

# China's South China Sea Strategy

## A Structural Realist Case Study

Thesis

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## Abstract

The South China Sea is one of the most contested regions in the world. Tensions are escalating between China and the littoral states. China's growing assertiveness and continued militarisation of the area is raising security concerns amongst the other states. This heightened feeling of insecurity has defaulted into an arms race, where the states are fortifying and increasing their own military capabilities. In short, the South China Sea dispute is a territorial dispute and maritime dispute between China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei and Malaysia.

In some cases, the claimants have overlapping claims of the South China Sea. China, Vietnam and the Philippines are the three states that have the most expansive claim within the disputed territory. China is the only claimant that places their territorial claim on historic rights. The South China Sea dispute it is not only about sovereignty, but it is also driven by possibility of a vast amount of resources beneath the seabed, which can be used to supply the claimants growing need for natural resources and fuel their economy.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine China's behavioural change in the South China Sea dispute and analyses the systemic variables that have attributed to this gradual change. The thesis draws upon a structural realist framework to analyse the three basic assumptions of structural realism: balance of power, security dilemma and national interest to see the extent of the impacts. It also examines the changing dynamics between the United States and China to see if it has had any effect on their actions.

The analysis will be conducted as a mixed methods case study to gain an in-depth knowledge about such a complex social phenomenon. The case study was limited to a time span from 2010 to 2018, as the academic literature cites

2009 and 2010 as the origin of Chinese assertiveness. From the analysis it can be concluded that the variables have had an impact on China's conduct. The systemic factors have facilitated China's rise within the international system. China now hold revisionists intentions and thereby the assertive and aggressive behaviour will continue until they gain full control of the South China Sea. If China continues to modernise their military forces and increasing their relative capabilities, they will be able to drive the United States out of the South China Sea completely.

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# 1. Introduction

The rise of China is due to the economic reforms and open door policy that was implemented in 1979 by Deng Xiaoping (Morrison 2009, 4; Nguyen 2017, 48). Since then China has focused on rapidly advancing their economy, military and global influence, which in the long term consolidates their status as a great power in the international system (Layne 2012; Mearsheimer 2010, 381; Ikenberry 2008, 26).

Meanwhile, the era of Western dominance is coming to an end. The United States are struggling to maintain their unipolarity<sup>1</sup>, and thereby influence the global world order (Layne 2012; Ikenberry 2008, 23). Despite their current unipolar moment the United States cannot claim to be a global hegemony (Mearsheimer 2010, 387). This provides emerging powers, like China, an opportunity to eventually shift the system to a bi- or multipolar<sup>2</sup> international system, and thus threaten the U.S. position (Ikenberry 2008, 23; Scobell 2018, 203; Yahuda 2013, 447).

China's growing influence in the international system has led to a series of incidents with the United States in the South China Sea (O'Rourke 2018, 9; Swaine and Fravel 2011, 11). The current dispute in the region can have a significant impact on future Sino-American relations (Ibid 2018, 1). In principle, the South China Sea dispute is a territorial dispute between several claimants

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<sup>1</sup> **Unipolarity**, a single great power dominating internationally (Mearsheimer 2001, 12).

<sup>2</sup> **Bipolarity** is when two great powers control the system, whereas **multipolarity** is three or more powers dominating the system (Ibid.).

(China, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei), who all claims different parts or in some cases overlapping parts of the area ('South China Sea Dispute' 2019; McDevitt 2014, 176). This also includes the fishing rights, rights to extract the natural resources beneath the seabed, and the control of one of the world's most valuable strategic shipping routes, where one-third of the world's trade routes passes (Watson, Lendon, and Westcott 2018; Fravel 2011, 296).

Therefore, tensions in the region have been rising over the last decade and resulted in an increased military presence (Fravel 2011, 298; McDevitt 2013, 175). Even though, the United States have no territorial claim in the South China Sea, they have security commitments in the region (McDevitt 2014, vi; O'Rourke 2018, 2–3; 'South China Sea Dispute' 2019). This in part explains the growing American military presence in the region. Furthermore, the United States claims it is seeking to uphold universal peace and stability, norms and values, and **Freedom of Navigation**<sup>3</sup> to keep China in check (Ibid, 4; McDevitt 2013, 175). The latter has been consolidating control of the South China Sea by building and fortifying on the islands and reefs in the region to strengthen their claim as well upgrading their military (Watson, Lendon, and Westcott 2018; Ibid, 13; Yahuda 2013, 452; Swaine and Fravel 2011, 5).

Hence, it can be said that China and the United States both have conflicting interests in the South China Sea, which is crucial for their own positions in the international system. And so the questions remains:

***“Why has China’s behaviour become more assertive in the South China Sea dispute?”***

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<sup>3</sup> **Freedom of Navigation (FON)**, also known as Freedom of the Seas, is: *“the rights, freedoms, and lawful uses of the sea and airspace, including for military ships and aircraft, guaranteed to all nations under international law.”* (O'Rourke 2018, 4)

## ***“How is this linked to the changing dynamics between the United States and China?”***

The research question and its sub question puts a spotlight on the South China Sea dispute as a geopolitical dispute between China and the United States (Scobell 2018, 199; ‘South China Sea Dispute’ 2019). Structural realism notes that the structure of the international system determines the state’s behaviour and that their desire to survive affects the policy making (Lynn-Jones 1998, 159; Dunne and Schmidt 2017, 105). Structural realism can then be used to gauge China’s behaviour through an offensive and defensive realist perspective as the theory focuses on the international system and the influences of said structure.

Although, China has attempted several times to settle the dispute through bilateral negotiations their actions are contradictory as seen in the development of the islands and reefs (O’Rourke 2018, 20; Watson, Lendon, and Westcott 2018). A case study of the Chinese behaviour will identify the causes and effects and how their behaviour should be interpreted.

## **2. Literature Review**

As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis takes its starting point in the South China Sea dispute. A literature review allows the researcher to become more familiar with the knowledge and understanding of their chosen research topic (Grix 2004, 38–39). The literature review helps narrowing down the focus area; gain insight into previously used approaches, theories, methods and sources; and contextualise their own research focus (Ibid.).

A brief review of the literature on the topic indicates the significance of it; thus the existing literature on the South China Sea dispute is quite extensive.

Nevertheless, there are still some unanswered questions that requires further research as it continues to develop. For the international community, the dispute has generated an enormous interest within a contemporary International Relations (IR) context as the outcome can possibly impact the international system (O'Rourke 2018, 6; Pesek 2017). Therefore, several attempts has been made at explaining the South China Sea dispute and the underlying causes. All these researches have varied in focus, theories and methods.

*Wu Shicun (2013)* studies the origin and development of the dispute from a Chinese perspective through various dimensions such as: history, law, international politics, economy, diplomacy and military affairs to back up the Chinese claims in the South China Sea. The study provides an overview of China's official stance, their attempts at solving the dispute with bilateral negotiations and a complete disregard of the claims from Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei and Malaysia due to China's historic rights.

In comparison to Wu, who based his study on a Chinese perspective, *Hsieh (2018)* includes several perspectives in his research, i.e. Taiwanese, Chinese, Filipino, American and Australian. This study also includes a historical and legal analysis, but there is a slight difference as Hsieh also has a geopolitical angle covered. The is the first research that mentions the Sino-American rivalry in the South China Sea, which leads to the next study.

*Song et al. (2014)* bases their research on the legal and political issues in the South China Sea from an American and European perspective. They focus on how the search for resources have led to several incidents between the claimants and how the third-party interference have escalated in the region.



*Chachavalpongpun (2014)* expands where Song et al. left off and analyses the dispute from an ASEAN perspective. The study focuses on the security and resource interest the South China Sea poses for the claimants and how it possibly can be resolved if all claimants abide by the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

These studies have different perspectives and presents several reasons as to why China has behaved as they do in the dispute. Some argue that it is due to the abundant resources in the region (Chachavalpongpun 2014; Song et al. 2014) while others cite the historic or legal rights as the rationale behind their actions (S. Wu 2013; Song et al. 2014; Hsieh 2018; Chachavalpongpun 2014). As with any complex social phenomena, there is still no consensus for as to why China conduct themselves in an assertive manner.

Nevertheless, it prompts the question: *“Why has China’s behavior become more assertive in the South China Sea dispute?”* And with China’s rapid economic ascent, modernisation and growing global influence that is posing a challenge to the U.S. dominant position it becomes relevant to apply structural realism to gauge whether the Chinese behaviour is assertive or not (Nguyen 2017, 47).

### **3. Methodology**

This section will the methodological considerations and assumptions relevant for this thesis. It is structured as follows. First, the research methods are presented. Second, the data collection methods applied is explained. Third, the choice of theory and the limitations is briefly discussed at the end.

## 3.2 Method

After identifying the philosophical foundation, it becomes relevant to clarify the research methods used to acquire the necessary knowledge. Although with a multitude of research methods available the most fitting one is the case study approach. This approach will be used to answer the research question and gain a better understanding of how China's behaviour has changed and the underlying causes for it.

### 3.2.1 Case Study

The **case study** approach can be used to seek in-depth insight of a specific setting or location (Bryman 2012, 67; Zainal 2007, 1–2). Yin (2003, 12–13) defines it both as an empirical inquiry and data collection technique, which: *“investigates a contemporary phenomenon within real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are clearly not evident.”* Therefore, this research strategy is particularly well suited for the mixed methods approach, also known as the pragmatic approach, as it enables the researcher to apply both qualitative and quantitative research methods to the case study to interpret the variety of data collected (Creswell 2009, 13).

The pragmatic approach and its abductive reasoning allows the researcher to switch back and forth between the inductive and deductive reasoning, and is dependent on which method that provides the best understanding of the research problem (Morgan 2007, 71; Ibid, 10–11). The mixed methods approach combines and draws upon the strength of both the qualitative and quantitative approach so that the end result becomes more validated (Ibid, 4).

Here the case study enables the researcher to solely focus on a specific real-life phenomenon to provide an explanation for what took place and why it

happened (Ibid, 13; Yin 2003, 6). In this case, the phenomenon being investigated is China's behavioural change in the South China Sea dispute and the implications for the Sino-American relations. The mixed methods case study approach benefits from extensive use of sources and data collection techniques and it is *"the preferred strategy when 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed"* (Yin 2003, 1, 14,).

Thus, the mixed methods case study is based on the theoretical perspective of structural realism. The mixture of qualitative and quantitative data will be used to identify and describe China's behavioural change by analysing the variables, which has influenced this change in accordance with the basic assumptions of structural realism. The pragmatic approach contributes to a understanding and explanation of a complex social phenomenon, which may not have been possible through other means (Zainal 2007, 4).

The case study spans from 2010 to 2018, when China's behaviour started to become more assertive in the South China Sea dispute. The eight-year time frame should be able to clarify the gradual change in China's conduct and describe the major events leading up to this. The following data collection were applied to the explanatory case study. The collected data is of both qualitative and quantitative nature.

### 3.3 Data Collection

Data collection represents a key aspect of any research study and is the data gathering process (Bryman 2012, 12). The data collection method differs from study to study and can be collected in a number of ways. The data used for the case study is a mixture of both **qualitative** and **quantitative nature**. The **mixed methods** or **pragmatic approach** combines elements of qualitative and

quantitative nature (Creswell 2009, 4). The pragmatic approach enables the researcher to alternate between qualitative and quantitative data as they see fit (Morgan 2007, 71). Creswell (2009, 14) notes that this approach: *“can be merged into one large database or the results used side by side to reinforce each other.”* As a result, the pragmatic approach offsets the limitations associated with a purely qualitative or quantitative research strategy.

In general, this mixed approach can be used **sequentially, convergently** or **transformatively**. The sequential method is used to strengthen a method with another, when the researcher wants to enhance, elaborate or expand their findings (Ibid.). Hence, each method is followed up by the opposite method to build knowledge upon each other (Morgan 2014, 10). The convergent method combines the findings of qualitative and quantitative data to address the research problem (Creswell 2009, 14). The combination of data are used to compare the results from different methods to see if they are similar (Morgan 2014, 11). The transformative method is when the researcher matches the methods according to their strengths for specific purposes to study distinctive parts of the research problem (Morgan 2014, 11).

The approach used here is consistent with a sequential method, which links qualitative and quantitative data closely to provide a better understanding of the research problem. The core data will consist of qualitative data, whereas the quantitative data is used as a supplement. Thus, the analysis will predominantly consist of primary and secondary qualitative data sourced from the Chinese and American government, peer-reviewed journals and articles on the issue of the South China Sea dispute. The qualitative data will be backed by secondary quantitative data, statistics, to generate a general overview on certain subjects.

### 3.3.1 Qualitative Data

The *qualitative research strategy* puts an emphasis on words and meanings rather than numbers and statistics, and is considered to be on the opposite spectrum of quantitative research strategy (Bryman 2012, 36; Grix 2004, 119). This research strategy enables the researcher to do an in-depth examination of social phenomena and human interactions. Bryman (2012, 399) argues that: *“the social world must be interpreted from the perspective of the people being studied”*. The qualitative research strategy is then used to understand and interpret the meanings of these human interactions, which is usually linked to descriptive data such as observation and interviews (Creswell 2009, 4; Grix 2004, 120).

The qualitative data collected in this process will perhaps give great insight to the different perceptions of China’s conduct in the South China Sea dispute and at the same time provide a contextual understanding of the case (Bryman 2012, 401; Ibid.). There are three types of sources, which data can be gathered from: **primary**, **secondary** and **tertiary** data. Primary sources are data from the time it first happened, that have yet to be interpreted and which other research is based upon (Gilman 2019). Secondary sources are interpretation, analysis and evaluations of the primary sources, which are used to add additional knowledge of the events in hindsight (Ibid.). Tertiary sources provides an overview of primary and secondary data (Ibid.).

The qualitative data applied for the analysis is a mixture of primary and secondary data. The primary qualitative data consists of government related documents such as white papers, press releases and speeches from both the Chinese and American government. The primary data represents the individual governments view on various subjects and their interests. Hence, it is important to keep in mind that they are biased towards one side or the other.

According to Zhang (2012, 881), any Chinese government related sources are known to be deliberately vague and lacks transparency. Thus, the American white papers are used to generate an overview of China's military modernisation progress and real strategic interests. Moreover, the government sources are used to track recurring themes and attitudes towards certain subjects.

The secondary data consists of peer-reviewed articles, textbooks and news articles are mostly there to provide an overview on specific incidents related to the South China Sea dispute. Furthermore, the secondary qualitative data is used to cross-reference the government statements with their actual conduct.

### **3.3.2 Quantitative Data**

The *quantitative research strategy* focuses on quantities, statistics and numbers as opposed to the descriptive data, that the qualitative research strategy utilises (Bryman 2012, 35). Grix (2004, 117) states that this strategy: “*seek general description or to test causal hypotheses; it seeks measurement and analyses that are easily replicable by other researchers*”. Hence, this particular research strategy is applied when the researcher wants to test out hypotheses or theories and identifying general patterns by finding the variables and investigate the relations among these variables (Creswell 2009, 4). The variables are measurable quantitative data, which is then implemented in the research study by numbering it so that the data is analysed using statistical methods (Ibid.; Grix 2004, 117).

The quantitative data used here provides a measure of reliability and objectivity as the analysis of this kind of data adds a validity to the thesis (Grix 2004, 117). Moreover, the use of quantitative data enables the researcher to

generalise and replicate their findings (Creswell 2009, 4). The quantitative data collected for the thesis is from secondary sources.

Some of the data used stems from white papers published in China and the United States and may be biased. Therefore, to counter the bias, the majority of statistics utilised were from the World Bank and Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) as they are less biased. Data from the World Bank is used to provide a general overview of the nations involved as it is one of the world's largest sources of knowledge for developed and developing countries (The World Bank n.d.). The data from SIPRI is used to assess the military spendings of those involved in the dispute and is among the world's most highly respected think tanks (SIPRI n.d.).

### **3.4 Theoretical Framework**

China's behaviour has changed since the economic reforms and open door policy that took place in 1979 (Economy and Oksenberg 1999, 1; Scobell 2005, 227). As briefly touched upon in the literature review, there is no general explanation for China's behavioural change in the South China Sea dispute. Some of the causal factors proposed so far are: The rise of China, national interest and security dilemma (Mearsheimer 2010, 381; Swaine 2010, 2; Fravel 2011, 296; Yahuda 2013, 446). However, these external factors alone cannot account for the behavioural change as a whole. The structural realist framework combined with the causal factors seeks to explain why China has acted the way they have done.

The causal factors used to examine state behaviour can be divided into different level of analysis: **the systemic** and **the domestic level**<sup>4</sup> (Jackson and Sørensen 2015, 21; Singer 1961, 78; Waltz 1979, 60–61). Brown (2001, 1–2) notes: “How we understand and interpret the world is partly dependent on how we define the world we are trying to understand and interpret.” The researcher may then choose to focus upon the international system as a whole, parts of it, the components of it or even the system itself (Singer 1961, 77). This is all a matter of perspective, because each perspective represents a certain understanding of the world (Brown 2001, 7–8).

A systemic level of analysis examines the systemic influences on state behaviour. An analysis on this level enables the researcher to generalise and explain about the causes (international system) and effects (state behaviour) within the context it plays out in (Singer 1961, 80). Any changes here to the international system will manifest as a change in state behaviour. However, it should be noted that the systemic level of analysis only examines international relations as a whole (Ibid.). It provides the bigger picture and is not ideal for a more nuanced and detailed explanation such as the domestic level of analysis (Waltz 1979, 65). In this level of analysis, the states are assumed to be like ‘black boxes’ and all the same, which makes their internal structures and institutions irrelevant (Ibid, 81). Here the only thing that matters are the systemic variables, that influences states rather than the domestic political influences.

According to Jackson and Sorensen (2015, 55): “*theory is necessary in thinking systematically about the world*”, which means that a theory is necessary when trying to explain a phenomenon (Brown 2001, 8–9). In this context, structural realism is the most suitable theory for understanding the South China Sea

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<sup>4</sup> **Domestic level of analysis** examines internal processes of state behaviour. It allows the researcher to examine individual states in greater detail and to discover the specific internal factors affecting foreign policy decision making (Ibid, 82–83).



dispute, as it focuses on the external factors in the structure of the international system and how these factors affect the decisions made (Jackson and Sørensen 2015, 75). Just like with the systemic level of analysis, structural realism disregards all differences between states and assumes that they are all similar to each other (Ibid., Mearsheimer 2003, 72). Structural realism can be said to focus on the anarchic international system and how state behaviour is influenced by this. Here all states pursue survival as a means to an end (Brown 2001, 4; Dunne and Schmidt 2017, 105; Mearsheimer 2001, 3).

Fundamentally, the characteristics of the structural realist system with anarchy (cause) as the ordering principle forces the states to ensure their own survival by gaining power (effect) within the structure of the system (capabilities) (Ibid.). The steady rise of China in the international system can be examined through structural realism as the theory focuses on the external systemic factors that have facilitated it. Structural realism holds that the international structure is anarchic with an endless and relentless struggle for power among states in the system and that this sets the condition for state behaviour. International politics is indeed shaped by the desire to survive in the system (Lynn-Jones 1998, 158). Thus, the structural realist approach can be used to conduct an analysis of the South China Sea dispute with a focus on the external factors that have led to China's behavioural change.

When applying the structural realist approach, it is important to keep in mind that the theory is divided into two approaches: defensive realism and offensive realism. Notably, the motivation behind state behaviour differs between the defensive and offensive realist perspective. Defensive realists argue that states maximise their security by preserving the existing balance of power, which is the best strategy (Waltz 1979, 126; Mearsheimer 2001, 19; Dunne and Schmidt 2017, 108). Whereas, the offensive realists asserts that the anarchical

international system encourages states to maximise their power to ensure their survival (Mearsheimer 2001, 3; Dunne and Schmidt 2017, 108). Structural realism will then help determine whether China's behaviour in the South China Sea dispute is seen as a revisionist state (offensive) or status quo state (defensive).

### 3.5 Limitations

However, some limitations should be noted as well. There were disadvantages of working with **government sources**, white papers, due to bias as they are written and produced from a governmental point of view. The lack of transparency and vague wording is a consistent critique of the Chinese government documents (Zhang 2012, 882). Therefore, the documents contain propaganda, which frames certain issues in a specific way to further China's agenda. Nonetheless, the government sources provides an insight to China's official stance (Ibid, 883).

Another limitation included the exclusive reliance on **English language sources**, which posed a few obstacles. The most significant disadvantage was during the data collection process, where the language barrier could have prevented the use of other relevant qualitative data. Any translated data used for the thesis inevitably faces some loss of context in terms of meaning, words, subtle nuanced differences in languages and the quality of the translation is only as good as the translator themselves.

**Time constraint** was one of the major limitations here with more time it would have been possible to incorporate an extra theory to gain a better understanding of the behavioural change apparent in the South China Sea dispute. One of the disadvantages of structural realism is that it relies heavily

upon the systemic incentives to explain state behaviour and sometimes states deviates from this (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 21). Dealing with a complex phenomenon such as the South China Sea dispute utilising a purely systemic level of analysis is not enough to account for the changed behaviour.

**Neoclassical realism** could have been applied to gain insight of the domestic level of analysis. Singer (1961, 89) points out that a: “*systemic level produces a more comprehensive and total picture of international relations than the national or sub-systemic level*” but at the same time a: “*lower level of analysis is somewhat balanced by its richer detail, greater depth, and more intensive portrayal.*” The mixture of the systemic approach and domestic approach would have derived a better explanation for the change as a combination of structural realism and neoclassical realism would have generated a more specific explanation instead of a general one about the South China Sea dispute.

## 4. Theory

This section presents the theory, which formed the basis for the analysis. First, an overview of structural realism is presented. Then a discussion of the defensive and offensive realist perspective and at the end a clarification of the three concepts: balance of power, security dilemma and national interest, which is applied during the analysis.

### 4.1 Structural Realism

Realism is one of the most widely used and dominant school of thought in IR (Dunne and Schmidt 2017, 101). However, Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller notes that “*realism is a paradigm, not a theory.*” (Wang 2010, 175) As it

comprises of several theories (Lynn-Jones 1998, 157). However, for this thesis, only structural realism have been found relevant for the case study.

**Structural realism** perceives the international system to be inherently anarchic, because it lacks a supranational body or centralised authority to counter the use of violence or even protect the states against other aggressors (Dunne and Schmidt 2017, 111; Waltz 1979, 102). Therefore, it is a self-help system where there is no monopoly on the use of force. Structural realism also defines the state as the main actor, as all states seeks survival (Ibid, 110). This makes them similar to each other, since they pursue the same purpose and tasks. States are considered as black boxes where its only the external systemic factors that matters (Mearsheimer 2001, 10–11; Waltz 1979, 99). However, the states differs in their capabilities and for that reason the structure of the international system is relative to the power of the states (Ibid.; Waltz 1979, 96). Balance of power is another key concept, where states strives to constrain each other through balancing while maximising their relative powers (Dunne and Schmidt 2017, 111). All the gains here is seen from a zero-sum perspective, because a state's gain is equivalent with the loss of another's (Waltz 1979, 70; Ibid, 110).

Structural realism has two approaches: **defensive realism** and **offensive realism**. Structural realists are divided on whether states should maximize their security or maximise their powers (Ibid.; Mearsheimer 2003, 72; Lobell 2010; Lynn-Jones 1998, 157). Defensive realists argues that states should maximise their security by maintaining a moderate strategy lest the system punishes them for attempting to gain too much power (Ibid, 108; Mearsheimer 2003, 72, 2001, 19–20; Waltz 1979, 126). In contrast, offensive realists assert that security is scarce. The best strategy for survival is to maximise their powers and

pursue hegemony if possible (Ibid.; Mearsheimer 2001, 3; Lynn-Jones 1998, 157; Lobell 2010).

### 4.1.1 Defensive Realism

Defensive realism is a strain of realism that emerged during 1979 with the appearance of Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (Dunne and Schmidt 2017, 108). The theory is Waltz's scientific approach to IR (Jackson and Sørensen 2015, 75; Brown 2001, 45). The defensive realist perspective shares the same basic assumptions as classical realism. However, defensive realists disregard human nature as the driving force on the international stage and ascribes it to the structure of the international system instead (Mearsheimer 2003, 72).

The theory is highly influenced by the structure of economic markets (Jackson and Sørensen 2015, 75). According to Waltz the international system are formed by a '*coaction of self-regarding units*' and that the '*city states, empires, or nations*' constitutes the structure of the system (Waltz 1979, 88). The theory is centered around the international system, which contains a number of structural features and interacting parts (Jackson and Sørensen 2015, 76; Ibid, 80). The structural features is characterised by anarchy as the absence of a centralised government and the distribution of capabilities among states (Brown 2001, 4; Mearsheimer 2001, 3). As Waltz (1979, 97) puts it: "*The structure of a system changes with changes in the distribution of capabilities across the system's units.*" Defensive realism is therefore a systemic theory that is used to understand state behaviour and detect changes within the international system (Brown 2001, 45; Jackson and Sørensen 2015, 76).

Waltz (1979, 118) assumes that states '*are unitary actors who, at a minimum, seek their own preservation*' and that they '*use the means available in order*

*to achieve the ends in view*'. In this regard, the international system is seen as a self-help system that forces states to look after themselves due to the lack of a centralised authority and to pay attention to the balance of power lest their rivals becomes too powerful (Brown 2001, 46; Mearsheimer 2001, 19). Defensive realists are proponents of security maximisation, because the structure of the international system encourages states to maintain status quo through a defensive and moderate strategy as the best route to security (Lobell 2010; Mearsheimer 2003, 72; Lynn-Jones 1998, 158; Waltz 1979, 127). The reasoning behind this is that any attempt to aggressively expand on their powers will trigger the security dilemma and balance of power (Ibid.; Mearsheimer 2001, 2). Therefore conquest rarely pays off as the offense-defence balance is always skewed in favour of defense, which makes it harder to conquer other states (Ibid.).

Balance of power is a key concept and it is like a law that emerges when changes occurs in the system that upsets the equilibrium (Waltz 1979, 62). States finds it more important to *"maintain their position in the system"* because *"increased power may or may not serve that end"* when the system compels them to seek security (Ibid, 126; Lobell 2010). In short, the system places an emphasis on balance of power, where states counterbalance one another. According to Brown the number of great powers makes up the balance of power and thereby the poles within the system (Brown 2001, 46). The poles are defined by following capabilities: size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence (Waltz 1979, 131). Essentially, the capabilities indicates the number of states that are able to threaten each other's survival (Brown 2001, 46).

Waltz differentiates between bipolarity and multipolarity (Jackson and Sørensen 2015, 76). He argues that *'the stability of the system... is then closely linked with the fate of its principal members.'* (Waltz 1979, 162) Focusing on the two systems, Waltz believes that bipolarity is more stable than multipolarity due to the balance of power (Ibid, 163; Jackson and Sørensen 2015, 76; Mearsheimer 2003, 79). As mentioned, any changes within the system manifest itself in state behaviour, which means that any changes to polarity makes it more difficult for states to seek survival (Waltz 2000, 5). According to Waltz balancing is completely different within a multipolar system thus it is harder to pinpoint *'who threatens whom, about who will oppose whom, and about who will gain or lose from the actions of other states accelerate as the number of states increases'*. (Waltz 1979, 163, 165, 2000, 6).

#### **4.1.2 Offensive Realism**

Offensive realism is a variant of structural realism or neorealism that emerged following Mearsheimer's *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* in 2001 (Dunne and Schmidt 2017, 108). Offensive realism rests on the same assumptions as defensive realism that the structure of the international system leads states to act in a certain way due to anarchy and the distribution of power (Mearsheimer 2001, 10). Nonetheless, Mearsheimer's offensive realist perspective diverges from defensive realism and emphasises that states are power maximisers and not security maximisers as the defensive realists claims (Lobell 2010; Ibid, 21, 32). Offensive realists are power maximisers because security is scarce in their eyes, which means that war is more likely to take place (Lynn-Jones 1998, 157).

Offensive realism diverges from defensive realism with the following assumptions: first, states can never be certain about the intention of others; second, states are rational actors (Mearsheimer 2001, 31, 2003, 72–73). None of

these assumptions alone creates enough incentive for states to behave aggressively (Mearsheimer 2003, 74). However, these assumptions combined with the others compels states to maximise their relative power to increase their odds of survival (Lobell 2010; Dunne and Schmidt 2017, 108). Mearsheimer argues that this results in three categories of state behavioural pattern such as: fear, self-help and power maximisation (Mearsheimer 1994, 11–12).

First, it is impossible to properly assess the intentions of the other states, which makes them fear each other (Mearsheimer 2003, 73). The fear level varies among the states, as they can go from being satisfied with the current power distribution (status quo) to forcefully attempting to alter the balance of power (revisionists) (Ibid.; Mearsheimer 2001, 32). The uncertainty is directly linked to the concept of security dilemma (Dunne and Schmidt 2017, 111). Second, states operate in a self-help system and have to ensure their own survival, here self-interest and power maximisation is key (Mearsheimer 1994, 11). Hence, states are rational actors, who are capable of strategizing and planning for their survival, but they do make mistakes as well (Mearsheimer 2003, 74). Third, offensive realists asserts that becoming a hegemon is the ultimate goal, because this is the best strategy for survival (Lobell 2010). More power means that no other state can threaten them, which leads to a perpetual security dilemma (Dunne and Schmidt 2017, 108; Mearsheimer 2001, 2).

According to Mearsheimer, the structure of the international system forces the state to maximise their powers and thereby engage in security competition and war to pursue hegemony if it is the right conditions for it (Mearsheimer 2003, 71; Lobell 2010). For offensive realists, there are no status quo powers in the system only revisionist powers due to the systemic incentives of the anarchic system (Mearsheimer 2001, 2). However, it is impossible to achieve global hegemony and should a state achieve this status they would become a



status quo power (Ibid, 40). The international system would no longer be anarchic, but a hierarchical one instead and be more peaceful as there no longer any security dilemma or war to worry about with the presence of only one great power (Mearsheimer 2003, 80).

Furthermore, there is a distinction between a global hegemon and regional hegemon. A global hegemon dominates the world, whereas the regional hegemon dominates a specific region (Lobell 2010; Mearsheimer 2001, 40). Some argues that the end of the Cold War shifted the international system to unipolarity and that the U.S. emerged as a global hegemon (Mearsheimer 2010, 80; Baylis, Smith, and Owens 2017, 5; Cox 2017, 70–71). However, global hegemony is impossible to achieve because it is difficult to conquer and subdue great powers over great bodies of water (Mearsheimer 2001, 41). The United States can only be categorised as a regional hegemon as they dominate the Western Hemisphere (Ibid, 40). Therefore, states that have achieved the status of regional hegemony will go to great lengths to maintain their position within the system (Ibid, 42).

### 4.1.3 Basic Assumptions of Structural Realism

Power is a core concept for all realists (Mearsheimer 2001, 12). It is key in understanding IR and state behaviour. As Mearsheimer (2001, 2) said: *“international politics has always been a ruthless and dangerous business, and it is likely to remain that way. Although the intensity of their competition waxes and wanes, great power fear each other and always compete with each other for power.”* International politics is thereby a power contest between states where power is assessed in terms of military capabilities, which in turn affects diplomacy (Ibid, 5; Baylis, Smith, and Owens 2017, 5). Diplomacy is then used to further their own **national interest** either through the use of

military force or the threat of it (Ibid, 3; Ibid.). Thus, the structure of the international system forces states to be trapped in a **security dilemma**, where they struggle for power and security amongst themselves. This struggle represents the **balance of power** (Ibid.; Mearsheimer 2003, 75; Brown 2001, 102).

### Balance of Power

Balance of power is one of the fundamental concepts within IR and is a rather puzzling concept as there are several interpretations of the it (Brown 2001, 107). For the purpose of this thesis, the structural realists understanding of the concept will be applied. The balance of power is used to maintain the equilibrium within the international system (Ibid.; Waltz 1979, 62). With the balance of power the states can acquire more power or maintain the current distribution of power (Mearsheimer 2001, 13; Waltz 1979, 118). If a state becomes too powerful and upset the balance of power and thereby threaten the other states within the system, balancing will occur to constrain them (Brown 2001, 46; Mearsheimer 2003, 75, 2001, 2). A balance of power system can only occur when the polarity within the system consists of a minimum of two or more great powers that can threaten each other's survival e.g. the United States and the USSR (Ibid.).

As previously discussed, the structure of the international system creates incentives for states to gain and balance power (Mearsheimer 2003, 75, 2001, 19). There are several ways to balance against aggressors, but defensive realists and offensive realists disagrees on how to go about it (Lobell 2010).

For defensive realists, states are motivated to seek security and survival overreaching leads to a balancing act (Ibid.; Mearsheimer 2001, 19–20, 2003, 75). Balancing can occur in two different ways: a **balancing coalition** or

**bandwagoning** (Dunne and Schmidt 2017, 111). Balancing coalition takes place when the states through '*internal efforts*' increases their military capabilities and then moves on to the '*external efforts*' to form alliances with the other states to weaken, destroy or counterbalance the aggressor (Waltz 1979, 118; Mearsheimer 2003, 75). Bandwagoning arises when weaker states decides to align themselves with the aggressor, however this is a risky strategy as the aggressor can turn on them (Ibid. 1979; Brown 2001, 111; Lobell 2010). Defensive realists also takes the **offense-defense balance** into consideration, which indicates whether the military power is favouring offense or defense (Mearsheimer 2003, 76, 2001, 20). This is used to pinpoint how easy or difficult the conquest will be (Ibid.). However defensive realist maintains that the offense-defense balance is always skewed towards the defense and should maintain their current power distribution (Ibid.).

Offensive realists on the other hand is of the opinion that states should shift the power distribution in their favour if the benefits outweighs the costs (Mearsheimer 2001, 2–3). For the offensive realists there are also two strategies when maintaining the balance of power: balancing and **buck-passing** (Mearsheimer 2001, 139). Offensive realists argues that balancing is inefficient and that states prefers **buck-passing** instead when facing an aggressor (Lobell 2010; Mearsheimer 2003, 76). Balancing is considered inefficient because the states involved shoulders the burden, buck-passing is considered the better option as the cost of fighting remains minimal (Mearsheimer 2001, 139). With buck-passing the responsibility of keeping the aggressor in check to another state, which then allows them to reap the benefits through the **bait and bleed** strategy by waiting on the sidelines (Ibid. 2001, 2003, 76). Another point that offensive realists disagrees on is that the offense-defense balance is skewed towards defense, often times the one who attacks first is the one who wins (Mearsheimer 2003, 76; Lobell 2010).

## Security Dilemma

Security dilemma is another important concept within IR and is closely linked to the balance of power (Tang 2009, 587). Much like the previous concept, security dilemma is also a loosely defined concept, but in essence it is a result of the structure of the international system (Ibid 2009, 589; Dunne and Schmidt 2017, 111). Structural realism dictates that in an anarchic international system there is no centralised authority to counter the use of force and protect states from each other (Mearsheimer 2001, 3; Tang 2009, 591). As Waltz (1979, 111) points out: *“self-help is necessarily the principle of action”*. Survival is dependent on the states themselves and is realised through **self-help** (Dunne and Schmidt 2017, 111). So the best way to survive is to increase and provide for one’s own security, which heightens the feelings of insecurity for the other states within the system (Ibid.; Lobell 2010).

The insecurity describes the security dilemma at its core and as a result all states are influenced by this (Ibid.; Mearsheimer 2001, 35). Simply put, states are caught in a perpetual security competition where survival is the end game (Mearsheimer 2003, 72). The states gain more power to secure their survival, which then results in more fear, insecurity and a lack of trust among the others (Dunne and Schmidt 2017, 111). In turn, the threatened states are compelled to accumulate more power (Mearsheimer 2001, 36; Lobell 2010). Power accumulation done for either defensive or offensive purpose will always become the other states’ insecurity that leads to the endless cycle of security dilemma (Dunne and Schmidt 2017, 111; Tang 2009, 591).

## National Interest

National interest is another complex concept that is difficult to define (Nincic 1999, 29; Brown 2001, 33). National interests is understood in two ways, states has an interest and that said interest is mirrored in the foreign policies (Ibid, 32). Hence, national interests is used to understand and examine state behaviour and foreign policies (Nincic 1999, 29; Jackson and Sørensen 2015, 77). For all realists the international system is characterised by anarchy that leads to a struggle for power and security among states and within this structure states are “*pursuing interests defined in terms of power*” (Brown 2001, 32). The state is considered a rational actor and thus “*each state plots the course it thinks will best serve its interests*” (Mearsheimer 2001, 31; Waltz 1979, 113). According to the structural realists, state behaviour is guided by these principles when they pursue power to achieve survival and security (Brown 2001, 33; Ibid, 117). This leads back to the anarchic structure of the international system and the self-help principle where power is a means to an end to achieve survival. However, if states in their pursuit for power upsets the power distribution a balancing act will occur.

## 5. Analysis

This section examines China’s strategy in the South China Sea dispute through conduct, statements, articles, speeches and reports. First, a brief overview of the South China Sea dispute will be provided as background information. Finally, at the end the structural realist framework and the three concepts of balance of power, security dilemma and national interest will be applied to the case study to gauge China’s action in accordance with the defensive and offensive realist perspective.

## 5.1 South China Sea Dispute

Over the past decade, China has become an increasingly active player on the world stage (Layne 2012). The implications of China's rapid economic and militaristic development and growing political influence has given rise to security concerns throughout Southeast Asia (Swaine 2011, 1; Nguyen 2017, 47). This is evident in the case of the South China Sea dispute, which is a territorial and maritime dispute between China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Brunei and Malaysia ('South China Sea Dispute' 2019). The South China Sea comprises of a number of reefs, islands and shoals (Watson, Lendon, and Westcott 2018; O'Rourke 2018, 7). It is an area that contains a vast amount of natural resources and strategic shipping routes (Fravel 2011, 292; 'South China Sea Dispute' 2019; Pesek 2017; McDevitt 2013, 177).

The area is important for strategic and political reasons, which intensifies the dispute. China has for several years claimed sovereignty over the South China Sea (Fravel 2011, 293). The area claimed is encompassed by a nine-dashed or u-shaped line, which gives China the historic rights to the South China Sea (McDevitt 2013, 178; Watson, Lendon, and Westcott 2018). They have attempted to further consolidate their claim by building, developing and fortifying in the area (Swaine and Fravel 2011, 5). However, under the United Nations Conventions on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) China's historic rights have no legal basis (Fravel 2016; McDevitt 2013, 178). The growing assertiveness exhibited by China is clashing with the American rebalance strategy (Ibid, 177).

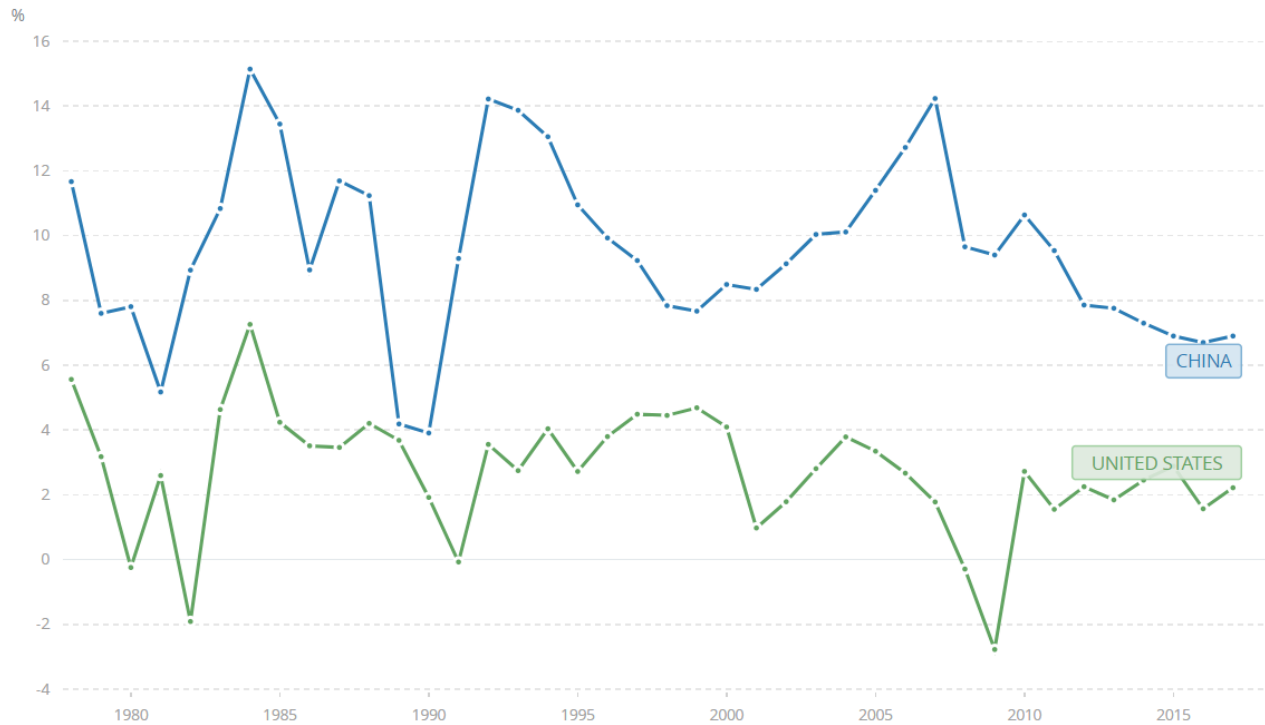
The South China Sea has become one of the biggest flashpoints between China and the United States (Ibid, 175; Mearsheimer 2010, 381; 'South China Sea Dispute' 2019). The United States maintains that their presence and activities in the region are to uphold FON, which China is violating with their sovereignty claim (McDevitt 2013, 176–77). Thus, the analysis takes its starting point in the

structural realist framework and the external variables to examine China's behavioural change in the South China Sea dispute to gauge whether they have been influenced by the relative power or relative security and from here conclude if it has been guided by the defensive or offensive realists perspective.

## **5.2 Balance of Power in the South China Sea**

The rise of China and the implications of it is a much-debated topic within IR. There are two prevailing views on the topic: China as a threat to the current International order or a peaceful China on the rise. According to structural realism, the international system and its systemic incentives can either influence or constrain state behaviour. The emergence of China as a rising power has drawn the attention from the international community to the growing assertiveness displayed in the South China Sea.

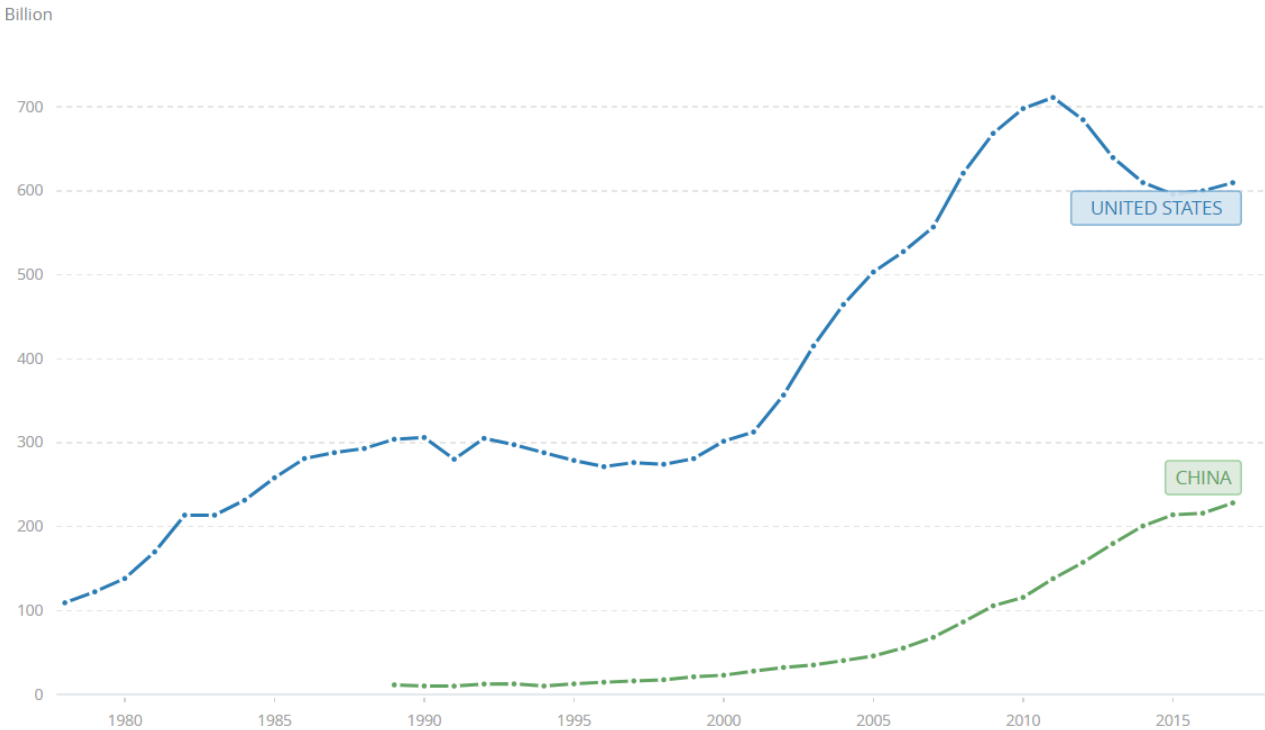
From a structural realist perspective, the anarchic structure of the international system creates incentives for states to gain more power as a means to an end. All states within the system pursue survival through relative power. As mentioned before, China's rise was facilitated by a series of economic reforms that was initiated in 1979. Since then, China has experienced a period of rapid economic growth, which has averaged at 10% annually (The World Bank 2019a). Despite the economic crisis, China as the world's second largest economy has continued to grow even with a halting economy, see fig. 1 (Ibid.).



**Fig. 1 - Evolution of GDP Growth (The World Bank 2019b).**

However, China now faces a number of challenges that can limit their economic growth. The rapid growth has led to a greater need for natural resources such as oil, gas, metals and minerals that is currently imported from elsewhere. In conjunction with the economic development the military expenditure has grown as well, see fig. 2.





**Fig. 2 - Evolution of Military Expenditure in USD (The World Bank 2019c)**

As seen in the fig. 2, China has invested a large sum of money into modernising their military over the years. Official Chinese sources cited that the defense budget for 2010 was ¥532.11 billion, which is about \$77 billion ('China's National Defense in 2010' 2011). This number greatly varies from SIPRI's own assessment, that estimated the budget to be \$115,71 billion, or the United States who were more critical and assessed it to be about \$160 billion instead (Secretary of Defense 2019, 94; SIPRI n.d.).

### 5.2.1 Power Accumulation

Hence, China's steady rise, continued economic development, military development and increased global influence cannot account for China's behaviour without the context of power. Structural realism assumes that the primary goal of states is survival, which is the driving factor behind state

behaviour. States can achieve this goal by increasing their relative powers. Power can either be gained through maximisation or security seeking behaviour. In accordance with offensive realism, China is attempting to maximise their power, influence and economic growth by altering the existing power distribution as evident in the following quotation: *“The international balance of power is changing, most notably through the economic strength and growing international status and influence of emerging powers and developing countries.”* (‘China’s National Defense in 2010’ 2011) China is gaining more power, because the benefits outweigh the costs as the Western dominance is in decline.

The economic growth that China is experiencing has laid the foundation for their military power, see fig. 1 and 2. It has allowed the Chinese government to pursue an internal balancing strategy that focuses on modernising the military capabilities, because the situation is becoming more volatile in the Asia-Pacific region (‘China’s National Defense in 2010’ 2011; ‘The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces’ 2013). Furthermore, it makes strategic sense for China to understate their defense budget as the steadily increasing military spendings may spread uncertainty amongst the other states in the region. Offensive realists assert that all states have some form of military capabilities and that they cannot be certain about the intention of others.

In several of its white papers, the Chinese government has proclaimed that they *“will never seek hegemony, nor will it adopt the approach of military expansion now or in the future, no matter how its economy develops.”* (‘China’s National Defense in 2010’ 2011; ‘China’s Peaceful Development’ 2011; ‘The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces’ 2013; ‘China’s Military Strategy’ 2015). However, the strengthened military capabilities is used to defend Chinese national interests in the South China Sea, which contradicts

the statement as China is asserting control over the region to increase their relative powers (Kim 2016, 37).

China is in the possession of growing military capabilities and could have revisionist intentions. The increased military activity in the South China Sea and uncertainty about China's intentions could lead to a balancing act by the other states and the United States (Swaine and Fravel 2011, 5–7, 11). Even with the ever-growing defense budget, the Chinese are far from reaching the same level of spending as the Americans, see fig. 2. This limits the possibility of China challenging the U.S. in the near future through external balancing, as it will be too risky for the other states to align themselves with China and change the current balance of power. Moreover, the Chinese military modernisation has renewed the U.S. interest in the region. China is upsetting the status quo by modernising their military capabilities and are seen as a threat. The claimants are forced to increase their own capabilities through internal efforts to be able to form a balancing coalition with the U.S. in the lead. However, the offense-defense balance would be in the favour of China, as the precise state of their military capabilities are unclear as the Chinese government stopped publishing any after 2015. The United States feels that China's actions are threatening the regional stability and are prepared to counterbalance the Chinese internal balancing efforts if necessary (O'Rourke 2018, 3).

### **5.2.2 Balancing**

A consequence of China's continued militarisation in the South China Sea is that it has triggered counterbalancing from the other claimants, who are also in the progress of improving their own capabilities (McDevitt 2014, 185; 'The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces' 2013). Thus, Chinese national interests could be halted and is now contingent upon diplomatic efforts and

regional cooperation to prevent any balancing coalition from happening ('China's National Defense in 2010' 2011). Both Vietnam and the Philippines are in the progress of modernising their own military capabilities.

For offensive realists, security is scarce and acquiring enough power ensures that other states cannot threaten China. Another way to increase relative powers is through territorial integrity. The South China Sea is of vital strategic importance for the Chinese government, a greater control of the area would increase their relative powers. The region is important, because it contains an enormous amount of natural resources beneath the seabed and important shipping routes that are necessary for their continued growth. If China gains control of the area they will control one-third of the world's commercial shipping routes, as well as limit the presence of the United States and diminish their operative capabilities at the same time (Watson, Lendon, and Westcott 2018).

Nevertheless, China's ability to project power is still developing and are therefore not yet able to contest the American presence in the South China Sea or attempting to alter the balance of power through external balancing. The U.S. needs unimpeded access to the South China Sea, as their ability to project power is crucial for their credibility as a strategic partner and allies in the region (O'Rourke 2018, 3). The era of Western dominance is declining, and the United States are struggling to influence the world order, which put an emphasis on the importance of the U.S. commitment in the South China Sea.

### 5.3 Security Dilemma in the South China Sea

China's continued economic and militaristic development has prompted security concerns among the other Southeast Asian nations, which has led to a security competition (Feng 2016, 154). As mentioned earlier, states fear each other and always look upon others with suspicion. All states possess some form of offensive military capabilities, which makes them dangerous to each other's survival as they could potentially destroy one another (Mearsheimer 2001, 30). Moreover, there is no higher centralised authority to protect China within the international system in case they need help. If China wants to survive in this anarchic environment, they have to help themselves and provide for their own security. This self-help world forces states to increase their capabilities to survive, which leads to the security dilemma and a perpetual arms race. Improvement of security measures, regardless of intentions, will result in the other states responding with similar actions as the attempt to increase security is seen as a potential threat (Tang 2009, 590–91).

Since 2009 and 2010, the situation in the South China Sea has been dominated by Chinese assertiveness and aggression according to academic literature (Feng 2016, 154; Fravel 2011, 310; Burgess 2016, 112; Yahuda 2013, 452). China has undertaken several efforts to further their territorial claim in the South China Sea dispute. This has caused confrontations with the U.S., Vietnam and the Philippines (Swaine and Fravel 2011, 6; O'Rourke 2018, 9). Some of the indicators of assertiveness in the body of water includes the confrontation with the *Impeccable* in 2009, the coercion of the Philippines at the Scarborough Shoal in 2012, the land reclamation and the subsequent construction activities that began in 2013, and the deployment of an oil rig in 2014 within Vietnam's

Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)<sup>5</sup> (Ibid, 9, 13; Garamone 2009; McDevitt 2014, 32–33; Watson, Lendon, and Westcott 2018).

For China, the expansion and military modernisation in the region is driven by their historic maritime weakness. Historically, China has always been more focused on protecting their geographic vulnerable border, which has always been exposed to external threats from foreign invaders (Swaine and Tellis 2000, 9–10). China's current position in the international system is attributed to the Century of Humiliation, which covers the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, where the West and Japan gained a vast amount of territory through unequal treaties (Layne 2012; Gries 2004, 45–47). Hence, the South China Sea has remained a maritime security concern for China (McDevitt 2013, 180). The security concern has manifested itself in the rapid military modernisation and the land reclamation in the South China Sea.

### 5.3.1 Military Modernisation

As the Chinese government notes in the white paper from 2015 the external threats are increasing and the country: *“still faces multiple and complex security threats”* (‘China’s Military Strategy’ 2015) This has forced them to build up their military capabilities so that they can: *“uphold its sovereignty and security interests”* (Yang 2017). This can be seen in their heightened interest in gaining control of the South China Sea, a maritime weakness of theirs, to further their chance of survival. With an annual economic growth of 10%, China has had sufficient amount of resources to upgrade their military capabilities and has the ability to control the South China Sea, see fig. 1 and 2 (The World Bank 2019a; O’Rourke 2018, 25). China is steadily increasing their capabilities so

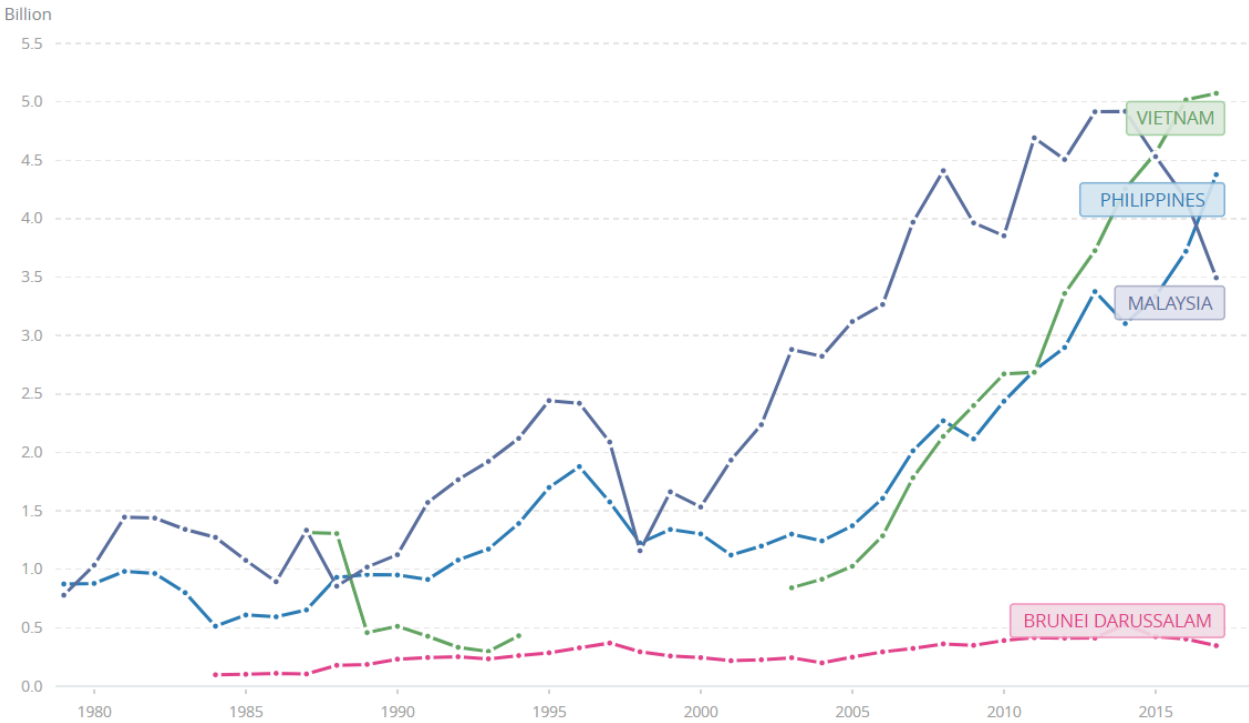
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<sup>5</sup> An **Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)** refers to the maritime area within 200 nautical miles (370 km) of a country’s coastal line, which gives the country the sovereign right and jurisdiction over any natural resources within the area (McDevitt 2014, 37).

that they can contest the U.S presence in the region in the future (Secretary of Defense 2019, 59).

However, Chinese white papers on national defense and military strategy has long been criticised for their lack of transparency and sustenance when addressing the country's defense policy or military modernisation (Zhang 2012, 881). Thus, observers are forced to rely on other sources to gauge China's real strategic intentions, either as a revisionist or a security seeking state, as none has been released after 2015 (Secretary of Defense 2019, 13). By assessing the available white papers on the subject, it becomes evident that the Chinese government continues to emphasise on developing a military force capable of winning; defending sovereignty and territorial interests; and advanced information and communications technology ('China's National Defense in 2010' 2011; 'China's Peaceful Development' 2011; 'The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces' 2013; 'China's Military Strategy' 2015). These recurring themes are connected to the insecurity prevalent within the security dilemma and the continued American presence and their influence in the region. The maritime nature of the dispute is dependent on the ability to project power. Thus, the potential for more power and thereby increased security is dependent on the current military capabilities in the South China Sea.

As briefly discussed, any effort at increasing one's own security will heighten the insecurity of others. This has led to similar measures taken by the other claimants to maintain the regional stability. China's aggressive behaviour has forced the littoral states to increase their defense budget and increase their naval capabilities as a way to maintain their presence in the region, see fig. 3 (J. R. Wu 2016; Zhen 2018).



**Fig. 3 Evolution of Military Expenditure in USD for Claimants (The World Bank 2019d)**

As shown in fig. 3, the defense budget of the claimants have all increased with a few exceptions. It is especially noteworthy that China has pursued separate strategies when dealing with the other claimants in the South China Sea dispute (Feng 2016, 155). China has been particularly assertive towards the Philippines and Vietnam, whereas Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei have been treated in moderate manner on the bilateral basis (Ibid.; Burgess 2016, 112). Overall, Vietnam and the Philippines have the largest overlapping claims in the dispute and have been involved in clashes with the Chinese ('South China Sea Dispute' 2019). In comparison, Malaysia and Brunei only have minor claims and have been more accommodating towards China (McDevitt 2014, 61, 2013, 182).

This explains the almost stagnant growth in the military expenditure of Brunei as they are largely dependent on their economic cooperation with China and would therefore not risk upsetting this by pushing their sovereignty claim (Tiezzi 2018). Malaysia has also sought a non-confrontational strategy in the



dispute and is balancing between the U.S. and China (McDevitt 2013, 182). Nonetheless, fig. 3 suggests that the increased military spending for the Malaysians indicates that they do perceive China to be a threat to some extent as they are working on strengthening military ties with the United States simultaneously (Ibid.; Zhen 2018).

China's assertive strategy towards Vietnam and the Philippines has pushed them towards the United States to depend on for military support (Kim 2016, 36). Compared with the other claimants, the Philippines and Vietnam has been more proactive with their sovereignty claims (McDevitt 2013, 181).

According to fig. 3, the military expenditure has always fluctuated for the Philippines (SIPRI n.d.). The country has clashed with China on different occasions, most notably in 2012 over Scarborough Shoal, and in 2016 where UNCLOS ruled in favour of the Philippines (Fravel 2016). From 2010 to 2016 there was a steady increase in the military spending, which began to decline in the following years, see fig 3. This can be associated with the Philippines softening stance towards China due to the economic incentives offered by the Chinese government, even though they did increase their naval capabilities from 2013 to 2016 (Zhen 2018; Calonzo and Jiao 2019; Bloomberg News 2018). Despite softening their stance, the Philippines remains a strategic ally of the United States, which means that in the case a conflict breaks out the U.S. is expected to aid the Philippines (O'Rourke 2018, 2). However, the Philippines is still pursuing increased capabilities to defend their sovereignty claim and deterring the Chinese militarisation as evident in their negotiations of an upgraded rocket system from the United States (Calonzo and Jiao 2019; Lu 2019).

As shown in fig 3, Vietnam's military spending have steadily increased throughout the years and has begun to modernise their military forces as a response to China's increased capabilities with Russian submarines (Kim 2015, 126; SIPRI n.d.). However, further training is required of the Vietnamese Navy before they can contend China's claim in the South China Sea (Burgess 2016, 130). Vietnam, like the Philippines, has had clashes with China in the region as one of the biggest opponents of the Chinese claim. Some of them includes the harassments of fishing vessels, confiscating their catches and severing seismic survey cables in 2011, and the installation of the oil rig in 2014 (Swaine and Frelv 2011, 6–7; McDevitt 2014, 33). As a reaction to the rapid militarisation of the South China Sea, Vietnam has started to increase their naval presence as well as fortifying their sovereignty claims with mobile rocket launchers (Zhen 2018; Torode 2016). Furthermore, the Vietnamese government is also increasing their defensive capabilities with the help of Russian military supplies and support from the U.S. in an attempt to deter China (Kim 2016, 43; Brunnstrom and Blanchard 2015). Much like the majority of the littoral states of the South China Sea, Vietnam is attempting to carefully balance between China, whom they share a land border with and are economic dependent on, and the United States (Ibid, 44).

### **5.3.2 Land Reclamation**

In 2013 China began massive land reclamation and base construction activities in the South China Sea (O'Rourke 2018, 13). China has reclaimed more than 3200 acres (12,96 km<sup>2</sup>) of land in the span of five years according to the American government (Secretary of Defense 2019, 75). The rapid construction of the seven artificial islands, are all equipped with military installations and facilities, which has resulted in concerns about China's intentions (Burgess 2016, 119). Even though the construction activities has ceased as of 2018, the

Chinese government is continuing to militarise the region (Watson, Lendon, and Westcott 2018; Secretary of Defense 2019, 73).

However, China is using the land reclamation and base construction as a way of enhancing their presence and power projection capabilities in the region. Therefore, the behaviour exhibited here is more in line with the offensive realist perspective as China is challenging the status quo in the contested waters by using the artificial islands as military outposts to control the area with its anti-ship and anti-missiles systems (Fravel 2016; Ibid, 73–74).

As a response to the land reclamation, the Philippines and Vietnam has also carried out land reclamations on their own in line with the defensive realist perspective. The Philippines moved to fortify and occupy their claims in the region, but have yet to militarise any of the nine islands and shoals as they fear Chinese repercussions (Mogato 2017; Petty et al. 2017). Instead the Philippine government has been working on upgrading and repairing on the existing structure in place (Ng 2018). Besides President Duterte is of the opinion that challenging China is pointless as: *“their mind fixed that they own the place. China will go to war”* (Mogato 2017).

On the other hand, Vietnam started their land reclamation project long before China (‘Vietnam’s Island Building: Double-Standard or Drop in the Bucket?’ 2016). The Vietnamese government is claiming 10 features in the South China Sea and has been building, fortifying and doing construction in a much smaller and slower scale than China (Ng 2018; O’Rourke 2018, 13). Hence, Vietnam is improving their defensive capabilities with the military installations and facilities through mobile rocket launcher capable of striking the Chinese installations if necessary (Brunnstrom and Blanchard 2015; Torode 2016; Feast and Torode 2016).

China's improved military capabilities has forced the other claimants to increase their own capabilities in the South China Sea either through fortification or expanding on their naval presence (Zhen 2018; Ng 2018). This feeds into the security dilemma where the attempt of enhancing one's own security heightens the insecurity of others (Mearsheimer 2003, 75).

## 5.4 National Interest in the South China Sea

As China continues its rise towards a great power status, it has become more assertive when dealing with its core interests. The core interests is a set of interests that represents non-negotiable topics within Chinese foreign policy (Swaine 2011, 2). The core interests are broadly defined by the Chinese government as: "*state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification, China's political system, and the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development.*" ('China's Peaceful Development' 2011) As previously stated the core interest have implications for state behaviour. For the purpose of the analysis, core interest will be used interchangeably with national interest.

### 5.4.1 Economic Interest

The South China Sea is one of the most contested regions due to the presence of abundant natural resources and it is one of the world's major trading routes (Watson, Lendon, and Westcott 2018; O'Rourke 2018, 5–6). As former Navy Admiral Huaqing puts it: "*whoever controls the Spratlys will reap huge economic and military benefits*" (Fravel 2011, 296). Hence, the prospect of vast resources is a driving factor that intensifies the situation as the natural

resources are very much needed to facilitate the necessary economic growth for the claimants (Kim 2016, 35). According to Chinese experts the oil and gas reserves are five times bigger than what was previously estimated by the U.S. Energy Information Agency (Burgess 2016, 116; Fravel 2011, 296). Furthermore, one-third of the world's shipping routes passes through the South China Sea, including China's foreign oil import (Ibid.; Watson, Lendon, and Westcott 2018; McDevitt 2014, 19).

As previously addressed in Chapter 5.2, China needs resources such as metals, minerals, food and above all else oil and gas to feed and fuel their booming economy. Therefore, China holds great economic interest in the region, as evident from the Chinese documents, where non-traditional security concerns like energy, resources and food are consistently addressed ('China's National Defense in 2010' 2011; 'China's Peaceful Development' 2011; 'The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces' 2013; 'China's Military Strategy' 2015). If the Chinese government controls the region then they effectively gain the rights and access to the fishing rights and any natural resources beneath the seabed.

In addition to being the world's second largest economy, China is also the second biggest oil consumer right after the United States (Buszynski 2012, 141). Controlling the South China Sea would make China less dependent on importing foreign oil and ensure that they remain supplied in the future (Kim 2016, 35). The Chinese government has enforced their claim in the South China Sea by disrupting attempts by Vietnam or Philippines at seismic surveys and implementing fishing ban in the region (Watson, Lendon, and Westcott 2018; Swaine and Fravel 2011, 5). China has gone as far as detaining fishing vessels and confiscating their catches and severing survey cables to ensure that none

of the other claimants will be able to gain any benefits from the resources present (Ibid.; Fravel 2011, 306).

Besides China, developing countries like the Philippines and Vietnam are also in need of oil and gas to fuel their economic development. Both Vietnam and the Philippines has attempted to survey for gas and oil within their own EEZ on separate occasions during 2011, which led to repeated clashes with China (Buszynski 2012, 141–42). The implications of China's conduct in these incidents and their use of maritime security patrol is an indication of offensive realist behaviour. China finds that the benefits outweighs the costs and knows that the Philippines and Vietnam are unable to retaliate, because they possess lesser military capabilities compared to China. This leaves China with ample room to do as they see fit, as they are protecting their maritime rights and preventing others from encroaching on their territory in the South China Sea.

#### **5.4.2 Sovereignty and Territorial Interest**

The Chinese government has pursued an assertive policy, where they have refused to compromise their stance on sovereignty and territorial claims and have increased their military capabilities to defend their national interests. So far, the core interests have primarily been linked to sovereignty and territorial issues such as Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang (Swaine 2010, 7). Nonetheless, the South China Sea dispute has highlighted the importance that the Chinese government places on the region.

China's sovereignty and territorial claims are based on historic rights and the claim is supported by the nine-dashed line which encompasses the Paracel and Spratly Islands (Fravel 2011, 293). In 2009, China submitted two note verbales pertaining to their claim to the Commission on the Limit of the

Continental Shelf (CLCS) stating in the first note that China: *“has indisputable sovereignty over the islands of the South China Sea and the adjacent waters, and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof.”* (Swaine and Fravel 2011, 2; McDevitt 2013, 179) The second note stated that: *“right to make submissions on the outer limits of the continental shelf that extends beyond 200 nautical miles in the East China Sea and in other sea areas.”* (Ibid, 3) In both cases a map with the nine-dashed line was included (Ibid.).

However, the scope of the claim remains ambiguous as China has refused to clarify the meaning of the nine-dashed line (McDevitt 2013, 176). Moreover, in 2016 an international arbitration rules that historic rights under UNCLOS had no legal rights as a basis for sovereignty and territorial claim (Ibid, 179; Buszynski 2012, 140). China has refused to accept the ruling and voiced their dissatisfaction of the decision to invalidate their historic claim (Fravel 2016).

The note verbales are more in line with the defensive realist perspective and were submitted as a counter-claim to the ones from Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines (Swaine and Fravel 2011, 3). China is seeking to preserve the status quo in the South China Sea, which is evident in their white papers where the Chinese government puts an emphasis on: *“peace, development, cooperation”* (‘China’s National Defense in 2010’ 2011; ‘China’s Peaceful Development’ 2011; ‘The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces’ 2013; ‘China’s Military Strategy’ 2015). China as a rational actor are fully aware that cooperation would be in their best interest as an escalation of the dispute would result in a possible balancing coalition. On the other hand, China’s attempt at circumventing the ruling through bilateral pressure is of offensive realist nature, which is also reflected in their power accumulation and growing capabilities (Buszynski 2012, 140).

## 6. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate the systemic variables contributing to China's behavioural change in the South China Sea dispute. A structural realist framework was applied to the case and has indicated that China's conduct were indeed more in accordance with the offensive than defensive realism. Additionally, the defensive and offensive realist perspective revealed that the United States decline in power also had an impact on China's actions, because the loss of relative power was to the advantage of China.

Therefore, it can be concluded that China is a revisionist state striving to gain control of the South China Sea and eventually shift the international system to a bipolar system. China's economic development has given them the opportunity to increase their relative powers that may end up threatening the U.S. dominance in the region. In short, the other claimants must be more cautious when dealing with an assertive China as they have proven that they are uncompromising when defending their sovereignty and territorial claims in the South China Sea dispute.

China can be said to be pursuing an interesting mixture of balancing strategy. They are utilising a hard-internal balancing strategy and is continuously modernising their military capabilities, because they want to surpass the relative power and power projection abilities of the United States. On the other hand, China is using a softer balancing strategy as an incentive and are attempting to sway the other claimants to bandwagon against the United States by creating a political and economic interdependence. This effectively limits option of a balancing coalition with the United States in the lead.



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