

CHINESE STRATEGY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA: *A GROWING QUEST FOR VITAL ECONOMIC AND STRATEGIC INTERESTS*

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The past decade has seen a notable increase in tensions in the South China Sea. Superficially the new situation has been triggered by Chinese territorial claims centering around the “Nine Dash Line.” While there is a large body of literature digging out China’s strategic interests behind its increasing assertiveness in the contested waters, it falls short of an overall investigation of Beijing’s maritime grand strategy—in which the South China Sea occupies a critical position. The aim of this article is therefore to examine the geostrategic, geopolitical, and geoeconomic significance of the South China Sea which comes to the fore in China’s grand strategy. It argues that these sea waters are critical in Beijing’s plans to establish and protect its status as a global maritime power in light of the sea energy reservoir, fisheries, and other vital maritime economic interests to reinforce its economic powerhouse. Beijing’s power projection and its increasing assertiveness in the contested waters have also served in the pursuit of controlling vital sea lanes of communication in the Indian Ocean. Significantly, the South China Sea preoccupies Beijing’s leadership’s strategic pursuit of being a global sea power as a balancing act vis-a-vis the United States in the Indo-Pacific region and intensifying the blockade of Taiwan.

Keywords: China, Grand Strategy, South China Sea, Maritime Policy, Geopolitics, Taiwan Blockade, Tensions, China’s Grand Maritime Strategy, International Relations, Strategic Interests, Offensive Realism, United States, U.S.–China Relations, Maritime Silk Road.

Estrategia China en el mar del sur de China: Una búsqueda creciente de intereses económicos y estratégicos vitales

La última década ha visto un aumento notable de las tensiones en el Mar de China Meridional. Superficialmente, la nueva situación ha sido provocada por reclamos territoriales chinos centrados en la “Línea de Nueve Guiones”. Si bien hay una gran cantidad de literatura que investiga los intereses estratégicos de China detrás de su creciente asertividad en las aguas en disputa, no llega a ser una investigación general de la gran estrategia marítima de Beijing, en la que el Mar de China Meridional ocupa una posición crítica. Por lo tanto, el objetivo de este artículo es examinar la importancia geoestratégica, geopolítica y geoeconómica del Mar de China Meridional que se destaca en la gran estrategia de China. Argumenta que estas aguas marinas son fundamentales en los planes de Beijing para establecer y proteger su estatus como potencia marítima mundial a la luz de la reserva de energía marina, la pesca y otros intereses económicos marítimos vitales para reforzar su potencia económica. La proyección de poder de Beijing y su creciente asertividad en las aguas en disputa también han servido para controlar las rutas marítimas vitales de comunicación en el Océano Índico. Significativamente, el Mar de China Meridional preocupa la búsqueda estratégica del liderazgo de Beijing de ser una potencia marítima global como un acto de equilibrio frente a los Estados Unidos en la región del Indo-Pacífico y la intensificación del bloqueo de Taiwán.

Palabras clave: China, Gran Estrategia, Geopolítica, Mar de China Meridional, Tensiones, Política Marítima, Relaciones Internacionales, Intereses Estratégicos, Realismo Ofensivo, Bloqueo a Taiwán, Estados Unidos.

对重要 经济利益和战略利益的日益追求

过去十年，南海紧张局势显著加剧。从表面上看，新局势是由中国围绕“九段线”提出的领土主张而引发的。尽管大量文献聚焦于中国对南海事务的日益自信背后的战略利益，但未能全面考察北京方面的海洋大战略（南海在该战略中占据关键地位）。因此，本文旨在分析在中国大战略中占据重要地位的南海的地缘战略意义、地缘政治意义和地缘经济意义。本文认为，鉴于海洋能源储备、渔业和其他重要的海洋经济利益（以加强其经济强国实力），这些海域对于北京方面建立和保护其作为

全球海洋大国地位的计划而言至关重要。北京方面在南海的力量投射及其日益自信也有助于控制印度洋重要的海上交通线。值得注意的是，南海是北京方面领导层对成为全球海洋强国的战略追求，以此在印太地区制衡美国，同时加强对台湾的封锁。

关键词: 中国, 大战略, 地缘政治, 南海, 紧张局势, 海洋政策, 国际关系, 战略利益, 进攻性现实主义, 台湾封锁, 美国。

The South China Sea (SCS), where China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, and Malaysia have a number of longstanding and overlapping territorial and maritime claims, has emerged as one of the world's more complex and potentially dangerous regions. For decades, the claimant states have been drawn into rivalry as each state sought to extend its sovereignty and jurisdictional claims over the land masses and their surrounding waters in the SCS. The disputed region even underwent several skirmishes—namely, Vietnam–China naval clashes—which ended in China's seizure of the Paracels and a number of Spratlys features including Johnson Reef from Vietnam in 1974 and 1988, respectively, and its control of the Filipino-claimed Mischief Reef in the Spratlys in 1994. Given the potential flashpoints, the claimants and the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) made efforts, bilaterally and multilaterally alike through ASEAN-sponsored regional arrangements, especially the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN–China Summit. The bilateral and multilateral attempts resulted in the ASEAN–China Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the SCS (DOC) in 2002. However, despite this political declaration, the dispute resolution has been left at an impasse due to a wide range of factors, including complex historical rights and intricate legal claims, multi-dimensional stakes for the claimants, and strong nationalism (Do 2017). Negotiations to authentically implement the DOC provisions toward the ultimate goal of concluding a Code of Conduct for the SCS have failed to make significant progress since 2002. Instead, tensions have risen and fallen, especially between China and two of the ASEAN claimants, Vietnam and the Philippines, triggering, at times, intense public reaction in Beijing, Hanoi, and Manila. Above all, the uncontrolled wave of tensions has been

triggered since 2009, which marked China's unprecedented assertiveness in its expansive territorial claims in the "Nine-Dash-Line"¹ extending over some 90 percent of the SCS's area, including the contentious Spratly Islands and the Paracel Islands. To consolidate its claims and exert its de facto control over the disputed region, Beijing deployed its power projection into the SCS by means of military and paramilitary forces, law enforcement, and economic, diplomatic, and civilian components—and beyond (Congressional Research Service 2019).

These developments coincided with the U.S. "Pivot to Asia," which began to take shape under President Bush and was intensified during the Obama years as part of the U.S. response to Chinese expansionism (Broderick 2015). Whatever its causes, China's build-up in the SCS has caused acute concern both within ASEAN as an organization and among the various ASEAN claimants, although to different degrees. Beijing's actions, moreover, have served to fortify U.S. resolve and have focused the attention of other powers on the geostrategic, geopolitical, and geoeconomic significance of the SCS, especially regarding the issue of the vital sea lanes that traverse it. The increasing tensions provoked by China's systematic and increasingly assertive moves in the SCS have directed international attention to the question of what really lies behind China's increasingly strong stance in the SCS. It also calls into question why the disputed region has come to the fore in Beijing's 21st-century maritime strategic policy.

This article aims to address these questions by employing a strategic analysis approach centering around the analysis of domestic and external factors as essential variables to formulate China's policy making as well as ways and means with a view to fulfilling strategic goals in its ends. The article first reviews the existing literature on China's SCS behavior to identify a research gap in the country's SCS strategy behind its increasingly assertive posture. I next lay out the geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geostrategic significance of the SCS, which serves as a sound ground for China's strategic considerations. The rest of the article looks into Beijing's maritime grand strategy and its SCS strategic goals behind its increasing assertiveness in this contested sea.

¹China inherited the Nine-Dash-Line from the previous Kuomintang government, which fled to Taiwan after its defeat in the Chinese Civil War. The map originally contained 11 dashes but the Communist government in Beijing eventually deleted two dashes when concluding rival territorial and maritime claims with Vietnam in the Gulf of Tonkin (see the Atlas of the Center for Strategic and International Studies at <https://amti.csis.org/atlas/>).

Literature Review

Since China's SCS unprecedented assertiveness in 2009, there have been domestic and external debates over China's SCS strategic objectives and reasons behind this shift in China's behavior. Feng (2017) examines three schools of thought that dominate Chinese debates. The first comprises "the pragmatists" who attach importance to the protection of "reasonable Chinese sovereignty and maritime rights" in the SCS with "limited disruption of regional stability." The second camp is formed by "the hardliners" who seek to enhance and enforce China's rights in the SCS while simultaneously intensifying power and influence expansion in the contested waters. The third camp encompasses "the moderates" who focus on the necessity to protect China's rights in the SCS while recognizing the significance of ensuring regional states' support for China's rise.

Sharing the pragmatist view, Fu (2016) insists that China's goal is "to protect its own interests and would respond firmly to provocations, encroachments on its territorial sovereignty, or threats to its rights and interests," while at the same time stressing the importance of maintaining external environment stability. Zhang (2013) views China's increased assertiveness in the SCS as a way of "protecting the perceived Chinese sovereignty and maritime interests against the intensified 'encroachments' by other claimant states" and against closer rapprochement of the regional states with the United States since its rebalancing strategy came into play in 2011. In a similar fashion, Fravel (2011) views economic and security interests as the driving forces behind Beijing's assertiveness in the SCS. Cáceres (2014) contends that Beijing's SCS strategy focuses on three pillars. The first is "prosperity" which, in Beijing's view, can be achieved by economic development given the significance of the SCS energy sources, natural resources, and raw materials. The next two pillars are power and security which can be ensured by increasing power projection including the navy, air force, and army in the SCS to control this vital maritime region and to prevent security threats in East and Southeast Asia.

It is obvious that the aforementioned literature has taken into account sovereignty, influence expansion, and maritime interests as China's SCS strategic objectives, and "the U.S. factor" and competing elites, as well as divergent ideological camps as the reasons behind China's changing posture toward the SCS. While certainly true, these works fail to provide plausible and specific accounts for why China views the SCS as the top priority in its maritime grand strategy and to what ends China's

SCS strategic objectives are designed. It is worth noting that grasping a comprehensive picture of China's changing behavior needs to take an insight into the interaction between domestic and international factors. To be specific, in terms of domestic factors, China's increasing confidence—as a result of its developed economic powerhouse, military might, and political influence, as well as demands for socio-economic development—has prompted Beijing to intensify its assertiveness in the SCS (Beckman 2014; Hongzhou and Bateman 2017; Howarth 2006; Li 2016).

The growing influence of hardliners in Beijing's policy making has also been an important variable to China's power projection and assertiveness in the contentious sea. Tu and Xu (2011) and Li (2016) share the view that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has exerted a crucial impact on Beijing's policy agenda and strategic orientations, endorsing military actions, and deployment of paramilitary forces in the contested waters in response to the other ASEAN claimants' rapprochement with the United States and its involvement in the regional issues including the SCS dispute. Another variable is the state actor factor, which centers around the power of Xi Jinping. Both Chinese and outside observers agree that, since Xi Jinping came into power in 2012 as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary, China's SCS policy has been elevated to new heights. For example, Xue (2018) posits that Xi's maritime stance has been attributable to China's increasing assertiveness in the SCS since he came into power, marking "the transition under his leadership from growing prosperous to getting strong." Chubb (2019) provides a further account when insisting that Beijing's SCS assertive posture under the Xi era includes three components: the pursuit of building China into a "maritime great power," the intensification of the SCS claims while mitigating military escalation in the disputed region, and prevention or objection against any other involved parties' legal claims relevant to the SCS. Another crucial domestic factor is Chinese modern nationalism which desires to build China into a "civilizational state" with its own "intrinsic logic of evolution and capability of generating its own standards and values" to protect territorial sovereignty and interests and to make unique contributions to the world (Wei-Wei 2012). As a result, the past two decades have marked China's unprecedented nationalistic sentiment to call for a tougher stance on the SCS by the government (Feng and Na 2019). Non-state actors are another factor explaining China's tough posture regarding the SCS. Xue (2018) argues that central state-owned enterprises (CSOEs) have exerted a dual impact on Beijing's SCS policy: on the one hand, the Chinese CSOEs have played an instrumental role in mobilizing resources, but

through which they influence Beijing's SCS policy makers in their favor; on the other hand, CSOEs make best use of "state-directed political tasks" to exert a pressing quest for Beijing to act assertively, especially in their beneficial sectors in the contested waters such as tourism, energy exploitation, and infrastructure.

Another perspective to explain China's changing moves in the SCS is the means the country has used to manage its claims. In the late 1990s, China attempted to maintain the doctrine of "keeping a low profile," which originated from the Deng Xiaoping era, while starting to engage Southeast Asian states within multilateral cooperative frameworks, such as the ARF and the ASEAN Plus Three (the ten ASEAN member states and three Northeast Asians, including Japan, South Korea, and China itself). Early in the first decade of the 21st century, Beijing initiated joint development in the SCS with ASEAN claimant states after the establishment of the 2002 DOC and promoted economic, politico-security, and socio-cultural cooperation within the East Asia Summit cooperative framework. However, since 2009, due to the domestic and international factors discussed previously, China has changed its behavior with different means, resulting in escalating tensions between China and the ASEAN disputant states, especially Vietnam and the Philippines, and an intensification of the "China threat" in Southeast Asia. Fravel (2011) posited that the country employed a combination of means—diplomatic, administrative, and military—to exert *de facto* control over the SCS. This strategy includes the expansion of an annual unilateral fishing ban, regular maritime security patrols, various forms of political and diplomatic pressure (including demarches and planting markers on unoccupied reefs), and the conducting of scientific activities and extensive naval exercises in the vicinity (Do 2017; Swaine and Fravel 2011). In addition, Beijing utilized economic, diplomatic, and civilian components—and beyond (Congressional Research Service 2019).

With regard to international factors, a large body of literature posits that the U.S. "Pivot to Asia" has been the major reason behind China's change in stance on the SCS over the past decade. Li (2016) argues that many Chinese scholars are convinced that the U.S. "Pivot to Asia" rebalancing strategy is to intensify containment against China's rise by intervening in the SCS disputes, causing anxieties and perceptions of insecurity in China. Schofield and Storey (2009) argue that Washington forged closer economic and politico-security relations with the region, and the "China factor" constituted a more significant part of its Asian foreign policy in light of the way China's increasing military capability was turning Asia's military balance in its favor and strengthening its

capabilities beyond the Taiwan Strait, including the SCS. Accordingly, in Beijing's view, Washington's return to Asia, especially East Asia, and its rapprochement with the regional states have been detrimental to China's political and economic regional influence, triggering challenges to the regional security environment at China's cost, and curbing China's regional power play by indirectly intervening in the SCS issue and supporting the ASEAN claimants' position (Broderick 2015; Li 2016; Xue 2020).

Another external factor for China's increasing assertiveness in the SCS comes from the ASEAN claimant states' unprecedented legal claims. The changing stance on the SCS commenced in 2009 when Vietnam and Malaysia sent a joint submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf to state their claims as a way of responding to China's series of proactive paramilitary and military actions in the SCS. This led to Beijing's unprecedented assertive posture in response by submitting its *Note Verbale* containing a controversial "Nine-Dash-Line" map to the UN Secretary-General to claim some 90 percent of the SCS with the country's SCS assertiveness as "indisputable sovereignty" (Elleman 2008; Emmers 2009; Tahindro 2016).

The literature mentioned above has provided a plausible account for China's changing posture toward the SCS over the past decade, given that Beijing leaders have taken into consideration the domestic and external factors in order to formulate their SCS policy, the indispensable trajectory in state policy making. However, the literature primarily explores China's changing behaviors and reactive assertiveness in the SCS through the lens of the country's strategy for managing its claims. In other words, the previous studies by both Chinese and external pundits fall short of thoroughly apprehending the Chinese grand strategy in the SCS according to its true nature—which has long been established to reach national strategic goals in its ends.

Analytical Framework

Ascertaining the true nature of Beijing's SCS strategy behind its increasing assertiveness and power projection in the contested waters needs to employ a strategic analysis approach—which, to my knowledge, few authors have employed. This approach is made up of three components: ends, ways, and means, of which ends is the most significant. China's strategic ends in the SCS focus on two categories. The first is economic interests, including maritime and other vital economic strategic considerations. The second is military, which allows the country to

build the status of a maritime power and to create a military barrier via which it can prevent any trade blockade through sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) and discourage future military activity conducted by any potential adversaries against it. The second component is ways in pursuit of strategic ends. Ways are exercised by modernizing and expanding military might, especially the PLA Navy, along with the development and advancement of geoeconomic power in the region. The third component is means, which is the combination of diplomatic influence and military and economic power to achieve its strategic ends. Within its limits, and using this approach, this article teases out in some detail China's SCS strategic calculations to achieve its ends, rather than looking into ways and means.

Theoretically, the present study employs an offensive realist approach to examine China's SCS strategic objectives. As a theory of international relations, offensive realism focuses on the three core assumptions about behavior: self-help, power maximization, and outgroup fear (Dominic and Bradley 2016). To be more specific, in the offensive realist paradigm, states can never be certain of others' intentions. As a result, an offensive realist state always seeks to maximize its power to address the fear arising from challenges imposed by another competitor or potential adversary. However, states fear each other not just due to uncertainty, but due to a clear certainty that states in an anarchic system *will* do harm to weaker states (Radtio 2015). This approach is generally true when looking at the increasingly strategic U.S.–China competition in the East Asian geopolitics chessboard. The SCS as a case in point where the U.S. “Pivot to Asia” strategy has caused China's anxiety, resulting in its power expansion and growing assertiveness in territorial disputes.

Significance of the SCS

The SCS is a marginal sea as it lies in the western part of the Pacific Ocean and borders the Southeast Asian mainland. It extends from Karimata and the Strait of Malacca in the southwest to the Taiwan Strait in the northeast. As a semi-enclosed sea of some three million square kilometers (equivalent to around 874,660 square nautical miles) (Djalal 1998), it is surrounded by ten littoral states: China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Republic of China commonly known as Taiwan. The sea contains hundreds of small islands, atolls, reefs, rocks, low-tide elevations, and submerged features—the majority of which are to be found in the Paracel and Spratly chains, and which are the subjects

of rival territorial and maritime claims on the part of China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei (Schofield 2016, 22–23).

The geopolitical importance of the SCS lies in its natural resources and in the dense network of trade routes that cross it, as well as in its broader strategic value for both internal and external stakeholders.

The region is rich in both biological and non-living natural resources. Fisheries constitute the most important source of livelihood for most ordinary people living along the coasts of Southeast Asia. According to a 2015 report by the Vietnam Ministry of Planning and Investment (VMPI 2015), with some 2,000 different species of fish and other specialty species (shrimp, crabs, mussels, seaweeds, etc.), the SCS contains an estimated 12 percent of global reserves, an important and near inexhaustible food supply—provided it is well cared for and protected. In addition, the SCS is widely believed to have very large oil and natural gas reserves, although both their extent and their accessibility are disputed. The U.S. Energy Information Administration (2013) estimated these undersea oil and gas reserves to be as much as 11 billion barrels and 190 trillion cubic feet, respectively. According to a 2015 report by the Vietnam Ministry of Planning and Investment, these oil and gas resources lie mainly around the continental shelves. The report identifies more than ten oil and gas basins in the SCS, with a total area of 852,400 km², accounting for 48.8 percent of the sea's entire continental shelf area. In addition, the whole continental shelf area of the SCS is covered by a thick layer of sediment rich in valuable industrial raw materials, such as Ilmenite, Monazite, Zircon, Cassiterite, and Arenaceous quartz, etc.

In terms of maritime traffic, the SCS incorporates or exerts a profound influence on trading routes. SCS lanes of communication have played an indispensable role in facilitating international trade and promoting economic interdependence throughout the entire Asia-Pacific region, Oceania, South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. For many decades, the SCS has acted as the main highway for the transport of oil, other energy resources, and commodities from the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Oceania to Japan, South Korea, and China. Every year, around 80 percent of Middle Eastern and African crude oil shipments destined for China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan pass across its waters. Some 55 percent of India's trade with the Asia-Pacific uses the SCS (VMPI 2015, 9). The sea is also crucial for the export of hydrocarbons from Sakhalin and other parts of the Russian Far East.

As the most important gateway linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans, the SCS has emerged as one of the world's busiest maritime trade routes, with around 50 percent of the world's commercial shipping carrying an

estimated USD 5.3 trillion's worth of trade, transiting its waters annually. The 41,000 ships laden with oil and gas that pass across the SCS each year are twice the number that pass through the Suez Canal and three times the number that transit the Panama Canal (Collins 2003). The commercial significance of the SCS to many countries, inside and outside the Asia-Pacific region, is evident.

In terms of strategic importance, the SCS inevitably has a significant impact on the defense strategies of all its littoral countries and on the possible expansion of their national power. The Paracel and Spratly Islands, in particular, serve as strategic locations that can be used to monitor and even, in some circumstances, control maritime routes across the sea through the construction of radar stations, information stations, and military bases. U.S. observers have contended that any country that controls the Spratly Islands could potentially dominate the entire SCS and expand its power into other vital sea lanes (Congressional Research Service 2019). Thus, the maritime countries that utilize these sea lanes insist that their national interests require unimpeded freedom of navigation across the SCS and the right of unhindered overflight in the airspace above it (Hassan 2002). The overlapping strategic and economic interests of the great powers in the Asia-Pacific Indian Ocean region—China, Japan, South Korea, the United States, Russia, India, and Australia—and the power shifts taking place elsewhere heighten the geostrategic importance of the SCS. As a result, those countries have made carefully negotiated mutual accommodation an even more urgent task (Sokolsky, Rabasa, and Neu 2000).

The economic, political, and strategic significance of the SCS has driven the claimant states to chronic competition over the land masses in the disputed region. Each state has geared toward invoking the extension of their sovereignty and jurisdictional claims over islets, reefs, and rocks, and their surrounding waters in the SCS. However, as the biggest power among the claimant states, China has shown the propensity to use coercive diplomacy and even force to pursue and consolidate its territorial claims. Noticeably, since 2009, China has pursued its SCS policy shift, symbolized by the so-called “Nine-Dash-Line” claims, as its new expansionist posture to the disputed region. The SCS came to the fore as a national goal of China's 21st-century grand maritime strategy, with Beijing leadership viewing the region in economic and strategic terms. As the former Commander Admiral of the Chinese PLA Navy, Liu (2004) observed, “whoever controls it [the SCS] will reap huge economic and military benefits.”

China's Grand Maritime Strategy and the SCS

To understand China's present maritime claims and increasing power projection in the SCS, it is essential to grasp a general picture of Beijing's maritime strategy. China's 21st-century maritime strategy is an integral component of a comprehensive national security policy designed to defend the nation's sovereignty, promote its economic development, and protect its energy supply (Ong 2010). Geographically and historically, China is both a continental and a maritime country. Its 18,000 km of mainland coastline, together with its three million square kilometers of territorial seas and over 6,500 islands, makes it the largest maritime land mass in the entire Indo-Pacific region (Wu 2014, 5). China's defeat in the Opium Wars ushered in the "century of humiliation," and its subsequent defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 paved the way for the relentless Japanese territorial encroachment of the 20th century, culminating in the Second Sino-Japanese War of 1937–1945. These painful historical events significantly sparked Chinese strategic thinking surrounding the growing significance of controlling maritime space for China's vital economic and strategic interests. This is traceable from the Chinese Navy under Liu Huaqing's leadership to the present era of Xi Jinping. As Commander-in-Chief of the PLA Navy in the 1980s, specifically from 1982 to 1988, Liu recognized two maritime zones the PLA Navy should be capable of controlling in two phases.

The first zone, the control of which represented the first phase of Liu's strategy, encompasses the Yellow Sea opposite Japan and the Korean Peninsula; the western part of the East China Sea, including Taiwan; and the SCS. China's vital national interests are at stake in these geographic areas, including its territorial claims, its maritime natural resources, and its coastal defense (Hartnett 2014). According to Howarth (2006), Chinese strategists portray this zone as delimited by "the first island chain," a north–south line which passes through the Aleutian Islands, the Kurile Islands, the Japanese archipelago, the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Liu determined that the PLA Navy should be capable of controlling this zone by the year 2002, ending the first phase of the strategy. Liu also clarified that the area to be "safeguarded" by the PLA Navy extended out to 200 nautical miles from the coast, and he even increased this distance later to 600 nautical miles (Kondapalli 2001, 3).

The second zone of the second phase in Liu's strategy is delineated by the "second island chain" as a north–south line, which passes the Kurile Islands and Japan and then takes a more eastern course through the

Bonin, Mariana, and Caroline Islands. Liu insisted that the PLA Navy should achieve control over this second zone by the year 2020 to secure the Chinese control of the whole oceanic area of the East Asian region.

A third phase of Liu's maritime strategy was to create a blue water navy—to transform the main mission of the PLA Navy from one of coastal defense to one of “offshore active defense”—which is capable of exercising a global influence by 2050 (Howarth 2006, 42). Liu's maritime strategy became more ambitious under Jiang Zemin's leadership; in his words, a “Great Wall at sea,” and even more vigorous under Xi Jinping's “Asian Dream” when Xi decided to pursue both the continental and maritime strategies in light of the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) project, largely funded by the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund, to integrate Eurasia, the South Pacific, and Eastern Africa into a Sino-centric “community of shared interests, destiny and responsibility” (Caixin 2015; National Development and Reform Commission 2015). Thus, it is clear that Xi has endorsed a more assertive policy in maritime reach, particularly concerning the SCS disputes, than his predecessors. Li (2016, 58) was convinced that Chinese behavior in the regional maritime disputes, since Xi came to power, has been the result of greater centralization in policy making and improved national coordination, including nationalist sentiment. In the case of the SCS, Beijing's policy increasingly demonstrates Xi's strong and nationalistic personality. As a result, under Xi's leadership, China is likely to be more serious about protecting its perceived national interests in the maritime domain. In a similar fashion, Hoo (2017, 3) argues that, despite the continuity of Beijing's maritime paradigms under Xi's leadership, it is clear that amid the continuity there have been some profound shifts from strategic slogans—such as “major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics,” the establishment of the AIIB, and the launch of the BRI—to a more assertive protection of maritime territorial interests in East Asia.

At this point, it is worth adding to the reasons behind China's increasingly assertive posture to maritime policy trajectory over the past decade. First, since the United States geared its attention toward East Asia in light of its “Pivot to Asia” discourse, Beijing has taken an increasingly assertive stance toward U.S. involvement in the regional disputes and collusion between Washington and the Southeast Asian disputant states, especially Vietnam and the Philippines. This has fueled the growth of Chinese hard-line views (Li 2016, 48). It should also not be left unmentioned that, after

more than three decades of China's economic reforms which have resulted in its rising economic and military power as well as political clout in regional and global affairs, China is now more confident about acting aggressively according to its maritime ambitions which have been at the heart of modern Chinese nationalism since its origin. Indeed, Ong (2010, 116) contends that China's expansionism and its need to become a global power largely stems from a "century of humiliation" by the Western powers and this new posture accommodates rising nationalist sentiment accordingly. Beijing's new maritime stance in response to nationalism will also legitimate the CCP's unaccountable monopoly of arbitrary power. Above all, in the view of both the Chinese government and many influential strategic thinkers, the focus of great power competition has been shifting from the struggle to control the land to rivalry on the seas, the objective being to dominate territorial waters, protect vital sea lanes, and control maritime resources (Dutton 2012, 263; Howarth 2006, 43–44). For this reason, Beijing seeks to consolidate and extend its maritime reach.

Taking the Chinese grand maritime strategy into account, Beijing's strategic considerations regarding the SCS in its 21st maritime policy trajectory are similarly framed by considerations over the mutually reinforcing interaction of the territorial claims and the growing quest for energy, and vital economic and strategic interests, which are known as geopolitical attributes necessary to understand China's behavior and its revised SCS position.

Energy Resources and Fisheries

China's fast-growing economy and increasing domestic consumption have driven Beijing to seek control over vital resources and maritime spaces. The liberalization of international trade, along with a dense net of investment flows into the coastal zone over the past 20 years, have transformed the whole coastal area and accentuated China's driving role (Truong and Knio 2016, 64). This brings the critical relationships between the nation's maritime border and its economic growth to the fore (Brandt 2008, 624–626). At the same time, it also corresponds with the specific pattern of China's historical maritime projection driven by the coastal provinces (Lo 2012).

The SCS, with its substantial reserves of oil and natural gas and its rich maritime resources, is especially significant in this context. China's coastal provinces occupy 30 percent of its total land area, support 40 percent of its population, and produce 60 percent of the national gross

domestic product, making the Chinese coastal provinces the most dynamic regions in China because of their favorable geographic position and national policy (Sun *et al.* 2018, 112). Against this background, continued economic growth and soaring living standards have inevitably accentuated the country's maritime orientation, influencing Beijing to pay more and more attention to guarding sea lanes and stimulating interest in exploiting offshore fisheries and raw materials (Singh 2000). This has been the driving force behind China's maritime expansion in recent decades.

Guaranteeing an uninterrupted and stable energy supply, in particular, is an essential prerequisite for China's continued development as an advanced industrial society. China relies on coal for 77 percent of its energy. However, difficulties in the extraction of domestic coal resources in the western part of the country and transportation of the product to the major industrial centers in the east have triggered a swing to reliance on oil and gas. China is the sixth-largest producer of oil in the world and the third-largest per capita consumer after the United States and the European Union (EU). Demand is so great that it has become a net importer of oil since 1993. Although China has made tremendous efforts to bolster the production of crude oil and to replace it with cleaner alternatives (such as biomass, natural gas, and renewable energy), China remains the world's largest importer of crude oil and gas. According to the China National Petroleum Corporation's Economics and Technology Research Institute, the country imported 440 million metric tons of crude oil in 2018, a year-on-year increase of 11 percent, accounting for almost 70 percent of its foreign oil dependency ratio, and it is expected to grow in the years to come (Zheng 2019).

Fisheries are another vital economic interest in China's critical consideration over the SCS. Unlike its role as a net exporter of food grains by 1995, China has been steadily increasing its annual grain imports to address the question of food security. China's total grain imports in 2014–15, for example, reached a total of 16 million tonnes, despite a sharp rise in overall grain production (Lyddon 2015). While consumption levels will continue to rise, the nation's agriculture faces several challenges on several fronts—desertification of the Yellow River, falling regional water tables, accelerating urbanization, vanishing farmlands, the declining effectiveness of fertilizers, and so on. In this situation, the SCS marine resources, especially seafood, have come to assume greater and greater importance. The Chinese government has thus placed much emphasis on promoting the fishing industry, not only in home

waters, but also in disputed areas.² China has emerged as the world's largest producer and exporter of marine products. By 2013, the nation's total catch of 61.7 million tonnes represented more than one-third of global fisheries' production and exports and earned USD 11.6 billion (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2014). According to the 2020 report by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI 2020, 8), China possesses between 1,600 and 3,400 vessels, making the Chinese fishing fleet the largest in the world, including a total of 16,966 distant-water fishing vessels operating on the high sea beyond the nation's exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

Success has come at a cost. Overfishing in Chinese domestic waters has seriously depleted fish stocks there, a problem exacerbated by industrial pollution, land reclamation, and aquaculture development, all of which combine to threaten the long-term sustainability of the fisheries sector. Against this background, Chinese fishing fleets have been increasingly operating in offshore waters, including in disputed areas of the SCS and in the EEZs of other countries, as well as on the high seas. This poses serious problems not only for the fishing industries of China's neighbors, but also for wider regional and global economic security.

Protecting Vital Sea Lanes and Power Projection into the Indian Ocean

Some 70 percent of the earth's surface is covered by oceans, and the Pacific, which occupies half of this area, is the greatest of them all. Since the beginning of the 21st century, securing vital SLOCs has been one of the top priorities in Beijing's strategic thinking and policy making. Seaborne trade has been of critical importance to the export-oriented development of the entire Asia-Pacific region for several decades now and the significance of the sea lanes for all the countries located there has increased correspondingly.

Unhindered movement of shipping is crucial to the continued prosperity and, in some cases, the very survival of all countries in the region. In the case of China, more than 70 percent of the country's petroleum and liquefied natural gas exports are shipped through the Strait of Malacca and 60 percent of the country's trade flows transit through the

²Beijing defines the development of the fishery industry as national political and strategic interests. China's leaders consider that promoting the fisheries sector will help protect the country's perceived interests in disputed waters. They also believe that a distant-water fishing fleet will help enhance fisheries cooperation with other members of the international community and thereby consolidate the nation's global strategic interests.

Strait and the SCS, making it the most important sea lane of communication for the Chinese economy (Paszak 2021). Mounting dependence on imported oil, gas, and grain makes it increasingly vulnerable to external pressures because Chinese imports of energy remain subject to a large dependency ratio from Africa and the Middle East via the vital sea lanes that traverse the SCS. Notwithstanding that, the future of China's growing shipbuilding and maritime transport industries depends on guaranteed access to and, in some cases, control over the country's maritime approaches³ in Beijing's grand strategy as discussed earlier.

The growing geopolitical importance of the sea lanes and China's increasing maritime orientation and interests have impelled Beijing to expand its presence around these crucial trade routes, with particular emphasis on the SCS, partly because of the rich oil, gas, hydrocarbon, and marine reserves in the SCS itself, and also because the sea is a vital artery linking the country with the oil-producing states around the Persian Gulf as well as with its trading partners in Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, Oceania, the Middle East, and beyond (see Figure 1).

Significantly, the Malacca Strait at the western extremity of the SCS constitutes the most convenient gateway from the Pacific into the Indian Ocean.⁴ China's increasingly assertive presence in the SCS has tended to draw attention away from its growing interests in the Indian Ocean. Yet, as a matter of fact, the country depends on the Strait of Malacca, with nearly three-quarters of its oil imports flowing through the Strait (Zhang 2011, 7612). China's 2015 defense white paper, which articulates an ambitious future regional role for the country, lays particular emphasis on the seas heralding a shift in focus from "offshore waters" defense to "open seas protection" (Chellaney 2015). This change is undoubtedly connected with China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative, an integral component of Beijing's grand strategy, the objective of which is to build an integrated web of economic, political, military, and cultural links with the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Complementary to the Maritime Silk Road is the overland Silk Road designed to link China with Russia and Europe through Central Asia and the Caspian Sea Basin (see Figure 2).

³During the Eighth Five-Year Plan, China constructed some 6.66 million tonnes of ships, earning a total of USD 2.7 billion in foreign exchange in exports. It currently exports 200 different types of shipbuilding products to some 70 countries. One-third of China's domestic transport and communications is dependent on maritime shipping.

⁴The Indian Ocean is of great geoeconomic importance—70 percent of the world's petroleum shipment and 50 percent of global container traffic passes over its waters.

CHINESE STRATEGY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Figure 1.
Significance of the South China Sea in the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs).



Source: Atlas of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (2014).

Figure 2.
China's Contemporary Maritime Silk Road Initiative.



Source: Xinhua, May 19 (2016).

President Xi Jinping's two-tiered Silk Road initiative, or the "One Belt, One Road" strategy, can be viewed as a Grand Design to extend Chinese political influence and buttress China's military and economic security on a transcontinental scale by consolidating trade routes across the Indian Ocean and through Central Asia as far as Europe in the west. Xi's robust SCS policies are thus closely linked to China's Indian Ocean strategy and the Maritime Silk Road concept, which places much emphasis on large-scale infrastructure projects in key coastal states situated on the great trade arteries. Beijing also hopes that these infrastructure projects will help alleviate the problem of domestic overproduction in an era of declining economic growth. Moreover, through its investments in littoral countries on relatively easy terms of credit, Beijing is transforming its growing economic weight into strategic influence, which challenges the current power balance in the Indian Ocean.

Not only has China sought to draw strategically located countries into economic partnerships, but it has also striven to acquire access to naval facilities, concluding agreements on refueling, repair, maintenance, and rest and recreation. Over the past several years, China has floated plans for building deep-water ports (with naval outfitting capabilities) with its allies and close partners—Cambodia, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Djibouti. A number of these ports have already been designed and financed and are operational to varying degrees. These projects have the additional merit of helping secure new supplies of natural resources and enabling the construction of additional road and rail corridors to transport them to China and then to export the finished products around the world (Mearsheimer 2011, 32). In this way, China acquires access to, potentially controls, and even owns small plots of land or seaports in strategically placed countries along the sea lanes in the SCS and the Indian Ocean. China's recent encroachment has aroused concerns in India not just about its energy security but also its national security in the face of the growing presence of the Chinese navy in the Indian Ocean as an act of encircling India (Dasgupta 2018; Khurana 2008; Singh 2017).

Seeking the Status of a Global Sea Power: A Balancing Act *vis-à-vis* the United States

China's maritime strategy, centered around its project to realize the Maritime Silk Road, in which the SCS is an indispensable component, serves Beijing's larger ambition, which is to achieve global great power status. In fact, Xi's ambitious Maritime Silk Road relates to the ancient

maritime Silk Road that began in Fuzhou (a city in Fujian, China) and then went to Southeast Asia through the SCS. It proceeded to Europe—via the Malacca Strait, the Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean—serving as a way for China to export its silk, ceramics, and tea and connect commerce and peoples across water bodies such as the East China Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the Arabian Sea (Blanchard and Flint 2017, 226). The reemergence of China as an extremely significant economic, political, and military power has been one of the most important developments of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, which helps revive Xi's initiative with a distinctly global reach. The transformation of China into a major sea power able to ensure a stable and secure maritime environment is pivotal to Beijing's grand strategy.

As already noted, the Chinese leadership and its security advisers believe that the locus of international conflict has been shifting from the land to the sea, especially to the struggle to control vital trade routes and resource-rich offshore waters. This perception of the dominant trend in world affairs began to take shape after Hu Jintao became chairman of the Central Military Commission in 2004, calling in the PLA to undertake “new historic missions” centering around protection of maritime interests, with an emphasis on building a blue water navy. At the CCP's 18th Congress, Hu called for the country to “resolutely safeguard China's maritime rights and interests and build China into a maritime power” (Financial Times 2019). Given the pivotal role of the SCS as a path to realize China's maritime power dream, PLA Senior Colonel Dai Xu (2010) asserted that not giving up an inch in sovereignty disputes is not meant to start war but to avoid war and seek peace. China, on this view, experienced constant wars in modern history—not because it was too strong and tough, but because it was too weak and soft. In a similar fashion, PLA Major General Luo Yuan (2015) insisted that controlling the SCS islands will enable China to effectively control this vital maritime region and international shipping routes. In other words, China must strive to gain control over every inch of the land and water of the SCS.

Although the image of “a string of pearls” was originally put forward by Western writers on Chinese strategy, the concept is not entirely without validity, as suggested above. Adherents of the “string of pearls” theory contend that China's ultimate goal is to extend its power from the “first island chain,” southward from the Japanese island of Kyushu, through Taiwan, then across the SCS over the waters enclosed within the “Nine-Dash-Line,” then out through the Strait of Malacca into the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf (Herscovitchi 2017; Khurana 2008) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.
China's First and Second Island Chains.



Source: Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2009 (U.S. Department of Defense 2009, 18).

The overriding objective of China's grand strategy, however, is simply to protect and develop the nation's economic, military, and political interests, as these are perceived by the government in Beijing. This makes it imperative to balance U.S. power in the western Pacific Basin and in vital strategic areas beyond. From China's point of view, the United States remains its most dangerous adversary, committed to containing Beijing's influence abroad and promoting regime change at home. From the U.S. perspective, an increasingly confident and powerful China has become the most credible rival to American dominance in world affairs in general and in the Indo-Pacific in particular. This explains why some consider that the global order of the 21st century will revolve around the contest between these two powers, a rising China and a declining America. Donohue (2017, 51) pointed out that, in the views of academics and policy practitioners, the United States and China are in the midst of a great-power transition in the 21st century. China's three decades of unprecedented economic growth and military modernization,

coupled with U.S. global overreach and budget burdens, signal a considerable shift in great-power hegemony in the Indo-Asian Pacific. As a result, many strategists and policy practitioners have offered critical prescriptions on what Washington needs to do and how to counter the “China rise/U.S. decline narrative” in this new, complex “Great Game” between the two powers. Former U.S. President Barack Obama’s “Pivot to Asia” and Washington’s opposition to the Chinese-sponsored AIIB, whose ambitious projects are closely connected to the “One Belt, One Road” initiative, can be seen as a reaction to America’s declining capacity to dominate the global agenda and exert its authority through overwhelming military power (Blanchard and Flint 2017, 234). President Trump’s U.S.–China trade war, the main objective of which was to weaken the Chinese economy while strengthening that of the United States, can be viewed in the same light—another harbinger of the end of hegemony and the transition to a multipolar world order.

Notwithstanding the use of economic and political means to contain a rising China, the U.S. growing military presence in the region is the primary reason for the potential U.S.–China rivalry. U.S. deployment of military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region to rebalance China has increased significantly in recent years. According to Glaser (2016), Washington has deployed 60 percent of its submarines in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region, and he predicted it was highly likely to have 60 percent of U.S. surface ships in the region before the early 2020s, not to mention growing military operations in the SCS. Li (2016, 48–49) observed that Chinese analysts frequently posit that the United States has sought to “pressure China, intervene in the South China Sea dispute and its military superiority in the region” by concocting the myth of “freedom of navigation.” Under the Biden administration, Washington remains affirmative and even more vigorous about the SCS issue, given its economic, political, and strategic interests in this vital maritime region. The first and primary route the Biden administration has taken is to rebuild alliances facing the territorial disputes with China. According to Lee (2021), since Biden came to power, Washington has repeatedly recalled the U.S.–Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty, which maps the U.S. response to any attack by China on Philippine forces and vessels in the SCS flashpoint region. Another critical way Washington is addressing the Chinese challenge is to unite its Asian–European allies and partners including Japan, Australia, India, Britain, France, and Germany to create a unified front against China. Chen (2021) affirms that Biden wants to change the “Trump-era strategy of fighting alone against China” by “adopting a new strategic posture in the South China

Sea in which allies and partners both inside and outside the region support each other and work together against China.”

The contest between the two rival powers will be a protracted one, complicated by their overlapping and interlocking interests with other powerful states such as Russia, Japan, India, Iran, and Turkey, and likewise complicated by the shifting balance within the EU and the long-term implications of Brexit, which even now remains obscure. Through its maritime and continental Silk Road initiatives, China is expanding its presence in the SCS and the Indian Ocean, in South and Central Asia, in the Middle East, and in Africa, seeking close partners and allies and endeavoring to draw regional states into its orbit.⁵ In the Indian Ocean, however, China faces strong competition from India. China’s ambitions in East Asian waters, including the SCS, will be difficult to realize at the present time because of the presence of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, which enjoys an almost unchallengeable supremacy across the entire Pacific Ocean and its marginal seas and could rapidly assert control over most coastal waters in an emergency. Beijing has good reason to be concerned about the possibility of U.S. involvement in any conflict over the future of Taiwan (Howarth 2006, 54). The United States, however, has no capacity to effectively employ its enormous military power on land in the East and Southeast Asian region, as history has amply demonstrated. So far, its efforts to destabilize its rivals and their allies have borne only bitter fruit.

Intensifying the Blockade of Taiwan

It must be noted that the growing strategic importance of the SCS is closely linked to Beijing’s strategic consideration of the Strait of Taiwan. From Beijing’s perspective, though Taiwan does not pose a direct military threat, it represents a political challenge for the reunification of Taiwan under Chinese rule as Taipei has been seeking independence underpinned by U.S. involvement (Ong 2010, 48). This is evident as, shortly after Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui’s visit to the United States in June 1995 and in the run-up to the first direct

⁵China has established two vital “blue economic corridors.” The first, which extends westward through the South China Sea into the Indian Ocean, linking up with the China–Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, the China–Pakistan and Bangladesh–China–Myanmar–India economic corridors, is intended to connect China with Africa, the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and beyond to Europe. The second, the China–Oceania–South Pacific corridor, extends southward across the South China Sea into the Pacific Ocean. There is also talk of another corridor linking China with Europe via the Arctic Ocean.

Taiwanese presidential elections in March 1996, the Chinese PLA launched a series of missiles at targets in the East China Sea. The first set of missiles fired in mid-to-late 1995 was intended to send a strong signal to Lee's government that it must not advocate Taiwan's independence. The second set of missiles fired in early 1996 was aimed at intimidating the Taiwanese electorate so that they would not vote for Lee in the presidential elections. In response, Washington deployed two aircraft carrier battle groups in the region, including Carrier Group Seven centered on the *USS Independence* and Carrier Group Five centered on the *USS Nimitz*, along with the amphibious assault ship, the *USS Belleau Wood*. Noticeably, the *Nimitz* and the *Belleau Wood* sailed through the Taiwan Strait as a strong signal to Beijing of U.S. involvement. Since the aftermath of the 1995–1996 crisis, the grave concerns of the Chinese leaders have been aroused about U.S. growing arms sales to Taiwan as Washington reiterated its commitment to the Strait in light of the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act that was passed into law by the U.S. Congress to assure U.S. interests in Taiwan's security, including its commitment to sell "defensive arms" to Taiwan (Ong 2010, 47–48).

In a broader sense, Washington's arms sales and its commitment to Taiwan's security are also posing an indirect challenge to China's national security, and this has made the Taiwan issue one of the most sensitive aspects of U.S.–Chinese relations in the 21st century accordingly. At this point, China's growing power projection in the SCS and the East China Sea China alike has embraced its strategic considerations to intensify the blockade of Taiwan to its advantage and to address any U.S. threat as well. As discussed earlier, Taiwan is incorporated in the "first island chain," including the SCS, with regard to China's gateway to the Pacific. Accordingly, in a national defense report, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (2004) calculated that controlling this "chain" will give China the platform not just to blockade Taiwan, but also to counter the naval superiority of the United States and Japan in the longer term. Ong (2010, 138) contended that the maritime zone off the Chinese coast and the waters surrounding Taiwan, including the SCS, would give Chinese forces all the benefits of coastal navies operating in home waters. It would, for example, enable Chinese naval forces to exploit the advantages of proximity to their bases and ground-based support such as aircraft and coastal missile batteries. Chinese submarine forces would also have the benefit of greater familiarity with the undersea terrain, a knowledge that would be an invaluable asset for tactical maneuvers. U.S. forces, on the other hand, despite all their efforts to adapt to the

exigencies of post-Cold War contingencies, would suffer the disadvantages of a blue water navy operating in a littoral environment.

It is true that Taiwan is playing up the China threat theory to earn support from the United States and its allies as China's maneuver targets not only Taiwan, but also the United States and Japan. However, it is unthinkable that China is getting ready to use its forces to seize Taiwan at all costs as Beijing is aware that Washington will intervene militarily in the Taiwan Strait if China takes military actions against Taiwan. In addition, the use of force to incorporate Taiwan and counter U.S. intervention would trigger grave consequences for China in terms of its economic modernization drive, thereby similarly triggering obstacles in its drive to global power status in the 21st century.

Also, in the event of a conflict, the United States could use its naval superiority to disrupt China's oil supplies because the Strait is of critical importance for China's energy supply due to its dependency on oil imports and its consideration to ensure the safety of supply delivery from the Persian Gulf via the Strait of Malacca to its eastern coast. However, it is certainly true that China's power expansionism in the SCS and other parts of its maritime zones serves as the strategic rationale for its blockade of Taiwan in the face of Taipei's bid for independence and external intervention from the United States. As Howarth (2006, 50) put it, "a blockade rather than an amphibious invasion should be among Beijing's preferred strategies to impose its will on the leadership and people of Taiwan."

Conclusion

The SCS is of cardinal geopolitical, geostrategic, and geoeconomic importance. It occupies a vital position in China's maritime strategic vision. China has been seeking to exert control over the SCS by pursuing a comprehensive strategy of encroachment designed to strengthen its de facto jurisdiction. This sea plays an important role in Chinese strategic thinking and planning for several reasons. First, it is a potential reservoir of oil, gas, fisheries, and other marine-based resources that are essential for the development of China's economic power. Second, the SCS serves as a vital strategic gateway along the SLOCs, or the "String of Pearls," facilitating the projection of Beijing's economic power, diplomacy, and growing naval might at the regional and global levels, under its ambitious Maritime Silk Road initiative. This helps China's efforts to balance the United States in the Asia-Pacific region, especially in the wake of Washington's "Pivot to Asia," foreshadowed by President Bush,

strengthened under Obama, and continued by Trump and Biden. It is also useful in China's attempt to contain India, another rising and potentially rival power, and to intensify the blockade of Taiwan.

China's increasing assertiveness in pursuing its "Nine-Dash-Line" claims, in tandem with its present soft and hard power projection into the disputed areas to exert de facto control, poses a very serious threat to the aspirations of the ASEAN claimant states, especially to Vietnam and the Philippines. China's actions also have implications for the maritime interests of several other powers, especially with regard to the question of freedom of navigation. The problem of how to solve the complex issues of the SCS in a way that protects the interests and satisfies at least some of the claims of all parties involved is one of the great challenges of our age.

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