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The Rise of a Great Wall of Sand in the South China Sea

A Qualitative Idea Analysis on How China has Demonstrated its Assertiveness Over
the South China Sea during Xi Jinping's Second Term as President of China

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how China has demonstrated its assertiveness in the South China Sea throughout Xi Jinping's second presidential term, from March 2018 to March 2023. Employing the theoretical framework of Offensive Realism, the thesis seeks to unravel the motivations behind China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, contributing to a nuanced understanding of its strategic behavior and geopolitical objectives in the region.

The findings from the research reveal a pattern of assertive behavior manifested through strategic military deployments and the assertion of territorial claims in the contested area. These actions align seamlessly with the core tenets of Offensive Realism, underscoring a calculated pursuit of dominance and protection of its interests, illustrating the broader designs of the Chinese Communist Party in the region. By unraveling the motivations and consequences of China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the nation's strategic behavior and geopolitical objectives in this critical maritime domain.

Key Words: South China Sea; China; Offensive realism

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1 Introduction

When China rose to power, it for a long time maintained this language that it would be a peaceful rise to power. But in the last decade or even in the last few years especially, that language has been dramatically shifting. This language has in particular been towards disputed territories such as Taiwan and the South China Sea.

The South China Sea is a region of great geopolitical significance that has emerged as a hotbed of tensions and disputes over the past decades. This maritime area has become a focal point of strategic interest for numerous countries. With its vast resources, vital trade routes, and geostrategic location, the South China Sea has attracted attention from major global powers. It now stands as a theater for renewed great power rivalry, with China's assertive expansion taking center stage. China has emerged as a central player, fueling tensions through expansive territorial claims and activities such as constructing artificial islands and military build-ups.

This thesis endeavors to delve into the Chinese assertiveness over the complex South China Sea situation during Xi Jinping's second term as president. Employing the theoretical framework of Offensive Realism, the thesis seeks to expose the underlying power dynamics, and security concerns that mold China's assertive actions in the region. By doing so, the research contributes to a more profound understanding of the South China Sea dispute and its broader implications. The heart of this study lies in shedding light on China's motivations, exploring how offensive realism illuminates the strategic decisions and maneuvers undertaken by the nation in this contested maritime space. The research endeavors to offer a nuanced analysis of China's assertiveness, deciphering the intricate interplay of power dynamics at play in the South China Sea.

The thesis aspires to provide valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and stakeholders invested in the region's future. Through a comprehensive analysis of power dynamics, this thesis aims to offer a foundation for informed decision-making in this complex and dynamic geopolitical arena. Further, the thesis seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the complex South China Sea situation.

1.1 Background

The South China Sea (SCS) stands as a strategically vital and economically important region in Southeast Asia. Its borders touch China to the north, Vietnam to the west, Malaysia and Brunei to the south, and the Philippines to the east. Its central location makes it a crucial maritime crossroads connecting the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean. The SCS has garnered attention from major global powers due to its vast resources, vital trade routes, and geostrategic importance. Countries sharing coastlines, including China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam, all lay claims in the region, turning the sea into a theater for revived great power rivalry.

Extending from the Taiwan Strait in the north to Malacca and Singapore in the south, the region encompasses several hundred islands, covering an approximate land area of six square kilometers. Within the South China Sea, four distinct areas include the Dongsha Islands in the northeast, Paracel Islands in the north, Spratly Islands in the south, and Scarborough Shoal in the central-eastern part of the sea. The Spratly Islands, with over 140 islands, constitute the largest land area, with Taiping (also known as Itu Aba) as the largest individual island, occupied by Taiwan. Paracel Islands represent another significant island group, including Woody Island, featuring a small military airbase, port, and hospital constructed by China. Despite competing claims from Taiwan, Vietnam, and China, China has exercised control over the Paracel Islands since 1974 (War on the Rock, 2015).

Prior to the Second World War, Japan, France, and China each laid claims to the Spratlys and Paracels. Amid the war, Japan extended its influence over portions of both island groups during its southward expansion, only to withdraw following its defeat. Post-World War II developments marked a pivotal phase, as strategic considerations intensified fueled by a power vacuum left by Japan. In 1946, the Republic of China (ROC) took control of the Paracels and Itu Aba in the Spratlys, simultaneously asserting complete claims over the entire region. During the same year, the Philippines initiated movements into the Spratlys. In 1947 The ROC further asserted its claims in the South China Sea by drawing a map known as the "Map of South China Sea Islands.", today known as the "Nine-Dash Line" or "Eleven-Dash Line". In 1950, amid the Chinese Civil War, troops from the Republic of China (ROC) completely withdrew from the Paracels, retaining only their presence on Itu Aba. One year later the San Francisco Treaty was signed; under Article 2(f) Japan renounced all its existing claims to the Spratlys and Paracels. The challenge arose because the treaty did not designate a rightful sovereign for the South China Sea; the Allies did not specify the

recipient of the islands renounced by Japan. Japan's withdrawal and disavowal of claims in the South China Sea contributed to the creation of a political vacuum, subsequently filled by present-day claimants in the Spratlys and Paracels (War on the Rock, 2015). Following the communist victory in the Chinese Civil War, the People's Republic of China (PRC) asserts its inheritance of the territory from the earlier Republic of China (ROC). This claim encompasses the controversial "Nine-Dash Line" map, forming the basis of the PRC's territorial assertion over the South China Sea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016).

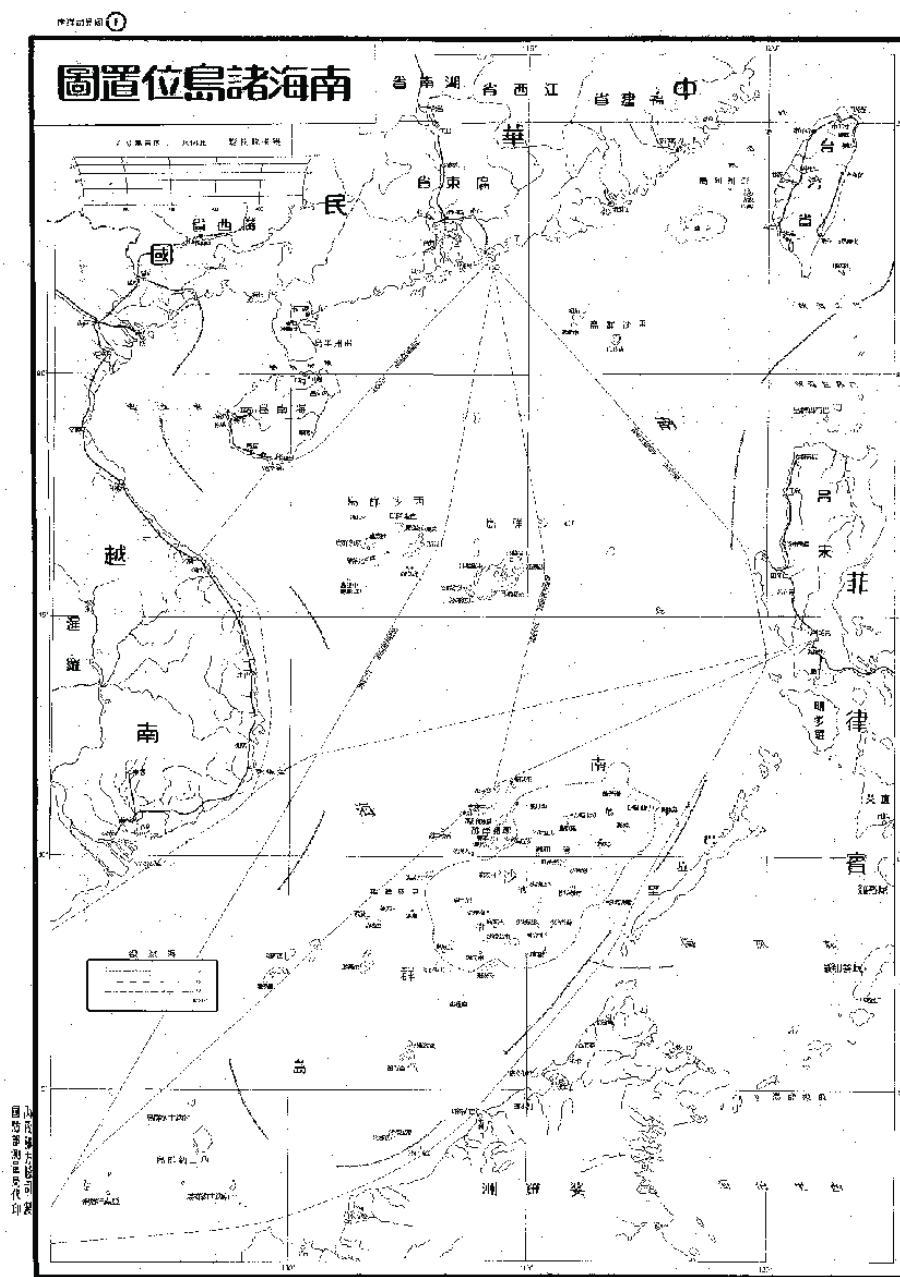


Figure 1: Original 11-dotted line map published by the Republic of China in 1947 (Taiwan in Perspective, 2012).

1.2 Objective & Question statement

The objective of this thesis is to analyze how China has demonstrated its assertiveness in the south china sea during Xi Jinping second term as president, ie. March 2018 - March 2023. This question was formulated according to the criteria suggested by A. Bryman; The research question should be clear, researchable, neither too broad nor too narrow, and most importantly, it should allow for the possibility to make an original contribution to the topic (Bryman, 2012, p.90).

This thesis holds both in intra-scientific and extra-scientific relevance. In terms of its intra-scientific impact, it has the potential to inspire future research on the South China Sea and contribute to the study of other regional issues. On an extra-scientific level, the aim is to enhance understanding of the complex situation in the South China Sea. The thesis, rather than aiming to cover the entire picture of the South China Sea situation, focuses on describing a limited number of Chinese interests associated with the theory of Offensive Realism

My research questions: *How has China demonstrated its assertiveness in the South China Sea during Xi Jinping's second presidential term, spanning from March 2018 to March 2023*

1.3 Disposition

The thesis is structured as follows: This first chapter provides an overview of the research problem, along with the some background information regarding the SCS and the research question is presented. It is followed by the literature review, where previous work is presented regarding the thesis's subject. The third chapter presents the theoretical framework guiding the analysis, specifically Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism, is presented. The Method chapter follows, outlining the analytical approach, materials used, limitations, and addressing the validity and reliability of the thesis. Subsequently, the fifth chapter presents the results and analysis of the collected empirical data, aligning with the employed framework. Finally, the Conclusion chapter summarizes the research results, and suggestions for future research are presented.

2 Literature review

Previous studies on the relationship between China and the South China Sea have undergone thorough analyses. Although prior research within the offensive realism framework exists, the majority has primarily concentrated on China's assertiveness in earlier periods of time. Notably, there is a gap in contemporary research that explores the latest developments in a similar depth.

An example of research on this topic is the study conducted by Jung and Lee (2017) titled "The Offensive Realists Are Not Wrong: China's Growth and Aggression, 1976–2001." The study indicates that China's continuous ascent is likely to strengthen its position in the South and East China Seas, safeguarding core strategic and economic interests. The research emphasizes that for China to establish itself as a regional hegemon, it must undermine the U.S.-led alliance network. China has strategically expanded in both economic and military dimensions, playing a pivotal role in multilateral institutions such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank. These moves aim to demonstrate Beijing's capabilities as a major power and weaken the encircling network led by the United States (Jung & Lee, 2017, p. 94).

Despite benefiting economically from ties with China, Asian states lean toward the US network. Rather than simply bandwagoning with the new regional power, Asian states are trying to maintain a balance between the two great powers or play along with the long-time external balancer without harming their security and economic interests. This all means that without weakening US influence in Asia, China cannot become a regional hegemony. This is why Beijing has begun to harshly respond to US allies on issues of territorial sovereignty and repeatedly asserting its own interests (ibid. p. 94).

Jung and Lee conclude that offensive realists are correct, as their statistical analysis shows that China's increased economic power correlates with heightened aggression. This is evidenced by China's greater hostility in territorial disputes, supporting the notion that a more powerful China tends to be more assertive. The analysis anticipates that China will persist in its uncompromising stance in the South and East China Seas if its economic rise continues, reinforcing its commitment to protecting core interests in strategic and economic matters (ibid. p. 88 & 103-104).

3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Theory Motivation

The motivation for choosing offensive realism as a framework to analyze China's assertiveness in the South China Sea stems from the perception that China is considered to be a realist country. Recently, Mearsheimer stated, “The Chinese are realist to the core,” highlighting how the Chinese engage in realist discourse (Fridman, 2023, 02:56.10). Another motivating factor is the influence of the practical philosophy of legalism, rooted in Chinese society. Legalism, represented by figures like Han Feizi, underscores the necessity of strong state authority for order and power consolidation. This alignment resonates with realism's emphasis on state interests, power dynamics, and national security (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2014).

3.2 Realism

Realism, also known as political realism, is a school of thought in International Relations that emphasizes the competitive and conflictual aspects of international relations. Realism's roots are often said to be found in some of humankind's earliest historical writings. Among its founding fathers, Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes are the names most usually mentioned. Realists consider the principal actors in the international arena to be states, which are concerned with their own security and act in pursuit of their own national interests for power. National politics is the realm of authority and law, whereas international politics, they sometimes claim, is a sphere without justice, characterized by active or potential conflict among states, where ethical standards do not apply (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2023).

Twentieth-century classical realism has largely given way to neorealism in contemporary times, representing an effort to establish a more scientific approach to the study of international relations. While neorealism continues the realist focus on power and self-interest, it introduces a more systematic framework. The increasing tensions among superpowers in the twenty-first century have sparked a renewed interest in the realist perspective (ibid.).

3.3 Offensive Realism

The theory of offensive Realism is an extension of Waltz's neorealism, thus Offensive Realism is also a structural theory of international relations. As with defensive realism, offensive realism sees great power as being concerned with how to survive in a world where there is no agency to protect them from each other. And that great powers recognize that power is the key to survival in the anarchy of the international system (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 21).

Offensive realism and defensive realism diverge in their perspective on a state's pursuit of power. Defensive realists believe that the international system provides states with little incentive to seek additional increments of power; instead, it pushes them to maintain the existing balance of power. In other words, states main objective is to preserve power rather than gain more of it. In contrast, offensive realists believe that status quo powers are rarely found in world politics. This is attributed to the fact that the international system provides strong motivations for nations to actively seek opportunities to increase their power at the expense of their adversaries and to capitalize on favorable circumstances when the benefits outweigh the costs. Mearsheimer states that when a great power achieves a military advantage over its rivals, it continues seeking more power. The pursuit of power stops only when hegemony is achieved (ibid. p. 21 & 34).

Since states actively seek to increase their power in the world arena, states pay close attention to how power is distributed among them, and they make a special effort to maximize their share of world power. States especially look for opportunities to alter the balance of power by acquiring additional increments of power at the expense of potential rivals. Mearsheimer says that states employ a variety of means; economic, diplomatic, and military to shift the balance of power in their favor. Even if doing so makes other states suspicious or even hostile. Because one state's gain in power is another state's loss, great powers tend to have a zero-sum mentality when dealing with each other (ibid. p. 34).

According to Mearsheimer, a country's political system and its level of involvement in the global economy have little impact on its behavior in the world arena. This is because both democracies and non-democracies equally prioritize their security: Offensive realists tend to view states as black boxes (ibid. p. 4).

Why do great powers often act aggressively towards each other? According to Mearsheimer, this is due to the structure of the international system. Even states that seek

only to be secure are compelled to act aggressively towards one another due to three key features:

1) The first feature is the absence of a central authority, i.e. anarchy (ibid. p. 3). Anarchy according to Mearsmer does not necessarily imply chaos or disorder. The realist definition of anarchy is simply an ordering principle; It means that the international system is made up of independent states that have no central authority above them. (ibid. p. 30). Because other states are potential threats, and since there is no higher authority to come to their rescue when they dial 911, states cannot depend on others for their own security. Each state tends to see itself as alone and vulnerable, and therefore it aims to provide for its own survival. In international politics, God helps only those who help themselves (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 33). The second feature is the fact that states always have some offensive military capability (ibid. p. 3). Fear among great powers arises from their possession of offensive military capability, which can be employed against each other. (ibid. p. 43). The third feature is the uncertainty surrounding states' intentions. States can never be certain that other states won't utilize their offensive military capabilities for an attack. While not all states necessarily harbor hostile intentions, it is impossible to be sure of that judgment because intentions are impossible to divine with 100 percent certainty (ibid. p. 3 & 31).

States operating in a self-help world almost always act according to their own self-interest and do not subordinate their interests to the interests of other states, or to the interests of the so-called international community. The reason is simple: it pays to be selfish in a self-help world (ibid. 2001, p. 33).

Mearsheimer emphasizes that individually, none of these assumptions mandates aggressive behavior among great powers. The only assumption dealing with a specific motive common to all states is that their principal objective is to survive, which by itself is a rather harmless goal. However, when these three features are married together, they create powerful incentives for great powers to think and act offensively toward each other (ibid. p. 31-32).

To summarize, Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism is an extension of Waltz's neorealism; Unlike defensive realism, it contends that states actively seek additional power. This pursuit persists until hegemony is achieved, irrespective of military advantage. Aggressive behavior among great powers stems from anarchy, offensive military capability, and uncertainty about other states' intentions. In a self-help world, states act in self-interest for survival.

4 Method

4.1 Analytical approach

The analytical approach chosen for this thesis is qualitative latent idea analysis. According to Beckman, idea analysis refers to a method for critically interpreting and analyzing political messages. It enables researchers to seek knowledge formulated in political contexts, deciphering how political reality is valued, changed, and understood. This method expands beyond traditional sources, incorporating a variety of materials, such as examining political discourse in diverse texts like speeches and legislative documents (Hollander & Alexius Borgström, 2009, p. 66). In a latent idea analysis, the spotlight is directed towards the underlying meanings that are neither intended nor clear and can only be clarified through an analysis of underlying interests. It serves to demonstrate that there may be different content in the source than what is explicitly stated in the source motives (ibid. p. 69-70).

Idea analysis is relevant to the research question on China's assertiveness in the South China Sea during Xi Jinping's second presidential term as it provides a methodological framework to dissect and interpret the underlying ideas shaping China's actions. By applying idea analysis, the thesis can delve into various texts, such as official statements, policy documents, speeches, and media discourse, to uncover the ideas driving China's assertive behavior. This approach enables a nuanced understanding of the political discourse surrounding the South China Sea issue, shedding light on the motivations, values, and narratives that influence China's actions in the region. Latent idea analysis adds depth to the examination of China's assertiveness by exploring the underlying meaning embedded in its foreign policy decisions.

4.2 Material

The credibility of a study hinges significantly on the approach and execution of the material collection. Since some sources from other individual's work have been used in this thesis, great demands are placed on studying the sources critically. In order to ensure that the materials used in this thesis are credible, the material gathering for the thesis follows the source-critical rules, which include: authenticity, independence, simultaneity, and tendency (Esaïsson et al., 2017, p. 290). Authenticity involves identifying the sender of a source and verifying whether the source accurately represents what it claims to be (ibid., p. 291). A

primary source gains greater credibility when it originates directly from the sender and has not undergone rewriting or reinterpretation, a potential issue often associated with secondary sources (ibid., p. 292–293). Simultaneity pertains to the timeframe when the source was written and addresses the relevance of the information contained therein today. It involves considering whether there are newer and more appropriate sources available (ibid., p. 294). Tendency focuses on the general reliability of the source and whether it exhibits any bias or leans, for example, negatively toward the subject being discussed (ibid., p. 295).

Specific considerations have been taken into account to adhere to the four source-critical rules before selecting appropriate sources. For instance, the majority of the material is sourced from primary sources, including official documents, spokesperson responses, and authoritative books. However, secondary sources have been used when primary sources were unavailable, such as in the case of obtaining information about the missile placement in the Spratly Islands. When secondary sources, like newspapers, were used, the four source-critical rules were also followed. This is exemplified by the inclusion of newspaper articles published in close proximity to the relevant time, contributing to the authenticity and credibility of the source. To further reinforce the reliability of the information, preference was given to well-established media companies over smaller ones. Notably, the chosen newspaper sources include Forbes, the Financial Times, The Guardian, Reuters, and CNBC.

4.3 Limitation

Given the relatively broad scope of this thesis research area, it has become necessary to make several delimitations to ensure the work remains within its given framework and to be able to publish a work of good quality. Therefore, the choice to focus on the time period, spanning Xi Jinping's second presidential term from March 2018 to March 2023, which allows for an in-depth analysis of China's South China Sea policy. Although the chosen timeframe is essential for delineating the study's scope, it does introduce limitations due to the dynamic nature of geopolitical events. Unforeseen shifts post-March 2023 fall outside the study's purview. Furthermore, the decision to narrow the analysis and concentrate on a limited set of interests aligned with Offensive Realism theory is intentional. While covering all perspectives comprehensively would be ideal, a broader scope would necessitate an impractical thesis length, exceeding manageable limits.

4.4 Validity and Reliability

The foundation of the thesis rests upon the author's ability to interpret complex material, a skill that introduces potential challenges to the study's replicability. The risk emerges from the possibility that the replication of the study might yield disparate results contingent upon the individual conducting it, thereby posing a threat to external reliability. However, the study is supported by the fact that the internal reliability is good as the author has been very cautious when it comes to choosing sources. When sources have been used that draw their own conclusions, The author has ensured that the information we used can be confirmed by other, independent sources. This is to avoid tendentious material (Esaiasson et al. 2017 p.295).

Furthermore, the author goes beyond just citing sources and instead immerses themselves in the materials and theories involved. This level of engagement has helped the author gain a deep understanding of the subject matter, ultimately strengthening the thesis's internal validity. It's especially important for a Western researcher studying Chinese claims in the South China Sea to remain objective, which is reflected in the use of primary sources. This approach provides a nuanced, culturally sensitive, and transparent analysis, aligning with the principles of a comprehensive and robust examination of the study's focal topic (Bryman, 2012, p. 465: 484-485).

5 Result and Analysis

5.1 Background Policy

In 2016, the Government of the People's Republic of China published its latest white paper on its policy regarding the South China Sea. In the paper, China's position is clear: it reaffirms territorial sovereignty and maritime rights in the South China Sea. China asserts historical rights over the Nanhai Zhudao (the South China Sea Islands), claiming that Chinese activities in the region date back over 2,000 years. The document states that China has discovered, named, and explored Nanhai Zhudao and relevant waters, continuously and peacefully exercising sovereignty and jurisdiction (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016).

Following the end of the Second World War, China regained sovereignty over Nanhai Zhudao, previously occupied by Japan. In 1947, the Chinese government strengthened the administration by updating geographical names and publishing a location map with a marked dotted line (Nine-dash line map). This map was officially published and made known to the world by the Chinese government in February 1948 (ibid.).

The paper also indicates China's willingness to peacefully settle disputes through negotiation and consultation with directly involved states, respecting historical facts and in accordance with international law. China expresses readiness to enter into provisional arrangements of a practical nature, including joint development in relevant maritime areas, to achieve mutually beneficial results and jointly maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea (ibid.). China's commitment to peaceful dispute resolution is evident in the joint Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), signed by China and ASEAN states in 2002. The DOC emphasizes the importance of building trust, resolving disputes through peaceful means, and exercising self-restraint in activities that could escalate tensions. The parties involved agree to enhance cooperation through dialogues, information exchange, and joint efforts in areas such as marine environmental protection and scientific research. To encourage respect for the principles of the declaration, the parties call on other countries to do the same and express their support for the eventual adoption of a code of conduct (COC) in the South China Sea. The DOC agreement aims to promote stability, cooperation, and peaceful resolution in the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2002).

5.2 Anti-ship cruise missiles

On May 2, 2018, reports surfaced indicating that China had positioned anti-ship cruise missiles and surface-to-air missile systems on three fortified outposts in the South China Sea—specifically, Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef; three islands that have been dredged out of coral reefs in the past five years. (Financial Times, 2018) & (CNBC, 2018). If verified, these installations would mark the first Chinese missile deployments in the Spratly Islands, where several Asian countries including Vietnam and Taiwan have rival claims. China has made no mention of any missile deployments Reuters, 2018).

China's placement of missiles in the South China Sea is not an isolated incident. In February 2016, reports emerged indicating that Beijing had installed advanced surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) on Woody Island. The strategic significance of Woody Island had been established earlier, as China had developed a port and constructed a runway and airfield on the island a quarter-century ago, in 1990. Furthermore, in 2015 China deployed advanced J-11 fighter jets, giving it the ability to control the airspace around the Paracels (Forbes, 2016). The expanding military infrastructure was further evidenced by satellite imagery capturing the presence of five Y-8 aircraft on Woody Island in November 2017 (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2018).

The anti-ship cruise missiles, identified as YJ-12B, have a range enabling China to strike surface vessels within 295 nautical miles of the deployed reefs. In addition, long-range surface-to-air missiles designated as HQ-9B have an expected range of targeting aircraft, drones, and cruise missiles within 160 nautical miles. A Pentagon official stated that The deployment of advanced weaponry on these outposts heightens tensions and raises concerns about the potential for increased distrust among claimants in the region (CNBC, 2018).

To summarize, on May 2, 2018, reports revealed China's deployment of anti-ship cruise missiles and surface-to-air missile systems on Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef in the South China Sea. This marked the first such missile deployment in the Spratly Islands, intensifying regional tensions. Notably, China had previously installed advanced surface-to-air missiles on Woody Island in 2016. The recent deployment of missiles with significant ranges raises concerns about heightened distrust among claimants in the region.

5.3 China's National Defense in the New Era

At the onset of the second half of 2019, The Chinese government released a white paper titled "China's National Defense in the New Era." This document outlined China's vision for fostering an inclusive, balanced, and secure Asian security architecture. A notable focus of the national defense paper was directed towards addressing the South China Sea (Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, 2019).

China asserts in the paper that a fundamental goal of its national defense in the new era is to resolutely safeguard its national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Furthermore, it explicitly states that the South China Sea islands and Diaoyu Islands are integral parts of Chinese territory. China reserves the right to exercise its national sovereignty by constructing infrastructure, deploying necessary defensive capabilities on the islands and reefs in the South China Sea, and conducting patrols in the waters surrounding the Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea (ibid.).

Additionally, China asserts that its armed forces are actively committed to safeguarding crucial maritime encompassing the East China Sea, South China Sea, and Yellow Sea. Through the execution of joint rights protection and law enforcement operations, the Chinese armed forces manage maritime and air situations, responding decisively to security threats, infringements, and provocations at sea (ibid.).

China also asserts in the defense paper its commitment to resolving territorial disputes through negotiations with directly involved states, based on respect for historical facts and international law. China continues to work with regional nations to jointly maintain peace and stability. One example is the implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and ongoing efforts to advance consultations on the Code of Conduct (COC) with ASEAN countries (ibid.)

To summarize, China's 2019 defense white paper prioritizes securing national sovereignty in the South China Sea, affirming its rights to develop and patrol the region. Committed to negotiations for territorial disputes, China collaborates with regional nations to promote stability and peace, exemplified by initiatives like the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea.

5.4 Incident with a Vietnamese Vessel

On 3 April 2020, reports emerged that a Chinese Coastguard vessel reportedly obstructed, rammed, and sank a Vietnamese fishing boat, identified as QNg 90617 TS, with eight Vietnamese fishermen aboard. The incident occurred during the vessel's routine fishing activities in the waters near the Hoàng Sa (Paracel) Islands of Vietnam. In response, the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs lodged a diplomatic note of protest with a representative of the Chinese Embassy in Ha Noi; The note called for an investigation into the incident and urged the Chinese authorities to provide adequate compensation for the losses suffered by the Vietnamese fishermen. All eight Vietnamese fishermen aboard the QNg 90617 TS had safely returned, according to information released by Vietnamese authorities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020).

China's response, as conveyed by Zhang Jun, spokesperson for the China Coast Guard, asserts that Vessel China Coast Guard 4301, acted in accordance with the law when warning and attempting to expel Vietnamese fishing boat QNG90617TS, which had reportedly entered waters off China's Xisha Islands for fishing activities. According to Zhang Jun, the Vietnamese fishing boat refused to comply with the warnings, engaged in hazardous maneuvers, and eventually collided with Vessel China Coast Guard 4301, resulting in its sinking (China Coast Guard, 2020).

To summarize, in April 2020 a Chinese Coastguard vessel reportedly obstructed and sank a Vietnamese fishing boat near the Hoàng Sa (Paracel) Islands. Vietnam lodged a protest, seeking an investigation and compensation, and all eight fishermen were reported safe. China's response claimed their Coast Guard vessel acted lawfully, issuing warnings to the illegally fishing Vietnamese boat, which allegedly refused to comply and collided with the Chinese vessel.

5.5 Two New Administrative Regions

On April 18, 2020, the Chinese Ministry of Defense issued a statement announcing a significant development in the governance of the disputed South China Sea territories. Sansha City, situated in Hainan Province, has established two distinct administrative districts, namely Xisha District and Nansha District. This administrative restructuring, approved by the State Council, is pivotal and warrants thorough examination. Xisha District is tasked with administering the Xisha and Zhongsha islands and the surrounding waters, with its district government located on Yongxing Island. Simultaneously, Nansha District is responsible for the governance of Nansha Island and its adjacent waters, with its district government situated on Yongshu Jiao (Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, 2020)

The aftermath of this announcement was marked by heightened tensions as Vietnam vehemently objected, contending that China's establishment of administrative units on the islands seriously infringes upon its sovereignty. In response, Geng Shuang, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, categorically stated China's firm opposition to Vietnam's protests. He emphasized that China firmly opposes any words or actions by Vietnam that undermine China's sovereignty, rights, and interests in the South China Sea. Shuang further asserted that China, in accordance with domestic laws and regulations, has sovereignty over the Xisha and Nansha Islands and their adjacent waters. The Chinese government has also exercised sovereign rights and jurisdiction over relevant waters, seabeds, and subsoils, routinely publishing names of islands, reefs, and seabed areas under its jurisdiction. Shuang clarified that these actions align with international law and practices and contribute to the improvement of marine management (*ibid.*).

Furthermore, Shuang highlighted that the administrative adjustments within Sansha City are in line with China's sovereignty, aimed at enhancing administrative management and fostering coordinated development. This move, according to Shuang, is conducive to Sansha City's economic growth and environmental protection (*ibid.*).

In conclusion, the establishment of Xisha and Nansha Districts within Sansha City signifies a watershed moment in the enduring South China Sea narrative. To comprehensively analyze this event, one must delve into the historical context, intricate geopolitical dynamics, and the broader implications for regional stability. This academic scrutiny is essential to unravel the multifaceted dimensions of China's administrative restructuring and its potential impact on the South China Sea's future trajectory.

5.6 Incident with a Philippine Vessel

On the 5th of February, it was reported that a Chinese coastguard ship allegedly used a military-grade laser light to temporarily blind a Philippine vessel. The Philippine Coast Guard accused a Chinese ship of shining a green laser light twice toward one of its boats. This was done to deliberately block a mission that was bringing supplies to its troops stationed at Second Thomas Shoal; a submerged reef in the Spratly Islands (The Guardian, 2023).

In response, on the following day, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos summoned the Chinese ambassador to express his serious concerns over China's increasing frequency and intensity of actions against Philippine vessels. Philippine foreign affairs spokesperson Teresita Daza also confirmed that a diplomatic protest had been filed, stating that "these acts of aggression by China are disturbing and disappointing." (The Guardian, 2023).

During a press conference held on February 15, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin addressed the allegations concerning the Nansha Islands, particularly the Ren'ai Reef (Second Thomas Shoal). Wang Wenbin stated that China has indisputable sovereignty over these islands, and that the Philippine Coast Guard vessel had entered the waters adjacent to the Ren'ai Reef without China's permission. He emphasized that the intrusion of a Philippine Coast Guard vessel into the waters adjacent to the Ren'ai Reef occurred without Chinese permission. In response to this intrusion, Wang Wenbin explained that the China Coast Guard ship, acting in accordance with the law, issued warnings to the Philippine vessel and urged it to depart from the area. During that process, the China Coast Guard ship utilized a hand-held laser speed detector and a hand-held greenlight pointer during this process to measure the distance and speed of the Philippine vessel, ensuring navigation safety. Wang Wenbin stated that the Philippine side's allegations do not reflect the truth (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023).

To summarize, a recent incident involved a Chinese coastguard allegedly using a military-grade laser to blind a Filipino vessel supplying troops at Second Thomas Shoal. In response, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos expressed serious concerns, filing a diplomatic protest. China defended its actions, asserting sovereignty over the Nansha Islands and Ren'ai Reef, claiming the Philippine vessel entered without permission. China's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin emphasized the use of a laser speed detector for navigation safety, dismissing Philippine allegations as untrue.

5.7 Analysis

This chapter seeks to put together the observations that can be drawn based on the findings presented above in accordance with the framework of offensive realism. Moreover, it aims to offer an answer to the research question addressed in the previous chapters: *How has China manifested assertiveness in the South China Sea during Xi Jinping's second presidential term, spanning from March 2018 to March 2023*

China's strategic deployment of anti-ship cruise missiles and surface-to-air missile systems on Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef in the Spratly Island group in 2018 can be seen as a manifestation of its active pursuit of regional power and pursuit of strategic superiority in the south china sea. These advanced capabilities provide China with a significant edge, allowing it to project power and assert control in the maritime domain. This strategic maneuver aligns seamlessly with the core tenets of Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism, where states actively seek opportunities to enhance their power, even at the expense of potential rivals (källa). The significance of stationing advanced missiles in the Spratlys is heightened by the increased tension in this area, where territorial claims are asserted by five countries. This contrasts sharply with the relatively less contested Woody Island in the Parcel Island group, where only three countries make territorial claims. This move within the contested Spratlys can be interpreted as a more offensive and potentially destabilizing decision compared to the earlier positioning of SAMs on Woody Island in the Parcel Island group. This is also consistent with Mearsheimer's offensive realism, that states pursue additional power in the international arena for strategic advantage.

China's assertion of sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea as articulated in the defense white paper, could be seen as an active strategy designed to secure crucial maritime and territorial interests ie further pursuit of power. According to Mearsheimer, states actively seek power as a means of survival in an anarchic international system. China's explicit claim to these territories, coupled with the declaration of the right to construct infrastructure and deploy defensive capabilities, reflects a strategic move to fortify its position and extend its influence in the region. By staking a clear claim, China signals its commitment to securing vital interests and positions itself as a formidable player in the geopolitical arena.

China's establishment of Xisha and Nansha Districts within Sansha City on the disputed islands further illustrates China's proactive efforts to alter the balance of power in its favor. While framed as administrative enhancement and sovereignty reinforcement by

Chinese authorities, this restructuring can be seen as a strategic maneuver aimed at consolidating control over disputed territories. From an offensive realist perspective, administrative adjustments can be viewed as instruments for increasing a state's power. This strategic maneuver reflects China's active pursuit of power and dominance in the region. By creating administrative districts, China solidifies its control over contested territories, justified under the umbrella of sovereignty.

The reported incidents involving the Chinese coastguard using a military-grade laser to temporarily blind a Filipino vessel in 2023 and in 2020 with the alleged sinking of a Vietnamese fishing vessel, reflects pursuit of dominance and protection of Chinese interests in the South China Sea. This incident aligns with Offensive Realism's view of great powers actively securing key territories. These incidents aren't world-shaking events, but they are indicative of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) broader vision for the South China Sea.

To summarize, China's demonstration of assertiveness in the South China Sea during Xi Jinping's second presidential term aligns with Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism. The deployment of advanced weaponry in the Spratly Islands in 2018 reflects a proactive pursuit of regional power and strategic dominance. Moreover, China's assertion of sovereignty over the islands, the establishment of administrative districts, and reported incidents in the South China Sea collectively illustrate a calculated pursuit of dominance and protection of its interests, revealing the broader strategic designs of the Chinese Communist Party in the region.

5.8 Summary Result and Analysis

Examining China's assertiveness over the South China Sea throughout Xi Jinping's second presidential term (March 2018 to March 2023) reveals a series of notable events. In 2018, China's deployment of advanced weaponry on Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef, escalated tensions and sparked concerns about heightened distrust among claimants in the region. These installations not only fortified China's position but also underscored its intention to project power and control over the contested maritime domain. The 2019 defense white paper emphasized China's commitment to safeguarding sovereignty in the South China Sea, asserting its right to patrol the region and deploy defensive weapons. April 2020 witnessed two significant events. First, a Vietnamese fishing vessel was allegedly sunk by a Chinese Coastguard vessel near the Paracel Islands. Simultaneously, administrative restructuring in Sansha City established Xisha and Nansha Districts, leading to heightened tensions in the region. The administrative restructuring appears to be more than just a procedural change; it seems to serve as a strategic tool for enhancing China's influence in the region. In February 2023, a reported incident involving a Chinese coastguard ship using a military-grade laser to blind a Filipino vessel near the Spratly Islands. The reported incidents involving the sinking of a Vietnamese fishing vessel in 2020 and the use of a military-grade laser against a Filipino vessel in 2023 could be seen as tactical moves within this broader strategy for dominating the South China Sea.

In essence, China's calculated pursuit of dominance goes beyond isolated events; it encompasses a spectrum of strategic maneuvers. The offensive deployment of advanced weaponry, coupled with administrative and sovereignty assertions, paints a cohesive picture of China actively shaping the geopolitical landscape in its favor. This aligns seamlessly with Mearsheimer's theory, illustrating how states, driven by the pursuit of power, employ multifaceted strategies to enhance their standing in the international arena. The Chinese Communist Party's actions in the South China Sea exemplify a deliberate effort to secure regional dominance and safeguard its interests.

6 Conclusion and Future Research

6.1 Conclusion

This thesis has examined how China has demonstrated its assertiveness over the South China Sea during Xi Jinping's second term as President of the People's Republic of China. Framed within the theoretical lens of John Mearsheimer's offensive realism. Through an analysis of key events, such as the missile placement on Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef, the 2019 Defense paper, the establishment of administrative regions Xisha District and Nansha District, and the incidents involving Vietnamese and Filipino vessels, a comprehensive understanding has emerged.

In the introductory part of the thesis, the research questions were: *How has China demonstrated its assertiveness in the South China Sea during Xi Jinping's second presidential term, spanning from March 2018 to March 2023?* In response, China's assertiveness in the South China Sea during Xi Jinping's second presidential term reflects a consistent and proactive pursuit of power and influence. This assertive stance is underscored by China's unwavering claim of full sovereignty over the islands in the region, a narrative that has been echoed throughout Xi Jinping's second term. This claim is not merely rhetorical; it is substantiated by tangible actions, including the strategic deployment of advanced weaponry such as anti-ship cruise missiles and surface-to-air missile systems, and the establishment of two new administrative regions within Sansha City in the South China Sea. Furthermore, the reported incidents, such as the sinking of a Vietnamese vessel and the use of a military-grade laser on a Philippine vessel, collectively illustrate a calculated pursuit of dominance and protection of Chinese interests in the region. These actions align seamlessly with Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism, which posits that states seek opportunities to enhance their power in the anarchic international system and continually strive to shift the balance of power in their favor.

My findings align with Jung and Lee's conclusions in 'The Offensive Realists Are Not Wrong: China's Growth and Aggression, 1976–2001.' Building on their insights, my analysis of events during Xi Jinping's second term reveals a consistent pattern of China actively reshaping the balance of power in the South China Sea. This strategic pursuit, as highlighted by Jung and Lee, supporting the offensive realism notion that a more powerful China tends to be more assertive. This research provides empirical support for the argument that China's

assertiveness aims to safeguard core strategic and economic interests, echoing the findings of Jung and Lee.

The findings of this thesis offer valuable insights into the power dynamics of the South China Sea, providing knowledge for policymakers to better comprehend the situation in the region. Additionally, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in the Chinese perspective on the South China Sea. By applying the theoretical principles of offensive realism to this specific case, the thesis not only enriches the broader study of offensive realism but also makes a contribution to the ongoing discourse within the field of international relations.

In navigating the waters of China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, the study aligns with the broader offensive realist perspective. The intricate interplay between power, security, territorial assertiveness, and regional dynamics underscores the complexities defining China's role in this strategically crucial area. Looking ahead, it becomes evident that understanding and navigating these waters demands continued scholarly attention to interpret the evolving currents that shape the destiny of the South China Sea.

6.2 Future research

The analysis of China's South China Sea policy during Xi Jinping's second term presents avenues for future research. One potential area for exploration involves conducting a comparative study across different regions or cases. By comparing China's policy in the South China Sea with other disputed regions, researchers can identify common patterns and variations in power dynamics, interests, and strategies. Expanding the analysis beyond China to include the positions and actions of countries surrounding the South China Sea, such as Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, Brunei, and Indonesia, could provide a broader picture of the situation. This comparative approach may uncover nuanced insights into the geopolitical landscape. Additionally, future research could incorporate alternative theoretical frameworks to enrich our understanding of power dynamics in the South China Sea. This multi-faceted approach may reveal new dimensions and perspectives, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding. Given the ongoing nature of the situation, there is a need for continuous research. Subsequent studies could, for instance, analyze Xi Jinping's third term to capture evolving dynamics and policy shifts.

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