

Troubled Waters

Assessing the Congruence between Offensive Realism and China's
Violations of International Law in the South China Sea

Abstract

This thesis examines how offensive realism can explain China's violations of international law in the South China Sea (SCS). Drawing on John Mearsheimer's five bedrock assumptions: anarchy, offensive capability, uncertainty of intentions, survival as a primary goal, and rationality, the study uses the congruence method within a qualitative case study framework. It assesses whether China's violations in the SCS, including its nine-dash line claims, artificial island construction, EEZ harassment, interference with freedom of navigation, and rejection of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) award, align with offensive realism's five bedrock assumptions.

The findings demonstrate a high level of congruence across three domains: territorial assertion and control, operational coercion, and legal rejectionism. While not all assumptions are evident in every violation, taken together, China's behavior reflects the full range of offensive realism's theoretical assumptions. The analysis suggests that offensive realism provides a strong and plausible explanation for China's behavior in the SCS. The thesis contributes to our understanding of how great powers behave and highlights challenges to the effectiveness of international law, especially the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Key words: China, South China Sea, Offensive Realism, UNCLOS

Word Count: 9993

1	Introduction.....	2
1.1	Background	2
1.2	Purpose and Research Question	3
1.3	Literature Review	4
2	Theory	7
2.1	Realism.....	7
2.2	Offensive realism	8
2.2.1	Achieving hegemony and maximizing relative power.....	10
2.2.2	Attaining power.....	11
2.2.3	Cooperation and world order.....	12
2.2.4	Conclusion.....	13
3	Research Design and Methodology	14
3.1	Qualitative case study.....	14
3.2	Congruence method.....	15
3.3	Operationalization	16
3.4	Material	18
3.5	Limitations and delimitations.....	19
4	Analysis	21
4.1	Violations of International Law	21
4.1.1	Nine-dash line claims	21
4.1.2	Construction of Artificial Islands.....	22
4.1.3	EEZ harassment.....	22
4.1.4	Interference with freedom of navigation.....	23
4.1.5	Violations found under the 2016 PCA ruling.....	23
4.2	Assessing congruence	25
4.2.1	Territorial assertion and control	25
4.2.2	Operational coercion at sea	27
4.2.3	Legal rejectionism	28
4.3	Conclusion.....	30
4.3.1	Analytical matrix.....	31
5	Discussion	32
6	References.....	36

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The South China Sea (SCS) is widely regarded as one of the world's most contested and strategically significant maritime regions. Approximately one-third of the world's trade passes through its waters, and it is rich in natural resources such as oil and gas.¹ Since the discovery of its rich natural resources, tensions have heightened and fueled competing territorial claims, making the SCS a region of economic and strategic significance.² China, one of seven states bordering the SCS, lays claim to a vast majority of the sea through the so-called nine-dash line that overlaps several exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of other states in the region.³ Giving way to conflicting claims where China, a great power, bestows influence superior to that of its neighbors.⁴

China has exercised its influence in the region in various ways. By constructing artificial islands, harassing foreign vessels, and neglecting judicial rulings, China upholds its territorial claims and sovereignty within the nine-dash line.⁵ Considering China is a party to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), these violations raise concerns regarding China's compliance with international law.⁶ The significance of this lies in the fact that UNCLOS is widely regarded as the primary source of international law that governs the oceans.⁷ It was adopted in 1982, to “contribute to the strengthening of peace, security, cooperation

¹ Noor, Ayesha (2024).

² Ibid.

³ Noor, Ayesha (2024); & LaFond, C., Eugene (2025); Beckman, R. C. and Schofield, C. H. (2014).

⁴ Mastro, O., Skylar (2024). p. 10

⁵ Cody, Stephen (2022). p. 67-68

⁶ United Nations. (n.d.) *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*. United Nations Treaty Collection.

⁷ Henriksen, A. (2023). p. 143

and friendly relations among all nations”, and as of May 2025, 170 parties have ratified it.⁸ It contains provisions that delineate the ocean into various maritime zones: internal waters, territorial seas, the contiguous zone, the exclusive economic zone (EEZ), the continental shelf, and the high seas. Within each zone, states enjoy different degrees of jurisdiction and sovereignty. Simply put, the further from the baseline (the point from which the various zones are calculated), the less the coastal state can influence and govern. China’s disregard for these delimitations and provisions that govern behavior on the oceans causes concerns relevant to all parties to the convention and the legitimacy of international law. In addition, the 2016 award by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), which found no legal basis for China’s nine-dash line, is rejected by China as they continue to assert its claims in the SCS.⁹ The relevance of this issue in Peace and Conflict Studies revolves around our expectations on international law and its effectiveness, but also the understanding of state behavior and existence of conflicts.

Naturally, China’s behavior in the SCS raises questions, not only regarding how China violates international law but also about the nature of how great powers behave. This paper explores this topic through the lens of offensive realism. A theory within international relations that argues great powers are driven by the pursuit of maximizing their relative power in an anarchic international system. It is a structural theory that provides an explanation for how states behave and revolve around survival, fear, and power competition. Applying this theoretical framework to China’s violations of international law in the SCS enables the evaluation of how well offensive realism predicts behavior in real-life situations.

1.2 Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to evaluate whether offensive realism provides a plausible theoretical explanation for China’s violations of international law in the

⁸ UNCLOS (1982) p.25; United Nations. (n.d.) *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*. United Nations Treaty Collection.

⁹ Anh, Tu (2021)

SCS. By applying the congruence method, the research aims to assess if China's nine-dash line claim, construction of artificial islands, EEZ harassment, interference with freedom of navigation, and rejection of international legal rulings is congruent with the five bedrock assumptions of offensive realism: anarchy, military capability, the uncertainty of intentions, survival as the primary goal, and rationality. The purpose is therefore twofold: partly empirical, to examine how China violates international law in the SCS, and partly theoretical, in evaluating the explanatory power of offensive realism in the case of China's violations in the SCS. In fulfilling the purpose of the thesis, the following questions will be addressed:

1. How does China violate international law in the South China Sea?
2. How can offensive realism explain China's violations of international law in the South China Sea?

1.3 Literature Review

China's assertive behavior in the SCS has generated plenty of academic work as scholars attempt to explain the motivations, implications, and strategic logic behind its maritime claims and assertiveness. The following section will give a brief overview of the already existing literature.

The expansion of China has been extensively researched. Authors such as So and Chu have accounted for the global rise of China to provide an overview of how China has risen from a poor third-world country to an economic superpower.¹⁰ An attempt to systematically interpret China as a global and regional power within world politics has likewise been made.¹¹ Simultaneously, Chinese foreign policy in regions outside Asia has been conducted with contributions regarding Chinese diplomacy in Africa by Power and China-US competition by Grano.¹² In line with the thesis, research has also been conducted to analyze behavior in and around the

¹⁰ See So, Y. Alvin., Chu, Yin-wah (2016)

¹¹ See Dessein, B. (ed.) (2014)

¹² See Power, M., Mohan, G., Tan-Mullins, M. (2012).

SCS.¹³ Scholars, such as Taylor and Cheng, have also focused on giving historical overviews of China's behavior in the SCS.¹⁴ As illustrated above, the behavior of China bears academic relevance from several different perspectives. It is evident that investigating China and its behavior is an intriguing subject within international relations.

This study examines China's violations of international law in the SCS and whether offensive realism provides a plausible explanation for China's behavior. Investigations of China's behavior in the SCS through the lens of offensive realism have already been conducted. However, to the author's knowledge, the congruence method has not been used in the case of China's violations of international law in the SCS. The idea of combining offensive realism and China's behavior stems from John Mearsheimer, the father of offensive realism, who predicted in the early 2000s that China would adhere to offensive realist principles and strive to achieve regional hegemony.¹⁵ Naturally, this generated subsequent research and debate around the subject. Scholars such as Xiaoyu Li and Myšička have applied offensive realism directly to China's maritime expansion, arguing that the behavior mirrors a power-maximizing strategy. Demonstratively, Myšička claims that China's expansion and military presence in the SCS aligns with John Mearsheimer's predictions about a rising power seeking to overturn the status quo.¹⁶ At the same time, Li finds that China's behavior is consistent with attempting to achieve regional hegemony.¹⁷ Similarly, Alenezi analyzes China's shift in 2008 from a "peaceful rise" to a more assertive maritime strategy.¹⁸ Veldheer uses the method of process-tracing to explain China's behavior through the lens of offensive realism, concluding that China is seemingly attempting to achieve regional dominance.¹⁹ Leverström adds to the discussion by analyzing the political effects and decisions during Xi Jinping's second term through offensive realism.²⁰ As shown, offensive realism have been

¹³ See Song, Y.-H. (ed.) (2014) & Elleman, B.A. (2014).

¹⁴ See Fravel, M. T. (2011). & Guan, A. C. (2000).

¹⁵ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014) p. 361

¹⁶ See Myšička, S. (2021)

¹⁷ See Li, X. (2016)

¹⁸ See Alenezi, D. A. (2020)

¹⁹ See Veldheer, R. (2020)

²⁰ See Leverström, L. (2024)

used to analyze China's behavior in the SCS and drawn conclusions that support the theory.

However, scholars have also pointed out how offensive realism cannot explain China's behavior. Kirshner has critiqued Mearsheimer and argued that offensive realism itself is inherently dangerous and wrong, and claims classical realism is a better-suited theory.²¹ Similar critiques have been made by Kuhn, who finds applying offensive realism to the rise of China faulty and too focused on military capabilities.²² Although the critics put forward legitimate concerns regarding the theory and its application, Mearsheimer states it is an indeterminate theory that leaves room for more suitable theories to explain phenomena in international politics.²³ The nature of broad-gauged theories, such as offensive realism, is that they are seldom able to answer every question that arises in world politics.²⁴

Although offensive realism has been applied to China's behavior in the SCS, to the author's knowledge, it has not been conducted using the congruence method with a focus on assessing whether the theory's five bedrock assumptions can plausibly explain China's violations of international law in the SCS. International law, more specifically UNCLOS, serves as the framework for interpreting the observed behavior. The aim is not to test or revise the theory, but to evaluate how it contributes to our understanding of real-life behavior. Thus, this paper fills the research gap on how China's violation of international law in the SCS is congruent with the five assumptions of offensive realism. Hence, confirming the researchability.²⁵

²¹ See Kirshner, J. (2012)

²² See Kuhn, F. (2021)

²³ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014) p. 11

²⁴ Ibid. p. 11

²⁵ Hart, C. (2018) p. 11

2 Theory

The following chapter introduces the theoretical framework of the paper. First, it presents the origin of offensive realism. Then, it presents John Mearsheimer's offensive realism and the five bedrock assumptions before describing the theory as a whole.

2.1 Realism

Realism is the oldest theory of international relations.²⁶ It is built upon foundational texts from ancient times by scholars such as Sun Tzu and Thucydides, who created a tradition of realist thinking that, to this day, is current.²⁷ Thomas Hobbes and Niccolo Machiavelli are likewise considered essential contributors to the theory.²⁸ Realists believe that politics are limited by human selfishness and anarchy, making power and security essential.²⁹ Given that states possess the greatest concentration of power in the international system, realism focuses almost exclusively on states as the primary actors.³⁰ Realists believe that the international system is anarchic without any supernational authority to govern it.³¹ Hence, the behavior of states is instead governed by the human pursuit of power and security.

The theory evolved further during the 20th century. Hans Morgenthau is one of the founding figures of modern realism. In his work, "Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace," he built upon the traditional thinking of those who came before him. He transformed realism into a coherent international relations

²⁶ Donnelly, J. (2013) p. 32

²⁷ James, P. (2022). p. 3

²⁸ Ibid p. 4

²⁹ Donnelly, J. (2013) p.33

³⁰ Gustavsson, J. & Tallberg, J. (2014) p. 53

³¹ Ibid. p. 53

theory and applied its philosophical patterns to contemporary issues. With his contribution, power became a central concept in the theory, as he posited that states seek power to achieve security, and the balance of power dictates the degree of stability.³²

Kenneth Waltz further developed the theory during the 20th century, coining the term neorealism or structural realism.³³ Neorealism places anarchy in the foreground, and rather than explaining the behavior of states as influenced by a fixed human nature, Waltz found international politics to be a system composed of units (states) and focused on how these units are arranged within a broader structure. In his view, the broader structure constrains and shapes state behavior, and given that the international system is anarchic, the logic of power politics governs state actions, not human nature.³⁴ Waltz's theory emphasized restraint in state behavior and preservation of power, which is why it has later been called defensive realism by scholars.³⁵

2.2 Offensive realism

This paper will utilize John Mearsheimer's offensive realism as a theoretical framework. In his work, "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics", which this paper heavily relies on, he further developed realism in the 21st century. Offensive realism builds upon Waltz's neorealism or structural realism, which focuses on the effects of the international anarchic structure.³⁶ It is primarily a descriptive theory, but also a prescriptive one, as it both explains how great powers have acted in the past and outlines how states *should* survive within the international system.³⁷

³² Kapitonenko, M. (2022) p. 27-28

³³ Ibid p. 29

³⁴ Gustavsson, J. & Tallberg, J. (2014) p. 56

³⁵ Kapitonenko, M. (2022) p. 31

³⁶ *ibid* p. 56; Toft, P. (2005) p. 382

³⁷ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014) p.11

Offensive realism claims that the international system heavily influences the behavior of states.³⁸ Factors, such as ideology and individual leadership, are not crucial to the theory. Instead, a state's relative power is of the most significant interest. Mearsheimer acknowledges that the theory is indeterminate, meaning it cannot be applied to explain all phenomena in world politics. However, the purpose of the theory is not to describe all types of cases. Instead, it is a broad-gauged theory. Mearsheimer himself describes it as follows:

In short, offensive realism is like a powerful flashlight in a dark room: even though it cannot illuminate every nook and cranny, most of the time it is an excellent tool for navigating through the darkness³⁹

Offensive realism relies on five bedrock assumptions, which, taken cumulatively, depict an international system wherein states have legitimate grounds to think and act aggressively.⁴⁰ First, the international system is anarchic, not relating to chaos or disorder but to the assumption that it comprises sovereign states without a governing authority to rule them. Second, great powers have an offensive military capacity to damage or destroy other states. In line with this, some states have more qualified capacity than others, concluding that some states are more dangerous than others.⁴¹ Third, the trust between states is limited due to their capability to pursue one another militarily. Mearsheimer points out, however, that this does not mean states always have hostile intentions. Instead, states can never be sure of other states' intentions since the switch from benign to hostile can happen overnight.⁴² Fourth, the primary goal of great powers is survival as states aim to retain their territorial integrity and domestic political order.⁴³ Fifth, great powers are rational actors that actively strategize to survive in the short and long term.⁴⁴ Together, these assumptions paint a rather alluring picture of why great powers ultimately aim to become a hegemon in the international system. These five assumptions are essential

³⁸ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014) p. 10

³⁹ Ibid. p. 11

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 29

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 30

⁴² Ibid. p. 31

⁴³ Ibid. p. 31

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 31

for conducting the research presented in this paper, as they serve as independent variables for the analysis.

2.2.1 Achieving hegemony and maximizing relative power

As mentioned above, the end goal of great powers is to achieve hegemony. Although the aim of this paper is not to determine if China intends to become a hegemon, it is crucial to understand the underlying motive for why great powers adhere to the five bedrock principles outlined above. Hegemony is achieved when a state is so powerful that it dominates all other states in the system.⁴⁵ However, it is essential to distinguish between a global hegemon, a state that dominates all states in the international system, and a regional hegemon, which dominates parts of the international system.⁴⁶ According to Mearsheimer, achieving global hegemony is unlikely due to the stopping power of water.⁴⁷ Only in the unlikely event of a great power attaining nuclear monopoly can it become a global hegemon.⁴⁸ In reality, achieving regional hegemony is favored. This, however, does not mean that a great power in the Western Hemisphere would not attempt to hinder a state in the Eastern Hemisphere from becoming a regional hegemon, and vice versa. It remains of great interest for a great power to be the sole regional hegemon in the system, as the coexistence of several would entail security competition among them.⁴⁹

In contrast to defensive realism, offensive realists do not prioritize maximizing security. Instead, states should aim to become the relatively most powerful unit in the system, since the stronger you are compared to others, the greater the likelihood of survival.⁵⁰ Awareness of the gap between states' power and the balance of power is essential for understanding the economic, diplomatic, and military means by which states interact.⁵¹ Ultimately, great powers operate with a zero-sum mentality regarding the power of other states. If state A gains power, state B will thereupon

⁴⁵ Gilpin, R. (1981). p. 29

⁴⁶ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014) p. 40

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 41

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 5

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 42

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 34

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 33

lose power. This is widely regarded as the “security dilemma” in international relations.⁵² Although the goal is survival, maximizing their relative power to become a regional hegemon increases the likelihood of survival.⁵³ Mearsheimer argues all states follow this logic and pursue opportunities to gain advantages over others while preventing themselves from being exploited.⁵⁴ In other words, offence is the best defense. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that states are not concerned about absolute power. Pursuing absolute power would entail that states disregard the power of other states. Simply amassing power for the sake of the quantity therein would mean that states operate for the sake of harnessing power and not for survival.⁵⁵

2.2.2 Attaining power

In achieving hegemony, Mearsheimer suggests that states can employ two strategies to attain power and achieve hegemony: either a state operates directly to make gains or indirectly to prevent aggressors or rivals from gaining power. On the one hand, direct attempts to gain relative power include war, blackmail, bait-and-bleed, and bloodletting strategies.⁵⁶ Although it may be costly to wage war, it can be deemed a rational choice if it outweighs the cost.⁵⁷ Blackmail entails threatening and forcing concessions from another to produce a desired outcome.⁵⁸ However, it is unlikely to be effective against great powers, but more fruitful against minor powers.⁵⁹ If a state adopts a bait-and-bleed strategy, it actively provokes two rivals to engage in conflict to bleed each other out, while a bloodletting strategy is when a state passively allows its rivals to engage in conflict without intervening.⁶⁰

⁵² Herz, J. H. (1950). p. 157

⁵³ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014) p. 34

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 36

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 36

⁵⁶ Ibid. pp. 138-139

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 150

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 152

⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 152

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 153

On the other hand, and of relevance for this thesis, balancing or buck-passing are indirect ways to check aggressors.⁶¹ Balancing represents the prevention of upsetting the balance of power through deterrence, either through diplomatic means, such as warning a potential rival of reprisals, intimidation, forming an alliance or coalition, or increasing defense spending (internal balancing).⁶² Buck-passing is getting another state to check the aggressor on their behalf, thereby avoiding direct involvement.⁶³ Employing this strategy, however, would put the buck-passer at risk of being left alone to confront the aggressor if the strategy fails and the buck-catcher is defeated.⁶⁴

What more determines the behavior of great powers is the intensity of threat and fear against other states, for more fear means more security competition and an increased likelihood of conflict.⁶⁵ Fear is caused by not knowing the true intentions of other states and their capacity to act upon them. Subsequently, the greater the capacity to potentially harm another state, the more feared it is.⁶⁶ However, offensive realism acknowledges that states have varying abilities to gain power within the system and, therefore, varying abilities to achieve hegemony. Albeit a state that possesses great military power still calculates its possible motivation to mobilize it. If the benefits of the offense are not greater than the cost of it, it is not justified.⁶⁷ This is not to say that great powers do not miscalculate, but merely to say that great powers are not to be perceived as mindless aggressors.⁶⁸

2.2.3 Cooperation and world order

While attaining power is central to the theory, offensive realism also considers cooperation and the issue of world order. When confronting the issue of a world order, offensive realists hold a rather pessimistic worldview, arguing that states only

⁶¹ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014) p. 155

⁶² Ibid. pp. 156-157

⁶³ Ibid. p. 139

⁶⁴ Toft, P. (2005) p. 386

⁶⁵ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014) p. 42

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 43

⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 37

⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 36

seek to create and promote a world order to maximize their share of global power.⁶⁹ It is driven by calculations of relative power, rather than by aspirations of creating an international system based on a standard set of regulations. For an offensive realist, world order is merely a product of self-interest and security competition among great powers.⁷⁰ Essentially, states exist in a self-help world and will not subordinate their interests to those of other states.⁷¹

The world order can be stable, as it was during the Cold War.⁷² However, when circumstances create an incentive for gaining power, great powers will pounce to take advantage of the situation without regard for a potential world order, but according to the logic of the balance of power.⁷³ All in all, offensive realism does not render cooperation impossible. Instead, it is entirely possible. However, it is inherently tainted with mistrust and the contemplation of how gains are distributed among states. Since calculating states' intentions is impossible, it makes states worry about being disregarded by other states in potential agreements. In addition, states fear relative gains, as cooperation can lead to an adversary gaining an advantage at their own expense.⁷⁴ All in all, as no cooperation can trump a state's will to survive and the logic of power competition, cooperation is considered inherently difficult.⁷⁵

2.2.4 Conclusion

The theoretical framework of offensive realism provides a foundation for addressing the research questions posed in this thesis. It enables an analysis of whether China's behavior in the SCS, more specifically, its violations of international law, can be plausibly explained by the theory. The five bedrock assumptions are operationalized as independent variables and used to assess congruence with China's violations.

⁶⁹ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014) p. 49

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 49

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 33

⁷² Ibid. p. 50

⁷³ Ibid. p. 50

⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 52

⁷⁵ Ibid. pp. 52-53

3 Research Design and Methodology

This chapter presents and motivates the methodological approach used to evaluate whether offensive realism can plausibly explain China's violations of international law in the SCS. It first outlines the case study design before presenting the congruence method and describing how the theoretical assumptions were operationalized and applied to the empirical material.

3.1 Qualitative case study

The purpose of this thesis was to evaluate whether offensive realism provides a plausible theoretical explanation for China's violations of international law in the SCS. To address this, the study employed a qualitative case study design using the congruence method, which enabled a structured comparison between theoretical assumptions and observed behavior without requiring complete causal testing.⁷⁶

A case study focuses on a single setting or unit that is spatially or temporally bound, allowing researchers to examine real-life situations and test views concerning specific phenomena.⁷⁷ According to Yin, conducting a case study is appropriate when exploring how and why phenomena occur, when the researcher cannot manipulate the subject's behavior, and when the study focuses on a contemporary issue.⁷⁸ In this paper, the case concerns China's violations of international law in the SCS. The violations were identified and described before the theoretical framework was operationalized to explain China's violations. Hence, it is a descriptive and explanatory case study. The qualitative nature of the case study comes from its focus on human perception and understanding, as opposed to a

⁷⁶ George, A. L. & Bennett, A. (2005). p. 169

⁷⁷ Løkke, A. & Dissing Sørensen, P. (2014) p.66. & Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). p. 235

⁷⁸ Yin, R. K. (2014). pp. 12-14; Baxter, P. & Jack, S. (2008). p. 545

quantitative case study that relies on linear attributes, measurements, and statistical analysis.⁷⁹

3.2 Congruence method

The thesis used the congruence method within a qualitative case study design. The congruence method entails assessing a theory's ability to explain or predict the outcome in a particular case.⁸⁰ The method applies an existing theory to examine whether the expected relationship between certain factors (independent variables) and outcomes (dependent variables) aligns with what is observed in a particular case. These expectations may be derived through deductive reasoning or based on empirical generalizations.⁸¹ Notably, the method is not used to establish a mere relationship between the expectation of a theory and the outcome in a particular case. It examines congruity, which refers to the extent to which the hypothesized cause and observed effect align in terms of strength, duration, and timing.⁸² Hence, the congruence method was used to evaluate whether offensive realism provides a plausible explanation for China's violations of international law in the SCS, based on the degree of congruity observed and conclude whether the observed behavior was consistent or spurious with the theory's expectations.⁸³ It is noted that this study did not account for the "timing" of the cause and effect, since offensive realism does not provide any theoretical tools for *when* great powers act in specific ways, but for *how* and *why* they act.

The use of the congruence method is justified, as the paper aimed to evaluate whether offensive realism offers a plausible explanation for China's violations of international law in the SCS and answer the question of how offensive realism can explain China's behavior. It is, therefore, a well-suited method, as it aligns well

⁷⁹ Stake, R. E. (2010). p. 17

⁸⁰ George, A. L. & Bennett, A. (2005) p. 168

⁸¹ Ibid. p. 168

⁸² Ibid. p. 169

⁸³ Ibid. p. 171

with the chosen theory and case, given that the theory provides clear independent variables and the case provides clear dependent variables.

3.3 Operationalization

To apply the congruence method to this qualitative case study, it was essential to operationalize the theory effectively. While offensive realism is not designed to make precise and deterministic predictions, it provides broad assumptions that can be translated into analytical categories for evaluating empirical behavior.

In this thesis, offensive realism was operationalized by utilizing Mearsheimer's five bedrock assumptions, which serve as the independent variables for the analysis. Each assumption was treated as a distinct theoretical expectation that presumably shapes China's behavior:

1. **Anarchy.** The international system is comprised of sovereign states without a governing or superior authority.⁸⁴
2. **Offensive capability.** The offensive capabilities of great powers enable them to damage or destroy other states, making them more dangerous than other states.⁸⁵
3. **Uncertainty of intentions.** Awareness of other states' intentions is inherently impossible since other states can pursue military action. This uncertainty fosters limited trust among states and hinders their ability to determine whether a state has the offensive intentions to match its offensive capabilities.⁸⁶
4. **Survival as the primary goal.** The primary objectives of great powers are to preserve territorial integrity and maintain domestic political stability.⁸⁷
5. **Rationality.** Great powers are rational actors who strategize for both short-term and long-term benefits.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014) p. 30

⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 30

⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 31

⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 31

⁸⁸ Ibid. p. 31

Each assumption was interpreted as an observable indicator and used to identify the presence of the five assumptions in China's violations of international law in the SCS. For example, the assumption of anarchy was reflected in China's disregard for the 2016 PCA ruling, while the assumption of survival as the primary goal was evident in China's emphasis on sovereignty and territorial integrity when upholding the nine-dash line. The empirical material was used to identify these assumptions across China's five different violations of international law in the SCS: 1. Nine-Dash Line claims. 2. Construction of Artificial islands. 3. EEZ harassment. 4. Interference with freedom of navigation. 5. Rejection of the PCA ruling.

The aim was to assess whether these violations are congruent with the expectations derived from offensive realism. Therefore, the dependent variable in this study was defined as China's violations of international law in the SCS. To present the findings in a more easily digestible manner, the five different violations were divided into three distinct domains: territorial assertion (the Nine-Dash Line and the construction of artificial islands), operational coercion (EEZ harassment and interference with freedom of navigation), and legal rejectionism (the rejection of the 2016 PCA ruling).

First, the paper established how China violates international law in the SCS. Thereafter, China's five types of violations of international law in the SCS were examined to determine the depth and breadth of congruency. Depth relating to how well each type of violation matches the assumptions of offensive realism. Breadth refers to the number of different violations that matched the bedrock assumptions. To establish the depth of congruency, each violation was investigated to assess its level of congruency, categorized as low, medium, or high. If a violation were found to match four or five of offensive realism's assumptions, the congruency was classified as high, while if a violation were found to match three of offensive realism's assumptions the congruency was categorized as medium, and if a violation were found to have matched one or two of offensive realism's assumptions the congruency was categorized as low. As a consequence of establishing the depth of each category of violation, the paper could thereafter conclude whether there was significant breadth in the findings and whether the

congruence with offensive realism extends across all of China's violations of international law in the SCS.

The analysis focused on assessing congruence and whether offensive realism can plausibly explain China's violations of international law in the SCS, not on proving causality. The duration of China's behavior was also considered, following George and Bennett's recommendation that congruity, rather than consistency alone, is essential for assessing a theory's explanatory value.⁸⁹ Hence, the observed duration of each violation was also taken into account when determining the overall congruity. If a violation was found to have occurred over a prolonged period, it was determined to strengthen the observed congruity. The findings were subsequently illustrated through an analytical matrix, which showed the level of congruency across all five types of violations.

3.4 Material

This study's empirical material included legal texts, official Chinese statements, military activity reports, and academic literature. The exact sources were selected to provide a comprehensive picture of China's violations in the SCS and to enable a comparison between the observed behavior and the theoretical assumptions of offensive realism.

The study heavily depended on John J. Mearsheimer's book "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics", which formed the theoretical foundation for this thesis. In the book mentioned above, Mearsheimer presents the five bedrock assumptions of offensive realism.⁹⁰ China's violations were operationalized and interpreted based on the five assumptions outlined in the book.

UNCLOS provided the framework for determining how China violates international law in the SCS. Its provisions served as a reference for identifying

⁸⁹ George, A. L. & Bennett, A. (2005) p. 171

⁹⁰ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014) pp. 30-31

observed violations. More specifically, the provisions were used to evaluate the legality of China's nine-dash line claim, EEZ harassment, interference with freedom of navigation, and the rejection of the 2016 PCA award. Besides UNCLOS, the 2016 PCA award in *The Republic of the Philippines v. The People's Republic of China* is central. Official Chinese sources, including policy documents and public statements, in conjunction with news articles, were used to understand how China justifies its actions. Reports from policy institutions such as the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative provided relevant data on the construction of artificial islands. Academic books and articles were utilized to support the interpretation of China's behavior and effectively operationalize offensive realism.

3.5 Limitations and delimitations

It is worth noting that offensive realism is a structural theory. Hence, it does not enable the production of detailed and deterministic predictions for real-life cases. Instead, it is indeterminate and offers only general expectations of how great powers behave in the international system.⁹¹ George and Bennett point out that this leads to structural realist theories being unable to be fully operationalized and thus unsuitable for explaining causal relationships.⁹² Therefore, the thesis did not employ the congruence method to establish causality. Instead, it was used to assess whether China's behavior in the SCS is congruent with the five bedrock assumptions of offensive realism and if it provides a plausible explanation for China's violations of international law in the SCS. Although congruence alone does not confirm the explanatory power of a theory or rule out others, the method enables the assessment of a theory's applicability and relevance in a particular case.⁹³ The analysis is therefore theory-guided, rather than hypothesis testing.

In choosing which behavior to analyze, the five violations were selected based on their relevance to the provisions in UNCLOS. Since the paper aimed to identify

⁹¹ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014). p. 11

⁹² George, A. L. & Bennett, A. (2005) pp. 185-186

⁹³ Ibid. pp. 185-186

how China violates international law in the SCS, behavior that could be interpreted as illegal under UNCLOS proved an effective way to present China's behavior coherently. Additionally, the identified violations have been consistently reported and subject to academic research. Therefore, the empirical data were easily accessible, facilitating analysis and the ability to draw robust conclusions. Although additional behaviors could have been analyzed, including Chinese lawfare and China's use of maritime militia, the paper's limited scope required a careful and thoughtful selection that allowed for a comprehensive analysis and conclusions.

4 Analysis

The following chapter will first identify China's violations of international law in the SCS. Thereafter, the identified violations will be operationalized using the congruence method to evaluate whether offensive realism provides a plausible explanation for them.

4.1 Violations of International Law

This section provides a concise overview of how China violates UNCLOS in the SCS, as well as a brief summary of the 2016 PCA award.

4.1.1 Nine-dash line claims

In upholding the nine-dash line, China directly violates several UNCLOS articles. Art. 57 delimits states' EEZ to no more than 200 nautical miles from the baseline. Considering the nine-dash line is drawn outside of 200 nautical miles and overlaps with the EEZs of the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia, it is in direct violation of their territorial rights.⁹⁴ Art. 56 stipulates that states enjoy sovereign rights to the exploration and exploitation of resources within their EEZ. However, it is a *sui generis* zone, governed by a distinct legal regime. Hence, it is not a part of the territory of a state and does not warrant complete jurisdiction of the coastal state.⁹⁵ Furthermore, since the nine-dash line also encompasses areas that, according to UNCLOS, are part of the high seas, it also contravenes Art. 89, which prohibits the high seas from being subject to any sovereignty and designates the zone to be considered *res communis*.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. See map. (2017)

⁹⁵ Henriksen, A. (2023) p. 151

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 155

4.1.2 Construction of Artificial Islands

Historically, China has claimed sovereignty over all islands in the SCS based on its assertion of continuous, peaceful, and effective exercise of sovereignty and jurisdiction for over 2000 years.⁹⁷ However, since 2013, China has been constructing artificial islands in the SCS, resulting in approximately 3,200 acres of new land through dredging sediment from the seafloor atop submerged reefs.⁹⁸ In doing so, they claim territorial rights within the SCS.⁹⁹

According to Art. 13(2), low-tide elevations, which are defined as features submerged at high tide, do not expand the maritime zone of a state. Since several of China's artificial islands have been built upon shallow reefs, they do not extend China's sovereignty and jurisdiction. Likewise, under Art. 121(3), rocks that cannot sustain human habitation or the economic life of their inhabitants do not generate an EEZ or continental shelf. Furthermore, Art. 60(1) stipulates that a coastal state may only construct artificial islands and installations within its own EEZ, and Art. 60(8) clarifies that artificial islands do not have the status of natural islands and cannot generate maritime zones. China's artificial islands, several of which lie within the EEZs of other states, are therefore to be considered unlawful and do not extend China's jurisdiction and sovereignty.

4.1.3 EEZ harassment

According to Art. 56(1)(a), a coastal state has the sovereign right to explore, exploit, conserve, and manage the natural resources of the waters and seabed within its EEZ. Additionally, Art. 56(1)(b) grants the coastal state jurisdiction over scientific research and the protection of the marine environment. China has interfered with these rights. For example, disrupting Philippine oil exploration within the EEZ of the Philippines or sinking Vietnamese fishing boats within the Vietnamese EEZ constitutes clear breaches of the provisions mentioned above.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, Art.

⁹⁷ Kohl, A.W. (2018) pp. 922-923

⁹⁸ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (n.d); Kohl, A.W. (2018) p. 923

⁹⁹ Kohl, A.W. (2018) p. 923

¹⁰⁰ Orendain, S. (2011); Storey, I. (2011); Thomas Joscelyn. (2020).

58(3) requires that all states operating in another state's EEZ must observe "due regard" for the rights and duties of the coastal state. Chinese actions, which often involve the deployment of vessels to intimidate or obstruct foreign vessels, disregard this.¹⁰¹ Additionally, Art. 73 stipulates that only the coastal state may board, inspect, or detain foreign ships within its own EEZ. Considering China has recently adopted new regulations allowing for the detention of foreign ships if they illegally enter the waters they claim, it is reasonable to state that it breaches Art. 73.¹⁰²

4.1.4 Interference with freedom of navigation

Art. 87 guarantees all states the freedom of navigation and overflight on the high seas, while Art. 58(2) extends these freedoms to the EEZs of coastal states. However, China routinely attempts to obstruct foreign military and surveillance activities within the waters it claims within the Nine-Dash Line. For example, the U.S. Navy conducts Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the SCS to assert navigational rights under UNCLOS.¹⁰³ In response, China has, for example, issued warnings and deployed missiles.¹⁰⁴ These confrontations violate Art. 58, which does not permit a coastal state to restrict passage through its EEZ. Moreover, China has at times attempted to enforce permission requirements for warships entering its claimed EEZ, despite there being no such requirement under UNCLOS.¹⁰⁵ This is inconsistent with Art. 19, which permits innocent passage through territorial seas, and stipulates that such passage must not be impeded unless it is prejudicial to the peace or security of the coastal state. Additionally, the Philippines has accused China of committing acts of piracy in boarding and ramming its navy vessels and therefore breaching Art. 101.¹⁰⁶

4.1.5 Violations found under the 2016 PCA ruling

¹⁰¹ Gomez, J. (2024)

¹⁰² Yeung, C. & Hui, K. (2024)

¹⁰³ Freund, E. (2017)

¹⁰⁴ Mongilio, H. (2023); Hussein, T. (2019)

¹⁰⁵ Blumenthal, D. & Mazza, M. (2012)

¹⁰⁶ Mongilio, H. (2024)

On 12 July 2016, the PCA issued an award in *The Republic of the Philippines v. The People's Republic of China*, a case initiated by the Philippines under Annex VII of UNCLOS. The Philippines challenged the legality of China's expansive maritime claims in the SCS, particularly those represented by the Nine-Dash Line, as well as China's construction on maritime features in the Spratly Islands. The Tribunal ruled in favor of the Philippines, underlining how China violates UNCLOS.

Firstly, they found no legal basis for the Nine-Dash Line under UNCLOS. Historically, China has supported its claim by citing its historical rights. However, UNCLOS does not recognize such claims and therefore ruled against the nine-dash line as a legal basis for sovereign rights.¹⁰⁷ Secondly, the tribunal classified several features in the Spratly Islands as either low-tide elevations or rocks incapable of generating an EEZ. None of the features qualified as "islands" under Art. 121(3), which requires the ability to sustain human habitation or economic life.¹⁰⁸ Thirdly, China was found to have interfered with the Philippines' sovereign rights in its EEZ, in violation of Art. 56 and 58.¹⁰⁹ Fourthly, China's large-scale land reclamation and construction on coral reefs were found to have caused extensive and irreparable damage to fragile marine ecosystems. Thus violating China's obligations under several articles that require states to protect and preserve the marine environment.¹¹⁰ Fifthly, China's construction of artificial islands upon low-tide elevations located in the EEZ of the Philippines was declared unlawful, as such features cannot be used to extend territorial rights.¹¹¹

China did not participate in any of the proceedings, claiming that the tribunal lacked jurisdiction.¹¹² This, however, was not a requirement for the award to become binding.¹¹³ Despite the binding nature of the award under Art. 296, China rejected

¹⁰⁷ PCA (2016), *South China Sea Arbitration*, Award. para. 278

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. para. 643-647

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. para. 757

¹¹⁰ Ibid. para. 992-993; UNCLOS Art. 192, 194(1), 194(5), 197, 123, 206

¹¹¹ Ibid. para. 948-957

¹¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2016)

¹¹³ UNCLOS Annex VII Art. 9

both the Tribunal's jurisdiction and the final ruling, continuing to assert control within the nine-dash line.¹¹⁴

4.2 Assessing congruence

The following section will analyze China's violations of UNCLOS, as provided for under Chapter 4.1, to assess the depth of congruity between China's violations of UNCLOS and the theoretical assumptions of offensive realism. The five observed violations are categorized into three domains: territorial assertion and control (the nine-dash line and the construction of artificial islands), operational coercion (EEZ harassment and interference with freedom of navigation), and legal rejectionism (rejection of the 2016 PCA ruling) to facilitate analysis.

4.2.1 Territorial assertion and control

The following subsection will investigate how China's nine-dash line and the construction of artificial islands in the SCS align with the assumptions of offensive realism.

It is submitted that the construction of artificial islands aligns with four out of five assumptions: anarchy, offensive capability, prioritizing survival as the primary goal, and rationality. Firstly, by disregarding UNCLOS provisions, China's construction of artificial islands matches the assumption of anarchy. In an anarchic system, states act based on a self-help logic and do not prioritize adhering to international norms.¹¹⁵ China's construction of artificial islands matches the behavior expected of a state operating in such a system. It shows that China prioritizes its sovereign interests over those the international order expresses. Secondly, the construction of these artificial islands demonstrates that China possesses significant military capabilities, as several different types of offensive

¹¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2016)

¹¹⁵ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014) p.33

military systems have been installed.¹¹⁶ It therefore shows a willingness to project their strength onto states in the region, which confirms the predictions of offensive realism that great powers adopt strategies to gain power indirectly.¹¹⁷ Thirdly, constructing artificial islands is a means of maintaining their territorial integrity. Considering China's claim to have exercised sovereignty over the waters for 2,000 years, further expanding its territory to solidify its claims aligns with the assumption that survival is the primary goal.¹¹⁸ Mearsheimer claims states can only achieve alternative aims if they are not conquered, reinforcing their territory is therefore logical from the lens of offensive realism.¹¹⁹ Additionally, constructing artificial islands can be viewed as a response to the security dilemma and a strategic move aimed at balancing, which enables China to gain power on behalf of other states.¹²⁰ Fourthly, and in connection with the aforementioned points, constructing artificial islands is seemingly part of a larger Chinese strategy to maintain maritime control in the SCS.¹²¹ It suggests that China is behaving as a rational actor with a long-term plan that accounts for its survival in the international system.

Regarding the upholding of the nine-dash line, it meets three out of five assumptions. First, it reflects the assumption of anarchy, as China acts without regard for UNCLOS and the fact that no supranational authority exists to enforce its provisions. In a position paper from 2016, China justifies its claims with its historical presence in the region, which speaks for its disregard for the legal reality, as they instead rely upon a historical narrative.¹²² Secondly, the nine-dash claim also matches the assumption of survival as the primary goal, as control over the SCS maintains China's perceived territory intact and reinforces its claims of sovereignty within the region. This is shown by a 2025 Chinese position paper, where China frame their maritime rights as integral to national security and sovereignty.¹²³ Lastly, the Nine-Dash Line reflects the assumption of rationality. Although unlawful, the claim allows China to exercise its power in the region. Some

¹¹⁶ Cordesman, A. H., Burke, A. A., & Molot, M. (2019). p. 315

¹¹⁷ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014) p. 156

¹¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2016b)

¹¹⁹ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014). p. 31

¹²⁰ Ibid. p. 156

¹²¹ Kozanhan, M. K. (2024). pp. 268-269

¹²² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2016b)

¹²³ Asia Pacific Task Force. (2025)

scholars have described it as a grey zone tactic that enables China to avoid direct confrontation.¹²⁴

All in all, the overall congruence between offensive realism and China's territorial assertion and control is assessed as high. China's actions can be interpreted as a power-maximizing strategy used to enhance regional dominance. Four out of five of Mearsheimer's assumptions, namely, anarchy, offensive capability, survival as the primary goal, and rationality, are reflected in China's construction of artificial islands, indicating high congruity and significant depth. In addition, three out of five, namely, anarchy, survival as the primary goal, and rationality, were reflected in China's upholding of the nine-dash line, indicating medium congruity. Given that China has constructed artificial islands since 2013 and has claimed the nine-dash line since 2009, it further strengthens the congruity for China's territorial assertion.¹²⁵ While not every assumption is evident, and despite that China's nine-dash claims indicate medium congruity, offensive realism provides a strong and consistent explanation for China's territorial assertions and control. Taking everything together, it illustrates significant depth in congruity. The overall congruence is therefore assessed as high. It lends support to the argument that great powers are driven by self-help and balance of power logic, and thus shows the theory's explanatory relevance for China's behavior in the SCS.

4.2.2 Operational coercion at sea

This section will examine how China's EEZ harassment and attempts to interfere with the freedom of navigation align with the theoretical assumptions of offensive realism.

As previously shown, it is evident that China disregards provisions under UNCLOS regarding EEZ rights and freedom of navigation. Therefore signaling that China instead chooses to act in accordance with the assumption that the international system is anarchic and lacks a governing authority. Additionally, using the Coast

¹²⁴ McLaughlin, R. (2022) p. 821

¹²⁵ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. (n.d.); Dupuy, F., Dupuy, P.-M. (2017) pp. 124-125

Guard to intimidate foreign vessels demonstrates China's lack of trust in the intentions of other states.¹²⁶ Likewise, China's responses to FONOPs, which included the deployment of naval forces, mirror this.¹²⁷ China's use of its coast guard and naval forces to intimidate vessels in contested waters, as well as the deployment of naval forces in response to FONOPs, serves as a tool for pressuring and intimidating neighboring states without resorting to armed conflict, thereby enabling China to maximize its power directly and show their offensive capability. Hence, it is submitted that this approach is relatively risk-free. It is therefore also a clear sign of rationality, as China actively balances power in its favor by intimidating and threatening foreign vessels, while remaining below a threshold that could potentially trigger a military confrontation. Since 1990, China has employed military and non-military coercion, demonstrating a consistent approach in its operations.¹²⁸

Although not open acts of war, intimidating neighboring states and foreign vessels are seemingly a part of China's strategy in the SCS. All in all, grouping together EEZ harassment and interference with freedom of navigation, China's operational coercion at sea reflects four out of five assumptions of offensive realism: anarchy, uncertainty of intentions, offensive capability, and rational behavior, indicating significant depth in congruity. Accounting for the longevity of the violations, the overall congruence is assessed as high, implying that China's behavior aligns with the logic that offensive realism predicts.

4.2.3 Legal rejectionism

China's outright rejection of the 2016 PCA ruling aligns with four out of five of offensive realism's bedrock assumptions. The tribunal, which found no legal basis for China's Nine-Dash Line claims and ruled against its actions in the SCS, was dismissed by China because it lacked jurisdiction.¹²⁹ Even before the tribunal offered its verdict, China disputed the process and chose not to partake in any of

¹²⁶ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. (2024); & Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. (2023)

¹²⁷ Hussein, T. (2019); Bluestone, Z. (2015)

¹²⁸ Zhang, K. (2020) pp. 1-2

¹²⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2016a).

the proceedings.¹³⁰ Despite the ruling being binding under UNCLOS, China has refused to comply and continues its activities in contested waters.¹³¹

Since the verdict does not acknowledge China's territorial claims, China's choice to disregard the ruling suggests that the behavior reflects the assumption of anarchy, as great powers do not recognize a higher authority over states. It also mirrors a self-help logic in which sovereignty is prioritized. In addition, the rejection of the ruling can also be interpreted as a signal to other states that no legal ruling will constrain China, thereby disincentivizing future proceedings. The assumption of uncertainty of intentions is reflected in China's mistrust of the PCA, as they, in a 2016 statement, explicitly state they do not accept the award and claim it violates international law.¹³² Although this assumption relates to other states' intentions, it is submitted that the behavior reflects a similar logic. Additionally, in their 2016 statement, they blame the Philippines for initiating the process, thereby further supporting the claim that their rejection matches the assumption of uncertainty in intentions.¹³³ Furthermore, the rejection supports China's primary goal of survival, as rejecting the verdict enables China to maintain control over its maritime territory and defend its sovereignty. Lastly, the rejection reflects rationality. Rather than comply with a ruling it views as unfavorable and illegitimate, China chooses to maintain its power while avoiding direct confrontation.

Overall, China's defiance of the PCA ruling is consistent with the expectations of offensive realism. Given that China has consistently denied the legitimacy of the proceedings and the subsequent award, this strengthens the case for high congruity. It illustrates how maintaining power is prioritized over compliance with international law in a self-help system. Overall, the congruence between this behavior and offensive realism displays significant depth, as four out of five assumptions of offensive realism are reflected in China's observed behavior. The congruence is therefore assessed as high.

¹³⁰ Government of the People's Republic of China. (2014)

¹³¹ Anh, T. (2021)

¹³² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2016a).

¹³³ Ibid.

4.3 Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that China violates international law on multiple grounds and on numerous occasions. It paints a clear picture of how China disregards UNCLOS and the 2016 PCA ruling in favor of its interests. Taken together, the analysis across all three domains: territorial assertion, operational coercion, and legal rejectionism, shows a high degree of congruence between China's behavior in the SCS and the theoretical assumptions of offensive realism. Across each domain, China's actions can be plausibly explained by at least four of the five bedrock assumptions of offensive realism. While the findings indicate high congruence, they do not prove offensive realism, nor do they suggest a need to revise or extend the theory. Instead, it shows its strong explanatory power and answers the question of how offensive realism can explain China's violations of international law in the SCS, despite each of China's violations not aligning with all five bedrock assumptions. The result is consistent with Mearsheimer's prediction of the theory being indeterminate and best understood as a flashlight used to illuminate a dark room. Taken together, the results suggest that offensive realism offers a plausible explanation for China's violations of international law in the SCS.

In the case of territorial expansion, China's nine-dash Line claims and construction of artificial islands serve as evidence of how China seeks to maximize its relative power and secure strategic advantages in an anarchic system. These violations demonstrated strong alignment in terms of anarchy, offensive capability, survival, and rationality. Concerning operational coercion, China's use of its coast guard to intimidate regional actors in foreign EEZs and naval forces to intercept FONOPs, while avoiding direct military conflict, aligns closely with the assumptions of anarchy, offensive capability, uncertainty of intentions, and rationality. Regarding legal rejectionism, China's refusal to accept the binding 2016 PCA award underlines a clear denial of a governing authority standing above the sovereignty of individual states. This strongly reflects the assumptions of anarchy, uncertainty of intentions, survival, and rationality, reinforcing high congruence. Notably, high congruity and significant depth within all three domains suggest a significant breadth across the assumptions, further enforcing congruence.

Given the need to account for the duration of both independent and dependent variables when assessing congruity, the findings illustrate that China has acted over a longer time period. Thus, giving support to the presence of congruence between the five assumptions of offensive realism and China's violations of international law in the SCS. The observed congruity, both in breadth (across violations), depth (across assumptions), and time, supports the theory's applicability and explanatory relevance in this case. While this thesis did not aim to establish causality, the findings provide a plausible explanation for why China violates international law in the SCS and ultimately answer the question of how offensive realism can explain China's violations of international law in the SCS.

4.3.1 Analytical matrix

The matrix below displays which assumptions in offensive realisms are reflected in the three domains.

Violation / Assumption	Anarchy	Offensive Capability	Uncertainty of Intentions	Survival as Goal	Rationality	Total Matches	Congruence Level
Territorial assertion	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	4/5	High
Operational coercion	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	4/5	High
Legal rejectionism	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	4/5	High

5 Discussion

The results of the thesis show that offensive realism offers a plausible explanation for China's violations of international law in the SCS. Across all three domains, territorial assertion and control, operational coercion, and legal rejectionism display a high level of congruence with the assumptions of offensive realism. Additionally, the observed behavior remains consistent over an extended period, lending further support to the conclusion of high congruence. These findings receive support from parts of the existing literature, which have underscored that offensive realism provides a theoretical framework applicable to China's behavior in the SCS.¹³⁴ At the same time, the thesis fills the identified research gap by applying a method to measure the level of congruence observable between the five bedrock assumptions of offensive realism and China's five types of violations of international law in the SCS. Naturally, it contributes to our understanding of real-life behavior and paves the way for future research to adopt the same methodological approach in other cases.

Notably, the analysis shows that not all assumptions were present across all domains. As demonstrated by the analytical matrix under 4.3.1, anarchy and rationality were consistently present, whereas offensive capability, uncertainty of intentions, and survival as a primary goal were not. This pattern raises questions regarding whether their absence weakens the claim of offensive realism providing a plausible explanation for China's violations. It is submitted that this, in itself, is not a weakness and does not necessarily indicate that offensive realism misses the mark. In attempting to understand the behavior of great powers, Mearsheimer emphasizes the need to account for all five bedrock assumptions collectively.¹³⁵ Taking cumulatively, China's violations of international law in the SCS, across all three domains, reflect the five assumptions of offensive realism. While no single

¹³⁴ See subsection 1.3 "Literature Review"

¹³⁵ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014) p. 32

violation displays every assumption on its own, the overall observed pattern of behavior demonstrates that China's violations of international law align with all five assumptions. This suggests that great power behavior may not always manifest itself through a single act, but rather through a coherent strategy that, over time, reveals its true nature. In this case, it shows a great power whose behavior is influenced by an anarchic international system, where military capabilities instill fear and incentivize relative power maximization for continued survival.

In the broader context, it is worth noting how the findings of this paper relate to China's potential goal of becoming a regional hegemon. Although this paper did not aim to investigate this question, the findings suggest that they support the notion that China is operating to achieve regional hegemony. Upon reflecting on the high congruence observed, it appears to demonstrate such a notion. Mearsheimer explains that striving for hegemony is derived from the five assumptions. Not one by one but taken cumulatively.¹³⁶ Since the findings prove a high overall congruence between the five assumptions and China's violations, it is therefore suggested that it gives support to claiming China is striving to achieve regional hegemony. Considering this, it further strengthens the theoretical relevance of offensive realism in this case.

Nevertheless, the findings also highlight an area where offensive realism falls short of providing a comprehensive picture. China has ratified UNCLOS and emphasizes the need to effectively implement it in areas such as maritime research and environmental protection.¹³⁷ As shown by this thesis, the implementation and compliance is selective, which may signal the existence of alternative aims. However, offensive realism only acknowledges alternative aims as long as they do not clash with the balance of power.¹³⁸ It is possible that alternative theories, which account for this, can offer a better explanation for why China only chooses to follow parts of UNCLOS. In any way, it stands as evidence for the limits of offensive realism and its ability, or inability, to explain how and why great powers act the

¹³⁶ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014) p. 29

¹³⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2022)

¹³⁸ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014) p. 46

way they do. Another point of possible scrutiny is offensive realism's inability to account for the timing of China's actions. The theory predicts that great powers always seek to maximize their relative power, but it does not account for the timing of this pursuit. Bearing in mind that the congruence method also includes a "timing" aspect, this part of the method cannot be operationalized as offensive realism does not provide the theoretical tools for *when* great powers act aggressively. Hence, the paper's findings need to be understood in light of the fact that congruence could be further examined if a theory accounted for a timing aspect.

The thesis's findings also raise questions regarding the effectiveness of international law. One conclusion that can be drawn is that UNCLOS is seemingly not enforced effectively. However, this is to be expected from the perspective of offensive realism, given that the international system is anarchic. The question then begs: what are we to expect from great powers if they do not enforce vital treaties such as UNCLOS? Are they expected to always adhere to the five bedrock assumptions of offensive realism, or do alternative theories explain it better? Similarly, if great powers are free to ignore international rulings, what is the point of it? Is it merely symbolic? The answer to these questions is of great relevance to the field of Peace and Conflict, as it is submitted that at least some degree of predictability is imperative to understand why states opt out of cooperation and instead choose to live by a *they* versus *them* philosophy. In any manner, the findings indicate that UNCLOS does not contain adequate provisions to ensure compliance. Considering it is the main regulatory framework for the law of the oceans, its ineffectiveness in the case of China's violations in the SCS undermines our confidence in its regulatory ability and our trust in international law as a whole. Envisioning an international system where all states comply with international law is inherently challenging, but it remains an ambitious goal. However, if we cannot expect states to comply with an international framework that supposedly reflects the interests and needs of states worldwide, is it even legitimate? For China, it is seemingly not.

For Peace and Conflict Studies, this thesis contributes to our understanding of how international law can be systematically undermined and how great powers behave. It also demonstrates that realist theory, which is often criticized for oversimplifying

real-world phenomena, remains capable of capturing the essential aspects of how states behave and its ability to predict future behavior. At the same time, the uneven presence of certain assumptions opens space for complementary theories to explain. This thesis encourages precisely that in future research.

6 References

Books

- Dessein, B. (ed.) (2014). *Interpreting China as a regional and global power: nationalism and historical consciousness in world politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Donnelly, J. (2013). "Realism". In S. Burchill, A. Linklater, R. Devetak, J. Donnelly, M. Paterson, C. Reus-Smit, & J. True (Eds.), *Theories of International Relations* (5th ed., pp. 32-56). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Elleman, B.A. (2014). *China's naval operations in the South China Sea: evaluating legal, strategic and military factors*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- George, A. L. & Bennett, A. (2005). *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Gilpin, R. (1981). *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gustavsson, J. & Tallberg, J. (2014). *Internationella relationer* (3:e uppl.). Lund: Studentlitteratur AB.
- Hart, C. (2018). *Doing a Literature Review: Releasing the Research Imagination* (2nd ed.). London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Henriksen, A. (2023). *International Law*. 4th edn., Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- James, P. (2022). *Realism and International Relations: A Graphic Turn Toward Scientific Progress*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kapitonenko, M. (2022). *International Relations Theory*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Mastro, O.S. (2024). *Upstart: How China became a Great Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014). *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Updated ed.). New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- So, Y. Alvin., Chu, Yin-wah. (2016). *The global rise of China*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Song, Y.-H. (ed.) (2014). *Major law and policy issues in the South China Sea: European and American perspectives*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Stake, R. E. (2010). *Qualitative Research: Studying How Things Work*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Power, M., Mohan, G., Tan-Mullins, M. (2012). *China's resource diplomacy in Africa: powering development?* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Academic Articles

- Alenezi, D. A. (2020). "US Rebalance Strategy to Asia and US–China Rivalry in South China Sea from the Perspective of the Offensive Realism". *Review of Economics and Political Science*, 9 (2), pp. 102-115.

- Baxter, P. & Jack, S. (2008). "Qualitative Case Study Methodology: Study Design and Implementation for Novice Researchers". *The Qualitative Report*, 13(4), pp. 544-559.
- Beckman, R. C. and Schofield, C. H. (2014). "Defining EEZ claims from islands: A potential South China Sea change". *International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law*, 29 (2), pp. 193-243.
- Cody, S. (2022). "Dark Law on the South China Sea". *Chicago Journal of International Law*: 23 (1), Article 4.
- Cordesman, A. H., Burke, A. A., & Molot, M. (2019). "Military Build Up in South China Sea as Part of Overall Change in China's Strategic Posture." In *China and the U.S.: Cooperation, Competition and/or Conflict An Experimental Assessment. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*. pp. 209-335.
- Dupuy, F., Dupuy, P.-M. (2017) "A legal analysis of China's historic rights claim in the South China Sea". *American Journal of International Law*, 107(1), pp. 124-141.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). "Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research". *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12 (2), pp. 219-245
- Fravel, M. T. (2011). "China's Strategy in the South China Sea". *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 33 (3), pp. 292-319.
- Guan, A. C. (2000). "The South China Sea Dispute Revisited". *Singapore Journal of International & Comparative Law*, 4 (1), pp. 1-24.
- Herz, J. H. (1950). "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma". *World Politics*, 2 (2), pp. 157-180.

- Kohl, A.W. (2018). "China's Artificial Island Building Campaign in the South China Sea: Implications for the Reform of the UNCLOS". *Dickinson Law Review*, 122(3), pp. 899-922.
- Kozanhan, M. K. (2024). The People's Republic of China's strategy in the three sea domain: the East China Sea, South China Sea, Indian Ocean, and the US's struggle for presence in this region. *SİYASAL: Journal of Political Sciences*, 33(2), pp. 261-276.
- Kirshner, J. (2012). "The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Classical Realism and the Rise of China". *European Journal of International Relations*, 18 (1), pp. 53-75.
- Li, X. (2016). "Applying Offensive Realism to the Rise of China: Structural Incentives and Chinese Diplomacy toward the Neighboring States". *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 16 (2), pp. 241-275.
- Løkke, A. & Dissing Sørensen, P. (2014). "Theory Testing Using Case Studies". *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, 12 (1), pp. 66-74
- McLaughlin, R. (2022). "The Law of the Sea and PRC Gray-Zone Operations in the South China Sea". *American Journal of International Law*, 116(4), pp. 821-835.
- Myšička, S. (2021). "Offensive Realism and the Future of China's Rise". *Pacific Focus*, 36 (1), pp. 63-91.
- Toft, P. (2005). "John J. Mearsheimer: An Offensive Realist Between Geopolitics and Power". *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 8 (4), pp. 381-408.

Theses and Dissertations

Leverström, L. (2024). “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”. Bachelor’s thesis, Lund University. Available at: <https://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/record/9143733>

Veldheer, R. (2020). “The South China Sea: A Battlefield for Regional Dominance? Testing Defensive and Offensive Realism in the South China Sea”. Master’s thesis, Radboud University Nijmegen. Available at: <https://theses.uibn.ru.nl/bitstreams/0a751cb7-a31f-49d1-9a05-0ebfd7a02275/download>

Government and Legal Documents

Government of the People's Republic of China. (2014). *Position Paper of the Government of the People’s Republic of China on the Matter of Jurisdiction in the South China Sea Arbitration Initiated by the Republic of the Philippines*. Available at: https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/press_briefing/2014/12/07/content_281475020441708.htm [Accessed 25 May 2025]

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2016a). *Statement on the Award of 12 July 2016 of the Arbitral Tribunal in the South China Sea Arbitration Established at the Request of the Republic of the Philippines*. Available at: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367334.html

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2016b). *China adheres to the position of settling through negotiation the relevant disputes between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea*. Available at:

https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg_663340/bianhaisi_eng_665278/plpbo/202405/t20240530_11324665.html

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2022). *Implement UNCLOS in full and in good faith and actively contribute to global maritime governance*. Available at:

https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg_663340/tyfls_665260/tfsxw_665262/202209/t20220902_10760381.html [Accessed 25 May 2025].

Permanent Court of Arbitration (2016). *In the Matter of the South China Sea Arbitration (Philippines vs. China)*. PCA Case N° 2013/19. Award, 12 July 2016.

United Nations (1982). United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). 1833 UNTS 397, 21 ILM 1261.

News Articles

Anh, T. (2021). “Five years after PCA verdict: China still ignores South China Sea ruling”. *Hanoi Times*. 2021-07-12. Available at: <https://hanoitimes.vn/five-years-after-the-ruling-of-pca-china-still-ignores-ruled-based-order-on-the-scs-318005.html> [Accessed: 2025-05-13]

Blumenthal, D. & Mazza, M. (2012). “Why to Forget UNCLOS.” *The Diplomat*. 2012-02-17. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2012/02/why-to-forget-unclos/> [Accessed 23 May 2025].

Gomez, J. (2024). “Philippines says China's coast guard fired water cannons and sideswiped its patrol vessel”. *AP News*. 2024-12-05. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/china-philippines-disputed-scarborough-shoal-south-china-sea-77e94f6acc69153bd7a9acc187027f9e> [Accessed 11 May 2025]

- Husseini, T. (2019). "China responds to US Navy's freedom of navigation operation in SCS". *Naval Technology*. 2019-01-10. Available at: <https://www.naval-technology.com/news/china-us-navy-freedom-of-navigation/> [Accessed 20 May 2025]
- Mongilio, H. (2023). "China protests U.S. South China Sea freedom of navigation operation". *USNI News*. 2023-03-24. Available at: <https://news.usni.org/2023/03/24/china-protests-u-s-south-china-sea-freedom-of-navigation-operation> [Accessed 11 May 2025].
- Mongilio, H. (2024). "Philippines accuses Chinese coast guard of boarding and ramming its navy vessels in South China Sea". *ABC News*. 2024-06-19. Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-06-20/philippines-chinese-coast-guard-confrontation-in-south-china-sea/104000608> [Accessed 19 May 2025]
- Noor, A (2024). "South China Sea: A Threat to Regional Stability". *Modern Diplomacy*. 2024-11-28. Available at: <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/11/28/south-china-sea-a-threat-to-regional-stability/> [Accessed: 17 May 2025]
- Orendain, S. (2011). "Philippines says China harassed oil exploration vessel". *Voice of America*. 2011-03-04. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/philippines-says-china-harrassed-oil-exploration-vessel-117457638/136022.html> [Accessed 8 May 2025]

Online Sources

- Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. (n.d.) *China Island Tracker*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. Available at: <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/> [Accessed 03 May 2025].

- Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. (2023). *Flooding the Zone: China Coast Guard Patrols in 2022*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. Available at: <https://amti.csis.org/flooding-the-zone-china-coast-guard-patrols-in-2022/> [Accessed 08 May 2025]
- Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. (2024). *Control by Patrol: The China Coast Guard in 2023*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. Available at: <https://amti.csis.org/control-by-patrol-the-china-coast-guard-in-2023/> [Accessed 08 May 2025]
- Asia Pacific Task Force. (2025). *China's national security in the new era: Anxious power, ambitious vision*. Beyond the Horizon ISSG. Available at: <https://behorizon.org/chinas-national-security-in-the-new-era-anxious-power-ambitious-vision/> [Accessed 13 May 2025]
- Bluestone, Z. (2015). *Water Wars: The PRC's Double Trouble in the South China Sea*. Lawfare. Available at: <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/water-wars-prcs-double-trouble-south-china-sea> [Accessed 19 May 2025].
- Freund, E. (2017). *Freedom of navigation in the South China Sea: A practical guide*. Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School. Available at: <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/freedom-navigation-south-china-sea-practical-guide> [Accessed: 11 May 2025]
- Kuhn, F. (2021). *Offensive Realism and the Rise of China: A Useful Framework for Analysis?*. "E-International Relations", Available at: <https://www.e-ir.info/2021/07/09/offensive-realism-and-the-rise-of-china-a-useful-framework-for-analysis/> [Accessed: 03 May 2025]
- LaFond, C.E. (2025). *South China Sea*. Britannica. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/place/South-China-Sea> [Accessed: 14 May 2025]

- Storey, I. (2011). *China and the Philippines: Implications of the Reed Bank Incident*. The Jamestown Foundation. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/china-and-the-philippines-implications-of-the-reed-bank-incident/> [Accessed: 13 May 2025]
- The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. (2017) *Law of the Sea: A Policy Primer – Chapter 10: The South China Sea Tribunal*. Tufts University. Available at: <https://sites.tufts.edu/lawofthesea/chapter-ten/> [Accessed: 16 May 2025]
- Thomas Joscelyn. (2020). *Why China sunk a Vietnamese fishing boat during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD). Available at: <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/04/10/why-china-sunk-a-vietnamese-fishing-boat-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/> [Accessed: 10 May 2025]
- United Nations. (n.d.) *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*. United Nations Treaty Collection. Available at: https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetailsIII.aspx?src=TREATY&mt_dsg_no=XXI-6&chapter=21&Temp=mt_dsg3&clang=en [Accessed: 17 May 2025]
- Yeung, C. & Hui, K. (2024). *China's new coast guard regulations up ante in South China Sea*. Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. Available at: <https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/chinas-new-coast-guard-regulations-in-south-china-seas> [Accessed: 10 May 2025]
- Zhang, K. (2020). *Chinese coercion in the South China Sea: Resolve and costs*. Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Available at: https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/pantheon_files/files/publication/KetianZhang_PolicyBrief_January2020.pdf [Accessed: 14 May 2025]