

A CONFLICT EVALUATION: ASSESSING CHINA'S INTERESTS IN THE SOUTH

CHINA SEA

By

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Abstract

This paper explores the interests that China holds within the South China Sea. Firstly, it details the validity of China's historic claims to the South China Sea, as well as the international laws dictating territorial rights. Along with assessing the legality of their occupation, this paper assesses the concrete, or tangible, and conceptual, or intangible, benefits of controlling the South China Sea. Issues such as the oil reserves, the fisheries, and the amount of trade in the South China Sea is assessed in relation to China's interests and possible gains. This also includes the effects of occupation on their nationalism, and the hypothetical gains in military or global leverage. While mostly focusing on China, this paper briefly touches upon neighboring countries' competing interests as well as assessing their effect on China's role in occupying the South China Sea. Finally, it argues that the main compelling interest for China is the military utility gained by securing the South China Sea.

Keywords: South China Sea, Spratly Islands, Paracel Islands, Chinese occupation

Introduction

Situated in the middle of emerging powers in Asia, the South China Sea is in a contentious area. The People's Republic of China, Vietnam, The Philippines, Malaysia, and other Southeast Asian countries all have some form of conflicting claims to islands in the sea. Whether based history or international law, these countries believe they have sole rights to their respective parts in the South China Sea. However, this has not mentioned the entanglement of the United States' interest in preserving these seas for free trade; A dynamic that pulls in the Republic of Korea and Japan as stakeholders into these conflicts. With Obama's "pivot to Asia" policy prescription, the South China Sea has become a myriad of conflicting claims, unclear territorial rights, and rising tensions.

The emerging power of China has been asserting their claims on the South China Sea and has steadily increased their hold onto the islands of the South China Sea. With the complete control of the Paracel Islands and the control of certain reefs in the Spratly Islands, China has a substantial interest in claiming this area. Basing their judgement on the ambiguous nine-dashed line, the Chinese authorities believe it is their right to fully claim the South China Sea (refer to Appendix A). To best understand China's rationale in bolstering their control of these islands, what are their interests in the South China Sea? While controlling all trade, having exclusive rights to the natural resources, and the projected societal gain in national from controlling the South China Sea are appealing interests, this paper argues that China's greatest benefit and interest from the control of the islands is the projected military utility.

This paper aims to explore two aspects of the South China Sea that draw China's interest in the region: natural or physical resources and the societal or military benefits. Understanding China's interests in the South China Sea can bring perspectives on China's attempts to furthering

their control on the South China Sea and can help in understanding the risk or propensity for conflict.

Firstly, this paper will go through the concrete details of the South China Sea such as the economic aspects from the natural resources and trade traffic. Insight into this will shed light on China's strategies in the intensity of pursuing these claims. The more control of the South China Sea, the more China has the power to dictate commerce and travel. Secondly, more conceptual ideas such as nationalism or projected military gain will be assessed. Matters such as using the South China Sea as a tool to bolster China's legitimacy, their past and current strategies in increasing their control of the islands, as well as the propensity to war will be discussed in this section. Mending these two concepts together will yield a stronger understanding of China's strategies and interests in this region. The South China Sea is a valuable tool in enforcing China's goals and power.

In order to fully examine their interests, a literature review of the three grand theories in international relations will be discussed. Then the next section is establishing the weakness of China's claims both historically and internationally. This is demonstrated through reviewing China's past, their sources that explain their historical connection, and assessing international law and court rulings. After that section, trade will be examined as a possible interest. The amount of global trade in the region as well as the sea lanes in accessing the area will be used to demonstrate this point. In addition, the oil and natural gases in the South China Sea will be scrutinized. The most recent data and estimates for the amount of oil as well as an assessment of the location of the oil and the commercial viability of extracting such oil. Lastly for this section, the maritime resources will be reviewed. Current data on the number of fisheries and each neighboring country's dependence on the South China Sea for sustenance is used to reach a

conclusion. Additionally, the effects of the South China Sea on China's nationalism will be looked upon as an interest. Polling data and protest turn-out is used to analyze China's strategy. Then the paper explores China's past and recent conflicts and what caused them to start the conflict and how they navigated these conflicts. Prior and recent conflicts such as the 1974 Paracel Islands Skirmish, the 1988 Johnson Reef Skirmish, the 1995 Mischief Reef Skirmish, and the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident are examined using M. Taylor Fravel's framework for understanding their strategies. Lastly, the militaristic benefits from controlling the region are explained as China's ultimate goal and interest.

Literature Review

However, before evaluating the conflict with respect to China's interests. It is important to briefly explain the literature that outlines the framework for international actors. This is essential as discussion of China's strategies of enforcing these interests in the South China Sea touches upon this framework. Understanding the three foundational international relations theory will provide insight in why these are interests into China, and how it affects their strategy in achieving these interests. Ultimately, China is taking a realism approach to achieving its interest of military control in the South China Sea. The foundational international relations theories of realism, constructivism, and liberalism will be discussed.

Realism is the school of thought that believes all nations are actors vying for more power. When more power is obtained, states become more stable and continuous as their country becomes more secure. This can be obtained through expansionism or bolstering military capabilities. A subset of realism that applies to China's current position is "balance of power". This subset of realism states that when there are two powerful hegemon, there will be a

balancing effect in the region that will lower the risk of war (Wong, 2018). When applying realism or offensive realism to China's strategy in the South China Sea, it would be rational for China to secure the South China Sea as a way of expanding their influence. However, this action is prevented by the "balance of power" from opposing hegemons such as ASEAN and the United States. A realist would believe that the drive for power and the draw of economic resources would cause China to try and secure the South China Sea through conflict or coercive diplomacy.

On the other hand, the school of liberalism adheres to different beliefs. This school of thought believes that the drive for power is not the only factor in a state's behavior. The harsh and dramatic costs to war can influence states to act differently when desiring stability and power. In fact, international cooperation and non-state factors can heavily sway diplomatic strategies. Under this theory, a strong degree of international trade one state has with another can prevent conflict. This is known as commercial liberalism. In addition, large alliances and international cooperation's can create peace under this theory (Wong, 2018). When applied to China in the South China Sea, the strong trade relations with the United States and many of the countries involved in the border dispute prevent the risk of conflict. In addition, the strong coordination and alliances between the ASEAN members also prevent China from taking militarized action in the disputed islands (Wong, 2018). A liberal would believe that the connections of trade in the South China Sea would prevent conflict between China and other Southeast Asian countries.

Lastly, constructivism is the last school of thought that applies to China's diplomatic strategies. Constructivism maintains that state's actions are developed through a complex web of their history, agenda, and goals, and not purely through nature. This implies that states' actions are socially constructed and align with these constructed ideals (Wong, 2018). In accordance

with the theory, the values a state enforces has more effect in their decision making than material goods. In the South China Sea, this can be applied to ASEAN's core mission and values.

ASEAN is dedicated to compromise and creating an environment that celebrates their shared cultures and history. Organizations and factors like this can have an impact in reducing the risk of conflict and effectively shape diplomatic strategy (Wong, 2018). Lastly, a constructivist may believe that China would want to reestablish Sino-centric. This can be achievable without conflict but seizing the South China Sea would be instrumental in securing that goal.

Examining the South China Sea tensions through the lenses of China's core interests, both concrete and conceptual, will add evidence to help understand their strategy. Through understanding China's interest in the natural resources, trade avenues, possible bolstering of legitimacy, and increased military leverage, China's behaviors in the region can be explained more easily.

China's Historical Claims Versus International Law

A discussion of the historical claims that surround the South China Sea is important to assessing their interests. Despite the complex history of competing historic rights, China still maintains their status quo in certain islands and disputes. This shows their proclivity and importance in maintain their control in this region. They are even willing to risk international goodwill to control these islands. Recognizing China's faulty claims not only weakens the argument of China protecting their historic legacy, rather it allows for a further discussion of the pragmatic and utility benefits from controlling the South China Sea.

China's Historic Claims

Before discussing the legitimacy of China's historic claims, it is important to establish what can qualify as legitimate sovereignty or ownership of land. Before establishment of international law, land was recognized as legitimate if it was acquired through conquest, cession, occupation of territory, prescription or accretion (Hayton, 2014). By using any of these forms of conquest, the land gained would be seen as legitimate. However, much of the historic claims from the Chinese government does not fall under any of these categories. Chinese authorities are claiming that their expansive ancient frontiers are evidence used for their land claims. However, the ancient Chinese empire's frontier was not land that fell under their strict sovereignty. Rather the fringe of their empire were suzerains under their tributary system. The blurring of total Chinese sovereignty versus granted independent suzerain autonomy is implemented to bolster their historic claims (Malik, 2013).

Additionally, Chinese historians will misrepresent foreign conquests as Chinese conquests. An example of this can be seen with Genghis Khan. During the time of Khan's conquests, the ruling dynasty built the Great Wall of China to stop the invading Mongolian and Manchu tribes. Although Mongolians and Manchurians are now considered "Chinese" from today's modern borders, they were not under this classification during the time of Genghis Khan – they were seen as invaders and barbarians (Malik, 2013). However, the authorities in China are now perpetuating that Genghis Khan was ethnic Chinese and are using his conquests to bolster their claims in regions such as Tibet, Taiwan, and much of the islands in the South China Sea (Malik, 2013). They are claiming conquests that were not originally from Chinese historical ruling powers, and misconstruing them in order to gain claims on lands they have no ties to.

Before the arrival of Western powers, China was seen as the dominant power militarily, economically, and politically (Kim, 2014). This assertion was protected by China's tributary system with other nations. In this system, other states would gift China prized possessions and valuable materials. Firstly, giving tribute to China guaranteed and legitimized China's sovereignty and supremacy in the region. The tribute coupled with humiliating or degrading acts, such as the kowtow, actively enforced this hierarchy (Kim, 2014). Secondly, the act of a lesser power paying tribute to China's supremacy also help legitimize the lesser country's state as China would recognize their gift, and in turn recognize that country's existence. Lastly, this system spread Chinese culture to all tributary states. This created an influential sphere as cultures that did not adhere to Chinese traditions were seen as barbaric or brutish and were not fit for diplomatic discussions (Kim, 2014). The hierarchical structure, which structured Sino-centrism gave both order and stability with China at the top. This is supported by the fact that East Asia saw more peaceful and stable times when compared to the West during China's tributary system (Kim, 2014).

However, the Sino-centric theory can be criticized in many ways. Firstly, China's tributary system was not as influential with Indic nations when compared to East Asian nations. This discounts the idea that all of Asia was under stable rule with China being the center. This factor also hurts this theory when applied into a modern context with the rise of India and other Indic nations. Another strong hegemon in the region, such as India, could prevent Sino-centric order (Kim, 2014). In addition, nation sovereignty and the definition of sovereignty was greatly expanded during the decolonization period. States now have much more control, and equality over their own affairs and actions. These factors would make it much more difficult for China to enforce a hierarchical system over these countries. Lastly, the effects of globalization can put a

stop to a Sino-centric order. As globalization in Asia is becoming more widespread, East Asian states are becoming more connected in global economies and the non-interference ideology is spreading (Kim, 2014). With respect to this, state power is both strengthening in decreasing, and thus creating more hurdles for China to enforce a hierarchical structure onto East Asia (Kim, 2014). Using the Sino-centric order argument is not applicable to China in modern times. This demonstrates that the constructivist argument that China is aiming to recreate the Sino-centric order through the South China Sea is not convincing. Rather, the seizure of the South China Sea is not a valid tool in recreating Sino-centric order.

Lastly, many Chinese scholars cite historical texts that assert Chinese influence and dominance in the South China Sea islands. However, these sources are vague in their descriptions, and none of them specifically mention the South China Sea. In fact, many of documents base their evidence on “conventional wisdom” rather than clear-evidence of any occupation. In addition to lacking concrete evidence, the sources that many Chinese scholars use to justify historic land claims are not unbiased pieces of research. Their sources were Chinese Community Party Journal articles that were published in the 1970s, and they were subsequently used to bolster their legitimacy in their invasions (Hayton, 2017).

The lack of concrete evidence when assessing China's historic claims to the South China Sea is troubling when trying to establish the credibility of their claims. However, there are concrete examples when the Chinese traversed the South China Sea. Notably, during the 5th century Chinese Buddhist pilgrims influenced the South China Sea by traveling through the islands on their voyage to Sri Lanka and India. However, these ships the pilgrims traveled in were neither operated nor controlled by Chinese authorities. They were in fact operated by Malay peoples (Malik, 2013). The most concrete evidence for China's historic land claims

comes from the mid-20th century. In 1947, Chiang Kai Shek was inspired by Nazi Germany's concept of Lebensraum, or living space. In an effort to expand the areas in which Chinese people could thrive, Chiang Kai Shek drew an eleven-dashed-line that encompassed the islands in the South China Sea. Chiang Kai Shek was never able to control these islands as Japan overpowered China in World War II. When the Chinese Communist Party won the rebellion after World War II, they adopted the eleven-dashed-line but downsized it to remove territorial claims on the Gulf of Tonkin, effectively dubbing it as the nine-dashed-line (Malik, 2013).

The uncertainty and lack of evidence in Chinese historic claims to the South China Sea severely weaken their ties to the islands. In fact, the most concrete example of claims to these islands come from the mid-20th century when arbitrarily drawing lines to expand Chinese influence. In addition, when using historic claims as a way to enforce modern occupations, other Southeast Asian countries have stronger ties to these islands (Hayton, 2014). Countries such as the Philippines, Malaysia, and Polynesian minors were experts in traversing through oceans and have deep histories in using and traveling on these islands (Malik, 2013).

International Law

In assessing whether a historic claim is valid in international court, there are many questions to be answered. Firstly, the timing of when to examine history is important. International courts must determine a "critical date" of when actions in history were seen as legitimate and illegitimate. This timing is crucial as the date alone can determine ownership. For example, if international courts saw the 1930s as the critical date, much of the South China Sea would go back to colonial powers, and if a more ancient date was used, many of the islands would go to Southeast Asian powers (Hayton, 2014).

When ignoring historical claims, there is some guidance from international law in determining who owns the islands. The United Nations Convention for Law of the Sea, or UNCLOS, ratified the concept of Exclusive Economic Zones. These zones establish that countries have territorial seas 12 miles out from their borders, and the country has sole economic rights from 200 miles out of their border (Hayton, 2014).

This concept can get tricky once authorities try to seize islands to extend their territorial sea and Exclusive Economic Zones. However, the piece of land or island must be able to support “human habitation and economic activity” in order to effectively extend territorial seas and Exclusive Economic Zones. If the rock is submerged during high-tide, or cannot support human habitation or economic activity, the territorial rights acquired are less (Hayton, 2014). The majority of the islands in the South China Sea do not fall into the former classification. However, Chinese authorities are changing this by creating artificial islands that can satisfy these requirements. This will be discussed further in China's military strategies.

Lastly, the Chinese government were taken to international courts by the Philippines about their territorial sea rights. In the lawsuit brought forth by the Philippines, the Philippines outlined the legal argument that the Chinese had no right to call many of their occupations as “islands” due to the distance from their ocean border, and the features of these rocks (Hayton, 2014). The ruling was overwhelmingly in favor of the Philippines, and the international courts effectively ruled China's nine-dashed-line as arbitrary. This discounts China's historical claims as well as they do not agree with statutes in international law. However, China disregarded the ruling and has not changed their behavior to fall in accordance with it (Perlez, 2016).

China's claims to the South China Sea through historical occupation and legal statute are both invalid. The historical basis of China's occupation in the South China Sea appears to be

popular belief although there is no concrete evidence to definitively prove it. Rather, the concept of a Chinese owned South China Sea appears to stem from an arbitrarily drawn map from less than one-hundred years ago. In addition, the international law regarding Exclusive Economic Zones and sea rights are not in favor of China's occupation in these islands. The loss of the lawsuit versus the Philippines greatly weakened their international legitimacy. Debunking China's historical claims along with the lack of international support to China controlling this region demonstrates mentions of China attempting to protect their historical legacy is not legitimate.

Establishing the illegitimacy of their claims is important in examining their interests. Firstly, this eliminates the explanation that China is merely trying to control the South China Sea as a way of protecting their historical legacy. Secondly, it raises the question as to why China is risking international goodwill for this region. This demonstrates that China has prevailing interests in which they are trying to secure. The following sections explore these possible interests.

Trade & Natural Resources in the South China Sea

This section of the paper discusses the prospects of the concrete resources that the South China Sea. When evaluating the trade, oil, and maritime resources, the South China Sea proves to be a plethora of economic opportunity. The degree to which this drives and shapes China's behavior with respect to these interests as well as countries with competing territorial interests will be evaluated and discussed in this section.

Global & Domestic Trade

The resources and geography of the South China Sea yields many trade opportunities for the surrounding and bordering countries. This prospect could provide substantial interest for China to claim territorial sovereignty over the region. Before discussing the trade, oil, and maritime resources of the South China Sea, assessing the relation of other countries in the area with respect to China aids in understand the dependence on reliance of these seas. Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei all have competing interests with China in the South China Sea. With the exception of Brunei, all other claimants to the South China Sea are enforcing their international claim by physically occupying their respective islands in the South China Sea (Jensen, 2017). The presence of other countries actively competing with China for territorial rights provides a sense of urgency and competition for China to exercise their sovereignty over the region. This can greatly affect the resource extraction and the interest China has in the region. This competition can lead to increased tensions and create a negative feedback loop. This will be discussed in a later section.

Currently, the South China Sea is an essential area for global maritime trade. The region carries about 60 percent of all maritime trade, and one-third of global shipping passes through these seas. In terms of China's economy, 39.5 percent of their trade goods flow through the South China Sea, which totals roughly 1470 billion USD (How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea, 2019). In addition to a large amount of China's trade goods flowing through the South China Sea, China heavily relies upon this region to import oil. From 2008 estimates, 22 percent of China's energy needs come from oil, and about half of the oil China uses in its energy needs is imported. Of that imported oil, 85 percent of it sails through the South China Sea and the Malacca Strait. This means that 10 percent of China's energy needs transit through the South

China Sea. It is also important to emphasize that 2008 estimates projected that China's use of imported oil is rising and is projected to further (Hayton, 2014).

These numbers illustrate China's dependency on the South China Sea, and how integral this region is for their trade. Disruptions in the South China Sea would greatly affect China's trade, and China should have a great interest in keeping this region stable. For example, there are four major routes for trade in the South China Sea. There is the Malacca Strait, the Sunda Strait, the Lombok Strait, and the Australian Detour (refer to Appendix B). The Malacca Strait provides the most economically and time efficient route, and therefore is the most used trade route for transits in the South China Sea. The Sunda and Lombok straits are alternative routes if the Malacca Strait is unavailable to cross. However, these alternatives routes can create a rise in shipping costs as trade vessels must traverse a further distance. Lastly, if all three straits are closed, the only alternative would be to use the Australian Detour. The Australian Detour is neither efficient nor economic and can cause a major disruption to China's trade and the surrounding countries that rely on it.

A conflict that blocks straits into the South China Sea can be detrimental to China's economy and other surrounding economies. A short conflict that requires the use of alternative routes will cause minor issues with trade (refer to Appendix C). However, a longer drawn-out conflict can severely ruin China's economy (How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea, 2019). For the above reasons, it would not make sense for China to restrict or constrain in the South China Sea. In fact, it would be more financially responsible for China to encourage the current free flow of trade in the South China Sea. Maritime instability in this region can cause a considerable rise on insurance premiums for shipments, and will force the use of alternative routes (How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea).

Trade transits by itself in the South China Sea is not a legitimate reason for China to exercise total sovereignty over the South China Sea. Creating instability or disruptions in the free flow of trade can gravely hurt China's economy as well as the other surrounding Asian economies. China could technically seize full sovereignty over the islands and open the region to free trade. However, this action would go against multiple international agreements and treaties and would possibly disrupt the free flow of trade. In addition, the large amount of oil crossing the South China Sea further provides incentives for China to preserve stability in order to avoid energy problems. The fragility and dependence on China's trade on the South China sea will rationally cause China to preserve free trade and avoid conflict that may disrupt the trade in this region.

Oil and Natural Gas

A possible compelling interest for China in the South China Sea is the oil resources that reside in the region. Before discussing how oil in the South China Sea may impact China's strategy, it is important to discuss the varying estimates of the oil in the region. The United States Information Administration estimates that the South China Sea currently contains 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas that are ready to be commercially extracted. It further extrapolates that another 15 billion barrels of gas and another 150 billion cubic feet of natural gas is undiscovered (South China Sea Expert Working Group, 2018). However, these estimates starkly contrast with China's Ministry of Natural Resources. China's estimate claims that the Spratly's themselves contains around 220 billion barrels of oil (Hayton, 2014). The Chinese estimates have caused people to dub the South China Sea as a "Saudi Arabia underneath the waves" (Reed, 2014). However, the Chinese estimates appear to be over-

promising and exaggerated. Only 30 percent of the oil reserves mentioned in the Chinese Ministry of Natural Resources report can be extracted, and only 10 percent of it can be extracted in a profitable and commercially viable way. The American estimate is transparent and appears to be the most accurate gauge of oil reserves in the South China Sea (Hayton, 2014).

Much of the oil lying in the South China Sea is not located in the disputed islands. In fact, the majority of the oil in the South China Sea lies within respective Exclusive Economic Zones of the neighboring foreign powers (Hayton, 2014). The Exclusive Economic Zone is internationally mandated, and would not make economic sense for China to engage into conflict for these reserves. However, if we ignore the fact that a large fraction of the oil lies inside already established foreign Economic Exclusive Zones, the oil in the South China Sea would barely meet Chinese energy demands. Currently, China uses an estimated 3 billion barrels of oil and 5 trillion cubic feet of gas a year. With the current commercially viable amount of oil available, the South China Sea would only provide two or three years of power to China before completely depleting the oil reserves. In addition to the limited commercially viable oil, and the limited oil available in the disputed area, the South China Sea offers weak infrastructure and weather conditions for oil extractions. The consistent tension and threat of conflict, underdeveloped infrastructure, and weather hazards such as typhoons can make the South China Sea a weak candidate for oil extraction (Hayton, 2014).

While these oil reserves may be insignificant for China's needs, it is significant for smaller countries such as Vietnam or the Philippines. The South China Sea provides about 10 percent of Vietnamese energy needs, and one-third of Luzon's energy needs are provided by the South China Sea (South China Sea Expert Working Group, 2018). If these methods of oil

extraction were disrupted for these countries, it could cause oil shortages and be detrimental economically.

In terms of China's interest in controlling the entire South China Sea, oil and natural gas appear to be a weak motivator. The amount of oil underneath the ocean is not enough to sustain China, and only provides a minor dent in assisting in China's energy consumption. The oil that transits through the South China Sea is more viable than the oil that physically lies within the disputed islands. This is because it would be more economically viable for China to attain its oil from areas with already established refineries such as the Middle East, or for China to invest in promising countries with vast amounts of unused oil such as Australia or Africa (Hayton, 2014). However, a benefit of controlling the South China Sea's oil reserves is that it would give China additional leverage over Southeast Asian countries that heavily rely upon the South China Sea for its oil uses. Although this viewpoint appears to be weak as China is dramatically more militaristically advanced than its Southeast Asian neighbors that these gains would be negligible.

Maritime Resources

The last important natural resource in the South China Sea is the vast number of fisheries available in the region. China and Southeast Asian countries surrounding the waters of the South China Sea heavily depend on fisheries for their economy, food needs, and exports. Fish are integral to their way of life and their sustenance. To demonstrate this, it is important to review how fisheries affect China's and Southeast Asia's economy and food intake. As a region, the South China Sea accounts for at least 10 percent all of fish caught globally. In addition, the fish caught from the South China Sea are responsible for about 10 percent of all Southeast Asian exports. For some countries such as Vietnam or the Philippines, the dependence on the island's

fisheries can be more severe. For example, the Vietnamese fisheries can account for about half of their agricultural exports, and other countries such as the Philippines experience around 40 percent of their agricultural exports being fish (Reed, 2014). This reveals a strong dependence of the maritime resources in the South China Sea. If these resources were restricted or depleted, this could severely harm China or Southeast Asian economies.

In addition to economic dependence on the maritime resources, the countries in the region also look to the South China Sea for feeding their populations. On average, the populations in Southeast Asia and China eat more fish as part of their diet when compared to other regions. On average, the Southeast Asian populations receive 20 percent of their protein from fish-based sources, and this number can be starkly higher depending on the country. For the Philippines, the fish protein dependence can get as high as 56 percent. (Reed, 2016).

Both the dietary needs and economic dependence on the South China Sea's maritime resources causes this region to be important for all countries involved. As of recently, the heavy reliance and overfishing of the South China Sea's fisheries are causing shortages in fish supply. It is estimated that anywhere from 5 percent to 30 percent of the fish resources in the South China Sea are depleting due to mass exploitation. This shortage is exacerbated by the fact that there is no international agreement to preserve these resources. Countries with waters in the South China Sea are fishing with no limit, and this is causing them to push further out into the ocean. This is forcing countries to go the limits of their Exclusive Economic Zones and is causing friction and confrontations between international governments. There has been reports of rival countries trying to stop foreign fishing competition close to their respective Exclusive Economic Zone. They are typically stopped by disabling rival fishing boats by ramming or firing upon them and arresting the fisherman in competitive zones (Reed, 2016). This is a point of

tension for many of the countries in the area and could result in a conflict if tensions rise high enough.

In an effort to preserve the fish supply in the South China Sea, China has instituted fishing bans from May to August in regions that extend out of their Exclusive Economic Zone. During this ban, no fishing is allowed in these regions in an effort to allow fish populations to replenish. These fishing bans are not cooperative as China did not consult or come to agreement with neighboring countries when drafting and enforcing this ban. However, many countries that are affected by this ban do not always comply. Notably, Vietnam and the Philippines do not see this fishing ban as legitimate nor do they try to comply with China's requests. (Reed, 2016).

China has been proactive in enforcing this fishing ban through confrontation and seizure. They have confronted foreign fisherman during the established fishing ban and confiscated their fishing materials. In addition, China has been dedicated to establishing their authority to enforce the fishing ban by increasing their surveillance. They have increased their aircraft and vessel size in 2015 in order to combat fisherman in the area (Reed, 2016). With increasing their surveillance, China can use these patrol or cruiser ships to negate competitive fishing, enforce their fishing ban, and aid fisherman that may be under threat from foreign governments (Fravel, 2011). The imposed fishing bans from China could be a possible accelerator for conflict in the South China Sea as this makes confrontations a more likely occurrence. This is a point of contention for competing countries and their interest in common fisheries.

The fish resources in the South China Sea is an important resource to nearly every country bordering the area. The economic and dietary dependence on the fish from the South China cause every country in the region to be fragile depending on their access to this resource. Currently, the free-market attitude to fishing in the region is causing a depletion of the available,

which leads countries to push to the bounds of their Exclusive Economic Zones. This causes tensions between foreign governments as they are all vying for their share of the fish in the region. As an effect of fishing to the limits of their Exclusive Economic Zones, the imposed fishing bans from China can deepen and intensify this effect. This creates a vicious cycle that will perpetually worsen if cooperation does not occur.

The potential for conflict can be assuaged by international coordination. Complying with an internationally agreed upon contract would lessen tensions and would help facilitate regrowth of fish populations in the area. An example of this working is the Sino-Vietnamese Agreement in the Gulf of Tonkin (Keyuan, 2005). This agreement was established in order to more clearly define fishing borders between China and Vietnam in this heavily-active fishing area. In a liberalism view, this prospect could serve as a model for similar agreements with foreign countries and could reduce the likelihood for war for countries that are in agreements. In addition, these agreements could serve as a baseline or encouragement for other aspects of the South China Sea such as the boundaries of their respective Exclusive Economic Zones and resource rights.

Bolstering Nationalism & Militaristic Strategy

This section of the paper assesses the conceptual concepts of what the South China Sea could yield for China. Although none of these concepts are materialistically tangible, the legitimacy, military advantage, or boost to nationalism it can provide is noteworthy. In this regard, these concepts make the South China Sea a noteworthy interest for China to pursue.

Promoting Nationalism

Independent of the South China Sea's physical resources, controlling the islands can be of substantial interest for furthering China's legitimacy. Not only does controlling these regions bolster China's economic prospects, it can also be used to display power and create a sense of nationalism among their citizens. As previously stated, the rights and control to the South China Sea are contested greatly with the Philippines and Vietnam challenging and disregarding China's current control.

In Vietnam, anti-Chinese sentiments are common throughout their citizens and past. For example, major roads in Hanoi bear names of historical figures that won battles against Chinese forces. The Vietnamese anti-imperialist view towards their northern neighbors still stands true today (Hayton, 2014). In May 2014, Vietnamese protests against Chinese oil extraction in the Paracel islands turned into riots. The issue of the China's occupation in the Paracel's were enough to turn a protest into a riot. In the Philippines, protests of Chinese occupations and actions in the Scarborough Shoal are common. In fact, when the issues of the South China Sea ramp up, Filipino views towards China greatly lower. This is demonstrated through polling of Filipino citizens towards China before and after the 2013 Scarborough Shoal standoff. In 2011, 62% of Filipino citizens had a positive view of China while 31% felt negatively towards China. After the 2013 Scarborough Shoal Standoff, the Filipino view toward China greatly lowered. In 2013, the positive view of China fell to 48% and 39% of Filipino viewed China as more of a threat than an ally (Hayton, 2014).

It is important to note that for these countries, the South China Sea is an issue that their citizens care deeply about. Conflicts that threaten their right to their control of these islands can spark protests and ruin the public's perception of the contesters. However, these attitudes are not

mobilizing the Vietnamese or Philippine government to take action. The Vietnamese ruling government did not become more mobilized to act against China, rather these protests were curtailed to not upset China's view of Vietnam. In the Philippines, citizens care about the South China Sea when China directly contests their sovereignty to the Scarborough Shoal. When the conflict or tensions die down, the Philippine population tends to worry about more immediate threats and the South China Sea issue falls in the background. Although these attitudes are not pressuring their respective governments into confrontation, it reveals that the South China Sea is a source of nationalism for these countries.

For Chinese citizens, the South China sea appears to be an issue that the ruling government is more concerned of than their citizens. This is demonstrated by the protest in Beijing in May 2012 over the Philippine control of the Scarborough Shoal. A measly five protestors attended. However, this protest was given much attention in their print and televised media (Hayton, 2014). The nearly non-existent turn-out is surprising as this was given a large amount media attention. Out the many citizens in Beijing, only five citizens found time to express their discontent. However, this seems to starkly contrast with the polling results among Chinese citizen attitudes towards the South China Sea. Around 53% of Chinese citizens stated that they pay close attention to developments in the conflict. The polling numbers do not align with the protest turn-out, and this suggests that much of the Chinese citizen discontent is manufactured (Hayton, 2014).

However, as this outrage may be manufactured, it serves an important purpose: pushing the concept of irredentism onto their citizens (Dixon, 2014). As previously stated in the section assessing their historical claims, China is known to revise their school curriculum to fit their territorial claims. In addition, China is strict about which flags are appropriately constituted as

China and which flags are not complete representations. In 2018, China forced the American clothes company Gap to apologize for selling a t-shirt that only included mainland China and omitted Taiwan and the nine-dashed line (Denyer, 2018).

Furthermore, it has also been noted that many generals in the Chinese army have media connections before coming involved in the military and therefore have connection to the media intelligence groups (Hayton, 2014). Allowing the military to designate the topics of discourse allows the military to bolster domestic nationalism. This allows the citizens to rally around a common enemy or goal. In addition, it also allows for military leaders to create the perceived international image of China's utmost concerns. The manufactured discontent primarily residing in the news media, classroom, and in online discussions rather than cultivating into physical protests allow the Chinese government to shape public opinion without the risk of mass rioting (Hayton, 2014). This prevents situations like the Philippines or Vietnam where the government allowed the protests to devolve into riots.

This strategy appears to be working well. When it comes to the South China Sea, online discourse among Chinese citizens is rampant. Most posts assert that China's rule in the South China Sea is absolute. Rather than draw from a historical narrative, Chinese citizens believe that the Sino-centric order is being reestablished and claiming the South China Sea is part of that (Dixon, 2014). As previously discussed, this is similar to the claims that reestablishing Sino-centric order provides greater stability to Asia in the region.

This is crucial because it demonstrates that the historical narrative that China tried to push is not being used by their citizens. Rather, it is the nationalism of China's rise to power that many citizens use as their justification for the occupation. In addition, the study also found that many citizens consider the Philippines and Vietnam to be "disrespectful" and "sneaky" because

they are not respecting China's power. Some even claim that the United States is to blame and they're trying to encroach on China's rise (Dixon, 2014). Using the South China Sea as an issue to bolster nationalism is working among their populace.

For China, the South China Sea is a useful tool in boosting domestic nationalism. Unlike Vietnam and the Philippines, Chinese authorities allow discontent to shape their public opinion without it manifesting into public protest. This allows the benefits of citizens legitimizing their governments actions without having to worry about public disorder. In addition, this issue allows the Chinese government to create a common issue in which their citizens can unite around. Many of their citizens argue that its China's time to restore Sino-centric order, and the South China Sea should rightfully be part of this. This allows another avenue of arguing that is independent of their historical claim or lack thereof. Lastly, it appears that achieving nationalism is not a core interest of China in the region. But rather, they are using nationalism as a tool to justify and to garner support for their interests in the region. With the citizens backing their unpopular international maneuvers, the Chinese government is legitimized in their actions. In sum, nationalism is a necessary means in achieving their ultimate goal.

Assessing Past Conflicts

Before assessing prior skirmishes in the South China Sea, it is important to briefly explain the conflict framework that these skirmishes will be assessed under. According to M. Taylor Fravel, states utilize three strategies in the during conflict: cooperation, delaying, and escalation. Cooperation is defined by the state utilizing efforts other than force to negotiate the territory that is contested. Furthermore, delaying is a strategy in which states neither offer nor concede their claims or occupations on land. In a delaying strategy, states attempt to maintain the

status quo. Lastly, escalation is the opposite in cooperation in which states exercise the use of force or coercive diplomacy in order to achieve the goal they desire (Fravel, 2011). Under the umbrella of escalation is the concept of bargaining power. Bargaining power can be explained as the strength of the claim a country has over a piece of land. For example, if a country has a strong degree of control in an area, whether it is militarily or culturally, that country has strong bargaining power in the region (Fravel, 2008). The 1974 Paracel Islands Skirmish, the 1988 Johnson Reef Skirmish, and the 1995 Mischief Reef Incident will be used to examine China's past strategies.

In 1974, Chinese forces skirmished with South Vietnamese soldiers over the control of the Paracel Islands. At this time of the Vietnam War, South Vietnam was losing heavily to the Northern Vietnamese. With the previous recognition and respect of Chinese claims to the Paracel Islands by the Northern Vietnamese, China seized initiated a conflict with the Southern Vietnam in the Paracel's when their Western allies were unable to assist (Hayton, 2014). The loss of life and casualties occurred on both sides, with South Vietnam receiving the majority of the damage. The conflict ended with total Chinese control over the Paracel Islands and even weaker Southern Vietnam (Fravel, 2011).

The 1974 Paracel Island skirmish is an example of China using an escalation strategy to further their control in the South China Sea. Declassified documents show that this military maneuver was orchestrated from the top-down with Mao Zedong rehearsing and planning these attacks since 1973. The opportunistic attacks show that China jumped into action when it was convenient and available when they had the power to seize control of the islands. In addition to the use of escalation, the Paracel Islands skirmish also correlate with China's loss of bargaining power (Fravel, 2008). When China claimed the Paracel's in the 1950s, it occupied none of the

islands in the regions. However, Southern Vietnam recognized the potential of islands and slowly occupied the archipelago. With the loss of bargaining power relative to Southern Vietnam, as China had a claim but no occupations, China seized control of the Paracel Islands when presented the opportunity to do so. However, until the 1980s China adopted a delay strategy in order bolster their naval capacity to be able to seize more land through an escalation strategy.

Another example of China using an escalation strategy is the 1988 Johnson Reef Skirmish. In 1988 tensions between China and Vietnam raised when Vietnamese and Chinese soldiers confronted each other over Mischief Reef. Chinese soldiers were attempting to remove Vietnamese planted flags on Johnson Reef. It is unclear who initiated the combat, but the aftermath resulted in the death of 74 Vietnamese soldiers and the Chinese control of the Johnson Reef (Hayton, 2014). At the end of this conflict, China now controlled 6 features in the Spratly Islands, thus furthering their control of the South China Sea (Fravel, 2008).

This is another case of China using an escalation strategy with respect to bargaining power. In months prior to the Johnson Reef Skirmish, China lost bargaining power as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia were furthering their occupations of features in the Spratly Islands. This explains why China seized control of 6 features within a span of three months in 1988 (Fravel, 2008). The use of escalation is apparent as China raised tensions and engaged in the use of force to seize control of the Johnson Reef.

Lastly, the Mischief Reef Skirmish is another example of the use of escalation in China's strategy. In 1995 the Philippine government was surprised to find Chinese installments and stilts built on Mischief Reef. The Chinese started construction in late 1994 and finished occupying the reef in early 1995 (Hayton, 2014). The use of coercive diplomacy constitutes the use of

escalation for this incident. This once again correlates with the loss of bargaining power as the Vietnamese occupied five more features in 1991 and the Philippine government increased their exploratory trips in the Spratly Islands for more oil (Fravel, 2008). With the perceived loss of bargaining power, the Chinese government took action and decided to claim another feature for themselves.

Modern-Day Chinese Strategy

Since the 1990s, China has mostly constituted a delay strategy into present day. The use of military force has been rarely used to disrupt the status quo, and the Chinese have been enforcing their claims. Their delay strategy is beneficial in that longer occupation can constitute more legitimacy in lenses of the international community (Fravel, 2011). Bolstering their already claimed islands and maintaining their status quo not only legitimizes their occupation, it also allows China more time to modernize their naval fleets.

The Chinese have both improved their naval fleet numbers and the sophistication of their naval technology. This is especially demonstrated in China's extensive research of hypersonic missiles that are able to sink aircraft carriers. It is expected that China should have this technology by the end of the decade (Farley, 2018). In addition to bolstering their naval technology and fleet numbers, the Chinese often have grand demonstrations of their navy to deter further occupation from challenging claimants. For example, China has consistently done live ammunition trainings and military exercises that show feats of strength that display their naval powers and capability. Namely, the naval parades in Taiwan strait along with navigating the South China Sea with their most modern destroyers, tankers, and frigates (Fravel, 2008). In addition to bolstering their naval power, the delay strategy also allows China to develop and

create artificial extensions to their shoals and islands. These actions further their stronghold in these islands and add more legitimacy to their occupations.

It appears that the Chinese authorities are heavily implementing a delaying strategy in order to preserve their current status quo in these islands. However, 2012 Scarborough Shoal Standoff with the Philippines may suggest otherwise. The 2012 standoff resulted in China taking de facto control the Scarborough Shoal as the Chinese navy stayed while the Philippines retreated (Hayton, 2014). This standoff is a clear use of escalation as the Chinese employed tactics of coercive diplomacy, and the Shoal was never returned to Philippines and thus changed the status quo. The Philippines were persuaded to leave the shoal through economic and trade pressure (Taffer, 2016). In addition, the Philippines had thought it had agreed with China to leave the Shoal due to an impending typhoon that was going to travel over the shoal. However, when the Philippines left the shoal, China remained and assumed control (Hayton, 2014).

Although there have not been any major acts of escalation by China since 2012, this does call into question the idea that China is actively pursuing a delay strategy. In using Fravel's framework, two possibilities could be occurring. Firstly, China has delayed long enough and is ready to use an escalation strategy due to their increased naval presence and relative powers to their neighbors. In addition, the fishing competition and oil expeditions could have caused a decrease in China's perceived bargaining power and decided to seize control of the Scarborough Shoal in attempt to regain it. Under this possibility, China could be preparing for the seizure of more features in the South China Sea and therefore will raise tensions. Secondly, the Scarborough incident could have been an idiosyncrasy in China's delay strategy and the delay strategy is simply still occurring.

However, Andrew Taffer calls into Fravel's framework into question and contends that China is employing a strategy known as "active defense". Active defense is a strategy in which a state is both actively offensive and defensive – protecting their territory while opportunistically claiming land when available. This is disrupting the status quo without engaging in escalatory manners (Taffer, 2015). This strategy more closely fits China's recent actions as they are vigilant in protecting their status quo but have gained territory when available.

Militaristic Value & Importance

It is already clear that the Chinese authorities already have a vested interest in maintaining their occupations that they currently hold in the South China Sea. However, this subsection connect trade, economic resources, and national as a means for China possibly attaining military leverage if it were to have total sovereignty over the South China Sea. Trade, economic resources, and nationalism are not enough to explain China's risk of international goodwill for going against these islands. But rather, these aspects are being used as tools to achieving military dominance in the region.

Firstly, if China possessed full sovereignty of the South China Sea, it could easily dictate trade. As previously mentioned, there are three main access points to the South China Sea: Sunda Strait, Lombok Strait, and the Australian Detour. Although China would be able to throttle or impose a tax through these straits, it is not advisable because unrestricted passage benefits China's economy the most. However, this ability to regulate shipping containers can be useful in greatly empowering China's leverage in times of wars or boycotts.

In terms of boycotts, China could restrict the flow of imports or exports of certain countries that they are boycotting against. As the South China Sea is a major maritime highway,

this could severely restrict the economies of not only Asian countries, but Western countries too. This would substantially give China more global influence as countries would be afraid to go against China's agenda for the risk of losing their trade access to the South China Sea.

An example of this security threat could occur in a conflict with the United States and their allies of Japan or the Republic of Korea. If a conflict were to arise in Asia between the United States and China, China's control of the South China Sea could be a huge leverage. Both Japan and South Korea's energy needs are heavily filled by imported sources. For example, Japan's energy self-sufficiency ratio is a measly 8.3% while South Korea's is sitting at 18.9% (Japan Agency For Natural Resources and Energy, 2017). By withholding or stopping these energy imports, in which most – if not all – travel through the South China Sea, China could handicap these countries' military capabilities. As this would weaken Japan's military potential, this would allow an avenue for China to also claim the Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea.

In addition to having the ability to severely handicap the United States' Asian allies' energy needs, China seizing total sovereignty over the South China Sea would help eliminate the influence of the United States in the region. With the direct control of trade, the Asian countries in the region will heavily depend upon China. This would cause the Chinese sphere of influence to greatly expand in the region and help nullify the trade leverage that the United States currently has. Additionally, controlling all of the Spratly and Paracel Islands would allow China to have air indisputable air dominance in the region. Creating artificial refueling and runways on these rocky features and islands would greatly extend the range of travel for their aircrafts and would lessen the need for China's aircraft carriers in securing the region.

Lastly, strictly seizing all of the South China Sea will also allow China to have unrestricted access to the fisheries. If this ability is used correctly, this may be of environmental

benefit to the South China Sea's marine biodiversity and fish stocks. Full control of South China Sea would allow China to impose their fishing bans without other countries disobeying their commands. As mentioned before, many Southeast Asian countries rely on these oceans for their dietary needs. With full sovereignty, China would be able to boycott this essential protein for these countries and could effectively cut a large portion of their food supplies.

Conclusion

Although China's historical claims and occupations in the South China Sea appear to be spurious and go against international law and norms, they have substantial interest in controlling the region. Through their access to the South China Sea's concrete and conceptual advantages, this region is important to China's both economically and strategically.

Firstly, nearly all of China's trade travels through the South China Sea, and restrictions of access in the Sunda or Lombok strait can cause considerable damage to their economy. The South China Sea is the highway for their trade, and disruptions in the area can severely handicap their country. Therefore, it is important for China to keep this unrestricted and stable. The need for keeping access in and out of the South China Sea as free as possible is a strong motivator in bringing stability to this region. The less stable the South China Sea is, the more likely it is for trade and international commerce to be dampened.

In terms of the prospects for oil in the South China Sea, it appears to be full of empty promises for China's energy concerns. Much of the oil in the region lies outside of their Exclusive Economic Zone and it is not enough to meet China's energy demands. Furthermore, most of the oil that is physically retrievable is not possible in a profit-friendly manner. However, the amount of oil can be useful in facilitating trade agreements or cooperation for countries

where this amount of oil would be impactful for their energy needs. However, the amount of economically retrievable oil in the South China Sea makes this less desirable interest for China.

The fisheries in the South China Sea is of considerable interest to China. Fish account for much of China's dietary and economic needs as China is the largest producer of fish products in the world. China has already deemed the fish resources in this region as a substantial interest as they are already trying to dampen the overfishing by instituting fishing bans. This interest of China may cause conflict as there has been confiscations and arrests made for foreign countries that are not obeying the fishing ban.

With respect to nationalism, occupation of the South China Sea allows the citizens to rally around a singular issue. Occupying this area can serve as a nationalism tool that further legitimizes and certifies China as an emerging superpower that is rightfully claiming their Sino-centric order for their citizens. This is especially useful in renewing themselves after their 100 Years of Humiliation (Dixon, 2014). This also allows the Chinese populations to become fired up about topics and policy without manifesting the passion into unruly protests or riots.

China appears to have implemented escalatory strategies in the South China Sea in their history. However, since the 1990's, China has resorted to a more delaying or active defense strategy in the region. This may be unsure as the seizure of the Scarborough Shoal in 2012 may hint that China is cycling back towards the escalation strategy.

Lastly, China would gain immense military value and leverage if it were to possess full sovereignty over the South China Sea. The United State's influence in the region as well as the threat of United States Asian allies would dissipate as China would have the ability to control imports – namely their energy important for the energy-starved states of Japan and South Korea.

Control of the South China Sea could dictate global markets and extend their sphere of influence to Asian countries.

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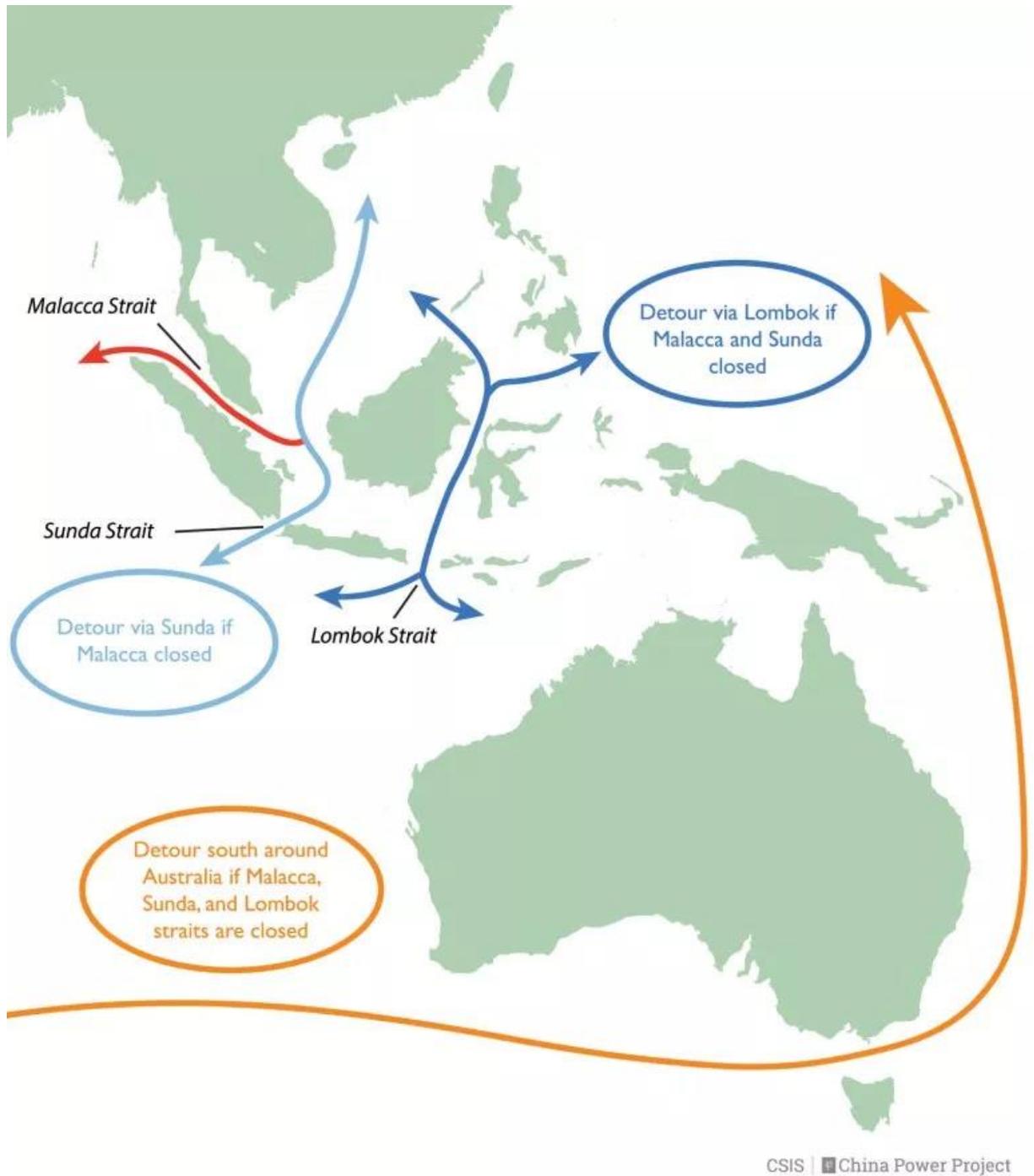
Appendix A

China's Nine-Dashed Line



Appendix B

The Paths of the Sunda Strait, Lombok Strait, or the Australian Detour



Appendix C

Estimated Additional Shipping Costs for Alternative Routes (Million USD)

	Sunda Strait	Lombok Strait	Australian Detour
Daily	9.21	17.00	92.98
Weekly	64.49	119.03	650.85
Monthly	279.46	515.80	2,820.25
Yearly	3,353.52	6,189.60	33,844.20

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