

**Faculté des sciences économiques,
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From Contestation to Hegemony China's Assertiveness in the South China Sea

**An Analysis of Beijing's Military, Diplomatic, and
Symbolic Strategies around the Paracel and
Spratly Islands since 2014.**

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and justification of the topic

Maritime spaces have long occupied a central position in the organization of international power, economic exchange, and political influence. As early as the late nineteenth century, classical geopolitical thought emphasized the decisive role of sea power in shaping the rise and decline of great powers. Alfred Thayer Mahan's seminal work highlighted how control over maritime routes, naval strength, and strategic chokepoints constituted a fundamental pillar of national power and international hierarchy (Mahan, 1890). Although the international system has since undergone profound transformations, the strategic relevance of maritime domains has not diminished; rather, it has been reshaped by globalization, technological change, and evolving patterns of interdependence.

In the contemporary era, seas and oceans are no longer understood merely as neutral spaces of circulation. Instead, they are increasingly conceptualized as politically charged environments in which sovereignty, security, and economic interests intersect. The intensification of global trade has reinforced dependence on maritime routes, while the growing competition for resources and strategic depth has turned maritime spaces into sites of contestation (Smith, 1994; Garnier, 2012). As a result, maritime geopolitics has re-emerged as a core dimension of international relations, linking classical concerns of power projection with newer issues related to norms, governance, and international law (Colin, 2016).

Within this broader maritime resurgence, the Asia-Pacific region has become one of the most dynamic and strategically significant theaters of global politics. Rapid economic growth, demographic shifts, and technological modernization have contributed to a rebalancing of power away from the Atlantic world toward the Indo-Pacific. Central to this transformation has been the rise of China as a major global actor. Over the past four decades, China has translated economic expansion into increasing political influence and military capabilities, challenging established regional and global power structures (Lampton, 2019; Medeiros, 2019). This process has been particularly visible in the maritime domain, where China's naval modernization and expanding operational reach have altered regional security dynamics (McDevitt, 2014).

The strategic consequences of this shift are especially evident at sea. Maritime security has become a key concern not only for regional states but also for extra-regional actors whose

economic and strategic interests are deeply tied to the stability of Indo-Pacific sea lines of communication. Freedom of navigation, access to maritime commons, and the credibility of existing maritime norms have thus moved to the forefront of strategic debates (America's Navy, 2024). In this context, maritime disputes are no longer perceived as isolated regional issues but as potential flashpoints with systemic implications for international order.

The South China Sea epitomizes these broader dynamics. Geographically, it constitutes a semi-enclosed maritime space connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans, through which a significant proportion of global maritime trade transits each year. Economically, it is endowed with rich fishing grounds and potential hydrocarbon resources, making it a vital source of livelihood and energy security for surrounding states (Gao et al., 2013; Golley et al., 2018). Strategically, it provides critical depth for naval operations and serves as a gateway between East Asia and the wider world. These characteristics alone would suffice to explain its importance. However, the South China Sea's significance extends well beyond material considerations.

Politically and symbolically, the South China Sea has become a focal point for competing visions of maritime order. Multiple coastal states assert overlapping claims over islands, reefs, and maritime zones, creating a complex web of legal and political disputes rooted in history, colonial legacies, and post-Second World War territorial arrangements (Chang, 1991; Tønnesson, 2002). For decades, these disputes were managed through a combination of diplomatic engagement, tacit restraint, and limited incidents, allowing a fragile status quo to persist. International maritime law, particularly UNCLOS, offered a normative framework within which competing claims could, at least in principle, be regulated (Beckman, 2013).

Yet the effectiveness of this framework has increasingly been challenged by evolving state practices. Since the early 2010s, the South China Sea has witnessed a marked intensification of activities that blur the distinction between peace and conflict, legality and illegality, civilian and military domains. China's growing presence in contested areas, combined with its expanding capacity to project power at sea, has placed unprecedented pressure on existing norms and institutions. Rather than relying exclusively on formal legal processes or conventional military force, China has pursued a multifaceted approach that integrates military modernization, maritime law enforcement, economic leverage, and diplomatic engagement (McDevitt, 2014; Lampton, 2019).

This evolution has transformed the South China Sea into what many analysts describe as a strategic laboratory: a space in which new forms of power projection and control are tested under conditions of high political sensitivity but controlled escalation. The region thus offers a unique vantage point from which to observe how a rising power seeks to advance its interests while avoiding the costs associated with open conflict. It also raises fundamental questions about the future of the maritime order, the resilience of international law, and the capacity of regional and global actors to respond effectively to incremental challenges (Medeiros, 2019; America's Navy, 2024).

The justification for focusing specifically on the Paracel and Spratly Islands lies in their centrality to this evolving strategic environment. Although small and largely uninhabited, these features occupy pivotal positions within the South China Sea and serve as anchors for broader maritime claims. Control over them enables sustained presence, surveillance, and power projection across surrounding waters, thereby amplifying their strategic value. More importantly, developments in these areas since 2014 signal a qualitative shift in China's approach—from contesting claims rhetorically to reshaping realities on the ground, and at sea.

By situating the analysis of the Paracel and Spratly Islands within this broader geopolitical and maritime context, this thesis seeks to move beyond narrow interpretations of the South China Sea disputes. Instead of treating them solely as legal disagreements or regional security dilemmas, the study approaches them as manifestations of deeper transformations in the international system. Understanding these dynamics is essential not only for assessing the future of the South China Sea, but also for grasping how maritime spaces may increasingly function as arenas in which global power and order are renegotiated.

1.2 Research problem

Although the South China Sea disputes have been extensively studied, the evolution of China's behavior in this maritime space since 2014 raises analytical questions that remain insufficiently addressed. Historically, competing claims over the Paracel and Spratly Islands have been shaped by overlapping sovereignties, colonial legacies, and post-Second World War territorial arrangements (Chang, 1991; Tønnesson, 2002). For decades, these disputes were managed through a combination of diplomatic engagement, limited coercion, and strategic ambiguity, allowing rival claimants to coexist within a fragile but relatively stable status quo.

This equilibrium has been progressively disrupted over the past decade. Since 2014, China has adopted a markedly more assertive posture in the South China Sea, particularly around the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Large-scale land reclamation, the construction of artificial islands, and the deployment of military infrastructure have significantly altered the physical and strategic landscape of the region (Poh et al., 2017; Buszynski, 2019). These developments have enabled China to sustain a permanent presence in contested areas and to extend its operational reach across vast portions of the South China Sea (McDevitt, 2014; Burgess, 2020).

What distinguishes this phase from earlier periods is not only the scale of China's activities, but also the manner in which they are conducted. Rather than relying primarily on overt military confrontation, China has combined naval deployments with the extensive use of coast guard vessels, maritime militia, diplomatic pressure, and legal narratives. This multidimensional approach allows Beijing to advance its interests incrementally while maintaining actions below the threshold of open conflict. Such practices have been widely conceptualized as "gray zone" strategies, characterized by ambiguity, gradualism, and deniability (Southerland, 2016; Cragin, 2024; Sarijo, 2024).

The academic literature has offered valuable insights into these developments, yet it remains divided along thematic and disciplinary lines. Legal scholars have focused on the implications of China's actions for international maritime law, emphasizing the tension between UNCLOS-based norms and practices that challenge or circumvent them. Particular attention has been paid to the 2016 arbitral ruling and to the broader question of the erosion of the rules-based maritime order (Beckman, 2013; Kausar, 2023; Javed et al., 2023; Ngo, 2024). From this perspective, the South China Sea is primarily understood as a legal battleground in which the authority of international law is contested.

In parallel, strategic and security-oriented studies concentrate on the military dimension of China's behavior. These analyses highlight the expansion of China's naval capabilities, the development of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) systems, and the strategic value of forward-deployed infrastructure in enhancing China's capacity to deter external intervention (Dolven et al., 2019; Wuthnow, 2018; Scobell, 2021; Ho, 2023). While this body of work provides a detailed assessment of the material balance of power, it often treats military developments in relative isolation from diplomatic practices and normative claims.

A third strand of the literature examines regional and diplomatic responses to China's actions. Studies focusing on Southeast Asian states and ASEAN explore strategies of hedging, balancing, accommodation, and legal resistance, underscoring the constraints faced by regional actors in responding to China's growing influence (Strating, 2020; Luu et al., 2023; McDougall, 2023; Thomas, 2022). These analyses illuminate the regional consequences of China's behavior but tend to frame China's strategy as a series of reactions to local dynamics rather than as part of a broader geopolitical project.

Taken together, these approaches reveal an important analytical gap. While the literature convincingly explains individual aspects of China's conduct—legal, military, or diplomatic—it rarely examines how these dimensions interact to produce cumulative and lasting effects. In particular, existing studies offer limited insight into how China's military deployments and diplomatic practices reinforce one another in transforming contested maritime spaces into de facto controlled areas, thereby reshaping the regional geopolitical balance without formal resolution of sovereignty disputes.

1.3 Research hypothesis

Building on the research problem identified above, this thesis advances the hypothesis that China's military and diplomatic strategies around the Paracel and Spratly Islands since 2014 are neither isolated nor purely reactive, but instead form part of a coherent and deliberate effort to reshape the regional geopolitical balance and impose a new maritime order in the Asia-Pacific. This hypothesis rests on the assumption that China's actions in the South China Sea must be understood as a cumulative and multidimensional strategy, in which military practices, diplomatic behavior, and normative claims are closely intertwined.

At the strategic level, this hypothesis draws on realist interpretations of state behavior in an anarchic international system. From an offensive realist perspective, rising powers tend to seek greater control over their immediate environment in order to reduce strategic uncertainty and prevent external constraints on their freedom of action (Mearsheimer, 2001). In this view, the South China Sea represents a critical maritime buffer zone for China, whose control would enhance strategic depth, secure key sea lines of communication, and limit the operational reach of rival powers. The militarization of the Paracel and Spratly Islands since 2014 can thus be interpreted as a means of consolidating regional influence rather than as a series of defensive responses to external pressure.

However, this hypothesis does not reduce China's strategy to material power accumulation alone. While military infrastructure, forward-deployed capabilities, and surveillance systems undoubtedly play a central role, their strategic significance lies as much in their political and psychological effects as in their operational utility. By establishing a persistent military presence in disputed areas, China alters the strategic calculations of other actors, raises the costs of opposition, and progressively normalizes its dominance in the region. These effects are gradual and cumulative, reflecting a preference for incremental change over sudden confrontation.

Crucially, this thesis hypothesizes that military practices are systematically complemented by diplomatic and legal strategies designed to manage perceptions and legitimize new realities on the ground. Constructivist approaches emphasize that power is not only exercised through coercion, but also through the production of meaning, norms, and shared understandings (Wendt, 1999). In the South China Sea, China has consistently accompanied its military activities with diplomatic engagement, legal argumentation, and historical narratives that frame its actions as legitimate, defensive, and consistent with regional stability. These narratives seek to portray China not as a revisionist disruptor, but as a responsible actor correcting historical injustices and safeguarding its sovereign rights (Zhang, 2019; Klein, 2014).

The central hypothesis of this thesis is therefore that China's military and diplomatic strategies operate in tandem to produce a form of strategic normalization. Military deployments create *faits accomplis* that reshape the physical and strategic environment, while diplomatic discourse and legal interpretations work to embed these changes within a broader normative framework. Over time, this interaction contributes to redefining what is considered acceptable behavior in the South China Sea, thereby weakening resistance and reducing the likelihood of effective countermeasures. The objective is not necessarily to secure formal recognition of sovereignty claims, but to establish a situation in which China's control is treated as a practical reality.

This hypothesis also implies that China's strategy is fundamentally adaptive and opportunistic. Rather than following a rigid blueprint, China continuously calibrates its actions in response to regional and international reactions. By operating below the threshold of armed conflict, China retains strategic flexibility and avoids triggering collective responses that could undermine its objectives. This logic aligns with broader theories of strategic interaction, which emphasize how incremental actions and signaling shape long-term outcomes in competitive environments

(Jervis, 1998). The effectiveness of China's approach thus lies less in any single action than in the cumulative impact of sustained pressure and gradual adjustment.

Furthermore, the hypothesis suggests that the Paracel and Spratly Islands function as strategic laboratories within China's broader regional ambitions. These contested spaces allow China to test the limits of international tolerance, refine its gray zone tactics, and assess the willingness of other actors to defend existing norms. Success in these areas not only strengthens China's position in the South China Sea, but also provides a template for how maritime power can be exercised elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific. In this sense, the South China Sea is not an isolated case, but a microcosm of evolving patterns of regional order-building.

Finally, this hypothesis assumes that the transformation of the South China Sea is as much normative as it is geopolitical. By combining military presence with sustained diplomatic engagement and selective adherence to legal norms, China seeks to reshape the maritime order without openly dismantling it. The resulting order is characterized by asymmetrical power relations, strategic ambiguity, and the gradual erosion of existing constraints. Testing this hypothesis requires an integrated analysis that captures the interaction between military practices, diplomatic strategies, and normative contestation over time. It is this interaction that lies at the heart of China's ambition to reshape the regional geopolitical balance and impose a new maritime order in the Asia-Pacific.

1.4 Objectives of the thesis

The primary objective of this thesis is to examine how China's military and diplomatic strategies in the Paracel and Spratly Islands since 2014 reflect a broader ambition to reshape the regional geopolitical balance and impose a new maritime order in the Asia-Pacific. Rather than analyzing China's actions as isolated or purely tactical responses, the study seeks to capture the strategic coherence and cumulative effects of these actions over time.

To achieve this overarching aim, the thesis pursues several interrelated objectives.

First, it seeks to analyze the military dimension of China's strategy in the South China Sea. This involves examining how the construction and militarization of artificial islands, the deployment of naval and air assets, and the expansion of surveillance and access-denial capabilities contribute to the consolidation of China's presence in contested maritime areas. The objective is not merely to describe these developments, but to assess how military practices enable China

to establish durable facts on the ground while remaining below the threshold of open armed conflict.

Second, the thesis aims to examine the diplomatic dimension of China's approach. This includes analyzing China's use of bilateral diplomacy, its engagement with regional institutions such as ASEAN, and its interactions with external powers. Particular attention is paid to how diplomatic strategies are used to manage tensions, limit collective opposition, and shape the strategic environment in which military actions unfold. In this regard, diplomacy is understood as a complementary instrument that enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of China's military posture.

Third, the thesis seeks to explore the normative and discursive dimension of China's strategy. This objective focuses on the role of legal arguments, historical narratives, and symbolic practices in legitimizing China's claims and actions in the South China Sea. By examining how these narratives are constructed and deployed, the study aims to show how China contributes to redefining perceptions of legality and legitimacy in contested maritime spaces, thereby facilitating the normalization of its expanding control.

A fourth objective is to analyze the interaction between military, diplomatic, and normative instruments. Rather than treating these dimensions as separate analytical categories, the thesis seeks to demonstrate how they reinforce one another in practice. This integrated approach is essential for understanding how incremental actions, sustained over time, can produce structural changes in the regional maritime order without formal resolution of sovereignty disputes.

Finally, the thesis aims to contribute to broader debates on maritime power and regional order-building in the Asia-Pacific. By using the Paracel and Spratly Islands as a focused case study, the research seeks to offer insights into how rising powers may seek to transform contested maritime spaces into spheres of influence through a combination of coercion, persuasion, and norm construction. In doing so, the study aspires to move beyond descriptive accounts and to provide a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary maritime strategies in an evolving international order.

1.5 Methodological Framework

This thesis adopts a qualitative research design aimed at analyzing the strategic logic, political intent, and normative dimensions underlying China's behavior in the South China Sea. Given the nature of the research question—which seeks to understand how military and diplomatic strategies interact to reshape the regional maritime order—a qualitative approach is particularly appropriate. Quantitative methods, while useful for measuring trends or frequencies, would not adequately capture the interpretive and discursive dimensions that lie at the core of this study.

The research is based primarily on the qualitative analysis of secondary sources. These include academic literature, strategic and policy reports, official government documents, and public speeches. This body of material enables the examination of both empirical developments—such as land reclamation, military deployments, and diplomatic initiatives—and the narratives through which these actions are framed and justified.

The study follows a case study approach focused on the South China Sea, and more specifically on the Paracel and Spratly Islands. This geographical and strategic focus allows for a detailed and contextualized analysis of China's actions since 2014, a period marked by a significant intensification of its activities in contested maritime areas. By concentrating on this case, the research seeks to identify broader patterns of behavior and strategic coherence.

Methodologically, the analysis is interpretative. It aims to identify and connect the different dimensions of China's strategy—military, diplomatic, and normative—rather than treating them as separate analytical categories. Military developments are examined through defense analyses and strategic assessments, while diplomatic practices are analyzed through policy statements and regional interactions. The normative dimension is explored through the study of legal arguments, historical narratives, and official discourse related to sovereignty and national identity.

Particular attention is given to Chinese official discourse, including speeches, white papers, and government communications. These sources are analyzed in order to understand how China frames its actions, constructs legitimacy, and positions itself within the regional and international order. This approach does not constitute a formal discourse analysis in the strict methodological sense, but rather a structured qualitative interpretation of recurring themes, narratives, and framing strategies.

The research also incorporates a diversity of sources, including Western and Chinese materials, as well as analyses produced by scholars and institutions based in the Asia-Pacific region. This includes contributions from Southeast Asian and regional research centers, which provide additional perspectives on the South China Sea and help contextualize China's actions within the broader regional environment. This approach aims to avoid a purely Western-centric interpretation and to enrich the analysis by integrating multiple perspectives reflecting different geopolitical positions and analytical traditions.

Finally, the study is limited to documentary analysis. No primary data collection, such as interviews, was conducted. All findings and interpretations are therefore based on the critical reading, cross-referencing, and synthesis of existing sources.

Transparency and academic integrity guide the use of digital tools in the research process. Artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT may occasionally be used to assist with linguistic refinement and clarity in English expression. Their use is strictly limited to stylistic support and does not extend to content generation, data analysis, or interpretation. All substantive arguments, analyses, and conclusions remain the sole responsibility of the author.

This methodological framework ensures coherence with the objectives of the thesis and allows for a comprehensive analysis of the interaction between material practices and normative constructions in China's strategy in the South China Sea.

2. Theoretical and Strategic Foundations

2.1 Theoretical Approaches to Geopolitical Analysis

2.1.1 Offensive realism and the pursuit of power (John Mearsheimer)

Offensive realism constitutes one of the most influential and controversial strands of contemporary realist theory in International Relations. Developed most systematically by John J. Mearsheimer, this approach seeks to explain why great powers, operating in an anarchic international system, are structurally driven not merely to seek security, but to pursue power maximization and, when conditions permit, regional hegemony. In contrast to more restrained variants of realism, offensive realism offers a stark and pessimistic interpretation of international politics, one that foregrounds competition, mistrust, and the persistent risk of conflict as enduring features of great power relations (Mearsheimer, 2001).

The theoretical foundations of offensive realism lie in the broader tradition of structural realism articulated by Kenneth Waltz. Waltz's neorealist framework emphasizes that the anarchic structure of the international system—defined by the absence of a central authority capable of enforcing rules—imposes powerful constraints on state behavior (Waltz, 1979). In such a system, states must rely on self-help to ensure their survival, as no external actor can reliably guarantee their security. Crucially, Waltz argues that it is not the intentions of states, but the structure of the system itself, that shapes patterns of competition and conflict. Because intentions can change and are ultimately unknowable, states are compelled to remain vigilant and to assess their security primarily in relative terms.

While Waltz provides the structural foundations of realist theory, his account remains deliberately cautious regarding the extent of power accumulation pursued by states. In *Theory of International Politics*, he suggests that states seek an appropriate amount of power sufficient to ensure their survival, and that excessive expansion may provoke counterbalancing coalitions that ultimately undermine security (Waltz, 1979). In later work, Waltz reinforces this view by emphasizing the stabilizing potential of balance-of-power dynamics and warning against conflating systemic pressures with aggressive intent (Waltz, 2000). This interpretation, often labeled defensive realism, assumes that states are primarily security maximizers rather than power maximizers.

Mearsheimer explicitly challenges this assumption. For offensive realists, the distinction between security maximization and power maximization collapses under conditions of

profound uncertainty. Because states can never be certain about the future intentions of others, there is no reliable way to determine how much power is “enough” to guarantee survival (Mearsheimer, 2001). As a result, rational states are incentivized to maximize their relative power whenever opportunities arise, even in the absence of immediate threats. Power accumulation thus becomes a rational response to systemic uncertainty rather than an expression of pathological ambition.

This logic rests on five core assumptions that structure Mearsheimer’s theory: the anarchic nature of the international system; the possession of offensive military capabilities by all great powers; uncertainty about other states’ intentions; the primacy of survival as the ultimate goal of states; and the rationality of states as strategic actors. Taken together, these assumptions generate a competitive environment in which mistrust is endemic and cooperation inherently fragile (Mearsheimer, 2001). Because even defensive measures can be interpreted as preparations for aggression, states are compelled to adopt worst-case assumptions when assessing the behavior of others.

The dynamics of uncertainty and mistrust identified by offensive realism are closely related to the concept of the security dilemma. Robert Jervis demonstrates that actions taken by one state to enhance its security can inadvertently threaten others, triggering spirals of competition even when no actor harbors aggressive intentions (Jervis, 1978). While defensive realists argue that the security dilemma can be mitigated under certain conditions—such as when defensive technologies dominate or when signaling is credible—offensive realists remain skeptical. From their perspective, the costs of misjudging another state’s intentions are so high that restraint becomes a risky strategy, particularly for great powers operating in strategically vital regions (Mearsheimer, 2001).

A central concept in Mearsheimer’s theory is that of regional hegemony. Offensive realism argues that global hegemony is unattainable due to the constraints imposed by geography and the difficulty of projecting power across vast distances. However, great powers can realistically aspire to dominate their immediate region and to prevent the emergence of peer competitors within that region (Mearsheimer, 2001). Historical precedent is provided by the United States’ successful establishment of regional hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, which allowed it to project power abroad while remaining largely insulated from direct threats. According to Mearsheimer, once a state achieves regional hegemony, it becomes primarily concerned with preventing other great powers from achieving similar dominance in their own regions.

This logic has profound implications for understanding contemporary power transitions, particularly in Asia. Aaron Friedberg's analysis of post-Cold War geopolitics argues that Asia is especially prone to intense strategic competition due to the presence of multiple major powers, unresolved territorial disputes, and weak regional security institutions (Friedberg, 1993). Unlike Europe, where economic integration and institutional density have mitigated some of the destabilizing effects of multipolarity, Asia lacks comparable stabilizing mechanisms. In this context, the rise of China introduces powerful incentives for rivalry with the existing dominant power, the United States, regardless of declared intentions or economic interdependence.

Friedberg later extends this argument by framing Sino-American relations as a long-term contest for regional mastery in Asia. He emphasizes that this competition is not limited to the military domain, but encompasses diplomacy, economics, technology, and ideological influence (Friedberg, 2011). From an offensive realist perspective, such multidimensional competition is precisely what one would expect when a rising power seeks to reshape a regional order dominated by another great power. Efforts to reassure rivals or to emphasize peaceful intentions are unlikely to eliminate these structural pressures, as capabilities rather than intentions ultimately drive strategic calculations.

Offensive realism also offers a compelling framework for understanding the strategic importance of maritime power in this rivalry. Although Mearsheimer's theory is not explicitly maritime, its emphasis on power projection, access denial, and control over strategically vital regions aligns closely with analyses of maritime geopolitics (Smith, 1994; Colin, 2016). Control over maritime spaces enhances a state's ability to secure trade routes, project military force, and constrain the freedom of action of rivals. In the Asia-Pacific, where maritime geography plays a central role in shaping strategic interaction, the pursuit of regional hegemony necessarily involves efforts to dominate key maritime domains (Medeiros, 2019; Lampton, 2019).

Mearsheimer explicitly applies offensive realism to the rise of China, arguing that China's growing economic and military capabilities make it increasingly likely to seek regional hegemony in Asia (Mearsheimer, 2006). In this interpretation, China's efforts to expand its influence, secure strategic depth, and reduce the presence of external powers are not aberrations or deviations from rational behavior, but predictable outcomes of systemic pressures. Friedberg reinforces this assessment by portraying the Asia-Pacific as the primary theater of twenty-first-

century great power competition, where control over maritime spaces and peripheral regions plays a decisive role (Friedberg, 2011).

These dynamics have broader implications for the international order. De Paiva Pires situates the rise of China within debates on the future of the liberal international order, arguing that realist dynamics of power transition expose the limits of institutional and normative approaches that underestimate the enduring role of power politics (de Paiva Pires, 2022). From an offensive realist standpoint, institutions and rules may shape the tactics through which competition unfolds, but they cannot fundamentally alter the structural incentives that drive great powers to seek power and influence.

In sum, offensive realism provides a rigorous and parsimonious framework for understanding great power behavior in an anarchic international system. By emphasizing the pursuit of relative power, the logic of regional hegemony, and the centrality of uncertainty and competition, it offers a powerful lens for analyzing contemporary geopolitical dynamics. Applied to the case of China, offensive realism suggests that assertive strategies aimed at reshaping the regional balance of power—particularly in strategically vital maritime spaces—are not anomalies, but rational responses to systemic pressures. This theoretical perspective provides a crucial foundation for analyzing China's behavior in the Asia-Pacific and sets the stage for examining how these dynamics manifest concretely in the South China Sea in the following sections.

2.1.2 Classical naval theory and maritime power (Alfred Thayer Mahan)

If offensive realism provides a structural explanation for why great powers seek regional dominance, classical naval theory—particularly as developed by Alfred Thayer Mahan—offers a strategic and operational framework for understanding how such dominance may be achieved through control of the seas. Mahan's work, especially *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (1890), constitutes one of the foundational texts of modern maritime strategy and remains highly relevant to contemporary debates on maritime competition in the Asia-Pacific (Mahan, 1890).

At the core of Mahan's argument lies the proposition that maritime power is a decisive determinant of national greatness. For Mahan, sea power is not limited to naval strength in a narrow military sense; it encompasses a broader constellation of elements, including geographic position, physical conformation, extent of territory, population size, national character, and the

character of government (Mahan, 1890). These factors shape a state's capacity to develop commercial networks, sustain naval forces, and secure access to global markets. Sea power thus emerges as a synthesis of economic vitality, strategic foresight, and naval capability.

Mahan deepens this argument in *The Problem of Asia and Its Effect upon International Policies*, where he emphasizes that the distribution of maritime power in Asia would become a determining factor in global politics (Mahan, 1900). He stresses that Asia's coastal geography, straits, and archipelagic configurations create conditions in which naval positioning and control of maritime corridors shape the balance of power among great states. For Mahan, the struggle for influence in Asia would inevitably revolve around access to strategic maritime zones, as these spaces condition both economic vitality and military reach (Mahan, 1900). This anticipation of Asia as a theater of maritime competition reinforces the enduring relevance of his theory for contemporary Indo-Pacific dynamics.

Mahan insists that control of maritime communications—rather than mere coastal defense—is the central objective of naval strategy. He argues that the ability to command the sea allows a state to protect its commerce, disrupt that of its rivals, and project power far beyond its immediate shores (Mahan, 1890). This emphasis on sea lines of communication (SLOCs) resonates strongly with contemporary analyses of maritime geopolitics, which highlight the strategic significance of chokepoints and trade routes in shaping global power distributions (Smith, 1994; Colin, 2016). In regions where maritime trade constitutes a primary artery of economic survival, control over key sea lanes becomes synonymous with strategic leverage.

In *The Problem of Asia*, Mahan explicitly underlines the necessity for maritime powers to secure forward positions in Asia in order to sustain influence and project authority beyond their immediate territorial waters (Mahan, 1900). He argues that naval stations, logistical nodes, and maritime footholds are not merely operational conveniences but structural prerequisites for durable influence. The possession or denial of such positions fundamentally alters the regional balance, as it determines which state can effectively command or contest surrounding waters (Mahan, 1900). This insight acquires particular resonance in semi-enclosed seas where geographic proximity amplifies the strategic value of even small insular features.

Geoffrey Till's modern reinterpretation of sea power further refines Mahan's insights for the contemporary era. In *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, Till argues that sea power must be understood as a multidimensional instrument combining military, diplomatic,

and constabulary functions (Till, 2013). Rather than focusing exclusively on decisive naval battles—as early readings of Mahan sometimes suggested—Till emphasizes the broader spectrum of maritime activities, including presence missions, deterrence, power projection, and maritime governance. This broader conceptualization aligns closely with contemporary practices in contested maritime spaces, where coast guard operations, maritime militia activities, and dual-use infrastructure complement traditional naval deployments (Poh et al., 2017; Ho, 2023).

Mahan's insistence on forward positioning and strategic bases is particularly relevant for understanding modern island-building and militarization strategies. He argues that overseas bases and coaling stations are indispensable for sustaining naval operations and ensuring command of distant seas (Mahan, 1890). In modern terms, such infrastructure enables sustained surveillance, rapid deployment, and denial of access to rival powers. The construction of artificial islands equipped with runways, radar systems, and missile platforms can thus be interpreted as contemporary manifestations of a classical maritime logic centered on forward presence and logistical resilience (McDevitt, 2014; Dolven et al., 2019; Wuthnow, 2018).

Moreover, Mahan views maritime supremacy not as an end in itself, but as a means of securing broader geopolitical influence. Control of the seas enables a state to influence distant regions, support allies, and deter adversaries without permanent territorial occupation (Mahan, 1890). In the Asia-Pacific, where maritime geography structures patterns of alliance and rivalry, the ability to maintain naval presence and conduct freedom-of-navigation operations plays a decisive role in shaping regional perceptions of power (America's Navy, 2024; Buszynski, 2019). Maritime presence becomes both a signal of resolve and a tool of strategic reassurance.

When read in conjunction with offensive realism, Mahan's theory provides the operational complement to structural incentives for power maximization. If, as Mearsheimer argues, rising powers are driven to seek regional hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2001; Mearsheimer, 2006), then maritime dominance becomes a critical instrument for achieving that objective in regions characterized by maritime geography. Friedberg's analysis of Asia as a theater of strategic competition underscores precisely this convergence between structural pressures and maritime strategy (Friedberg, 1993; Friedberg, 2011). The Asia-Pacific, defined by archipelagos, straits, and semi-enclosed seas, renders sea control particularly consequential.

Mahan's reflections on Asia in 1900 also demonstrate that maritime competition in the region was not an unforeseen development of the twenty-first century, but a structural feature anticipated at the height of classical geopolitics (Mahan, 1900). His emphasis on the strategic centrality of Asian waters, the importance of insular positions, and the linkage between sea control and political influence provides historical depth to contemporary analyses of Indo-Pacific rivalry. In this sense, classical naval theory does not merely illuminate past imperial contests; it offers enduring insights into how maritime spaces become arenas of power projection and geopolitical reconfiguration.

In sum, classical naval theory, as articulated by Mahan and refined by contemporary scholars such as Till, provides an indispensable framework for understanding the strategic logic of maritime competition. By emphasizing control of sea lines of communication, forward positioning, commercial interdependence, and geopolitical leverage, Mahan's theory illuminates the enduring relationship between maritime power and national influence. Applied to the contemporary Asia-Pacific—and particularly to the South China Sea—this framework suggests that maritime consolidation is not merely tactical but deeply embedded in broader strategies of regional dominance. In combination with offensive realism, classical naval theory thus offers a powerful lens through which to interpret contemporary maritime dynamics and the strategic behavior of rising powers.

2.1.3 Constructivism and identity dynamics (Alexander Wendt)

Whereas offensive realism interprets international politics through structural constraints and material capabilities, and classical naval theory highlights the strategic importance of maritime control, constructivism shifts the analytical focus toward the social construction of international reality. In this framework, power, threat, and even anarchy are not treated as fixed objective conditions, but as phenomena mediated by intersubjective meanings, identities, and normative structures. Alexander Wendt's contribution is central to this perspective, particularly through his argument that “anarchy is what states make of it” (Wendt, 1992).

In his 1992 article, Wendt challenges the realist assumption that anarchy inevitably produces self-help and power competition. He contends that anarchy, understood as the absence of central authority, does not possess intrinsic causal effects. Rather, its meaning depends on the shared understandings and expectations that states construct through interaction (Wendt, 1992). States do not respond to material power in isolation; they respond to the perceived identity and

intentions of others. A nuclear-armed ally does not generate the same reaction as a nuclear-armed rival. Thus, structures of rivalry, competition, or cooperation are socially constituted rather than predetermined.

Wendt develops this argument systematically in *Social Theory of International Politics*, where he distinguishes between material structures and ideational structures (Wendt, 2000). While acknowledging the importance of material capabilities, he argues that they acquire meaning only within social contexts defined by shared knowledge. Identity becomes a key explanatory variable: it shapes how states define their interests, how they interpret threats, and how they justify actions. Interests are therefore not given exogenously—as in realism—but are constructed through identity formation and normative interaction (Wendt, 2000). This ontological shift has profound implications for understanding maritime disputes, where questions of sovereignty, legitimacy, and historical entitlement are deeply embedded in identity narratives.

Constructivism further emphasizes that norms shape both behavior and legitimacy. Finnemore argues that international norms are not mere constraints but constitute actors by defining what is considered appropriate behavior within a given community (Finnemore, 1998). States internalize norms through processes of socialization, and their actions often reflect a logic of appropriateness rather than a purely instrumental logic of consequences. In the maritime domain, norms embedded in UNCLOS, freedom of navigation principles, and sovereignty doctrines create a normative framework within which states justify and contest their claims (Beckman, 2013; Kausar, 2023). Disputes over maritime rights thus become struggles over normative authority as much as over material control.

The constructivist emphasis on identity is particularly salient in the Chinese context. Qin Yaqing argues that Western theories often underestimate the relational and processual dimensions of Chinese political thought (Qin, 2018). His relational theory posits that international politics should be understood through the lens of relationships rather than isolated actors. Identity emerges through interaction, and order is shaped by evolving patterns of relational hierarchy and reciprocity (Qin, 2018). This perspective complicates realist interpretations by suggesting that China's behavior may be guided not solely by power maximization but also by historically embedded understandings of status, recognition, and relational positioning.

Yan Xuetong similarly highlights the normative dimension of Chinese strategic thought. While often associated with realist analysis, Yan's work emphasizes the importance of moral authority and political legitimacy in sustaining durable power (Yan, 2014). He argues that a rising power must cultivate normative leadership in order to secure stable influence. This emphasis on moral standing resonates with constructivist arguments about the co-constitution of power and legitimacy. Influence, in this sense, derives not only from material superiority but from the ability to shape normative expectations and define acceptable conduct.

David Callahan's scholarship provides further insight into the identity narratives shaping Chinese foreign policy. In *National Insecurities*, Callahan demonstrates how narratives of historical humiliation and sovereign restoration structure contemporary Chinese nationalism (Callahan, 2004). These narratives frame territorial disputes not merely as strategic contests but as moral imperatives tied to national dignity. In *China: The Pessimist Nation*, he argues that Chinese political discourse oscillates between triumphalism and insecurity, producing a hybrid identity that simultaneously asserts resurgence and perceives encirclement (Callahan, 2010). Such identity constructions influence how maritime disputes are framed domestically and internationally, transforming contested waters into symbols of national revival.

Constructivism also illuminates the performative dimension of maritime practices. The construction of artificial islands, the naming of maritime features, and the invocation of historical rights can be understood as acts of identity reinforcement and norm construction. These practices signal not only control but belonging. As Zhang notes, historical narratives and civilizational references are mobilized to legitimize maritime claims and embed them within broader discourses of national rejuvenation (Zhang, 2019). The performative assertion of sovereignty thus contributes to the social construction of legitimacy, even in the face of competing legal interpretations.

Furthermore, the rejection or reinterpretation of international arbitration decisions cannot be explained solely through material calculation. From a constructivist perspective, such actions reflect contestation over normative authority and the meaning of legal order (Ngo, 2024). The struggle over UNCLOS interpretations becomes a struggle over whose understanding of maritime governance prevails. In this context, legitimacy operates as a strategic resource. As Finnemore argues, even powerful states seek to frame their actions within normative justifications, because legitimacy enhances compliance and reduces resistance (Finnemore, 1998).

Constructivist analysis also interacts with the broader geopolitical literature on Asia. Medeiros highlights how China's strategic discourse increasingly frames the Asia-Pacific as a space of historical restoration and rightful influence (Medeiros, 2019). Lampton similarly underscores the importance of political narratives in shaping China's regional engagement (Lampton, 2019). These discursive constructions influence both domestic expectations and external perceptions, contributing to the social environment within which material strategies unfold.

The constructivist perspective does not deny the importance of material power emphasized by realism or maritime theory. Rather, it argues that material capabilities are embedded in social meanings. A naval base is not simply a logistical asset; it is also a symbol of presence and recognition. A maritime patrol is both an operational act and a narrative statement. Through repeated interaction, these practices contribute to redefining what is considered normal or legitimate in a given maritime space.

In the Asia-Pacific, where historical memory, civilizational discourse, and competing visions of order intersect, identity politics plays a particularly central role. Maritime disputes are embedded within broader narratives of post-colonial recovery, sovereign affirmation, and national rejuvenation. Understanding these dynamics requires attention not only to balance-of-power calculations but also to how actors construct and contest meanings. Constructivism thus provides an indispensable analytical lens for examining how identity narratives and normative claims interact with strategic behavior in contested maritime regions.

2.2 China's Strategic Hypothesis in the South China Sea

2.2.1 A multidimensional strategy: military, legal-diplomatic, symbolic

China's strategy in the South China Sea since 2014 is best understood as a multidimensional project integrating military consolidation, legal-diplomatic maneuvering, and symbolic narrative construction. Rather than relying on open confrontation or unilateral coercion alone, Beijing has progressively articulated a layered strategy designed to transform the regional balance of power while reshaping the normative and symbolic environment in which maritime disputes unfold. This multidimensionality reflects both material calculations and ideational ambitions, combining structural power accumulation with efforts at legal legitimation and identity affirmation.

The most visible component of China's strategy has been the rapid physical transformation of disputed maritime features. Satellite imagery and field analyses document the large-scale land reclamation and infrastructure construction undertaken in the Spratly Islands from 2014 onward (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2017; AMTI, 2018). These reports detail the development of runways, radar installations, missile shelters, deep-water ports, and logistical facilities, significantly enhancing China's operational reach across the South China Sea. What had previously been isolated reefs were converted into militarized outposts capable of supporting sustained air and naval operations (Erickson, 2014; Wuthnow, 2018).

The consolidation of these positions enhances maritime domain awareness and strengthens anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, complicating the operational freedom of external actors (Dolven et al., 2019; Ho, 2023). In semi-enclosed maritime environments, forward positioning multiplies strategic leverage by reducing response times and expanding surveillance envelopes (Mahan, 1890; Till, 2013). The cumulative effect is not simply defensive reinforcement, but a structural alteration of presence and access in the region.

This military consolidation has been accompanied by calibrated maritime enforcement practices. Coast guard deployments and maritime militia activities blur the boundary between civilian administration and military posture, enabling sustained pressure while limiting escalation thresholds (Poh et al., 2017; Ho, 2023). Administrative measures such as fishing regulations, patrol patterns, and the establishment of governance districts reinforce *de facto* jurisdiction without immediate recourse to overt armed confrontation (Dutton, 2011). Through incremental and repetitive actions, control becomes normalized before it is formally recognized.

Parallel to these material developments, a sustained legal-diplomatic strategy has sought to contest prevailing interpretations of maritime law. The arbitration initiated under UNCLOS and formalized before the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2014 constituted a direct legal challenge to China's claims (PCA, 2014). The subsequent rejection of the tribunal's jurisdiction and ruling reflects a refusal to accept interpretations perceived as incompatible with sovereignty claims (Talmon, 2014). The contestation of arbitration procedures illustrates an attempt to redefine the legal parameters within which maritime disputes are adjudicated (Beckman, 2013).

Selective engagement with international law allows sovereignty claims to be framed within alternative historical and jurisdictional narratives. Rather than abandoning legal argumentation, reinterpretations emphasize historic rights, administrative continuity, and jurisdictional

reservations (Beckman, 2013; Talmon, 2014). Legal discourse thus becomes an arena of normative struggle in which competing understandings of maritime entitlement are advanced (Ngo, 2024).

Diplomatic engagement complements this legal contestation. Bilateral negotiations, ASEAN consultations, and support for codes of conduct reduce the likelihood of unified counterbalancing while preserving core sovereignty positions (Zhao, 2013; Strating, 2020; Buszynski, 2019). Assertive maritime behavior coexists with diplomatic reassurance, producing a dual-track approach that combines firmness on territorial claims with flexibility on procedures and mechanisms.

The symbolic and narrative dimension reinforces both material and legal strategies. Sovereignty in the South China Sea is embedded within a broader narrative of national rejuvenation and territorial integrity. Official speeches delivered at Party congresses and major political gatherings under Xi Jinping consistently frame maritime rights as inseparable from the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (Xi Jinping, 2012; Xi Jinping, 2014; Xi Jinping, 2017). In this discourse, defending maritime claims becomes part of restoring historical dignity and overcoming past humiliation.

Narratives of humiliation and sovereign restoration transform contested maritime features into symbols of national revival (Callahan, 2004; Callahan, 2010). The South China Sea is thus not merely a strategic space but a symbolic frontier where national identity is enacted. Administrative acts such as renaming features, publishing official maps, and institutionalizing maritime governance further embed territorial claims within state identity (Zhang, 2019). Through repetition and institutionalization, these practices produce a sense of permanence and rightful authority.

Normative contestation extends beyond domestic discourse. Competing interpretations of maritime order reflect divergent understandings of legitimacy and appropriate behavior (Wendt, 2000; Finnemore, 1998). Framing actions as defensive, restorative, and historically grounded reduces reputational costs and complicates external opposition. Identity-based claims interact with legal argumentation to reshape expectations regarding acceptable conduct in contested waters (Qin, 2018; Yan, 2014).

The integration of military consolidation, legal reinterpretation, and symbolic affirmation generates cumulative strategic effects. Infrastructure alters operational realities; legal contestation reframes normative boundaries; narrative construction reinforces domestic legitimacy and signals resolve externally (AMTI, 2017; Babar et al., 2022). The result is a structured and layered approach that gradually transforms the South China Sea from a contested maritime arena into a space increasingly shaped by Chinese presence, governance practices, and discursive authority.

2.2.2 The role of the Chinese Communist Party and the narrative of national rejuvenation

Understanding China's strategy in the South China Sea requires situating it within the domestic architecture that produces and stabilizes long-term strategic behavior. The key feature of this architecture is that foreign and security policy are not neutral state functions insulated from politics; they are embedded in a Party-led system where regime legitimacy, ideological coherence, and strategic objectives are closely intertwined. Maritime policy is therefore shaped by a combination of centralized authority, institutional control over coercive instruments, and narrative production that turns sovereignty claims into identity-based imperatives.

A first element is the concentration of decision-making power at the top of the political system. Strategic priorities are increasingly framed and coordinated through Party-centered mechanisms rather than through plural, competing bureaucratic channels, which reduces fragmentation and enables sustained policy lines over time (Economy, 2018; Cabestan, 2020). This matters for the South China Sea because a multidimensional strategy—linking island-building, maritime law enforcement, diplomacy, and narrative legitimation—requires coordination across different state and quasi-state actors. A more centralized political environment makes it easier to synchronize these instruments toward stable strategic goals (Cabestan, 2020; Economy, 2018).

A second element is the Party's structural control over the military and security apparatus. The armed forces and security institutions operate under a political logic where loyalty and alignment with top-level priorities are central. This reinforces the ability to translate political narratives into operational postures and to sustain long-term maritime consolidation without frequent strategic reversals (Cabestan, 2020; Economy, 2018). In practical terms, this type of control helps explain how large-scale maritime activities can be maintained over years—

particularly the sustained transformation of reefs into fortified outposts and the normalization of continuous presence in contested zones (AMTI, 2017; AMTI, 2018; Ho, 2023; McDevitt, 2014).

A third element is the production of a coherent national narrative that defines the meaning of sovereignty. The South China Sea is not framed merely as a set of technical maritime entitlements or a bargaining problem; it is framed as part of a broader historical trajectory linking national dignity, territorial integrity, and the overcoming of past humiliation (Xi Jinping, 2012; Xi Jinping, 2014; Xi Jinping, 2017; Callahan, 2004). Within this narrative, sovereignty disputes become symbolic “tests” of national resolve, and policy choices become tied to demonstrations of historical restoration and political authority (Callahan, 2004; Xi Jinping, 2017).

This narrative framing has direct domestic consequences. A sovereignty-centered discourse increases the political costs of compromise, because concession can be interpreted internally as weakness or as betrayal of historical justice. This creates an environment in which assertive postures are not only strategically attractive but also politically safer than negotiated retreats, since domestic audiences can treat firmness as evidence of regime strength (Shirk, 2007; Callahan, 2004). A structural tension follows: external flexibility becomes harder precisely when sovereignty issues are narrated as existential components of national identity (Shirk, 2007; Callahan, 2010).

The narrative of “national rejuvenation” functions not only as ideology but as a mechanism that organizes strategic priorities. Maritime claims and maritime presence become embedded within a national project of regaining status and recognition, turning the South China Sea into a stage where regional hierarchy is asserted and performed through repeated acts of presence, administration, and symbolic sovereignty (Xi Jinping, 2012; Xi Jinping, 2014; Xi Jinping, 2017; Zhang, 2019). This helps explain why symbolic actions—maps, naming practices, administrative announcements, ceremonial language—matter strategically: they stabilize claims by embedding them within identity and legitimacy rather than leaving them as negotiable interests (Zhang, 2019; Callahan, 2004).

At the level of international behavior, identity and norm construction matter because legitimacy shapes resistance and compliance. Actions in contested maritime spaces do not operate only through coercion; they also operate through attempts to define what is “normal,” “lawful,” or

“historically justified.” The international environment becomes partly social and interpretive: behaviors are judged, contested, and sometimes gradually normalized depending on how claims are framed and received (Wendt, 1992; Wendt, 2000). In this perspective, sustained narratives—especially those repeated by senior political leadership—contribute to shaping both domestic and external expectations about rightful behavior (Wendt, 2000; Finnemore, 1998).

This dynamic is particularly visible in the legal-diplomatic dimension of the South China Sea, where the arbitration process initiated under UNCLOS and formalized at the Permanent Court of Arbitration crystallized a confrontation between legal interpretation and political sovereignty narratives (PCA, 2014). The refusal to participate in or accept arbitration operates both as a juridical position and as a symbolic act of resistance to perceived external imposition, reinforcing domestic narratives of autonomy and dignity (Talmon, 2014; Xi Jinping, 2014). In this context, legal reasoning is inseparable from ideology, as it forms part of a broader claim about authority, sovereignty, and the power to define the applicable rules (Beckman, 2013; Talmon, 2014). Moreover, disputes over UNCLOS, historic rights, and maritime status extend beyond technical legal disagreement, reflecting competing conceptions of legitimate order and of who holds the authority to determine it (Beckman, 2013; Dutton, 2011). This entanglement of law and power intensifies when sovereignty and national rejuvenation narratives transform the dispute from a pragmatic contest into a moral-political claim (Callahan, 2004; Xi Jinping, 2017).

The Party-led narrative also supports a specific style of strategy: incremental consolidation combined with political framing. The physical transformation of features—documented through imagery and technical assessments—creates durable facts on the ground (AMTI, 2017; AMTI, 2018). The continued use of coast guard and auxiliary assets blurs the boundary between civilian governance and military posture, enabling persistent pressure while limiting escalation (Poh et al., 2017; Ho, 2023). In parallel, diplomatic messaging and sovereignty narratives reduce the space for external actors to reinterpret these moves as purely aggressive, because they are framed as defensive acts of rights protection and national restoration (Xi Jinping, 2014; Zhao, 2013).

The Party’s interest in legitimacy further shapes external diplomacy. A stable domestic narrative of rejuvenation encourages consistent signaling abroad: maritime posture is framed as rightful and non-negotiable in principle, while negotiation is encouraged on procedures, codes of conduct, or de-escalation mechanisms that do not touch the core sovereignty claim (Zhao,

2013; Strating, 2020; Buszynski, 2019). This pattern fits a multidimensional strategy: it preserves the political red lines demanded by domestic legitimacy while exploiting diplomatic channels to manage backlash and prevent coalition-building (Strating, 2020; Buszynski, 2019).

Finally, the South China Sea functions as a particularly effective arena for linking domestic legitimacy to external strategy, because it simultaneously involves territorial symbolism, economic narratives, and strategic geography. The area is continuously framed as vital to national interests, not only in security terms but also through broader references to prosperity, stability, and long-term national objectives (Gao et al., 2013; Golley et al., 2018; Xi Jinping, 2017). This reinforces the political utility of maritime assertiveness: it can be presented as protecting both the nation's future and its historical dignity, aligning strategic behavior with regime legitimacy (Shirk, 2007; Economy, 2018).

2.2.3 The logic of control: securitization, deterrence, affirmation

The consolidation of Chinese influence in the South China Sea follows a structured logic that can be analytically decomposed into three interconnected mechanisms: securitization, deterrence, and affirmation. These mechanisms do not merely accompany material expansion; they provide the conceptual architecture through which control is progressively institutionalized. Rather than relying on episodic confrontation, this logic operates cumulatively, embedding power within political meaning, strategic signaling, and administrative normalization.

Securitization functions as the foundational layer of this logic. Security is not treated as a fixed objective condition but as a politically constructed status attributed to specific issues. When a matter is successfully framed as a threat to sovereignty, territorial integrity, or regime stability, it moves beyond routine policy management into a domain where extraordinary measures become legitimate (Skidmore, 1999). The South China Sea has been elevated into such a domain. By associating maritime disputes with national dignity, historical justice, and regime legitimacy, sovereignty claims are transformed into non-negotiable security imperatives (Xi Jinping, 2012; Xi Jinping, 2017).

This securitization reshapes both domestic and external expectations. Domestically, the linking of maritime sovereignty to existential national narratives reduces the political space for compromise. When maritime features are framed as components of territorial integrity tied to

national rejuvenation, policy flexibility becomes politically costly (Shirk, 2007; Callahan, 2004). Externally, securitization signals that certain thresholds—such as perceived encroachments on claimed waters—trigger elevated responses. The transformation of fishing disputes or energy exploration activities into matters of sovereignty protection illustrates how administrative or economic issues are redefined within a security framework (Dutton, 2011).

Skidmore’s emphasis on the social construction of security highlights that such framing alters institutional behavior and policy prioritization (Skidmore, 1999). Maritime law enforcement agencies, coast guard units, and naval forces operate within a narrative environment where their actions are justified as defensive and restorative. The normalization of continuous patrols and the expansion of administrative jurisdiction reflect not isolated tactical choices but a reclassification of maritime governance as a core security responsibility.

Deterrence constitutes the second layer of the logic of control, operating through calibrated signaling and positional reinforcement. The objective is not necessarily immediate territorial expansion but the prevention of adverse changes in the strategic environment. The concept of a “delaying strategy” clarifies this dynamic: consolidation is pursued incrementally while avoiding direct confrontation, thereby preserving long-term bargaining leverage (Fravel, 2011). Rather than provoking decisive conflict, actions are calibrated to strengthen *de facto* control while keeping escalation below major war thresholds.

Fravel’s analysis of China’s approach to territorial disputes underscores the importance of timing and relative power considerations (Fravel, 2011). When leaders perceive that the balance of power is improving or that time favors their position, restraint and gradual consolidation become preferable to risky escalation. In the South China Sea, the expansion of infrastructure, surveillance capacity, and maritime enforcement presence enhances strategic depth without triggering immediate large-scale confrontation (AMTI, 2017; AMTI, 2018). The logic is positional: each additional runway, radar installation, or coast guard patrol increases operational flexibility and complicates countermeasures.

Yamaguchi’s examination of China’s evolving maritime posture emphasizes the integration of conventional naval modernization with broader anti-access and area-denial capabilities (Yamaguchi, 2016). The development of layered defensive systems—including advanced missile deployments, expanded submarine capabilities, and extended-range air assets—contributes to shaping the operational environment in ways that deter intervention. Deterrence

here is not limited to overt threats; it operates through the creation of uncertainty regarding escalation costs. The presence of hardened facilities and dual-use infrastructure signals endurance and resilience, reinforcing perceptions that any attempt to reverse the status quo would entail significant operational risks (Yamaguchi, 2016; Erickson, 2014).

Administrative deterrence complements military signaling. Repeated enforcement actions, warnings to foreign vessels, and regulatory measures establish patterns of expected behavior (Fravel, 2011; Dutton, 2011). Over time, such repetition shapes expectations and contributes to the gradual internalization of new operational norms. The deterrent effect lies partly in habituation: the more frequent and routine the presence, the higher the threshold for contestation.

Affirmation constitutes the third layer of the logic of control, stabilizing gains through symbolic and institutional embedding. Whereas deterrence shapes behavior through cost calculation, affirmation shapes perception through repetition and identity reinforcement. Sovereignty is performed and reproduced through bureaucratic acts—renaming maritime features, integrating them into administrative hierarchies, publishing official cartography, and incorporating them into educational and political discourse (Zhang, 2019; Xi Jinping, 2014).

Affirmation also operates through leadership discourse that repeatedly links maritime sovereignty to national rejuvenation and historical continuity (Xi Jinping, 2012; Xi Jinping, 2017). Such repetition reduces ambiguity about long-term intentions and embeds territorial claims within collective identity. The strategic effect is cumulative: when claims are consistently framed as intrinsic components of national identity, external actors face increased difficulty in persuading domestic audiences that compromise is acceptable.

Normatively, affirmation interacts with international legal contestation. Rejecting specific arbitral interpretations while continuing to invoke sovereignty and historical continuity reframes the dispute as one over rightful authority rather than mere jurisdiction (Talmon, 2014; Beckman, 2013). This process reshapes expectations about what constitutes legitimate order in contested waters. Affirmation thus functions not only internally but also as an attempt to influence the interpretive environment in which maritime claims are assessed (Wendt, 2000).

This logic also explains why large-scale escalation has been avoided despite persistent tension. A delaying strategy favors gradual improvement of positional advantage over immediate

confrontation (Fravel, 2011). Enhanced maritime capabilities and fortified outposts increase bargaining leverage while maintaining ambiguity regarding escalation thresholds (Yamaguchi, 2016). At the same time, securitization ensures that sovereignty remains politically salient, preserving domestic cohesion around maritime policy (Skidmore, 1999; Shirk, 2007).

Control in the South China Sea thus emerges from the sustained interaction of constructed threat perception, calibrated deterrent signaling, and identity-based affirmation. The maritime domain becomes an arena where strategic positioning, normative contestation, and political symbolism intersect, generating a layered and cumulative transformation of authority.

3. Concrete Implementation of China's Strategy

3.1 Militarization and Physical Transformation of the Archipelagos

3.1.1 Territorial transformation: artificial island construction

The physical transformation of maritime features in the South China Sea represents one of the most visible manifestations of China's expanding presence in the region. Beginning in the early 2010s, Beijing undertook large-scale engineering operations aimed at modifying the physical geography of several features under its control in both the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos. Through dredging, land reclamation and infrastructure development, previously small coral formations or partially submerged reefs were converted into significantly larger land platforms capable of supporting permanent installations. These operations have profoundly altered the spatial configuration of several parts of the South China Sea and represent a major shift from earlier forms of occupation that were historically limited to small military outposts established on naturally emergent features (Erickson, 2016; McManus, 2017). This large-scale transformation can also be interpreted through a Mahanian perspective, where control over strategic maritime positions and forward bases constitutes a key instrument of sea power and long-term influence (Mahan, 1890).

The geographical characteristics of these archipelagos help explain the significance of these transformations. The Spratly Islands consist of a vast network of reefs, shoals and small islands dispersed across approximately 180,000 km² of maritime space in the southern South China Sea (Smith, 1994). Most of these formations are extremely small and lie only a few meters above sea level, while many others remain submerged at high tide. Even the largest natural islands are very limited in size and have historically supported only minimal infrastructure. As a result, the occupation of these features by the various claimant states long relied on small structures, often consisting of modest military installations built on stilts or reinforced coral platforms (Fravel, 2011). These installations allowed a symbolic presence but provided limited logistical capacity and remained vulnerable to the harsh environmental conditions of the region.

Beginning around 2013, China launched an extensive program of dredging and land reclamation across several reefs under its control in the Spratly archipelago. The engineering process involved the use of large hydraulic dredgers capable of extracting sand and sediment from the seabed and depositing this material onto coral reefs in order to raise their elevation and expand their surface area. This process gradually transformed submerged or semi-submerged reefs into stable artificial islands capable of supporting permanent infrastructure.

Satellite imagery indicates that these operations progressed at an exceptional pace between 2013 and 2015, demonstrating the scale of the technical and logistical resources mobilized during the construction campaign (McManus, 2017; AMTI, 2018).

The scale of the reclamation works in the Spratly Islands was unprecedented. According to available estimates, more than 3,200 acres of new land were created through dredging operations across several reefs, representing roughly thirteen square kilometres of artificial landmass (McManus, 2017; AMTI, 2018). These projects transformed previously narrow coral outcrops into large platforms capable of accommodating extensive infrastructure. The rapid expansion of these reclaimed surfaces significantly altered the physical geography of several reefs that had previously been barely visible above water during low tide.

The most extensive reclamation works were carried out on Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef and Mischief Reef, which became the largest artificial islands developed by China in the Spratly archipelago. At Fiery Cross Reef, dredging operations expanded a small coral formation into an artificial island covering approximately 2.7 km². The newly created surface rapidly hosted extensive infrastructure including port facilities, administrative buildings and a long runway capable of supporting aircraft operations (Erickson, 2016; McManus, 2017). Subi Reef underwent a similar transformation. Initially consisting largely of a submerged reef, it was expanded through massive dredging operations into a large artificial island where numerous installations were subsequently constructed (AMTI, 2018). Mischief Reef experienced one of the most dramatic transformations, evolving from a submerged reef into one of the largest artificial structures in the archipelago after large-scale reclamation work conducted between 2014 and 2015 (Kohl, 2018; McManus, 2017). From an offensive realist standpoint, such developments reflect a rational strategy of power maximization aimed at strengthening regional dominance and reducing strategic vulnerability (Mearsheimer, 2001).

In addition to these three major sites, China also carried out reclamation activities on several other reefs in the Spratly Islands, including Gaven Reef, Hughes Reef, Johnson South Reef and Cuarteron Reef. Although the land areas created on these sites were smaller than those of the three principal installations, the reclamation works nevertheless allowed the construction of permanent buildings, communication facilities and logistical structures. The distribution of these reclaimed sites across different sectors of the archipelago created a network of installations extending throughout the Spratly Islands (Smith et al., 2019; Erickson, 2016). This

spatial distribution contributed to the transformation of several scattered coral features into a series of fixed installations capable of supporting sustained human presence.

Following the initial dredging operations, extensive engineering work was conducted to stabilize the newly created land surfaces. Engineers reinforced reclaimed areas through soil compaction, concrete reinforcement and the construction of seawalls designed to protect the artificial islands from erosion caused by waves and storms. Additional works included the development of harbor basins and docking facilities to facilitate maritime logistics. These stabilization measures were essential in transforming newly deposited sediment platforms into durable structures capable of supporting large buildings and operational infrastructure (McManus, 2017).

The largest reclaimed reefs were also equipped with major infrastructure installations, including long airstrips constructed on Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef and Mischief Reef. Each of these runways measures approximately 3,000 meters in length and required substantial engineering efforts to ensure ground stability and structural resistance to environmental conditions. Around these airfields, additional facilities were built, including aircraft hangars, radar installations, communication systems and logistical buildings. The rapid development of such infrastructure highlights the scale and technological sophistication of the construction projects undertaken in the archipelago (Erickson, 2016; Holmes, 2014).

China's territorial transformation efforts were not limited to the Spratly Islands. In the Paracel archipelago, which Beijing has controlled since the mid-1970s, several islands also experienced land expansion and infrastructure development. Although the scale of reclamation there remained smaller than in the Spratlys, satellite observations indicate that a number of islands underwent dredging and coastal modification works designed to increase their usable land area. On Tree Island, for example, reclamation activities added approximately twenty-five acres of new land, enabling the construction of port facilities, a helipad and energy infrastructure including wind turbines and solar panels (AMTI, 2017). North Island also experienced smaller-scale reclamation works, which expanded the island by several acres and were accompanied by the construction of protective seawalls and additional buildings (AMTI, 2017). These projects illustrate how the physical modification of island features also occurred within the Paracel archipelago, albeit on a more limited scale.

The most developed location in the Paracel Islands remains Woody Island, which has progressively evolved into a central hub for Chinese infrastructure in the archipelago. Over time, the island has undergone significant expansion through port modernization, infrastructure construction and the development of logistical facilities capable of supporting sustained human presence. Although Woody Island was already naturally emergent before these developments, successive construction projects substantially increased its capacity and infrastructure density, reinforcing its role as a key installation within the archipelago (Erickson, 2016; Hayton, 2019).

Beyond their physical transformation, these reclamation projects have also generated considerable environmental consequences for the surrounding marine ecosystems. Coral reefs are among the most biologically diverse and fragile environments in the world, and the dredging techniques used during land reclamation can cause extensive ecological damage. The extraction of sediment from the seabed and its deposition onto coral structures directly destroys reef formations, while suspended sediment plumes increase water turbidity and can spread over large areas, affecting coral growth and marine habitats. Scientific studies indicate that reclamation operations in the Spratly Islands have caused significant degradation of coral reef ecosystems and affected surrounding marine environments through the dispersion of sediment and the burial of coral structures (McManus, 2017; Smith et al., 2019).

Within only a few years, these dredging and reclamation operations transformed numerous coral reefs and small islands in both the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos into significantly larger land platforms capable of supporting extensive infrastructure. Whereas earlier installations in these archipelagos had consisted primarily of small and often precarious outposts, the newly constructed artificial islands now constitute stable territorial platforms capable of sustaining long-term human and logistical activity. The scale and speed of these engineering works therefore represent one of the most significant physical transformations of the maritime landscape in the South China Sea in recent decades (Hayton, 2019; Luu et al., 2023).

3.1.2 Military deployment: runways, radars, missile systems, ports

Following land reclamation, China equipped its installations in the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos with a dense network of military infrastructure, transforming these features into operational forward bases capable of sustaining air, naval and surveillance activities. According to official U.S. assessments, these outposts now provide China with runways, deep-water ports,

advanced sensors and defensive systems, enabling a persistent military presence and rapid response capability across the South China Sea (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025; Erickson, 2016).

Airpower capabilities are concentrated on the three main Spratly bases—Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef and Mischief Reef—each equipped with runways of approximately 3,000 meters, completed between 2015 and 2016 (Erickson, 2016; AMTI, 2018). These airfields are supported by extensive aviation infrastructure. Satellite imagery analysis shows the presence of multiple hardened aircraft shelters and large hangars on each of these bases, allowing for the deployment, maintenance and protection of combat aircraft as well as larger support platforms (AMTI, 2018). The U.S. Department of Defense notes that these airfields enable the operation of combat aircraft, patrol aircraft and transport platforms, significantly extending China's operational reach into the South China Sea (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025). The presence of taxiways, apron areas and associated support facilities further indicates that these bases are designed for sustained and continuous air operations rather than temporary deployments (AMTI, 2018). These forward-deployed capabilities align with Mahan's emphasis on the necessity of overseas bases to sustain naval power projection and maintain control over strategic maritime spaces (Mahan, 1890).

Surveillance and information dominance are ensured through the deployment of advanced radar and sensor systems across multiple features. On Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef and Mischief Reef, radar towers equipped with radomes and associated communication systems have been identified, forming part of a broader network of sensors capable of monitoring maritime and aerial activity (AMTI, 2018; Holmes, 2014). Additional installations include high-frequency radar arrays, such as those observed on Cuarteron Reef, which provide long-range detection capabilities (AMTI, 2018). According to the U.S. Department of Defense, China has also deployed advanced radar systems, including those designed to detect low-observable (stealth) aircraft, further enhancing situational awareness across the region (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025). These systems are integrated into a wider surveillance architecture, allowing for continuous monitoring of key maritime routes and contested areas (Erickson, 2016). Beyond their operational function, these surveillance systems also contribute to shaping perceptions of control and dominance, illustrating how material capabilities acquire strategic meaning within a broader social context (Wendt, 1999).

Defensive and missile-related infrastructure constitutes another key component of these deployments. On several Spratly features, China has installed point-defense systems and fortified positions designed to protect critical infrastructure such as airfields and radar installations (AMTI, 2018). These include close-in defensive systems and artillery positions forming a protective perimeter around key facilities. In addition, the presence of hardened shelters and covered structures suggests the capability to deploy mobile missile systems when required (AMTI, 2018; Kohl, 2018). In the Paracel Islands, more explicit deployments are documented. On Woody Island, China has deployed HQ-9 surface-to-air missile systems, providing long-range air defense coverage over the surrounding maritime area (AMTI, 2017; Erickson, 2016). The U.S. Department of Defense further notes the deployment of anti-ship cruise missiles and surface-to-air missile systems across several outposts, reinforcing China's ability to contest both aerial and maritime access in the region (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025).

Naval infrastructure plays a central role in supporting these capabilities. Major Spratly installations include deep-water ports with dredged harbor basins, docking piers and logistical support facilities, allowing for the regular resupply of personnel and equipment (AMTI, 2018; McManus, 2017). These ports are capable of accommodating a range of vessels, including naval ships and coast guard units. According to U.S. assessments, these outposts support persistent deployments of the PLA Navy, China Coast Guard and maritime militia, significantly reducing response times and enabling sustained maritime operations (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025; Rapp-Hooper, 2015). In the Paracels, China maintains multiple harbors across the archipelago, including major facilities on Woody Island, which has been developed into a key logistical hub supporting both air and naval operations (AMTI, 2017; Hayton, 2019).

The operational sustainability of these installations is ensured through the development of extensive logistical infrastructure. Across the Spratly bases, the presence of fuel storage facilities, ammunition storage areas, communication systems and support buildings enables long-term autonomous operations (AMTI, 2018; Kohl, 2018). Additional infrastructure, including navigation and communication equipment, facilitates coordination between different bases and supports continuous operational activity. The U.S. Department of Defense emphasizes that these features are now capable of supporting extended deployments and sustained military operations without immediate reliance on mainland resupply, highlighting their role as forward-operating bases (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025).

Taken together, these developments demonstrate a structured and comprehensive process of militarization across both the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos. The combination of airfields, radar systems, missile-related infrastructure and naval facilities, supported by robust logistical systems, has transformed these features into integrated military installations. This network of forward bases enables continuous surveillance, sustained presence and rapid operational response across the South China Sea, reflecting a significant enhancement of China's military posture in the region (Erickson, 2016; U.S. Department of Defense, 2025; IISS, 2023).

3.1.3 A2/AD logic and maritime control

The militarization of China's installations in the South China Sea must be understood not as a simple accumulation of infrastructure, but as the integration of these features into a broader anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) system designed to restrict adversary freedom of movement - and control the operational environment. A2/AD refers to a combination of capabilities aimed at preventing an opponent from entering a contested area (anti-access) and limiting its operational effectiveness once inside (area denial), relying on a coordinated use of sensors, strike systems and defensive assets (Krepinevich, Watts & Work, 2003). In the case of China, this logic has been progressively extended from the mainland littoral to the maritime domain of the South China Sea, where artificial islands now function as forward nodes within this system.

The development of Chinese A2/AD capabilities is part of a long-term effort to challenge what has been described as the United States' "command of the commons," namely its ability to operate freely in the air and maritime domains (Biddle & Oelrich, 2016). Through the deployment of interrelated missile, sensor and command systems, China seeks to deny such freedom of movement to external actors, particularly in the Western Pacific and within the First Island Chain, where the South China Sea constitutes a central operational theater (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025). As emphasized by Mastro, this strategy is not purely defensive but aims at enabling China to exercise greater control over its near seas while shaping the strategic environment in ways that complicate U.S. intervention (Mastro, 2019). The integration of artificial islands into this architecture contributes to extending the geographical reach of these capabilities beyond the Chinese coastline. From an offensive realist perspective, the development of A2/AD capabilities can be understood as a strategy aimed at limiting external intervention and securing a favorable regional balance of power (Mearsheimer, 2001).

A central component of this system lies in the development of a dense and layered strike capability. China has established a “system-of-systems” combining anti-ship, anti-air and land-attack missile systems capable of engaging targets at significant distances from the mainland, with ranges extending hundreds of miles and, in some cases, reaching the First and even Second Island Chains (Suorsa, 2025). These capabilities are supported by the PLA Rocket Force, whose ballistic and cruise missiles are designed to target both naval assets, such as carrier strike groups, and fixed infrastructure, including military bases (Suorsa, 2025). In this context, the deployment of similar systems on artificial islands significantly enhances their operational relevance by reducing the distance between launch platforms and potential targets. As noted in assessments of Chinese military modernization, these strike systems are increasingly integrated within joint operational frameworks, enabling coordinated use across services and domains (IISS, 2023).

The effectiveness of A2/AD relies heavily on the ability to detect, track and target adversary forces, making surveillance and reconnaissance systems a critical component of the overall architecture. China has developed a comprehensive network of sensors combining coastal radars, over-the-horizon systems, satellites and airborne platforms, enabling persistent monitoring of maritime and aerial activity across the South China Sea (Suorsa, 2025). The establishment of radar stations on artificial islands has played a key role in expanding this coverage, providing enhanced situational awareness and reducing gaps in detection across the region (Suorsa, 2025). These systems are further reinforced by space-based assets, including a rapidly growing constellation of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance satellites, as well as navigation systems such as BeiDou, which support targeting and coordination functions (Suorsa, 2025). This emphasis on information dominance reflects what Costello describes as a focus on degrading the adversary’s C4ISR architecture, with the objective of disrupting command and control processes and reducing operational effectiveness (Costello, 2017). In this regard, Dobija further highlights that China’s approach to A2/AD increasingly relies on the integration of information, electronic and cyber domains to complement kinetic capabilities, reinforcing the systemic nature of its operational doctrine (Dobija, 2022).

Airborne and unmanned platforms complement this network by providing additional layers of surveillance. Aircraft such as the KJ-500 airborne early warning system and specialized intelligence platforms contribute to long-range detection and information gathering, while unmanned aerial systems, including models such as the BZK-005 or WZ-7, provide persistent

surveillance capabilities with extended endurance over maritime areas (Suorsa, 2025). These platforms enable continuous monitoring of the operational environment and facilitate the rapid transmission of targeting data to strike systems, forming an integrated sensor-to-shooter chain, which is central to the effectiveness of A2/AD systems (Krepinevich, Watts & Work, 2003).

Naval forces constitute another essential component of China's A2/AD system, contributing both to sea control and to the enforcement of access denial. The PLA Navy, now the largest in the world in terms of fleet size, includes a wide range of modern surface combatants, submarines and amphibious units capable of operating in the South China Sea (Suorsa, 2025). The South Sea Fleet alone comprises numerous destroyers, frigates and submarines equipped with advanced missile systems, including anti-ship cruise missiles such as the YJ-12 and YJ-18, which provide significant strike capabilities against surface targets (Suorsa, 2025). Submarines, particularly diesel-electric platforms equipped with air-independent propulsion, further enhance this capability by offering stealthy strike options and the ability to interdict maritime traffic (Suorsa, 2025). These developments reflect a broader evolution of the PLA Navy toward a more capable and flexible force able to operate in contested environments and support A2/AD objectives (IISS, 2023).

The integration of these different components reflects a broader shift toward what Chinese doctrine describes as “informatized warfare,” emphasizing the importance of information dominance and networked operations (Suorsa, 2025). This approach seeks to “blind” and “deafen” adversaries by targeting their sensors and communication systems, while preserving the integrity of China's own networks. Cyber, electronic warfare and space-based capabilities therefore play a critical role in supporting A2/AD operations, ensuring both the effectiveness of strike systems and the resilience of the overall architecture (Suorsa, 2025). As highlighted by Costello, this systemic targeting of information systems represents a central feature of Chinese operational thinking, where the objective is to paralyze adversary decision-making processes rather than merely destroy physical assets (Costello, 2017). Dobija similarly underlines that the effectiveness of China's A2/AD strategy depends on the synchronization of these different domains, allowing Beijing to operate within a fully integrated battlespace (Dobija, 2022).

Artificial islands in the South China Sea play a key role in this system by serving as forward platforms that extend both the sensing and striking capabilities of the PLA. Equipped with radars, communication systems, missile emplacements and logistical infrastructure, these

installations allow China to project power further into contested areas and to maintain a persistent presence in strategic maritime zones (Suorsa, 2025; U.S. Department of Defense, 2025). By reducing the distance between sensors, shooters and potential targets, they increase the responsiveness and effectiveness of A2/AD operations, while also complicating adversary planning and operations. As noted by Mastro, such forward-deployed capabilities are instrumental in enabling China to impose operational constraints on opposing forces without necessarily engaging in large-scale conflict (Mastro, 2019).

From a strategic perspective, these capabilities enable China to pursue several operational objectives, including the restriction of access to contested areas, the protection of its own forces and assets, and the imposition of costs on potential adversaries. A2/AD can be used to support different forms of military action, ranging from deterrence and coercion to more active operations such as blockades or limited strikes (Biddle & Oelrich, 2016). In particular, the ability to interdict maritime and aerial movement makes A2/AD a powerful tool for enforcing control over key sea lines of communication and for isolating contested territories, a strategy that may be more feasible than large-scale amphibious operations in a contested environment (Biddle & Oelrich, 2016).

At the same time, the effectiveness of A2/AD is not unlimited and depends on a number of structural constraints. As highlighted in the literature, the reach of such systems tends to decrease with distance from the supporting landmass, and the effectiveness of surveillance systems can be affected by environmental and operational factors (Biddle & Oelrich, 2016). Moreover, the reliance on fixed infrastructure, such as radar installations or airbases, creates potential vulnerabilities in high-intensity conflict scenarios, where these assets could become priority targets.

Overall, the integration of artificial islands into China's A2/AD architecture reflects a coherent and evolving strategy aimed at reshaping the military balance in the South China Sea. By combining long-range strike capabilities, advanced surveillance systems and forward-deployed infrastructure, China has developed a layered and multidimensional system designed to control access, monitor activity and, if necessary, deny adversaries the ability to operate freely within this strategically vital region.

3.2 Legal and Diplomatic Strategies of Legitimation

3.2.1 Rejection of international arbitration (The Hague, 2016)

The arbitration initiated by the Philippines in 2013 under Annex VII of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) represents a central attempt to juridify the South China Sea dispute by isolating issues related to maritime rights and obligations from the broader question of territorial sovereignty. This procedural strategy aimed to bring the dispute within the compulsory dispute settlement mechanisms of UNCLOS, which constitutes a comprehensive legal framework governing maritime entitlements, including territorial seas, exclusive economic zones (EEZs), and continental shelves (Becker, 2009). By focusing on the interpretation and application of UNCLOS provisions, the Philippines sought to avoid questions of sovereignty over land features, which fall outside the Convention's jurisdictional scope.

This approach was already reflected in the early procedural phase of the case, during which the tribunal framed the dispute in strictly legal terms, emphasizing that the submissions concerned the interpretation and application of the Convention rather than territorial sovereignty (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2014). The arbitral tribunal subsequently endorsed this distinction more explicitly, affirming that it was not competent to determine sovereignty over disputed islands but could rule on maritime entitlements and legal claims derived from them (PCA, 2015). This allowed the tribunal to proceed despite China's objections, concluding that the dispute concerned the interpretation of UNCLOS provisions rather than territorial ownership. In doing so, the tribunal relied on the structure of the Convention itself, which establishes binding procedures for the settlement of disputes concerning its interpretation, even in the absence of one of the parties (PCA, 2015). The tribunal thus rejected China's argument that the case was fundamentally about sovereignty and therefore outside its jurisdiction.

China, however, categorically refused to participate in the arbitration and rejected its legitimacy from the outset. In its official Position Paper, Beijing argued that the dispute "essentially concerns territorial sovereignty over several maritime features," and therefore falls outside the scope of UNCLOS dispute settlement procedures (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2014). China further emphasized that it had made a declaration under Article 298 of UNCLOS excluding disputes relating to maritime delimitation from compulsory arbitration, thereby reinforcing its position that the tribunal lacked jurisdiction. This legal argument was coupled with a political position favoring bilateral negotiations as the appropriate mechanism for

resolving the dispute, reflecting a broader rejection of third-party adjudication in matters perceived as core sovereignty issues.

The tribunal nonetheless proceeded with the case and, in its Award, delivered a landmark ruling on 12 July 2016. It concluded that China's claims to "historic rights" within the so-called nine-dash line are incompatible with UNCLOS, which it considered to establish a complete and exhaustive system of maritime entitlements (PCA, 2016a). The tribunal demonstrated that earlier Chinese legal instruments, including the 1958 declaration and subsequent legislation, did not support a claim to extensive maritime rights over the waters within the line, but rather referred primarily to sovereignty over insular features (PCA, 2016a). It further noted that the concept of "historic rights" invoked by China lacked a clear legal definition and was not compatible with the Convention's regime, which limits maritime entitlements to those explicitly provided for under UNCLOS.

In addition, the tribunal conducted a detailed legal analysis of the status of maritime features in the Spratly Islands. It concluded that none of these features qualify as "islands" capable of generating an EEZ under Article 121(3) of UNCLOS, as they are unable to sustain human habitation or economic life of their own (PCA, 2016a). Instead, they are classified as "rocks" or low-tide elevations, which significantly limits their maritime entitlements. This finding has profound implications, as it drastically reduces the extent of maritime zones that can be claimed on the basis of these features.

The tribunal also found that China had violated the Philippines' sovereign rights within its EEZ, particularly through interference with fishing and petroleum exploration activities and through the construction of artificial islands on features located within the Philippine EEZ (PCA, 2016b). These activities were deemed incompatible with UNCLOS obligations, including those related to the protection of the marine environment and the duty to respect the rights of other coastal states.

Despite the legal authority of the Award, China immediately rejected its validity and binding nature. In its official statement, the Chinese government declared that the ruling was "null and void and has no binding force," reaffirming its policy of non-acceptance and non-recognition (State Council of the PRC, 2016). This position has been consistently reiterated in subsequent official communications, which maintain that the arbitration was illegitimate and that China's sovereignty and maritime rights remain unaffected (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC,

2025). This rejection reflects not only a disagreement over legal interpretation, but also a broader contestation of the authority of international adjudication mechanisms when they are perceived to conflict with national interests.

From a critical perspective, the tribunal's reasoning has been subject to significant academic debate. Talmon argues that the tribunal artificially separated maritime issues from underlying sovereignty disputes in order to establish jurisdiction, thereby constructing a legally justiciable dispute that does not fully correspond to the geopolitical reality of the conflict (Talmon, 2016). According to this critique, the fragmentation of the dispute into discrete legal questions risks obscuring the structural link between territorial sovereignty and maritime entitlements. At the same time, broader analyses of international order dynamics suggest that such legal processes unfold within a context of great power competition, where rising powers may selectively accept or reject international norms depending on their strategic interests (De Pires, 2022) .

Ultimately, the rejection of the 2016 arbitration highlights the structural limits of international law in resolving highly politicized disputes. While UNCLOS provides a detailed and binding legal framework, its effectiveness depends on the willingness of states to comply with its rulings. As demonstrated in this case, even a legally robust decision may have limited practical impact when confronted with strategic interests and power considerations, illustrating the gap between legal normativity and geopolitical realities (Becker, 2009; PCA, 2016b).

3.2.2 Selective interpretation of UNCLOS

China's approach to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in the South China Sea is characterized by a selective interpretation of its provisions, combined with the strategic use of its procedural limitations and normative ambiguities. China ratified UNCLOS in 1996, thereby formally accepting its legal framework while subsequently developing interpretative positions that diverge from its dominant reading (Colin, 2016). While UNCLOS establishes a comprehensive framework governing maritime zones and rights, it also contains structural gaps, notably regarding sovereignty and dispute settlement, which allow states to develop competing legal interpretations (Beckman, 2013; Klein, 2014; Javed et al., 2023). This dynamic reflects a broader pattern in which legal norms are mobilized in support of competing national claims rather than applied uniformly, as multiple legal bases including historical, territorial and maritime arguments are invoked simultaneously within the same dispute (Furtado, 1999; Chang, 1991). This selective interpretation also illustrates how legal

norms are not applied in a purely objective manner but are shaped by state interests and identities, as emphasized by constructivist approaches (Wendt, 1999).

UNCLOS defines maritime entitlements through a structured system, notably Articles 3, 56 and 57, which establish a territorial sea of 12 nautical miles and an Exclusive Economic Zone extending up to 200 nautical miles, within which coastal states enjoy sovereign rights over natural resources (UNCLOS, 1982; Javed et al., 2023). However, these rights do not confer full sovereignty, as the EEZ also preserves freedoms of navigation and overflight for other states (UNCLOS, 1982; Colin, 2016). China adopts a restrictive interpretation of these provisions, arguing that foreign military activities within its EEZ, including surveillance and intelligence gathering, require prior consent due to potential threats to national security (Colin, 2016). This position is particularly significant given that China has been a State Party to UNCLOS since 1996, reinforcing the tension between its formal commitment to the Convention and its restrictive interpretation of certain provisions (Colin, 2016). This interpretation reflects an extension of coastal state jurisdiction beyond the dominant reading of UNCLOS and aligns with broader patterns in which legal rules are interpreted in light of strategic considerations rather than strictly normative constraints (Furtado, 1999).

This divergence is made possible by the structure of UNCLOS itself. The dispute settlement system under Part XV allows states to exclude certain categories of disputes through declarations, reflecting a politically negotiated compromise (Klein, 2014). China has relied on this flexibility through its declaration under Article 298, excluding disputes relating to maritime delimitation and military activities from compulsory arbitration (UNCLOS, 1982; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2014). This legal mechanism enables China to remain formally within the UNCLOS framework while rejecting third party adjudication, as illustrated by its refusal to participate in the arbitration initiated by the Philippines (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2014). This position is closely linked to the nature of the dispute itself, which is rooted in competing claims of sovereignty over maritime features rather than solely in maritime delimitation, placing it partially outside the operational scope of UNCLOS (Furtado, 1999; Chang, 1991).

The Chinese Position Paper of 2014 further develops this argument by asserting that the South China Sea disputes fundamentally concern territorial sovereignty rather than the interpretation of UNCLOS, thereby placing them outside the jurisdiction of arbitral tribunals (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2014). This requalification of the dispute is central, as jurisdiction

depends on how the legal issue is framed (Klein, 2014). China reaffirmed this position in its 2016 official statement, declaring the arbitral award null and void and without binding force, thus rejecting its legal consequences while maintaining its adherence to UNCLOS in principle (State Council of the PRC, 2016).

At the substantive level, China complements its interpretation of UNCLOS with the invocation of historic rights, particularly through the nine-dash line. This claim has been formalized in diplomatic communications submitted to the United Nations in 2009, in which China asserted sovereignty over the islands of the South China Sea and rights over adjacent waters (Becker, 2009). However, the legal nature of this line remains deliberately ambiguous, as it is not accompanied by precise coordinates or a clear legal definition (Ikeshima, 2013). This ambiguity allows multiple interpretations, ranging from sovereignty claims over insular features to broader assertions of maritime rights, and reflects a pattern of overlapping legal justifications already identified in earlier analyses of the dispute (Chang, 1991; Furtado, 1999). The invocation of historic rights can therefore be seen as part of a broader process of norm construction, where states seek to legitimize their claims by embedding them within historically and socially constructed narratives (Finnemore, 1998).

Chinese legal scholarship has attempted to provide a doctrinal basis for these claims by arguing that historic rights can coexist with UNCLOS. Long standing practices such as fishing, navigation and resource exploitation are presented as generating rights under customary international law that are not extinguished by the Convention (Gao and Jia, 2013). This interpretation implies that UNCLOS does not constitute an exclusive legal regime, but rather coexists with other sources of international law (Gao and Jia, 2013). However, this view is contested by analyses emphasizing that UNCLOS establishes a comprehensive system of maritime entitlements based on clearly defined categories of maritime zones (Beckman, 2013; Becker, 2009).

The arbitral tribunal in 2016 adopted this restrictive interpretation, concluding that UNCLOS does not recognize historic rights within the EEZ beyond those explicitly provided for in the Convention (PCA, 2016a). It further emphasized that China's position is inconsistent with its conduct during the negotiation of UNCLOS, during which it did not assert historic rights overriding the EEZ regime, thereby weakening the legal coherence of its current claims (PCA, 2016a; UN, 2026). The tribunal also determined that many of the maritime features in the Spratly Islands do not qualify as islands under Article 121 paragraph 3, as they are incapable

of sustaining human habitation or economic life, and therefore cannot generate an EEZ (PCA, 2016a). This conclusion is reinforced by legal analyses of maritime feature classification, which distinguish between islands, rocks and low tide elevations, each generating different maritime entitlements (Kohl, 2018).

According to this classification, rocks are not entitled to an EEZ or continental shelf, while low tide elevations generate no maritime zones (Kohl, 2018). Artificial islands which have been extensively constructed in the South China Sea do not possess a territorial sea and cannot create new maritime rights (Kohl, 2018). UNCLOS specifies that such constructions are only permissible within a legally established EEZ, reinforcing the principle that maritime entitlements derive exclusively from natural land features (UN, 1982; Kohl, 2018). This principle is encapsulated in the doctrine that the land dominates the sea, which underpins the structure of maritime law (Beckman, 2013).

Despite these legal constraints, China's interpretation of UNCLOS is shaped by broader strategic considerations. The Convention reflects geopolitical compromises and remains open to competing interpretations influenced by power dynamics (Colin, 2016). The South China Sea dispute has long been associated with strategic and economic interests, particularly access to maritime routes and natural resources, which encourage states to adopt flexible legal positions (Chang, 1991; Furtado, 1999). This dynamic is reinforced by the structural limits of UNCLOS, which does not address territorial sovereignty and leaves certain contested issues insufficiently regulated (Beckman, 2013; Kohl, 2018).

Finally, UNCLOS provides mechanisms for the peaceful settlement of disputes, but their effectiveness depends on state consent and compliance (Javed et al., 2023). The absence of coercive enforcement mechanisms allows states to disregard legal interpretations when they conflict with national interests, highlighting a broader limitation of international law in highly contested geopolitical contexts (Furtado, 1999).

In this sense, China's selective interpretation of UNCLOS reflects a broader tension between legal normativity and geopolitical strategy. By combining formal adherence to the Convention with the invocation of historical rights, jurisdictional exceptions and security-based interpretations, China constructs a flexible legal position that challenges the universality of UNCLOS while avoiding outright violation.

3.3 Strategic Narrative and Grey Zone Operations

3.3.1 Grey zone tactics: militias, coast guard, dual-use infrastructure

China's grey zone tactics in the South China Sea rely on the coordinated use of maritime militias, coast guard forces, and dual-use infrastructure, forming a coherent system designed to alter the status quo incrementally while remaining below the threshold of conventional warfare. These practices correspond to a broader pattern of strategic behavior in which states pursue revisionist objectives through gradual and ambiguous means rather than overt military confrontation (Mazarr, 2015). This strategy is consistent with offensive realism, which predicts that states will pursue incremental expansion of influence when direct confrontation entails excessive risks (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Maritime militias constitute a central operational tool in this framework. Civilian fishing vessels are mobilized to assert presence in contested waters, creating a persistent and deniable form of pressure. These vessels operate in disputed zones not only for economic purposes but as instruments of sovereignty assertion, contributing to the gradual consolidation of control. The repeated deployment of such fleets reflects a logic of strategic gradualism, where incremental actions accumulate over time to produce significant geopolitical effects without triggering escalation (Arif et al., 2024). This dynamic is consistent with earlier patterns of Chinese behavior, where the strengthening of presence and control has often preceded formal consolidation of claims (Fravel, 2011).

The use of militias is closely linked to the activities of the China Coast Guard, which operates as the primary enforcement arm of China's grey zone strategy. Positioned between civilian and military domains, the coast guard enables the projection of coercive power under a legal and administrative framework. The adoption of the 2021 Coast Guard Law formalizes this role by granting authority to use force in defense of sovereignty and maritime rights, including in situations defined as imminent threats (AMTI, 2021). This legal foundation expands the operational flexibility of coast guard units, allowing them to engage in coercive actions such as boarding, expulsion, and deterrence operations while maintaining the appearance of law enforcement.

Operational practices illustrate the intensity and continuity of these activities. Chinese maritime enforcement agencies have conducted extended patrols in contested areas, increasing both their frequency and duration over time. These patrols involve actions such as expelling foreign

vessels, detaining fishermen, and disrupting economic activities, including hydrocarbon exploration. Incidents involving the cutting of seismic survey cables demonstrate the use of calibrated coercion to assert jurisdiction while avoiding escalation into open conflict (Fravel, 2011). Such actions are consistent with a broader strategy aimed at deterring rival claimants from strengthening their own positions, particularly in areas related to resource exploitation (Sarijo, 2024).

Dual-use infrastructure further enhances the effectiveness of these grey zone tactics. Artificial islands and maritime installations serve both civilian and military purposes, enabling sustained operational presence in contested areas. These facilities support coast guard deployments, logistics, and surveillance activities, while simultaneously reinforcing sovereignty claims through physical occupation. The development of such infrastructure reflects a multidimensional strategy combining administrative, legal, and physical measures to consolidate control over disputed territories (Kim, 2022). This approach also aligns with broader patterns of militarization and territorial transformation that underpin China's strategic posture in the region (Ngo, 2024).

The integration of these instruments is supported by a broader legal and diplomatic framework that seeks to legitimize China's actions. Maritime law enforcement activities, including patrols and the regulation of fishing and resource exploitation, are presented as exercises of jurisdiction consistent with China's interpretation of international law. This selective interpretation enables China to justify its actions while challenging the legitimacy of competing claims, reinforcing a strategy that combines legal argumentation with operational enforcement (Poling et al., 2021). At the same time, diplomatic practices aim to delay dispute resolution while consolidating control, allowing China to strengthen its position without engaging in direct confrontation (Fravel, 2011).

Grey zone tactics are also facilitated by the ambiguity inherent in maritime governance structures. The complexity of overlapping jurisdictions and the lack of clear enforcement mechanisms create an environment in which incremental actions can proceed with limited resistance. This ambiguity is particularly evident in the interaction between civilian and military actors, where coast guard and militia operations blur traditional distinctions and complicate responses from other states (Arif et al., 2024). The necessity for flexible and coordinated responses to such challenges has been highlighted by regional actors facing these tactics, emphasizing the difficulty of adapting conventional security frameworks to grey zone dynamics

(Arif et al., 2024). This ambiguity also illustrates Wendt's argument that the meaning of actions in international politics depends on interpretation, as similar behaviors may be perceived differently depending on the identities and expectations of the actors involved (Wendt, 1992).

China's approach also reflects a broader strategic culture that integrates multiple instruments of power. Military, administrative, economic, and informational tools are combined to produce a comprehensive strategy aimed at reshaping the regional order. This multidimensional approach is evident in the synchronization of maritime enforcement activities with infrastructure development and legal assertions, creating a layered system of control that extends across different domains (Kennedy et al, 2017). Such integration enhances the resilience and effectiveness of grey zone operations by ensuring that actions in one domain reinforce outcomes in others.

The asymmetry between China and other regional actors further amplifies the effectiveness of these tactics. Superior capabilities in maritime law enforcement and naval support provide China with escalation dominance, enabling it to manage confrontation levels while maintaining continuous pressure. This creates a structural dilemma for smaller states, which must either accept incremental encroachments or risk escalation in a context where they face significant disadvantages (Arif et al., 2024). The persistence of Chinese vessels in contested areas, even after temporary withdrawals, illustrates this dynamic and its impact on regional stability (Erickson, 2017).

At a broader level, these practices reflect the characteristics of grey zone conflict as an emerging form of state competition. Actions are deliberately designed to remain below the threshold of war while achieving strategic objectives through gradual and cumulative effects (Mazarr, 2015). The combination of militias, coast guard forces, and dual-use infrastructure exemplifies this approach, enabling China to reshape the operational environment in the South China Sea without provoking a decisive response.

Overall, China's grey zone tactics constitute a coherent and adaptive strategy that leverages ambiguity, gradualism, and multidimensional integration to consolidate control over contested maritime spaces. Through the sustained use of maritime militias, the legal and operational authority of the coast guard, and the strategic deployment of dual-use infrastructure, China is able to progressively alter the balance of power in the South China Sea while maintaining the appearance of legality and avoiding the risks associated with open conflict.

3.3.2 Historical narrative: ancestral rights, colonial humiliation, national revival

China's historical narrative in the South China Sea is structured as a sequence of original presence, foreign interruption, and rightful restoration. In that sequence, "ancestral rights" are not presented as a vague cultural memory, but as a cumulative archive of discovery, naming, navigation, settlement, administration, and cartography. Chinese historical and legal writings insist that the South China Sea islands entered the Chinese political imagination long before the modern law of the sea, with references to Han era voyages, Ming expeditions, Qing patrols, and repeated naming practices that tied the Paracels and Spratlys to the Chinese imperial space (Chang, 1991). The same narrative is prolonged into the twentieth century through state backed cartographic and administrative acts, including the 1914 and 1935 map lineages, the 1947 atlas with the eleven dash line, and the 1947 official gazette of island names, which are invoked as proof that the maritime claim was not improvised after the Cold War but sedimented over time (Gao and Jia, 2013). In this sense, "historic rights" function not only as a legal formula, but as a narrative device that turns scattered records into an image of uninterrupted historical belonging (Gao and Jia, 2013; Chang, 1991).

This narrative acquires political force because it is inserted into the larger memory of maritime humiliation. The South China Sea is not remembered only as a space of routes and fishing grounds. It is also folded into the broader lesson that China became vulnerable when foreign powers arrived from the sea. In the discourse of national humiliation, the Opium War marks the beginning of a long period in which China was forced open, dismembered, and symbolically degraded, and maritime exposure becomes one of the recurring signs of weakness (Callahan, 2004). Xi Jinping's 2012 "Road to Rejuvenation" speech reinforces exactly that causal lesson when it links more than 170 years since the Opium War to the imperative that backwardness leaves China vulnerable to attack and that rejuvenation requires strength (Xi Jinping, 2012). The historical narrative surrounding the South China Sea therefore does not simply claim prior use. It converts the sea into a mnemonic frontier where earlier foreign incursions, treaty losses, and strategic weakness are remembered as reasons why sovereignty can no longer be left ambiguous (Callahan, 2004; Xi Jinping, 2012).

The humiliation component is then fused with a redemptive vocabulary of revival. Xi's 2014 speech on the "Chinese Dream of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" presents rejuvenation as a long held aspiration since the beginning of modern times, rooted in the idea that a weak and divided China brings disaster whereas a united and prosperous China brings

collective security and dignity (Xi Jinping, 2014). Xi's 2017 Party Congress report deepens the same temporal structure by presenting the Opium War as the turning point from civilizational greatness to decline, and by framing the Party's historical role as reversing that decline and restoring prosperity and strength (Xi Jinping, 2017). What matters for the South China Sea is that territorial disputes are inserted into this same narrative arc. They are not coded as peripheral maritime disagreements. They become fragments of the unfinished work of historical recovery, closely tied to reunification, territorial integrity, and the rejection of any renewed partition of Chinese space (Xi Jinping, 2014; Xi Jinping, 2017; Poh and Li, 2017).

This is why the emotional architecture identified in the "pessoptimist" literature is especially useful here. China is narrated as simultaneously ascendant and aggrieved, powerful and still haunted by prior subordination. The point is not simply to remember humiliation. The point is to mobilize a form of vigilance in which every sovereignty question can be read as a possible repetition of earlier losses (Callahan, 2010). In that framework, the South China Sea is narrated through historical maps, ancient voyages, and references to past invasions, while compromise is made to resemble another unequal concession imposed by external pressure (Callahan, 2010). This same fusion of triumph and trauma is visible in the Xi era more broadly, where rejuvenation is described as the governing ambition of the period and as part of a wider recalibration of China's relationship with the outside world (Economy, 2018). The maritime claim is therefore not only backward looking. It is also future oriented, because remembering humiliation becomes the means through which a stronger China justifies its return to a more central place in regional and global politics (Callahan, 2010; Economy, 2018).

The Xi era has also repackaged this historical narrative in a more outward facing diplomatic language. Poh and Li show that since 2012 official discourse has linked the "China Dream" to notions such as a "community of common destiny" and "major power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics," which means that the story of revival is no longer confined to domestic patriotic education but is projected into China's external conduct (Poh and Li, 2017). Xi's 2015 UN speech follows the same pattern. It presents the realization of the Chinese Dream as dependent on a peaceful international environment and a stable international order, while simultaneously insisting that China will not pursue hegemony and that its rise will generate opportunities for others (Xi Jinping, 2015). In the South China Sea, this allows Beijing to frame a hard sovereignty position in defensive language. Historical recovery is narrated as compatible

with peace, and even as a contribution to a fairer order, because the restoration of rights is presented as correction rather than expansion (Poh and Li, 2017; Xi Jinping, 2015).

That narrative became sharper after the global financial crisis and especially after 2008. Zhao's analysis shows that the sovereignty discourse surrounding maritime disputes became more strident, with the South China Sea increasingly absorbed into the language of core interests, more forceful patrols, and stronger reactions to foreign exploration and legal initiatives (Zhao, 2013). The shift is significant for the historical narrative because it marks the point at which older formulas such as "shelving disputes" were increasingly overshadowed by a language of rights protection and non negotiable sovereignty (Zhao, 2013). At the same time, the legal and historical record continued to be updated through administrative codification, as the 1958 territorial sea declaration, the 1984 Hainan administrative inclusion, and the 1992 territorial sea law reaffirmed the narrative that the four island groups belonged within China's territorial framework (Gao and Jia, 2013). The claim thus became narratively denser: ancient discovery supplied the origin, humiliation supplied the moral urgency, and contemporary legislation supplied the appearance of continuity (Zhao, 2013; Gao and Jia, 2013).

A final feature of this narrative is that it seeks recognition as much as control. Qin's relational perspective is useful here because it suggests that political meaning is produced through relationships rather than through isolated actors alone, and that identity is shaped within a broader relational context (Qin, 2016). Applied to the South China Sea, this means that the historical narrative is not only about proving ownership in an abstract legal sense. It is also about defining the relationship between China and its neighbors, and between China and outside powers, in a way that restores respect, status, and deference after a century in which China remembers itself as subordinated (Qin, 2016). This helps explain why official discourse constantly oscillates between legal memory, civilizational continuity, and diplomatic recognition. The South China Sea is narrated not as an isolated maritime dispute, but as one site where China's return to historical centrality is to be acknowledged in practice as well as in principle (Qin, 2016) ; Xi Jinping, 2017).

4. Regional Reactions and Geopolitical Reconfigurations

4.1 Responses from Coastal States and External Powers

4.1.1. ASEAN States' Adaptation Strategies in Response to China's Rise in the South China Sea

The adaptation strategies of ASEAN states in response to China's rise in the South China Sea are embedded in a regional environment characterized by increasing power asymmetry and significant heterogeneity of national interests. This diversity constitutes a structuring element of the regional response, as member states do not perceive either the Chinese threat or the economic opportunities in a uniform manner (Joshi, 2023). Some states, particularly those directly involved in territorial disputes, tend to prioritize security concerns and sovereignty issues, while others emphasize economic cooperation and regional stability, reflecting differentiated strategic priorities. This divergence is reinforced by varying levels of economic dependence on China, as well as differing domestic political considerations that shape national foreign policies. As a result, ASEAN's collective response remains fragmented, with individual states adopting tailored approaches that reflect their specific strategic calculations. This lack of homogeneity limits ASEAN's ability to adopt a coherent common position and fosters the emergence of differentiated national strategies, ultimately weakening its capacity to act as a unified geopolitical actor (Joshi, 2023).

In this context, ASEAN seeks to maintain a form of centrality within the regional architecture by positioning itself as both a "core" and a "hub" of diplomatic interactions in Southeast Asia (Hamanaka, 2024). This centrality relies on the organization's capacity to structure interactions among member states and external powers through institutional platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit. By acting as an intermediary, ASEAN attempts to shape the regional order and maintain its relevance despite increasing great-power competition. However, this position is increasingly challenged by power dynamics and by China's preference for bilateral engagement strategies, which tend to bypass ASEAN-led multilateral frameworks. As a result, ASEAN's centrality becomes more fragile, as external actors may engage selectively with individual member states rather than through the organization as a whole. This dynamic reduces the effectiveness of collective action and highlights the structural limitations of ASEAN's institutional influence in a rapidly evolving strategic environment (Hamanaka, 2024).

The adaptation of ASEAN states primarily relies on a shared normative framework centered on respect for international law and the promotion of peaceful dispute settlement. ASEAN

declarations consistently emphasize the importance of adhering to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), exercising self-restraint, and avoiding actions that could escalate tensions (ASEAN, 2014; ASEAN, 2024). These principles are repeatedly reaffirmed in official communiqués and summit statements, reflecting a collective commitment to stability and rule-based order in maritime disputes. This normative approach also serves to legitimize ASEAN's role as a regional mediator, reinforcing its diplomatic credibility on the international stage. However, the reliance on non-binding principles limits the practical effectiveness of these norms, as states retain the freedom to interpret and implement them according to their national interests. Consequently, while this framework contributes to maintaining a minimum level of stability, it does not prevent the persistence of tensions or the gradual transformation of the status quo in contested areas (ASEAN, 2014; ASEAN, 2024).

The use of international law also functions as a strategic instrument, enabling states to frame their claims and contest those of China within a recognized legal framework. International law thus shapes state behavior and structures interactions in the South China Sea dispute, although its effectiveness remains limited due to the absence of binding enforcement mechanisms and differing interpretations (Beckman, 2013). In particular, legal principles relating to maritime entitlements, sovereignty over features, and delimitation processes provide a structured basis for diplomatic engagement and dispute management. However, the ambiguity surrounding certain claims, especially those advanced by China, complicates the application of these rules and weakens their constraining effect. Furthermore, the selective use of legal mechanisms by states underscores the political nature of legal strategies in this context. As a result, international law operates more as a framework for legitimization and diplomatic positioning than as an effective tool for dispute resolution (Beckman, 2013).

Alongside this normative approach, ASEAN states develop capacity-building strategies aimed at strengthening their resilience in the face of China's rise. Indonesia, for instance, has undertaken a transformation of its defense doctrine by emphasizing maritime capabilities and adopting anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategies based on asymmetric means and enhanced maritime surveillance systems (Sarjito, 2025). This transformation reflects a broader shift toward maritime security prioritization, including the modernization of naval forces, the deployment of surveillance technologies, and the strengthening of coordination between military and civilian maritime agencies. These measures aim to improve situational awareness and deter potential incursions without escalating tensions. The emphasis on asymmetric

capabilities also indicates a recognition of the limitations faced by smaller states in conventional military competition. By focusing on deterrence and resilience, Indonesia and other ASEAN states seek to adapt to a security environment characterized by uncertainty and increasing strategic competition (Sarjito, 2025).

These strategies must be understood as responses to China's own approach, which combines militarization, paramilitary presence, and grey-zone tactics to consolidate its position in the South China Sea. The use of maritime militias and coast guard forces allows China to gradually alter the status quo without triggering open conflict, while the construction of infrastructure on disputed features strengthens its power projection capabilities (Poling et al., 2021; Mastro, 2014). These activities include land reclamation, the establishment of military facilities, and the deployment of surveillance systems, which collectively enhance China's operational reach in the region. The incremental nature of these actions complicates the responses of ASEAN states, as they fall below the threshold of conventional conflict. Consequently, regional actors must develop flexible and adaptive strategies to counter these developments, often relying on indirect measures rather than direct confrontation (Poling et al., 2021; Mastro, 2014).

Within this framework, hedging strategies emerge as a dominant response, allowing states to balance economic engagement with China and the diversification of their security partnerships. This approach seeks to maximize economic benefits while minimizing security risks associated with China's rise (Kuik, 2016). By maintaining strategic ambiguity, states can engage with multiple partners simultaneously, reducing dependence on any single actor. This strategy also allows them to adjust their policies in response to changing circumstances, preserving flexibility in an uncertain environment. The effectiveness of hedging lies in its ability to reconcile competing priorities, although it also reflects the constraints faced by smaller states in navigating great-power competition (Kuik, 2016).

Malaysia exemplifies this strategy through a policy combining economic cooperation with China and strategic caution in managing maritime disputes (Gerstl, 2020). This approach involves maintaining strong trade and investment ties with China while avoiding overt confrontation over territorial claims. Malaysia's strategy reflects a careful balancing act, aimed at preserving economic benefits without compromising national sovereignty. This pragmatic posture allows the country to manage risks while maintaining stable relations with both China and other regional actors, illustrating the practical application of hedging in a complex strategic environment (Gerstl, 2020).

Vietnam adopts a more assertive posture, characterized by a combination of economic cooperation and strategic resistance. This strategy relies on strengthening military capabilities and developing partnerships with external powers, allowing it to contain Chinese influence while avoiding direct confrontation (Thayer, 2016; Thayer, 2013). Vietnam's approach includes military modernization, increased defense spending, and enhanced cooperation with partners such as the United States and India. This dual strategy reflects a determination to defend national interests while maintaining a degree of engagement with China, highlighting the complexity of strategic adaptation in the region (Thayer, 2016; Thayer, 2013).

The Philippines, by contrast, have pursued a more fluctuating strategy, marked by a phase of appeasement that prioritized short-term economic gains (De Castro, 2017). This approach involved seeking Chinese investments and reducing tensions through diplomatic accommodation, although it did not eliminate underlying disputes. The variability of this strategy reflects the influence of domestic political dynamics on foreign policy decisions, as well as the challenges of balancing economic and security considerations in a contested maritime environment (De Castro, 2017).

At the regional level, ASEAN plays a central role in managing tensions primarily through diplomatic and institutional mechanisms. The organization's involvement has been reflected in the multiplication of declarations, communiqués, and dialogue mechanisms aimed at regulating disputes and promoting regional stability (Vinh et al., 2024). These efforts include regular ministerial meetings, summit discussions, and engagement with external partners, all of which contribute to maintaining communication channels and reducing the risk of escalation. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms depends on the willingness of member states to coordinate their positions and act collectively.

One of the key pillars of this effort is the negotiation of a Code of Conduct (COC) with China. This process, initiated in the late 1990s, aims to establish a normative framework for managing disputes but remains characterized by persistent deadlocks and divergences among the parties (Vinh et al., 2024). While progress has been made in developing a common negotiating text, fundamental disagreements regarding the scope, legal status, and enforcement mechanisms of the COC continue to hinder its conclusion.

ASEAN states' adaptation strategies are also shaped by the growing involvement of external powers in the region. This dynamic further complicates strategic choices, as states must

navigate between different partnership options while preserving their autonomy (Joshi, 2023). External actors contribute to capacity-building, maritime security cooperation, and diplomatic engagement, but their involvement also introduces additional layers of competition and influence.

However, ASEAN's effectiveness remains constrained by significant internal limitations. The principle of consensus hinders the adoption of strong common positions, while divergences between member states—particularly between claimant and non-claimant states—undermine cohesion (Vinh et al., 2024). These internal divisions reduce ASEAN's ability to respond decisively to regional challenges and weaken its overall strategic posture.

Finally, recent tensions in the South China Sea, particularly between China and the Philippines, illustrate the persistence of a conflictual environment despite ASEAN's diplomatic efforts. These developments confirm that the adaptation strategies implemented by regional states remain insufficient to fundamentally alter the balance of power on the ground (Vinh et al., 2024).

4.1.2 The role of the United States: FONOPs, strategic alliances (AUKUS, Quad)

The consolidation of China's position in the South China Sea, particularly since the large-scale land reclamation campaigns initiated around 2013–2014, has significantly altered the regional strategic environment and prompted a structured response from the United States. This response has combined operational tools such as Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) with the reinforcement of strategic alignments, notably through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), regrouping the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, and the AUKUS partnership, bringing together the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. These mechanisms aim to counterbalance the transformation of disputed maritime features—especially in the Spratly Islands, including Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef—into militarized outposts capable of sustaining extended Chinese presence (McDevitt, 2014).

FONOPs constitute the most visible and continuous dimension of U.S. engagement. These operations, conducted regularly by the U.S. Navy's Seventh Fleet, involve vessels such as Arleigh Burke-class destroyers transiting within 12 nautical miles of contested features to challenge maritime claims deemed inconsistent with international law. For instance, operations conducted near Mischief Reef—classified as a low-tide elevation under UNCLOS—directly contest any attempt to generate territorial seas from artificial constructions (Kausar, 2023).

These actions are not isolated demonstrations but part of a sustained operational pattern that intensified notably between 2015 and 2023, with multiple missions each year aimed at maintaining navigational rights and preventing the consolidation of unlawful claims (Freund, 2017; Sadhasivam et al., 2023). This approach corresponds to a broader strategic posture aimed at reaffirming the principle that the United States will “fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows,” even in the face of growing Chinese opposition (Konishi, 2018).

The necessity of these operations is rooted in the scale and sophistication of China’s island-building strategy. Between 2013 and 2016, more than 3,200 acres of land were reclaimed in the Spratly archipelago alone, transforming submerged features into permanent installations (Buszynski, 2019). These artificial islands are now equipped with 3,000-meter runways capable of hosting combat aircraft, hardened shelters, radar systems, and missile batteries, including surface-to-air and anti-ship systems. Such infrastructure allows for continuous surveillance and rapid force projection across critical sea lanes through which approximately one-third of global maritime trade transits (McDevitt, 2014; Wuthnow, 2018). The integration of these assets into an A2/AD framework significantly complicates external military access and reinforces China’s capacity to control its maritime periphery, forming what is increasingly described as a layered defensive system combining civilian, paramilitary, and military assets (Konishi, 2018).

Within this context, FONOPs serve both a legal and operational function. Legally, they reaffirm that artificial islands do not generate maritime entitlements under UNCLOS, thereby contesting attempts to reinterpret international norms (Kausar, 2023). Operationally, they maintain U.S. naval presence in contested waters, ensuring continued access despite the increasing density of Chinese military infrastructure. However, their limitations are evident in their inability to reverse the physical transformation of the maritime environment. The establishment of permanent facilities on previously submerged features represents a structural shift in the regional balance of power, effectively creating new strategic realities that cannot be undone through naval patrols alone (Buszynski, 2019). The persistence of land reclamation activities despite repeated operations highlights the limited coercive effect of this approach when not combined with broader strategic measures (Konishi, 2018).

This structural limitation explains the increasing reliance on multilateral and minilateral frameworks. The QUAD, initially conceptualized in 2007 and revitalized in 2017, has evolved into a central platform for strategic coordination among its four members: the United States, Japan, India, and Australia. Its activities include high-level summits, joint naval exercises such

as the Malabar exercise—held annually in locations ranging from the Bay of Bengal to the Philippine Sea—and coordinated diplomatic statements emphasizing the importance of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” (Vikrant, 2021). These initiatives contribute to reinforcing interoperability and signaling collective resolve without formalizing a mutual defense obligation.

The strategic logic of the QUAD lies in its flexibility. Rather than directly confronting China in contested areas such as the South China Sea, it focuses on shaping the broader strategic environment. This includes maritime domain awareness initiatives, infrastructure investments, and capacity-building programs targeting Southeast Asian states. Such efforts aim to strengthen regional resilience and reduce vulnerability to coercion, particularly in countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam, which are directly affected by Chinese activities in disputed waters (Mia et al., 2024; Tahir et al., 2023). These initiatives also align with broader U.S. efforts to support regional partners through surveillance systems, coast guard modernization, and joint maritime exercises designed to improve domain awareness and operational coordination (Konishi, 2018).

Nevertheless, internal divergences limit the QUAD’s effectiveness. India’s strategic priorities, for example, are heavily influenced by its continental rivalry with China along the Himalayan border, leading to a more cautious approach in maritime disputes. Similarly, economic interdependence with China constrains the willingness of some members to adopt more confrontational positions. These factors contribute to a degree of ambiguity regarding the QUAD’s long-term role and its capacity to act as a cohesive strategic actor (Vikrant, 2021).

In contrast, AUKUS represents a more clearly defined and capability-oriented framework. Announced in September 2021 by the leaders of the United States (Joe Biden), the United Kingdom (Boris Johnson), and Australia (Scott Morrison), the partnership aims to enhance military cooperation, particularly through the transfer of nuclear-powered submarine technology to Australia. This initiative marks a significant departure from previous non-proliferation practices, as it involves the sharing of sensitive propulsion technology previously restricted to the U.S.–UK bilateral relationship (McDougall, 2023).

The strategic relevance of AUKUS is directly linked to the operational challenges posed by China’s A2/AD systems. Nuclear-powered submarines, characterized by their extended range, stealth, and endurance, are particularly suited to operating in contested environments such as

the South China Sea. Their ability to remain submerged for prolonged periods and to conduct both intelligence-gathering and strike missions enhances the capacity of allied forces to penetrate defended areas and to counterbalance Chinese maritime dominance (McDougall, 2023). In this context, maintaining a credible balance of naval capabilities remains a central concern, particularly as projections suggest a continued expansion of the Chinese naval fleet toward several hundred vessels by the 2030 horizon (Konishi, 2018).

Beyond submarines, AUKUS also encompasses cooperation in emerging technological domains, including cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and undersea systems. These areas are increasingly central to modern warfare, reflecting a shift toward multidomain competition in which information superiority and technological innovation play a decisive role (Erickson, 2016). This evolution highlights the growing complexity of the strategic environment and the need for integrated responses that extend beyond traditional military capabilities.

Regional reactions to AUKUS have been mixed, reflecting both strategic and normative concerns. While countries such as Japan have expressed support, others, including Indonesia and Malaysia, have raised concerns regarding the potential for increased militarization and the implications for nuclear non-proliferation regimes. Statements from regional leaders indicate a cautious approach, emphasizing the importance of maintaining stability and avoiding escalation (McDougall, 2023). These concerns echo broader regional sensitivities regarding external intervention and the risks associated with intensified great power rivalry (Konishi, 2018).

The interaction between FONOPs, the QUAD, and AUKUS reflects a broader transformation in U.S. strategy, moving from unilateral dominance toward a networked security architecture. This approach seeks to distribute responsibilities among allies and partners while maintaining a central coordinating role. It also reflects the scale of the challenge posed by China's rise, which cannot be addressed through isolated actions but requires sustained and coordinated efforts across multiple domains.

At the same time, this strategy contributes to the intensification of strategic competition. From a Chinese perspective, these initiatives are often interpreted as elements of a containment strategy, reinforcing perceptions of encirclement and external pressure (Lampton, 2019). This perception reinforces a security dilemma in which defensive measures by one side are viewed as offensive threats by the other, leading to a cycle of escalation. In response, China has

continued to expand its military presence in the South China Sea, including the deployment of additional assets on artificial islands and the increased use of maritime militias and coast guard vessels to assert control (Erickson, 2016).

These grey-zone tactics further complicate the strategic landscape. The use of layered “cabbage strategy” approaches—combining civilian vessels, paramilitary forces, and military assets—allows for incremental control while avoiding direct confrontation, making it difficult to formulate proportional responses (Konishi, 2018). This ambiguity challenges conventional deterrence mechanisms and requires a more comprehensive strategy integrating legal, diplomatic, and informational tools.

Finally, the broader implications of U.S. engagement in the South China Sea extend to the future of the international maritime order. The region has become a focal point for competing interpretations of sovereignty, legality, and governance. While the United States and its partners emphasize the importance of maintaining open sea lines of communication and adherence to international law, China advances a more state-centric and historically grounded vision of maritime rights. This divergence reflects deeper structural tensions within the international system and highlights the stakes associated with the ongoing contest for influence in the Indo-Pacific (Na'imullah, 2025).

In summary, the role of the United States in the South China Sea is defined by the interaction of operational persistence and strategic adaptation. FONOPs provide a direct mechanism for challenging excessive claims, while the QUAD and AUKUS offer complementary frameworks for enhancing deterrence and regional coordination. Although each of these instruments has inherent limitations, their combined effect contributes to shaping the strategic environment and constraining unilateral attempts to redefine maritime norms. Their long-term effectiveness will depend on their ability to adapt to evolving dynamics and to maintain the support of regional actors within an increasingly contested geopolitical landscape.

4.2 Toward a Redefinition of the Asia-Pacific Maritime Order?

4.2.1 Erosion of International Norms and Limits of Multilateral Governance

Beyond the immediate dynamics of maritime disputes, the South China Sea reflects a deeper structural transformation characterized by the progressive decoupling between international legal norms and their effective enforcement. While the normative framework governing maritime order remains formally intact, its authority has been significantly weakened by

patterns of contestation, reinterpretation, and selective compliance. The 2016 arbitration ruling clarified key legal principles regarding maritime entitlements and invalidated expansive historical claims, yet its rejection and non-recognition exposed the structural limitations of international law when confronted with power asymmetries (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016). In this context, legal norms persist in form but lose their capacity to effectively constrain state behavior, highlighting a growing gap between legal validity and political reality (Talmon, 2014; Beckman, 2013).

This gap contributes to a broader erosion of normative coherence within the maritime domain. Competing interpretations of fundamental principles such as exclusive economic zones, historic rights, and freedom of navigation have transformed the legal framework into a contested arena rather than a stabilizing structure. The persistence of overlapping claims and the expansion of “excessive” maritime assertions illustrate the inability of existing legal regimes to maintain a consistent and universally accepted interpretation of maritime rules (Strating, 2020). As a result, international law increasingly functions as a flexible resource mobilized within strategic competition rather than as a fixed set of constraints, thereby reducing predictability and weakening its regulatory function. In this perspective, control over maritime space has historically been closely associated with broader patterns of power projection and influence, where the ability to secure trade routes, strategic positions, and lines of communication has shaped international hierarchies and state behavior (Mahan, 1890). These dynamics are further reinforced by legal ambiguities surrounding emerging practices such as artificial island construction, which reveal gaps and uncertainties within the existing legal framework and limit its capacity to regulate new forms of territorial assertion (Kohl, 2018).

At the systemic level, this erosion is further reinforced by the increasing use of strategies that operate below the threshold of open conflict. These practices, often situated in a legal and operational grey zone, complicate attribution and response while avoiding clear violations of international law, thereby undermining the effectiveness of existing normative frameworks (Mazarr, 2015; Ho, 2023). Through repeated use, such strategies contribute to the gradual normalization of behavior that stretches or circumvents legal boundaries, leading to a progressive hollowing out of norms without formally overturning them. In parallel, the evolution of Chinese foreign policy reflects a shift toward a more active role in shaping international rules and institutions, contributing to the transformation of the normative environment itself (Poh et al., 2017).

Simultaneously, the limitations of multilateral governance amplify this process of normative erosion. Regional institutions have demonstrated a limited capacity to coordinate collective responses, reflecting both structural constraints and divergent national interests. The prevalence of hedging strategies among Southeast Asian states, characterized by a balancing between major powers rather than alignment within a unified framework, illustrates the fragmentation of regional governance (Kuik, 2016). This fragmentation is reinforced by institutional features such as consensus-based decision-making and the absence of enforcement mechanisms, which limit the ability of multilateral organizations to uphold rules or manage disputes effectively (Strating, 2020).

In parallel, the persistence of Freedom of Navigation Operations further illustrates the limits of existing enforcement mechanisms within the maritime order. These operations are designed to challenge excessive maritime claims and reaffirm internationally recognized navigation rights, notably by contesting restrictions such as requirements for prior notification or authorization and by operationally asserting rights in contested waters (Freund, 2017). They function as part of a broader strategy aimed at preventing the consolidation of unlawful claims by consistently objecting to deviations from established legal norms (Freund, 2017). However, the continued need to conduct such operations and the persistence of the claims they challenge highlight the structural limits of these mechanisms. Rather than ensuring compliance, these practices underscore the reliance on repeated contestation as a substitute for effective enforcement, reinforcing the gap between formal legal principles and their practical implementation.

More fundamentally, these dynamics reflect a broader weakening of norm internalization. The effectiveness of international norms depends on shared acceptance and socialization among state actors, a process that appears increasingly fragile in the current context (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Wendt, 1992). The persistence of competing narratives, combined with strategic mistrust, undermines the emergence of a shared understanding of acceptable behavior. This is further exacerbated by security dilemmas, in which defensive measures are interpreted as potential threats, reducing incentives for cooperation and reinforcing unilateral approaches (Jervis, 1978).

Taken together, these developments point to a structural fragmentation of the maritime governance system. The erosion of international norms is not simply the result of legal disagreement but reflects deeper transformations in power distribution, strategic interaction, and institutional effectiveness. As legal ambiguity increases and multilateral mechanisms

struggle to adapt, the gap between normative frameworks and geopolitical realities continues to widen. In this evolving environment, international law retains its formal presence but loses its capacity to regulate behavior effectively, while multilateral governance remains constrained by internal divisions and external pressures, contributing to the emergence of a more fluid, contested, and power-driven maritime order.

4.2.2 The Emergence of Chinese Maritime Hegemony

The erosion of normative constraints and the limitations of multilateral governance have contributed to a broader structural transformation in the regional order, characterized by the gradual emergence of Chinese maritime hegemony. Rather than resulting from a formal reconfiguration of institutions, this shift reflects the consolidation of a hierarchical order in which China increasingly occupies a dominant position. In this context, the South China Sea illustrates how the weakening of legal and institutional frameworks enables the translation of material capabilities into structural influence, allowing a single actor to shape the rules, expectations, and behavior of others (Burgess, 2020; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

At the core of this transformation lies a growing asymmetry of power, which underpins the emergence of hegemonic dynamics in the maritime domain. The ability to project power and maintain a sustained presence in contested areas reflects a broader logic historically associated with maritime dominance, where control over sea lines of communication and strategic positions translates into political and economic leverage (Mahan, 1890). This is particularly evident in the South China Sea, whose geography constitutes a central strategic space where control over access directly influences regional balances of power (Holmes, 2014). In this context, China's expanding strategic posture and its capacity to shape the operational environment limit the ability of external actors to contest its influence effectively, reinforcing a configuration in which power is increasingly concentrated and hierarchically organized (Wuthnow, 2018).

This asymmetry translates into a form of hegemonic control that is not formally institutionalized but operates through the consolidation of facts on the ground. Despite legal challenges and diplomatic opposition, China continues to exercise sustained control over large portions of the South China Sea, demonstrating the limited capacity of smaller states to alter or reverse these dynamics (Kausar, 2023). The persistence of this situation reflects a shift from contested sovereignty to normalized dominance, where the absence of effective countermeasures leads to

the gradual acceptance of an unequal distribution of power. In this sense, hegemony emerges not through recognition, but through the stabilization of asymmetrical control over time.

At the regional level, the emergence of Chinese maritime hegemony is further reflected in the transformation of state behavior. Rather than engaging in direct confrontation, regional actors increasingly adopt adaptive strategies that reflect both constraint and dependence. The persistence of collective action problems limits the ability of states to coordinate effective resistance, thereby reinforcing the dominant position of the most capable actor (Burgess, 2020). Similarly, multilateral processes such as negotiations over a code of conduct remain constrained and produce limited outcomes, illustrating the inability of regional institutions to counterbalance hegemonic influence (Thayer, 2013). In this context, multilateralism does not disappear, but becomes embedded within a hierarchical structure shaped by Chinese preferences.

These dynamics contribute to a broader pattern of strategic dependence, in which states adjust their policies in response to the constraints imposed by an increasingly dominant actor. The transformation of threat perceptions and strategic alignments reflects this shift, as regional actors seek to navigate an environment structured by Chinese power (Na'imullah, 2025). However, these responses do not fundamentally alter the underlying hierarchy; instead, they confirm it by demonstrating the extent to which regional actors must adapt to the presence of a dominant power. The coexistence of hedging, limited balancing, and selective accommodation illustrates the consolidation of a hegemonic environment in which autonomy is constrained.

At the same time, broader patterns of great power competition reinforce rather than undermine this dynamic. The Indo-Pacific increasingly reflects a context of strategic rivalry, yet this rivalry unfolds within a regional structure already shaped by Chinese influence (Friedberg, 2011). This contributes to a paradoxical situation in which competition persists, but does not prevent the consolidation of hegemonic dynamics at the regional level. As states anticipate a continued shift in the balance of power, their behavior increasingly reflects expectations of Chinese predominance (Friedberg, 1993), further stabilizing the emerging hierarchy.

The internal drivers of this transformation also play a crucial role in sustaining hegemonic dynamics. The influence of nationalism contributes to a more assertive foreign policy, reinforcing the persistence of territorial claims and reducing the likelihood of compromise (Zhao, 2013). At the same time, the transformation of international norms in contexts of weak

enforcement allows dominant actors to reshape expectations about acceptable behavior (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Through repeated practices, what was once contested becomes normalized, contributing to the consolidation of a hegemonic order not only in material terms, but also at the normative level.

Moreover, the persistence of strategic tensions and mutual suspicion reinforces the structural advantages of the dominant actor. In a context characterized by security dilemmas, attempts by states to increase their own security can be perceived as threatening by others, thereby reducing trust and intensifying competition (Jervis, 1978). This helps explain why China's growing maritime presence produces not only balancing responses, but also caution, hedging, and strategic adaptation among neighboring states. The result is a regional environment in which cooperation becomes more difficult, collective resistance remains limited, and the most capable actor is better positioned to consolidate influence over time.

Finally, the broader strategic environment highlights the difficulty of reversing these dynamics. External efforts to counterbalance Chinese influence, including emerging security arrangements, have produced limited results and have not fundamentally altered the regional distribution of power (Tahir & Amin, 2023). At the same time, the structural characteristics of the South China Sea—its geography, density of strategic features, and centrality to regional trade—make it particularly conducive to the consolidation of control by a proximate and persistent actor (Mia et al., 2024; Holmes, 2014). In this context, the emerging order is not one of open domination, but of embedded hegemony, where influence is exercised through structural constraints, behavioral adaptation, and the gradual normalization of asymmetry.

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate the emergence of a form of maritime hegemony that is neither formally codified nor uncontested, but nonetheless structurally decisive. The combination of power asymmetry, strategic dependence, and normative transformation produces a regional order in which China increasingly shapes the behavior of states and the evolution of governance frameworks. Rather than replacing the existing system, this process reconfigures it from within, resulting in a hierarchical and power-driven maritime order in which dominance is exercised through practice, expectation, and structural constraint.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of findings and validation of the hypothesis

This thesis demonstrates that China's behavior in the South China Sea cannot be adequately explained through linear or compartmentalized interpretations. The central finding is not merely that China combines military, diplomatic, and legal instruments, but that it deliberately exploits the structural weaknesses of the existing international order—legal fragmentation, institutional inertia, and strategic asymmetry—to produce a slow but durable reconfiguration of regional power.

The hypothesis is therefore validated, but with an important qualification: China's strategy is less about imposing a new order than about hollowing out the existing one from within.

The empirical analysis shows that the transformation of the Paracel and Spratly Islands is not simply a matter of territorial consolidation. It constitutes a form of geopolitical engineering, in which physical infrastructure is used to redefine the operational environment and alter the cost structure of regional interaction. Artificial islands, militarized outposts, and surveillance systems do not just extend China's reach—they create a condition in which contestation becomes structurally disadvantageous for other actors. This reflects a shift from classical territorial control to environmental domination, where power lies in shaping the space in which others must operate.

However, the most significant finding lies in the interaction between material and non-material dimensions of strategy. China's approach systematically blurs the boundaries between war and peace, legality and illegality, civilian and military action. This ambiguity is not incidental; it is the core mechanism of the strategy. By operating in the "gray zone," China avoids triggering the thresholds—legal, political, or military—that would activate effective countermeasures. In doing so, it exposes a structural paradox of the liberal international order: it is highly effective against overt aggression, but poorly equipped to respond to incremental, deniable, and legally ambiguous challenges.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings challenge simplified readings of realism. While offensive realism explains the drive for regional dominance, it underestimates the extent to which power can be exercised indirectly, through normalization and perception management rather than coercion alone. China's strategy is not purely about maximizing power in a material sense; it is about reshaping the conditions under which power is recognized and contested. This

is where constructivist insights become essential: legitimacy, narrative, and repetition are not secondary tools, but central components of strategic effectiveness.

The legal dimension further reinforces this interpretation. China does not reject international law outright; instead, it engages in a selective and instrumental use of it. By contesting arbitration outcomes while continuing to invoke legal language, China transforms law into a field of strategic competition rather than a constraint. This reveals a critical weakness in the normative order: its authority depends on shared acceptance, which can be eroded without formal withdrawal. The result is not the collapse of international law, but its gradual relativization.

At the geopolitical level, the thesis shows that the South China Sea functions as a controlled testing ground. China calibrates its actions to remain below escalation thresholds while continuously expanding its position. This reflects a long-term strategic rationality: time becomes a resource, and patience a form of power. The absence of decisive confrontation should not be interpreted as stability, but as a condition that favors the actor capable of sustaining incremental pressure.

Yet, this strategy is not without limits or risks. Its effectiveness depends heavily on the passivity, fragmentation, or strategic hesitation of other actors. It also generates cumulative tensions that may, over time, reduce the space for ambiguity and increase the likelihood of miscalculation. In this sense, China's approach stabilizes its gains in the short term but may contribute to long-term instability by eroding shared rules without replacing them with a fully institutionalized alternative.

In sum, the hypothesis is confirmed, but the findings go further: China is not only reshaping the regional balance of power, it is transforming the logic of competition itself. Power is no longer exercised primarily through decisive confrontation or formal domination, but through gradual, ambiguous, and normalized practices that redefine what is considered acceptable. This evolution poses a structural challenge to both realist and liberal interpretations of international order, as it operates in the space between them—where rules exist, but their meaning is continuously contested.

5.2 Theoretical and empirical contributions of the thesis

The contribution of this thesis lies less in producing new empirical data than in reframing how existing dynamics are interpreted. Its primary value is analytical: it challenges fragmented readings of China's behavior and proposes a more structurally coherent understanding of contemporary maritime power.

At the theoretical level, the thesis questions the sufficiency of dominant paradigms when taken in isolation. Offensive realism explains China's pursuit of regional dominance, but it tends to overemphasize direct coercion and underestimates the strategic utility of ambiguity. Conversely, constructivist approaches capture the importance of norms and narratives, but often detach them from material power structures. By combining these frameworks with classical naval theory, the thesis demonstrates that China's strategy operates precisely at their intersection: it is simultaneously material, strategic, and symbolic.

This leads to a more critical insight: power in contemporary geopolitics is increasingly exercised through the manipulation of thresholds rather than through their transgression. The thesis contributes to theory by showing that the key variable is not simply the distribution of capabilities, but the ability to act without triggering decisive responses. In this sense, it refines realist assumptions by introducing a form of indirect power maximization, where control is achieved through the gradual restructuring of constraints rather than overt domination.

A second theoretical contribution is the conceptualization of strategic normalization as a mechanism of order transformation. Unlike traditional models of power transition, which emphasize rupture or conflict, this thesis shows that change can occur through cumulative, low-intensity actions that progressively redefine legitimacy. This concept highlights a blind spot in both realist and liberal approaches: neither fully accounts for how norms can be altered in practice without being formally replaced. The result is not a new order, but a degraded and asymmetrical one, in which rules persist but lose their constraining force.

The thesis also contributes to the literature on gray zone strategies by moving beyond descriptive ambiguity. Rather than treating gray zone actions as inherently unclear or opportunistic, it demonstrates that ambiguity itself is strategically produced and maintained. This shifts the analytical focus from "what these actions are" to "what they do structurally": they delay response, divide actors, and erode normative clarity. In this sense, gray zone strategies are not a category of behavior, but a method of geopolitical transformation.

Empirically, the thesis offers an integrated reading of developments in the Paracel and Spratly Islands since 2014. Existing studies often isolate military, legal, or diplomatic dimensions; this research shows how their interaction generates cumulative effects. Infrastructure construction, maritime enforcement, and legal contestation are not parallel processes but mutually reinforcing mechanisms that produce de facto control.

Another empirical contribution lies in the systematic comparison between Western and Chinese sources. This does not simply balance perspectives; it reveals a deeper divergence in the interpretation of order itself. What is framed externally as revisionism is internally presented as restoration and normalization. This gap is not rhetorical but structural: it reflects incompatible conceptions of legitimacy, sovereignty, and hierarchy. By highlighting this divergence, the thesis contributes to a more critical understanding of why normative consensus is difficult to sustain.

Finally, the thesis contributes to broader debates on the transformation of international order. It shows that contemporary challenges do not necessarily take the form of direct confrontation with existing rules, but of their progressive redefinition through practice. The South China Sea illustrates a form of order transformation without formal rupture, where power operates through endurance, repetition, and ambiguity.

5.3 Research limitations

The main limitation of this thesis lies in the interpretive nature of its core argument. By emphasizing coherence, multidimensionality, and long-term intent, the analysis risks attributing a level of strategic unity to China's actions that may, in reality, be more fragmented, adaptive, or even opportunistic. The Chinese policy process remains opaque, and the absence of direct access to internal deliberations means that what appears as a coordinated grand strategy may partly emerge from bureaucratic competition, local initiatives, or reactive adjustments.

A second limitation concerns the tendency toward structural over-interpretation. The thesis deliberately reads China's actions as part of a broader transformation of international order. While this provides analytical depth, it may also obscure more immediate drivers such as tactical signaling, domestic pressures, or short-term crisis management. Not every action necessarily fits into a long-term geopolitical design, and the risk is to retrospectively impose coherence on processes that are, at least in part, contingent.

The dual-source approach, combining Western and Chinese materials, introduces another constraint. While intended to reduce bias, it also exposes the analysis to competing epistemologies that are not easily reconcilable. Chinese sources often operate within a state-aligned discursive framework, while Western analyses are embedded in strategic and normative assumptions about a rules-based order. The thesis highlights this divergence, but it cannot fully resolve it. As a result, interpretation remains situated between two partially incompatible readings of reality.

The geographical focus on the Paracel and Spratly Islands strengthens analytical precision but limits external validity. The South China Sea is treated as a strategic laboratory, yet it may also be an exceptional case due to its specific combination of geography, history, and power asymmetry. Generalizing the findings to other regions risks overlooking contextual differences, particularly where legal regimes, alliance structures, or strategic environments differ significantly.

The temporal framing of the study also constrains its conclusions. By focusing on developments since 2014, the thesis captures a phase of acceleration but not its long-term trajectory. The argument of “strategic normalization” assumes cumulative and durable effects, yet this remains empirically incomplete. It is still uncertain whether these changes will stabilize into a new equilibrium, provoke stronger counterbalancing, or generate escalation dynamics that disrupt the current trajectory.

Finally, the analysis tends to privilege China as the central strategic actor, which creates a methodological asymmetry. Other actors—ASEAN states, the United States, and regional coalitions—are often treated as reactive rather than co-constitutive. This risks underestimating the extent to which the regional order is shaped by interaction rather than unilateral transformation. In reality, China’s strategy both exploits and depends on the responses, divisions, and constraints of other actors.

Taken together, these limitations highlight a central tension in the thesis: the effort to produce a coherent and critical interpretation of evolving dynamics while operating under conditions of incomplete information and structural ambiguity. The conclusions should therefore be read not as definitive claims about intent or outcome, but as a theoretically informed interpretation of an ongoing and contested geopolitical process.

5.4 Suggestions for future research

Future research should move beyond the assumption of coherence that often underpins analyses of Chinese strategy and instead investigate the internal dynamics of policy production. This includes bureaucratic competition, civil-military relations, and the role of local actors in shaping maritime practices. A more fine-grained understanding of these processes would help determine whether the observed strategy is centrally orchestrated or emerges from layered and sometimes competing institutional logics.

A second direction concerns the need to decenter China analytically. Much of the existing literature, including this thesis, risks reproducing a China-centric narrative in which other actors appear primarily reactive. Future work should instead examine how Southeast Asian states, as well as external powers, actively shape the strategic environment—through legal resistance, selective alignment, or strategic ambiguity. This would allow a shift from a unilateral to a genuinely interactive understanding of regional order formation.

Further research should also interrogate the limits of strategic normalization. The thesis shows how incremental practices can reshape norms, but it remains unclear where this process breaks down. Under what conditions does gradual change trigger collective pushback? At what point does ambiguity cease to be stabilizing and become a source of escalation? Addressing these questions would refine the concept and test its explanatory power beyond the South China Sea.

Another important avenue lies in the evolution of international law under conditions of sustained contestation. Rather than asking whether the rules-based order is collapsing, future research should examine how legal norms are reinterpreted, fragmented, or selectively applied in practice. This implies treating law not as a fixed framework, but as a contested field shaped by power, discourse, and usage. Such an approach would bridge the gap between legal scholarship and geopolitical analysis.

Technological change also requires greater attention. The increasing use of surveillance systems, unmanned platforms, and data-driven maritime awareness is likely to transform the nature of control at sea. Future studies should explore how these tools interact with existing strategies of deterrence and ambiguity, and whether they reinforce or undermine the logic of gradual domination identified in this thesis.

Finally, comparative research is essential. The patterns observed in the South China Sea should be tested in other contexts—whether in the East China Sea, the Arctic, or even non-maritime domains such as cyberspace. This would help determine whether the mechanisms identified here reflect a broader transformation of power projection or remain specific to a particular geopolitical configuration.

Overall, future research should adopt a more critical and less state-centric perspective, focusing on interaction, contingency, and the structural conditions that enable or constrain strategic behavior.

Declaration of AI use

I declare that I have used an artificial intelligence tool (ChatGPT) solely for the correction and stylistic improvement of certain English sentences, without relying on AI for the generation or analysis of academic content.

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