

# The Turn of the Tide: Explaining China's Growing Assertiveness in the South China Sea

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Before the late 2000s, China employed a diplomatic “next generation” approach to its territorial disputes in the South China Sea (SCS). Beginning in the late 2000s, however, China has assumed threatening attitudes, and taken a strong stand against other disputants. Why has China recently shown its assertiveness when dealing with the South China Sea issue? This study argues that two factors—China’s growing naval capabilities and the growing presence of China’s strategic rivals around the South China Sea—led China to adopt a more assertive policy regarding the South China Sea issue.

*Keywords:* the rise of China, South China Sea disputes, Sino-Southeast Asia relations, China’s assertiveness

## Introduction

At the negotiation on the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Japan and the People’s Republic of China in 1978, then Vice President Deng suggested that, if issues between China and Japan were too sensitive and difficult to deal with at that time, China and Japan should let the next generations address these issues. He also requested that the two countries cooperate on other issues, setting very sensitive issues aside. It seems that China followed Deng’s dictum of so-called “Next Generation Resolution”, at least by the mid-2000s. Since the rise of China was realized at the end of the Cold War in the early 90s, China tended to establish close relationships with other neighboring countries, and actively participated in international and regional organizations. Arguably to mitigate a sense of threat by China toward neighboring countries, China’s foreign policy during the 90s and 2000s seems to be relatively peaceful, or at least moderate.

However, since the late 2000s, China has shown more militarily assertive behaviors in its sea territorial disputes than before. China has actively built military-related facilities and reclaimed small islets around the disputed waters. At the same time, it has deployed its state-of-the-art warships to the disputed areas and increased the number of naval exercises there. Facing other countries’ claims on the disputed areas, China has assumed threatening attitudes and taken a strong stand against countries directly involved in the dispute, as well as against major external actors, specifically the United States (US).

This phenomenon implies that China now relies on a more assertive policy regarding its territorial issues, whereas in the past, it used a more peaceful approach which involved bilateral and multilateral diplomatic channels. Thus, based on this phenomenon, a question has arisen: What made China reject Deng’s dictum of “Next Generation Resolution”, and change its approach to sea territorial disputes? In other words, why has

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China since the late 2000s shown its assertiveness when dealing with its sea territorial disputes? China's recent assertiveness is somewhat puzzling because after the Cold War and until the late 2000s, China had made significant efforts to reassure its neighboring countries, specifically Southeast Asian countries, which were concerned about the China Threat. China's recent assertiveness seems to be contradictory to its reassurance campaign. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to find what factors have caused China's recent assertive behaviors in the primary area of its sea territorial disputes, the South China Sea (SCS).

Several studies provide explanations for China's assertiveness since the late 2000s. Although these explanations primarily emphasizing the role of internal and domestic factors could provide some insights, this article argues that existing accounts are insufficient to understand China's recent change in its approach to the SCS issue. This study further insists that focusing solely on these internal causes is problematic, and that both internal and external factors should be considered. In other words, both China's growing naval capability, which enables it to effectively deal with vast waters around the SCS, and the growing military presence of China's strategic rivals—specifically the US and India—around the SCS, which accelerates China's perception that its sovereignty around the SCS is significantly threatened, are two primary factors that led China to be more assertive when dealing with the SCS issue in the late 2000s.

Understanding the determinants of China's recent assertiveness in its sea territorial disputes in general and the SCS issue, in particular, seems to be essential for several reasons. Most of all, China's behaviors in sea territorial disputes could be a good indicator of whether China will be a status-quo or revisionist actor in the near future. Thus, studying this topic could provide scholars with empirical evidence regarding whether China is likely to be a status-quo or revisionist actor on the international scene. In addition, considering China's growing economic, military, and political influences on the international scene, and its position as a global power, its assertiveness in sea territorial disputes could have significant impacts on both the regional and international orders. Thus, by understanding why China has recently adopted a more assertive approach to its sea territorial disputes around the SCS, China's neighboring countries, as well as primary external actors, will be able to effectively deal with an assertive China.

In the following sections, some explanations suggesting why China shifted its foreign policy towards the SCS issue will be discussed and reviewed. These explanations primarily attribute China's recent assertiveness to internal factors—domestic problems, growing nationalism, and the thirst for energy resources. After reviewing these explanations, this article will address the central argument of this study—that both an internal factor (that is, China's growing naval power) and an external factor (that is, the growing presence of China's strategic rivals around the SCS) should be taken into consideration in order to understand China's recent assertiveness, followed by a research method section. Then, empirical analysis will be conducted. In the empirical analysis sections, first of all, China's recent assertiveness will be discussed, using certain criteria to show that there has been a remarkable shift in China's approach to the SCS issue from relatively moderate and peaceful to more assertive. Then, two explanatory variables—the status of China's naval capability and China's strategic rivals' foray into the SCS—will be investigated to show that these two factors conjunctively have led China to adopt a more assertive policy. A conclusion will follow.

### **Previous Explanations for China's Recent Assertiveness**

What has led China to adopt more assertive policy toward its sea territorial disputes around the SCS? In other words, why China has recently shown more assertiveness when dealing with the SCS issues? Various

theoretical perspectives and studies suggest potential answers to this question, and these can be divided into three groups.

One group tries to explain China's assertiveness in conjunction with the logic of diversionary war theory, insisting that, when facing domestic and social instability, which could threaten China's central authority, Chinese leaders are more likely to adopt a more expansionist foreign policy, in order to divert discontent of China's society (Pei, 2006; Ross, 2009; Shirk, 2007). However, some studies empirically show that internal instability does not necessarily lead China to take a hardline external policy, which is designed to divert social discontents (Fravel, 2005; 2008; 2010), and this diversionary war theory fails to appropriately comprehend one important factor: the level of stability of Chinese regime (Yamaguchi, 2013). The second argument centers on the role of Chinese nationalism, pointing out that there has been growing and intensifying nationalism among Chinese people, and arguing that this growing nationalism plays a significant role in encouraging China to recently act more boldly and arrogantly (Swaine & Fravel, 2011; Yahuda, 2013). Nevertheless, whether Chinese nationalism and nationalistic demonstrations necessarily leads China's assertive external policy is still debatable, because some scholars show that China sometimes tends to suppress these nationalist demonstrations in order either to signal its intentions to its counterpart, or to cooperate with its counterpart for economic reasons (Downs & Saunders, 1998/1999; Weiss, 2014). In addition, as Alastair Iain Johnston (2013) argued, there is no clear indicator showing that China's national sentiment has recently jumped. The third group points out that China's recent aspiration to acquire a stable source of natural resources and alleged natural resources around the SCS should be one important determinant of China's growing assertiveness here (Li, 2010; Nyman, 2013). But, some analysts raise the question of the validity of the current potential status of natural resources around the SCS, and weaken this explanation (Nincic, 2009, pp. 31-43; Kennedy, 2014, pp. 23-39).<sup>1</sup>

After all, although these arguments may provide some insights into China's external behaviors in some issue areas, these existing explanations are either theoretically problematic or empirically not supported, and thus, are insufficient to explain why China recently adopted a more assertive policy toward the SCS issue than in the past. This study argues that two factors—one that is internal and the other that is an external factor—should be taken into consideration. The former is China's growing naval capability that can support China's policy towards the SCS. Kaplan (2010) implied that naval powers in history have generally been more benign than land powers because their navies cannot effectively control and occupy vast waters; and therefore, China is also likely to follow similar paths with other historical sea powers. Thus, one can infer that if China's naval power is not effectively strong, it can be expected to be benign; however, if China possesses a strong naval power to effectively control vast area of the SCS, and if it can effectively counter other naval powers around this area, it could become more confidential and assertive. Analyzing China's growing expansionist strategies, Li (2009) linked this issue to China's growing naval capability, suggesting that there has been a positive correlation between these two factors. Furthermore, other scholars point out China's growing military power as one of the causes of China's recent assertiveness (Pant, 2011, p. 109; Yahuda, 2013, pp. 451-454).

In order for China to effectively control and exert its influences over vast disputed waters, possessing powerful and advanced naval power—equivalent to other powerful regional actors—is essential. This study assumes that Chinese leaders can estimate China's national power before they decide to take certain foreign actions. Indeed, China has estimated its naval power and assessed if its naval power can effectively control the

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<sup>1</sup> The following scholars analyze current potential status of natural resources around the SCS.

vast disputed waters around the SCS. For instance, until late 2007, Chinese naval leaders estimated that China did not possess a strong naval power to deal with the SCS issue, and some naval leaders were “resisting any headlong rush into naval expansion in a southward direction” (Goldstein, 2011, p. 329). This implies that, before China decided to implement militarily assertive policy toward the SCS issue, Chinese leaders may have estimated its naval power. Once they thought that China’s naval power can sufficiently and practically counter other powers’ naval activities around the SCS, they eventually may have decided to act more confidentially and audaciously. Thus, China’s recent military assertiveness could be a result of recent growing Chinese naval power.

However, this factor alone does not sufficiently explain China’s recent assertiveness, because not all military build-ups and increase of naval power lead to one country’s assertive foreign policy. Thus, the other factor should be conjunctionally considered: The growing insecure external environment around the SCS mainly caused by its strategic rivals, such as the US and India, both of which have competed with China in terms of either world or regional hegemony. According to Christensen (2011, p. 55), China’s external behaviors generally have been reactive to unwelcome events by other actors, implying that China’s recent assertiveness also should be understood as its reactive and responsive attitude to its decreasing bargaining power and its perceived unfavorable security environment around the disputed waters. Indeed, some scholars indicate that China’s recent assertiveness around the SCS is mainly caused by other disputants’ reinforcement of their sovereignty over the SCS (Johnson, 2013; Pham, 2011, p. 145; Swaine & Fravel, 2011, p. 7). Fravel (2007/2008) also suggested that, when China faced powerful opponents or its bargaining power decreased around disputed areas, it was more likely to use its force. These studies imply that when the presence of powerful countries increases around China’s territorially disputed areas, which could reduce China’s bargaining power around those areas, and as a result, China perceives that its sovereignty over those areas are threatened, it is more likely to take militarily assertive actions. However, unlike these studies, the author’s emphasis is not on other countries directly involved in the SCS dispute, such as Vietnam, or the Philippines, but on more powerful external actors, which are regarded as China’s strategic rivals. Considering that China is competing with these countries in many areas, and that these countries are militarily powerful, the growing presence and increasing influence of these countries around the SCS may be perceived—sometimes even overstated—as a significant threat to China’s sovereignty over this area. Indeed, as some studies show, many Chinese scholars and analysts express concerns about the both US and India’s growing presence around the SCS, and their efforts to establish closer strategic and military ties with other disputants, and point out that the these strategic rivals’ growing provocation facilitated China’s more vigorous response (Scobell & Harold, 2013; Swaine, 2010). However, it also should be noted that this factor alone does not explain China’s assertiveness, either. Even though China perceives growing threats around the SCS because of the increasing military presence of other countries, it will not be able to take militarily assertive behaviors around these vast waters, unless it has effective and strong naval power to counter these powerful countries.

### **China’s Growing Assertiveness in the Sea since the Late 2000s**

This study focuses on China’s recent assertiveness in the SCS, specifically since the late 2000s, and defines it as China’s active defensive behavior for its sovereignty over the disputed waters in response to other countries’ hostile activities or external threats. In addition, it should be noted that China’s recent approach to the SCS issue should not be regarded as aggressive actions. Several scholars and news media have confusingly

and interchangeable used the term of China's assertiveness and aggressiveness. Some explanations primarily emphasizing internal factors tend to explain that China's economic growth or domestic components are more likely to facilitate China to take more expansionist actions and adopt a more aggressive foreign policy. Indeed, China's dramatic economy may have played a significant role in leading China to act aggressively on the international scene. However, the driving forces of China's foreign policy are more complicated than these explanations. The author's argument that one external factor—the growing threatening external security environment around the SCS to China—should be taken into account suggests that China's recent behaviors around the SCS should be characterized as defensive assertiveness rather than aggressiveness. In other words, given that China's recently changing approach to the SCS has been responsive to the worsening external security environment around the SCS mainly caused by China's strategic rivals, China's changing policy toward the SCS is more likely to aim at defending its sovereignty around the SCS, not at attacking or seizing other countries' occupied islands there.

Various scholars seem to use different indicators to show China's recent assertiveness. For instance, Swaine (2010, pp. 2-3) considered China's recent confrontational approaches toward the US regarding the Iranian nuclear issue, environmental issues, or China's unprecedentedly intense complaints about the Obama administration's decision to have talks with Dalai Lama, and about the administration's decision to sell its weapons to Taiwan in 2009, as indicators of China's recent assertiveness on the international scene. However, some scholars insist that these cannot be indicators of China's new assertiveness, but they should be regarded as a continuation of China's existing assertive policies (Johnston, 2013; Scobell & Harold, 2013, p. 114). More importantly, these indicators of China's recent assertiveness cover various issue areas, and thus are not appropriate indicators for China's recent assertiveness in the SCS. Some scholars and analysts use the Chinese government's official statements regarding the SCS issue as an indicator of China's assertiveness in the SCS. China recently has articulated its sovereignty, some scholars and analysts say, over the disputed waters in resolute and even arrogant manners, and explicated the scope of its sovereignty over vast waters with the nine-dashed line (Swaine & Fravel, 2011). Nevertheless, these indicators also have limitations in showing China's recent specific assertiveness because they are simply a continuation of what has existed in the past.

Other scholars suggest more proper indicators capturing China's recent assertiveness in the SCS. These indicators include China's recently growing administrative and military activities around the SCS, such as more active and frequent patrols by Chinese marine-related administrative agencies, more active imposition of unilateral fishing bans in the SCS, and growing number, intensity, and duration of naval exercises since the late 2000s, all of which seemingly were aimed at strengthening China's influences and sovereignty over the disputed waters (Johnston, 2013; Thayer, 2010). As will be discussed later in detail, these indicators show that China's assertiveness has become apparent since roughly the late 2000s. Until that point, China seemed to try to deal with this issue through more peaceful ways, such as diplomatic bargaining, arguably in order to reassure its neighboring countries about China threats. However, since the late 2000s, China seems to take more assertive actions, based on these indicators.

China's more assertive and stubborn approach to the SCS dispute started roughly in the late 2000s. Before that point, China seemed to rely primarily on more multilateral diplomatic ways to deal with various issues, arguably for several reasons. First of all, China's active reliance on multilateral diplomacy since the 90s aimed at reassuring its neighboring countries that its rise would be peaceful (Glosny, 2006; Saunders, 2008, p. 131). Second, China's growing optimistic perception of regional institutions in Asia also facilitated China's

engagement in these organizations (Cheng-Chwee, 2005; Shambaugh, 2004/2005, p. 73). In other words, China saw that its involvement in these regional organizations could be an opportunity for its economic development and a check on the US leverage in Asia. As a result, China eagerly participated in various regional organizations, such as ASEAN + 1 (ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] + China), ASEAN + 3 (ASEAN + China, Japan, and South Korea), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Vision Group (Shambaugh, 2004/2005, pp. 72-78), indicating that China was trying to address various issues through diplomatic channels.

Specifically in regard to the SCS issue in 1995, both China and Southeast Asian disputants for the first time agreed to discuss the SCS disputes in multilateral diplomatic ways. And after a few years, in November 2002, China and ASEAN signed the declaration on the conduct of parties in the South China Sea. This declaration includes: the freedom of navigation around the SCS, the proclamation that SCS issues should be dealt with peacefully, and the agreement that parties should avoid any activities that could complicate the disputes (Simon, 2008, p. 205). China also initiated a series of diplomatic talks with the Philippines, and both China and Vietnam exchanged high-level delegations (Thayer, 2011a, p. 78). In addition, in 2005, three primary disputants of the SCS disputes—China, Vietnam, and the Philippines—agreed to joint seismic surveys to conjunctionally investigate hydrocarbon resources around the SCS areas. With its active participation in various multilateral institutional and diplomatic mechanisms, China for the first time found “common interest to engage all ASEAN states constructively and exclusively to talk about cooperation, rather than quarrelling over issues like the Spratly dispute” (Cheng-Chwee, 2005, p. 110). Until the mid-2000s, China’s approach to the SCS issue can be characterized as a number of modest multilateral diplomatic steps (Cheng-Chwee, 2005; Glosny, 2006; Scobell & Harold, 2013).

However, in the late 2000s, China’s approach toward the SCS dispute changed from a diplomacy- and negotiation- oriented one to a more coercive and military-oriented approach. China’s recent assertiveness is indicated by its several administrative, paramilitary, and military activities around the disputed waters. Compared to the previous period (i.e., between the 90s and the mid-2000s), China’s assertiveness since the late 2000s can be seen in: more unilateral imposition of fishing bans (administrative dimension), more active and frequent administrative patrols around the SCS (administrative and paramilitary dimension), and the growing number, intensity, and duration of naval exercises with deployment of China’s state-of-the-art submarines and surface vessels (military dimension).

First of all, the Chinese government’s more inclusive and unilateral imposition of fishing bans in 2009 indicates China’s recent assertiveness in the SCS. Indeed, China initially declared and imposed its unilateral fishing ban in 1999, due to the decrease of catch, and this ban has been aimed at preserving fish resources around the SCS. However, what is notably different between the fishing ban in 1999 and that in 2009 is that, the scope and the target of the fishing ban in 2009 was remarkably extended (Buszynski, 2012, p. 143; Swaine & Fravel, 2011, p. 5). For instance, its new extended fishing ban enables China to seize and detain foreign fishing boats.

Second, China’s recent assertiveness in the SCS is also indicated by the fact that since the late 2000s China’s fisheries administrations have increasingly patrolled the SCS. For instance, in 2009, China’s South Sea Region Fisheries Administration Bureau organized eleven special operations to effectively patrol the Paracels (Fravel, 2011, p. 305). In March of the same year, China deployed the largest scale of patrol vessels, including 311 vessels converted from retired naval ships, to the Paracels, and in May, it once again deployed another

patrol fleet to the same area. Furthermore, in April 2010, Chinese Fishery Administration vessels were deployed to the SCS and patrolled this area in order to protect Chinese fishery activities there. Unlike with past patrols in this area, the Chinese government then decided to conduct regular patrols around the Spratly Islands, after these large-scale patrols were deployed (Li, 2010, p. 61). In other words, although there were also patrols around the SCS in the past, they were sporadic, rather than regular operations. In addition, the scope of patrols since the late 2000s has been extended as far as to the Spratly Islands, and the number of patrol vessels has also increased.

The third indicator of China's recent assertiveness is the growing number, intensity, and duration of its naval exercises around the SCS. Some scholars argue that, specifically since the late 2000s, the scope, duration, frequency, and number of China's naval exercises around the SCS has increased remarkably. Johnston, for instance, states that "in 2009 and 2010 China's military and paramilitary presence in the South China Sea was more active than in previous years" (Johnston, 2013, p. 19), and other scholars also articulate that "the frequency and scope of exercise in the area have apparently increased", while some of the exercises cover longer distances and include more ships than in the past (Swaine & Fravel, 2011, p. 6). Large-scale naval exercises conducted in the SCS in 2008 mark a turning point, because this series of exercises deployed China's state-of-the-art surface warships, showed an unprecedentedly wide range of exercises encompassing a number of disputed waters, and involved a number of different types of exercises, such as counterterrorism, opposition-force, and live-fire drills (Fravel, 2011, p. 309; Swaine & Fravel, 2011, p. 6). In March and April of 2010, China deployed its North Sea Fleet to the SCS, where it performed a series of large-scale naval exercises, showing off China's capability to conduct long-range naval exercises. From the late 2000s onward, China's naval exercises around the SCS have been growing in number and scope.

These three activities by China since the late 2000s show clear differences from those in the past, and indicate China's recent assertiveness in the SCS. Obviously, various dimensions and characteristics of these activities—scope, numbers, intensity, and substance—are different than those conducted before the late 2000s. As will be discussed later in detail, China's growing activities around the SCS in both administrative and military terms may have been facilitated by two factors—China's strengthened naval capability, and the increased presence and influence of China's key strategic rivals around Southeast Asia. Due to these two factors, China initiated more assertive actions around the SCS to solidify its sovereignty over the disputed waters, and signaled its resolute will to defend its territorial integrity against other disputants' claims.

Alongside these activities around the SCS, there is one notable characteristic of China's recent approach toward the SCS. As Fravel (2011) argued, China's recent strategy in the SCS incorporates multiple methods. Currently, China's strategy includes diplomatic, administrative, and military components. At first glance, China's recent approach toward the SCS could be regarded as simply either extension or a multidimensional version of China's multilateral diplomacy-oriented approach during the past period (between the 90s and the mid-2000s), because one can argue that China's current strategy has just added military and administrative components to its existing diplomatic approach toward the SCS. Indeed, since the late 2000s, China has not only adopted more assertive policies in both administrative and military terms, but has also maintained diplomatic options to deal with this issue. Nevertheless, while when addressing the SCS issue before the mid-2000s, China seemed to invest significant efforts in a diplomatic approach, its current efforts in diplomatic terms have "shown sporadic progress at best" without producing tangible and meaningful results (Swaine & Fravel, 2011, p. 5). This implies that although China is currently using a multidimensional strategy, it can be

argued that between the diplomatic component, on the one hand, and the administrative and military components; on the other hand, China's strategic focus seems to be leaning towards the latter.

### **Factors for China's Recent Assertiveness**

Then, what led to China's recent assertiveness in the SCS? The analysis below shows that, two factors, one internal, and the other external, seem to have motivated China to adopt a more assertive policy when addressing the SCS issue. China's recent assertiveness can be regarded as a consequence of both its own growing naval capability and the increased presence of extra-regional great naval powers around the SCS. Indeed, a comparison of the period between the 90s and mid-2000s, on the one hand, and after the late 2000s, on the other hand, reveals remarkable differences in the status of China's naval power and the military presence of the US and India.

#### **The Status of China's Naval Power**

Before implementing any national policy, a state should possess sufficient capabilities to effectively enforce that policy. In other words, in order to effectively and successfully defend vast water areas, such as the SCS, and to deter potential hostilities or attacks by other actors, it is a prerequisite for China to possess ample naval power. Furthermore, by possessing strong naval power that enables China to keep other naval powers in check, and to control the vast SCS areas, China may have decided to take more confident and audacious actions around the SCS. Thus, it can be argued that, when China had sufficient naval power, it would deal with its external problems, such as territorial disputes, humanitarian rescue missions in open waters, or anti-piracy operations abroad, more actively and confidently than it would when it did not have sufficient naval power. Indeed, China's growing naval power could be one significant factor that led to its recent active participation in anti-piracy operations and exercises for long-range humanitarian rescue missions.

With its impressive and dramatic economic growth since the early 90s, China has made significant efforts to build up and modernize its military power. Its national defense budget has increased exponentially, and cutting-edge weaponry has been developed endogenously or purchased from foreign countries. Specifically, the Chinese navy has implemented "selective modernization focused on vessels that have greater range, are more survivable, and carry more lethal weapons system" than its coastal defense force at the end of the Cold War (Goldstein 1997/1998, p. 47). Nevertheless, until the mid-2000s, China's naval power had various problems and limitations. Despite continuous naval build-ups during the period between the early 90s and the mid-2000s, several scholars and analysts point out that China's naval power in general, and submarine capability in particular, was significantly limited and had some problems (Glosny, 2004, p. 132; Goldstein, 1997/1998, p. 48; Goldstein & Murray, 2004, p. 195; O'Hanlon, 2000, pp. 62-64).<sup>2</sup> For instance, only five out of 67 submarines which China operated in 2000 were modern and had a relatively quiet design, while all other submarines had outdated diesel-electric designs (Cliff, 2015, p. 65). In addition, about half of China's submarines during this period were obsolete Romeo-class, the oldest diesel submarines in operation in the world, and another class of outdated submarines (the Ming class) also had various technical problems in terms of batteries and engines (Glosny, 2004, p. 132).

China's surface warships during this period also had serious problems. Most of the surface warships in the

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<sup>2</sup> These studies also deal with China's naval power in general, and submarine power in particular, during the 90s and the early 2000s.

Chinese navy in 2000 were obsolescent: among 60, none was equipped with a long-range surface-to-air missile defense system, and only two were equipped with a medium-range missile defense system (Cliff, 2015, p. 64). Furthermore, many Chinese surface warships also had few guns, which were relatively small and did not have effective gunfire capability (O'Hanlon, 2000, p. 64).

Based on these limitations and problems during this period, several scholars articulate that China's naval power until the mid-2000s did not match the US naval power operating in Asia, nor did it enjoy naval supremacy over its core interest, Taiwan. For instance, Goldstein's assessment of China's military power in the 90s compared to that of other regional actors, such as the ASEAN countries, Taiwan, Japan, and the US, shows that, although China's modernization efforts during the 90s of its military, and the navy in particular, enhanced some dimensions of its military capabilities, its military power did not enjoy indisputable superiority even over the ASEAN countries, let alone Taiwan, Japan, or the US (Goldstein, 1997/1998, pp. 51-54). In addition, it was questionable whether the Chinese navy could conduct long-range missions covering the SCS.

However, as a result of continuous naval build-ups and modernization processes since the early 2000s, the Chinese navy had impressively strengthened its capability in qualitative terms by the late 2000s. Although many of China's surface warships were still outdated, three new classes of destroyers and two new classes of frigates were developed, most of which are equipped with long-range engine systems and cutting-edge missile defense systems, which are comparable to the systems of the US vessels. In addition, even though about 40 percent of China's attack submarines in the late 2000s were still outdated, China had introduced three new classes of attack submarines. Specifically, one type—the Shang-class—shows an improved capability to intercept surface ships and conduct missile attacks (Cliff, 2015, pp. 75-76). In addition, as a result of China's new submarine construction program, the Chinese navy obtained state-of-the-art nuclear-powered submarines, and came to possess dramatically increased submarine capability, which is comparable to US submarine power (Cole, 2010, p. 87).<sup>3</sup> Around the late 2000s, newly developed and deployed Chinese navy warships were “the beginning of the first really modern navy that Beijing [would] deploy as an instrument to deter Taiwan, thwart US intervention, and secure China's territorial claims in the East and South China Sea” (Cole, 2010, p. 88).

Specifically, there are two remarkable differences between China's naval capability during the period between the early 90s and mid-2000s, on the one hand, and around the late 2000s, on the other hand. First, since the late 2000s, China has possessed sufficient naval power to check other great naval powers around the SCS. This does not mean that China currently enjoys supremacy over other great powers' overall naval capabilities. Rather, while the US enjoyed unquestionable naval supremacy in Asia until the mid-2000s, with China's naval modernization efforts, strengthened submarine capabilities, and increasing arsenal of quiet submarines, the US's solid naval supremacy in Asia has become questionable in the late 2000s (Goldstein & Murray, 2004; Womack, 2011, pp. 379-380). Moreover, Ross (2009, pp. 59-60) argued that China's submarine power since the late 2000s has raised the vulnerability of the US naval operations around the Pacific area, including the SCS. Of course, it should be noted that it is still obvious that the Chinese navy does not have the ability to dominate the entire SCS against the US, Japan, and India. However, as Cole (2010, p. 113) aptly argued, simply measuring China's overall naval forces against other great navies is meaningless, but analyzing China's naval capability in term of how much it can deploy its strengthened naval power to certain disputed

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<sup>3</sup> Cole's statement that “except for submarines, China remains far behind the United States in terms of fleet modernization” implies that, at least in terms of submarine capability, China does not remain behind the US. Cole also discusses China's naval modernization processes in detail.

areas is meaningful. Based on this, whether the issue “concerns Taiwan or an East or South China Sea objective, it seems fairly certain that China will be able to seize the initiative when employing its new [n]avy” (Cole, 2010, p. 113).

The second point is that China's navy since the late 2000s has shown increased power projection ability, which has enabled China to project its naval power as far as the SCS. Most notably, China's deployment of its fleet to the Gulf of Aden in 2009 indicates that its navy currently has sufficient capability to project its naval power beyond Asia. Although China faced some challenges, its deployment of its fleet to the Gulf of Aden “indicated that significant progress had been made in naval logistics capabilities”, and Western analysts also assessed that the Chinese navy had the capability to support its operating forces (Cliff, 2015, p. 151; Cole, 2010, p. 132). Indeed, with its latest naval vessels, and after the construction of Yulin Naval Base around Hainan Island in 2007, China could mitigate its logistical problems around the SCS, and its naval power projection ability also reached a sufficient level to cover most parts of the western Pacific (Thayer, 2010, pp. 71-73). China's series of naval exercises around the SCS which started in 2010 also indicates not only its naval supremacy in Asia, but also its strengthened capability to operate long-range naval missions (Yahuda, 2013, p. 452).

Overall, China achieved the great success of its naval build-ups around the late 2000s. Since then China has been able to effectively and practically deal with other great naval powers around the SCS, and deploy its navy to the vast disputed waters, whereas it could not do so until the mid-2000s. This implies that, between the 90s and mid-2000s, China did not possess sufficient naval power to address SCS issues in an assertive and confident manner. However, after its naval power was sufficiently enhanced, China may have judged that it could effectively control the vast waters around the SCS, and exert a credible naval deterrent against other external powers, such as the US. As a result, China may have become more confident that it could deal more assertively with the SCS issue.

### **The Growing Presence of China's Rivals around the South China Sea**

Although the growth of China's naval capabilities may have played an important role in leading China to adopt a more assertive policy in the SCS issue, this factor alone is an insufficient driving force of China's recent assertiveness, considering that military build-ups do not always cause one country's assertive policy. In other words, there should be some other legitimate and reasonable rationale for China's recent assertiveness: its growing concern that its alleged sovereignty over the disputed waters of the SCS is significantly threatened, and that its leverages in this region are also challenged. This study posits that China's sense of threat may not have been primarily caused by the claims of disputants over the SCS or their military build-ups, considering that China has already enjoyed unwavering military and political preponderance over these weaker disputants: Rather, China's sense of crisis may have been provoked by the growing presence around the SCS of the US and India—more militarily and economically powerful extra-regional powers—and their establishment of close strategic ties with disputants specifically since the mid-2000s. Given that both the US and India have fiercely competed with China in various issue areas for either world or regional hegemonic position, these countries' unconcealed efforts around the mid-2000s to promote close relationships with other claimants in the SCS dispute could be regarded as a significant threat to China's claims over the SCS. Specifically, although one can argue that the US has maintained dominant power in Asia since the Second World War: (1) the growing US military presence around the SCS; as well as (2) breakthroughs in its bilateral relations with one core disputant,

Vietnam, have been remarkable since the mid-2000s. Both of these have led China to have a sense of threat about its external security environment.

In spite of the legacy of the Vietnam War, the US and Vietnam normalized their diplomatic relations in 1995, and since then, US-Vietnam relations have been growing. However, these strengthening ties have centered mostly on economic and trade issues, while defense and strategic relations have lagged far behind, due to Vietnam's distrust of the US's real intentions (Solomon & Drennan 2001, p. 9). Although the US eagerly wanted to "expand security and military cooperation with Vietnam since the early 2000s, Hanoi has been more cautious" because of the inconsistency of the US Asian policy (Shearer, 2012, p. 264).

However, since 2005, US-Vietnam relations have made rapid progress in strategic and military terms. Vietnamese Prime Minister Khai's visit to the US in 2005 marked a new phase in the US-Vietnam relations. During this visit, leaders of both countries stated for the first time the concept of partnership between the US and Vietnam, and President Bush reaffirmed that the US would support Vietnam's security and territorial integrity (Hung, 2014, p. 296). In 2005, both countries concluded the International Military Education and Training agreement, and in 2006, then US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld agreed to expand military relations with Vietnam on all levels. In their joint statement in 2008, leaders of these two countries "endorsed the creation of new political-military and policy planning talks, which allow for more frequent and in-depth discussions on security and strategic issues", and the US once again affirmed its support for Vietnam's national sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity (Hung, 2014, p. 297). In October of that year, the first US-Vietnam political, security, and defense dialogues were held in Hanoi.

In addition to its growing approach to Vietnam since 2005, the US has also increased its military presence, and its ability to project naval power to the SCS areas. Between late 2003 and late 2010, the US deployed about 20 naval vessels to Vietnam. Moreover, in 2007, the US assigned more than half of its overall navy ships to the Pacific Fleet for the first time since the end of the Cold War (Friedberg, 2011, p. 103). Although there are no available aggregated and systematic data indicating the US naval presence around the SCS, these facts show that the US reinforced its naval projection power to cover the Pacific Oceans, including the SCS, and increased the frequency of its naval deployment to Vietnam in the mid-2000s.

The bilateral relations between India and Vietnam show a similar trajectory, although India-Vietnam relations began earlier in strategic and military terms than US-Vietnam relations. Before the mid-2000s, Indo-Vietnam relations also focused primarily on economic terms, under the name of India's "Look East" policy, which was initially aimed at establishing close economic relations with India's Southeast Asian neighbors. However, since the 2000s, the "Look East" policy has become more security- and military- oriented (Kwon, 2015; Pant, 2011; Zhao, 2007), and alongside India's newly enhanced strategic and military ties with other Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam has also been recognized as a significant partner by India. In 2000, then Vietnam Prime Minister Khai visited New Delhi, and Vietnam and India made their traditional political relations more security-focused. They agreed on a comprehensive defense cooperation agreement, including exchange of intelligence, joint coastguard training, and supplying for components for weaponry (Brewster, 2009, p. 30). Nevertheless, while both countries seemed to establish closer military and security ties with each other, Vietnam was still cautious about promoting its relations with India to the level of strategic partner, due to Vietnam's economic ties with China at that time. Both countries' discussions on arms trade were stalled, and specifically when the Congress-led government came in to power in 2004, Indo-Vietnam relations returned to being economy-focused (Brewster, 2009, pp. 30-31).

However, bilateral strategic and military relations between India and Vietnam marked a milestone in 2007, with a rise in their relations to a strategic partnership (Thayer, 2011b, p. 336). In December of the same year, India and Vietnam expanded their defense and strategic cooperation, including an exchange of high-profile military personnel, and military training. In addition, India has provided Vietnam with a vast number of essential parts for Vietnamese naval submarines, which enables Vietnam to maintain its modernization program (Thayer, 2011b, p. 336).

Besides its reinforcement of strategic relations with Vietnam, India has increased its forays into the SCS. Since 2000, India has regularly deployed its navy fleets to Vietnamese naval ports, and also conducted joint naval exercises with Vietnam around waters close to the SCS (Scott, 2012, p. 1030; Scott, 2013, p. 57; Zhao, 2007, p. 131). For instance, in 2004, India deployed a five-ship flotilla to the SCS, showing its enhanced naval projection ability to the open seas (Scott, 2013, p. 57). During the same year, India also “made three separate deployments into the SCS”, and since then it has annually conducted multi-ship deployments there (Brewster, 2009, p. 35). India’s growing number of joint naval exercises with Vietnam around the SCS since the mid-2000s also indicates India’s growing influence in that region. Considering that the SCS has been recognized as China’s traditional backyard, India’s active bids to promote strategic and military relations with Vietnam, and India’s growing military presence around the SCS, could be perceived as non-negligible threats to China’s alleged sovereignty over the disputed SCS areas.

The approach to Vietnam by the US and India, and their naval presence in Southeast Asia in general, and the SCS in particular, have been noticeable specifically since the mid-2000s, preceding China’s growing assertiveness in roughly the late 2000s. In addition, these two countries’ positive efforts to expand their military influences on Southeast Asia by reinforcing close strategic and defense ties with Vietnam, and by increasing naval forays around this area in the mid-2000s, were likely to be precipitated by their concerns about the rise of China *per se*, not about China’s specific assertive behaviors around the SCS. In other words, these two countries implemented several policies aimed at expanding their leverage over this region, even though in the mid-2000s China carried out its reassurance campaigns.

Indeed, the US’s allocation of a large number of its naval vessels to the Pacific Fleet in 2007 was implemented as one essential component of its constraint policy against the rise of China (Friedberg, 2011, pp. 101-112), although both countries enjoyed relatively peaceful relations at that time. India’s growing activities around the SCS were also motivated by India’s concerns about uncertainty caused by a rising China, as well as by China’s friendly relationship with Pakistan, and thus could be considered as one component of its balancing strategies against the a rising China. One scholar explicitly states that the stepping up of Indo-Vietnam relations to the level of strategic partnership was focused on naval cooperation between these two countries, with China in mind (Scott, 2013, p. 61). Indeed, rationales for the active bids by the US and India to expand their influence and growing presence around Southeast Asia were most likely to center on their concerns about the uncertainty of a rising China. Nevertheless, considering these two countries’ concerns related to the rise of China—and China’s specific assertive behaviors around the SCS—and given the chronological order, it can be argued that China’s specific assertiveness around the SCS must not have been an evident factor behind these two countries’ noticeable activities around this region during the mid-2000s.

Facing the growing presence of its powerful rivals in its backyard since the mid-2000s, with their close military and strategic ties with one core disputant in the SCS issue—Vietnam, China may have thought that it would become more difficult to deal with this issue. Specifically, considering that the US, India, and Vietnam

share similar interests in checking China's rise in this region, it can be assumed that China regarded both Vietnam's reinforced strategic and defense relations with the US and India in the mid-2000s, and these two countries' growing presence around the SCS, as significant obstacles to China's influence over the disputed waters as well as its claims for sovereignty there. China has continuously expressed an uncomfortable feeling regarding these two countries' activities in Southeast Asia. For instance,

China has not welcomed the warming of US-Vietnam security relations. US ship visits to Vietnam during 2010 and the transit through Vietnam's EEZ of the aircraft carrier USS *George Washington* drew warnings to Hanoi in China's state-controlled media not to become a strategic pawn of the United States. (Shearer, 2012, p. 265, as cited in Storey, 2010)

Furthermore, Chinese analysts and scholars have cast doubt on the intentions of the US approach to other disputants of the SCS in general, Vietnam in particular, and continuously expressed concerns that growing US influences on Southeast Asia would enable other disputants to consolidate their sovereignty claims over the disputed areas, which could constrain China's influences there (Li, 2010, p. 59). Under this condition, China was more likely to decide that it was necessary to assert its sovereignty over the disputed waters in a more assertive and determined manner. If not, China might have assumed that other claimants with powerful supporters, the US and India, could take the initiative for the SCS issue from China. Therefore, over all, this indicates that China's recent assertiveness around the SCS was driven by the growing presence of both the US and India, and not vice versa.

#### **Discussion: The Driving Forces behind China's Recent Assertiveness in the SCS**

As discussed above, two factors together led China to adopt a more assertive policy toward the SCS dispute roughly around the late 2000s. On the one hand, China's naval build-ups enabled China to effectively and practically control vast waters and exercise its influence over the disputed areas. Between the early 90s and mid-2000s, in spite of exponentially increasing its defense budget and significant investments in its naval modernization program, Chinese naval capabilities during that time had significant limitations regarding the country's long-range and long-term naval operations, and its relatively outdated surface vessels and submarines were not comparable to those of other extra-regional great naval powers operating in Asia. However, China's continuous naval build-ups and modernization programs eventually bore fruit in the late 2000s. As a result of these efforts, Chinese navy developed state-of-the-art surface combatants and submarines, which enabled it to conduct the 21st century multi-mission tasks in vast waters (Cole, 2010, pp. 97-108). Furthermore, China's naval capabilities in the late 2000s were comparable to even the US naval power which was deployed to this region, although China's overall naval power was still inferior to that of the US. Indeed, by the late 2000s, China possessed the third-strongest naval power in the world, behind only the US and Russia (Pant, 2009, p. 287). Once Chinese leaders assumed that China's naval power was sufficient to effectively control the SCS, as well as to cope with other great naval powers in this region, around the late 2000s, they may have thought that China needed to take more assertive and audacious actions, with its increasingly prestigious position on the international scene.

On the other hand, the second factor, an external one, is the growing presence and expanding influence of China's strategic rivals around the SCS specifically in the mid-2000s, which eventually gave a sense of threat to China. It can be argued that China's external environment around the SCS deteriorated before China showed its assertiveness in the late 2000s. That is, the growing presence of the US and India around the SCS has become exceptional since the mid-2000s. These two countries have markedly reinforced their strategic and

military ties with Vietnam, one primary disputant of the SCS dispute, and they have also increasingly deployed their naval fleets to waters close to the SCS, roughly since the mid-2000s. Considering that Chinese scholars, analysts, and state-owned media have continuously expressed uncomfortable feelings and concerns about these two countries' growing footprints in this region since the mid-2000s, it is obvious that China considered the increasing presence of its strategic rivals as a serious threat to its alleged sovereignty over the SCS. Indeed, one of the foremost goals of China's foreign policy has been to integrate its territory and stabilize its core interests (that is, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang Uygur). Although the SCS has not been officially recognized as China's core interest (Swaine, 2011, p. 9),<sup>4</sup> this area is still regarded as China's important sea territory, and a significant component of China's territorial integrity. Thus, facing the increasing footprints of the US and India around the SCS, China decided to take more assertive actions in this area, in order to signal its resolute will to tackle these two countries as well as other disputants around the SCS, and actively defend its alleged sovereignty.

However, it should be noted that neither of the above factors can solely explain China's recent assertiveness in the SCS. Only when both of these factors are taken into consideration can China's recent assertiveness be understood. Even if China possessed sufficient naval power, it would be unlikely to take assertive actions around the SCS at the cost of losing favorable relationships with its neighboring countries, unless it perceived that its sovereignty over the SCS was seriously threatened. Alternately, even if China felt that its alleged sovereignty over the SCS was threatened by other great powers, it would be unlikely to implement a more assertive policy, unless it possessed strong naval power to effectively deal with other strong naval powers and control the vast waters. In either situation, China would be more likely to rely on negotiation or economic sources as a bargaining tool. Indeed, this study has shown that these two conditions were simultaneously met before China employed a more assertive policy than in the past. This clearly indicates that China's growing naval power and increasing threats to its alleged sovereignty over the SCS are the two causes of China's recent assertiveness, indicated by China's growing administrative and military activities around the SCS and its imposition of a more inclusive unilateral fishing ban.

### **Conclusion**

China's assertive behaviors in the SCS since the late 2000s have been remarkable. Since that time China has increasingly exercised its sovereignty over the disputed waters and islands in the SCS, by increasing the number, scope, duration, and frequency of naval exercises and administrative patrols around this area. This study has argued that two causes—China's strengthening naval power and the growing presence of China's strategic rivals in the mid-2000s—contributed to China's recent assertiveness around the SCS in the late 2000s.

The findings of this study also provide some insights about the current increasing tensions between China, on the one hand, and the US and other disputants, on the other, regarding the SCS territorial dispute. China's assertive policy, noticeably initiated since the late 2000s, was caused by two factors—China's naval power, and activities in this region by the US and India—and has in turn provoked other countries' intense responses. Other claimants, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, have tried to reinforce their ties with other actors, and demanded that the US and India play increasing roles as a balance against an assertive China. The Obama administration implemented a re-balancing strategy against China, which is called the "pivot to Asia", and

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<sup>4</sup> It has been reported that Chinese officials and public media have stated that the SCS has been China's core interest since the 2000s. However, according to Swaine, no official Chinese sources or documents state that the SCS is a core interest of China.

India in the early 2010s also clearly reaffirmed that it would continue to deploy its naval fleet, possibly including its carrier, to the SCS area. In turn, this created a spiral effect: China's repeated warnings and expressions of unpleasant feelings indicate that it has taken seriously anti-China activities by other actors, and perceived that its territorial integrity was significantly threatened again. With this situation, China's continuous naval modernization efforts and build-ups have enabled it to possess more powerful naval capabilities, with aircraft carriers, five-generation naval aviation, and advanced logistic capabilities, all of which empower China to conduct more effective, far-reaching, and long-term naval operations around the SCS than in the late 2000s. With these two continuously existing factors—continuing naval growth and China's sense of threats—China has continued to implement its assertive policy regarding the SCS territorial issue.

It should also be noted that the findings of this study are not applicable to China's assertiveness in the East China Sea (ECS), specifically the Senkaku/Diaoyu territorial dispute with Japan. The two causes suggested by this study may be insufficient to understand China's assertiveness regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu issue and its determined attitude toward Japan. Considering that China has a memory of past national humiliation by Japan, for instance, nationalism may be an important factor in China's assertiveness in the ECS. Indeed, unlike public attentions toward the SCS issue, China's political and intellectual elites and the public tend to emphasize historical humiliation and injustice by Japan (Dixon, 2014, pp. 1058-1068), and they tend to have specifically intense anti-Japan sentiment regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu issue. This implies that, unlike China's assertiveness in the SCS, its assertiveness in the ECS as well as its resolute attitude toward Japan may be partially caused by China's special national sentiment toward Japan. The author posits, therefore, that the findings of this paper cannot easily be generalized to explain China's assertiveness in its overall territorial disputes, and that further case studies focusing on each of China's specific territorial disputes need to be conducted.

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