

Chinese Behaviour in the South China Sea: An Offensive and Defensive Realist Case Study

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1. Introduction

In November 2017, China presented its new dredger ship. The vessel would greatly enhance China's capabilities to create islands (China tests, 2017). Seeing it as a threat, the president of the Philippines, Duterte, responded in a press conference that he would be speaking to China about its intentions in the South China Sea. The latter, in turn, also responded publicly that it would continue to cooperate with "ASEAN countries to safeguard peace, stability and prosperity of the South China Sea region" (Mogato, 2017; Xi tells, 2017). A few weeks earlier, the United States decided to add two aircraft carriers and their accompanying vessels to the 7th fleet, which is based in Japan and exercises in the eastern Indian and western Pacific oceans. The enlargement of US naval presence in the area was done to warn both North Korea and China, and signal that the US is still a predominant force in the region (London, 2017). The United States defends its activities in the South China Sea by arguing that it is upholding the importance of freedom of navigation. The country is also claiming that China is violating this freedom. The latter has been building fortifications on islands and reefs in order to strengthen its claim and upgraded its fleet with new warships. Tensions have been rising in the last decade, resulting in increased presence of naval vessels of claimant countries, as well as escorts for fishing boats and even arrests of fishermen and confiscation of their boats. This was done by China, but also Vietnam and the Philippines (Fravel, 2012).

The tensions relate to the many disputes in the South China Sea. Multiple countries claim overlapping islands and waters in the South China Sea as their territory. They do so based on historical claims, as well as by usage of UNCLOS. The latter states that all waters within 200 miles are a country's exclusive economic zone and all resources found within these 200 miles may thus be claimed by the respective country (Buszynski, 2012, pp. 1400). All waters outside these 200 miles are international waters and are jurisdiction of the UN Maritime Law. China lays claim to part of the waters and islands based on the self-created "9 dash line" (ibid). It thereby struggles against so called universal laws and conventions set by the UN. The US does not claim any territory in the area, but aims to uphold universal norms and values, and keep China in check. The country also has various allies that compete with China considering the disputes. For all claimants, the area is important due to the oil and

natural gas it inhabits, which makes it a source for energy and economic profit. Furthermore, a large amount of oversea trade passes through the region.

This thesis evaluates China's behaviour through both offensive and defensive realism. This is done because these theories focus on the international structure, in which China has been growing for the past decades. The theories are also helpful to examine China's behaviour in comparison to its neighbours and other key actors in the area, such as the US. By using these theories we can properly judge whether to view China as an offensive country aiming to dominate the region and possibly the world, or whether we should view it as a defensive country that simply wishes to defend its territory and itself. Structural realism, which is divided between the aforementioned, holds that it is the international structure that sets the conditions for national foreign policymaking. Indeed, international politics is shaped by the desire of states to survive in the international system (Lynn-Jones, 1998). Nevertheless, within structural realism there is disagreement on the motivations of states for this behaviour. Defensive realists expect countries to pursue a balance in the international system and thereby maximize their security, while offensive realists expect countries to actively create an imbalance in their favour and thereby maximizing their power. Great powers will seek to dominate their geographical region, becoming the hegemon, not accepting any other great power in the area. Furthermore, they seek to expand their power in the system, overpowering others globally (Mearsheimer, 2014). Defensive realists argue that expansion is not wise, because other states will naturally form an alliance and balance against the expanding state, ultimately posing a threat to the latter's security. On the other hand, offensive realists argue that pursuing an expansionist strategy is more capable of guaranteeing security, and thereby survival, for their own state. Some defensive realists have proposed to improve communication to signal state's intentions and thereby decrease tensions, yet due to the anarchic structure and distrust states cannot trust statements made by their colleagues. Indeed, foreign policy is characterised by misperception and abuse of power, which is underscored by offensive realists. Defensive realists are more optimistic about the possibilities for avoiding war when seeking security but still is aware of uncertainty and potential distrust (Wivel, 2017; Dunne and Schmidt, 2013; Hamilton and Rathbun, 2013).

In order to anticipate critique, the first part of the analysis considers neoclassical realism. Domestic politics, although irrelevant for structural realism, is rather important for neoclassical realism. This thesis recognizes that domestic politics has some influence on its external behaviour. By including a section on domestic politics in the analysis, it can be better evaluated whether the internal politics or the structure of the international arena are more influential on China's behaviour in the international scene. Domestic politics includes the internal power politics. The foreign policy executive that decide on the policies, and those that try to influence them and obtain more powerful positions for themselves, such as the elites and decision makers. Intertwined in this is a struggle of interests and believes, as politicians often disagree with one another or have different interests that require another direction of the policy at stake. This often results in the process of implementation and execution being slowed down. The section focusses on the internal politics of maritime security issues, as this is the sector that is important for this thesis. Nevertheless, this thesis stands by the argument that the international structure is far more important because a country is always concerned with its own survival and will always respond to foreign countries trying to infringe upon it.

China participated in multiple of the many attempts made to settle the disputes in the South China Sea. The country often affirmed that it is committed to seeking a peaceful settlement of disputes, which fits its policy of non-interference and its relatively low military aggression (Andrews, 2017, p. 249). It is puzzling then that China says it seeks peaceful means to settle the disputes and pushes for cooperation in such direction, while also developing new warships and building islands. Does China behave this way because it feels it should be able to protect itself or is it to build ways to expand? By investigating this case we better understand China's behaviour and the disputes in the South China Sea in general. It also fosters our understanding of a country that often opposes the status quo on what are claimed to be universal norms and laws. Furthermore, by looking into this case we better understand the country that is growing to become possibly the most powerful country in the international arena. Moreover, we can better understand the complexity of the policies developed by the countries in the region, as well as the policies developed by the US in the region. Considering the theory side of this topic, if we better understand this case, we can better understand the implications of structural realism and how realism explains great

power politics. The topic is thus not only relevant for the policies developed today by many countries including China and the US, but also relevant to better understand the theories at hand.

The research question of this thesis is the following. To what extent can Chinese activity in the South China Sea be explained by both offensive and defensive realism? The question is answered by investigating Chinese actions, policies and statements through the lenses of both offensive and defensive realism. Using both theories shapes the opportunity to remain critical and open to alternative explanations. After shortly investigating domestic politics, it continues to examine actions, policies and statements on the disputed islands and the 9 dash line. By focussing not only on activities on islands and in the waters but also statements made by political leaders about the broader conflict and possibilities for peace, this thesis enhances the ability to critique. The islands include the Spratly and Paracel Islands and the Scarborough Shoal. It will do so through document analysis and examining the actual actions in the SCS through process tracing.

The following sections examine previous literature and provide the essential considerations for the methods and theories used in the analysis. It then continues with a brief examination of domestic politics, after which the thesis focusses on the international structure. These chapters focus on the 9 dash line and on the disputed islands. In these chapters, statements, policies and actions are investigated. The last section of the analysis provides a discussion, after which a conclusion provides a comprehensive answer to the research question.

2. Literature Review

A lot has been written about territorial disputes in the South China Sea. As there are many disputes that have been going on for decades, and many actors are involved, these studies vary in focus concerning the issues and actors and use different theories. While some investigate only one country, others focus on multiple. Some tend to look at the issue historically, regarding the evolution of the disputes over years (Guan, 2000; Fravel, 2011; Storey, 1999; Hong, 2013; Wang, 2010). Others have put the focus on contemporary developments using the perspective of international organizations (Buszynski, 2003) or the

implications for and influences of trade and international law (Rowan, 2005; Odeyemi, 2015).

Studies on the disputes in the South China Sea from the viewpoint of international organizations such as UN and ASEAN may take a liberalist approach. They argue that behavioural norms play a key role in the settling of disputes, or at least reducing the potential for conflict. Institutions and other non-state actors are capable of considerable influence on states and their policies. Furthermore, they find that being part of organizations and the global economy has many benefits and countries thus become more willing to work together in a multitude of fora (Acharya, 2014; Cruz de Castro, 2015; Ikenberry, 2011). From these accounts would flow that China recognizes the benefits of being part of the global economy and seeks closer ties with other countries, organizations and nonstate actors to develop closer economic ties. Furthermore, the country would get itself more involved in regional fora to tackle the complex issues present in the South China Sea. On the same side of this spectrum fits constructivism, which holds that actors can be socialized into certain behaviour (Burgess, 2016). By interacting with others, they learn how to behave properly on the basis of shared ideas, norms and beliefs, according to the rest of the group. In this way, ASEAN has great potential to deescalate the conflicts in the South China Sea and eventually settle the disputes. They have tried to do so by negotiating on the Code of Conduct and its details. Indeed, they are more optimistic about the influence of multilateral fora. It would flow from this theoretical lens that China can be socialized into behaving accordingly on the South China Sea. The country would become more and more willing to abstain from aggressive behaviour, because that is what the group wants. Nevertheless, these theories overemphasise the role of institutions and nonstate actors and perceive their influence to be much greater than it actually is. Although economic interdependence is of considerable importance, they seem to downplay the importance of national security and maritime rights that are linked to the territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

Indeed, others claim that these institutions have little power and avoidance of conflict is more likely to be achieved through bilateral engagement. These realist accounts argue that states are the main actors and that they decide their behaviour themselves. They will do whatever is in their interest. This is clearly seen when ASEAN countries pursue their

own policies with regards to China, and try to find help with other strong countries such as the US, Russia and India to balance or possibly offend China (Cheng and Paladini, 2014).

The importance of international organizations and regimes are at times difficult to pin down. It has been argued that legal documents, such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), could both be an opportunity but also a trigger considering the settlement of disputes (Odeyemi, 2015). Indeed, Odeyemi argues that the disputes within the South China Sea are increasingly securitized, which makes settlements increasingly unlikely although most of them refer to UNCLOS. Concerning China, he argues that China's behaviour is expansionist and therefore a solution to China's disputes is unlikely to be found in the near future. Likewise, Buszynski has a rather pessimistic view and argues that US presence diminishes ASEAN's role as a mediator (2012, p. 144). He claims China believes US presence is a threat and encourages ASEAN claimants in the South China Sea (ibid), while Majumdar (2015) argues that the changing balance of power is due to China taking advantage of ASEAN efforts to manage the conflict. This argument is in line with offensive realism. Fravel (2012a) views Chinese patrol vessels being aggressive against Vietnamese and Philippine fishing boats and energy inspections as well as the expansion of the military and the increase of naval presence in the disputed territories. Nevertheless, he holds that China did not expand its claims and other claimants have increased their military capabilities as well. He therefore regards Chinese behaviour as defensive.

Some argue that Chinese behaviour has been a response to the US becoming more involved in the region. This on request of countries in the region, and because of importance of the region to the country. The latter is often considered to be an important regional balancer, together with growing involvement of Japan. This is because China is considered to be rather intimidating (Cruz de Castro, 2015b). Indeed, some consider US presence to be crucial for a peaceful future (Rowan, 2005). Nevertheless, whether US presence is good for the region, and might foster settlements and lower possibilities of conflict is thus a topic of ongoing debate.

Studies that involve China often lack of understanding the Chinese. Increasing attempts have been made by looking into the head of state, strategies and securitization (Goldstein, 2011; Nie, 2016; Taffer, 2015; Zhang and Bateman, 2017; Zhang, 2017). This makes sense to better understand the country itself, but it does not help explain why it

behaves like it does with other states on the South China Sea. The country will respond to other countries not because of their internal politics, but because of their survival in the international arena.

Structural explanations consider that besides the common interests of the claimants, which are access to more natural gas and oil, a big amount of fish catch, and more security for the trade that passes through these waters, the South China Sea has other interests for China. Militarily, it would provide a buffer zone for the south of China, as well as a steady base in case conflict would emerge over Taiwan with the US (Fravel, 2011). Indeed, in its disputes, China has strengthened its military as opposed to the weak Philippine army, to prevent military confrontation. The Philippines has found support of ASEAN to approach the dispute diplomatically (Storey, 1999). Some argue that China feels threatened by ASEAN, and it therefore seeks bilateral relations. The former arguments are defensive realist explanations of China's behaviour. Nevertheless, others argue that ASEAN is not that concerning, yet China solely prefers bilateral talks because the country would then certainly be the most powerful and thus in a better position from the start (Majumdar, 2015). Furthermore, some state China is willing to compromise (Fravel, 2011), it merely does not want external influence, which is a direct reference towards the US (Storey, 2017). Indeed, China has shown to be willing by engaging in talks with ASEAN to establish a code of conduct, and ensure peace and stability in the area. Furthermore, this is also shown by granting access to Philippine fisherman at the Scarborough Shoal (ibid). Nevertheless, other authors remain pessimistic.

Overall, the existing literature is extensive, but developments in the last few years force an update. Furthermore, previous studies lack agreement on certain issues. As in any complex situation, they have different explanations on the disputes and potential settlements, and are thereby at times conflicting with one another. Since there are many actors and issues involved, it is not possible to contribute to all these conflicting accounts. Nevertheless, taking into account recent events and the growing position of China in the world, it is considered to be more relevant to look into China's behaviour. Indeed, it remains puzzling why China is behaving like it is. It has made efforts for peaceful settlements, but were these genuine? Some say the country is behaving aggressive, but is that the fitting

explanation? The unclarity demands a closer look in order to explain its behaviour in the South China Sea.

3. Method and Theory

3.1 Method

In order to provide a comprehensive answer to the research question, this thesis uses process tracing and document analysis through the lenses of both offensive and defensive realism. Qualitative research is conducted. More specifically, the analysis is a single case study of China in the South China Sea. Looking into this case enhances a better understanding of the tensions in the area, the scope of the disputes, and China's behaviour in the South China Sea in particular. China is chosen because it deviates from the UN Conventions concerning Maritime legislation, and it has created its own geographical scope, as opposed to the other countries in the region claiming territory mostly based on UNCLOS. Furthermore, China's rising position in the world and region, as well as its active challenging of existing "universal" norms and laws, makes the country an interesting case to look into.

The methods employed are both process tracing and document analysis. It thereby investigates Chinese statements as well as Chinese activity in the area. The statements concern government provided white papers, statements and speeches. The ones selected for the analysis are those made available digitally by the Chinese government in English. It thereby focusses on the disputed islands, namely the Spratly and Paracel Islands and the Scarborough Shoal, as well as the 9 Dash Line. Chinese activity is defined as naval vessels patrols, building fortifications on islands and reefs, and confrontation with other states. The latter is done in light of the scepticism that a state, in this case China, might not reveal its plans, partially or in full, on record. By looking at its actions and the events that happened in practice, the author finds evidence that supports their statements or reveal behaviour that does not fit their narrative. To answer these questions the cases will be examined through primary and secondary sources. The first set will be official white papers, statements and speeches provided by the Chinese government. The latter set contains of online newspaper articles for contemporary events, academic articles and think tank reports. The author is aware of agendas of both the government and media outlets. The government's credibility is

checked by investigating its activity in the South China Sea, whereas for the credibility of the media outlets multiple sources are sought to back up their claims. Triangulation is thus both done in the types of cases, the narrative of the behaviour as well as the actual observable behaviour, and in the sources consulted, being government, media and academic sources.

In order to make the analysis more manageable while remaining capable of providing an in-depth answer to the research question, the timeframe is set from 2010 until the beginning of 2018. This is done in order to give an insightful update with more recent material while being able to remain considerate of behaviour of China over a longer period, namely the 8 years noted above. It thereby is able to judge whether behaviour at a certain instance might be out of tone with behaviour over a longer period, or whether it is in line with the overall behaviour. Nevertheless, a more historical context is given when necessary.

When conducting document analysis one should remain aware of the issues involved. Analysing a document carries the potential of bias, both by the author of the documents in question as well as the researcher (O'Leary, 2014). This is tried to be tackled by reflecting on both offensive and defensive realism, which forces the researcher to remain critical. Furthermore, this is tackled by investigating multiple documents. Concerning the potential bias of the writer of the document, the official documents are all written by Chinese government officials. Indeed, it must be kept in mind that the documents are written for the purpose of an agenda, possibly leaving certain elements out, framing issues in their advantage or making untrue statements (Bowen, 2009). To tackle this in another way, China's behaviour on the South China Sea in practice is included in the analysis. By examining what China has done in practice, it can be seen whether these actions are in line with their statements, and thus truly are how it rationally behaves, or not. Certainly, it is more complicated as actions and interpretations do not always match, yet by putting multiple statements and actions under investigation, it is more plausible to generalize China's behaviour in the South China Sea.

3.2 Theory

This thesis uses the lenses of both offensive and defensive realism to gather an understanding of China's behaviour in the South China Sea. The aim is to understand the cases itself, and not to redefine theory. Like any other theoretical lens, these theories focus

on certain aspects and disregard others. The broad assumptions have been explained in the introduction and are thus not repeated in this section. It does, however, go into detail on how to differentiate between both with regards to the analysis of statements and actions of China in and on the South China Sea.

In order to improve transparency of how the analysis is conducted and to be able to classify China's behaviour as either defensive or offensive, the analysis focusses on the following concepts and criteria. They provide clarity on the differences of the theories in practice and thereby enhance the ability to make a distinction between offensive and defensive behaviour and thus provide more clarity for the analysis. It must be kept in mind that differentiating between the two can be difficult, and phenomena can be interpreted in both ways. Therefore by putting statements and actions in context and testing them against the following concepts and criteria, this thesis advances a well considered explanation.

Offensive and defensive realism differ on how states respond to the security dilemma, more concretely on security and power. Defensive realism holds that states are moderate in their pursuit of survival. The most important thing for them is become or remain secure. They want to maximize security, but thereby do not want to expand unnecessarily. They are aware that if they do so, other states will counter them because inevitably the security of these other states are threatened. Nevertheless, they are uncertain about other states and their intentions. Defensive countries will thus not take the opportunity to expand, but respond accordingly when another countries does. This is because although they are uncertain, they are more optimistic about other state's intentions and attitudes. They believe that states are more keen to avoid confrontation and will work together to tackle another state's threat. This is done in the form of balancing. This would mean that China will not pursue expansion but will defend its territory when necessary. Furthermore, it would work together with other states. Nevertheless, China being the biggest state in the region, it is unlikely to be part of the balancing but rather to be more considerate of its actions. On the other hand, offensive realism holds that states are more aggressive. They want to maximize their power. Obtaining new territory is in line with this rationale. If a state becomes the most powerful, its chances for survival are optimized. They seek to dominate and discourage other states of increasing their power. In line with this, other powerful states or hegemons of other areas are not allowed to become actors in their

region. If there is an opportunity for self-help and the costs are lower than the gains, they will surely take it. This means that they will go against other states at any time, even if they are in an alliance with them. This is done because they are pessimistic about other states' intentions and attitudes, and if they would not follow this behaviour, other states certainly will and they will thus sabotage themselves believing in the good of other states that does not exist. States follow expansionist policies. In order to be able to do this, they strengthen their tools to support their expansionist policies. Examples are strengthening the military, pursuing unilateral diplomacy, and mercantile economic policies. In this rationale, China will take the opportunity to expand, and will bully its neighbouring countries while doing so. It will thereby leave no doubt for the US that it is not welcome in the region. It will thereby seek domination in all forms, and seek ways to make its neighbours less powerful.

Both theories have a different rationale on whether states are capable of cooperating with one another and on how successful these alliances can be. Defensive realists believe that defensive attitudes are better to have than an offensive one. They believe that the former are able to form coalitions against the latter, and thereby prevent hegemonic policies from achieving its goals. They believe in balance and restraint. Defensive countries will thus seek cooperation with one another if they feel threatened by a third country, and thereby warn the third country and emphasize its offensive behaviour. Defensive countries will also exhaust the opportunities to avoid war, most likely starting by seeking dialogue. In line with this, China will cooperate with ASEAN or other platforms and exhaust all possibilities to avoid war. Offensive realists, on the other hand, believe that an offensive attitude achieves more. Indeed offensive states are continuously aggressive (Tang, 2010). They prefer bilateral dialogue over multilateral platforms, because this gives the opportunity to be dominant. Becoming more powerful is better at all times. Smaller states seek alliances with strong states, giving them an advantage against the weak and thereby guaranteeing their survival. Offensive attitudes have little confidence in cooperation. They are capable of agreeing to cooperation if it suits their own needs, but the cooperation will not be strong or reliable. They will discontinue the cooperation as soon as it no longer fits their needs. Being offensive, China will thus agree to certain forms of cooperation but will discontinue if it no longer is considered profitable.

4. Analysis

The following chapters examine China's actions, policies, and statements on the South China Sea. The SCS has many disputed areas in which China takes part. Not only the countries in the geographical area claim certain islands and territory to be theirs. The US is also present in the area to defend what it calls freedom of navigation. The latter argues that anyone should be free to be on waters that does not belong to any state. Furthermore, it holds that outside the exclusive economic zone, the water is free to anyone and thus universal laws apply. The US does not recognize certain territory that China claims to be theirs, to be China's. Rather, it believes them to be universal. Other countries also do not believe them to be China's, but rather to be theirs. All actors are certain of their statements and actively live up to these to a certain extent. The countries at times seek common ground, ways to avoid escalation and a future solution for tensions. Nevertheless, at times the countries take action to strengthen their claims. It is in this international structure that China makes statements and executes actions.

4.1 Domestic Politics: Important influence on SCS issues?

Both defensive and offensive realism disregard domestic politics. They view a country as a black box. It does not matter what it is the inside, because it has no influence on what the country decides to do externally. Neoclassical Realism holds that domestic politics highly influence foreign policy, and thereby the behaviour of the state in the international arena. This means that there are multiple stakeholders within domestic politics that pursue different interests or directions. They seek to influence national foreign policy and thereby the behaviour of their government abroad. This chapter examines whether the internal Chinese politics are important or irrelevant for its behaviour in the South China Sea.

To be sure, the published statements, briefs and white papers by the Chinese government is presented as one front. It does not acknowledge whether there were disagreements within the government, or whether societal stakeholders pushed for a different direction. The same is done in any other country, although before making such a decision there has been debate and consultation in many countries. Although China has a one party rule, which effectively means one person rule, there are multiple forces within that have their own interests. Neoclassical realism argues that foreign policy is a result of

internal politics, instead of a response to the international structure. They argue that it does matter what happens inside a country, and it should not be viewed as a black box that would respond to the international structure regardless of its internal situation. Indeed, the theory holds that different kinds of actors try to advance their interest and influence the government to pursue a foreign policy in favour of this interest.

For this section, the analysis focusses more on previous research, since government statements do not present the difficulties that were part of the process to make a decision or develop a policy. Nevertheless, media outlets are included whenever possible, to support empirical evidence and developments that occurred over the last few years.

As of the start of his presidential term in 2013, Xi Jinping promised his neighbouring countries prosperity and mutual beneficial trade and investment. Indeed, he committed to an Asian Infrastructure Bank and a Silk Road to connect China with the rest of Southeast Asia. In his home country, he advocated for a better relationship with neighbouring countries. He wanted mutual trust, equality, coordination, with the aim to develop better security and diplomacy. The basic principle was “to treat them as friends and partners, to make them feel safe, and to help them develop.” (Jakobson, 2014, p. 6). Although this attitude sounds very friendly and cordial, Chinese defence for territorial claims did not soften. Instead, its naval capabilities have strengthened over the years, with maritime law enforcement agencies gaining many vessels which are regularly considerably larger than the vessels of neighbouring countries. Furthermore, Chinese leaders have voiced their motivations to defend the territory that is rightfully China’s. They find support with Chinese elites as well as certain maritime actors. All believe that China has been to reserved in the past, practicing self-control when it came to maritime disputes. They believe this has resulted in many violations of China’s sovereignty and interests (ibid, 2014, p. 7). Xi thus wants friendly and fruitful relationships with his neighbours, without having to make concessions on China’s territorial claims. China’s military capabilities keep growing. Nevertheless, that does not have to be a sign of offensive behaviour. Every state has to a certain extend military capabilities, and defensive countries wish to be able to defend themselves whenever necessary. The tone he set is rather defensive, seeking cooperation for the development of the region as a whole. Indeed, he even underscored cooperation on security.

Xi declared to adhere to the path of peaceful development but will thereby not give up its legitimate rights and national interests (ibid, 2014, p. 8). Just like the Chinese elites, Xi wants a strong China, yet knows that for the economic growth he needs a stable international structure. This includes the maritime economy, research and security. The actors, interest and lobby groups involved in the latter three sectors are numerous. They include shipping, tourism, fishing and other resource extraction companies, research on climate change and environmental issues, maritime traffic control, environmental protection, safeguarding sovereignty and eliminating smuggling. Besides these the government had multiple bodies of the Party, agencies of the government, and units of the People's Liberation Army (hereinafter PLA) involved in protecting China's territorial integrity as well as decision making.

Xi Jinping possesses the most power within the country, as well as on maritime security issues. He heads the government, the military and the party. He chairs the Politburo Standing Committee, the highest decision making body in the country, as well as other committees and bodies that are involved in developing policies. Close related to him are three essential policy-makers without a government function that head committees important to maritime security. They control the flow of information to senior leaders and manages their schedules, and shape China's public rhetoric on maritime security policies. Small groups within the party exist to discuss, draft and coordinate policies on important issues, after which they report back to the Politburo. These groups include all relevant actors and seek to overcome problems in coordination and bring together all expertise needed. Their meetings and outcomes are secret (Jakobson, 2014, p. 8, 12-13). Within the government, there are many ministries related to maritime security issues. Too further complicate, not only the ministries overlap in authority and decision making on specific maritime security issues and policies, the departments that make up the ministries do so as well. They often go against each other and their decisions. Nevertheless, all ministries rank beneath the State Council, and all government agencies rank beneath the Party. They do, however, have a certain influence as they draft laws and regulations and implement policy goals set by the leadership (Jakobson, 2014, p. 13-15). This is similar to the power of government bureaucracy in democratic countries, yet their influence is far less.

Before 2013 there were five civilian law enforcement agencies, each with its own fleet, that were part of a different central government ministry or agency. They did not work together properly and also had overlapping authority. The result was ineffective maritime law enforcement. Many observers recognized this, as well as senior officials that requested a unified national coast guard. In 2013, the decision was made to restructure the maritime agencies. This was done to strengthen their capabilities, and make an end to the problems coming from overlapping jurisdiction, poor coordination, and inefficient use of resources (Jakobson, 2014, p. 16-18). The newly developed Coast Guard became part of the People's Armed Police, which essentially means it is now part of the military section instead of the civilian and thereby is closely linked to the PLA navy (Zhen, 2018). Making the organization part of the military section means that they are capable of doing more than they would have under the civilian authority. The restructuring also means that the Chinese coast guard is now subordinate to Xi instead of the state. What can be clearly seen in the restructuring is that Xi is centralizing multiple ineffective agencies into one, and bringing it directly under his control. He created a body that strengthened China's capability to actively defend its maritime territory, that he can control.

Over the years, China also has been strengthening its military by building bigger and better naval ships, including aircraft carriers, destroyers and submarines, of which some are able to carry ballistic missiles (Buszynski, 2012). Nevertheless, China has been a developing country for many years and simply did not have the money for an extensive naval force. Now it has become richer due to its growing economy, it has the ability to invest in a stronger navy. Any country would rationally invest in better military capabilities, in order to be capable of defending itself against external threats. The restructuring and strengthening of the maritime security capabilities has considerable impact on what China is capable of doing. China has been growing for years, economically and, as a result, militarily. Indeed, it has made the military more effective but the influence is still little. It does not make a difference in how China response to issues in the South China Sea. In the end, Chinese vessels respond to critical situations as they did before. Xi Jinping did formulate a clear line which has to be followed, being friendly relations with its neighbours on the bases of mutual trust while remaining clear on the territories claimed. Indeed, Xi did formulate being cordial with neighbours, helping them develop, and even having a mutual beneficial future.

Nevertheless, the way countries respond to one another did not seem to change. The responses have been the same throughout the years. Furthermore, Xi needs its neighbours to grow economically. Its for his own country's interest to cooperate with them. Nevertheless, if China needs to be defend its territory in any possible way, it will do so. This has little to do with cordial relationships because of economics. While there can be some influence found in domestic politics, it is not big enough to explain China's behaviour in and on the South China Sea. The following sections look into Chinese behaviour caused by the international structure.

4.2 9 Dash Line, UNCLOS and Other Territorial Claims

China supports its claims on the islands with its self-created "9 Dash line". This chapter examines how the 9 dash line came into being, whether it can be viewed in a defensive or offensive way. It takes into account the manner in which China challenges the status quo, and what are often claimed to be universal rules and principles. This section is more concerned with Chinese statements about the South China Sea and territorial claims in general, as the next examines the disputed islands specifically, and thereby goes more into depth with events that happened in and around the islands.



Figure 1. Map showing the territorial borders of China according to the 9 dash line, the territorial borders of China and its neighbours according to UNCLOS, and the disputed islands therein. Source: US Naval War College, 2018.

The U-shaped line, or dash line, was already officially drawn and published in 1948 (Zhang, 2017). It took other countries over 50 years to object to the line, when China attached it to responses to claims made by neighbouring countries at the UN. Nevertheless, the attachment was the first time China officially notified the UN of the nine dash line. Essentially, it embodies the whole South China Sea. Considering that the dashes are drawn rather close to both the mainland of Vietnam and the Philippines, a first observation would be that the territory China claims in comparison to its neighbours is rather unfair. Nevertheless, China claims that the islands inside the dashes have been theirs historically. The dash line is not in line with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which holds that territorial waters end 22 kilometres from the shore. For as far as 320 kilometres from the shore, the coastal country has the right to exploit all natural resources. Usually, foreign countries are allowed freedom of navigation and overflight in these 320, as they are international waters. The dash line does not recognize this. China objected to UNCLOS because it does not consider historical rights. Indeed, China believes it is unfair because the convention came into existence and into force much later after China developed its dash line. Ever since, they have tried to pressure diplomatically for a revision or an exception, in order to have their claims internationally recognized (Buszynski, 2012, p. 140). After the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled that the dash line is not a base for China to make historical claims, China clearly stated its disagreement. The Chinese believe it is their right to claim the territory. One of the scientists that established the dash line, stated that the lines are developed on a solid scientific basis (Beech, 2016a). China thereby states that it is not politics, it is simply a fact. Historically, the territory within the dash lines is theirs. In a response to a court ruling, China reaffirmed its sovereignty over the territory. it claimed China has been on the South China Sea for over 2000 years and it was the first to discover, name and exploit resources on the islands. Most importantly, it was the first to “continuously exercise sovereign powers over them” (Position Paper of the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Matter of Jurisdiction in the South China Sea Arbitration Initiated by the Republic of the Philippines, 2014; Xinhua, 2016).

In its official statements, China does not often refer to the dash line. It is thus difficult to find statements from the government that explicitly mention the dash line. Possibly, this is done because it knows the objections of other countries and the importance attached to universal laws such as UNCLOS. When one considers the objections of most countries towards the dash line, it is rather unsurprising that China refers most to “historical claims” which the dash line effectively captures.

In its statement on China’s Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation, China declared the following. “[...] we should properly resolve differences and disputes, and maintain a sound environment of peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. Most of the hot spot and sensitive issues in this region have been left over from history. To handle them, the countries in the region should follow the tradition of mutual respect, seeking common ground while reserving differences, and peaceful coexistence, and work to solve disputes properly and peacefully through direct negotiation and consultation. We should not allow old problems to hamper regional development and cooperation, and undermine mutual trust. For disputes over territories and maritime rights and interests, the sovereign states directly involved should respect historical facts and seek a peaceful solution through negotiation and consultation in accordance with the fundamental principles and legal procedures defined by universally recognized international law and modern maritime law, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Pending a satisfactory solution to disputes, the parties concerned should engage in dialogue to promote cooperation, manage each situation appropriately and prevent conflicts from escalating, so as to jointly safeguard peace and stability in the region. [...] China is committed to upholding peace and stability in the South China Sea, and working for peaceful solutions to the disputes over territories and maritime rights and interests with the countries directly involved through friendly negotiation and consultation. This commitment remains unchanged (Xinhua, 2017).”

In its statement China clearly follows the defensive realist narrative. It does not want conflicts to escalate, and specifically asks its neighbouring countries to work together to prevent conflicts from escalating. It wishes to do so through dialogue, negotiation and cooperation with the countries directly involved. It thereby refers to third countries being active in the region, among which the US and India, and implicitly states that they have no

right to be involved. China furthermore calls for peaceful coexistence and the adherence to universally recognized laws. What is important is that the country calls for respecting historical facts and satisfactory solutions. Potentially, this refers to the 9 dash line, which it has drawn up in the 1950s, as well as its claim to most islands based on them being China's centuries ago. Indeed, the country wants to work together on a solution, but it is clear that this solution needs to fit them as well. China is open to cooperation, but will thereby not give up its claimed territory.

"The overall maritime situation remains stable in the region. It is all parties' common interest and consensus to maintain maritime peace, security and freedom of navigation and overflight. [...] China has called for even-handed, practical and mutually beneficial maritime security cooperation. It adheres to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, the fundamental principles and legal system defined by universally recognized international laws and modern maritime laws, including the UNCLOS and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, in dealing with regional maritime issues, and is committed to coping with traditional and non-traditional maritime security threats through cooperation. Maintaining maritime peace and security is the shared responsibility of all countries in the region, and serves the common interests of all parties. China is dedicated to strengthening cooperation and jointly tackling challenges with all relevant parties so as to maintain maritime peace and stability (Xinhua, 2017)."

Peace and stability is the goal claimed to be pursued. In doing so, China declares it wishes to do so in cooperation with its neighbouring states in the region. Stating that it wants to work together to have a stable region and declaring it to be a shared responsibility, it follows defensive logic of balancing and cooperating in pursuit of security. To turn it around, it does not state that it seeks to expand or pursue more power. Furthermore, the statement is keen on universal laws for all parties involved, and does not mention a focus on bilateral cooperation but mentions a plural of states working together. It includes the Five Principles on Peaceful Coexistence, which was a joint proposal of India, Myanmar and China in the 1950s. The five principles are mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence (The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, 2014). It

thereby reaffirms its territorial claims, by stating that others should respect its sovereignty and territory.

“China's development is peaceful in nature, and it will not harm or threaten anyone. China will never seek to advance its interests at the expense of others. China does not seek hegemony now, nor will it do so in the future. Last year, China held its first neighbourhood diplomacy conference. We made it clear that the neighbourhood tops China's diplomatic agenda. This fully shows that China attaches a great deal of importance to neighbouring countries. [...] China sees its rise as being part of the historical tide of the Asian renaissance. We see our relationship with neighbouring areas as an important foundation for China's global role. While developing ourselves, we must bring benefits to our neighbours and deepen the bond of mutual benefit with them. Only in this way would we be able to preserve peace and stability in the region and move forward with our neighbours toward shared prosperity and a common destiny (Ibid, 2014).”

China claims it does not want to harm anyone, and will not pursue its interests at the expense of others. It clearly states it does not pursue hegemony. The country claims it wants to share its development, and sharing the benefits thereof with its neighbours. This is how it wants to preserve peace and stability in the region. The narrative is a clear defensive realist narrative. It does not want to provoke and it does not want to expand. If positive developments are made, China wants to share these with the countries in the region. This follows the defensive logic of shared gains. A gain for one is a gain for all. This in opposition to offensive logic, where a gain for one is a loss for another. What is clear from the statements above, is that third countries, those outside the region, have no right to be involved in the region and its issues.

In 2002, China agreed with ASEAN on the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DoC). In 2011, they agreed on guidelines on how to implement the declaration. They are rather vague, yet they do signal the willingness for cooperation. Moreover, the guidelines were agreed upon in a phase of growing tensions. The cooperative response, although vague, of all participants signalled that they actively chose to diminish tensions and thereby the possibility of war, a clear tenant of defensive realism. Indeed, the guidelines were substantially unimpressive. They do not mention relevant information on the territorial disputes. They do not provide concrete agreement on sovereignty and rights.

The declaration is at best a symbol for cooperation, which is possibly a sign of offensive realism, as the countries agree to work together as long as it benefits their positions but will abandon the cooperation as soon as the details become concrete and they have to live up to certain agreements they would rather not.

In 2017, China agreed to go into negotiations about what the code of conduct should contain in detail. The Chinese premiere attending the ASEAN summit in November expressed hope that these negotiations will bring forward a strengthening of mutual trust and understanding. Furthermore, he expressed the wish for the negotiations to be a “stabilizer” in the region. He also promised that his country would “firmly safeguard” the freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea (Pomfret and Morales, 2017). Again, what the negotiations will concretely entail is not discussed. Critics are sceptic about how effective the negotiations and the eventual details will be (Majumdar, 2015). Remaining sceptic, it is indeed doubtful in how far these negotiations will lead to a tough agreement all parties will abide by. Furthermore, it is doubtful that the parties will agree to a legally binding code, and if they do so whether they will keep to it. The possibility of the negotiations resulting in a concrete dispute resolution mechanism are dubious. If such an agreement would be made, it would mean that if two parties clash they would have to follow the measures laid down in the agreement. Considering the disputes in the South China Sea and the portion China claims, it is highly likely that China will be involved in these clashes for the majority of the time. China did say that it wants to cooperate with its neighbours and forge good relationships, yet it did express multiple times the preference for bilateral relationships. This means that it rather discusses issues with the other country in question, one on one, instead of with the group. This is rather unsurprising, since in the ASEAN format it is the ASEAN countries and China. China is the outsider and ASEAN aims to present itself as a front. Does this mean that the country is being noncooperative, not wanting to give in something for the better good of the region? Does this mean it is stalling tensions, waiting for the right time to escalate the situation? What is important to take into account, is the rebalancing of the US in the Asia-Pacific. Increasing US presence is welcoming for most ASEAN countries and Japan, which have friendly and military relationships with the country (Burgess, 2016; Guan, 2000). It is, however, a disadvantage and rather threatening

for China. Indeed, neighbouring countries are able to find support, yet China finds increasing opposition.

The US has continued its interest in the Asia Pacific region and tried to strengthen its ties with ASEAN countries. It has been argued to be a strategy to counterbalance China in the region. However, Clinton argues otherwise. The Obama administration made the Asia Pacific region a clear interest. While the region was developing its security and economic systems to foster stability and prosperity, the US wanted to commit to help build these systems and “harness Asia’s growth and dynamism” (Clinton, 2011, p. 57). Getting more involved in Asia would help recover the American economy, as Asia would have many opportunities for investment, trade and technology and a large consumer market. Furthermore, Clinton stated that peace and stability in the region was essential to global progress. This is why the Obama administration argued “defending freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, countering the proliferation efforts of North Korea, or ensuring transparency in the military activities of the region’s key players” was necessary (ibid, p. 57). Clinton argues the US reaches out to the countries of the Asia Pacific, including China, to ensure “a more comprehensive approach to American strategy and engagement in the region” (ibid, p. 59). More specifically, the US requests “these emerging partners to join us in shaping and participating in a rules-based regional and global order” (ibid, p. 59). Concerning China, Clinton is aware that fears and misperception exist on both sides of the Pacific. She argues that neither threatens the other. When one makes progress, it is good for the other. Both countries have “much more to gain from cooperation than from conflict”. Nevertheless, both have to ensure effective cooperation, being honest about their differences and realistic about expectations, while at the same time meeting their “respective global responsibilities and obligations”. Furthermore, she specifically asks China to deepen respect for international law and a more open political system, because they are a foundation for stability and growth. By not doing this, China is limiting its own development unnecessarily (ibid, p. 60). Essentially, the US thus disrupts the regions’ development in order to advance its own interest. It clearly wants a stake in how the region develops and is aware of this. It reaffirms China that it is not increasing its presence in the area to disrupt Chinese activity, trying to take away the possibility of China interpreting the situation differently. However, one should remain sceptical of in how far this statement is true. Does

the US not want to disrupt China? The US does not claim any territory in the area. It is thus not a defensive country. Indeed, it is an external country trying to influence the area. It does so by having military alliances with the Philippines and Japan, and having regular freedom of navigation patrols.

China is aware of the threat the US poses but does not want it to escalate. “Since 2015 the overall relationship between China and the United States has remained stable and even made new progress. The two countries have maintained close contacts at the leadership and other levels. [...] The two countries have maintained communication and coordination in the field of Asia-Pacific affairs through bilateral exchanges and relevant mechanisms at all levels, and agreed to build a bilateral relationship of positive interaction and inclusive cooperation in the region. [...] China is willing to promote the sustainable, sound and stable advance of bilateral relations, and work with the new US administration to follow the principles of no conflict, no confrontation, mutual respect and mutually beneficial cooperation, increase cooperation in bilateral, regional and global affairs, manage and control divergences in a constructive way, and further bilateral relations from a new starting point, so as to bring benefits to the two peoples and other peoples around the world (Xinhua, 2017).” China is aware of the complications that US presence carries with it. It remains careful and cordial in its statements. Nevertheless, it pressures for bilateral interaction. This is a tenant of offensive behaviour. However, the statement is non-aggressive, and urges for the avoidance of confrontation and conflict. It is thus rather careful, and in line with its previous defensive narratives. Again, the US is an external power and essentially has no right to be in the area. The US poses a direct threat because it supports other countries in the South China Sea and actively objects to Chinese standards. Indeed, the US supports the Philippines and Japan militarily, with which China both has territorial disputes. If it would escalate, China not only has to compete with its direct neighbours, but also with the US.

What flows from this is that China continuously reaffirms cordial relationships with its neighbours, and other parties. Indeed, it implies that third parties have no right to be in the area and to involve itself in issues concerning the countries in the neighbourhood. Nevertheless, China remains cautious in its narrative concerning the US. So far, China has unpacked itself as a country with the characteristics of a defensive country. Nevertheless,

this sections has mostly focussed on words. The following section examines clashes and responses in reality in and on the South China Sea, in order to see if it actually behaves according to its statements.

4.3 Disputed Islands and Activities

Although China has made attempts to settle the disputes peacefully and has sought to do so through bilateral relations, it has been active on and around the islands it claims. The islands examined are the Spratly and Paracel Islands and the Scarborough Shoal. This chapter looks into what China concretely does in and around those islands, and whether these can be seen as defensive or offensive behaviour. It thereby takes into account the attempts for peaceful settlements. If the country namely seeks rapprochement with a country or a group of countries to settle the issue peacefully but at the same time acts offensive on the islands discussed, one may doubt the legitimacy of the attempt to find agreement.

“China has indisputable sovereignty over the Nansha islands [Spratly Islands] and their adjacent waters. China has always been committed to resolving disputes peacefully through negotiation and consultation, managing disputes by setting rules and establishing mechanisms, realizing mutually beneficial outcomes through cooperation for mutual benefit, and upholding peace and stability as well as freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea. China and the ASEAN countries stay in close communication and dialogue on the South China Sea issue. When fully and effectively implementing the DOC, the two sides have strengthened pragmatic maritime cooperation, steadily advanced the consultations on COC and made positive progress. China resolutely opposes certain countries’ provocations of regional disputes for their selfish interests. China is forced to make necessary responses to the provocative actions that infringe on China’s territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, and undermine peace and stability in the South China Sea. No effort to internationalize and judicialize the South China Sea issue will be of any avail for its resolution; it will only make it harder to resolve the issue, and endanger regional peace and stability (Xinhua, 2017).”

China states that the Spratly islands is theirs. It then reaffirms that it has always chosen the peaceful pathway to resolve disputes. This shows that china is aware of the Spratly Islands being disputed territory, while simultaneously reaffirming that they believe it

is theirs and they do not see the need for discussion about this. It claims that other countries have made provocative moves for their own selfish interest. In response to this, China is forced to respond. China argues that these provocative actions breach the country's territory as well as its maritime rights and interests and the peace and stability in the region as a whole. It thus needs to respond. Again, this is defensive, as it believes the territory does not belong to the others and it should therefore be defended. More importantly, it chooses to do so peacefully, choosing not to escalate the tensions or to expand and lay claim to more territory. China claims that making these issues international or judicial is not the pathway to resolution. The latter rationale seems not in line with its peaceful pathway. It seems a threat to those who make provocations that breach china's territory, rights and interests. Indeed, international and judicial meddling in such a case is not appreciated, while China stated peaceful negotiations as a proper way to resolution before. Nevertheless, the statement, although being more hostile in tone, is still in line with defensive behaviour. China namely argues that others have made provocative moves and it therefore feels the necessity to respond and defend itself. Other states have disrespected China's territory and rights and thus China needs to stand up for itself and respond. It clearly signals that these actions are not acceptable. However, it also clearly states that international and judicial meddling will not help. It thereby does not seek alliance with other states to balance those that have posed a threat to its sovereignty. This narrative is rather offensive. On other issues, however, it claims close communication with ASEAN and mutual beneficial outcomes are the pathway towards a peaceful area. China thereby thus seems to differentiate between disputes that involve provocative neighbours and pose direct threats to china, and disputes in the area in general.

Nevertheless, when it states to "resolutely oppose certain countries' provocations of regional disputes for their selfish interests" it clearly forgets its own manmade built islands in disputed waters, on three of which it built runways, surface-to-air missiles and radars. It thus repeatedly puts itself in the defensive frame, while building military equipment on disputed territory can clearly be defined as offensive behaviour.

In its 2015 whitepaper on Military Strategy, it states the following. "As the world economic and strategic centre of gravity is shifting ever more rapidly to the Asia-Pacific region, the US carries on its "rebalancing" strategy and enhances its military presence and its

military alliances in this region. Japan is sparing no effort to dodge the post-war mechanism, overhauling its military and security policies. Such development has caused grave concerns among other countries in the region. On the issues concerning China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, some of its offshore neighbours take provocative actions and reinforce their military presence on China's reefs and islands that they have illegally occupied. Some external countries are also busy meddling in South China Sea affairs; a tiny few maintain constant close-in air and sea surveillance and reconnaissance against China. It is thus a long-standing task for China to safeguard its maritime rights and interests. Certain disputes over land territory are still smouldering. [...] All these have a negative impact on the security and stability along China's periphery (Xinhua, 2015)."

By mentioning the economic and strategic centre of the world moving to the Asia-Pacific, and the US rebalancing to this region, it shifts focus from security to power. Indeed, it does not appreciate external countries interfering in the area now that it become economically and strategically more important. It is clear about this as it states that these developments have a negative impact on the security and stability of China and its outer territory's. This relates to offensive realist thinking, not wanting an external hegemon in the area. Nevertheless, the way China presents the events, it is in line with defensive realism. China repeatedly brings up disputed territory in its white papers and reinforces it to be theirs. It frames other countries to be provocative by occupying these islands and reefs, as they clearly are actually China's. Other countries thus overstep their borders and thereby threaten China's territory. By doing so they threaten China's security and the latter thus needs to respond. To consider the opposite, it does not present an agenda for expansion. The country has claimed that these islands belong to its territory for decades, and did not expand the borders of these territorial claims. Certainly, it build fortifications on these reefs and islands to strengthen its claim but it did not expand. These strengthening and militarizing could be in line with offensive realism by increasing its military power, yet defensive realism holds that part of its security is to have military capabilities to a certain extend.

4.3.1 Clashes

In 2009, China detained 33 Vietnamese fishing vessels, while detaining only seven in 2010. Nevertheless, it does the same to its own fishing vessels in routine patrols in which

they board, inspect, fine and detain fishing vessels (Fravel, 2012a). Many maritime law enforcement vessels patrol the area to assert their territorial claims. This is done by many claimant countries, including China. Claiming overlapping territories and deploying vessels to reassert these territories repeatedly leads to clashes.

In April 2012, China responded to the Philippines being on the verge of arresting Chinese fishermen. The latter were inside the Scarborough shoal's lagoon. Previously, China responded to similar situations by increasing their presence in the area. They did not attempt to control the area, but regularly patrolled the waters around the Scarborough Shoal. Nevertheless, in 2012 Chinese Marine Surveillance vessels intervened by forming a blockade in front of their fishermen. They thereby prevented the Philippine navy from arresting them. The fisherman left, but the Chinese vessels stayed for weeks and were joined by ships of the Chinese Bureau of Fisheries Administration. They did so to defend their claim of sovereignty over the Scarborough Shoal (Fravel, 2012b). Ever since the incident, China controls the access to the Scarborough Shoal. One could argue this shows inconsistency, arresting foreign fisherman but not letting their own fishermen be arrested by foreign authorities. Nevertheless, it seems China treats its own fishermen engaging in unauthorized activities or territory the same as foreign ones doing so. As for their own fishermen being almost arrested by foreign authorities, they were defended because they were on territory that China claims. Indeed, the Philippines claims the area as well, for which they argue that they are allowed to arrest the fishermen. The Scarborough shoal is disputed territory, both countries believe it is theirs, and therefor they both believe they were in their right to either arrest the fishermen because they were in violation or to defend them because they did nothing wrong. The countries both claimed they had the right to assert territory, whereas China was more explicit in saying that it "first discovered the island, gave it the name, incorporated it into its territory, and exercised jurisdiction over it" (China Power Team, 2016). Indeed, the first response can clearly be defined as defensive. Nevertheless, the Chinese vessels staying and growing in size and therefor capability can be offensive when considering it is disputed territory. They took the opportunity to firmly claim the territory, creating space for escalation instead of seeking ways to ease the situation.

On May 8th, 2013, China got into a conflict with the Philippines when Chinese vessels tried to prevent the Philippines from resupplying a war ship inherited from the Second

World War period, which is stationed in the Spratly Islands. The Philippines stationed the Sierra Madre there in 1999 to establish presence in the Spratly Islands and thereby reaffirm their claim to it. Indeed, the Philippines denounced Chinese presence by stating in a diplomatic protest that their counterpart was being provocative and their presence was illegal. China publicly responded that it has indisputable sovereignty over the territory (China Power Team, 2016). In March 2014, the two countries had a confrontation again about the area and the Sierra Madre when China blocked restocking of the ship for several weeks (ibid). China commented on the incident that the action by the Philippines was a political provocation. On November 13th 2015, China got into a confrontation with Vietnam about the Spratly Islands, when the Chinese Coast Guard and naval vessels confronted a Vietnamese supply vessel.

On July 7th the same year, Chinese maritime law enforcement boarded a Vietnamese fishing vessel near the disputed Paracel Islands. According to Vietnamese sources, they confiscated equipment and destroyed property. The Vietnamese state that it violates their sovereignty. Chinese sources do not comment on the event. Repetitions of this event occurred in the following year, when on January 7th, March 1st and August 15th 2014 Chinese authorities boarded another Vietnamese fishing vessel (China Power Team, 2016). On November 27th, the Chinese also used a water cannon and according to Vietnamese sources cut the fishing nets and badly damaged the fishing vessel. The same happened in June 7th, 10th and July 31st and Sept 29th 2015.

Also in January 2014, the Chinese Coast Guard used its water canon loaded with oil against Philippine fishing vessels near the Scarborough Shoal, after which it left the area. The Philippines were not amused with the action and publicly stated that it protests the harassment and the way in which this was done (China Power Team, 2016). China simply stated that the Coast Guard was in the area to help a stranded ship. The two countries found themselves in a confrontation again on January 29th, April 11th and 18th 2015 when the Chinese Coast Guard found Philippine fishing vessels to be in the Scarborough Shoal, and thus trespassing (ibid).

In these incidents, it seems that China takes a stronger stance in its response. Whereas its neighbours respond with statements and diplomatic protests, China actively defends its territory and provokes its neighbours. It is difficult to determine its motivations to

do so. The country continuously reaffirms that it behaves the way it does because it is their territory, and every foreign vessel that comes into the territory is disrespecting China's sovereignty and maritime rights. China not only does this in direct response to incidents, but also throughout its statements in white papers and other press releases. Nevertheless, it can also be interpreted as offensive behaviour. Words are solely a smokescreen for its true intentions. Clearly, China takes every opportunity to be rather straightforward, leaving no doubt, about where they believe their borders are and that they will be protected. China knows it is disputed territory and its neighbouring countries claim certain areas as well. In the majority of cases, China either responds by harassing its neighbour when it comes into disputed territory or by firmly claiming the territory. Furthermore, China's behaviour is not constructive, as it repeatedly responds that it is theirs and everyone else has no right to be there, and is not afraid of confrontation. Its behaviour cannot be classified as cautious. Furthermore, it does not seek dialogue with its neighbours for a suitable solution. Instead, it falls back on the existing territorial claims.

A big confrontation occurred in May 2014 and lasted for almost three months, when China set up an oilrig in the territory near the disputed Paracel Islands. Vietnam send dozens of fishing and coast guard vessels to disrupt the activity (ibid). China thereby send over hundred fishing, coast guard and naval vessels to defend the oilrig. Clearly, China must have been aware of the implications of its actions. It knows the area is disputed and claimed by not only them but also its neighbouring countries. The presence of even a fishing vessel had caused multiple conflicts in the previous years. Establishing an oilrig in the area would certainly cause a conflict with its neighbours. If Vietnam would have done so, China would have send vessels to protest the action as well. In this light, the action by China is offensive. Nevertheless, China has claimed the territory to be theirs for decades, and has repeatedly stated this and stated to be been offended when foreign vessels entered the area. In this way, it simply established an oilrig in its own territory. Still, China is capable of being rational and thereby able to anticipate possible reactions to its action. Indeed, what followed from the installation of the oil rig was active defence by both countries by sending maritime vessels into the area, as well as verbal defence by both countries issuing statements that the other should leave the territory because it was theirs. In the end, it became an interplay of accusations, reminding the other of cases in the past where they breached their sovereignty

in the same but less intensive way. China removed the oilrig a month earlier than scheduled. Does this signal then that it avoids escalation? In an offensive attitude, it would take any opportunity to expand its power and territory. Nevertheless, it would do so if the costs were lower than the gains. If China would have behaved more aggressive what would have happened? The Vietnamese might have found support with the Philippines, whom repeatedly find themselves in conflict with the Chinese as well. ASEAN would have tried to find a diplomatic channel to ease the tensions. The US might even involve itself at some point, condemning China for being provocative in disputed territory, and urging all parties to seek a solution. What must be remembered is that the US supports certain countries in the area militarily if necessary. Nevertheless, all countries are aware that escalation might have disastrous consequences.

Another 14 similar small incidents happened over the course of 2016 up to the first half of 2018. Over the years, these incidents were all about reaffirming territory. The maritime vessels in the disputes offend their foreign counterparts for being in their territory, or are in a specific territory because they believe is rightfully theirs. When being attacked by foreign vessels they are defended by their own because, again, they believe they are not in breach. It is the other party that is in breach, because the territory is theirs. They have the right to be there, the others do not. The incidents happen repeatedly and all follow the same pattern. Some are more intense than others, which sometimes results in strengthening of presence in a certain area, for example establishing a maritime security fleet that remains in the specific area for an undetermined time as China did in the Scarborough Shoal. It is, however, mostly China that harasses foreign vessels. According to its statements, it is in its right to do so, defending its own territory. Nevertheless, the other countries also claim these territories and do not seem to actively harass Chinese vessels. Does this mean China's behaviour is more offensive, because its neighbours respond less violent? To be clear, both countries find themselves at times in waters they are not supposed to be in according to its neighbour. The difference is that the Philippines and Vietnam both respond diplomatically and in statements. They perform arrests but do not actively harass in the manner China does. In defensive realist logic, China still has the right to use military capabilities in order to defend itself when it feels threatened and its sovereignty is at stake. Indeed, damaging equipment and using water cannons filled with oil can be considered violent, but it surely is

not as violent as using proper military equipment such as missiles and other weapons, which is also still in the range of defensive behaviour pending the situation. Furthermore, these methods were deployed to warn and scare away its neighbours which were in violation. In offensive realist behaviour, these methods, most likely with military equipment, would have been used to conquer new territory. China has not done so.

4.3.2 Island Building

China has been building fortifications on multiple islands and reefs it claims to be theirs in the South China Sea. It has also made some considerably larger by dredging surrounding waters from late 2013 onwards. On the islands, China has built buildings, sports fields and runways. For military purposes, some islands are equipped with surveillance, communications and logistics infrastructure (Beech, 2016b). Allegedly, the Chinese governments stated that their activity serves the purpose of improving living and working conditions of its people stationed on the islands as well as safety of navigation and research (ibid). Building on disputed islands strengthens China's claim to them, and its defensive capabilities on them. Nevertheless, one could argue that increasing military capabilities on disputed territory is in line with offensive behaviour. It may be seen as provocative against other countries that claim the same territory. Indeed, it does not create a space for negotiation and possible resolution. Nevertheless, it follows the same rational as is used when Chinese vessels harass others when they are in their territory. China claims the islands and reefs are theirs and has the right to build on them. Indeed, it could also be described as defensive behaviour. It takes the opportunity to strengthen its military capabilities but that does not mean it is being provocative. All countries wish to be able to defend itself whenever necessary. China has the opportunity to strengthen its military, and does so in line with uncertainty.

Its neighbouring countries, Vietnam and the Philippines, although in a smaller capacity, have done the same. In May 2016, Vietnam had dredging 10 archipelago's and reefs in the Spratly Islands, effectively creating 120 acres of new land, while China at the time created 3000 acres of new land in the same island group. It has been doing so since the beginning of 2014 (Vietnam's Island Building: Double-Standard or Drop in the Bucket?, 2016). The islands and reefs facilitate stations for economic, scientific and technological services since the 1980s and 1990s (Vietnam Expands Another Outpost, 2018). Vietnam is

possibly aware that these stations are fragile, and therefor chooses to strengthen its defensive capabilities. The Philippines has done the same. In the 1970s, it built the first runway in the Spratly Islands. In the last two years, it has been building new facilities for the military stationed on the specific island in question, as well as dredged the area around the island in order to be able to repair the runway with proper material, which otherwise could not reach the island (Philippines Launches Spratly Runway Repairs, 2018). If one had to put the countries on a scale of defensive behaviour concerning the strengthening and expansion of islands, the Philippines would be most defensive. The country has been clear on refraining from expansion. It solely follows the purpose of strengthening existing capabilities. Vietnam's strengthening and expansion of islands is slightly less defensive, as it expands islands as an end to become stronger. The Philippines had to do so to be able to properly rebuild a runway, and refrained from doing so where it was not necessary. The most doubtful defensive behaviour then comes from China. Indeed, China has been dredging and building structures on islands in a tenfold compared to its neighbours. Is it then offensive behaviour? Because there is actually less a threat coming from its neighbours? One could argue it is, taking power whenever possible and thereby diminishing the possibility of its neighbours to do so. Nevertheless, China has not expanded its territorial area. It still claims the same, and its neighbours are able to do the same. However, every time they do so, China warns them, as they have warned China when it dredged more and more islands. Nevertheless, defensive rationale also follows that countries will strengthen military capabilities when this is possible. Furthermore, one has to take into account the larger region and the alliances therein. China faces a multitude of countries against it. Indeed, this is because it is the bigger country in the region, and others naturally balance against it. Nevertheless, they find support in the US. In another conflict, China also finds opposition in Japan. There are little, if any, countries that will support China when tensions would escalate. On the opposite, other countries will quickly find support if they have to oppose China. It is therefor not odd that China choses to strengthen its capabilities and therewith its claims in the disputed South China Sea.

4.4 Discussion

So far, this essay has analysed the 9 dash line and the islands China claims to be theirs, as well as China's internal politics relevant to the South China Sea disputes.

What becomes clear in the examination of China's internal politics is that it is not a major influence on how the country behaves on the South China Sea. Throughout the departments and ministries, there are different interests and stakeholders concerning foreign policy. An important development within domestic politics might be the development and strengthening of the military. Nevertheless, this is due to China transitioning into becoming a developed country. It thereby has the opportunity to expand and strengthen its military capabilities, because it now simply has the money to do so. This is not inherent to any change in politics, but simply to its growing economy. Any other country would take the opportunity to strengthen its military capabilities if it could.

Throughout its white papers, China reaffirms its commitment to a peaceful and stable region. The country strongly believes in cooperation with other actors involved in the area. Indeed, it is a shared responsibility to keep the region peaceful and stable, and it should be kept this way through dialogue, negotiations and other peaceful means. Throughout these statements flows a defensive realist narrative that is committed to keep the status quo and balance together with other states. Furthermore, peaceful means are prioritized above aggressive ones. Nevertheless, when other countries provoke China and overstep territorial boundaries, international and judicial tools are deemed irrelevant. The country thereby implies that a breach in its security will be matched in response. The proportion or the means of this response is unclear, yet it clearly implies that China will defend itself however possible. If its security is breached, it will consider all options, or so it signals to potential provocative states. Although the tone is more aggressive, it still pursues security and not power. It does not seek expansion of power in its statements. Indeed, it is seen in practice that when China clashes with another country it is clear on the boundaries of its territory and that its neighbours are not welcome within them. Nevertheless, it is also clear that while China is rather aggressive in such instances, it does not take the opportunity to escalate the situation. It does not conquer additional territory and it does not send its fleet to attack the neighbouring country.

Nevertheless, one must remain critical. If its statements would be aggressive and violent, its neighbouring countries would oppose China together. Furthermore, they would not cooperate and leverage would be little. One should expect that the statements do not fully match China's intentions. A country will never fully disclose its interests and intentions. This is where its actual behaviour on the waters of the South China Sea fills in certain gaps. China claims the majority of the South China Sea to be theirs and acts upon it when foreign vessels infringe upon their claimed sovereignty. In its statements, however, it seems to forget its own possibly provocative behaviour. Indeed, it built military capabilities on disputed islands, and expanded them by dredging islands in disputed areas to strengthen its claim. When other countries do this, it is classified as provocative. In public, China keeps the narrative running that it wants to build mutual beneficial relationships with its neighbours, yet out on the sea one could argue that its behaviour is at times more befitting offensive realism. Should we then disconnect strengthening military capabilities and building islands from offensive behaviours? China has claimed the territories in which it has been building islands for the past few years. Its neighbouring countries, although in a lesser capacity, have done the same. China has been consistent by defending the territory it claims. Having many countries in the area that cannot be considered allies, as well as their backing by the US, it is rational behaviour to strengthen military capabilities when this is possible and defend one's own territory when this is necessary. To consider the opposite, China has not used any military capabilities aggressively outside the territories it lays claim to. Furthermore, it responds to other countries in a consistent manner. It does so by clearly stating what they believe their territory is and by actively defending it. The country thereby does not take the opportunity to escalate. Rather, it remains open to possible solutions that are agreeable for all parties involved.

Some observers argue that the current behaviour of China, being cooperative and more cautious of escalation, presenting itself to be willing to work on solutions on fora such as ASEAN, is simply a phase. They argue that China is taking its time to grow economically, and to build ways to make other countries dependant on it for loans and trade. Furthermore, they argue that China is taking its time to strengthen and expand its military. China has been developing and building new weapons, ships and other material to expand its military capabilities. Indeed, in this they all find arguments that this perceived defensive

behaviour is solely a smokescreen for what happens next. Nevertheless, the analysis cannot know what happens next. We are unable to predict the future. The author can only say that it is fairly possible that China continues to behave the way it does. However, it might also be possible it does not. The future is a whole other research question. One that cannot be examined at the moment, but simply when the future is at present.

5. Conclusion

This thesis has examined China's behaviour in the South China Sea. The research question was the following. To what extent can Chinese activity in the South China Sea be explained by both offensive and defensive realism? It has thereby aimed to remain critical of the motivations of this behaviour, through employing both theories that regard behaviour in a different manner. These lenses have been employed on the domestic politics, the 9 dash line and the activities on and around the islands in question. China's attempts to accomplish peaceful settlements have thereby taken into account. By doing so this thesis has found that China's behaviour is largely defensive. It is clear that China does not allow others to question its territory even if it is disputed and claimed by others as well. All territory China claimed to be theirs is fiercely protected. It has done so for decades. Nevertheless, it has been open to solutions and has remained cautious in situations that had the possibility to escalate, and thereby repeatedly prevented potential war. Indeed, in any situation that could be escalated it clearly stated it wishes not to and seek solutions that would be suitable for all parties involved. China has preferred to do this through bilateral channels, which is more characteristic for offensive countries, as they then have the ability to be dominant and intimidating. Indeed, China has not been very keen on intense cooperation with ASEAN, however it did on multiple occasions accept the opportunity to do so. It must be remembered that in the ASEAN forum, it is China against a whole group of other countries, which are often backed by the US. The latter country often gets itself involved in the region, strengthening military alliances with neighbouring countries of China and at times even actively proclaiming that it does not agree with what China is doing, especially with regards to the South China Sea. One might be sceptical due to China's assertive responses to other countries coming into disputed territory. However, this is in line with defensive realism, which holds that a country will always try to protect itself. This includes other countries

invading their territory and thereby disrespecting their sovereignty, albeit in territory that is claimed by others as well.

One could argue China's behaviour is offensive, making its territorial claims stronger by building a stronger military capacity on the disputed islands and expanding them through island building. One can also find an argument in the many instances it cooperated with ASEAN without any effective outcome. Indeed, by now, proper cooperation with many willing countries would have resulted in less tensions and incidents. Nevertheless, this thesis holds that China's behaviour is defensive, and defensive realism thereby explains its behaviour in the South China Sea to a better extent than offensive realism does. Indeed, China has spoken and behaved like a defensive country does. It has been consistent in doing so over many years. Nevertheless, one can never be completely certain of a country. Maybe it has been waiting for years to take advantage of others. However, China cannot be qualified as an offensive country. It has not taken the opportunities to escalate clashes, neither to gain more territory than it already claimed. Furthermore, it has not refused to cooperate. Instead, it has been open to finding potential solutions. One might say that China has been holding back when cooperating with ASEAN, but one must be reminded then that ASEAN tries to be a front, meaning that China faces multiple countries backed by the US on its own. Furthermore, cooperation does not mean agreeing to solutions that have rather negative results for China. It cannot agree to giving in territory, because it has been theirs for decades. That is it willing to work on a solution, does not mean that a solution will be found easily.

One must keep in mind that a theory is a simplified view of the world that focuses on certain aspects and leaves out others in order to comprehensively examine a phenomena. It thus cannot provide a full picture with all factors involved. In this way, this thesis is indeed limited in its examination, but this was necessary to provide an in depth analysis. By doing so, it has focused on the factors that were considered most important to explain China's behaviour in the South China Sea. Furthermore, the thesis thereby advances a better understanding and the implications of the theories at hand.

As in any dispute, perceptions are important to evaluate. The author has tried to remain objective in critical, building in two theories that perceive different attitudes. This thesis does not present any possible solutions to the disputes. Its purpose was to evaluate

China's behaviour and consider how one could critically interpret it. By doing so, one can better understand a country that is on its way to take over the US as the most powerful country. This is important, because uncertainty and misinterpretations can have massive implications. The difference between being a defensive country and an offensive country bring with it a multitude of different policies and different attitudes towards it. Indeed, China has opposed what are claimed to be universal norms and laws. It has been very assertive when it comes to what they believe is theirs. Nevertheless, it has not threatened to expand the territorial claims that have been in place for many decades. The country has been clear on signalling that it does not want escalation and actually prefers a solution to the disputes, as any other country would. These disputes involve many countries and thereby many preferences and interests, which make the possibility for a solution that suits everyone rather difficult. One cannot say that China is reluctant when it does not immediately agree with a possible solution. It is all in line with what they believe is right.

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