shed light on some fundamental questions about the rise of China and how this phenomenon challenges America’s supremacy in Asia, with a particular focus on territorial disputes in the South China Sea. First, it briefly discusses competing theoretical perspectives in international relations regarding the rise of China and develops an analytical foundation to evaluate the China threat hypothesis, again focusing on the territorial disputes in the South China Sea and its implications for US supremacy in Asia. Then, it examines key issues in the South China Sea—disputes through diverging and converging interests in addition to the logic behind China’s foreign policy behavior toward ASEAN as a whole and toward each claimant with which the nation has territo-

rial disputes. Next, it explores major changes and continuities of the region's dynamics, influenced by the rise of China, and the implications of Beijing's growing power for the United States in terms of keeping the US-led peace and stability in Asia. Finally, a brief discussion of policy recommendations for China and the United States is offered, since both countries have special responsibilities to maintain regional order and security in the twenty-first century.

### **Chinese Foreign Policy: Theory and the Rise of China**

On the debate of China's rise and its effects on the US-led security and economic order in Asia, there are two dominant perspectives, liberalism and realism—however broadly defined—each of which presents markedly different futures. In general, liberals tend to focus on China's economic opening up and interaction with other countries, the pacifying effects of which will eventually bring China's political liberalization and encourage China to embrace the rules of the existing international system. In contrast, realists emphasize the changing power dynamics and argue that China will become even more assertive as its power and influence increase; thus, the United States (along with its allies and friends in Asia) should be prepared to deal with challenges to the regional and global order posed by this rising Asian giant. These disagreements between liberal optimists and realist pessimists are the most widely understood manifestation of the debate over the rise of China and its impacts. These grand theories “tap into deep-seated forces shaping China;” yet both have weaknesses because of “their linear projection of the future of Chinese policy towards international order—be it the conflictual revision expected by power theorists or the harmonious integration predicted by interdependence advocates.”<sup>4</sup> To address these caveats, some variations in each theoretical foundation have been explored by a growing number of international relations scholars. For example, some realists do not believe in the inevitability of war, caused by the clash between China's rise and America's decline; whereas, some liberals predict a more pessimistic future, filled with conflict as a consequence of ideological incompatibility and mistrust between a nondemocratic China and a democratic America. Analyzing the logic behind these contending views is useful in guiding us to understand the reality of China's growing influence in

Asia and its implications for US policy as well as the future of territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

### **Liberal Views on China's Rise: Optimism, Pessimism, and the Effects of Nationalism**

Liberals do not usually see a rising China as a threat to America's interests and to the regional and international order. Rather, they have a relatively optimistic view of China's rise and expect a bright future for Asia in general and Sino-US relations in particular, influenced by the pacifying effects of some inextricably related and mutually reinforcing mechanisms, including China's economic liberalization, its membership in international institutions, and its growing potential for political reform and democratization. Drawing on theories of economic interdependence, for example, liberal optimists assert that economic exchange fosters good relations among states by extending the scope of shared interests. In addition, production interdependence becomes intensified in the process of the globalization of supply chains, while the rise of markets leads to "a capitalist peace" where war becomes obsolete given that a nation's wealth can be created by accumulation of human capital and technology, *not by territorial expansion*. Liberals also emphasize that greater interdependence has a restraining effect on state behavior by raising the costs of violent conflict among states.<sup>5</sup> In effect, China thus far has benefitted enormously from participating in the global economic order rather than challenging existing international institutions. In other words, China has risen precisely because of the successful opening of its economy, the consequence of which has made the monetary costs of expansion through violent conflict significantly high. As such, liberals highlight the extensive costs China would have to bear if it were to assume hostile foreign policies in territorial disputes with its neighbors or toward the United States. Hostility would damage the decades of successful economic reforms, lucrative trade ties with other states, and China's participation in a global system that has effectively supported its rise.

Some liberals are less optimistic about the pacifying effects of China's economic liberalization and more skeptical about the implications of the country's growing power on important matters, including Sino-US relations and the ongoing South China Sea spats. For example, these

so-called “liberal pessimists” point toward the differences between the internal structures and domestic political dynamics of China and the United States (along with America’s allies and friends in the region) and expect greater tensions, which could occur as a result of the interaction among these countries, whose core values are incompatible and whose visions for what constitutes regional leadership are irreconcilable. In other words, what makes liberal pessimists worry is the disparate nature of the Chinese regime vis-à-vis the US-led democratic alliances and partnerships. The inevitable interactions of the two regimes could create a vicious cycle of mutually reinforcing distrust and fear. What makes matters worse is that China is still an authoritarian regime *in transition*, led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—the legitimacy of which is based on an anachronistic ideology that has lost most of its charm.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Chinese leaders face a dilemma of adapting its old politics to the new and increasingly complex society without losing control of the system. Under the condition, they may opt for utilizing the military as a diversionary measure to face “external threats,” including “foreign encroachments” on China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity in the South China Sea, without making the issue of extending political freedom of their people and embracing a more open society as a primary order; as doing so could not only undermine internal cohesion along the way but also threaten Chinese leaders’ grip on power in the end.

In addition, Beijing has resorted to the promise of building a more prosperous economic future together with appeals to Chinese nationalism so as to compensate for increasingly irrelevant communist tenets and to enhance public support for the regime. Yet, this could be a dangerous mixture, given that if Chinese leaders fail to deliver the promise of economic growth, they would be under pressure to depend “even more heavily on nationalist appeals as its sole remaining source of support.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, nationalism can be one of the most powerful domestic sources of territorial expansion, which could be exploited by Chinese leaders to bolster political security at home through uniting the public and diverting their frustrations outward. There are several reasons why nationalism and territory are closely intertwined and can easily provide a justification for the state to take a diversionary action through belligerent expansion.<sup>8</sup> In the case of China, such incentives are particularly strong because of its historical memories of territorial loss and its aspiration to regain the status of a great power after its century of humiliation. In

this light, a key aspect of Beijing's legitimacy stems from protecting national dignity and never again letting China to be bullied. What is more, China's growing social instability and public discontent, engendered by decades of rapid economic reforms *at any cost*, have made nationalism even more essential as a substitute for the governing ideology and as a mechanism to unify the country and sustain the legitimacy of the state. Consequently, leaders in Beijing fear that if they show flexibility regarding China's foreign relations, including its maritime claims in the South China Sea, it could be taken as a sign of disgraceful appeasement and weakness at home. In this view, China's muscle-flexing foreign policy, including its southward push into the western Pacific, can be seen as a diversionary maneuver to preserve domestic cohesion and unity as well as regime legitimacy.

### **Conventional Realism**

In general, realism offers a more gloomy prediction with regard to China's rise and its expansionist ambitions. In particular, scholars who support offensive realism or power transition theory take the China threat seriously and predict it to be a cause of conflict in the future. According to the theory of offensive realism, conflict in international politics is likely to occur when rational states perceive power as the ultimate source of security and seek to maximize their prospects for survival in an anarchic world through expansion, as they grow stronger relative to other great powers.<sup>9</sup> In this view, China's rise will not be peaceful, especially as it challenges the interests of the existing hegemon and other great powers in the system along with its efforts toward outward expansion.<sup>10</sup> Contrary to offensive realism, defensive realism does not view states as aggressive power maximizers. Instead, the logic of the security dilemma is an important aspect of defensive realism.<sup>11</sup> According to this view, China may not have a national objective to displace the United States as a preponderant power in Asia and beyond. Nonetheless, defensive realism still shows a fairly pessimistic outlook about the future of East Asia and Sino-US relations due to the mechanism of the security dilemma. The larger political goals of both China and the United States may be purely defensive; yet, the "defensive" measures that each takes, along with its regional allies and friends, to secure its position may still arouse alarm and encourage the other side to consider countermeasures so as to assuage a sense of vulnerability.

For most realists, China rising is detrimental, given that “throughout history, rising powers have tended to be troublemakers, at least insofar as their more established counterparts in the international system are concerned.”<sup>12</sup> It is not unusual for rising powers to strive to secure their frontiers and even to challenge territorial boundaries, taking measures to have access to new markets, resources, and transportations routes. In addition, they are more likely to try to fully exercise their rights to protect “core interests” and reclaim their “place in the sun.” In this view, China’s “ambitions will grow as its capabilities increase” and as its new-found power allows it to enjoy more opportunities for influence; thus, “China’s goals will be more expansive than they now are.”<sup>13</sup> However, this does not mean that China will be more war-prone. Rather, it means China is more likely to do “what all great powers do: not simply react to its international environment, but instead act to shape that environment in ways that are conducive to its national interests.”<sup>14</sup>

With regard to contemporary China, most pessimistic realists conclude the country, as a rising power, is likely to behave no differently than have others of its kind throughout history, becoming more assertive as its economic and military capabilities expand. John Mearsheimer, for instance, expects China to “be strongly inclined to become a real hegemon” like all previous potential hegemonies, as long as it continues to accumulate its power; this means the country “would not be a status quo power but an aggressive state determined to achieve regional hegemony.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, other scholars of power theories highlight China’s revisionist intentions, influenced by its growing geopolitical appetite. They assert that China’s transition from a poor, developing country to a relatively wealthier one will “result in a more assertive foreign policy” from Beijing, making it “less inclined to cooperate with the other major powers in the region” and more eager to change the regional balance of power and ultimately replace the United States as the world’s leading superpower.<sup>16</sup> According to these views, therefore, issues like the ongoing South China Sea territorial disputes can be seen as a potential source of China’s dissatisfaction and the eventual breakdown of the status quo. This is because China is more likely to demonstrate growing ambitions to extend its territorial control along with the increase of its power—the consequences of which would include heightening risk of an inadvertent (or even intentional) conflict along the way. In a similar vein, China’s yearning for achieving regional hegemony, through force if necessary,

would also make conflicts over territory in the South China Sea more likely, especially if China's expansionist ambitions clash with the resistance of other claimants supported by the United States, the existing superpower.

### **Avoiding the Thucydides Trap**

All in all, notwithstanding some variations within each school of thought, both liberals and realists largely engender two different outcomes of China's ascendancy, its policy toward territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and the greater security implications of the issue for Sino-US relations. One view is that China's eventual dominance of the South China Sea through its military and economic expansion will be inevitable. Another perspective is that Beijing will curb its territorial ambitions and refrain from resorting to militaristic expansion in order to prevent regional conflicts that would damage its economic interests, undermine its assertion of "peaceful rise," and even strengthen US involvement in Asian affairs and further legitimize Washington's rebalance to Asia. Yet, as asserted by Rory Medcalf, "the story is only beginning," and it still remains to be seen which scenario will turn out to be right.<sup>17</sup>

Thus far, China has taken a position of pragmatic realism. As asserted by many China experts, "interpreting Chinese foreign policy as *a rational pursuit of national interest* is preferable to seeing a major role of ideology in Chinese foreign policy-making."<sup>18</sup> (emphasis added) In a way, the Chinese seem to have supported the realist view of a hierarchy of issues in global politics—headed on several occasions by questions of military security, national sovereignty, greater power and prestige through economic strength and prosperity, and preservation of the political system led by the CCP through internal stability—even without explicitly acknowledging or using the realist concepts of "high politics" and "low politics."<sup>19</sup> Moreover, force has been considered a usable and effective instrument in China's foreign policy making. According to Wang Jisi, "the Chinese believe using or threatening force to be the most effective means of wielding power" to address their deep security concerns, despite their recognition that other means can also be employed.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, Chinese leaders have adopted a policy of *pragmatism*, which is defined as behaviors that are "disciplined by neither set values nor established principles."<sup>21</sup> Rather, pragmatism in policy behavior has been firmly goal-fulfilling and interest-driven, conditioned ex-



tensively by China's national needs, political objectives, and geostrategic ambitions. According to David Lampton, "the PRC's [People's Republic of China] global behavior is distinctive in its utter pragmatism, or [what is called] the situational ethics with which these contending impulses are balanced as Chinese leaders decide how to act internationally" in the course of seeking to "maximize benefits in an ever changing yet interconnected global environment."<sup>22</sup> In this, Chinese leaders consider values and ideas of "right" and "wrong," if not unimportant, at least less important. Nor do they treat communist ideology as sacred and immutable; rather, it is something they can modify and adjust, as shown in their acceptance of a market economy, in order to advance national interests and preserve the existing regime under the leadership of the CCP.

Until now, China's pursuit of pragmatic realism has allowed it to *work with* its neighbors and the major powers within the existing international system while mostly restraining itself from overtly expressing its expansionist ambitions, attempting to change the status quo, or challenging the American hegemonic influence in Asia. Even if China has never been fully satisfied with the post-Cold War geopolitical settlement, the complexity of modern power realities has made it reluctant to be a full-blown revisionist power. This is because the collapse of the American-led world order could undermine China's national interests, facilitated by the current system, in which the country, as one of the geopolitical insiders, has enjoyed special privileges like its veto power at the UN Security Council along with easier access to trade, investment, and technology from other societies.<sup>23</sup> The conciliatory track has not always guaranteed the lack of tension between China and its neighbors (and/or the United States), nor has it completely eliminated the potential for shifting toward the warlike track caused by some serious incident at sea or dangerous diplomatic gambits over protracted territorial disputes in the region. Nonetheless, the peace-inducing incentive of China's relations with its neighbors and the United States, supported by its pragmatic realism, has mostly prevailed over the conflict-producing ones until now. This has been largely due to overlapping interests among China and the United States and most of China's Asian neighbors, in terms of keeping the peace in the region and collaborating to deal with major global problems with regional implications. In addition, despite China's discomfort with America's overall military superiority and the US presence in Asia, what the United States calls national interests have

not essentially been in conflict with China's policy preference of supporting regional stability.

Yet, as elucidated by Suisheng Zhao, China's "pragmatic strategic behavior is flexible in tactics, subtle in strategy, and avoids appearing confrontational, but it is uncompromising with foreign demands" that could undermine its vital national interests or disrespect its historical sensitivities.<sup>24</sup> This implies that China's pragmatism, which has facilitated its relatively peaceful rise thus far, will not automatically guarantee its continuing support for regional stability and status quo in the future. Instead, its pragmatic realism could evolve in either way. Until now, China's potential for involvement in armed conflict has been limited not necessarily because the country is genuinely peaceful or risk-averse but because the benefits that it gains through economic interdependence and pacific coexistence with other states still exceed the high costs of risking war. This view that the likelihood of China's overt aggression, including territorial expansion, is low has allowed observers to be cautiously optimistic about China's dealing with its neighbors, embroiled in territorial disputes for years.

Nonetheless, although Beijing thus far has emphasized the importance of regional stability and peaceful interdependence with other states as necessary conditions for its continuing economic success, its strategic calculation and cost-benefit analysis may change if it considers that a combination of multiple internal and external factors can make the ultimate benefits of its coercive and unilateral actions substantially outweigh the costs. For example, China's increasingly assertive rhetoric and actions in the South China Sea can be seen as a manifestation of its new strategic calculations, which involve the needs to boost "President Xi Jinping's prestige and authority for his domestic reform agenda. Against this backdrop, public opinion has emerged as a powerful force that could either bolster or degrade Chinese leaders' legitimacy when it comes to evaluating their responsiveness to the people's demands regarding massive external problems and internal challenges. However, Beijing's politics of compromise, patience, and rapprochement may not be considered pragmatic if it the nation faces a situation where it needs to demonstrate its resolve not to be "contained" or "threatened" by others or in dealing with matters of sovereignty and territorial integrity. In this sense, Chinese leaders' growing assertiveness on territorial matters can be interpreted as part of efforts to boost their authority and prestige and

to adapt China's old manner of governance to the new society without losing control of the system. Under these circumstances, president Xi asserted that "no country should presume that we will trade our core interests or that we will allow harm to be done to our sovereignty, security, or development interests," even while reaffirming Beijing's adherence to the policy of "shelving disputes and carrying out joint development" in contested waters—in line with ideas initially put forward by Deng Xiaoping.<sup>25</sup>

As a rising (or reemerging) power, China has an increasing interest in terms of showing its strength and safeguarding its pride. Thus, it is more inclined to retaliate with force, if provoked, even though it may still be reluctant to initiate and enter into a military conflict with any of its neighbors. In this sense, the supreme irony of Washington's Asia-Pacific pivot, which is often seen as "an American reprise of Cold War 'containment' now directed at China, fueling an arms race and U.S. alliance structure that is a growing threat to China," is that it has encouraged a list of countries in the region, including "the Philippines and Vietnam, as well as Japan, to oppose and challenge China, and to decline to negotiate in good faith to resolve disputes," testing the limits of Beijing's restraint with US-led "defensive" alliances and partnerships, which are deemed to be offensive in the eyes of Beijing.<sup>26</sup> In conjunction with the rise of nationalist competition in the region, this may further facilitate the process of Beijing's shifting focus from economic to geopolitical concerns, which in turn would expedite self-reinforcing cycles of aggression among all sides locked in the disputes.

Nonetheless, "conflict is a choice, not a necessity," although enduring disputes are more likely if established countries like the United States (with its regional allies and friends) treat every advance in China's military capabilities as a hostile act or China, as a rising power, disregards "the tenuous dividing line between defensive and offensive capabilities" and overlooks "the consequences of an unrestrained arms race."<sup>27</sup> Under the circumstances, both China and its neighbors, supported by the United States, may create the self-defeating "Thucydides trap."<sup>28</sup> This implies that a deadly combination of the growth of Chinese power and the anxiety that this caused in America (and its allies and friends in the region) may evolve into mutual distrust and turn their healthy rivalry into conflict and unnecessary war. Interesting in this analysis is that China's increasing assertiveness regarding issues like the South China Sea is

not as important in itself as a sign of things to come—that being the potential danger of China, the United States, and other claimants in the disputes falling into dangerous and destructive zero-sum competition.

At present, America's strategic concerns include losing its hegemonic status and being gradually pushed out of Asia. On the one hand, there is China's fear of being militarily encircled by an outside power aligned with inside powers, capable of impinging on China's territory or intervening in its own "regional" affairs. Under the circumstances, "just as Chinese influence in surrounding countries may spur fears of dominance, so efforts to pursue traditional American national interests can be perceived as a form of military encirclement."<sup>29</sup> The clash between these forces could make concerns about those powers falling into the Thucydides trap more than just an illusion. The critical question is whether, and if so under what conditions, China's pragmatic realism would steer it to be more conducive to peaceful conflict resolution instead of choosing a hostile revision of the status quo. What follows is an analysis of the assumptions discussed above to examine whether the United States and China, along with other Asian nations, can avoid the Thucydides trap by letting their seemingly irreconcilable objectives coexist without resorting to violence. In a larger sense, this case has produced only partially known outcomes as tensions over the contested waters of the South China Sea continue with sluggish multilateral diplomatic efforts to institutionalize a binding code of conduct (COC).

## **The South China Sea Disputes**

China's assertion of its right to a vast stretch of the South China Sea has directly set it against the Philippines and Vietnam, while Brunei, Malaysia, and Taiwan also have overlapping claims with China—especially over their rights to exploit the region's possibly extensive underwater oil and gas resources in addition to rich fisheries. The traditional high seas freedoms are also at stake, making the issue even more complex and extraregional. For instance, Washington has interests in safeguarding the rights to navigate, overfly, and conduct military exercises within waters that China claims as its own. Also, ASEAN as a whole, and other directly or indirectly involved states, have important shared interests in terms of seeking a peaceful regional order, the significance of which goes beyond the territorial disputes among a limited number of claimants.

This section is designed to explicate major changes and continuities of maritime security and territorial disputes in the South China Sea amid China's rise as a dominant player in Asia. The overall implications of the ongoing tensions between China and other disputants for Sino-US relations will also be evaluated.

### **Changes and Continuities of Territorial Disputes**

In 2010 Beijing for the first time identified protecting its sovereignty in the South China Sea as a “core interest” that cannot be compromised, alongside previously claimed Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang, stating its “willingness to respond to actions it perceives as challenging” those national interests of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and maritime rights.<sup>30</sup> In the following year, however, Chinese defense minister Liang Guanglie stated his country's “solemn pledge” never to “seek hegemony” and alluded that China's policy in the South China Sea was “purely defensive in nature.”<sup>31</sup> This statement was made amid heightened tensions across the South China Sea during the first half of 2011, in the aftermath of Vietnam's unprecedented live-fire naval exercises after accusing the Chinese of a “premeditated and carefully calculated” attack against Vietnamese oil-exploration vessels.<sup>32</sup> The Chinese had also been accused by Manila of unloading construction materials on Philippine-claimed Amy Douglas Reef and firing on Filipino fishermen, leading to great anxiety not only in the Philippines but also among most of its neighbors regarding China's territorial ambitions and to considering Beijing's gentle rhetoric as nothing more than a disguise for its gradual expansionism.

That directly undermined Beijing's agenda to project its image as a regime committed to peaceful development. Similarly, rising tensions in the South China Sea could undermine China's national interest of maintaining regional stability, which is necessary for achieving the top political goal of preserving legitimacy of the CCP through continued economic growth. Furthermore, escalating tensions over the territorial disputes could cause China to lose its leverage over its potent rivals, especially the United States, if Washington should use the disputes over the South China Sea to meet its broader goal of gaining deeper strategic and economic influence in the region. Based upon these evaluations, China decided to soften its position toward ASEAN as a group and took a charm offensive toward a number of individual states in the region through more positive and pragmatic diplomacy in line with its “good-

neighbor” policy. For instance, despite their continuing adherence to the principle for resolving the issue through negotiation with parties directly concerned and the persistent effort to avoid the issue becoming internationalized, Chinese leaders pledged to hold consultations with Southeast Asian nations on the COC so as to avoid escalating tensions and to maintain mostly cooperative ASEAN-China relations from turning into potential conflict.<sup>33</sup> Even while asserting full implementation of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) as the first step to peaceful settlement of disputes, the COC was embraced, at least rhetorically, as the continuation of the DOC and an ultimate guideline for parties concerned to constructively manage their differences. This gesture was widely hailed in the region as a pragmatic step forward, given that China had previously rejected any efforts by ASEAN members and their Western allies, most notably the United States, to create a multilateral regional forum to solve the South China Sea issue through a binding COC.

Furthermore, Beijing renewed its efforts to engage ASEAN in line with China’s *strategy of divide and prosper*, which is interpreted as a *strategy of divide and conquer* by others. China offered a series of attractive measures for the group as a whole, pushing for stronger integration with regional economies while hiding its stick in hope of accentuating the shared destiny of China and the ASEAN nations. This approach was driven not only by Beijing’s commercial interests but also strategic imperatives so as to overshadow Washington’s power and influence in the region and to make Southeast Asian states rely more on China for trade and investment. While sidestepping territorial disputes, President Xi asserted during his address to the APEC CEO Summit in October 2013 that “China cannot develop in isolation from the Asia Pacific while the Asia Pacific cannot prosper without China.”<sup>34</sup> In his efforts to mend regional relations overshadowed by escalating tensions over the South China Sea and to enhance China’s role as a chief regional partner, Xi sought to reveal China’s softer foreign policy initiatives, emphasizing Beijing’s readiness to build political and strategic trust with its wary neighbors as well as to strengthen the China-ASEAN free trade area and expand investment and financing channels to bolster ties with ASEAN.<sup>35</sup> In addition to multilateral diplomacy, Beijing tried to strengthen its bilateral ties with a list of ASEAN members, including even ones locked in territorial disputes with China—such as Malaysia, Brunei, and Vietnam—by

offering economic packages and highlighting their shared destiny.<sup>36</sup> From Beijing's perspective, Sino-ASEAN cooperation, along with China's friendship with a number of individual states in the region, would be the key not only to strengthening economic relations between China and the regional body but also to building trust—necessary for reducing regional tensions and promoting China's major power status.

Regarding the South China Sea disputes, however, China has been less compromising and never deviated from its position that the disputes are *not* an issue between China and ASEAN, thus Sino-ASEAN cooperation should not be affected by such disagreements. China has maintained its view that regional cooperation, not island disputes, should be at the crux of China-ASEAN relations—even while increasing its assertiveness in the South China Sea in recent years. This is due in part to Beijing's new strategic calculation, made in a combination of inextricably linked internal and external factors, which has led it to reconsider the cost and benefits of its coercive and unilateral actions in the South China Sea. Internally, China's exceptional economic growth, made possible partly by embracing certain aspects of capitalism over the past few decades, has had considerable political implications as well as crucial economic changes in the course of taking important “economic decisions out of the hands of central state planners and bureaucrats,” the consequences of which include a new state-society balance with less dominant leaders facing stronger and increasingly pluralized society and individuals, armed with easier access to information and greater control over their lives.<sup>37</sup>

Despite Chinese leaders' preoccupation with their own enormous domestic challenges, they are also extremely attuned to external power relations, “both the current power relationship and the interlocutor's future power prospects” in diplomatic, commercial, and other settings. The Chinese assume the United States is extremely unlikely to “involve itself in a military conflict in China's backyard—an assumption, made after years of watching the US hesitation about military intervention” in places like Syria and Ukraine.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, these leaders harbor a growing conviction of American decline together with suspicion (if not indignation) of Washington's efforts to prolong US leadership and dominance over Asia by hedging against and preventing China from replacing the United States as a superpower.<sup>39</sup> In the midst of China's claims over disputed territories that increasingly challenge US leadership in

Asia and test US alliances in the region, Beijing has warned against any single power's attempt, implicitly referring to Washington's Asian pivot, to dominate regional affairs, even calling for a new Asian security framework to counter the United States.<sup>40</sup> Concurrently, the significance of maritime disputes in the South China Sea has increased as the sea plays a role as China's "natural security shield for its densely populated southern regions and ports."<sup>41</sup> In effect, "China's traditional emphasis on economic growth is now increasingly accompanied by more nationalistic postures on political and security issues" along with the rise of competitive nationalism across the region, further complicating the matter and making the prospect for the "return of geopolitics" more plausible.<sup>42</sup> In this light, China's decision in early May 2014 to deploy its mega oil-drilling platform Hai Yang Shi You (HYSY) 981 into contested waters near the Paracel Islands off Vietnam is especially telling, as it seems to have exposed glimpses of Beijing's deliberate determination to change the regional environment in China's favor. The deployment of the oil rig has also reinforced the perception of Beijing becoming "more proactive in promoting periphery diplomacy" and quietly departing from Deng Xiaoping's counsel to "observe calmly, secure our position, hide our capacities and bide our time, be good at maintaining a low profile and never claim leadership."<sup>43</sup>

However, China's bold provocation with the operation of the HYSY 981 has backfired, sparking skirmishes between the Chinese and Vietnamese coast guard vessels and deadly anti-Chinese riots in Vietnam—with Beijing having to evacuate more than 3,000 Chinese nationals after attacks on Chinese-owned factories and construction projects in Vietnam. The HYSY-981 incident has also made Beijing's "charm rhetoric" sound void and Southeast Asian nations more suspicious of China's aggressive regional ambitions, further convincing its neighbors of the needs to strengthen their ties with the United States. Against this backdrop, China announced on 15 July 2014 that its commercial exploration operations had been completed "a full month before its original deadline of August 15" and that its mega oil-drilling platform would be removed from disputed waters in the South China Sea and towed back to Hainan Island, ending "the physical confrontation at sea between Chinese and Vietnamese ships" as swiftly as it had started.<sup>44</sup> The early withdrawal of the oil rig was widely interpreted as Beijing's pragmatic face-saving approach to ease tensions and repair relations with Vietnam,



making “a tactical shift in Chinese policy from confrontation at sea to diplomacy and political dialogue.”<sup>45</sup>

Despite the growing conviction of the end of charm diplomacy—supported by China’s increasingly assertive rhetoric and actions in the region—the regime remains too pragmatic to risk (not to mention completely abandon) its pursuit of economic and diplomatic cooperation with its Southeast Asian neighbors. This is true despite the regimes continued advancement of Chinese national interests even in the midst of its territorial contestations with its neighbors. However, China has become more confident and comfortable than ever with its strategy of simultaneously pursuing a charm offensive and coercion, with the expectation it can manage to balance the task of keeping good relations with its neighbors and contemplating the idea of altering the status quo in its favor.<sup>46</sup> China’s pragmatic realism, combined with its awareness of its own limitations especially regarding the United States in every possible setting, would continue to make it highly cautious about projecting hegemonic ambitions to build the Sino-centric order. Doing so could further legitimize American intervention and damage the positive impacts of globalization and economic interdependence.

China’s maritime disputes with a number of Southeast Asian nations have increased anxieties among those directly and indirectly involved in the controversies due to the growing potential for armed conflict or a negative impact on sea shipping lanes. According to a 2014 Pew Research poll, majorities in eight of the 11 Asian states surveyed, including some ASEAN members, are worried about territorial disputes between China and neighboring countries leading to a military conflict, with overwhelming proportions of the public in the Philippines (93 percent) and Vietnam (84 percent) expressing such fears.<sup>47</sup> Notwithstanding their overall security concerns about China’s growing assertiveness and its rising military power, however, a number of important ASEAN members want close ties with China economically. This is the prevailing view in Thailand (75 percent), Malaysia (69 percent), and Indonesia (55 percent), where many believe “China’s growing economy is good for own country.” Regarding the question of whether “China will overtake or has already overtaken America as superpower,” Asian nations are mostly divided in their opinion, whereas the countries of the European Union, the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa more or less believe that this has already happened or will happen.<sup>48</sup>

In effect, the divided view among China's Asian neighbors, especially ASEAN members, regarding the rise of China sheds some light on why ASEAN has not been in a unified position for years when it comes to dealing with the South China Sea disputes. At least on the surface, ASEAN member states have shown a consensus on broad goals for achieving the COC—even while acknowledging the reality that the code is not a magic wand to completely solve core disputes. The official position of the group is that the COC is a necessary condition for promoting region-wide confidence and for avoiding lawlessness, as there will be a greater risk of escalation of tensions due to miscalculation without it. However, there remain specific disputes, not to mention a lack of compatibility of preferences, between China and some members of ASEAN—most notably the Philippines and Vietnam. At the same time, the convergence of interests between China and some ASEAN countries, including even those locked in the disputes in the South China Sea, has led those nations to downplay tensions and distance themselves from this particular issue while trying to strengthen their economically profitable and strategically preferable ties with Beijing.

The division among ASEAN over the South China Sea disputes was painfully epitomized at 2012 ASEAN Summit when Cambodia—the ASEAN chairman of that year and a close ally of China—kept the issue off the agenda, leading to the failure to release a final joint communique for the first time in the group's history. Despite Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen's close relationship with the Vietnamese, "Cambodia's dependence on Chinese aid and investment—worth more than \$11 billion during the last two decades" and Cambodia's position as a party not directly involved in the territorial disputes, have led Phnom Penh to support Chinese claims, inadvertently strengthening Beijing's position in territorial matters by publicly splitting ASEAN and making the organization "a dysfunctional trading bloc incapable of negotiating for itself."<sup>49</sup> ASEAN's lack of unified will for confronting China has also been demonstrated by some of its other members, including Brunei and Malaysia, which have downplayed concerns about the threat posed by Chinese naval vessels patrolling the region's waters. Despite tensions over the South China Sea, these two nations see reason to tread cautiously, given their complex and mostly lucrative interdependence with China. For instance, "Malaysia has taken a relatively low key role in public on the two occasions Chinese warships have passed by James

Shoal to claim it as part of China's territory," due to fears of unnecessarily provoking the country's critical trade partner.<sup>50</sup> Accordingly, regardless of Malaysia's concerns about these incursions and China's growing pressures against its neighbors like the Philippines and Vietnam, Malaysia has taken a softer approach, glossing over the matter by claiming "that the Chinese vessels had stayed in international waters during their activities" and by trying to keep a nearly neutral stance toward China within ASEAN.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Brunei failed to attend "talks among the four Southeast Asian nations with claims on the South China Sea," promoted by the Philippines, claiming that it would not be in Brunei's "national interest to do so."<sup>52</sup> Likewise, even while expressing concerns about escalating regional tensions and emphasizing the importance of establishing the COC in the South China Sea, top Thai officials have repeatedly asserted that their country would "continue to play an active role in boosting ASEAN-China ties" and would not allow any particular issue to undermine mostly positive ASEAN-China relations.<sup>53</sup>

On the other hand, Vietnam and the Philippines have been locked in bitter fights against China over territory in the South China Sea, including the Paracels and the Spratlys. In the case of Vietnam, for years, the nation has occasionally shown a tendency to take a more nuanced and pragmatic approach in dealing with China; however, Vietnam, along with the Philippines, has also been one of the most active opponents of China's expansionist ambitions. This was largely because Hanoi could not afford to ignore China's economic status as its largest trade partner and most important investor. Indeed, China's rapid rise has increased the need for Hanoi to position its relationship with Beijing in a more practical way. Against this backdrop, Hanoi has tried to prioritize the common interests between China and Vietnam over their differences, despite the complex bilateral relations in recent history, during much of which China has been one of the most fearsome enemies of Vietnam. For example, while visiting China in June 2013, Vietnamese president Truong Tan Sang promoted partnership with China in a wide range of fields, including people-to-people exchanges and economic cooperation for mutual benefits through accelerating China's "implementation of major investment projects" in Vietnam.<sup>54</sup> The two sides also made an attempt to establish a working group for discussing joint natural resources exploration in waters of the Beibu Bay, located in a northern arm of the South China Sea.<sup>55</sup> This discussion was considered as a sign of Viet-

namese pragmatic concession to China. It signaled Hanoi's readiness for bilaterally solving the disputes by taking a step-by-step approach, starting with the easiest possible cooperation—adjusting Vietnam's previous insistence on a multilateral process. This would pave the way for solving more difficult issues, including the tricky long-term issue of sovereignty over the South China Sea.

However, carefully cultivated Sino-Vietnam rapprochement stopped in May 2014 after the positioning of the Chinese oil rig in waters claimed by Vietnam, causing the most serious deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations since the 1979 border war. This oil-rig incident has heightened Vietnam's political dilemma, often described as a lose-lose situation. The continuous erosion of Vietnam's territorial integrity, caused by appeasing China's encroachment, "could trigger a popular uprising, and even a revolt within the army," which is increasingly dissatisfied with the subservient party leadership. The army's perception is that these leaders unduly acquiesce to China. However, exclusively siding with a democratic America in dealing with Chinese aggression would eventually require the Vietnamese Communist Party to implement sweeping political reforms to align itself with the United States and US democratic allies and friends in the region.<sup>56</sup> What has further complicated Vietnam's domestic political situation is the reality that "the Vietnamese Communist Party is split between more conservative pro-China elements and pragmatic national interest types," with the latter group favoring closer ties with the United States.<sup>57</sup> Concurrently, the so-called May riots against Chinese citizens in Vietnam had adverse effects on the Vietnamese economy and revealed the potential for how brinkmanship in both Hanoi and Beijing could spiral out of control.

Overall, Vietnam has had to be more cautious about dealing with China's provocations, even while preparing for a potential war with China and seeking to step out of China's economic shadow. At the same time, Vietnam's enduring doubt regarding China's rise has encouraged Vietnamese leaders to carefully balance and improve relations with other global powers, including the United States and Russia. For example, Vietnam has worked to rebuild its ties with Russia, which has pledged to provide loans to help Vietnam upgrade its military equipment and provide Russian military supplies, including six *Kilo*-class diesel attack submarines to the Vietnamese navy.<sup>58</sup> In addition, Hanoi has tried to use the escalating rivalry between Beijing and Washington to enhance

Vietnam's own geopolitical and economic advantage, as the two major powers are keen to woo Vietnam away from each other's strategic orbit. With a hope of gaining greater access for its exports to the United States, Vietnam has joined negotiations to enlarge the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the US-led free trade agreement among Pacific Rim economies. At the same time, Hanoi has sought to balance between Beijing and Washington without going too far in either way, so as to maximize the nation's position of independence and geopolitical strength even as a minor power. It is a rationally calculated strategy of double-handedness that reveals Hanoi's political objectives to continue to ride on China's coattails while cautiously maintaining its diplomatic centrality between a still formidable United States and a rapidly rising China to maximize Vietnam's own national interests.

In contrast, Manila has taken a more straightforward and less compromising position, openly criticizing Beijing's divide-and-conquer strategy. Realistically speaking, the Philippines is ill-suited for confronting China by itself due to the bilateral power disparity, with the Philippine military being one of the region's weakest and having a military budget one-fortieth the size of Beijing's budget. The Philippines is also unable to directly challenge China due to the latter's status as the world's second-largest economy and one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. This provides Manila with a much weaker economic and diplomatic leverage over Beijing. Under these conditions, the Philippines has tried to strengthen ties with its key ally, the United States, in line with Washington's rebalance to Asia. In addition, the Philippines has embraced a charm campaign with Japan—another crucial democratic ally of America in Asia—which is a major regional competitor of China in search of its own sphere of influence. The Philippines has done so by boosting its economic relations and strengthening its military ties with a swath of nations in the area, thus potentially making Southeast Asia a key battleground for Sino-Japanese rivalry. In effect, the Abe administration has taken a series of strategic dialogues and defense exchanges with a number of Southeast Asian states, “providing patrol boats for the Philippine Coast Guard, and doubling its military aid budget for Indonesia and Vietnam” to build wider-ranging regional partnerships and boost regional maritime capabilities to more actively counter China's territorial assertion.<sup>59</sup> Whereas most ASEAN members have been reluctant to openly choose sides given their geographical proximity

and shared destinies with China, the Philippines has welcomed Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe's push to expand Japan's military role and to allow for the "reinterpretation" of Japan's pacifist constitution. Such reforms would grant the Japanese armed forces a greater role in "collective self-defense" against a common enemy—implicitly targeting China and its growing assertiveness in the region.<sup>60</sup>

In effect, most other ASEAN members have tried to strike a balance between threats and interests posed by China because business and trade opportunities offered by this rising giant, in addition to Beijing's calls for building a comprehensive strategic partnership, seem more promising in the long run than Japan's assistance measures do. This explains why these nations have largely put aside their misgivings about China's rise and strived to build win-win relationships with Beijing rather than pursuing a zero-sum developmental pattern.<sup>61</sup> However, the Philippines and Japan have been excluded from Beijing's overall plan to revamp its smile diplomacy toward most other countries in Asia. Under these conditions, the convergence of interests between Manila and Tokyo in various issues, including their shared threat perceptions regarding Beijing's assertiveness in the East and South China Seas, led the two to establish the Japan-Philippines Strategic Partnership. This agreement's objective is to strengthen bilateral cooperation in the field of maritime affairs "through such measures as the dispatch of patrol vessels of the Japan Coast Guard" to the Philippines.<sup>62</sup> These intensifying bilateral ties reveal important aspects of Manila's broader strategy, aimed at strengthening its defense cooperation with a willing partner to make up for the Philippines's lack of military power. This is a part of Manila's efforts to multilaterally handle the security challenge so as to more effectively counter Beijing's pursuit of bilateralism, which Manila is not capable of facing alone. Moreover, Manila took legal action under the auspices of the UN Convention on the Laws of the Sea in January 2013 to counter the Chinese incursions into what the Philippines considers its maritime domain. Beijing has condemned the action, claiming Manila has breached the DOC, and refused to participate in the process. Nonetheless, Manila has continued the proceedings with a hope that its legal case against China would "carry considerable moral and political weight."<sup>63</sup>

However, most ASEAN members, even those states agitated by China's claims, have been reluctant to offer explicit diplomatic support for Manila's arbitration because of Beijing's growing influence in the region

and their concerns that the legal case “might have negative repercussions for ASEAN-China relations.”<sup>64</sup> Overall, underneath “ASEAN’s veneer of diplomatic unity,” ASEAN diplomacy amid the China threat has shown more continuities than changes in terms of failing to present a united front on the maritime disputes and to “convince China to exercise self-restraint in the South China Sea.”<sup>65</sup> As an unintended and ironically positive byproduct, the heated South China Sea disputes in the midst of the brewing major power rivalry between China and the United States have enhanced the strategic significance of Southeast Asian states as Beijing and Washington compete to win the favor of these regional players in countering each other’s policy of containing the other. However, the escalating South China Sea disputes have continued to expose conflicting interests and divisions among ASEAN members and their lack of cohesive strategic vision for the future. In particular, their diverging perspectives on how best to handle Beijing’s growing assertiveness have increased the potential for them to be “at the mercy of great power rivalry between China and the United States for regional influence” and to be caught in the middle of conflict between the two in the future, possibly forcing them to take sides.<sup>66</sup>

As elucidated in *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission 2013 Report*, “China’s military modernization, rising economy, and growing diplomatic influence” are strengthening Beijing’s ability to enforce its territorial claims “in its near seas,” including the South China Sea, Yellow Sea, and East China Sea.<sup>67</sup> Although the South China Sea dispute is not new, the risks of conflict between US military forces and/or America’s allies on the one side and their Chinese counterparts on the other side are increasing. This is largely because China’s unswerving sovereignty claims over disputed waters in the region are supported by its ongoing military modernization and growing economic clout. The combination of these two factors is changing the overall configuration of the regional security architecture. What is more, the relative decline in US power is slowly undermining America’s decades of military supremacy and hegemonic influence in Asia and beyond. Yet, the report says that it is still critical for the United States to maintain a credible military presence in Asia given that China is becoming more capable of using “its growing power in support of coercive tactics that pressure its neighbors to concede” to Chinese claims in the maritime disputes. The report further emphasizes, the increasing importance of deepening America’s ties

with allies and partners in Asia and the needs to bolster the capacity of US forces' readiness in the western Pacific to counterbalance "China's growing military capabilities and surge naval assets in the event of a contingency."<sup>68</sup> Accordingly, the United States has strengthened its strategic relations with countries in the Asia-Pacific, including key members of ASEAN, such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam. The frequency of joint military exercises between and among the United States and those countries in the region has increased in conjunction with Washington's strategic rebalancing to Asia, although Beijing has warily looked on "the Asia pivot" as an American attempt to rally those states against China. In effect, Beijing has warned Washington against making efforts to hurt China's core interests by strengthening America's ties with countries in the Asia-Pacific and inflaming tensions in the region's waters and against using the issue of freedom of navigation as an excuse to interfere with China-ASEAN relations.

However, those warnings have not convinced Washington to reverse its Asian pivot. At the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in 2012, Leon Panetta, then-secretary of defense, presented a comprehensive and detailed explanation of how his country would rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific through consolidating America's alliances and partnerships in the region and by pursuing "innovative rotational deployments that emphasize creation of new partnerships and new alliances."<sup>69</sup> Among others, America's growing defense relationship with Singapore and the forward deployment of US combat vessels in that country were mentioned as part of a tangible manifestation of Washington's commitment to rebalancing. Then, USS *Freedom* arrived in Singapore in April 2013 as part of Washington's plans to increase the US military presence in the region.<sup>70</sup> In addition, the United States has vowed to boost military ties with the Philippines, one of America's oldest allies in the region, to secure Southeast Asia's sea lanes in line with the principle of freedom of navigation. Washington has also sought to strengthen its political support for Manila as part of the strategic pivot to Asia and to defend its ally from China's growing aggression in waters claimed by the Philippines. In this, Manila's objective to enhance its security (through American support as leverage against China) has opportunely dovetailed with Washington's strategy to pivot away from years of serious military engagement elsewhere toward the Asia-Pacific, partly to "manage," if not contain, a rising China.



Although the United States, as a non-claimant in the South China Sea disputes, does not take sides in the issues, these developments have occurred because the nation has a deep stake in preserving global navigational freedoms and unimpeded commerce across the seas. These include the busy sea lanes in the South China Sea, which are critical to world trade. Thus, the United States, for both strategic and commercial reasons, has been a constant facilitator of freedom of the seas, which is also an important collective good to the world. Simultaneously, however, US officials have long highlighted diplomacy as the wisest course to subdue regional concerns over China's growing strength and repeatedly asserted that America's strategy toward Asia is not designed to "push back against or be in conflict with China."<sup>71</sup> Such a caution is because of the overall significance of Sino-US cooperation, which is vital to global peace and stability. As acknowledged by Obama administration officials Hillary Clinton and Timothy Geithner, "few global problems can be solved by the U.S. or China alone. And few can be solved without the U.S. and China together. The strength of the global economy, the health of the global environment, the stability of fragile states and the solution to nonproliferation challenges turn in large measure on cooperation between the U.S. and China."<sup>72</sup> Given this reality, the United States appears to have determined to prevent Asia's island disputes from undermining overall Sino-US relations, the significance of which in every issue dimension cannot be overemphasized. Despite America's concern about the destabilizing effects of China's territorial claims, the United States has little interest in seeing its regional allies and friends—let alone its crucial trade partner, China—become embroiled in military conflicts to settle their disputes over ownership of islands, use of seabed resources, or the scope of their territorial seas and exclusive economic zones.<sup>73</sup> Rather, US interests lie in those disputes being resolved through diplomatic negotiations and pragmatic compromises. That is why senior officials in Washington, even while striving to stem China's expansionist ambitions, have repeatedly warned against the danger of China-bashing and emphasized the need to proactively engage Beijing, including through making progress in Sino-US bilateral defense ties to build trust and to avoid any miscalculations or unnecessary incidents in the region.<sup>74</sup>

## Moving Forward

All in all, the ongoing territorial disputes in the South China Sea carry enormous implications for overall security in Asia and beyond. In effect, the given issue can be seen as a critical test case that would illuminate the prospect for Beijing's capabilities and willingness to alter the regional status quo amid geopolitical rivalry between still preeminent US forces and China's rapidly modernizing military in the era of globalization and complex interdependence where the two states and their neighboring countries are inextricably tied together based on various issue linkages and closely intertwined economic interests. In a larger sense, therefore, the significance of the South China Sea disputes goes beyond the estimated value of potential energy resources—not to mention a few small islands and rocks. This is largely due to the greater tension between China's ambitions of reestablishing itself as a great power and the US objectives of safeguarding its supremacy and keeping favorable alliances and partnerships in the region. Concurrently, America's handling of this so-called Asian problem is becoming a litmus test for the future status of US primacy as the nation faces crucial opportunities to prove its hegemonic resilience and its military and diplomatic skills to protect its allies and friends while navigating through its rivalry with a rising China. Thus, Sino-US competition may be unavoidable, especially given each other's pursuit of continuously expanding their own geostrategic influence and national interests.

China's core interests and ambitions are likely to expand as the nation's power expands. However, China's intentions and willingness to aggressively use that power are not predetermined—nor are the exact contents of those intentions and willingness static. Rather, “the specific nature and content of its growing appetites,” along with the means through which they are fulfilled, will be greatly influenced by “the choices that other states take in regard to China” as well as the Chinese domestic audience, which is sensitive to any outside actions taken against the country.<sup>75</sup> The Chinese elite cannot afford to take a conciliatory strategy of peaceful rise *if* doing so may appear too soft to protect China's national interests and pride, especially when other states singled out China as a threat or an instigator of regional tensions. Nevertheless, the US priority in terms of keeping American preeminence and credibility as a regional security guarantor is likely to make the United States reluctant to give way to China's growing assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific, which China

considers its own traditional sphere of influence. That could heighten the potential clash between the two great powers, with the South China Sea disputes becoming a trigger. Joseph S. Nye asserts that “throughout history, whenever a rising power creates fear among its neighbors and other great powers, that fear becomes a cause of conflict,” with even small events triggering an unintended and catastrophic chain reaction.<sup>76</sup> In other words, exaggerated and unmanaged fears could produce the so-called Thucydides trap, creating a devastating self-fulfilling prophecy.

Still, the escalation of regional tensions into war with US military intervention is neither inevitable nor desirable for the US and China or other countries in the region. The fact that both Beijing and Washington, along with members of ASEAN, have their common interests in safeguarding the freedom of navigation in the strategically and economically important South China Sea is promising. In fact, these mutual interests have been strong enough to overshadow the conflict-producing aspects of China’s territorial spats with its neighbors or the Sino-US rivalry, caused by alliance politics and mutual suspicions regarding each other’s strategic intentions in the region. As Singaporean prime minister Lee Hsien Loong acknowledges, “None of the Southeast Asian countries want to have a fight with China. In fact, China, too, goes considerably out of its way to develop friendly relations with ASEAN.”<sup>77</sup>

Still, it is critical for all to find ways to agree on practical face-saving solutions to the South China Sea disputes, including “joint development, shared infrastructure and coordinated investment” as well as international arbitration.<sup>78</sup> Though none of these proposals are new, the effectiveness and plausibility of success of these plans would increase only if all those involved let their seemingly irreconcilable objectives co-exist by making some concessions and changing their perspectives about what should be prioritized. It is also important to make efforts to moderate mutual suspicions regarding each other’s strategic intentions and to control rising nationalism across the region through dialogue—treating the task of building trust not as a precondition but an ultimate challenge and goal. For example, if China’s priority is set to seek a peaceful solution rather than preserving national pride or establishing/extending sovereignty, embracing the idea of “using the Law of the Sea to help split sovereignty from commercial exploitation and joint development of fishing, oil and gas resources” would become easier, enhancing China’s credibility as a peace-loving power and invalidating the notion of

the China threat.<sup>79</sup> It is also important for other claimants to prioritize the COC as a mechanism to manage tensions and to avoid open armed conflict rather than seeking such as a panacea and/or as a way to single out and disgrace China for its intransigence.


What is more, China needs to walk the walk—not just talk the talk—when it comes to demonstrating the nation’s intention to rise peaceably. At the rhetorical level, Beijing “has repeatedly lauded its ‘peaceful rise’ intention and a new security concept for regional security arrangements;” yet, in practice, China has done poorly in removing many barriers to make that vision credible. Moreover, China has been ineffective in providing “detailed roadmaps to the sort of peaceful regional order that it openly preaches.”<sup>80</sup> For example, Beijing’s explicit statement of support for a dialogue with ASEAN claimant states on the COC is a gradual, yet important, step forward to creating an environment more conducive to the multilateral settlement of the issue. Nevertheless, Beijing needs to continue the Sino-ASEAN consultations on the COC in a way that produces substance and strengthens mutual trust through vigorously promoting common understanding and compromise. As for other claimants in the South China Sea and ASEAN as a whole, this is the key moment to reunite themselves in a way to enhance their regional leverage and develop their capacities to ameliorate their fears of a rising China. Concurrently, these nations must capitalize on the opportunity to expand the scope of their economically profitable relations with China into strategically reliable partnership instead of being overwhelmed by the protracted nature of the South China Sea disputes.

As for Washington, the core task is to make it clear that the nation’s pivot to Asia is not designed as a zero-sum game to target and isolate China but to fulfill the US role as a reliable provider of Asian security—still powerful enough to maintain its vital alliance relationships and keep regional tensions at bay. In case of any regional conflict over the disputed territories, the United States has a responsibility to defend its long-standing ally, the Philippines, and to support its regional partners such as Indonesia and Malaysia. To do otherwise would undermine America’s credibility not only in Southeast Asia but in the Asia-Pacific and elsewhere. At the same time, it is important to embrace the reality that encouraging restraint from all parties and peacefully resolving these disputes will be in America’s best interests. In fact, direct American intervention could be counterproductive, given the risk of damaging

its critically important ties with China in the name of defending US allies and friends even if Chinese actions might not directly threaten core American interests, including freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. Nonetheless, Washington must pay close attention to Beijing's perception of American decline and maintain comprehensive national power in order to keep healthy and balanced relations with a rising China. Despite the significance of Sino-US collaboration on a range of global problems, excessively accommodating China's demands might backfire, as doing so could feed "an image in Beijing of weakness in the outside world," encouraging it to make a further attempt to push.<sup>81</sup>

Thus, the United States needs to continue its engagement in Asia with some muscle in its diplomacy—not necessarily to provoke China but to enhance deterrence to counter China's expansionism and to convince Beijing there is nothing to be gained by bullying its neighbors. At the same time, nothing good can come from excessively "pushing China, which has its own concerns about America's role in Asia, into a corner."<sup>82</sup> Under these conditions, it is essential for the United States to find the right balance between reassuring US allies and partners of Washington's commitment to the stability in Asia-Pacific *and* maintaining America's pragmatic policy of engagement with Beijing so as to protect US interests without exploiting Beijing's anxieties. This would require the United States to pursue a strategically nuanced approach to sustain its credibility as the major balancer of power in Asia, while simultaneously making efforts to create an environment in which China would be incorporated as an essential part of the regional community. Such an approach would necessitate a delicate balance of alliance management on the one hand and practical and vigorous engagement with Beijing on the other. In this, the United States would have to work hard to enhance its strategic relationship with China, even while striving to maintain its military supremacy and to keep the regional balance of power in its favor. Such a cautious and seemingly inconsistent approach would not necessarily reflect the discrepancy of Washington's Asia policy. Rather, it would be a sensible manifestation of the realities of America's complex interdependence with China and other states in the region.

Faced with the risk of conflict and the task of reducing the geopolitical tensions, scholars and global leaders alike have called for building strategic trust, based upon a new type of major power relationship between Beijing and Washington.<sup>83</sup> Henry Kissinger, for example, asserts

that “the emergence of a prosperous and powerful China” should not be considered “in itself to be an American strategic defeat” given the non-zero-sum nature of their bilateral ties in the twenty-first century.<sup>84</sup> Perhaps then, the real danger is to treat a rising China as detrimental to regional peace while seeing growing tensions in the South China Sea simply as a reflection of Beijing’s expansionist ambitions or concluding that Sino-US relations will follow the vicious cycle of the rise and fall of the great powers. To fall prey to such thinking will enhance an arms race and worsen the security dilemma. Thus, there is no better time than now to heed Joseph Nye’s counsel that “the best way to make an enemy of China is to treat it like one,” leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>85</sup> In fact, the future of China’s rise is open-ended, which is not necessarily bad. Rather, it means it is still possible to shape the future to become more peacefully and mutually-enhancing. Such a promise can bring out pragmatic realism in China, which strives to emerge not as a threat but a powerful, yet respected and proud, member of the regional and international communities. The specific issue of South China Sea disputes, though deemed as a major geopolitical flashpoint, can still be turned into an opportunity for creating a better future. Especially if China wants to be recognized not merely as a rising power but also as a valued leader in Asia and beyond, that nation must not miss this chance to mitigate the ongoing tensions by assuaging its neighbors’ concerns about its aggressive expansionism and by promoting inclusive region-wide commercial benefits and strategic partnerships. 

## Notes

1. Washington has repeatedly asserted that the goal of its pivot, designed to shift some 60 percent of American overseas-based forces to the Asia-Pacific by 2020, is not aimed at containing China. Nonetheless, the policy has triggered “Chinese anxiety about U.S. containment.” See Bonnie S. Glaser, “Pivot to Asia: Prepare for Unintended Consequences,” *CSIS Global Forecast 2012*, 13 April 2012, 22–24, [http://csis.org/files/publication/120413\\_gf\\_glaser.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/120413_gf_glaser.pdf).
2. Zhao Hong, “The South China Sea Dispute and China-ASEAN Relations,” *Asian Affairs* 44, no. 1 (2013), 27.
3. Taylor Fravel, “Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation: Explaining China’s Compromises in Territorial Disputes,” *International Security* 30, no. 2 (2005), 47.
4. Jeffrey W. Legro, “What China Will Want: The Future Intentions of a Rising Power,” *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 3 (2007), 515–16.

5. Stephen G. Brooks, "The Globalization of Production and the Changing Benefits of Conquest," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 43, no. 5 (1999): 646–70; and Eric Gartzke, "The Capitalist Peace," *American Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1 (January 2007): 166–91.

6. Although stable democracies and stable autocracies are mostly less war-prone, those countries in transition, especially ones that face the growing internal pressures to expand the scope of political participation and to create a more open and liberal political system, are at greater danger of war. Those regimes are more likely to initiate military conflicts in order to secure their grip on power by uniting the public, creating the "rally round the flag effect," and scapegoating "enemies of the nation at home and abroad." See Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: Norton, 2000), 158.

7. Aaron Friedberg, "The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?" *International Security* 30, no. 2 (2005), 30.

8. Jack Levy, "The Diversionary Theory of War: A Critique," in *Handbook of War Studies*, ed. Manus I. Midlarsky (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 259–88.

9. Eric J. Labs, "Beyond Victory: Offensive Realism and the Expansion of War Aims," *Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (1997): 1–49.

10. John J. Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 381–96.

11. John H. Herz, "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 2, no. 2 (January 1950): 157–80.

12. Friedberg, "The Future of U.S.-China Relations," 18.

13. Robert Art, "The United States and the Rise of China: Implications for the Long Haul," *Political Science Quarterly* 125, no. 3 (Fall 2010), 361–62. Similarly, Henry Kissinger asserts that it is only natural that China's territorial ambitions would grow together with the increase of its power. It would be abnormal if China decided not to direct some portion of its newly-established wealth to strengthen its position and modernize its military capabilities; the more unusual outcome would be if a rising power like China, which is poised to overtake the United States as the biggest economy, "did not translate its economic power into some increased military capacity" and strategic influence. See Henry A. Kissinger, "The Future of U.S.-Chinese Relations," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 2 (2012), 44–55.

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