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China's maritime militias in the South China Sea

**Analyses of 2014 Vietnamese and 2021 Filipino
incidents under the neorealist scope**

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Executive summary

Because wars have evolved, the way they are conducted and their actors have changed and multiplied. Where military confrontation was usually the preferred way, nowadays, states tend to try and spare their men. Because of that, more actors have entered the game. China has instrumentalized this evolution to create a new side to its army by implementing maritime militias. This modernity of military capabilities was done in a way to project power and sustain the Anti-Access Area Denial strategy that China has been surely growing in the South China Sea region. The more modern their navy became, the more assertive they got. Their army became an essential tool in their foreign policy making, specifically maritime militias.

The growing use of them has arisen a question on the effect they were having on the situation. Through the scope of neorealism were formulated two hypotheses of sub-branches: defensive realism and offensive realism. In order to study why maritime militias were being used, two case studies were chosen: one concerning the Paracels in 2014 and one concerning the Whitsun Reef in 2021. Both saw an assertiveness in China's behavior during the incident. As a result, the hypothesis of offensive realism was confirmed to be the right fit to explain China's behavior.

It was concluded that if China's goal is to take over the entirety of the South China Sea, then maritime militias are well on the way to help them reach that goal. They are a unique asset and instrument with which they can manage escalation of conflicts, keeping it under the threshold while steadily moving and advancing in the South China Sea. While they do frustrate and create diplomatic protests from neighboring states, they have yet to really bear international consequences that would disturb China's advancement; and that is what China is counting on.

Keywords: neorealism, defensive realism, offensive realism, China, Vietnam, the Philippines, maritime militias

Abbreviations

ADIZ: Air Defence Identification Zone

A2/AD: Anti-Access Air Denial

BOP: Balance of Power

CCP: Chinese Communist Party

EEZ: Exclusive Economic Zone

IR: International Relations

NM: Nautical Mile

PAFMM: People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia

PCA: Permanent Court of Arbitration

PLA: People's Liberation Army

PLAAF: People's Liberation Army Air Force

PLAN: People's Liberation Army's Navy

PRC: People's Republic of China

UNCLOS: United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

Table of content

<u>I.</u>	<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	<u>10</u>
A.	PROBLEMATIC.....	10
B.	LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES	11
C.	METHODOLOGY AND ADDED VALUES.....	13
<u>II.</u>	<u>THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: A TOOLBOX OF CONCEPTS.....</u>	<u>15</u>
A.	FROM TRADITIONAL WARFARE TO THE IRREGULAR ONE: A NEW WAR DEBATE	16
B.	THE GRAY ZONE'S SWEET SPOT: HYBRID THREATS IN MILITARY STRATEGIES.....	18
1.	A2/AD	19
2.	CABBAGE STRATEGY.....	19
3.	MARITIME MILITIAS	20
C.	THEORETICAL APPROACH: FROM CLASSICAL REALISM TO NEOREALISM.....	22
1.	CLASSICAL REALISM	23
	i. A vocabulary parenthesis.....	26
	ii. Conclusions on the realist part and its non-relevance for this thesis	29
2.	NEOREALISM	30
	i. The paradigm quasi-Kuhnian revolution: Waltz and Mearsheimer	31
	ii. Defensive realism.....	34
	iii. Offensive realism.....	35
3.	CONCLUSIONS OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	35
<u>III.</u>	<u>CHINA IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: A STEADY ADVANCEMENT</u>	<u>38</u>
A.	CONTEXT OF THE DISPUTE: A MULTIFACETED CONFLICT	38

1.	GEOPOLITICAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS FOR THE COVETING OF THE AREA	38
2.	A POTENTIAL STRATEGIC TRIANGLE	40
3.	HOW THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY PERCEIVES CHINA'S ACTIONS.....	41
4.	CHINA'S GROWING PRESENCE IN ASSERTING THEIR CLAIM	41
B.	EVOLUTION OF CHINA'S MILITARY CAPABILITIES: FROM OBSOLETE TO SUPREME	43
1.	FROM 1980 TO 2013: EVOLUTION OF SECURITY PERCEPTIONS	44
2.	FROM 2014 TO 2019: THE CONFIDENCE IS RISING.....	46
	i. General overview	46
	ii. Military bases building on contested reefs	47
	iii. China's claims invalidated by the Hague	48
3.	FROM 2019 UNTIL NOW: FOCUS ON EXPANDING IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA	49
	i. General overview	49
	ii. 2021 defense budget: what lies between the lines	51
	iii. Conclusions on China's military evolution.....	52
<u>IV.</u>	<u>MARITIME MILITIA PRESENCE IN CASE STUDIES.....</u>	<u>53</u>
A.	CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE EVENTS IN THE PARACEL ISLANDS BETWEEN VIETNAM AND CHINA IN MAY 2014	53
1.	HISTORICAL AND GENERAL CONTEXT	53
2.	EVENT TIMELINE.....	56
B.	CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE EVENTS IN WHITSUN REEF BETWEEN CHINA AND THE PHILIPPINES IN MARCH 2021	58
1.	HISTORICAL AND GENERAL CONTEXT	58
2.	EVENT TIMELINE.....	60
C.	CONFRONTING REALITY WITH THEORY: CORRELATING THE FINDINGS WITH THE HYPOTHESES	63

1.	NEOREALISM AND CHINA'S MILITARY EVOLUTION.....	63
2.	NEOREALISM AND CHINA'S ACTIONS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA	64
3.	FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS	66
D.	COMPARING THE TWO CASES.....	68
E.	WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR THE SOUTH CHINA SEA ?	69
<u>V.</u>	<u>CONCLUSIONS</u>	<u>71</u>
<u>VI.</u>	<u>REFERENCES</u>	<u>73</u>
<u>VII.</u>	<u>FIGURES</u>	<u>85</u>
A.	FIGURE 1	85
B.	FIGURE 2	85
C.	FIGURE 2 BIS.....	86
D.	FIGURE 3	86
E.	FIGURE 3 BIS.....	88
F.	FIGURE 4	88
G.	FIGURE 5	89
H.	FIGURE 6	90
I.	FIGURE 7	91
J.	FIGURE 8	93
K.	FIGURE 9	93
L.	FIGURE 10	94
M.	FIGURE 11	94
N.	FIGURE 12	95

O.	FIGURE 13	96
P.	FIGURE 14	97
Q.	FIGURE 15	97
R.	FIGURE 16	98
S.	FIGURE 17	99

I. INTRODUCTION

A. PROBLEMATIC

Beijing has been the center of many analyses since it was considered a 'rising power' on several occasions (Steinsson, 2014). Its general military growth and vow to become a "*world-class force [...] by 2049*" has garnered the attention of many scholars. Its foreign policy has generally evolved into a more open and cooperative view (BBC, 2021). Yet there seems to be a questioning on the specific use of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) and Beijing's devolution on the South China Sea.

The area is of a highly strategic interest. Not only does it nurture 10% of global fishing (Vox, 2017), but it also has a maritime route going through and representing 80% of boat traffic as well as reefs that have been disputed by several states for decades (China Power Team, 2017). It is a highly tense point that Beijing has been claiming for years. It appears that China's pivot to the South China Sea was made easier with the growing capacity of its naval army.

In parallel of this, war has been evolving into a less confrontational mode than traditional war. It has been named hybrid warfare and uses other actors and technologies than state actors. Because of that, China has created a new distinct panel to its army: the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia. While the name contains armed forces, the ships are actually manned by civilians which creates a new complexity in the hybrid warfare of the South China Sea.

China's modernization of its military has seen maritime militias growing exponentially since the end of the Second World War and their presence in the South China Sea is more and more instrumentalized. Furthermore, China's actions sometimes appear to grow in tandem with its military capability, and as the South China Sea subject takes room in the news with events going from the 2007 and 2014 incidents with Vietnam to the 2021 situation in the Whitsun Reef, it is questionable whether China's policy of maritime militia use is based on a de-escalation of the conflict or as a new instrument of enforcement of their claim in the region.

Consequently, the present paper will serve to answer the question of why China's maritime militias are used as part of the ongoing hybrid warfare. Two case studies were chosen to test the hypotheses later formulated: the events of 2014

involving an oil rig in Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone surrounding the Paracels, and the events in the Spratly Islands in 2021 and involving the Philippines' sovereignty.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Whilst searching for cues on the way China behaves geostrategically and how said behavior could be understood, it was found that scholars diverge in categorizing events. There are mainly two diverging views attributed to the neorealist tradition. While scholars (Acharya, 2014; Beukel, 2010; Liang, 2018, Mingjiang, 2010, 2011; Raditio, 2015; Rosecrance, 2006; Sitaraman, 2014) agree that China's rise and position economically and militarily is a powerful one, they don't see eye to eye on the actual goal China has in mind by using maritime militias.

China's rise and militarization can be seen as a bit alarming by Asian countries. India militarizes, fearing an encroachment with "*China-friendly*" (Sitaraman, 2014, p. 90). They try to seek safety with the US, but China has made it abundantly clear that it did not want external interventions in the region (Raditio, 2015;). "*Asia's security should rely on Asians*" (Xinhua quoting President Xi Jinping during the fourth Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), 2014).

In addition, scholars diverge on the topic of the South China Sea region which is seen as a "*key strategic issue*" (Roche, 2013, P. 1) in China's politics. Its interaction in the region goes from becoming more assertive to making efforts to cooperate with other countries (Mingjiang, 2010). The fact that China has never really been clear on what its intentions were on the South China Sea has had an important impact because it created a perception of suspicion (Raditio, 2015).

According to Raditio (2015), there is also no clear indication that China has been increasing its military presence in the South China Sea since 2005. Its presence is a logical consequence of its sovereignty claim on the region. The fact that China did not seem ready to negotiate a code of conduct in any way (Raditio, 2015), but suddenly turned things around when the Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling came after the Philippines seized them, is another source of suspicion. Sitaraman (2014) mentions that, after the ruling, China's behavior changed, and it became much more open to

multilateralism and negotiation. This all comes to reinforce the feeling of distrust and the feeling that China wants to be seen as a future world leading power (*ibidem*). This turnabout in more cooperative politics may come from the need for international approval.

Scholars also defend China by pointing out that countries may claim that China's behavior is an assertive one, but it remains true for other countries (Raditio, 2015). Yet, China witnessed those surrounding countries' militarization and has not made any military move to the military responses of Asian countries (*ibidem*). That is explained because the quantity of power a state possesses does not determine its behavior or politics (Rosencrance, 2006). Moreover, China is stuck in defining its identity and is caught between taking the lead in the developing world on some issues and siding with the developed world on other political issues (Mingjiang, 2011). China has often found itself frustrated because other parties in the South China Sea dispute weren't responding favorably to a joint development.

As we said, opinions differ on the matter and, again, China's blurry ending objectives to the international community certainly play a role in this. For these reasons, China has both been accused of being assertive, aggressive and abrasive in its politics, but has also been seen as a power which is cooperating and flexible (Beukel, 2010; Mingjiang, 2010; Raditio, 2015). The argument which links both views is that there are "*two faces of power in the rising China*" (Beukel, 2010, p. 1).

This Gemini trait is what helped formulate the hypotheses that would answer the research question. The assertive side of China can be linked to an offensive realist branch of neorealism which formulates the first hypothesis like so: maritime militias are used as part of China's strategy to pursue their goal no matter the consequence and thus changing the status quo and power balance of the region. Maritime militias are used as a full militarized body and instrument to take over the entire South China Sea.

On the other hand, the debate also shows a more peaceful side of China where they would not be in search of a pure takeover of the area but simply to be recognized as a leader of the region. This follows the branch of defensive realism and allows the establishment of the second hypothesis: maritime militias are used as part of China's strategy of a hybrid warfare which means they want to pursue their goals and project

power while trying to leave unaltered the current status quo and balance of power. Because of that, maritime militias are used as an instrument of de-escalation of conflict.

C. METHODOLOGY AND ADDED VALUES

To conduct this research, a documentary technique was opted for as it is a reliable and essential technique in International Relations. It will conduct our research through scientific articles, books, scientific journals, quantitative data (statistics mainly), official statements, Foreign Policy Strategy documents, press releases, news articles, etc. The research methodology is a deductive one and will be performed through a hypothetical-deductive approach. The deductive approach is all the more relevant as the researcher cannot initially ignore the theory and results of previous research on their subject (Huilier, 2019). On the contrary, these elements will form the basis from which the research will be built.

The structure of the master thesis bears a very scientific lead: theory, reality, crossing the two. Hence, the theoretical framework will start the analysis with the definition of the different concepts at hand. Notably, the idea of war and hybrid warfare will be painted, the notion of maritime militia as part of China's military strategy will be detailed. Then comes the chosen theory as a guiding point for the analysis.

The second chapter contains a survey of China's position in the South China Sea. It will start with a contextualization of the dispute of the South China Sea. The South China Sea is a rich and complex environment to which several geostrategic aspects can be found. Consequently, China's strategy has been drawn from those interests and are thus monitored by the international community who is, as the literature review shows, sceptic about China's intentions. It will go on to detail China's impressive evolution of military capabilities from 1980 until now. The starting date of 1980 was chosen because it was at that point that China truly started modernizing its PLA because of changing security perceptions.

The third chapter is the reality part of the scientific development of the research. It will show in action and reality how China is behaving itself by analyzing two specific events. The first one concerns Vietnam and China in the Paracel Islands Group in 2014 while the second concerns the events of the Whitsun Reef between

China and the Philippines in 2021. In both cases, a historical and general context of China's relations with both states will be made. This will give a good view of how relations were beforehand. Then comes the event timeline which will go into detail as to what happened exactly during the two incidents.

The episode of 2014 and 2021 were not chosen by luck. The research intends to look for a potential evolution of their capabilities which could show a difference in practice and application of China's strategy. Similarly, Vietnam and the Philippines were chosen because of their difference, notably in terms of alliance with the United States as well as the history between China and Vietnam, and China and the Philippines respectively.

Because of the intended comparative purpose of the paper, it was believed that analyzing findings and implications from both events in order to infirm/confirm the hypotheses would be easier if done in one same section. It will also allow for a brief point of comparison of China's reaction and methodology during the events of 2014 and 2021. Finally, one last point before the concluding chapter will entail of a brief entake on what the future of the South China Sea holds.

Some of the added values of such a methodology have been brushed, but it appears important to point out the significance of the chosen structure for this Master thesis. Firstly, the comparative aspect of the research allows for the discovery of a potential pattern in China's behavior and use of maritime militias. Secondly, as China is sometimes suspected to lack transparency, the research will hopefully show a deeper understanding of what China is looking to achieve and corroborate actions with words. Third, hybrid warfare is highly relevant in the current context since military conflicts are evolving towards a more hybrid character, especially at sea, the situation is usually not as clear cut as on land. Lastly, the formulation of the question as a why allows for a more analytical description with a form of causality and effect.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: A TOOLBOX OF CONCEPTS

Heraclitus' idea is that, since the beginning of humankind, war has been a part of life. Whether to survive, scare off predators or impose yourself as leader of the tribe, resort to violence was the answer. Over the years, war became a subject that academic researchers became obsessed with. Questions such as its causes, goals and involved actors have been countless asked by scholars. That last part especially has faced many controversies and evolution. War was indeed initially a matter of individual against individual. The creation of the State then gave it a meaning, a sense of nationalism and defense of a territory. The State gave war a sense of legitimacy, a protocol and frame (Forge, 2013).

New technologies and actors emerged from evolution and revolution, revising the way of war: states became involved, medias meddled in warfare, and non-State actors became a regular occurrence. This last element is the topic at hand. From evolution stemmed the idea of hybridity in terms of war. Traditional wars declined in favor of the new war debate (Kaldor, 2013).

This is what this chapter will be emphasizing on. First, it will browse through the evolution of the definition of war, its characteristics, and its evolution. Then, the concept of irregular warfare will be defined since they have specific relevance, tactics, and characteristics; all of which will be discussed in that section. Further, the chapter will specialize in one of its aspects and game-changer: hybrid threats as part of military strategies, and more specifically as part of gray zone conflicts. As will be seen, the gray zone is not a specific type of conflict but an *"operational environment"* (Chambers, 2016, p. 5).

As was just mentioned, this first chapter will focus on the main concepts put forth in the thesis. As such, the concept of war and its evolution will be briefly approached to trinkle down on the debate over hybrid warfare. That part will entail a clear definition of what hybrid warfare is. Then comes the game-changer that arose with hybrid threats in gray-zone conflicts. This part will detail the reasons why states resort to hybrid threats, their different characteristics and tactics in the military strategy. Lastly, the thesis will be guided by neoclassical realism and the branches of defensive realism and offensive realism.

This following section will go through the evolution of warfare from conventional to modern to postmodern, and will study the new war debate faced with critics and renewed logics of warfare.

A. FROM TRADITIONAL WARFARE TO THE IRREGULAR ONE: A NEW WAR DEBATE

War has been at the center of studies since the beginning of time. First and foremost, it is eye-opening to start with a characterization of war by one of the pioneers of military strategic thinking in its time (and today still): Sun Tzu (2016). His two first lessons already characterized the gravity and seriousness of war indeed: "*1. The art of war is of vital importance to the State. 2. It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. Hence it is a subject of inquiry which can on no account be neglected...*". These few sentences alone show the intensity of engaging in war, and more importantly its basic characteristics. Through these words, it is possible to pinpoint various elements: violence, destruction, and the notion of mortality. They are each explicitly hinted.

It also refers to the State which shows the traditional view of a war from state to state and the idea of 'vital importance' which indirectly justifies and normalizes its use. The way Sun Tzu phrased these two lessons also points out the necessity of preparedness, thus corroborating with another pioneer of a few centuries later: "*no one starts a war — or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so — without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it*" (Achenbach, 1990 citing Clausewitz, 2010).

The concept of war has been defined intensively but, for the purpose of this paper, the definition of Cambridge dictionary (2021) will be taken as example because of its non-political view of war: war is an "*armed fighting between two or more countries or groups*". The interesting part about this definition is that, in its basicness, it shows a traditional definition of war. Each great war certainly brought its novelty to the mix while keeping the basics of having an actual *armed group* on the intended territory.

On the other hand, there seems to be several other accepted ideas about war and states. Following Thomas Hobbes' (1968) view, the war is a war of all against all.

The selfishness of men will cause such uprisings as well as the need for an entity that governs the anarchy of interaction between humans. Since war is a product of an organization, it means that socialization creates the envy for war whereas had there been no organization, men would have been reluctant to organize themselves and fight. In other words, war is not a natural nor a universal phenomenon but a social one.

According to Clausewitz (2010), war is but the natural course of political dealings. That being said, with political dealings came political modernity which transformed the way war was performed. In that sense, it is possible to correspond the history of war with the history of the state. Political dealings as directly linked to the States are tricky in the sense that they have a double role in war (Baripedia, 2021). They naturally have a positive dimension since they are the ones that create law and order, and divide labor, but they will also be the ones to decide on whether to engage in war. So is the law of war at the time: wars are declared by states.

Nevertheless, modernity diversified the types of war: short and revolutionary. The first one has a clear sequencing (declaration, cease-fire, peace treaty) and a codification with codes of conduct and nobility of the sword (Holsti, 2001). The second is a bit more complex and enters the concept of nation *en armes*. As a matter of fact, modernization meant two things: being able to assemble an army quickly, (which meant training them) and developing nationalist armies (which meant they are not mercenaries anymore). As such, revolutionary wars are not just to gain a bit of territory but to delete your enemy from existence. This meant that the objectives were unlimited; there was no will for democracy or will for liberation (*ibidem*).

Furthermore, while World War II marked the modernization of warfare militarily speaking — with the use of chemical weapons, through the gas chambers, and nuclear weapons deployed in Japan —, the end of the Cold War truly marked the era of modern warfare. World War II, while being a novelty in weaponry, still had the basic mechanisms of states against states warfare. The Cold War however entered an era that could be different in several ways.

Mary Kaldor (2013) classifies them as follows. First, identities have replaced ideas; it is now ethnic groups fighting instead of an ideology birthed and nourished through the states. This in turn inevitably places a group in a position of exclusion since *"fighting for an ethnic identity necessarily means excluding the other"* (p. 20).

Secondly, war is no longer for people but against them. As such, they are faced with a diversity of actors who do not represent the state or do not even aspire to be the state but are simply looking to acquire resources or goods from the state to enrich certain groups. Lastly, the world in which we are entering is a war economy that is supported by *"transnational networks such as the mafias, meaning that we are entering global networks that feed these wars"* (p. 20).

Therefore, this evolution to modern warfare shows significant transformations in terms of ideology and actors (Kaldor, 2013). Yet, 9/11 further transformed the face of warfare. Not only did the incident have an ideology of long-oppressed religion behind it but had a power-political one as well. A State can be as untouchable and powerful as it wants to be, but deception is quick when faced with urgency and with a direct hit to its center. The events of the 9/11 forever changed the game because the United States were faced with no state enemy. The why and how of the incident matter not in the present paper but it is important to mention it because it marks the entry of another era of postmodern warfare; one where the actors of war have significantly broadened and one where people are becoming less sympathetic to the idea of dying abroad. Therefore, warfare becomes more technological, less centralized, and where the use of non-state actors is broadened (*ibidem*).

Nevertheless, there seems to be a debate about whether the 21st century in fact organized violence differently. From that debate emerged numerous terms for contemporary conflicts, such as hybrid warfare.

B. THE GRAY ZONE'S SWEET SPOT: HYBRID THREATS IN MILITARY STRATEGIES

Globalization and new technologies have contributed to complexify conflicts. Where Clausewitz's (2010) statements of war were long thought to be the universal and unequivocal definitions of war, recent years have shown that the terms of war are changing. The very principle that wars are indeed to destroy enemy forces through direct military engagement only is almost in complete contradiction with the idea of hybrid warfare. The Russian Federation's invasion of Crimea in March 2014 catapulted the term of hybrid warfare to the front of security studies (Wither, 2020) and the term intends to reflect the complexity of the 21st century.

1. A2/AD

Anti-Access Area Denial (A2/AD) is a military strategy that has been used for a few decades. It concerns mainly great powers because of the modernity requirements needed to enforce it (MDAA, 2018). Because of that, it is found mainly in Russia and China. The idea behind it is to make sure that no vessel, ship, aircraft or any military capability from your adversary is able to freely move on what you consider your territory (*ibidem*).

In this particular case, China is using said strategy to disrupt US ships from the freedom of navigation they so eagerly fight for (Tri, 2017). Beijing mostly uses it in the areas of strategic interests to them: Taiwan and the South China Sea. It in turns puts US navy in range of "*precision-guided cruise and ballistic missiles*" (MDAA, 2018, p. 1). China's military modernization surely enabled it to use forceful capabilities. Figure 13 shows capabilities off the coast of Taiwan but the ship represented are placed all over the South China Sea thus rendering the area difficult from access.

2. CABBAGE STRATEGY

Furthermore, within this A2/AD military strategy is found the paramilitary cabbage strategy which has been used for a few years by China and helped them secure some sectors of parties to the South China Sea. Where China was looking to project its power through military modernization, it is now using its modernity gain to secure foothold in strategic locations. The Cabbage strategy is used as a metaphor for the vegetable. The coveted area is used as the heart of the cabbage, and ships are set out to surround said area in order to block any access from other claimants to the strategic interest in question (Heydarian, 2019).

Figure 11 is really useful in understanding the mechanism of said strategy. In the case of the South China Sea, the strategy used is more of an "*economic cabbage strategy*" (*ibidem*, p.1). In other words, the islands are here used as the center of the cabbage, and ships are strategically placed around like leaves protecting the cabbage's heart in order to block access from other ships. In the Philippines' islands case, which are mostly supposed to receive shipments and commercial goods, this strategy is said to be used in an economic capacity. Still, China's presence and protection of island are

also used as a clear message and symbol that China is ready to protect what is theirs. This symbol is used through another capacity: maritime militias.

3. MARITIME MILITIAS

Historically, right after the end of the Chinese civil war and the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Mao Zedong as head of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) put a paramount importance in defending coastlines from nationalists that retreated to Taiwan or other islands off their coast (Grossman & Ma 2020). Defending the coast proved to be higher a challenge than expected since, at the time, the Chinese navy was very weak. The creation of an organized maritime militia was found as the quickest way to combat the threat although maritime militias existed prior to the CCP's rise to power but they provided *"state funds and training to transform disparate, local forces into a national-level coherent force charged with protecting the new regime"* (*ibidem*).

When Mao was at the head of the PRC, he wanted to force collectivization across Chinese society since, after the civil war, coastal communities was in disarray (*ibidem*). By April 1956, the CCP had established *"786 fishing collectives involving nearly 76 households, which represented nine-tenths of Shandong fishermen"* (Swanson, 1982). Moreover, when the PRC was created, a lot of collaboration was made between Russia and them in order to create a naval strategy. As such, a lot of military officers came from the Soviet Union to help establish something decent since they were facing the same problems.

The Soviet Union taught the PRC to use a naval strategy called "Young School". Because of the land-centric nature of the country, it was considered important to protect the coastline, as opposed to the Old School who believed that naval projection was the most important, and resources were to be implemented in majority out to sea (Herrick, 1968). As will be seen in a later section detailing China's military, it appears they have reverted to the Old School thought since then.

As of now, China's armed forces are actually divided into three categories (see Figure 12). There is the People's Liberation Army (PLA) containing the navy — of which a later section is dedicated to —, the People's Armed Police leading China's Maritime Law Enforcement and containing the Coast Guard, and the Militia which

contains *"a growing proportion of sea-based units"* (Erickson, 2017). Maritime militias establish a de facto presence in disputed areas to challenge counterclaimants' ability to maintain control over disputed features (Schuster, 2021).

They are used in classic gray-zone operations and hybrid threat that use violence without ever crossing the war threshold which would trigger an inevitable confrontation between China and the United States; a confrontation they have been trying to avoid for years, although some see it as inevitable (Haas, 2017). China, by using the number advantage of its navy and maritime militias, is looking to win without fighting. The more overwhelmed the others will be when facing the militia and CCG, the less likely they will fight back (Grossman & Ma, 2020).

In summary, the way of war has changed and with it evolved the techniques to defy one's adversary. Whereas frontal confrontation was certainly the preferred way for war, it has now been deemed a waste of resources and men who could be accomplishing more in a safer way. The point now is not to avoid as much as possible the declaration of war. Instead, the war threshold will be toyed with operations considered as "gray-zone", which means that the operations are aggressive enough for the adversary to notice and receive damage but not as hard as to force the adversary to escalate repercussions to the point of declaring war.

To avoid that, other means are used. For China, their strategy is an A2/AD one which has been in place for a few decades now. Its point is to keep away one's enemy by restricting its freedom of movement, and by having top-notch defense systems which will force any rival to turn back. Furthermore, within the scope of A2/AD strategy, China has been using the paramilitary cabbage strategy to surround the targeted islands and render them inaccessible to foreign ships, thus creating territorial sovereignty violation according to the international community.

Be that as it may, the most important and unique asset of China's hybrid warfare methods resides in its use of maritime militias. The PAFMM (People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia) has played a highly instrumental role in helping China achieve its regional territorial goals. While existing even before the creation of the PRC, the CCP was the one who truly organized the militias into one of the three sea forces China uses. So much so that the civilians that were once employed are now militarized

professionals. The technology and modernity of the PAFMM has a deterrence impact on various claimants of the area, thus giving an undeniable edge to China.

C. THEORETICAL APPROACH: FROM CLASSICAL REALISM TO NEOREALISM

A paradigm consists in *"one or more past scientific achievements which were sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity"* (Kuhn, 1970, p. 11 cited in Guzzini, 1992). When those achievements are met with a consensus, it becomes "mature science" and comes to enrich one's framework. Therefore, a first aspect of the paradigm is that without it, there can be *"no deepening, no criterion to choose problems from"* (Kuhn, 1970, p. 37 cited in Guzzini, 1992), and thus, no roots for research. As such, a paradigm constitutes a tool of research, one that can only be constructed by a fundamentally new view of the world and the understanding that the previous paradigm has no more meaning (Guzzini, 1992).

As mentioned in the previous sections, irregular warfare does not have one single characteristic and angle of analysis because it is composed of various and diverse elements which are subject to changes related to the evolution of technologies, context, time, resources, goals, etc. This alone pushes one to extend said statement to the object of research of theories of International Relations (IR). Each theory of international relations has indeed been designed to study a subject under different and specific lenses at a certain point in time, space, and evolution. Because of this, the author believed that the complexity and hybridity of irregular warfare necessitated a hybridity of theoretical approaches. Consequently, several lenses were to be examined to determine which best unblurs the complexity of the South China Sea dispute.

Describing in depth each element, in theory and its practical application to the subject at hand, would however imply a massive analysis and fall beyond the scope of this master's thesis. This present work will therefore focus on the theoretical approach of the neorealist perspective and its branches of defensive realism and offensive realism. It is believed that the level of causality formulated in the research question allowed a better understanding of China's behavior through the lenses of neorealism.

1. CLASSICAL REALISM

Classical realism worked as a paradigm (Guzzini, 1992). It is considered one of the oldest and most dominant international theory (Battistella, 2015). Authors going from Thucydides¹ in 400 B.C. to modern-day have studied its angles, birthing new branches and subtleties. Its object of study is defined by the analysis of the causes of war and the conditions of stability of the international order (Battistella, 2015). The theory holds that *"desiring to possess power, which is inherited in human nature, is the most central assumption of political realism"* (Muradov, 2019, p. 53). This statement was believed to be the utter truth for so long that some even called it *"the eternal wisdom"* (Buzan, 1993 cited in Battistella, 2015).

Realism encompasses four assumptions. Yet, even with the belief of realism as a continuing relevance (Walt, 2003 cited in Battistella, 2015), subtleties were quick to emerge for some of them. The first one is that the state of anarchy of international relations goes hand in hand with the state of war because, since there is no central authority, there is no deterrence from using armed violence for states. From this first assumption, it appears doubtful that cooperation would arise between great powers, even if there could be significant benefits from it. In fact, *"international anarchy is the principal force shaping the motives and actions of states"* (Guzzini, 1992). Joseph Grieco deepens this statement by arguing that the reluctance to cooperate stems from two things: *"state concerns about cheating and state concerns about relative achievements of gains"* (Grieco, 1988, p. 487).

The mistrust among realists is manifested by the belief that *"today's friend may be tomorrow's enemy in war"* (Grieco, 1988, p. 488). Powerful state concerns about relative achievements of gains is in fact highly regarded through the reasoning that from cooperation comes less independence and, *in fine*, less survival rate. Not only that, but with cooperation arises the worry that *"achievements of joint gains that advantage a friend in the present might produce a more dangerous potential foe in the future"* (*ibidem*). Thus, realism believes that cheating always needs to be taken into consideration because states are *"unitary-rational agents"* (*ibidem*).

¹ See Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, tran. Richard Crawley, 1974 for his take on power politics being central in all forms of political realism.

The second assumption in Battistella (2015) is that the principal actors of IR are conflict groups which, under the Westphalia system, are "*essentially territorially organized nation-states*" (p. 122, *translated from French*). Therein lies one of the truths in Realism: the recognition of the state's historicity. Yet, one of the pioneers of classical realism, Hans Morgenthau, disagrees and refuses to make the state a point of reference because it is directly linked to the historical context. The actual bond between an interest and a state depends on the context in which it is currently found. Thus, recognizing the state as a benchmark fixates the political world when it revolves around evolutions and may be replaced by "*larger elements of a completely different character*" (Morgenthau, 1948, p. 12).

Probably the most influential postulate that classical realism harbors is that actors, embodied in the head of the executive branch, are rational and are "*looking to maximize their national interests in terms of power within the constraints of the international system*" (Battistella, 2015, p. 122, *translated from French*). Ironically enough, while this particular assumption garners the most analyses, most of them concur that there is no concrete counterargument on the reality of the rationality and pessimism of the individual. It is not that realists are bellicose *per se*, but that the use of force and war appear as the simple continuation of politics through other means (Clausewitz, 2010 cited in Battistella, 2015).

The fourth and last assumption touches upon the balance of power (BOP) as the only regulation mode capable of ensuring order and international stability. This term will be thoroughly used throughout the thesis and ought to be the subject of a next point. Regardless, a preview can already be addressed by saying that said balance of power and its importance have been faced with both praises and critics. For example, Richard Cobden (1836) — among others —, considers that BOP has not been known to ensure peace, nor does it sometimes take into consideration that states are not static units. Nevertheless, others claim that it does guarantee freedom of small states and ensures multiple major international actors (Political Science, 2018).

The predominance and continuing relevance (Walt, 2003 cited in Battistella, 2015) of classical realism, paradoxically, also constitutes its weakness. The idea that realism possesses the lens that will show event in the 'realist' way inadvertently implies that other lenses are considered as unrealistic fantasies. Despite that, out of the

four main assumptions of realism, subtleties — loopholes, even — were quick to emerge for some. One of the four is that the state of anarchy of international relations goes hand in hand with the state of war because, since there is no central authority, there is no deterrence from using armed violence for states. From this first assumption, it appears doubtful that cooperation would arise between great powers, even if there could be significant benefits from it. In fact, *"international anarchy is the principal force shaping the motives and actions of states"* (Guzzini, 1992).

Joseph Grieco deepens this statement by arguing that the reluctance to cooperate stems from two things: *"state concerns about cheating and state concerns about relative achievements of gains"* (1988, p. 487). Paul R. Viotti and Mark V. Kauppi (2010) take it a step further by encompassing this statement and pointing out that if the nature of international relations is anarchic and states seek to survive then realism as *"a theory of international relations is unneeded to exist"* (Viotti & Kauppi, 2010 in Muradov, 2019, p. 41). That is to say that if realism holds an irreputable truth to its arguments then states would not be able to act differently than to maximize their power and ensure its survival. Nevertheless, its weight on the scene of international relations' theories presents it as inescapable during the study of a conflict such as that of the South China Sea.

While wars have been known to be somewhat savage, the principle differs from *"mindless slaughter and destruction"* because it is organized and has an aim (Clausewitz, 2010 cited in Forge, 2013, p. 222). On the other hand, war is only as rational as the reason of the states is rational and the fact that war stems from the selfishness of men only serves to assume that war is the cause of rivalry among the common interests of individuals (Clausewitz, 2010). Because of this, as mentioned in the section on war, realists deny that war is subject to moral critique (Calhoun, 2001). That is because, ordinarily, morality can be applied to a person's actions in most contexts; but not war because *"all is fair in war"* (*ibidem*).

Machiavelli (2008), in *The Prince*, believes that rulers must avoid emotions and apply pragmatism in all decisions. Briefly, his idea is that if you aspire to acquire and maintain power, it means having no moral limits whatsoever. To him, there are two ways of fighting: respecting the rules and no holds barred. A good leader must be

both. Expanding this statement means that morality is, for realists, but a shadow behind which states hide their true interests in international politics (Machiavelli, 2008).

i. A VOCABULARY PARENTHESIS

BALANCE OF POWER (BOP)_

The first to be mentioned is the BOP. It is one of the oldest and most fundamental concepts of international theory. As mentioned, authors have been seen to diverge on its necessity and continue to do so. *"The trouble with balance of power is not that it has no meaning, it is that it has too many"* (Claude, 1962). Here are four of the many definitions formulated by realist scholars:

"Whenever the term Balance of Power is used without qualification, it refers to an actual state of affairs in which power is distributed among nations with approximately equality" (Morgenthau, 1948).

"Balance of Power is such a system in which some nations regulate their power relations without any interference by any big power. As such it is a decentralized system in which power and policies remain in the hands of constituting units" (Claude, 1962).

"Balance of Power is an equilibrium or a certain amount of stability in power relations that under favourable conditions is produced by an alliance of states or by other devices" (Schwarzenberger, 1964).

Balance of Power means "the maintenance of such a just equilibrium between the members of the family of nations as should prevent any one of them from becoming sufficiently strong to impose its will upon the rest" (Castlereagh cited in Payne, 2021).

Each definition was specifically chosen because of several elements that translate the paradigm of realism and its oppositions. Claude's (1962) definition was chosen for its reference to the anarchic characteristic of the system which in turn impacts states that act out of survival and power lust, thus confirming the first assumption made earlier. On the contrary, the last was selected because of its reference to a 'just equilibrium' which diverge from Morgenthau (1948) where it is implied that the equilibrium is merely approximate. In addition, the reference of Castlereagh to

prevent any state to become so strong that it may impose its will strengthens the idea put forth by Claude (1962) and the necessity of an anarchic order. Lastly, Schwarzenberger's (1964) definition goes against the state of quasi-non-existent cooperation due to the constant concerns of relative achievement of gains previously mentioned.

The quantity of definitions present in the literature depicts the nuances of the classical realist theory. Many authors have addressed the task of defining the nature of the BOP, but Palmer and Perkins (1954) have identified and summarized them. Because of the BOP's central role in this study, the following will briefly mention the different natures. They refer to Palmer and Perkins but was taken out of Political Science (2018):

- A temporary and unstable equilibrium: there is a certain paradox to this element since, as stated beforehand, a context is in constant change, making it impossible to not evolve. This of course impacts the state of equilibrium of the international system and explains why Palmer and Perkins consider that, though it stands for equilibrium, it also involves some disequilibrium; hence Schwarzenberger's mention of 'a certain amount of stability'.
- The need to actively achieve it: the BOP is not a phenomenon that just happens. States must secure it through their own behaviors and acts which explains why war sometimes results: acts can be interpreted in different ways, and not necessarily the ones that are meant. This element will be a bit more detailed in the next point of definition of the security dilemma.
- The efficiency of BOP is tested through war: it is in direct link to what was just mentioned. Interpretation of actions may lead to war, which inevitably ends the BOP.
- Hegemons as actors of BOP: it appears evident that, in such a system, big and powerful states are the ones holding the cards and smaller ones are either victim or spectators of the phenomenon. There is also an obvious emphasis on the need for 'states' (plural).

Now that the nature of BOP is well framed, the methods of balance are partly what will concern this thesis. A later section will link them to China's behavior in international relations, specifically in the South China Sea, and towards the Philippines

and Viet Nam. The goal is to find a potential match that could help with confirming or infirming the different hypotheses, but this will later be detailed. Still taken from Political Science (2018), Palmer and Perkins detailed seven major methods to keep the BOP:

- Compensation: usually territorial, meaning the annexation or division of a land.
- Alliances and counter alliances: they are regarded as a principal method of BOP. Alliance is a device by which "a combination of nations creates a favorable balance of power by entering into military or security pacts aimed at augmenting their own strength vis-a-vis the power of their opponents" (p. 1). However, counter alliances usually warrant aggressiveness and are more likely to lead to war.
- Intervention and non-intervention: they revolve mainly around interventions in domestic affairs or the decision to remain neutral when facing certain states. Both can play a role in keeping balance but may very well also force the end of it.
- Divide and rule: which resonates strongly with the divide and conquer leitmotiv. The price to keep balance will either be to divide competitors or to keep them divided.
- Buffer states: using a state as a buffer allows you to have a physical boundary that serves to moderate the growing tensions between two powerful neighbors.
- Domestic methods: a change of balance perceived by a country as unfavorable spurs on its need for survival. As such, it triggers its wish to become more powerful. This usually entails the acquirement or modernization of a military capability or reach economic developments in related industries. The point is to either prepare itself for a potential attack or try and even the game.

The different methods found were important to specify because China's situation may be mirrored in some of the different elements itemized above. In fact, the South China Sea has lived through many tensions and has been facing a security dilemma for many years (Radtke, 2015). The fourth assumption of realism spoke of the balance of power. Yet, it was brought up that some scholars believe it to be necessary to avoid a spiral in a security dilemma.

When mentioning the fundamental assumptions of the realist theory, the conviction that actors are rational individuals is noted as well as the need to survive and the incline to use violence if need be. It was understood that the basic units of the global system are the states which rule citizens and possess sovereignty over the territory. When a state feels threatened by a neighbor's behavior, it reacts defensively and prepares for a potential attack because its main objective is to maintain its security (Jervis, 1976 in Glaser, 1997). Because of this need to survive and prosper combined with the anarchic international system, states find themselves in competition with one another when there are common interests and compatible goals to be found (Glaser, 1997). The security dilemma thus exists when *"many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others"* (Jervis, 1996 cited in Glaser, 1997).

On the other hand, according to Jervis (1996), the magnitude and nature of the security dilemma will depend on two main variables: the offense-defense balance and offense-defense differentiation. In fact, the only non-variable element is the anarchic global system but the "attractiveness of cooperative or competitive means" will determine how far and how long the security dilemma stands (Glaser, 1997, p. 171). The offense-defense balance is, according to Glaser and Kaufmann (1998), an "optimistic theory of international politics" (p. 44). It is so because defensive stances do not have the same impact as offensive ones and thus can avoid major wars. Defensiveness will rather put the emphasis on arms control than arms race (*ibidem*).

Nevertheless, while Levy points out that this offense-defense theory revolves around flaws since it cannot be measured, Glaser and Kaufmann disagree by arguing that the offense-defense balance should be defined as the ratio of the cost of the forces that the attacker requires to take territory to the cost of the defender's forces (Glaser & Kaufmann, 1998, p. 45).

ii. CONCLUSIONS ON THE REALIST PART AND ITS NON-RELEVANCE FOR THIS THESIS

In summary, realism predicts the outcomes for the world and the events happening in it by putting a focus on recurring patterns of great powers. Because of the believed necessity for anarchy, balance of power changes will inevitably push

states to regain balance and find some sort of equilibrium. Thus, realists put forth that powerful states are fighting for their survival and their own gain of power. Not only will this view complicate cooperation since they believe that any cooperation or ally can turn the next day but the fact that the international system is anarchic means there is no control over how they achieve security. Relative power position and perceived threats play a big role in the level of stability and balance of power of the region and can very well create a security dilemma if interpretations do not go the way they were intended to. Realist scholars think in a pessimistic way and believe international actors to be calculative and rational. As such, distrust is a key word and that is why war usually is the answer for them.

Despite the dominant role realism has played in international relations, it does not explain the use of irregular warfare in the South China Sea. An explanation can be found in the realists' relations with war. It is unavoidable to them, and politics are driven to end in violence eventually. The anarchic world dictates that no one can affirm having a hold over the states. Yet the definition of irregular warfare and its link with gray zone hybrid threats is that the actions taken against a state fall below the threshold of war and thus harbor no declaration of war from one to another. This single element indirectly confirms the presence of something other than the maximization of power especially since China classifies, from a realist point of view, as a strong power. Classical realism remains unsatisfactory in comprehending the ongoing irregular warfare in the South China Sea.

Regardless, it is useful to bare it in mind since it points to a realist weakness which was discussed at the beginning of this section: the realist perspective does not hold an indisputable truth to every reality. States, in this case, thus do not think of war as the ultimate method to achieve goals. Otherwise, there would not be this "flirtation" with the war threshold. The next section studies neorealism and bares the same logic.

2. NEOREALISM

The introduction to the realist theory mentioned that a paradigm was a tool of research that would be partly shaped through its historical context. It was also stated that contexts are in constant evolution. Thus, a second aspect is that when a paradigm no longer explains the world and is replaced by another, it is called a 'revolution' (Kuhn, 1970 cited in Guzzini, 1992). Said phenomenon inevitably comes after a debate

between proponent of competing paradigms and answers the question of which problem is more significant to have solved (Guzzini, 1992).

Affirming that neorealism was a revolution in the Kuhnian sense of the word would be an exaggeration. It was not; not a complete one at least. Still, it did answer more significant problems and was seen as a new view over the world because it diverged on a critical point with realism while keeping its main views. In fact, it resolved some anomalies and acknowledged a very specific element that realism overlooked: states are not the only explanation for certain outcomes (Waltz, 1979).

This next point will depict the fundamentals of the neorealist view and the differences encountered with realism.

i. THE PARADIGM QUASI-KUHNIAN REVOLUTION: WALTZ AND
MEARSHEIMER

DIVERGENCES WITHIN SIMILARITIES_

Because of the empirical perspective realism gives to the phenomena of the world, neorealism is considered more as a normative paradigm (Morgenthau, 1948). As summarized, great powers have the most leverage in the international world and will fight for their national interests (Mearsheimer, 2001). Nevertheless, while realism believes conflict to arrive because of the calculating and selfish nature of states, neorealism finds the roots of conflict in the anarchic international system (Hobson, 2000 cited in Pashakhanlou, 2009).

Another big difference pointed out by Schweller (1996) in Pashakhanlou's article is that *"classical realists differentiate between status-quo and revisionist powers while neorealism regards states as unitary actors"* (2009, p. 2). Thirdly, where realism believes states to be the only and main actors of the system, neorealism allows more space for complexity (Hobson, 2000 cited in Pashakhanlou, 2009). Lastly, because of the behaviorist revolution of the 1960s, neorealism was heavily influenced by it. In turn, this allowed them to give a more *"rigorous and scientific approach"* to study IR (Georg & Sorensen, 2007 cited in Pashakhanlou, 2009, p. 2).

To speak of neorealism without mentioning Kenneth Waltz would be an aberration since he is considered the most influential thinker in the neorealist branch (Maliniak et al., 2007 cited in Pashakhanlou, 2009). Neorealism was highly affected

by behaviorism which explains why Waltz starts his work with some basic assumptions that come to predict certain behaviors for states (Waltz, 1979). In her summary of *Theory of international politics*, Ceren Altincekic — American Ph.D. student — outlined Waltz's assumptions in three points:

- The affirmation that the international system is anarchic remains for both realism and neorealism. "*There is no higher central authority that can enforce rules over individual states*" (Altincekic, 2021, p. 1).
- Because of this, states will act on survival mode, and it will be reflected in the way they behave towards one another. The basis of self-help is key which explains why rationality will be extremely present.
- Given the anarchic state of the world, the structure may only change if "*great powers take actions that will lead to a change*" (*ibidem*). In other words, since great powers are the main players, they hold the power of change over the structure and will in constant balancing act to increase their chance at surviving.

At first glance, it all seems rather similar — or even identical — to realism but the fundamental addition that Waltz (1979) brought forth is the idea that the realist theory is too reductive and only takes into consideration states as the only source of cause to an outcome. Waltz (1979) disagrees strongly with the idea of a single label as opposed to several because reducing states to a label "*reduces the complexity, breadth and richness*" of reality (Pashakhanlou, 2009, p. 5).

THE POWER VARIABLE_

Power is often considered as *the* main element in realist traditions because no other theory puts the emphasis as much on it (Baldwin, 2016). Morgenthau (1948), while being one of the fathers of realism, has made several critics towards it. The two first ones being that its definition of 'power' was vague and, at times, confusing, and that there were no actual clarification and specification of what contexts of power entail (*ibidem*).

The striking difference between Morgenthau and Waltz's view of power is based upon human nature (Pashakhanlou, 2009). Morgenthau (1948) premises that politics are governed by laws which are created by human nature and will thus be turned towards protecting and dominating the other; it is what is called *animus*

dominandi (i.e., 'political mans'). From this, it appears clear that his view of human nature is universally fixed. Therefore, it seems only logical that bringing together 'political mans' would merely serve to increase their lust for power and be reflected on the state's impulses internationally (Morgenthau, 1948). In other words, the anarchic characteristic of the international stage is what keeps men's desire to dominate and is consequently the driving force of state behavior.

Kenneth Waltz (1979) disagrees with this on three accounts. The first one is that the universal aspect of Morgenthau's view of human nature is entirely hypothetical for lack of empiric evidence. The second is that there is an incoherence in the realist view that is reflected by the variations observed. The universal perspective of human nature turns it into a constant indeed and yet, *"a constant cannot explain variation"* (Pashakhanlou, 2009, p. 3). A cause of war is by the same token the cause of peace (Waltz, 1959, p. 28). The last part is greatly linked to what was just mentioned and argues that reductionism fails to account why the patterns of international politics constantly reoccur even though the actors and their character are in a constant change (Waltz, 1979, p. 65 in Pashakhanlou, 2009).

Waltz's reluctance for simplicity allowed neorealism to take the international environment into account, and that means focusing not only on power, but more importantly on the distribution of power (Waltz, 1979 cited in Altincekic, 2021). Moreover, for Morgenthau (1956), an important aspect of power is equated to material strength (i.e., military capability) and *"more significant is a nation's character, morale and quality of governance"* (p. 186). Waltz's definition of power differs because his view of power includes many variables: *"size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence"* (Waltz, 1979, p. 131). This sheds the basics for the determination of soft power and hard power. However, they were decided to be irrelevant for this study and will not be detailed.

Nonetheless, as mentioned, the distribution of power is to Waltz the main *"determinant of international outcomes"* (Waltz, 1979 cited in Altincekic, 2021) and will be affected by the international environment. Explaining outcomes from the behavior of states ignores the patterns of international behavior that *"cannot be explained by differences at the state level"*. The structural level may explain those

patterns and why *"dissimilar units behave in similar ways"* (*ibidem*). In other words, *"international systems are defined with respect to the number of great powers they accommodate at a certain point in time (i.e., bipolarity, multipolarity, hegemonic system...)"*. Although this characteristic seems to be unit level, Waltz clarifies the issue by *"distinguishing the distribution of power which is a structural level variable as opposed to power itself which is a state-level variable"* (*ibidem*).

One last remark on the distribution of power is that the unequal distribution of material capacity influences directly the states' way to defend themselves and, *in fine*, influences their behavior on the international stage (Waltz, 1979). As such, the size of the population and territory, its geoeconomic advantages and its economic capacity, military capacity will be determining for a state's power and its capacities (*ibidem*).

Briefly, while neorealist come to an agreement over the structure of international relations as the primary impetus in seeking security, it is still in debate whether states are truly merely trying to survive and live in a (sometimes tacit) common accord with its neighbors to not do anything that could create a security dilemma or whether their endgame is to maximize their relative power and shake the current *status quo* by instilling a security dilemma. This constitutes the respective basics of the next two points: defensive realism and offensive realism.

ii. DEFENSIVE REALISM

One of the pillars when speaking of defensive realism is, once more, Kenneth Waltz who says that states tend to balance against one another when said state starts to take up too much space and power. It does not necessarily mean it happens each time but it can be a response from a state that feels threatened by a more aggressive behavior (Rosecrance, 2006).

Defensive realism holds that *"the international system provides incentives for expansion only under certain conditions"* (Taliaferro, 2000, p. 129). Following this reasoning, the desire of a state for power is not what Morgenthau calls a *"lust of power"* (Morgenthau, 1948 cited in Baldwin, 2016). On the contrary, states will look to acquire just enough power in order to survive (Baldwin, 2016) because acquiring power is risky and does not necessarily mean being safe (Radtke, 2015). Furthermore, Taliaferro (2000) adds that, under anarchy, many of the means used by a state are relative power: you increase your security in order to decrease another's.

The idea of decreasing a state's security is taken further in Raditio's (2015) article *"China's shifting behavior in the South China Sea: a defensive realist perspective"*. He details that it does not matter whether your relations with a state is a cooperative or rival one. The mere fact that a state is indeed militarizing, or modernizing will immediately be interpreted as a potential threat to the observer's eye, which in turn creates a potential security dilemma (Raditio, 2015). The observer will interpret the militarization of another state as an act of *"greed"* (*ibidem*, p. 310), when it is merely a gain in power from said state that leads to modernization.

Threats lead to conflicts of interest that bring elements both subjective and objective, which means it will either be respectively reconcilable or unreconcilable. Interpretation is key and can sometimes be the actual source of conflict (*ibidem*).

iii. OFFENSIVE REALISM

Offensive realism does not entirely differ from Waltz's assumptions. The concept of anarchy is very much still present but where Mearsheimer (2001) — considered as pioneer for the theory — differs is the quantity of power needed for a state to survive. Offensive realism holds that, anarchy allows sometimes strong incentives for expansion (Taliaferro, 2000). Mearsheimer (2001) adds that power is a necessary consequence of this anarchic system and is an available and cumulative resource. Raditio (2015) adds that security is in direct link to these resources and that it is becoming scarce because the resources are scarce as well. Power is based on material resources to 'conquer and control a territory' (Baldwin, 2016). All states strive to *"maximize their power relative to other states"* (Taliaferro, 2000).

To become the hegemon in the system and guarantee in turn your survival, it is needed to obtain security and power through military power and the win of the arm's race (Raditio, 2015; Rosecrance, 2006; Taliaferro, 2000). As such, it is difficult to predict whether states will balance or buck pass in response, but they usually will not bandwagon (Rosecrance, 2006).

3. CONCLUSIONS OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In summary, neorealism is believed to have the best perspective to embark on the chosen topic of analysis because of its relation to the environment in which a state manifests itself and takes actions. States are rational beings in search of a specific goal.

The neorealist paradigm was seen as the most relevant considering China's expansion and the detailed debates over its intentions. The notion of an anarchic character of the system, of the rationality of states, of the duality of interpretations between security and maximization of power, of the relevance of relative power position as protection and image projection in the international world, and of the creation of a security dilemma through misconstructions confirmed that it was the right theory for this study. Detailing both branches of neorealism serves to put in actual terms the potential goal China has in mind by using maritime militias as part of its strategy in the ongoing hybrid warfare with Vietnam and the Philippines. This translation in tangible and concrete terms was used to formulate the hypotheses tested in the present paper.

Concerning the region of the study, the Spratly Islands and Paracel Islands have long been the center of attention of the disputes of the South China Sea region, for it is the center of gravity of global economy and security (Ritonga, 2017). *“Competition and conflict in the South China Sea involve many nations due to its resources and vital sea lanes”* (Blazevic, 2012, p. 79). China’s power development has led it to reverse back to historical claims over the region (Gomez, 2020), thus bringing forth a *“highly dynamic strategic environment”* (Ritonga, 2017, p. 111).

China has repeatedly served as a *“common denominator of intensifying anxiety”* for its neighbors and the *“aggressive scope of its claims to the sea and its islands”* (Blazevic, 2012, p. 79). As the situation does not seem to change and the participants’ claims do not appear to waver, there are growing security concerns that need to be considered, especially since China has changed its strategy from using invasion threats to using maritime militias as part of the hybrid warfare rush seen in the last few years.

Let this serve as a reminder of the topic at hand: between 2014 and 2021, for which purpose are China's maritime militias as part of the ongoing hybrid warfare used in the conflicts with both the Philippines and Vietnam in the South China Sea? Answering the question will put two hypotheses to the test. The first one that maritime militias are used as part of China's strategy of a hybrid warfare which means they want to pursue their goals and project power while trying to leave unaltered the current status quo and balance of power. Because of that, maritime militias are used as an instrument of de-escalation of conflict. It is thus guided by defensive realism.

The second entails that maritime militias are used as part of China's strategy to pursue their goal no matter the consequence and thus changing the status quo and power balance of the region. Maritime militias are used as a full militarized body and instrument to take over the entire South China Sea. It thus relates more to offensive realism. Both case studies later observed will serve to determine which best explains China's behavior towards Vietnam and the Philippines.

This next chapter will detail the context and present an overview of the conflict in the region. Special emphasis will be put on the importance of the region for China starting from the claimed territory to its economic relevance. Then, the evolution of China's sea power will be addressed and present an overview of the grand strategy in the South China Sea. This entails a characterization of China's modernization of military power, the introduction of maritime militias as a hybrid threat as well as the strategic thought behind them.

III. CHINA IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: A STEADY ADVANCEMENT

The following chapter has an interest in explaining China's point of view on the matter. There is a logic in China's actions and a clear objective. They believe themselves to be a new power leader so they act in a way they believe will grant them respect. However, the question is whether they want to achieve through fear and coercion, or collaboration. Knowing what China's interests and goals are will help answer the research question and topic of this master thesis.

A. CONTEXT OF THE DISPUTE: A MULTIFACETED CONFLICT

"Conflicts arise in the development and existence of things" (Zaka, 2020). The very existence of the South China Sea has long caused troubles for its neighboring states. Before delving in the events happening in the region, it is important to understand just why the South China Sea has been said to be an extremely high-tension point. A first element is found in the fact that, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (China Power Team, 2017), the area harbors 80% of global trading.

Believing that the South China Sea situation revolves around a commercial route, and resources to be coveted would be highly reductive. Yet ignoring the major maritime route that goes through the region, as shown on Figure 15, would bias any finding and blatantly ignore the various interests of the states involved in the conflicts in the region. More than that, the South China Sea is also a geopolitical rivalry and tension points. From the actual maritime route to its hidden resources and the maritime borders involved in a conflict with several states, this section will view the conflict and interests pertaining to the particular situation that is the South China Sea.

1. GEOPOLITICAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS FOR THE COVETING OF THE AREA

From a purely commercial perspective, the South China Sea is the center of gravity of global economy and security (Ritonga, 2017). *"Competition and conflict in the South China Sea involve many nations due to its resources and vital sea lanes"* (Blazevic, 2012, p. 79). What is meant by this is that the maritime route going through

the South China Sea links the biggest ports going from East Asia to Europe (*ibidem*). The route transports manufactured products in containers but is also used for energetic raw materials.

Regarding resources in the area, it is worth mentioning energetic resources (Blazevic, 2012) as well as fishing resources (Frécon, 2021). The energetic resources have already been mentioned and concern mainly hydrocarbon deposits. As for the fishing resources, the area counts for 12% of fish catches in the world (*ibidem*), meaning much more than any fishing zone globally. The downside of this phenomenon is the overfishing acts. States such as Indonesia, the Philippines, or China certainly see a geoeconomic interest to the area and globalization makes a much higher demand and possibility for export.

The other reason for the coveting of the area is a geopolitical one with the issue of maritime borders (see Figure 1). 1982 marked the adoption of the Montego Bay Convention on the rights of the sea. This Treaty has for purpose to delimitate maritime borders and defines, among other, the Economic Exclusive Zones of each state. It is a maritime space that leads up to 200 nautical miles (NM) off the state's shore and is found between the territorial waters and the high seas. The EEZ, says the Convention, has the specificity to allow exclusive rights of exploitation over the maritime space. Furthermore, Article 76 of the Convention adds that a State may apply for an extension of its rights to exploit marine soils and subsoils (which do not include the EEZ). This would mean that islands such as the Scarborough, the Paracels, or the Spratlys would allow for an additional zone of exploitation.

China has a different claim over the South China Sea (Figure 2 bis) than that of the official maritime border definition of the 1982 Montego Bay Convention (Figure 2). China's claim is called the "nine-dash line" and illustrates China's maritime border claim. It constitutes a historical claim that dates to 1947, right after the Second World War, when Beijing announced its goal of expanding maritime borders under the Ming dynasty, an area of six hundred years ago (Morris, 2021). Later, it decided to include areas from its Qing dynasty, which brought the claim to the almost entirety of the South China Sea (*ibidem*). Chinese Ambassador in Israel Zhan Yongxin's justification for China's claim resides in the following:

"China is actually the victim with regards to the South China Sea issue. The Chinese people were the first to discover, name and develop the South China Sea Islands. Successive Chinese government have exercised continuous jurisdiction over the islands by means of administrative control, military patrol, production and business operations and maritime disaster relief" (Yongxin, 2016, p. 1).

2. A POTENTIAL STRATEGIC TRIANGLE

There is an obvious strategic and economic interest to the Chinese claim. In Figure 3bis, there are three main group of islands, each of which are claimed by several states. The Spratlys are the trickiest ones because they lay in the territorial waters — official and claimed ones — of each country. The strategic interest of these three groups is therefore that combined, they form what has been called the *"strategic triangle"* (Mollman, 2016, p. 1). The reality, as explains Mollman (2016), is that, since 2014, China has been building maritime and military bases on the Spratly islands as well as the Paracels (see Figure 8). Considering the image above, there appears one last group, the Scarborough Shoal in the Philippines, over which China has had no luck in building military bases. It is here argued that the Philippines being an ally of the United States plays a decisive role in the explanation.

Nevertheless, were China able to build those military infrastructures, it would give China a strategic triangle *"for monitoring and policing activities across the South China Sea"* (Mollman, 2016). Figure 3bis serves to really illustrate the strategic significance China would gain if it succeeded in building those military bases in the Scarborough Shoal. The different rings are an estimate of the range of Chinese fighter jets of the region that was presented by lawmaker Dan Sullivan when he warned the Senate Armed Services Committee in April 2016. The overlapping rings easily cover most of the South China Sea.

Mollman (2016) even reminds of the threat China made by saying that it could also become an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) which could be established over the sea and would require foreign aircraft to notify Chinese authorities in advance of flights (see Figure 5). Though, if that situation was to happen, the paper argues that the most probable outcome is that the United States will keep flying fighter jets or aircrafts over the region. That would be a symbolic yet effective way of toning China's

ambitions and claims down while remaining under the war threshold that would trigger the conflict to a higher level.

3. HOW THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY PERCEIVES CHINA'S ACTIONS

Logically, China's claims of the region have received more than little criticism by the international community (Morris, 2021). There has been talks of "*stoking territorial disputes*" (*ibidem*), of a will to "*revise the status quo*" (Jervis, 1978), and a "*naked power grab by China*" (Fisher, 2016). China has of course demented these allegations by stating that the nine-dash line was but a "*long-lost historical claims that the country, after two centuries of weakness, is finally strong enough to recover*" (*ibidem*). This quote is quite revealing of Beijing's view of both itself and how they want to be perceived. Its rapid growth and rise into a major world power has pushed it to up its claims but it is also about the world seeing that they are now capable of claiming back what is theirs. The paper argues that there is a real reputation game to be put forth. The Cabbage strategy which was mentioned in an earlier section is a clear indication of China claiming more and more of the territories, and thus controlling them.

In a way, the South China Sea conflicts are about China's rise (Fisher, 2016). There is of course the underlying economic, territorial, resources elements that were mentioned but, the paper argues that things would be going a lot more smoothly had China slowed down its modernization of military capabilities or toned down the aggressivity — even more so since there have already been many "China-threat" narratives throughout the years. The hypotheses that are to be tested in the present paper are representative of China's situation. The paper comes to wonder whether Beijing is not divided between going on a full expansion no matter the repercussions and dealing with the international community's fears of seeing such a rising power having aggressive behaviors in protecting what is believed to be theirs.

4. CHINA'S GROWING PRESENCE IN ASSERTING THEIR CLAIM

Frécon (2021) illustrates well the situation of tension in which the international community finds itself. Frécon (2021) actually spoke of the fishermen avoiding getting close to China's — official — maritime borders for fear of getting apprehended. As

such, they end up fishing in Malaysian waters but are still arrested by Chinese coast-guard vessels which do not hesitate to shoot fishermen if need be. The Chinese military vessels are so impressive that fishermen fear for the damage they could cause to their boat. However, the Vietnamese government has geostrategic interests in regions such as the Spratlys or the Paracels and thus force fishermen to ride their boat in these areas in order to guarantee their state's sovereignty over the territory. The only problem is that if the fishermen boats get damaged by Chinese coastguards, they receive no help from their government.

The same fear is found in the Philippines (Frécon, 2021). In 2014, China built a military basis on the island of Karang Subi, making it so that Filipino fishermen were not able to go anymore. China's vessels are made of iron, big in size, and *"equipped with modern and powerful motors"*. This does not bode well for vessels of the area — apart from the United States' vessels whose presence in the region was said to be the only remaining element before China takes an even more aggressive stance (Ritonga, 2017). The fear goes so deep that, in February 2021, Vietnam repeated its claim to some of the Spratly Islands and stated that *"they continue to build up military resources to ensure it can strike Chinese facilities"*. (The Economic Times, 2021). Furthermore, countries like the United Kingdom, France, or Germany — which had chosen to stay silent or discrete on their stance over China's behavior in the region —, have decided to openly condemn China's aggression in the region.

In summary, all maritime activity — mainly fishermen and economic sector vessels — traveling the region in general are at a crossroad between economic and political problems. Chinese vessels are on such a high alert also due to the lack of fish in the area. The global attraction the region harbors has had a dire effect in the fish present in the area. As a result, China's vessels have raided the area (Frécon, 2021), making good findings less likely. That is because in Southeast Asia, fish and fishery products are a major source of protein. *"Fish and the fishing industry remain an important economic activity"* since most of the States bordering the South China Sea are developing countries in which *"the agricultural economic sector still accounts for a considerable part of their national economies"* (Nguyen, 2005, p. 12). As such, fisheries industry has a prominent role in *"securing sources of food and income"* (*ibidem*) for the states in the region.

On the other hand, another important player of the dispute is the United States. While they have no claim in the area, they see the South China Sea as their "*backyard*" (Fisher, 2016) and have sent fleets to defend it because they do not want China taking control over the area and are looking to defend their ally, the Philippines. This entails that States are in an arm wrestling with saving face from their various claims and trying to function in a globalized economy that puts both main maritime powers China and the United States at the center of any economic transaction. They are the main pillars in the economy so smaller states find themselves having to bandwagon with one of them at times while simultaneously having to work and trade with both. This sometimes creates economic repercussions — mostly from China — on those countries.

On a final side note, the author adds that neoclassical realists would probably argue that China's government is under a lot of pressure domestically to uphold their claims since there is a legitimacy and reputation to save. There has been so much tension between the state and its people that there is an expectation from the people that China would comply with its statements and would not quit under any circumstance. There is a power reputation of achieving its goals that has been quite popularized in China, and which also blocks the government to show leniency toward the international community's fears.

B. EVOLUTION OF CHINA'S MILITARY CAPABILITIES: FROM OBSOLETE TO SUPREME

While this Master thesis research question focuses on the years between 2014 and 2021, it was thought important to show the evolution of military capabilities and the reasons for such modernization of the PLA in order to understand the reasons of China's actions in Vietnam and the Philippines contested waters. The following will thus go from the 80s which is when China took notice of a need for modernization in its military. The evolution is mainly analyzed through some US documents because China's transparency on the matter — and this will make the object of a further point — can sometimes be limited (Tian & Su, 2021). US documents offer estimates based on what has been made public by China but also consider the numbers that may have been put on the side. Still, it is acknowledged that it constitutes a potential bias in the

accuracy of the numbers since the US may as well forge their estimates; it is a risk that is known and assumed.

China's military is divided into four categories: the PLAA (Army), the PLAN (Navy), the PLAAF (Air Force), and the SAF (Second Artillery Force). Because the scope of this thesis is to analyze the use of maritime militias, the focus will be on the PLAN. Despite that, on a side note, it is important to bear in mind that some investments made in the PLAAF have had some impacts on the situation in the South China Sea. They have indeed played a role in deterring some of the claimants to act in a more aggressive way.

1. FROM 1980 TO 2013: EVOLUTION OF SECURITY PERCEPTIONS

Modernization is a historical process characterized by necessity and universality. The Second World War helped Beijing take notice of the PLA's "*obsolescence*" (USCC, 2014, p. 282). As a result, in the 80s and 90s, China underwent a "*paradigmatic transition*" (Li, 2010, p. 336) that marked its first intentions of evolution towards modernity. Consequently, for the next fifteen years, China underwent a modernization that was incremental and gradual (USCC, 2014). This was the first sign of economic development being put at the forefront of China's strategic goals.

As USCC (2014) points out, the initial idea of modernization came with the prospect of conflicts with Taiwan. The 90s were the years when Taiwan was leaning towards democracy. As such, it gave the right incentive for China to start modernizing in case of conflict scenarios arising. Moreover, NATO and the US — strong supporter of Taiwan becoming independent — started developing their arsenal with "*long-range, precision strikes and network-centric warfare*" (p. 282) which in turn led Beijing to accelerate modernization in the late 90s. That moment marked the beginning of US-China naval rivalries.

As years went by, it became evident that China would be in need of resources which pushed them to develop an export-driven economy. Ultimately, the recognized strategic essence and necessity of the sea lanes in its periphery combined with the goals of nationalistic ambitions of the CCP created an arms race in military capabilities that would, as China hoped, ensure a control over the marine resources of the South and

East China Sea (USCC, 2014). Yet, in 2000, the Annual Report to the Congress assessed the PRC's armed forces to be a sizeable but mostly archaic military that would not fit the CCP's long-term ambitions (DoD, 2020): *"the PLA's ground, air, and naval forces were sizable but mostly obsolete. Its conventional missiles were generally of short range and modest accuracy."* (p. 4).

2004 marked the year where Beijing started deploying outside of its periphery. Consequently, as China's military grew and modernized, so did its penchant for expanding. Because of that, China created a requirement for the PLA to be able to project power outside of Asian waters (USCC, 2014). It also marked a turning point in China's foreign policy and will to change the "China-threat narrative" into a more friendly one. Therefore, they used the PLA's now modernized capability to take on missions of peacekeeping operations, counterterrorism, disaster relief, etc. Figure 3 shows a detailed analysis taken from USCC's report (2014) on China's military modernization and use of deployments for non-traditional missions. In any case, what is interesting is what happens in early 2014: *"a PLA Navy surface task group carried out a sophisticated training exercise spanning the South China Sea, eastern Indian Ocean, and Philippine Sea"* (p. 284).

In a way, this marked how ready China was and the following years were a testament to how powerful the Chinese navy's capability became. China adapted itself to the development caused by globalization. They seized their opportunity and, in June 2010, in a Declaration of the 10th Meeting of the Council of heads of State of the SCO Member States, China was writing:

"The world is undergoing major development, transformation and adjustment. A multipolar world is taking shape, countries are increasingly interdependent, and globalization is gaining momentum. All this has major implications for the development of the world economy and international relations."

As a result, China's military spending have never stopped growing. 2012 harbored the *"largest PLAN open-ocean exercise seen to date"* (DoD, 2014, p. 7 cited in Cordesman, 2014). It also bought its first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning* (Figure 6), after conducting the most publicized PLAN modernization. It later conducted its *"first launch and recovery of the carrier-capable J-15 fighter"* (*ibidem*). Then, in 2013, the

Liaoning relocated itself to the port in the North Sea Fleet to sustain integration training throughout the year. Though, in November, the aircraft-carrier deployed out to the South China Sea where it conducted local training near Hainan Island with surface ships (*ibidem*).

Figure 4 shows statistics of China's announced defense spending from 1989 until 2014. Their announced official projected defense budget increased from 720 billion RMB in 2013 to 808 billion renminbi in 2014, meaning a 12.2 percent increase. The shift happened in 2012 when President Xi Jinping came to power. In his declaration delivered at the National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping reminded the nation of the aspiration of the Chinese Dream, a vision to bring China back as a great power. Xi Jinping has pushed forth more than any predecessor the military reforms because he is looking to produce a *"world-class force that could dominate the Asia-Pacific and fight and win global wars by 2049"* (Jinping, 2017).

This section does not detail the different investments made in naval military capabilities simply because the time-period does not enter into consideration when looking strictly at the analysis at hand. The history from the 80s to 2013 was of an informational character on the evolutions of China's military capabilities. To sum up, in 2010, the Annual Report to Congress was writing that Chinese naval forces have *"the largest force [...] including 75 principal combatants, more than 60 submarines, 55 medium and large amphibious ships, and roughly 85 missile-equipped patrol craft"* (DoD, 2010, p. 2).

2. FROM 2014 TO 2019: THE CONFIDENCE IS RISING

i. GENERAL OVERVIEW

2014 marked the turning point in Chinese military intentions. *"We expect peace, but we shall never give up efforts to maintain our legitimate rights, nor shall we compromise our core interests, no matter when or in what circumstances"* said Xi Jinping during the NPC of the PRC (2014) in a plenary meeting of the People's Liberation Army delegation at the legislative session at the time. They were at that point able to fulfill that statement because China's PLAN has been growing at an incredible pace since the 80s (see Figure 7 for detailed statistics of the PLAN from

1985 to 2014). Therefore, it appears natural that China's approach to maritime security would have evolved as well.

Wars have become asymmetric in nature because new actors have appeared and rendered conflicts more complex. China is a good example of that since new platforms and weapons have emerged. Islands of the Scarborough Reef, Senkaku Islands, Spratly Islands, and the Paracels have seen civilian maritime agencies with the PLAN used as a back-up in case of escalation of conflict (DoD, 2014). This is way for China to mark its claim over the coveted islands and show their presence. It also comes directly in the strategy of hybrid warfare where non-military are used as a way to put pressure without ever crossing the war threshold. In help of those maritime militias, the China Maritime Surveillance and Fisheries Law Enforcement Command ships are also responsible for directly asserting Chinese sovereignty on a daily basis (*ibidem*).

The platforms and weapons systems built are anti-access in focus, which refers to the A2/AD mentioned in the first part. As a reminder, it is a strategy which goal is to prevent an adversary from occupying or traversing an area of sea, air, or land. The Chinese naval military has combined it with a cabbage strategy consisting in surrounding the targeted islands in such a way that no ship can berth them. China has been steadily growing its use with no thought of the repercussions. Those platforms have targeted a *"full spectrum of vulnerabilities inherent in CGSs and other power-projection platforms"* (DoD, 2014 cited in Cordesman, 2014, p. 223).

ii. MILITARY BASES BUILDING ON CONTESTED REEFS

What is however an important development in China's military modernization and quite a power-projecting element is the construction of military bases on islands claimed by several other states from the South China Sea. To recall, the South China Sea has several groups of islands each claimed by different states; yet China has claimed waters encompassed in the Nine-dash line. It appears, as shown in Figure 8, that from 2014 and 2016, China has managed to build military bases on several islands of the South China Sea.

As China's techniques of construction are similar, it is not necessary to detail each reef. The Fiery Cross Reef will be the one detailed. In short, it is a 1.5 square mile island and was initially underwater, as most of the reefs chosen by China. They

thus used enormous ships to bring sand from the ocean to the coast of the reef in order to bring the ground level over water (see Figure 9). The Fiery Cross Island ended up looking like a true naval base by the end of 2016 with an air strip, a radar and missile systems (see Figure 10). According to an analysis of the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative by the CSIS (2016), these artificial islands were created as significant point-defense capabilities *"in the form of large anti-aircraft guns and probable close-in weapons systems, at each of its outposts in the Spratly Islands"* (p. 1).

Not only that but China then proceeded to deploy the PLA navy ships around islands that they considered theirs, thus blocking the way for any other ship by using the cabbage strategy mentioned earlier (Figure 11). Some of the boats thus block access to commercial and shipments to the Philippines.

The fact that China is showing more aggressivity in defending their claims has not helped calm down the situation. As a matter of fact, as ships travel through the area, Chinese vessels do not hesitate to intercept them (BBC, 2014), sometimes resorting to violence and firing on fishermen (Austin, 2019; Bengali & Uyen, 2020). Because of such aggressiveness, the Philippines proceeded to seize the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) to determine the legality of China's claims.

iii. CHINA'S CLAIMS INVALIDATED BY THE HAGUE

The international community has been reacting for a while to China's actions in the South China Sea, yet none had taken action against them. The United States, while having no claim in the region, keep patrolling the area to reassure neighboring countries and assure stability (Ritonga, 2017). However, in 2016, the Philippines, supported by many of the countries involved in the dispute seized the PCA to rule over the legality of China's claims in the South China Sea, specifically the nine-dash line as China's historic territorial sea. The PCA did, in its Award, emphasized that *"it does not rule on any question of sovereignty over land territory and does not delimit any boundary between the Parties"* (PCA, 2016, p. 1). The award gave reason to the Philippines and confirmed that China's historical claims were illegitimate and unlawful.

The award pointed out several important issues on the matter. Pradhan (2020) points them in *Times of India*. He categorizes them into five points. First, the ruling completely dismisses the Nine-dash line claim using the United Nations Convention

on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as legal basis. Second, the award also clarifies the definition of the "islands" and it turns out that none of the Spratly islands are legally islands because in order to be considered as such, there would be a need to be able to *"sustain a stable community or independent economic life"* (p. 1). Not only that but before 2014, they were actually underwater reefs. Moreover, the PCA ruled and agreed that the Johnson, Cuarteron and Fiery Cross Reefs were rocks and not islands, meaning there have no entitlement to the extending of the territorial sea under UNCLOS. Third, the PCA emphasized on the Chinese 'land-reclamation activity' as causing severe harm to the coral reef environment and thus requested a cessation. Fourth, the Court did confirm that China had violated the Philippines' territory of the Scarborough Shoal when they seized it in 2012. And, finally, Pradhan spoke of the breach to the Philippines sovereign rights by exploiting its EEZ and exploring for oil and gas in the region (Pradhan, 2020).

This award had thus a huge impact on the legality of China's actions in the region. The international community, especially the United States, rejoiced in the ruling and expected the claims and growing security dilemma to de-escalate (Memo, 2016). Regardless of the award, China has never recognized the ruling as lawful since it had, in 2014, declared that the PCA had no jurisdiction on the matter (PCA, 2016). Furthermore, China has never recognized nor signed the UNCLOS which means that the borders and EEZ determined in the document hold no legal value to them as they are not bound by the Treaty. This explains why its activities have not stopped, arresting and chasing away fishing boats and jets flying above the region. Nevertheless, China did manage to search for more legal evidence over its claims since the ruling.

3. FROM 2019 UNTIL NOW: FOCUS ON EXPANDING IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

i. GENERAL OVERVIEW

China's regional military activities were mainly focused on two things in the year 2019: Taiwan and the South China Sea. Taiwan was the driving force for the PLA's training and reorganization that year as *"all of the Chinese navy's platforms [...] could be used to coerce [...] or invade Taiwan"* (Skylar Mastro, 2019, p. 2). In any case, what is more relevant to the scope of this paper remains the South China Sea. As mentioned, the ruling of the PCA in 2016 had little impact over the China's

behavior as it is still hoping to gain *de facto* control over the South China Sea. Not only is there an economic significance to the region but there is also a military advantage in the first island chain which would *"increase the likelihood that it could prevail contingencies over Taiwan and other claimants [...] in the South China Sea (ibidem).*

On the military side, as concisely explained by Oriana Skylar Mastro (2019) in her paper for the American Enterprise Institute, China is looking to weaken the United States presence and influence in the region. The A2/AD strategy used is making way and progressively denying foreign military vessels and aircrafts to the sea and airspace in the South China Sea. Furthermore, the military bases constructed on the reefs now can accommodate *"fighters, bombers, tankers, large transport, patrol airborne early warning, and aircraft refueling"* (AMTI, 2018 cited in Mastro, 2019, p. 2). It seems China has embraced and highlighted the *"greater global role"* it sees for itself (DoD, 2020, p. VI).

To concur, China's expansion on the island has now extended to Woody Island since Xi Jinping now has the intention of turning it into a national key strategic service and logistics base (GCR, 2019). To begin with the process of territorialization, China placed J-10 fighter on the island and extended the capability of its radar to reach the island (Lendon, 2019). On another side, China's unannounced drills in the area have increased and are now including missile defense systems, repelling vessels, and live-fire exercises (Zhen, 2019); all of which seeming to concur with the A2/AD strategy set out by Beijing. They seem to grow in number each year as, by May 2019, it had already surpassed the number conducted in 2018 (Mastro, 2019).

China renewed, in 2020, its strategy to advance military modernization to completion by 2035 and transform the PLA into a "world-class" military by the end of 2049 (Brown, 2021). Briefly, 2020 served to safeguard its sovereignty on the contested islands by applying the concept of active defense (DoD, 2020). Because of the perceived wins over their sovereignty claims, their policy is taking shape of a revisionist of the international order, thus concurring with the idea that their foreign policy of 'nation rejuvenation' is the way to go (*ibidem*).

With a defense budget set at 1.36 trillion yuan (almost 214 trillion USD, an increase of 6.8% since last year), there are no detail about specific priorities (Funairole, Hart, Glaser & Chan, 2021). Over the years, there has been speculation that China had little public transparency which would indicate that the reports usually do not include all activities (Tian & Su, 2021).

As a matter of fact, activities such as military research and development (R&D), paramilitary forces, military construction and arms imports have been said to have been left out (*ibidem*). In 2019, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) estimated that Chinese defense-related expenditure reached 240 billion USD (nearly 40% higher than the official budget) (Funaoile et al., 2021). As transparency is a growing concern among scholars (Tian & Su, 2021), the same reasoning could be applied to the official numbers of 2021.

"Many defense-related outlays fall directly under the Central Military Commission (CMC), China's highest military authority, chaired by Xi Jinping" (Funairole et al., 2021). Strategic advantage could be obtained from blurring the exact numbers. Unsurprisingly, and since their use has been ever-growing in recent years, paramilitary and coast guard budgets, which play a fundamental role in asserting China's revendications in the South China Sea have been excluded from the official budget (*ibidem*).

In the end, if there were any hesitation on how powerful China's navy has become, the Congressional Research Service's (2021) article "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities — Background and Issues for Congress" has removed them. Because of the surprising declaration of the United States concerning China's *"surpassing of the United States"*, it was decided to leave the quote intact:

"China's navy is, by far, the largest of any country in East Asia, and within the past few years it has surpassed the U.S. Navy in numbers of battle force ships (meaning the types of ships that count toward the quoted size of the U.S. Navy), making China's navy the numerically largest in the world. [...] The PLAN's overall battle force is expected to grow to 420 ships by 2025 and 460 ships by 2030" (p. 2).

iii. CONCLUSIONS ON CHINA'S MILITARY EVOLUTION

In summary, China's military has seen a lot of changes since the 80s. In a little over 40 years, China has managed to grow in all aspects of its military. Since the point of focus is the navy, it was seen that throughout the years, Beijing was able to steadily invest in better and more modern technology and equipment, raising it to the level of rivalry with the United States. So much so that they are now able to defend their claims not only from the sea but from military bases built from the ground up (literally) as well. The main objective that was growing back into the once powerful state it was is now well on the way to become reality; some would even say it has.

Plus, the power-projection intended has made an impact in the region as they now possess the largest navy in the world, surpassing the United States. Beijing is looking to defend their territorial claims no matter the cost. The ruling of 2016 has had no change on their revendication and their presence in the South China Sea is ever growing and has now traveled to Woody Island in Vietnam. They do not hesitate to use force in order to defend what they believe as theirs and the neighboring states have taken notice. On a final note, while transparency might not have been a priority for China, it is undeniable that their ever-growing defense budget *"has shifted military balance in the region in its favor"* (Funairole et al., 2021).

IV. MARITIME MILITIA PRESENCE IN CASE STUDIES

The present chapter composes the core of the analysis. It will analyze the case studies of the events in the Paracel Islands between Vietnam and China in 2014 and the events in the Spratly Islands between the Philippines and China in 2021. A historical and general context of Beijing's relations with both states will be addressed. Then comes the crossing between the theory and reality which will serve to conform or refute the formulated hypotheses. In addition, the comparative methodology chosen allows for a comparison of both cases to find potential similarities and differences in China's behavior towards the two. Finally, because the South China Sea is not a resolved issue, a section contains a prospect of what the future holds for the region and what could be done.

A. CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE EVENTS IN THE PARACEL ISLANDS BETWEEN VIETNAM AND CHINA IN MAY 2014

1. HISTORICAL AND GENERAL CONTEXT²

The main area of the dispute concerns the Paracel Islands, known as Xisha Islands in China and the Hoang Sa Archipelago in Vietnam. It is a group of approximately 130 coral islands and reefs in the Northern West area of the South China Sea (Oliver, 2019). The island chain is divided into two groups of islands, as Figure 14 shows, the Amphitrite Group and the Crescent Group. In total, the Paracel Island Chain is no more than 38,900 square kilometers.

When looking back at Figure 1, they are geographically equidistant from China and Vietnam. It was initially controlled by Japan who lost the First Chain of islands after the Second World War as part of the Potsdam Declarations. It thus rendered the Island Chain to the United States control because they took over Japan in 1945. Nevertheless, in 1948, China started calling for their return and claiming back the islands (CFR, 2020). Since China's rise to power and military modernization, the reefs

² Oliver (2019) gives a general and complete overview of the complete on which this section's structure will be based.

and islands have been claimed and ruled under their control following the building of military bases from 2014 (Oliver, 2019).

While the reefs and islands do amount to a certain area, the 2016 ruling of The Hague has put a hold on the legality of the claims by saying that the islands were not actually islands but rocks. As the UNCLOS proclaims and as a geostrategic interest, considering them as islands would give whoever was in control an additional 20 NM of Exclusive Economic Zone. Even the term EEZ contains the word economic which has been at the basis of the conflict for decades. It is indeed said that the conflict has been attributed to the oil and natural gas availability for extraction. Nevertheless, an analysis from EIA has dismantled such a claim in its analysis saying that:

"The Paracel island territory does not have significant discovered conventional oil and gas fields and thus has no proved or probable reserves. Geologic evidence suggests the area does not have significant potential in terms of conventional hydrocarbons" (EIA, 2013, p. 4).

It appears that the economic side of hydrocarbons in the conflict is here rendered less relevant. Even though there are other economic benefits to those islands, they are lesser than hydrocarbons ones. Yet China and Vietnam have both been claiming vehemently historical claims to the archipelago (Nguyen, 2017). A previous section spoke of a historical claim from China which was perceived as lacking legal basis. Yet Vietnam has been voicing a historical claim as well that they deem having *"ample historical and legal evidence to prove that past Vietnamese states had claimed sovereignty"* (*ibidem*, p. 245) that dates to a few hundred years.

Historically, the island chain was under the control of the Japanese forces (CFR, 2020). Following the Second World War, Japan was put under the control of the United States and made it so that they had to give up the First Island Chain. China, however, had other ideas and started claiming the Chain back in 1948. In 1951, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai declared that the PRC had sovereignty over both the Paracel and Spratly Islands groups (Oliver, 2019). Despite that, it was not until 1958 that they brought the sovereignty claim again by linking *"its claims to territorial sovereignty with the assertion of [...] rights to territorial waters"* (Fravel, 2011, p. 292). As Oliver (2019) stresses, China worked towards having a legal framework to

its claim even going to the point of adopting the UNCLOS it had up until then refused to sign.

Vietnam, while not as powerful as China, doubled its efforts to assume control over the territory to the point that, in 1974, China and the Vietnamese fleet were involved in the biggest armed naval battle concerning the Paracel Islands. The battle resulted in China defeating South Vietnamese forces and taking control of the archipelago since (Oliver, 2019). Nevertheless, Hanoi, even now, never abandoned its claims over the region and adopted in the 90s another approach by putting force cooperation with China and the international community in order to build a Code of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea that was signed in 2002. This Code gave birth to a non-binding resolution that set out rules of conduct over the region, the Article 5 of which reads as follows:

"The Parties undertake to exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes and affect peace and stability including, among others, refraining from action of inhabiting on the presently uninhabited islands, reefs, shoals, cays, and other features and to handle their differences in a constructive manner"
(MFA, 2013, p. 1).

A non-binding resolution to which China partook in negotiating, formulating, and signing (Oliver, 2019). This marks a clear step in the direction of de-escalation of the conflict. This dates back to the moment when China started projecting a collaborative image in an attempt to defuse the "China-threat" narrative. It was even seen by Hanoi as an olive branch and, over the year of 2002, China had invested in over 230 projects in Vietnam *"with its contractual value exceeding US\$ 0.37 billion. Its investment mainly covered machinery and electrical product-assembling, food-processing and real estate"* (Oliver, 2019 citing China Daily, 2006). In addition, the two capitals agreed to regular *"joint patrols, a joint fisheries survey, and joint hydrocarbon exploration"* (Oliver, 2019 citing Green et al., 2018).

The cooperation and resembling period of "détente" of the Cold War was unfortunately short-lived as, in 2007, Hanoi deployed a contingent of vessels as an attempt to eject Chinese survey vessels from the Paracels as they had deemed such an operation to be uncalled for. That being said, China responded in keen by directing

two CMS vessels to Vietnamese survey ships that resulted in several collisions (Martinson, 2015).

Fortunately, no crew was harmed but it brought the conflict back to a point of tension that has been succinctly going from tension to "détente" over the past decade. As neither of the two countries have stood down from their claims, the incident of 2007 makes but an illustration of steadily occurring operations of control in the South China Sea.

2. EVENT TIMELINE

The 2007 incident bears the same logic the events from May to July 2014. The PCR funds at least five agencies who have the responsibility of enforcing the law along the coast and disputed waters claimed by China (Martinson, 2015). While they are of no importance for this matter, one of the fleets — which happens to be the same fleet used in 2007 — is called the "*Weiquan fleet*". They have missions that go a little further in ocean waters than other fleets and serve to 'weiquan zhifa', which literally means using law enforcement to safeguard Chinese rights and interests against foreign encroachment (*ibidem*).

On May 1st, 2014, Vietnamese authorities discovered that three vessels and HYSY-981 (an oil rig) were operating in their EEZ even though Vietnam had urged China not to perform any oil or gas drills in the area. Vietnamese foreign ministry spokesman Le Hai Binh demanded that "*China drop its drilling plans and move it out of the area*" (Khanh, 2016).

On May 4th, as Vietnam had sent ships to guard its territory and try removing China's oil rig, Chinese vessels rammed into two Vietnamese ships and hit another six. "*Chinese ships, with air support, sought to intimidate Vietnamese vessels. Water cannon was used*" (CNBC, 2014). This triggered a "*show of force*" from Vietnam who, on May 6th, sent out almost 30 naval and coast guard ships (Oliver 2019 citing Brummit, 2014).

While the international community and surrounding states worried about a potential over-escalation of the conflict with the United States urging states to conduct themselves safely and appropriately, Vietnam confirmed having no issue with taking this to the next level. They even affirmed they were ready to resist China's

aggressiveness and what Hanoi had perceived as a clear trespassing of their territory (CNBC, 2014).

From their point of view, this was but another attempt from China to one up the area and forcefully claim explore territories in search of resources. However, Beijing claimed that the conducted operations were nothing out of the ordinary since Vietnam had attempted exploratory operations as well. The only difference was that the Vietnamese fleet is nowhere near as impressive and well-armed as China's Weiquan fleet.

As the international community manifested itself, Vietnamese citizens started protesting and, for about a week, over 20,000 citizens walked the streets as a peaceful protest (Taylor, 2014). Notwithstanding, this did nothing to deter China who continued reinforcing the oil rig defense and sent out additional vessels and aircrafts to support the expanded cordon area (Oliver, 2019). Over the course of May, various diplomatic exchanges happened to discuss the events and try to defuse the growing bomb from exploding.

For the following months, things kept escalating with China ramming into a Vietnamese fishing boat and sinking it on May 26th with the whole thing getting caught on camera (Panda, 2014). June went on in a similar way, over a hundred Chinese vessels were stationed in the region to defend the oil rig, all the while said oil rig kept on drilling into Vietnam's EEZ (Oliver, 2019 citing an Embassy of the PRC in Vietnam statement, 2014). Diplomatic resources were used, and it seemed that the high-ranking meeting between the Vietnamese and the PRC's Prime Ministers was effective because on July 15th, the HYSY-981 was redeployed in other waters, a month ahead of schedule (Denyer, 2014).

The events not only served for China to reclaim the region and reaffirm their revendications but, once the oil rig was deployed elsewhere, China reasserted the fact that *"countries outside the region strictly maintain neutrality, clearly distinguish right from wrong, and substantially respect the concerted efforts of the countries in the region to safeguard regional peace and stability"* (ibidem). Thus, a gentle reminder of how welcome the United States' presence in the region is felt by Beijing.

B. CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE EVENTS IN WHITSUN REEF BETWEEN CHINA AND THE PHILIPPINES IN MARCH 2021

1. HISTORICAL AND GENERAL CONTEXT

Geostrategically speaking, the Philippines have found themselves in the middle of China and the US for years because they are composed of 7641 islands which makes them the fifth-longest coastline with most of its provinces bordering the sea (IISS, 2021). Its coastline stretches as far as Itu Aba, the largest natural land feature of the archipelago and occupied by Taiwan; another geostrategic point between the US and China (Jennings, 2021). To top it all off, as explained by ICG (2021):

"It also stands between a segment of China's coast and access to the Pacific Ocean, thereby constituting a crucial part of what is often referred to as the "first island chain" that delimits China's near sea."

Though, Filipinos have been fighting back in more ways than one since the 1960s. As a matter of fact, during his whole presidency, Ferdinand Marcos made sure to send military waves that would ensure a presence on the Spratly Islands and show the intent that Manila had on the islands (ICG, 2021). In 1978, as a result of the incorporation of an island group to the Philippines' EEZ, nine of the Spratlys were officially under Manila's control. While the 80s were rather quiet between the Philippines and China since the latter was preoccupied with Vietnam, the 90s were eventful.

As Filipinos thought of their neighbor as harmless and posing no threat to the Philippines interests, in 1995, they woke up to Chinese flags standing proudly on Mischief Reef, one of the islands of the Spratly group coupled with a few Chinese ships (The Hindu, 2016). That event not only turned Manila's head towards Beijing but caught the eyes of Washington as well, as they are bound by 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty to the Philippines. However, despite the Treaty, the United States remained rather neutral in Manila's quarrel and refrained from publicly giving support. Evidently, the incident shook up the foundations of Manila-Washington relations to the point where Manila questioned the utility of the strategic alliance with the US (*ibidem*).

In August 1995, China and the Philippines signed off on a Code of Conduct in the hopes of alleviating tensions. The goal nevertheless failed when China kept its aggressive naval presence in the area and, in 1997, tensions went through the roof when fishermen from both countries were spotted squabbling in the area (The Hindu, 2016). This launched Manila to seek a closer partnership with Vietnam and triggered a military modernization for them (ICG, 2021).

Since and all the way until 2010, tensions have been going back and forth between the two countries. As such, the Philippines have been monitoring closely the Chinese ships and movement, especially when it comes to the Spratly Islands (see Figure 16) and the maritime space around them. With maritime space surrounding the area, Filipinos are primarily speaking of the Scarborough Shoal, a *small ring of rocks and reefs more than 200km west of Luzon*" (*ibidem*, p.1) which was in 2012, the object of a big dynamic change in Filipinos' behavior.

In 2012, while the need to expel Chinese fishermen from the Scarborough Shoal was frequent, Manila dispatched its largest naval frigate when Chinese fishing boats illegally came in the area. As armed sailors were checking the Chinese ships, its crew sent out a distress signal which brought two unarmed patrolling vessels nearby and settled there. The standoff lasted for two days while diplomats tried finding a solution to a rapidly growing tension (Jamandre, 2012).

On April 12th, it was agreed that Manila would demilitarize by bringing in simple coast guard, but China added another ship instead of reciprocating. Diplomats seemed to come to an agreement when, on the next day, one of three Chinese ships left the area and brought the total amount of ships to one apiece (Inquirer, 2012). China asked for a total withdrawal initiated by Manila, but they refused and threatened to bring the incident on an international level by including ASEAN and to pursue third-party arbitration (ABS-CBN, 2012). In turn, China refused any internationalization attempts and accused Manila of breaching their agreement to resolve this bilaterally (ICG, 2021).

It went on for a few weeks, ships stayed put but diplomatically, threats were made: the Philippines did go to the United States asking for support which they received in a limited way as Washington appeared frustrated with Manila's management of the crisis. By May 2012, the Philippines were starting to see some

shipments rejected in Chinese ports (GMA, 2012). This was evidently perceived by Manila as economic coercion (though they never did accuse them officially) while China simply stated that the shipments failed their quality control tests (ICG, 2021).

All the while, China kept sending vessels to the area, as did the Philippines. Between May and July, countless of official meetings happened between the two states and, on June 15th, the Philippines ships withdrew, although some of their reasons seem unclear. Still, Chinese ships did not leave the area and have thus since then taken over control of the Scarborough Shoal. This event highlighted and proved the rapidly eroding stability in the South China Sea and sent an alarm to neighboring states of the area.

This incident left a bitter taste in Manila's mouth which resulted in them launching procedures to seize the PCA in order to challenge China's claims over the South China Sea and prove them legally illegitimate. This event is important to Manila too because it shows how the Philippines are fighting back against China. They felt rather humiliated by China after the Scarborough incident and the PCA's ruling gave them an edge on the situation. Unfortunately, China did not accept the ruling as such and has refused to back down from the area since.

It could have been the beginning of China letting go of their claim, but Duterte entered office in 2016 and proceeded to diverge completely from the previous presidency, starting nurturing friendly relations with China. In turn, it resulted in Manila not standing up to China's aggressive behavior and upholding of the UNCLOS, to which China has been party to since 1994 (CNBC, 2021). Three years into office, Duterte even let go of a Chinese vessel ramming into a Filipino fishing boat and sinking it, downplaying it as a *"little maritime incident"* to avoid losing the economic interests that China had invested in the country since the beginning of his presidency (Heydarian, 2021).

2. EVENT TIMELINE

The Whitsun Reef is one of the islands of the Spratlys and measures less than 11 square kilometers. It is 175 nautical miles west Palawan Island in the Philippines and 638 nautical miles from China's Hainan Island (BenarNews, 2021). The incident that will be analyzed here is the biggest incident since the Scarborough Shoal

On March 7th, 2021, the Philippines noticed the presence of some 200 Chinese vessels, including maritime militias, just lying side by side (see Figure 17). Remembering the events of 2012, the Philippines started diplomatic meetings with the United States and China and expressed their grave concern, asking China to *"stop this incursion and immediately recall these boats"* (DND, 2021). A request to which the Chinese embassy in the Philippines responded by stating that the *"fishing vessels take shelter near [...] due to rough sea conditions"*, adding that it has been *"a normal practice. [...] Any speculation in such helps nothing but causes unnecessary irritation"* (MFA, 2021). The statement finished by China hoping the situation could be handled in a rational and objective manner.

The Philippines however did not let up and claimed that such a huge number of vessels would cause *"a concern due to the possible overfishing and destruction of the maritime environment, as well as risks to safety of navigation"* (CNBC, 2021). Later on, the Department of National Defense (DND) of the Philippines stated being *"appalled"* by the *"utter disregard"* of the UNCLOS (DND, 2021). It took advantage of the opportunity to remind China of the PCA ruling denying China's nine-dash line claim and thus confirming that they had no right in being in the Whitsun Reef.

It pursued their statement by saying that the continued presence of Chinese maritime militias disregarded China's alleged search for shelter and revealed *"their intent to further occupy features in the West Philippine Sea"* (DND, 2021), especially since the weather had been good so far. The difficulty of the situation is that the PCA ruling of 2016 specifies that the Philippines has no right to *"deny Chinese fishermen access"* since this is a contested and disputed area (CNBC, 2021). As such, apart from a pure confrontation, there is not much the Philippines can do to defend the area.

On April 5th, Lorenzana pledged to file further diplomatic protests if China did not meet with the request of withdrawing their ships from Whitsun Reef (Venzon, 2021). China evidently contested further by saying that this was in no way a permanent presence in the region, that they were just fishing and to stop *"hyping up"* the event (Wong, 2021). Foreign Secretary Locsin rejected the request and repeated its demand for China to leave the Whitsun Reef, especially since *"nobody fishes by lashing ships together"* (ABS-CBN News, 2021).

Despite the official lashing of one another, bilateral talks were continued and resulted in the inclusion of the United States in the talks as well as expelling a Chinese diplomat (ABS-CBN News, 2021). As the Philippines filed yet another protest, the international community has started taking stands with Vietnam — loud protester of China's claims in the South China Sea — and released a statement saying they were monitoring the events of Whitsun Reef (Anh, 2021). It certainly did not help that China has threatened to stop the donation to the Philippines of COVID-19 vaccines as Manila faces an *"alarming spike in coronavirus infections"* (CNBC, 2021).

By mid-April, only nine Chinese vessels remained in Whitsun Reef, but a few hundred other Chinese vessels were spotted in other maritime features of the Spratly islands, mainly the Thomas Shoal (See, 2021). Rodrigo Duterte began losing his patience as he threatened to sink Chinese vessels occupying his EEZ (CNBC, 2021). China in turn requested that the Philippines remove the BRP Sierra Madre from the shoal, but the Philippines continued to refuse (Gomez, 2021).

Tensions seemed to calm down by mid-May as only nine Chinese vessels remained in the maritime space surrounding the Whitsun Reef. By June, an increase was seen again and a total of 236 ships were spotted in that same region (Viray, 2021). The situation has been pretty much the same since then with China withdrawing vessels to put others elsewhere in the Spratly, the Philippines filing diplomatic protests, and the Chinese presence ever growing. By mid-October, AMTI (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative) has reported more and more maritime militia boats simply lying side by side and showing no evidence of fishing (BernaNews, 2021).

Unsurprisingly, the growing tensions and continuing presence of China's vessels have led China to take more actions to assert their sovereignty. As of November, two Filipino ships with food supplies were blasted with water cannons by Chinese coast guard vessels (Gomez, 2021). No injured have been reported, but it was perceived as a true aggressive stance as Manila struggles against a surge of typhoon lately.

Locsin deplores such events and conveyed their *"outrage, condemnation and protest of the incident"* (*ibidem*), and regrets the fact that it is such actions that could threaten the relations Duterte and Jinping have been nurturing since the beginning of Duterte's presidency. Despite it all, Manila has been keeping friendly relations with

Beijing in fear of the many repercussions it could have. Up until now, this was the latest flare-up in tensions in the South China Sea as the Philippines battle against particularly violent typhoon Rai which damaged many infrastructures and outposts of both Manila and Hanoi (RFA, 2021).

C. CONFRONTING REALITY WITH THEORY: CORRELATING THE FINDINGS WITH THE HYPOTHESES

1. NEOREALISM AND CHINA'S MILITARY EVOLUTION

Mearsheimer (2001) claimed that great powers would have the most leverage in the international world and would thus fight for their national interests. China's military modernization since the beginning of the 2000s is a clear indication of this. Moreover, they have been modernizing in a way to project power and prevent any other state from being able to counter their actions. The South China Sea has been claimed for decades as the main interest to China and they do not give any sign of a potential back down. In addition, protecting their national interests meant projecting power in a way that they cannot face rivals matching their power capability. Once more, it is in perfect accordance with Waltz's (1979) principle of states acting in survival mode and how it will be reflected on how they behave towards one another.

Secondly, unlike realism which focuses solely on the international system, neorealists take into account the power distribution variable. Thus far, before China's decision to modernize and claim historical grounds, there was no indication of them over becoming the great power that it was. Their military was "*obsolete*" (DoD, 2020) and could in no way fight back against the United States which, at the time of the Second World War and ever since, usually came out victorious. The distribution of power was thus in favor of the West. It also did not help that the United States' focus was turned back to Asia, a pivot against which China has been rather loud on how disapproving they were. Nevertheless, China's military modernization has been allowing for a change in the distribution of power, especially in terms of naval military capabilities.

Lastly, the unique asset of the maritime militias is also in accordance with neorealists' search for more complexity than realists. Initially, maritime militias had no military aspect to them. That being said, they did broaden the spectrum of state

being the main actors in international relations; giving it a modernity that is characterized in hybrid warfare.

2. NEOREALISM AND CHINA'S ACTIONS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

China's presence in the South China Sea is surely a sign of its steady advancement in the area. As mentioned in the first analysis on China's evolution of military capabilities in relations with neorealism, it was concluded that the military modernization was a way for China to project power in a world where power distribution will be determinant in who the players are. Only the biggest powers will indeed be able to have an impact on the global structure. While China's goal has been revendicated for many years, they were only able to make face with the United States' power in recent years. Because of that, their initial goal of impressing and projecting such a force that adversaries would have no choice but to back down has so far been working in their favor.

Secondly, the anarchic stature of the world is also quite present in the way China behaves. It was seen with the 2012 Scarborough Shoal and 2014 Oil rig events where they received many warnings and diplomatic protests from the international community, then came the PCA ruling which they did not recognize, now the Whitsun Reef incident. It appears clear that because of the anarchic system, the current global order is not recognized by China. The United States, while the only ones able to make a difference in China's behavior, have no other ammunition than condemning publicly China's actions because China has now grown into a major economic power and the United States need them for trading as well.

Thirdly, Mearsheimer (2001) and Waltz's (1979) views of having leverage in order to fight for their national interests and survive is clearly represented in China's behavior. Because the anarchic system is as such, there is no incentive that could push China to slow its descent in the South China Sea. Furthermore, it appears that China's power-projection has slowly been shifting the power balance in the region. Moreover, it also created a shift in the status quo and has been creating a security dilemma.

Fourthly, all of the elements above are in consistency with the distribution of power noted by Waltz (1979). He details that the unequal distribution of material

capacity influences directly the states' way to defend themselves and, *in fine*, influences their behavior on the international stage. China has clearly been more comfortable with its role as a global power and both case studies are concluded with a victory of China. This solidifies their belief that they are truly above in terms of capabilities as well as the law and Treaties.

As Waltz's says, it is a matter of protecting one's national interests and projecting power. Hybrid warfare adds a layer of complexity by using instruments that are not states. The fact that maritime militias are harder to identify and usually civilians leave a gap in how to react. Because of that, in the events of the Whitsun Reef, it has been claimed detrimental to the Philippines. Still, Filipino and Vietnamese ships both found themselves facing damage to their ships. This is a clear indication of how far China is willing to go to ensure the protection of their national interests.

Another element that can be put forth is that, concerning the Filipino Reef, China used a different approach from Vietnam. The first thing that can be noted on the events of the Oil rig in 2013 is its violence. As detailed in a previous section, China has been modernizing its military for a few years and 2014 was the year where they were trying to emphasize and make a reality out of their claim on the South China Sea by building military bases in the Spratlys and Paracels. It has been growing more comfortable in shaping its foreign policy around its People's Liberation Army, especially their Navy. This would be a first element in explaining why they did not hesitate, even though Vietnam was issuing no signs of going in a direct confrontation, to sink several Vietnamese ships.

Nevertheless, the Whitsun Reef harbored significantly less violence since the ships were only stationed in the area with no intention of fishing. Three elements could be put forth: the first is that the Philippines have an alliance with the United States which would theoretically mean that the stronger the damage caused to them, the bigger the risk that Washington gets involved, which is a concern for Beijing. Secondly, the fact that the United States have failed to intervene during the events of the Whitsun Reef as well as the 2012 Scarborough Shoal may have an impact in the long term on how far China may take things concerning the Spratly islands and Filipino claimed reefs. The non-action gives China free reign, or at least looser reign, on their behavior in the South China Sea. Thirdly, China's calmer approach to the

Whitsun Reef may be in relation to Xi Jinping trying to make China more "*credible, loveable and respectable*" (BBC, 2021). They are trying to save their reputation internationally and the less victims or violence, the better.

However, the use of maritime militias shows a contradictory intent that corroborates with China's narrative in general. Maritime militias are thus used as a quasi-peaceful means to stay below the war threshold. Nevertheless, the weaponization of said ships renders the use of the civilian term useless and tend to hide the potential dangerousity of the militias. For example, it was the case when water cannons were used in the Whitsun Reef's events. Beijing tends to play a double-face game as a pattern of reassuring states while planning an aggressive action. That was the case with maritime militias, but it also happened with the Filipino shipments or how the Chinese ships were sheltering themselves from the rain in the Whitsun Reef. While there are no proof of such a duplicity, there have been talks of economic coercion in several foreign policy moves from China.

In summary, it was proven that choosing the neorealist theory as a guide for this analysis was the right choice as the situation generally fits the approach. The anarchic level of the system has indeed had consequences on the way China behaves in the region. The will for dominance has pushed them to modernize their military capabilities not only as a way to project power but as a means to survive and change the current power balance of the region. This unequal distribution of power is a way for China to impose their supremacy. Furthermore, the hybrid warfare implements the use of maritime militias to broaden actors and confuse their adversaries in the way they should be reacting towards citizens. It also proves that protecting national interests is of paramount importance.

3. FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The goal is to answer the following question: *why are China's maritime militias as part of the ongoing hybrid warfare used in the conflicts with Vietnam in 2014 and the Philippines in 2021 in the South China Sea?* In order to do that, hypotheses were formulated and were tested through the two study cases that were just detailed. This part will now entail their confirmation or refutation.

The first hypothesis formulated adopted a defensive realism perspective and was formulated as follows: maritime militias are used as part of China's strategy of a hybrid warfare which means they want to pursue their goals and project power while trying to leave unaltered the current status quo and balance of power. Because of that, maritime militias are used as an instrument of de-escalation of conflict.

The events concerning the oil rig in 2014 shows zero effort in trying to de-escalate the conflict. China knowingly disrupted Vietnamese maritime activities in their EEZ. In addition, the sinking of six Vietnamese ships delivers no clear sign of a peaceful conflict resolution intent. Their idea was to display their power in order to, firstly, impress the adversary and show the power balance and power distribution in their favor. It also served to alter the current status quo by pushing the Vietnamese to resort to force and try to modernize their navy throughout the years.

Secondly, concerning the events on the Whitsun Reef, there was a clear power display since China deployed over 200 ships in the region. There is a will to show force and remind neighboring states of the new power distribution in the region. Even so, China displayed much less aggressivity, part from the sinking of that one ship that ended up being labelled as a little maritime incident by Manila. The deployment of those ships has had no impact, other than the environmental one deplored by Manila. There is an obvious disrespect for official borders and legal rulings as well as an economic coercion which serves to further disrupt the region's stability.

Lastly, in both cases, China is using bilateral talks to resolve their dispute because they are stronger on a one on one than they are facing ASEAN or the United States for example. This has served them in the past and is instrumental to them getting their way with their actions. As such, while those bilateral talks could be seen as a way to de-escalate the conflicts, it is mainly a way to show the international community that they are willing to talk over issues while still maintaining a control and upper hand during the negotiations.

In light of the elements put forward, it appears that the second hypothesis fits the situations better. Though China sends official messages of peacefulness, diplomatic talks, and tactfulness which could follow a defensive realist view, in reality, they are more offensive in their actions. As a reminder, the second one was more of an offensive realist perspective and reads as follows: maritime militias are used as part

of China's strategy to pursue their goal no matter the consequence and thus changing the status quo and power balance of the region. Maritime militias are used as a full militarized body and instrument to take over the entire South China Sea.

It can now be concluded that, while there is an evident form of violence in both cases, Vietnam has suffered more damage from China's aggressiveness than the Philippines did. Officially, China wants to display a state of tolerance, cooperation, and friendliness but the aggressiveness of their actions tones their discourse down and leaves room for distrust from other neighboring states. In addition, the power displayed by China's navy sends a clear message of Beijing's willingness to defend their national interests. In both cases, China showed a will to calm the situation down by accepting bilateral meetings and claiming that the conflicts should be solved in a peaceful manner (Reuters, 2015).

Despite that, this element alone does not erase the aggressiveness with which Beijing conducts its foreign policy. China is disrespecting not only the UNCLOS but a ruling of the PCA as well stating that they have no right to sail across other states' EEZ and pursue economic activities without agreements. In addition, China is using its military not only to impress but to show a clear intent of taking over the region to which it deploys them to. On the other hand, the PLAN's modernization, apart from the power display, was also used to scare off, sink, or hit other ships in order to scare them away from the coveted regions. Lastly, it does not erase the fact that China has been covertly using economic coercion to force neighboring states to bend to their will.

In conclusion, the defensive realist hypothesis can now be infirmed while the offensive one can be confirmed. Although, it needs to be nuanced in the level of offensiveness with which China conducts itself with the Philippines and Vietnam.

D. COMPARING THE TWO CASES

While the offensive realist theory has been highlighted as the most fitting to the current situation of the South China Sea, there are several that are differences in China's reaction in both cases, there are similarities in the way China has been behaving towards both countries as well as their situation in general in relations to China.

The first noticeable element is the dates of the case studies. They are separated by seven years and have a lot of bad history in terms of relations with China. They are both aware of what China is capable of not only through the two case studies of this analysis but through the events of 2007 in Vietnam and 2012 in the Philippines. On the other hand, there is an evident evolution between 2014 and 2021, not only in terms of maritime militias but also in terms of coordination. The capability in Vietnam in 2014 was already impressive with the coordination of a hundred of vessels and maritime militias, but the Philippines beared double this number and in entailed the occupation of several waters at the same time. In both cases, China is highly coordinated, despite the higher number in vessels.

Thirdly, even though China did some damage to the adversary's fleet both in Vietnam and the Philippines, they did use maritime militias as a calculated move of crisis management. The idea is to stay below the war threshold, as is one of hybrid warfare's characteristic. Then, the PAFMM is also used as a means to avoid the inclusion of other states. It is indeed easier to deal with the conflict as a bilateral issue than to include other states or international institutions. Lastly, in both events, the fact that the PAFMM are civilian units and thus harder to perceive shows not only a lack of information from the counterclaimants' parts but also shows a gap in proper reaction. They are not facing military but civilian units which bears a fair difference in the way they may react.

All in all, China has a certain pattern in the way they behave. Mostly, the focus is put in keeping a bilaterality in all conflicts in order to keep an upper hand in the negotiations. In addition, their coordination in deploying vessels fast and in large quantity is a definite move to overwhelm the adversary. Furthermore, maritime militias are used as a means to confuse the other as to who they are facing military wise, and as a way to stay below the threshold and rendering useless the inclusion of others.

E. WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR THE SOUTH CHINA SEA ?

Thus far, China is winning because other states parties to the conflict are unwilling to get wet and climb up the escalation risk ladder. In this case, it is the United States' job since they are militarily the only ones capable of facing the Chinese fleet. Even then, it was said by the US themselves that China now surpasses them in terms of equipment and numbers. The United States must therefore, according to Mastro

(2019), renew their commitment to the South China Sea by starting to reenact their alliance to the Philippines. They hold the key to keeping the vital interest of freedom of navigation in the area. The change in presidency happening in May 2022 however might help in rearranging the Filipino stance over China since it was already hinted that Duterte's laxity would be rectified (CNBC, 2021).

In addition, similarly to CTF-150 which is a Combined Task Force (CTF) based in Bahrain and in concordance with Oliver's (2019) idea, it would be high time that a similar Force was created in Asia-Pacific. China has the advantage on numbers and on being able to intimidate its adversary. Having a CTF patrolling, applying the UNCLOS, and maintaining freedom of navigations operations would maybe keep China at bay. As Vietnam and the Philippines have both been stepping up on modernizing their military, combining that to the United States rivaling modernity to China would give them an undeniable edge.

That being said, their escalation-risk threshold must be set higher. China has no intention of engaging in a war with the United States as they see it as not worth the cost. Regardless, they play with that threshold because they know that, currently, Vietnamese and Filipino fleets alone are no match to them, and they are well aware of it. Thus, showing that direct confrontation is no issue would maybe make China backtrack on using force, especially if facing a Combined Task Force of the Asia-Pacific. Finally, it is becoming increasingly evident that South China Sea states must prepare for military confrontation since no legal judgments, international protest, or open condemning of China's actions seem to disrupt China's line of thought.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The situation of the South China Sea has long been the center of attention because of its economic assets but mainly because of the territorial disputes surrounding the area. The goal of this paper was to discover why China was using maritime militias as part of the ongoing hybrid warfare in the region of the South China Sea by analyzing the events of 2014 in the Vietnamese Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and the events of the Whitsun Reef in 2021. Two hypotheses were established that both followed a sub-branch of neorealism: a defensive realist one and an offensive realist one.

While the research permitted a better understanding of China's strategy to use the maritime militias, there remains evidently some limits to the issue. Firstly, the fact that there were no interviews conducted means that there is no "inside" information that could help bring a more transparent or non-political aspect to China's strategy. On a similar issue, using the United States data for military evolution could pose a bias in the objectivity. Thirdly, in a lesser way, the documents used for this paper were mainly in English which excludes most Chinese or Asian interesting and pertinent papers. Lastly, and it is linked to the following paragraph, using two different dates of case studies as well as two different states makes it harder to perceive an evolution in reactions.

To answer the question, the paper chose two case studies to confirm the hypotheses. The events of 2014 in the Paracel Islands showed China taking a very aggressive stance towards the protection of their claim. They did not hesitate to use maritime militias and other military vessels to sink several Vietnamese ships. On the other hand, the events of 2021 in the Spratly Islands show a smoother stance. Even though China has been calling for a peaceful resolving of the conflicts, they are the first ones to initiate a violation of the neighboring states' EEZ. Their assertiveness and aggressiveness have led to a security dilemma due to the change in power distribution which they actually ignited. Because of that, it was concluded that although their discourse shows a more quiet, cooperative, and reassuring voice, the aggressiveness of their actions led to the confirmation of the second hypothesis pertaining to an offensive realist branch.

Neorealism was confirmed to be the right theory for the analysis at hand because of the focus on the distribution of power and its consequences on power projection of states. The anarchic character of the international system was also confirmed to have an impact on States' behavior. Furthermore, having leverage as a state is the only way to change things around since the unequal material capabilities will inevitably give an advantage to the bigger powers. Finally, there is a big emphasis both on protecting your national interests as well as the use of other actors than states. Thus, China using maritime militias in order to defend what they perceive as their territory and combining it with a military modernization that changes power distribution in the region to the point that no other state is able to have leverage over them whether in terms of legal evidence or material capability, is a clear confirmation that neorealism fits the South China Sea situation.

In terms of prospective and for a better understanding of why China has resulted in using maritime militias in the South China Sea, and more specifically why the area is of such importance, there are internal factors to take into account. Applying neoclassical realism could add value to the analysis and give it a more thorough and global understanding. In addition, as China's military has evolved and presidencies have changed, it could be interesting to perceive an evolution both in terms of military capabilities and instrumentalization as well as foreign policy analyses and evolution. Finally, analyzing if the United States can be linked to such a change in behavior from China's part depending on whether they are dealing with Vietnam or the Philippines would be interesting and could prove whether the United States' presence in the region is indeed vital to the freedom of navigation and the maintenance of UNCLOS maritime borders.

In conclusion, and to answer concretely the research question, if China's goal is to take over the entirety of the South China Sea, then maritime militias are well on the way to help them reach that goal. They are a unique asset and instrument with which they can manage escalation of conflicts, keeping it under the threshold while steadily moving and advancing in the South China Sea. While they do frustrate and create diplomatic protests from neighboring states, they have yet to really bear international consequences that would disturb China's advancement; and that is what China is counting on.

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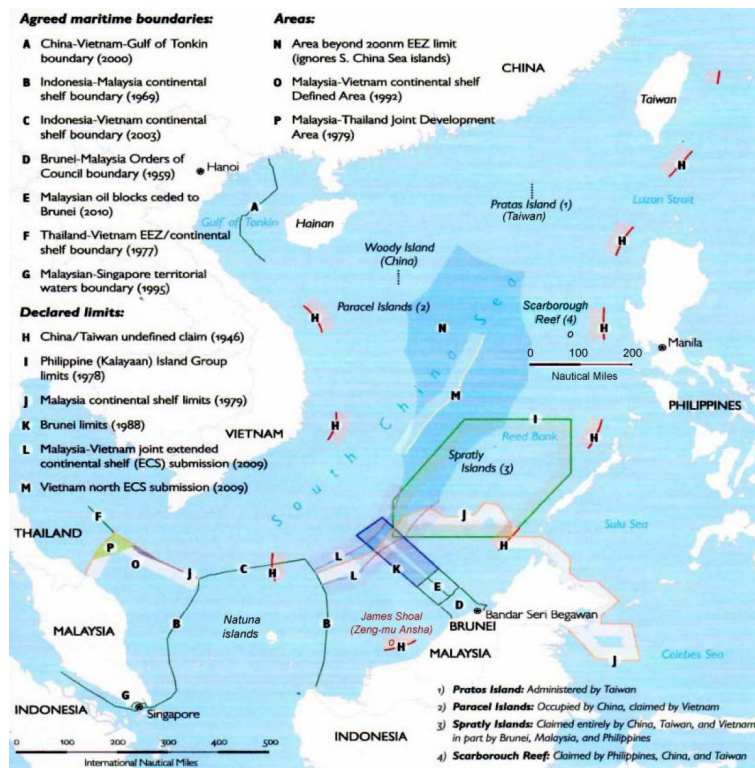
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<https://www.businessinsider.com/china-drills-in-the-south-china-sea-to-test-wartime-command-system-2019-2?IR=T>

VII. FIGURES

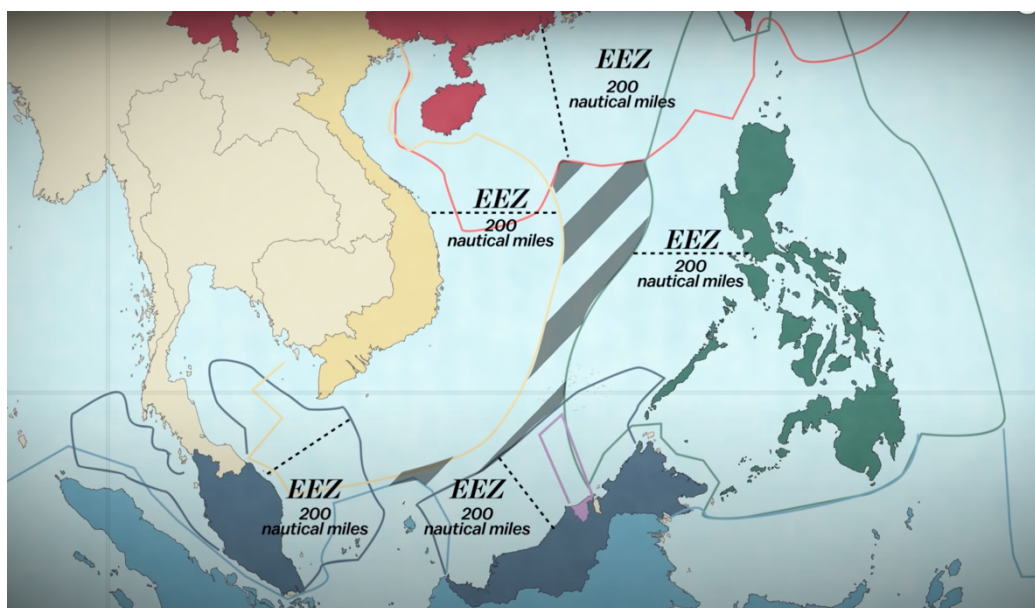
A. FIGURE 1



Map from the US Department of Defense detailing the issues of the South China Sea

Source: found in Khalid Zaka's article; from <https://www.straight.com/news/khalid-zaka-a-summary-of-south-china-sea-conflict>

B. FIGURE 2



Official delimitation of the UNCLOS on maritime borders

Source: Vox (2017). Pourquoi la Chine a-t-elle construit des îles en Mer de Chine Orientale? From

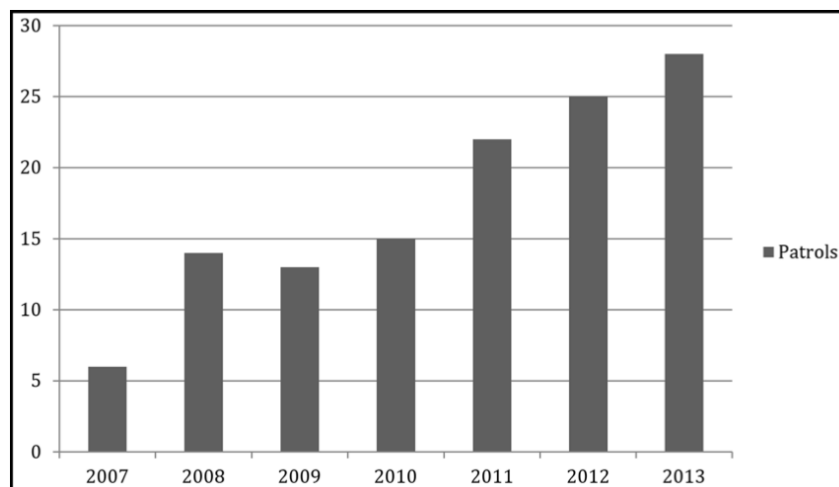
C. FIGURE 2 BIS



China's claimed nine-dash line

Source: Data via the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative; Design by Aliza Grant, Forbes Staff

D. FIGURE 3



Graph representing the increase in patrols from 2007 to 2013

Source: USCC, (2014). "PLA Navy Surface and Submarine Combat Readiness Deployments, 2007–2013". From https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Annual_Report/Chapters/Chapter%202;%20Section%202%20China's%20Military%20Modernization.pdf

Pages 283-284:

- The number of what official Chinese sources refer to as PLA Navy “combat readiness patrols,” or “blue-water training” deployments, increased from six in 2007 to 28 in 2013, according to Commission analysis of U.S. government information and Commission discussions with U.S. and foreign government officials (see Figure 1). The PLA Navy now maintains a near-constant presence

throughout the first and second island chains (see Figure 2).^{*} This activity currently is concentrated in the Philippine Sea, an area Beijing judges would be crucial to interdicting U.S. forces in a conflict, but is expanding gradually into the southern reaches of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. According to a senior U.S. Navy official, “the amount of time [PLA Navy surface task groups] train in the Philippine Sea now rivals that of the United States.”

- Since 2009, the PLA Navy has conducted counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden to protect Chinese commercial shipping interests. Not including naval diplomacy, the initial Gulf of Aden mission represented China’s first operational deployment of naval forces outside of China’s regional waters. More recently, from January to June 2014, two successive PLA Navy ships joined ships from Russia and Europe for 20 joint escorts of chemical weapons used in Syria’s civil war from Syria into international waters for neutralization. The PLA Navy’s activities in the Gulf of Aden and the Mediterranean Sea demonstrate its ability to conduct small-scale long-distance naval operations for extended durations despite China’s lack of overseas military bases. For more on these PLA Navy operations, see Chapter 2, Section 1, “Year in Review: Security and Foreign Affairs.”
- In 2010, China deployed fighter aircraft to Turkey for a joint China-Turkey air exercise that reportedly involved mock dogfights and other air-based maneuvers. During the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s Peace Mission exercise later in 2010, PLA Air Force bombers, escorted by fighter aircraft, carried out China’s first simulated long-range air strike from air bases in western China. Following mid-air refueling, the aircraft rehearsed bombing ground targets in Kazakhstan. China’s activities during these exercises demonstrated for the first time the PLA Air Force’s ability to conduct long-range air strikes and air-ground operations.
- In 2011, the PLA Air Force and Navy deployed four cargo aircraft and one surface combatant, respectively, to support and protect the evacuation of 35,000 Chinese nationals from Libya in China’s first overseas noncombatant evacuation operation. China’s Ministries of Commerce, Foreign Affairs, and Public Security; the Civil Aviation Administration of China; Chinese companies operating in Libya; and Chinese shipping companies also participated in the evacuation and coordinated closely with the PLA. This operation enabled the PLA to demonstrate a commitment to the protection of Chinese citizens overseas and highlighted China’s ability to rapidly mobilize civilian assets for military operations.
- In 2013, the PLA contributed nearly 400 troops to the United Nations (UN) Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali. This was Beijing’s first deployment of infantry to support a peacekeeping operation since China began participating in UN missions in 1990. China previously had limited the

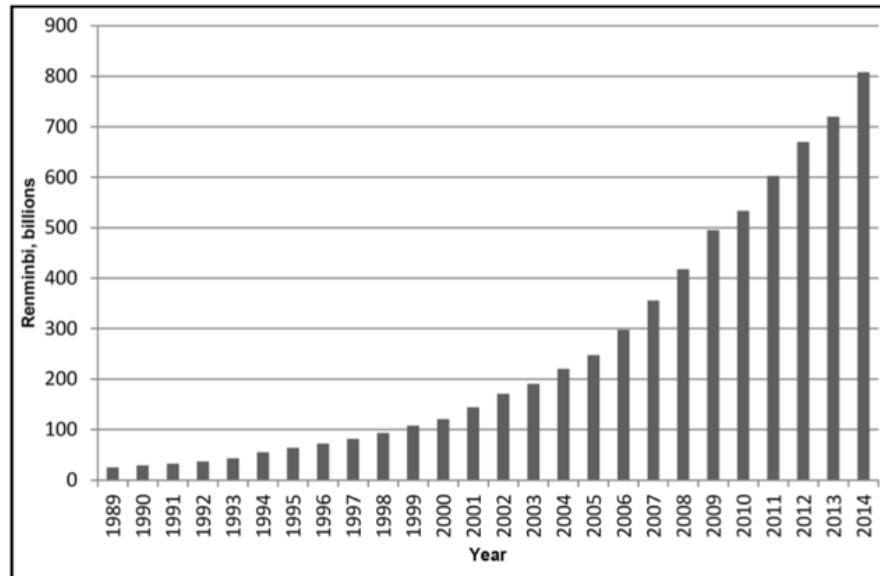
PLA's participation in peacekeeping operations to noncombat troops—mainly military observers; staff officers; and engineering, medical, and transportation personnel. Additionally, China began to deploy 700 troops to the UN Mission in South Sudan in September 2014, marking Beijing's first contribution of an infantry battalion to a UN peacekeeping force.

- In early 2014, a PLA Navy surface task group carried out a sophisticated training exercise spanning the South China Sea, eastern Indian Ocean, and Philippine Sea. The deployment marks the first time the PLA Navy has conducted a surface combat readiness patrol in the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, from late 2013 to early 2014, China conducted its first submarine combat readiness patrol to the Indian Ocean. For more on these PLA Navy deployments to the Indian Ocean, see Chapter 2, Section 1, "Security and Foreign Affairs Year in Review."

E. FIGURE 3 BIS



F. FIGURE 4



Statistics of China's announced defense spending from 1989 until 2014

Source: USCC, (2014). "PLA Navy Surface and Submarine Combat Readiness Deployments, 2007–2013". From https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Annual_Report/Chapters/Chapter%202;%20Section%202%20China's%20Military%20Modernization.pdf

G. FIGURE 5



China's delimited announced threat of an ADIZ (Air Defense Identification Zone) in the South China Sea

Source: DoD, Annual Report to Congress on Military and Security Developments involving the People's Republic of China 2014, June 2013, 5.

H. FIGURE 6



China's first aircraft carrier called the 'Liaoning'

Source: CHINATOPIX/AP

I. FIGURE 7

	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2014
Personnel	350,000	295,000	300,000	260,00	295,000	255,000	255,000
Navy	350,000	260,000	260,000	220,000	255,000	215,000	215,000
Conscript	?	35,000	40,000	40,000	40,000	40,000	40,000
Reserve	?	?	?	?	?	?	?
Naval Aviation	some	25,000	25,000	26,000	26,000	26,000	26,000
Marines	some	6,000	5,000	5,000	10,000	10,000	10,000

Naval Vessels

Aircraft Carriers		1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2014
	Liaoning	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total		0	0	0	0	0	0	1

Submarines		1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2014
Strategic	Qing (SLBM trials / SSB)	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	Golf (SLBM trial)	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
	Xia (Type 092)	0	0	0	0	1	1	1
	Jin (Type 094)	0	0	0	0	0	2	3
Tactical	Han (Type 091)	2	4	5	5	5	4	3
	Shang (Type-093)	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
	Romeo (Type S5G)	0	1	1	1	1	1	0
	Kilo (RF Type EKM 636/636N)	0	0	0	3	2	10	10
	Kilo (RF Type EKM 877)	0	0	0	2	2	2	2
	Ming (Type-035)	0	3	0	2	3	3	4
	Ming (Type-035G/B)	0	0	9	15	16	16	16
	Romeo (E3SB)	79	85	34	35	36	8	0
	Song (Type-039/039G)	0	0	0	1	3	13	16
	Yuan (Type-041)	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
	Yuan (Type-039A/B)	0	0	0	0	0	0	12
	W-class	21	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total		103	93	49	65	68	65	70

Guided Missile Destroyers		1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2014
	Hangzhou (Sovremenny)	0	0	0	1	2	4	4
	Luda III (Type-051GII)	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
	Luda (Type-051)	10	16	15	13	11	10	0
	Luda (Type-051DT)	0	0	0	0	2	3	0
	Luda II (Type-051G)	0	1	2	2	2	1	0
	Luhai (Type-051B)	0	0	0	1	1	1	1
	Luhu (Type-052)	0	0	1	2	2	2	2
	Luyang I (Type-052B)	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
	Luyang II (Type-052C)	0	0	0	0	0	2	4
	Luyang III (Type-052D)	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	Luzhou (Type-051C)	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
	Anshan (Soviet Gordy)	4	2	0	0	0	0	0
Total		14	19	18	20	21	28	15

Guided Missile Frigates		1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2014
	Jianghu I (Type-053H)	11	13	13	26	26	11	2
	Jianghu II (Type-053H1)	0	9	9	1	1	9	6
	Jianghu III (Type-053H2)	0	2	5	3	3	3	1
	Jianghu IV (Type-053H1Q)	0	2	2	0	0	1	1
	Jianghu V (Type-053H1G)	0	0	0	0	0	6	6
	Jiangwei I (Type-053H2G)	0	0	3	4	4	4	4
	Jiangwei II (Type-053H3)	0	0	0	6	8	10	10
	Jiangdong	2	2	1	0	0	0	0
	Chengdu	4	4	2	0	0	0	0
	Jiangkai I (Type-054)	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
	Jiangkai II (Type-054A)	0	0	0	0	0	6	15
	Luda II (Type-051)	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
	Luda III (Type-051DT/G)	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
	Total	22	37	37	40	42	52	54

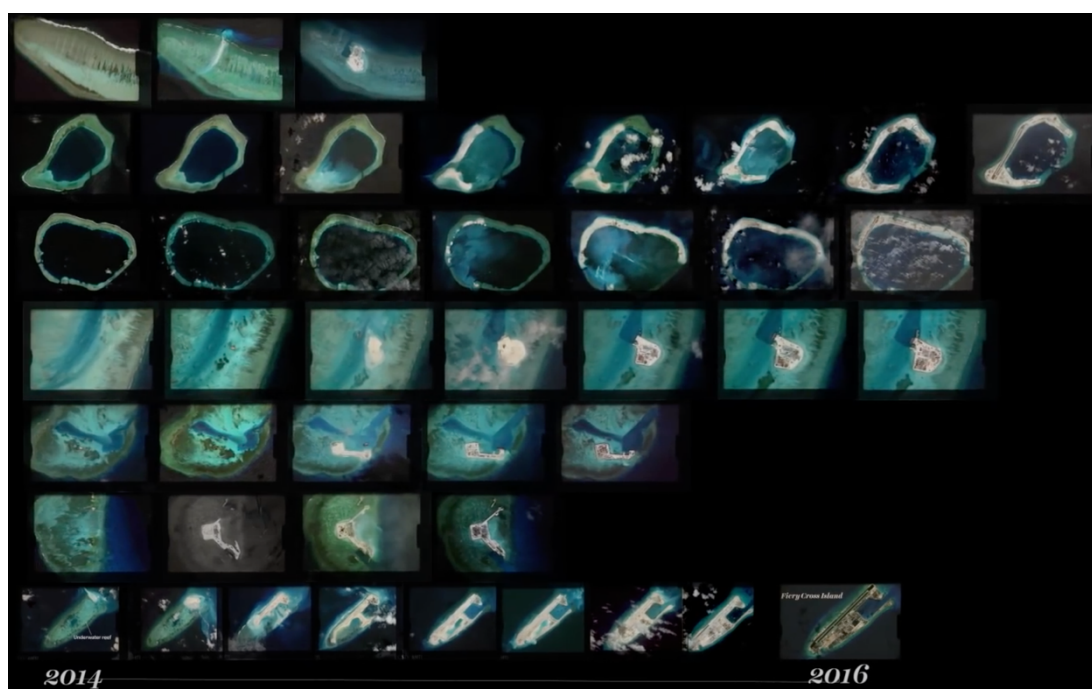
Patrol and Coastal Combatants		1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2014
	Jiangdao (Type-056)	0	0	0	0	0	0	8
	Houbei (Type-022)	0	0	0	0	0	60+	65+
	Huangfeng/Hola (Type-021)	0	125	120	38	38	0	11
	Houjian (Type-037/II)	0	0	0	0	0	7	6
	Houxin (Type-037/IG)	0	0	6	20	22	16	20
	Haijui (Type-037/I)	0	10	4	2	2	2	2
	Hainan (Type-037)	28	90	96	96	88	93	48
	Haqing (Type-037/IS)	0	0	0	20	19	25	22
	Haizui (Type-062/I)	0	0	0	11	8	15	34+
	Shanghai III (Type-072/I)	305	290	300	100	79	35	some
	Total	333	515	526	287	256	193	117

Mine Warfare		1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2014
	Wochi	0	0	0	0	0	4	8
	Wozang	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
	Wosao	?	?	1	7	5	4	16
	Futi	0	0	0	0	0	46	4
	Wolei	?	?	0	1	1	1	1
	Total	0	0	1	8	6	55	31

China's detailed evolution of naval capabilities from 1985 to 2014

Source: IISS Military Balance, 1985-2014, and reporting by HIS Jane's. Adapted by Anthony H. Cordesman and Tyler Duhamel at the CSIS.

J. FIGURE 8



*Evolution of the underwater reefs being turned into military bases by China between 2014 and 2016
From top to bottom: Cuarteron Reef, Subi Reef, Mischief Reef, Johnson Reef, Hughes Reef, Gaven Reef and Fiery Cross Reef*

Source: CSIS/AMTI images taken from Vox (2017). Pourquoi la Chine a-t-elle construit des îles en Mer de Chine Orientale? From <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luTPMHC7zHY>

K. FIGURE 9



Chinese ships taking sand from the sea ground and moving it towards the reefs to elevate it above the sea level

Source: Vox (2017). Pourquoi la Chine a-t-elle construit des îles en Mer de Chine Orientale? From <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luTPMHC7zHY>

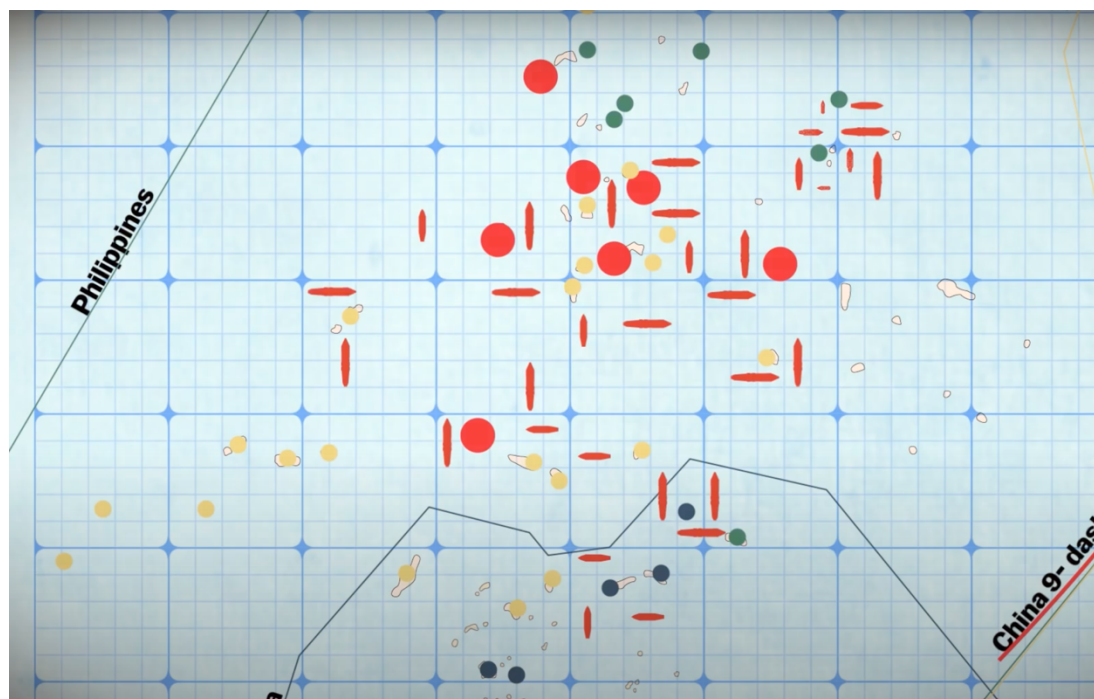
L. FIGURE 10



Satellite imagery of Chinese infrastructures (air strips, radars, and missile systems) built on the Fieri Cross Island

Source: CSIS/AMTI images taken from Vox (2017). *Pourquoi la Chine a-t-elle construit des îles en Mer de Chine Orientale?* From <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luTPMHC7zHY>

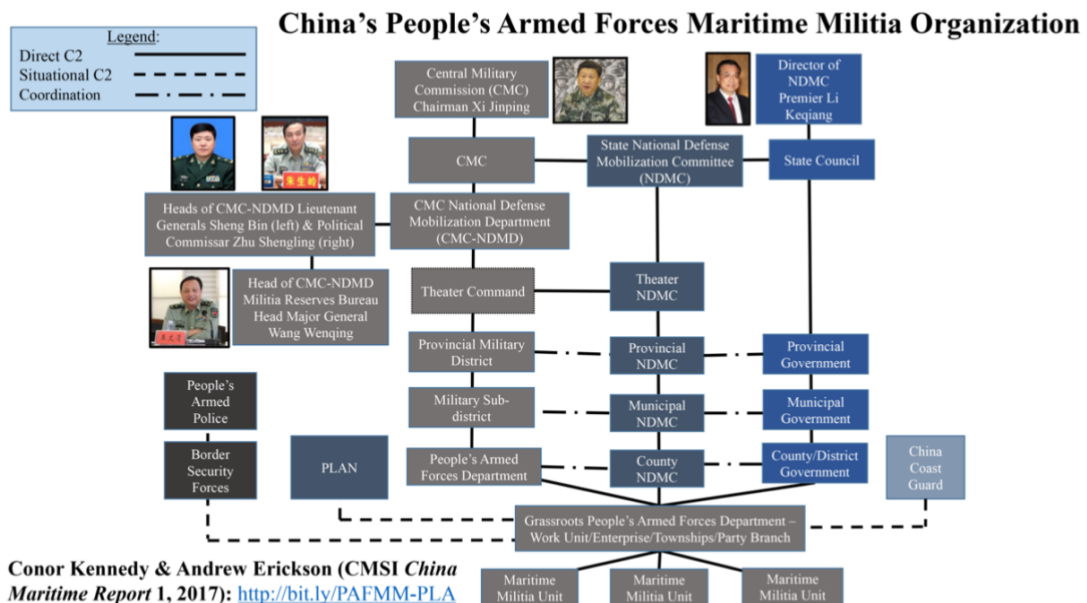
M. FIGURE 11



Schematic representation of the cabbage strategy used by China around contested islands. The big red spots are the military bases that China has been steadily building since 2014. The green, yellow, and blue spots are islands respectively claimed by Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia, and the represented red ships are the Chinese ones.

Source: Vox (2017). *Pourquoi la Chine a-t-elle construit des îles en Mer de Chine Orientale?* From <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luTPMHC7zHY>

N. FIGURE 12



China's People's Military Organization from Commander to Maritime militias

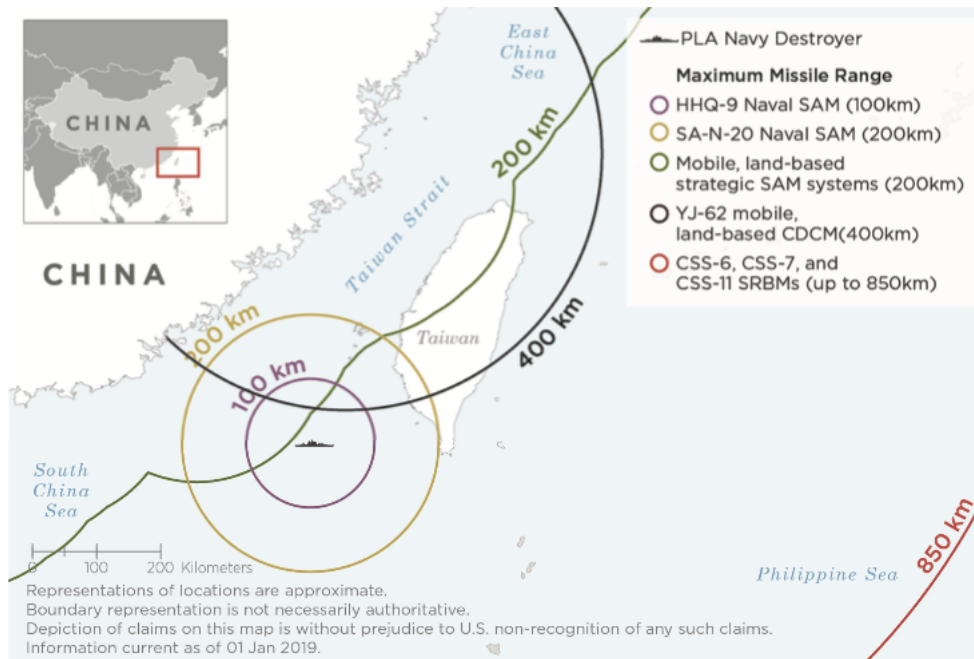
Source: Erickson, A. (2017). *Understanding China's third sea force: the maritime militia*. From <https://medium.com/fairbank-center/understanding-chinas-third-sea-force-the-maritime-militia-228a2bfbbedd>



China's Armed Forces are divided in three categories

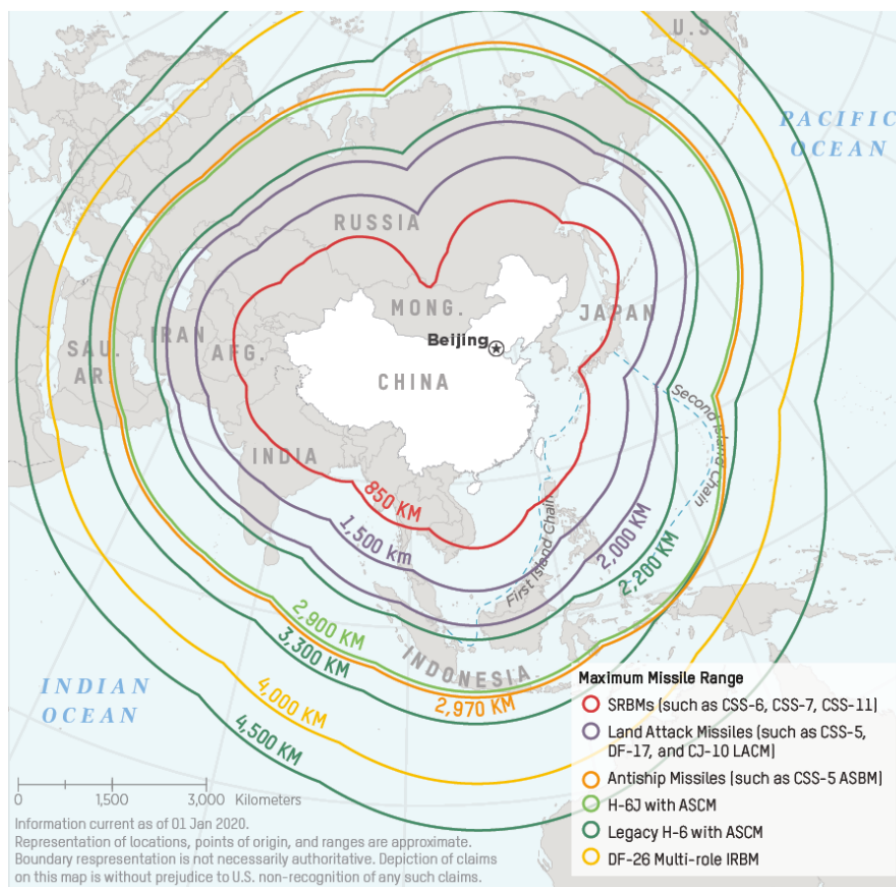
Source: Erickson, D. (2021). *The China Maritime Militia Bookshelf: latest developments, statements, analysis, fleet estimates, trilingual Wikipedia entry*. From <https://www.andrewerickson.com/2021/05/the-china-maritime-militia-bookshelf-latest-developments-statements-analysis-fleet-estimates-trilingual-wikipedia-entry/>

O. FIGURE 13



Depiction of missile range from China from a PLA Navy Destroyer and Land-based missile

Source: MDAA (2018). China Anti-Access Area Denial. From <https://missiledefenseadvocacy.org/missile-threat-and-proliferation/todays-missile-threat/china/china-anti-access-area-denial/>



Depiction of maximum missile range of China's missile capabilities

Source: MDAA (2018). China Anti-Access Area Denial. From <https://missiledefenseadvocacy.org/missile-threat-and-proliferation/todays-missile-threat/china/china-anti-access-area-denial/>

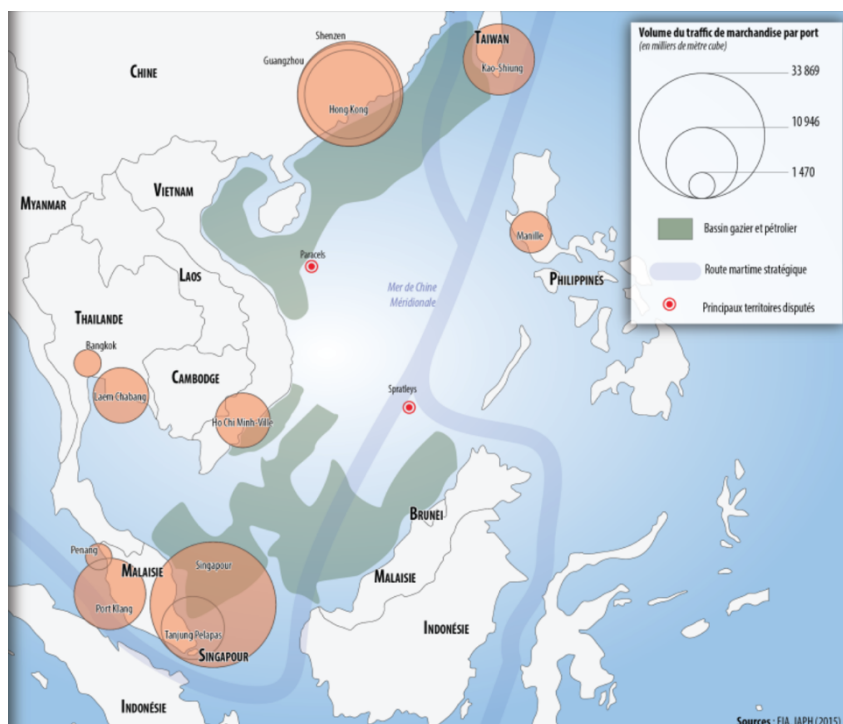
P. FIGURE 14



The Paracels Island Group in the South China Sea

Source: Wikipedia (2021). Îles Paracels. From https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Îles_Paracels#/media/Fichier:ParacelIslands.png

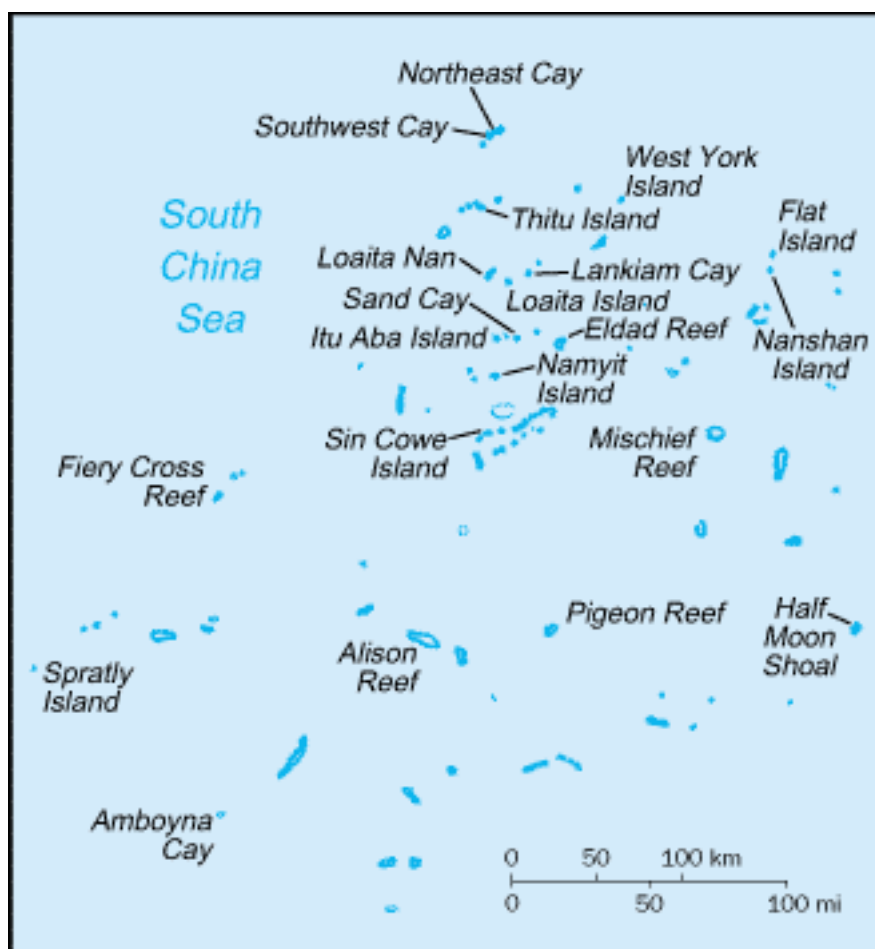
Q. FIGURE 15



Volume of merchandise traffic by port

Source: EIA, IAPH (2015)

R. FIGURE 16



The Spratly Islands in the South China Sea

Source: Wikipedia (2021). Iles Spratleys. From https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iles_Spratleys#/media/Fichier:Spratly_Islands-CIA_WFB_Map.png

S. FIGURE 17



*Satellite imagery obtained by NPR from Maxar Technologies shows Chinese vessels moored in the crook of the boomerang-shaped coral bar known as Whitsun Reef or Ba Dau Reef in Vietnamese.
Source: CNN*

