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**The Reactive Approach – A two-step model to China’s security
perception in the Paracel Islands dispute since 2008**

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Introduction

Studying China's South China Sea foreign policy can be a daunting task given the often seemingly contradictory behaviour exhibited by China. Tensions and military incidents have occurred in this area periodically since the 1970s. The South China Sea possesses considerable natural resources, including hydrocarbons, oil reserves and fish stocks. Over half of the world's annual tonnage of crude oil transits through the South China Sea's marine passages (Borges 2003, 7), hence the geostrategic importance of ensuring stability in these waters. Furthermore, this Asian sea represents the world's second most utilized maritime route because it links the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean. In the case of the Paracel Islands dispute between China, Vietnam and Taiwan, for example, the Chinese government has alternately adopted three possible main strategies regarding territorial conflicts: resolution, confrontation or "shelving" (Fravel 2011, 296-297). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has generally favoured resolution, except with offshore island disputes. Fravel assesses that "since 1949, China has settled seventeen of its twenty-three territorial disputes" (2005, 46). However, this trend has been countered with regards to offshore island disputes, where a shelving policy has mostly been adopted with sporadic confrontation (Fravel 2011, 297).

The practice of shelving disputes with regards to the South China Sea conflicts has been favoured since the Deng Xiaoping era of foreign policy making. This Chinese leader decided that the country must focus on economic development in order to guarantee promised economic prosperity and safeguard political stability. Deng's dictum was to shelve sovereignty disputes so as to favour joint development (Raine 2011, 77). According to Jian Zhang (2013, 20), the trend of

adopting a moderate foreign policy approach to the South China Sea has continued well into the 2000s as China sees a “need to improve relationships with ASEAN countries”. Examples of the Chinese shelving policy include the signing of two agreements in the early 2000s: the 2002 ‘Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea’ (DOC) with ASEAN countries and the 2003 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia. Signatories to the DOC and the 2003 Treaty agreed to resolve their differences in a peaceful manner (Wu 2007, 231).

In the case of the Paracel Islands, it should be noted that the early 2000s witnessed an escalation of disputes. For example, in January 2005, Chinese and Vietnamese ships exchanged fire (Folkmanis 2005, online), but in March of the same year, China, the Philippines and Vietnam signed an agreement to conduct joint marine seismic research in the South China Sea (Fravel 2011, 299). Thus, while there have been incidents of aggressiveness, the Chinese government has generally applied a shelving policy with Vietnam regarding the Paracels dispute. The image China tried to project under Hu Jintao’s leadership, from 2002 to 2012, was that of a peaceful and cooperative rising power. From the early 2000, China has indeed acted in a more cooperative manner with its neighbours with regard to the South China Sea disputes. This has manifested itself, for example, through the signing of a “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea” with the ASEAN in 2002 and a joint seismic survey agreement in 2005 with the Philippines and Vietnam (Fravel 2011, 299). Specifically in relation to the Paracel Islands, both parties -- the Vietnamese and Chinese governments -- have often been willing to “put aside” their disputes in favour of encouraging economic development (Buszynski & Sazlan 2007, 161).

Despite this recent history of peaceful shelving, most authors studying Chinese actions in the South China Sea agree that China’s position has hardened since 2008-2009. This new level of

assertive behaviour has given rise to many questions. Media outlets and a number of China observers have raised the alarm as regards a general change in China's foreign policy actions, particularly in the South China Sea. Authors such as Hughes (2011) and Thomas J. Christensen (2011) point to the global financial crisis in 2008 as the turning point when China became more assertive in its policies towards the region. The financial crisis highlighted US economic weakness while China was able to manage the global crisis relatively well (Yahuda 2013, 447). Observers therefore link China's assertiveness to the CCP's evaluation of the United States' decline, discernable through the financial crisis, and to China's parallel rise in power (Christensen 2011, 54). China's perceived shift in the balance of power encouraged the CCP to be more assertive, which seems at variance with its previous approach. Swaine and Fravel define Chinese assertiveness with regard to the United States(US) as follows: [assertiveness] is "official or governmental behaviour and statements that might appear to threaten U.S. and/or allied interests or otherwise challenge the status quo in maritime Asia along China's periphery, thereby undermining Asian stability and causing concern to U.S. and Asian leaders" (2011, 2). This definition of assertive behaviour is understood as a trend where the Chinese government is prone to manifest more aggressive behaviour, a stance that can affect its international image negatively and the status quo in the region. Indeed, the more assertive Chinese actions "since 2008 have been viewed with alarm by the United States and others in Asia" (Zhao 2013, 535).

This relatively recent change to a generally more assertive Chinese disposition raises the following question: What explains China's more assertive foreign policy in the South China Sea Paracel Islands dispute since 2008? More specifically, this essay seeks to understand China's own security perception and to shed light on the explanatory factors of this changing tendency in its foreign policies in the South China Sea. In order to investigate this puzzle, the focus will be on

the case of the Paracel Islands. This group of local islands located in the South China Sea are the subject of disputes between China, Taiwan and Vietnam. Since the aim of this essay is to examine the Chinese perspective of the conflict, Taiwan will not be considered in this study. China regards Taiwan as an integral part of the Chinese state and its external relations as being managed by the Chinese government. The actors in the Paracel Islands conflict are therefore China, Vietnam, and the United States, the latter being involved as the de facto global hegemon. For Robert Kaplan (2014, 171), the South China Sea will only become more important in the future. More precisely, the importance of focusing on the Paracel Islands conflict in the South China Sea is twofold. As regards the Chinese perception, Kaplan explains that, among the ASEAN countries, China perceives Vietnam as its only real adversary in the South China Sea conflicts, reiterating the statement made by an American official: “If China can break off Vietnam they’ve won the South China Sea” (2014, 53). From the Vietnamese perspective of a sea-bordering country, the Paracel Islands and its surrounding waters are crucial. One-third of the Vietnamese population lives on the coast and the maritime sector makes up fifty percent of the GDP (Kaplan 2014, 59). Both the Vietnamese and Chinese cases are based on historical claims and they try to refer to international law.

Four main hypotheses can be found in the specialized literature to explain this new Chinese assertiveness. It is worth briefly introducing them. First, what is referred to as “*the resource quest*” attributes China’s hardened actions to a growing need for resources. This hypothesis can be linked to the lateral pressure approach developed by Nazli Choucri and Robert North (1975). The logic of their approach is that a state could become more assertive in its foreign policy decisions to monopolize territory because of a resource need spurred by population, technological and economic growth (Fravel 2010, 513). In the case of China, as a

growing economic power with the world's largest population, the country is, of course, on a constant quest for resources. The South China Sea not only contains natural resources and considerable fish stocks, but also represents a crucial maritime passage for the transport of these and other resources. Given that the quantities of natural resources have not yet been confirmed and that China is diversifying its resource inputs, this explanation does not appear to be strong enough to solely justify China's greater assertiveness in Paracel Islands dispute.

A second hypothesis relates to *nationalism*. Scholars such as Raymond Lee (2014, 3) and Shawn McHale (2014, 2) associate China's new foreign policy fervour to nationalism. Nationalism is growing in China and the Chinese leadership cannot afford to completely ignore popular opinion while keeping control over the country (Raine 2011, 81). Sarah Raine (2011, 81) explains that some Chinese academics in favour of a more conciliatory policy towards Vietnam in the Paracel Islands dispute were considered as "Western puppets" and received death threats. Nationalism also remains a very important tool for the Chinese Communist Party to establish its legitimacy. While nationalism appears to be quite an important factor in China's hardened policies, it is worth noting that due to the Chinese political system, the CCP still retains sole decisional power. The CCP having long controlled nationalism to its advantage, the influence of popular nationalism on Chinese foreign policy actions should not be overestimated.

A third hypothesis is *geostrategic*. According to this approach, China has had no choice but to assert its presence explicitly and with greater force in the South China Sea since the United States' declared pivot to Asia. Scholars believe that the US pivot to Asia is partly responsible for the more rigid Chinese policy in the South China Sea. Robert Kaplan recalls that when the Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced budget cuts, he nonetheless insisted that the cuts

would not affect the US posture in the Pacific waters (Kaplan 2014, 181). Although specific US actions may act as a trigger for China's assertiveness, the geostrategic hypothesis does not fully explain China's reasoning behind its general trend of assertiveness.

A fourth hypothesis – *offensive realism* – is defended by John Mearsheimer (2001; 2002; 2010). He explains that China is growing inflexible because, as any rising power, it is looking to increase its military and political power, and will tend to pursue an expansion phase (Kaplan 2014, 178). This means that China is pursuing a more assertive and intransigent policy simply because it has the capacity to do so. This view is also consistent with the theory of power transition put forward by several authors such as Tammen Kugler, Lemke et al. (2011) who argue that China will be increasingly belligerent, as it accumulates more material power (Fravel 2010, 505). On the other hand, the United States still holds a significant hard power advantage in terms of military apparatus and power projection capacities over China. Therefore, as a rational power, China should in theory be cautious about how aggressively it acts in the South China Sea with many of the United States' allies and the United States potentially ready to get involved.

This examination of the four hypotheses lead to the conclusion that no single hypothesis can explain the hardening of China's actions since 2008 towards the Paracel Islands dispute in the South China Sea. Each hypothesis is interesting – even necessary – but none offer a sufficient explanation when taken individually. We thus propose a fifth hypothesis – that of *reactivity* – which sees Chinese foreign policy as primarily reactive. Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt (2013) defines the reactive approach as one “that allows Beijing to use perceived provocations as a chance to change the status quo in its favour – all the while insisting the other party started the trouble.” China's foreign policy is responsive to both internal and external factors. External

factors include the United States' meddling in South China Sea affairs and Vietnam's status quo changing actions. These two external factors act as triggers for China's reactivity. Internal factors involve the growing influence of popular nationalism in China, the constant search for resources and a lack of internal political coordination for foreign policy decisions. China is reacting to these internal factors because the latter are increasing the CCP's insecurity. This domestic insecurity creates structural conditions that will lead the external triggers to result in a reactive assertive policy. This essay seeks to incorporate elements of the four aforementioned hypotheses into a fuller explanation. Such an explanation of the newly and more often than not assertive Chinese foreign policy must be understood as an interaction between these factors and the response to these factors has grown in importance since 2008. Based on secondary sources, this essay is divided into two chapters. The first chapter is theoretical in intent: reviewing the four main theoretical approaches presented in current literature and presenting the reactive analytical framework outlined above. The second chapter is empirical: drawing on selected examples, the reactive approach will be used to explain China's growing assertiveness in the Paracel Islands dispute.

Chapter 1: Theoretical approaches

What explains China's hardened and more assertive foreign policy in the South China Sea Paracel Islands disputes since 2008? There are four theoretical approaches in the literature which seek to provide plausible accounts as to China's greater assertiveness. Each offers a way of highlighting the variation in China's actions. They are: 1) *offensive realism*, 2) *the resource quest*, 3) *nationalism*, 4) *geostrategic*. This theoretical chapter presents these four approaches and evaluates their explanatory power regarding China's shift from shelving to more frequent assertiveness in its South China Sea policy. Since these approaches taken individually are insufficient to explain the causality at the heart of this puzzle, i.e. why China is now generally more assertive, it is suggested that a comprehensive answer requires a combination of these four approaches. This new approach is labelled as the reactive approach.

The first part of this chapter will focus on a presentation and critical assessment of the four approaches highlighted in the literature. The second part of the chapter outlines the proposed reactive approach. This core argument is that there is a mix of structural factors and trigger factors that can explain China's actions, and that both domestic and international factors must be taken into consideration for a more comprehensive explanation. Indeed, the resource quest and nationalism, two approaches identified in the current literature, are integrated as structural factors in the reactive approach. The geostrategic hypothesis helps to target the trigger factors of the reactive approach. All of these factors are necessary, but not sufficient alone to explain China's growing assertiveness. In this way, the reactive approach potentially offers a better interpretation of the direct causal link leading to China's assertive actions in the Paracel Islands conflict. It is

argued that a comprehensive answer to the puzzle requires that all the factors emphasized be combined and that the causality might not be as direct as implied in the current literature. A two-step causality model will be presented, in which internal factors create a heightened sense of insecurity for the decisional actors, who will react more assertively to external trigger factors.

Literature review

1. Offensive realism hypothesis

While there are many branches of realism, offensive realism is a popular hypothesis to explain China's international behaviour. Offensive realism is advocated by John Mearsheimer, Professor at the University of Chicago. His work focuses on the power dynamics in international relations, and particularly on offensive realism, notably in his 2001 book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. The focus on realism is justified as China is generally acknowledged as being a realist power. Mearsheimer has also applied his offensive realist approach to the case of China's rise (2001; 2010). This section first reviews the offensive realism approach and then briefly examines how this theory applies to the Paracel Islands dispute.

John Mearsheimer maintains that offensive realism is the approach that can account for the dynamics of great power politics in international relations. He believes that states, the main actors in international relations, seek above all to survive. States are on a constant quest to gain power because of the anarchic international system. This anarchic setting means that other actor's intentions are unknown, and that states can only secure their survival through power (Mearsheimer 2001). States are rational actors that want to maximize their power, which, being relative, can often lead to perceived aggressive actions. Moreover, Snyder adds that for offensive

realists, there are very few status quo powers, as the “ultimate goal is to be the hegemon in the system” (2002, 152). In light of the difficulties of power projection associated with being the world hegemon, most great powers will settle to be the regional hegemon. When a state gains a great deal of power, it will necessarily increase its relative power, leading to a change in power distribution, and will be encouraged to continue its progress. Mearsheimer believes that as states become stronger, they will unavoidably want to pursue expansion and might consequently become more belligerent (Fravel 2010, 505). When states are not on the offensive, they can adopt a defensive role involving either buck-passing or balancing (Snyder 2002, 162). With regards to China, Kaplan notes that Mearsheimer has “asserted that China would pursue great power status in political and military ways much as rising powers have done throughout history” (2014, 178).

Mearsheimer (2001) predicted that China’s rise would result in two possible outcomes. The first scenario sees China’s economic development decelerating, meaning that Japan would remain the wealthiest country in the Asian region. As China overtook Japan to become the world’s second largest economy in 2010, and as of 2014, the world’s largest economy in purchasing-power-parity terms, it is important to take account of a second scenario, which is that China overtakes Japan’s economy. Mearsheimer believes that in this second scenario, China would now be capable of becoming the regional hegemon (Snyder 2002, 169), which could lead to China acting in a more assertive manner, just because it can. Similar to Mearsheimer’s notion that all states wish to increase their power, “it is well known that the achievement of ‘comprehensive national power’ is an important facet of Beijing’s grand strategy to realise its Chinese Century” (Wilkins 2010, 392). For authors such as Zhang (2013, 19), China’s assertiveness is the result of China wanting to compete with the US as the hegemon in the Asian region, especially since the global financial crisis displayed the US’s weak points. Indeed, as

realist thinkers are dominant in China and the US, the decision makers' prediction is that China's rise will lead "at a minimum to rivalry and tension, and at a maximum to a major confrontation (Buzan 2010, 23). Mearsheimer argues that as a growing power, China will not want the US to maintain its military forces active in Asia (2010, 390). As a result, in an offensive realist perspective, the US will respond by trying to contain China in order to "ultimately weaken it to the point where it is no longer a threat to rule the roost in Asia" (Mearsheimer 2010, 390). Mearsheimer (2010, 390) goes on to explain that China's neighbours will necessarily fear a rising China and will take measures in order to prevent China from obtaining too much power and become the regional hegemon. The realist approach even gives policy advice to the US noting that it should "shift from engaging China to containing it" (Snyder 2002, 169). This situation has the potential to create a security dilemma between China and the US and its allies (Wilkins 2010, 392). Realist thinkers suggest that in order to maintain a balance of powers, the US would have to keep its presence strong in the Asian region, as it would be irresponsible to let China control the Eastern hemisphere (Kaplan 2014, 176).

The disputed claims to the South China Sea make it a competitive area. In addition, the passages of the South China Sea see the passing of many military ships from different countries, making it a potentially volatile area. According to Mearsheimer, "A wealthy China would not be a status quo power but an aggressive state determined to achieve regional hegemony" (2001, 402). Realist thinkers believe that China will "pursue its interests more assertively" (Glaser 2011, 81) now that it has become the Number One economy in the world and that the 2008 financial crisis has opened up the possibility for a change in the distribution of power relative to the US. Glaser (2011, 81) explains that these realist thinkers use the example of China's recent behaviour in the East and South China Seas to support their thinking. As early as 2002, Mearsheimer (2002,

27) was convinced that China's growth would cause incidents with its Asian neighbours and that the Asian region could become a potentially dangerous security competition arena. For example, China has keenly asserted "its interpretation of maritime rights within its EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone) under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, an interpretation that seeks to limit the activities of foreign naval forces" (Fravel 2010, 518). The offensive realist view states that China will seek to become the regional hegemon of the Asia-Pacific region by controlling the South China Sea. Mearsheimer refers to the 2010 diplomatic incident when two high-ranking Chinese officials were said to have proclaimed to their US counterparts that the South China Sea was now a 'core interest', demonstrating the extents of China's new assertive behaviour (2010, 389).

China has also had an offensive realist focus, with the modernization of its military and particularly its navy. In terms of budget, "its military spending rose by 175 percent in real terms between 2003 and 2012, the largest increase for the period among the top 15 spenders" (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2013, online). Just in 2014, China announced a 12.2 percent increase of its annual defence budget compared to 2013. These spending trends have alarmed China's South East Asian neighbours. Zhang explains that many believe that China's assertiveness has "been driven by China's new naval strategy seeking to control the South China Sea due to its intention to compete with the United States for regional primacy (2013, 19). "Observers date the beginning of China's naval modernization effort to various points in the 1990s" (O'Rourke 2014, 2). China's naval focus has been widespread, ranging from education to purchasing modernized equipment. This new strategy is called the "far sea defense" which will allow China to project naval power farther than its inner seas. In Wong's view, this strategy is notably to protect shipping lanes in the Asia-Pacific and to "help secure Chinese interest in the

resource-rich South and East China Seas” (2010, online). China’s belligerent attitude could be explained by its increasing confidence because of its growing economy and military capacities (Ross 2012, 71). Wang (2011, 68) argues that it is because of China’s “enhanced position”, that its actions are becoming more assertive.

Critical assessment: The costs of assertiveness, China’s relative power

“Historically, states have fought over territory more than any other issue that divides them says Wasquez” (Fravel 2010, 506). This fact combined with a rising China, involved in a number of territorial disputes, is bound to create some concerns. Authors such as Mearsheimer contend that because of the anarchic structure of the international arena and as a rational actor, growing powers such as China will seek to extend their territorial reach to secure their position as a regional hegemon. However, Fravel (2010, 506) points out that such theories do not often take into account the costs and benefits evaluation of the rational actor if it chooses a belligerent route. Mearsheimer does concede that great powers are rational and will therefore only expand if the situation permits (Snyder 2002, 153). In China’s case, it can be argued both ways. On the one hand, the balance of power has tilted since the 2008 financial crisis and China’s economy and military have grown continuously. On the other hand, China has much to lose if it adopts overly assertive behaviour. A more belligerent China could push its Asian neighbours to rally with the US to counter balance China. For example, Glaser, when referring to China, points to the warming of relations between the US and India as a sign that “the cycle of assertiveness and balancing has already begun” (2011, 81). As a rational power, China would not want to take the chance of pushing all its neighbours into the arms of the US and risk being encircled in the South China Sea.

China's cumulated capacities have the possibility of "fuelling the already existent security dilemma in the US-China relations" (Shambaugh 2011, 25). Many authors have pointed out that China's military capacities are still relatively weak compared to the US. China's main weakness is its low power projection capabilities. "China's ability to seize and control territory from other states also remains limited, constrained largely by the lack of robust strategic lift capabilities to deploy and sustain troops beyond its borders" (Fravel 2010, 509). The US still operates the world's most powerful navy with the capacity to sustain a military presence on the other side of the world, including Asia. As emphasized by Crisher & Souva, "the United States' position as the world's dominant naval power remains secure and will be for quite some time" (2014, 603). Moreover, while China is a nuclear power, Lanteigne (2013, 3) explains that China is still far behind the US and some parts of Asia when it comes to conventional weaponry. Therefore, China is still not in a position where it could challenge US power in the Asian seas (Ross 2013, 73). Since China is a rational power, it becomes harder using the offensive realism approach to explain China's greater assertiveness in the South China Sea. Territorial conflicts are also very costly. For the CCP, whose legitimacy rests so much on guaranteeing China's continuous economic growth, it might seem very risky to simply pursue territorial expansion because it is more powerful than before.

Another interesting point put forward by Fravel (2011), and reiterated by Kaplan (2014), is that an accumulation of power can also have the reverse effect to that anticipated by offensive realists. As China accumulates power, it might feel less threatened and therefore not feel the need to employ assertive behaviour to ensure its dominance, as the possession of power alone would be a big enough deterrent. "The very build-up of military power by China means that paradoxically China can wait and not use force" (Kaplan 2014, 178). For example, Fravel (2011,

314) says that, historically, China has not been keen to use force to settle territorial disputes with weaker neighbours. In line with these actions, China has been promoting a peaceful rise showing that it can integrate into the international system by complying with the World Trade Organization regulations and participating in discussions over the South China Sea with the ASEAN countries for example. The offensive realist approach cannot explain the fact that China has been cooperative regarding many territorial conflicts while continuing to gain power. “China has generally not seized or conquered large amounts of land that it did not control before the outbreak of hostilities” (Fravel 2010, 507) when it comes to territorial conflicts in the past years. The offensive realist approach only seeks answers from interstate relations and misses key domestic elements that have a direct effect on the CCP’s decision-making process with regard to the South China Sea. Furthermore, it is not a satisfactory explanation that China would become assertive simply because it has become more powerful.

2. The resource quest hypothesis

Zweig & Jianhai (2005), Hatemi & Wedeman (2007) and Li (2010) have pointed to or predicted a link between China’s need for resources and the adoption of assertive behaviour in the South China Sea. Over the past decades, China has been dealing with a combination of rapidly shifting demographics and an intensifying need for resources. The multitude of resources available in proximity in the maritime region could explain why China is more assertively trying to guard the region. The logic behind this approach is based on the theory of lateral pressure. Nazli Choucri and Robert C. North (1975) developed the theory of lateral pressure in order to explain why states looked to expand their capacity and influence abroad (Fravel 2010, 513). Choucri wanted to “illustrate how low politics, such as population, resources or technology,

could be transformed into high politics” (2014). In other words, Choucri wanted to demonstrate that domestic factors (*low politics*), such as a growing population could directly shape a country’s foreign policy (*high politics*). Her collaboration with Robert C. North led them to define lateral pressure as “the propensity of states to expand behaviour and exert leverage outside territorial boundaries” (Choucri 2012, 25). A state facing high levels of growth in the economic, demographic and technological sectors will be more likely to turn its attention to new territories for the required resources as a way to respond to the demands associated with its growth. Depending on the type of development, this could lead the state in question to be more aggressive or cooperative in the international domain.

Choucri (1976) unpacks the causal logic by observing that the combination of growing demographics and technological advancement lead to increasing popular pressure on the state for more resources for development. The demographic and technological factors encourage the population to be more politically active and make it easier to apply pressure on their government. “The greater the pressures, the higher is the likelihood that national activities will be extended outside of territorial boundaries” (Choucri 1976, 82). Furthermore, Choucri explains that if two countries with high capacity and increasing pressure have intense intersecting interests, the “greater the chance that competition will assume military dimensions” (1976, 82). The three actors in the Paracel Island disputes do fit this bill to a certain degree since they are all facing high stakes. China is developing its capacity and is facing increasing pressure to expand. The United States is the world power with the most military capacity and will not want to lose free international passage through the South China Sea. Vietnam’s capacity is not comparable to the two other nations, but it has always been known as a combative country and feels considerable pressure to protect its coastal rights since these rights impact greatly on its economy.

Choucri and North do not distinguish countries based on their political systems. The theorists divide states depending on their demographic movement, technological advance and access to resources. The countries subject to high-lateral-pressure are *Alphas*, *Betas* and *Gammas*. *Alpha* countries have “populations, technologies, and resource accesses that are large and advancing commensurately” (Choucri, North & Yamakage 1992, 14). This forces them to look outward “in pursuit of economic, political, and strategic security [...] such countries may be expected to extend trade, diplomatic activities, and strategic ‘defenses’ further and further beyond their original boundaries” (Choucri, North & Yamakage 1992, 14). *Beta* countries possess a rising population and progressing technology, but limited domestic resources and/or trade capacities. This type of nation will put pressure on its government to increase trade opportunities or to expand its territory. *Gamma* states have a dense population, technological progress and access to resources through trade networks. *Delta* states, which have low demographic numbers and advanced technological capacities “seem to fight the fewest wars” (Cashman 1993, 197). Finally, there are “the world’s low-capability societies” (Choucri, North & Yamakage 1992, 16), the developing states divided into the *Epsilons*, *Zetas*, and *Etas*, which are not as subjected to lateral-pressure and are therefore fight in fewer wars according to Choucri & North’s theory (Cashman 1993, 197). As Fravel notes: “states most likely to face high levels of lateral pressure and pursue expansion are the *Alpha* states with large populations experiencing rapid economic growth and industrialization” (2010, 513) and because alpha states already have access to some resources, they are in a better position to be assertive internationally than *Beta* states, and they have a more urgent need for resources than *Gamma* nations. Fravel (2010, 513) argues that China appears to be a good fit as an *Alpha* state under the lateral-pressure theory. China has a booming population and a rapidly advancing technological sector and possesses resources. However, it must expand its supply of resources to keep up with its rapidly expanding economy. In particular,

China has to focus on securing vital resources, such as petrol and food supplies, in order to alleviate popular pressure.

An econometric analysis allows Choucri and North to formulate a number of key propositions:

(1) There are complex causal links among indicators of national growth and indicators of external expansion and violent behaviour; (2) Population growth and technological developments contribute to military capability: the relation is positive, causal, and direct; (3) the higher the budgetary allocation to the military, the greater appear to be the expansionist tendencies of nations and the more violent the intersections among their spheres of influence; (4) National growth, increasing military expenditures, and greater intersections among spheres of influence contribute to more violent international behaviour (Choucri 1976, 86).

Following Choucri and North's causal logic on the link between "national growth and international violence" (Choucri 1976, 86), it could be concluded that China's rising technological advance and parallel population growth have played a part in expanding the country's military capacity. The need for resources combined with an increasing military budget allocation have prompted China to be more assertive in its international behaviour.

Critical assessment: Uncertain and diversified resources and questioned causality

The first reason why the theory of lateral pressure cannot provide a full explanation is that it is not powerful enough to alone explain China's increasingly regular assertive actions. Authors such as McHale believe that it is erroneous that "most analysts assume that resources, especially oil and gas, lie at the heart of most claims to the South China Sea" (2014, 2). The quantities of oil and gas in the region have never been officially confirmed. While according to some, there seems to be potential for great resource reserves, others, such as the USGS survey, state that the "proven reserves are estimated to be only 2% of those in Saudi Arabia" in 2009 (Fravel 2010, 514). It

would make it difficult to justify China's entire assertiveness on an uncertain claim to resources. China has also been making an effort to diversify its supplies of natural resources (Buszynski 2012, 141), meaning that the country is not solely dependent on the South China Sea reserves. China has been very active in diversifying its sources as a strategy to reinforce its resource security. Different areas have been targeted, such as Africa and South America. "Unlike Imperial Japan, it is not bereft of resources to the point that it is driven to minimize its dependence through expansion" (Goldstein 2011, 82). Fravel, supporting the overemphasis of the resource quest hypothesis for China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, goes on to explain that China's oil imports "only account for about 10% of China's overall energy consumption" (2010, 513).

Cashman feels that "lateral approaches to war have now been largely abandoned as unproductive" (2004, 197). Cashman rightly emphasizes that this theory provides an incomplete argument to explain the source of conflict, as "there is no strong empirical evidence that such scarcities have been at the root of interstate wars in the last several centuries [but that] resource scarcities may well be an important factor in causing internal strife within states" (2004, 198). Indeed, China is not so resource barren that the resource quest could explain fully its more frequent assertive actions in the South China Sea disputes. But the resource quest should be examined as a factor in its greater assertiveness. The resource quest hypothesis has the advantage of looking inwards for factors that might have an effect on international behaviour. However, by only searching internally for explanatory factors, important international dynamics are overlooked. In the Paracel Islands dispute, the causality does not seem to be as direct as suggested by the resources quest approach. Instead of looking at this hypothesis as a direct outward looking factor (China needs resources → therefore China is more assertive), it could act as an internal structural condition affecting the CCP decision-making process. This avenue will

be explored in the analytical framework presented later in this chapter, in order to show that the causal link of the resource quest hypothesis is different than its original framing in the literature.

3. The nationalist hypothesis

The nationalist hypothesis, as explored by Prizel (1998), Chen (2005), Holbig & Gilley (2010), Hughes (2011) and Zhao (2013), supports the idea that nationalism is a determinant of foreign policy. For Stephen M. Walt (2011, online), “nationalism is the ‘most powerful political force in the world because [Nations] operate in a competitive and sometimes dangerous world – seek to preserve their identities and cultural values’”. The concept of nationalism still appears to be quite elusive when it comes to pinpointing a common definition or theorizing about its explanatory power. It is defined as: “(1) the attitude that the members of a nation have when they care about their national identity, and (2) the actions that the members of a nation take when seeking to achieve (or sustain) self-determination” (*The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 2014).

Nationalism can be generated from top-down, by the government and the elite, as a way to promote specific ideals within the population, or bottom-up, through grass-roots movements with common ideals. With regards to foreign policy, the top-down approach can help rally the population around a state’s foreign policy decisions. The bottom-up approach can allow the population to influence decision-makers on international issues. While nationalism can have several variants, such as positive nationalism or pragmatic nationalism, Prizel (1998, 19) stresses that a common factor regarding nationalism and foreign policy is that “all countries frequently use national identity to articulate their foreign policies and, in turn, rely on foreign policy as a

foundation of their legitimacy”. The author illustrates that it is advantageous for a modern state to promote nationalism “because having a loyal and united population that is willing to sacrifice (and in extreme cases, to fight and die) for the state increases its power and thus its ability to deal with external threats” (Prizel 1998, 19). The causal link between rising nationalist sentiment and assertive foreign policy has been explored empirically with many examples. These include the case of Russian nationalism spilling over to induce assertive foreign policy leading to the Russia-Georgia War and the case of Chinese nationalism and the South China Sea disputes. The rationale supporting these cases is that an increasingly nationalistic population will exert pressure on its state to ensure that the state acts in a way which represents them and their ideals. If the general sentiment is anger or extreme pride, this translates into the state’s foreign policy being more assertive and less compromising.

Hughes (2011, 601) explains that nationalism has been widely studied by China scholars since the CCP’s patriotic turn after the 1989 Tiananmen massacres. Most Western observers view China’s growing popular nationalism in a negative light (Chen 2005, 35), believing that it will lead to diminishing cooperation and rising aggressiveness. It is true, as stated by Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro, that Chinese popular nationalism is “driven by nationalist sentiment, a yearning to redeem the humiliations of the past, and the simple urge for international power, China is seeking to replace the United States as the dominant power in Asia” (Chen 2005, 35). Chinese nationalism is linked to a constant desire to redeem past humiliations through China’s rising capacities. Gries (1999, 66) points out that historically “Chinese anger has at times been strong enough to action in cases of foreign policy”. Scholars therefore believe that increased Chinese popular nationalism, which most often translates into spikes of pride or anger, definitely has the power to affect foreign policy in reflecting those same sentiments. Even a long-time

China scholar such as Edward Friedman admitted the far reach of nationalism and its potential impact on assertiveness: “the new, post-Mao nationalism in China not only challenges Taiwan’s autonomy, it also could endanger peace in the Pacific–Asia region” (Chen 2005, 35-36). Holbig & Gilley (2010, 403) describe how spikes of popular nationalism can drastically decrease the CCP’s range of possible tactics when it comes to foreign policy. Moreover, it can encourage Beijing to be less compromising when it comes to dealing with the international community (Christensen 2011, 62).

Critical assessment: The CCP decision-making process

According to the nationalist hypothesis, a popular national sentiment that is aggressive can push a country’s foreign policy in the same direction. In the case of China, not only has popular nationalism been on the rise but there has also been a growing interest in the movement’s influence on foreign policy actions, including towards the South China Sea. The CCP and the popular nationalist movement share the view regarding actions in the South China Sea that “compromise is not in their national interest” (Raine 2011, 69). While the rise of popular nationalism could help explain China’s higher levels of assertiveness in the Paracel Island dispute, it is nonetheless important not to overestimate the direct influence of popular nationalism on the CCP’s policy decisions. Indeed, the CCP still retains full decision-making authority on all Chinese foreign policy choices. The Party is fully aware of the dangers associated with excessive nationalism, as “it could breed more public frustration and created more pressure on the government if its policies fail to deliver immediately” (Wan 2011, 79). Jessica Chen Weiss takes this cost into account as well, noting that “nationalist protest is especially risky because it has the potential to shake the foundation of state legitimacy, particularly regimes relying on nationalist mythmaking to bolster their popular credential” (2013, 5), as is the case for the CCP. To allow

popular nationalism too much direct influence could therefore affect the CCP's legitimacy by disrupting domestic stability and could make it harder for the Party to manage its relations with foreign powers. Zhang thinks that higher levels of popular nationalism are not enough to "fully explain the specific manners in which China has more forcefully asserted its claims in recent years" (2013, 19). The government remains prudent when dealing with "inflammatory remarks found in the media and on the Web sites" (Wang 2011, 79), demonstrating that the CCP is paying attention to spiked in popular nationalism, but is not categorically responsive to its demands. While the rise of popular nationalism cannot directly explain China's growing assertiveness in the Paracel Islands dispute, it is an important factor in elucidating the puzzle of greater Chinese assertiveness. Increased nationalism undeniably has a direct effect on the CCP's sense of legitimacy and therefore security, depending on whether they share the same foreign policy goals. Nationalism acts as an element in the decisional equation, acting not as directly on the foreign policy actions, but weighing in as a consideration in decision-making.

4. The geostrategic hypothesis

Advocates of a geostrategic approach (Lieberthal & Wang 2012, Ross 2012 & Lanteigne 2013) believe that it is the strategic choices made by the states involved in the South China Sea disputes that are responsible for encouraging the CCP's more assertive actions. In South China Sea studies, and specifically the Paracel Islands conflict, scholars point to the United States as the main actor influencing China's increasing boldness. Two main trends support the importance of investigating the geostrategic hypothesis. First, the CCP believes that the 2008 financial crisis has altered the balance of power between the US and China, encouraging China to assert itself in its region. Second, China is acting in a bolder manner because of a perception of a heightened

security threat caused by the US's renewed attention in the Asia-Pacific region. The geostrategic choices that could play into China's greater perception of threat, we include, for instance, alliances signed between the US and Asia-Pacific actors and official statements. Paradoxically, the balance of power and the US's attention to the South China Sea dispute tend provoke opposite initial reactions from China: one incites confidence while the other incites fear, but both lead to the same result, greater assertiveness.

The balance of power concept is based on "the relative distribution of power among states into equal or unequal shares" (Griffiths, O'Callaghan & Roach 2014, 19). It assumes that an unbalanced power is dangerous and that is why states will seek to restore balance through alliances or by increasing their capacity. The South China Sea region, more generally, and the Paracel Island disputes, in particular, fit the conditions of a balance of power system as enumerated by Griffiths, O'Callaghan & Roach (2014, 20). These include: "1) a multiplicity of sovereign states unconstrained by any legitimate central authority; 2) continuous but controlled competition over scarce resources or conflicting values; 3) an unequal distribution of status, wealth, and power potential among the political actors that make up the system". Vietnam, the United States and China are all sovereign states of unequal capacity, competing for the control of the Paracel Islands and their adjacent seas. The causal logic behind the shifting power balance declares that as China gains confidence, it will have less incentive to be cooperative and more reason to be assertive. The result of this causal logic is quite similar to the offensive realist perspective, the difference being the initial intent. For offensive realism, China is consciously seeking to maximize its power and shift the power balance in its favour, whereas for the geostrategic approach, China is acting on an opportunity where the power balance has shifted because of external factors, in this case, the US's economic hardships. China's rise in power will

encourage neighbouring states to play alliance games against China, which will make the CCP feel insecure and incite forceful behaviour.

A balance of power system will encourage states to achieve equilibrium, often by balancing “against” a rising power that is destabilizing the system, as an unbalanced system creates an insecure environment. This gives rise to three possible strategies. First, states can apply a *containment* strategy in order to halt the destabilizing influence of a rising power. Lee, for example, believes that the US should “contain the potential threat associated with China’s speed-up military build-up and Beijing’s pursuit of the great power status” (2014, 6). A potential power would be very alert to containment strategies. A rising state would use assertiveness against any actions perceived as hindering its growth. A second possible strategy is *encirclement*. China is surrounded by states that have alignments with each other or with the United States. For example, the United States has had long-standing agreements with South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan and Australia. Wirth explains that the dangers associated with a state leadership that is feeling encircled and isolated is “more assertiveness, aggressiveness even [and that] leaders will be prone to miscalculations because they can’t see the overall situation” (2014, online). A third popular strategy is *hedging*, a policy stemming from uncertainty where “a state spreads its risk by pursuing two opposite policies which are contradictory: balancing and engagement” (Hemmings 2013). This confounding strategy makes it difficult to foresee states’ actions and, in China’s case, perpetuates uncertainty in the region.

China’s growing insecurity due to a heightened perception of threat in the South China Sea is the second dimension of the geostrategic hypothesis. This is arguably due to the United States’ renewed asserted interest in the region. The presence of another power in the region will

necessarily heighten China's insecurity. When a country feels threatened, it will be suspicious and act in a more precipitous manner. An insecure state will employ assertive actions if it can in order to protect itself and its assets. As stated by Raymond Cohen (1978, 93): "threat perception is the decisive intervening variable between action and reaction in international crisis". Lieberthal and Wang (2012, 7) maintain that the Beijing leadership believe that it is because of the US's actions in the Asian region that there is continuing distrust between the two powers. This contributes to elevating China's national threat perception and insecurity, leading to more assertive actions. The US's increasing interest and presence in the Asia-Pacific region makes the CCP feel insecure. To have the US presence and attention in its backyard leads the CCP to sanction more assertive actions to accentuate China's influence in the Asian region.

Critical assessment: Uncertain power balance shift, partnerships and the US's track record

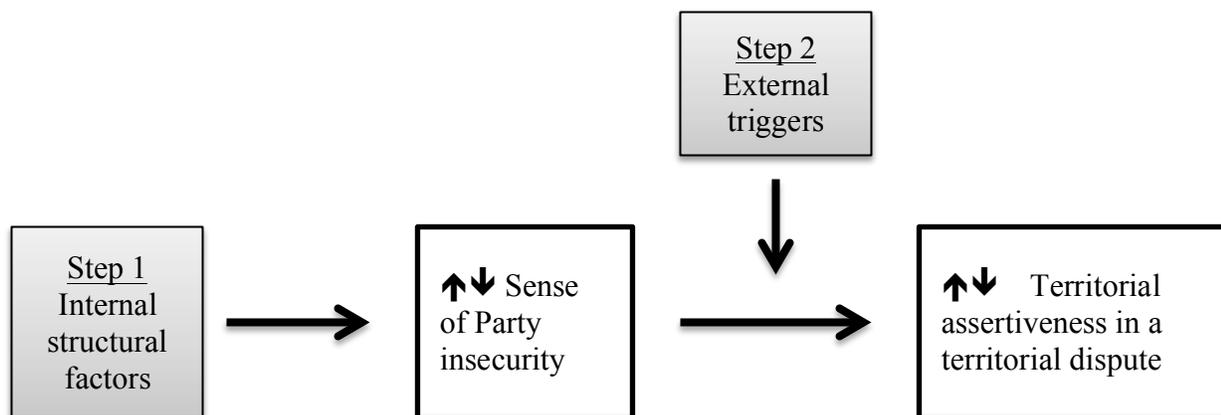
Many factors suggest that the geostrategic hypothesis alone cannot explain China's growing assertiveness. First, there are many uncertainties tied to the power balance concept. Johnston raises this point, reminding readers that there is "an ongoing debate as to how much power has shifted between the United States and China, and what advantages this created for China" (2013, 35). While the shift in power balance since 2008 is often referred to, it might actually be promoted by the Chinese leadership or hard-core popular nationalists as a way to justify assertive actions in the South China Sea. Second, China has been focusing on its economic development for the past decades. Thus, many efforts have been made on China's part to create partnerships with the United States, Japan and ASEAN states. Fravel states: "the United States and China have gone to great lengths to manage bilateral tensions and prevent them from spiralling out of control" (2014, 107). The author gives the example of the 2012 incident when a compromise was reached between the US and China regarding Chen Guangcheng, the Chinese

activist who took refuge in the US embassy in China (Fravel 2014, 107). China has also been trying to promote the image of a peaceful and cooperative rising power for the past two decades, and has engaged in a charm offensive, especially towards its Asian neighbours (Raine 2011, 69). China's charm offensive policies, including engagement in regional organizations and political and economic bilateral cooperation efforts with countries such as Vietnam and Japan, have led to a "growing perception that China is a status quo power" (Shambaugh 2005, 24). Hence, it would not be fully rational in a geostrategic sense to risk the consequences of greater assertiveness because of a perceived power shift. China's assertiveness justified by the power balance might also risk pushing the South Asian countries towards the US, thus encouraging them to cooperate in a hedging, encircling or containing strategy against China. Finally, as regards the US's presence and strategies in the South China Sea, threat perception can allocate motive incorrectly. The CCP has to carefully assess the US's behaviour, as a rational actor. Looking at recent history, the CCP might judge it quite unlikely that the US would intervene in the Paracel Island disputes. For example, the US did not react when China demonstrated assertiveness in seizing control of the Scarborough Shoal in 2012, related to the Spratly Islands dispute (Sun 2014, 2). It is consequently difficult to justify that the US's sole presence in the Asia Pacific region alone can explain China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea. This approach is not a sufficient explanation as it posits a direct causality between geostrategic considerations and China's assertiveness in the Paracels. It is therefore necessary to look at other factors, including domestically, to understand how the US's greater shift to the Asia-Pacific region might be related to more assertive actions from China.

Analytical framework

The four contending approaches presented in the literature (*offensive realist, resource quest, nationalist and geostrategic*) cannot satisfactorily answer the question: What explains China's hardened and more assertive foreign policy in the South China Sea Paracel Islands dispute since 2008? These hypotheses, however, do suggest possible elements of an explanation of the change in Chinese behaviour. The second part of this chapter argues that to fully grasp China's actions in the Paracel Islands dispute, it is important to look at both domestic and international factors and, that the CCP's behaviour in the South China Sea is best explained by a reactive approach. The CCP is exhibiting more assertiveness as a result of its reactions to both internal structural factors and external trigger factors. Domestic factors are creating an insecure environment for the CCP's political legitimacy. These internal structural factors generate an environment conducive for China to react more aggressively to external trigger factors (see Figure 1). We first review the three main concepts that characterize the reactive approach (realism, the CCP and security studies) and then provide an overview of the proposed analytical framework that will be further developed in the case of the Paracel Islands in the second chapter.

Figure 1: Analytical framework



1. Concepts

Three foundation blocks must be established in order to ascertain the thinking behind the reactive approach. The first notion is that China follows realist logic. Indeed, China's foreign policy decision makers act according to a realist conception of international relations. Buzan (2010), Shambaugh (2011) and Zhao (2013) consider that realists are at the helm of China's foreign policy. As Shambaugh (2011, 12) explains, the CCP regards states as the core decisional actors, the international theatre is understood as being anarchic and state sovereignty is the prime objective of all rational actors. China's commitment to defending national sovereignty has even emerged as a policy declaration in 2003 under the banner of "core interests". The core interests include: "upholding our basic systems, our national security; the sovereignty and territorial integrity; and economic and sustained development" (Xinhua News Agency 2011). This core interest diplomacy has been applied to regions that China defines as de facto Chinese territory, including Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet. Chinese officials reportedly articulated to US dignitaries in 2010 that the core interest label had been extended to include the South China Sea (Stares 2013). While this statement was not confirmed or denied by the CCP directly, the government has since reiterated its unquestionable sovereignty over the South China Sea. The unofficial claim nevertheless has had the effect of increasing fears among China's neighbours. Furthermore, China has recently placed greater focus on modernizing its army, another distinguishing realist trait - the prominence of hard power. The official Chinese military budget figures, and unofficial numbers which are expected to be higher, illustrate China's unyielding devotion to its military growth. In 2014, analysts observed that China's military budget has seen "double-digit increases almost every year for the past two decades, and now the biggest in three years" (*The Economist* 2014). In Shambaugh's view, a combination of factors, including China's fast economic recovery after the 2008 financial crisis, have paved the way to "an increasingly realist, narrowly self-

interested nation, seeking to maximize its own comprehensive power” since 2009 (2011, 24). As a realist power, China has been basing its foreign policy decisions on its relative power in the international power dynamics (Zhao 2013, 545).

Second, the realist setting implies that the analysis must focus on understanding perceptions at the level of the state. When analyzing China’s foreign policy, the state is inseparable from the Chinese Communist Party, the core political decisional unit. The CCP’s main objective is to maintain successfully its one-party rule. To achieve this objective, the Party needs to ensure its relevance in a context where communist values are declining. The 1989 “troubles” “exhibited the internal legitimacy problem faced by the CCP leadership” (Chen 2005, 48). To ensure its domestic legitimacy, the CCP has accentuated the importance of its role as stabilizer of internal discord, promised impressive economic growth, improved living conditions and projected powerful image of a country respected internationally. The then state councillor for external relations, Dai Bingguo, emphasized the CCP’s role in China’s foreign relations, by first ensuring “China’s political stability, namely, the stability of the CCP leadership and of the socialist system; second, sovereign security, territorial integrity and national unification; and third, China’s sustainable economic and social development” (Wang 2011, 71). It can be considered that the CCP’s preeminent concern is its own survival. Cabestan (2009, 64) explains that foreign policy decisions are usually highly centralized, shared within leading CCP bodies that are all presided by the Chinese supreme leader. Since Jiang Zemin’s period as China’s leader, the Party Secretary has had most of the control over foreign policy issues, “due to what Chinese political scientists call the three in one principle [where] since 1989, the CCP General Secretary has held the CMC [Central Military Commission] chairmanship and – since 1993 – the PRC presidency” (Cabestan 2009, 69). As the CCP is the main decisional unit when it comes to

foreign and domestic policy, it is inevitable that one component can affect the other. Therefore, it is worthwhile to look at both domestic and international factors in order to better understand China's decisional mindset regarding its international actions.

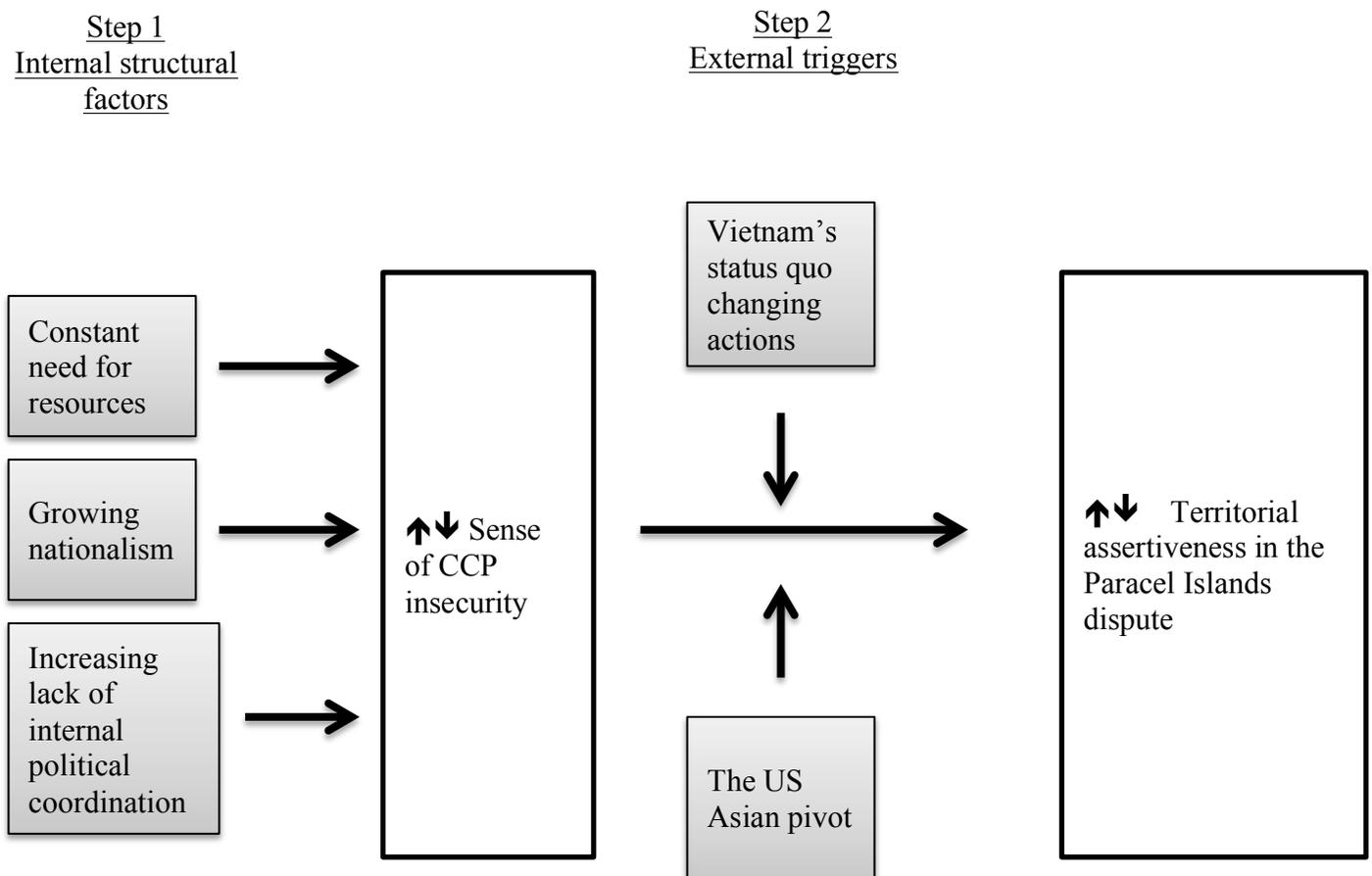
Finally, the reactive approach is based on a security studies perspective. Traditional security studies emphasize that a country's level of security is based on its military and economic capacity. There are many different definitions of security. In general, security is understood as safety, which for some is "order and predictability in our relations with others" (Jackson-Preece 2011, 15). Another accepted definition of security is proposed by Arnold Wolfers (1962): "Security, in an objective sense, measures the absence of threats to acquired values, in a subjective sense, the absence of fear that such values will be attacked" (Brauch 2005, 8-9). Insecurity occurs when a state perceives a threat. According to Haftendorn, Keohane, and Wallander, "threat is the simplest and most obvious of all security problems" (1999, 2). Security threats will arise "when a state (or a group of states) has both the intention and capacity to circumscribe the security of another state" (1999, 2). Threats are quite difficult to assess, as they are often subjective. In China's case, the State will most likely feel threatened if one of its core interests is at play and especially if it affects the survival of the CCP. The factors proposed in the reactive approach all bring out an element of uncertainty and feed into the CCP's perception of threat. China's assertiveness could be the CCP reacting to what it perceives as serious threats.

2. Factors

The reactive hypothesis seeks a more complete understanding of China's behaviour in the Paracel Islands dispute. In the light of the literature review and having identified the CCP as the

decisional actor, it becomes clear that although the CCP has a realist view of international relations, it is influenced by both internal and external factors. The internal structural factors include a constant need for resources, increased popular nationalism and lack of internal political coordination. These act as structural factors which heighten the CCP's sense of insecurity domestically. The environment is therefore conducive for China to react more aggressively to external trigger factors (see Figure 2), such as Vietnam and the US engaging in actions likely to disrupt the status quo.

Figure 2: A reactive approach to the Paracel Islands dispute



Internal Factors

Two of the internal factors identified in the reactive approach stem from the hypotheses identified in the literature review above, namely the resource quest hypothesis and the nationalist hypothesis. China's growing need for resources is not a sufficient factor to explain its assertive behaviour in the Paracel Islands conflict, but it does reveal a facet of the CCP's vulnerability. Since much of the CCP's legitimacy is based on its ability to ensure a strong and growing economy, it must be able to provide readily available resources. The constant need for resources stemming from a booming economy and growing population creates a great deal of pressure on the CCP and increases its own feeling of insecurity if it cannot satisfy these demands. The causal logic of the resource factor therefore does not lead directly to China's more assertive actions, but the need for resources does increase the decisional actor's sense of insecurity which, combined with other factors, can lead to greater assertiveness.

The nationalist factor is derived from the nationalist hypothesis. The CCP's main pillar of legitimacy used to rest on its communist ideology, but with the opening of the Chinese market-economy, the CPP has turned to nationalism as its promulgated core values. Chinese nationalism has been used as a tool to legitimize the party, but the past decade has seen a rise in popular nationalism, which is not generated by the elite but by the population. This can increase the CCP's feeling of insecurity as it has the potential of loosening its control because nationalism is no longer exclusively a party tool. Waves of popular nationalism can also lead to increased criticism of the CCP. As with the resource quest hypothesis, the nationalist hypothesis cannot alone explain the CPP's tendency towards bolder behaviour in the Paracel Islands dispute, but it once again conditions the CPP's sense of insecurity which in turn, can explain its assertive

international behaviour in conjunction with other factors. The causality is once again more indirect and complex than the explanation offered by the nationalist approach.

The third factor is the increasing lack of internal political coordination. This factor does not stem from one of the distinct hypotheses presented above, but is referred to in the literature by authors such as Cabestan (2009), Christensen (2011), Yahuda (2013) and Wang & Wang (2014). There has been a strong push towards the professionalization and growth of the army. This has prompted the army and its elites to act more independently on certain issues. Moreover, several different units within the State are active in the South China Sea and they might be responsible for more assertive actions in the region. The decentralization of certain powers combined with the absence of a tangible grand strategy for the Paracel Islands are making it harder for the CCP's core political decisional unit to control all of its various actors' actions. This has the effect of increasing insecurity among the CCP's core decision makers because of the lack of coordination. There is a high potential for loss of control over the different actors, thus exacerbating CCP insecurity.

The combination of these three internal factors has created structural conditions in which the CCP feels more vulnerable because of an atmosphere of insecurity. Indeed, the CCP's political legitimacy is linked to pragmatic objectives (Zhu 2011, 124). This type of legitimacy, called performance legitimacy, "means that the government relies on accomplishing concrete goals such as economic growth, social stability, and national unity, to retain its legitimacy" (Zhu 2011, 124). Since the 2008 financial crisis, the need to consolidate resource flows has come to the forefront, the spikes in popular nationalism have accentuated and the lack of coordination of South China Sea actors have all made it harder for the CCP to accomplish its performance

legitimacy objectives, therefore increasing its sense of insecurity. If the CCP's legitimacy and hold on power are vulnerable, the Party might react more strongly to external trigger factors as a way to assert itself both internationally and domestically. Its strong stance on the international scene is a way to secure its position internally.

External factors

Two external factors are derived from the geostrategic hypothesis reviewed in the first part of this chapter. The geostrategic approach looks at China's regional actors and how their actions might trigger China's bold behaviour in the Paracel Islands dispute. The Islands dispute involves two official actors, China (including Taiwan for the purposes of this study) and Vietnam, as well as an unofficial but ever present actor, the United States. By observing both, Vietnam and the US, their influence on China's actions in the South China Sea can be detected. Indeed, the CCP's feeling of insecurity is already heightened because of internal structural factors, and the US's and Vietnam's actions trigger China's higher assertiveness because of the perception of a direct threat that they trigger.

The United States' desire for a stronger presence in the South China Sea is the first external factor that has an influence on CCP decision makers. As China is attempting to better consolidate its presence as the regional power in Asia, the US has publicly renewed its interest in the South China Sea region, constituting a direct threat for China. If the CCP is already feeling increased insecurity because of structural internal conditions, official statements about the South China Sea that potentially change the status quo or military actions in the region will be perceived as direct threats to China and can lead to more assertive behaviour. By acting

assertively, China signals its dominating presence in Asia and, to domestic audiences, appears strong against the US.

Vietnamese actions that potentially change the status quo represent the second external factor. Even if Vietnam does not have equal power capacities vis-à-vis China, the CCP can still perceive certain actions as threats if they have the potential to alter the status quo. As Kao Weimin notes: “Vietnam has often displayed a hard-line attitude on the South China Sea territorial issue, and also displayed resolve that it does not shrink from fighting over the islands there” (Luttwak 2012, 166). Given the CCP’s already vulnerable feelings, status quo changing actions on the part of Vietnam, including alliances with other countries or official declarations, can be perceived as threatening and encourage an assertive reaction.

Conclusion

China’s actions in the Paracel Islands can thus serve a double purpose. To its adversaries, assertive actions demonstrate its power and its resolve to not compromise. To its population, assertive actions internationally can help its legitimacy by validating its ability to defend the country’s claims. The reactive approach, outlined in this chapter and characterized its two-step model, allows for a clearer understanding of how domestic factors and external factors act differently. They intervene at different moments, but are both necessary to elucidate the puzzle of China’s growing assertiveness in the Paracel Islands dispute since 2008. The second chapter of this essay will explore this case.

Chapter 2: Empirical explanation

The previous chapter argued that, rather than focusing on one particular factor, as is advocated by the *offensive realist*, *resource quest*, *nationalist* and *geostrategic* theoretical approaches, the explanation of China's more assertive foreign policy in the South China Sea Paracel Islands dispute since 2008 requires a more inclusive approach. The reactive approach offers an alternative, integrating both internal and external factors and placing the CCP at the centre of the analysis. The first part of this empirical chapter briefly explores the recent history of China's foreign policy and the Paracel Islands dispute. The second part applies the two-step reactive approach outlined in the preceding chapter. Each factor's causal logic will be reviewed and illustrated with examples.

Contextual setting: A brief history of Chinese foreign policy and of the Paracel Islands dispute

After three plus decades of socialist economic planning China shifted its economic priority to the development of a market economy in the 1980s and 1990s under Deng Xiaoping's governance. International issues were largely relegated to the backburner. China's focus was its economic development, which required resources and trade with foreign countries, encouraging Deng to build peaceful international relations. Deng was quoted as summarizing his approach in the following way: "Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership"

(Brzezinski 2009, 56). Deng implemented a strategy where conflicts, territorial included, would be shelved and dealt with at a later time in order to promote good economic relations. Jiang Zemin, General Secretary of the CPC until 2002, opted to continue promoting Deng's dictum. Under Hu Jintao's leadership (2002-2012), China advanced a new concept, that of "peaceful rise", in order to calm its neighbours' worries regarding China's skyrocketing economic development. Emphasis was still placed on the importance of economic development and this concept demonstrated the CCP's understanding of the costs associated with belligerent behaviour (Fravel 2010, 511). Diverting from the peaceful development dictum, China has displayed more consistent assertiveness regarding the South China Sea since the 2008 global financial crisis. Many authors (Christensen 2011, Shambaugh 2011, Luttwak 2012, Ross 2012, Zhao 2013) share this view, pointing to a stronger military presence in the seas, blunt official statements and brash actions, which were not often seen before the 2008 economic crisis.

In the case of Vietnam, it has always been a combative nation. For centuries, the country's history has been marked by its resistance against China, both during imperial times and the more recent border wars. "Vietnamese fear of China is profound precisely because Vietnam cannot escape from the embrace of its gargantuan northern neighbour, whose population is fifteen times that of Vietnam" (Kaplan 2014, 56). Vietnam simply refuses to be engulfed by China, with the looming memory of the tribute system that dominated the China-Vietnam relationship for so many years. Vietnam's national identity is particular in the sense that it was shaped "through and in opposition to Chinese influence" (Kaplan 2014, 57). Kaplan (2014, 67) further notes that Vietnamese nationalism is specifically aggressive towards China. Vietnam continues to adamantly claim the Paracels, even if China has occupied the western part since a brief battle in 1974.

The entire South China Sea, including its islands and resources, is claimed by both Vietnam and China. Vietnam's claims rest on historical precepts, including maps and writings dating from the imperial era, maintaining "the position that the 'Feudal Vietnamese State' had effectively controlled the [Paracel and Spratly archipelagos] since the 17th Century" (Nguyen & Amer 2007, 306). In addition, Hanoi stresses that during the Japan peace treaty signing on September 7th 1951, no parties then objected when they stated their official claims: "And as we must frankly profit from all the opportunities offered to us to stifle the germs of discord, we affirm our right to the Spratly and Paracel islands, which has always belonged to Vietnam" (Chiu & Park 1975, 8). China's official claims, which are illustrated by its nine-dashed line maps, date back more than 60 years and are also based on historical precepts. With regard to the Paracel Islands, Yahuda points to China's "first formal claim to sovereignty over islands in the South China sea in 1951 in response to the peace treaty negotiations with Japan in San Francisco" (2013, 450).

Historical claims are much harder to defend than legal claims in international arbitration. Buszynski (2012, 140) refers to two legal courses of action that can guide territorial claims in this case: effective occupation stemming from the Permanent Court of Arbitration and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). China stressed its claims to the Paracel Islands in 1974 when it forcibly expelled South Vietnamese troops from the islands, giving it a basis to support the effective occupation principle, while "Hanoi contested the legitimacy of China's use of force to expel the Vietnamese from the Paracel Archipelago in January 1974" (Do 2014, online). Vietnam does not recognize the legality of this ownership as China ousted the failing South Vietnam government while the Vietnam War was still being fought and before the 1975 reunification of the country. With regard to UNCLOS, "it does not support claims that go

beyond EEZs [exclusive economic zones] or declared continental shelves, yet China's claim goes well beyond its EEZ and overlaps with the legal claims of the ASEAN states" (Buszynski 2012, 140). China dismisses this legal impracticality by noting that UNCLOS (agreed in 1982, ratified in 1994) came into being much later than when China first laid its claims (Buszynski 2012, 140). China's rights over the South China Sea are taught in Chinese schools from an early age through themes of national unification "and of China's righteous claims to sovereignty in disputes both on land and at sea" (Yahuda 2013, 454).

There have been a few other notable incidents in the South China Sea since 1974, but from the early 2000s, "China has placed much emphasis on cultivating ASEAN and its members and it has refrained from the use of force to advance its claims" (Yahuda 2013, 450). A good example of China's desire to shelve disputes and focus on cooperation and economic ties is its participation in the 2002 agreed "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea." The Declaration's participants agreed to free navigation in the South China Sea and to seek peaceful resolution for territorial conflicts, without ever resorting to threats or armed forces. While there have been talks that this Declaration could evolve into an actual code of conduct in the South China Sea, China has been careful to resist any binding arrangements that might lead to the claims being brought in front of the International Court of Justice in the Hague (Yahuda 2013, 456). With regards to a possible settlement, Vietnam has not opposed eventual bilateral negotiations with China, but has insisted that the code of conduct, which it helped draft with the Philippines in 2000, be extended to the Paracel islands dispute, therefore pushing for ASEAN involvement in the conflict (Nguyen 2001, 115). China, on the other hand, has always insisted that claims must be settled bilaterally, without outside meddling, with the possibility of joint resource exploration and development, although this cooperation has not had as much success as

anticipated (Yahuda 2013, 456). The shift in behaviour exhibited by China since 2008 has therefore left many puzzled.

The reactive approach – An empirical review

The reactive approach presented in the first chapter combines a variety of factors to explain China's more assertive policy in the South China Sea Paracel Islands dispute since 2008. The contention is that it is necessary to combine different lines of analysis, rather than the single causal factor associated with one or the other of the prevailing hypotheses in the literature. Indeed a number of authors emphasize that multiple factors are at work. Cabestan (2009, 65) stresses that since the 2000s, it is necessary to look at internal and external preoccupations to fully understand China's foreign policy. Christensen (2011, 59) believes that a mix of China's international confidence and domestic insecurity causes China's assertive actions. Yahuda (2013, 446) considers that a combination of four factors is at play: the balance of power alteration, the growth of Chinese military power, heightened nationalist sentiments among officials and the population, and the maritime domain becoming a national interest. The reactive approach explored here also emphasizes the combination of factors and further seeks to identify the causal sequence in China's growing assertiveness in the Paracel Islands dispute in the South China Sea since 2008.

To bring empirical light on the reactive approach advanced here, each structural and external trigger factor will be examined. To better understand the internal factors, two approaches will be used for each factor. First, in order to provide an empirical understanding of how the

2008-2009 financial crisis might have impacted on our targeted factors, a historical descriptive approach traces the major changes over time. Second, an evaluation is made of how the factors influence the decision makers and their calculations regarding the Paracel Islands dispute.

1. Internal Structural factors

The internal structural factors considered in the reactive approach are the constant need for resources, growing popular nationalism and the increasing lack of internal political coordination. Each contributes to a heightened sense of CCP insecurity.

Constant need for resources

Historical review. Taylor Fravel (2008) explains that there has been a renewed interest in the Paracel Islands area since the 1970s. South Vietnam and China both launched explorations and surveys of the surrounding seas around that time. “South Vietnam initiated a program to exploit offshore petroleum resources, announcing in 1971 that it would offer oil concessions to foreign companies for exploration blocks in the South China Sea” (Fravel 2008, 277). China also magnified its survey efforts, with geological, meteorological and topographical studies, before improving its already existing structures in 1971 on Woody Island, the biggest island of the Paracels (Fravel 2008, 278). With South Vietnam’s repeated actions in the South China Sea region, including exploration and even seizing islands, in March 1973, China “issued its first formal claim to maritime resources beyond its territorial waters when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the undersea resources in the sea areas along China’s coast all belong to China” (Fravel 2008, 278). China had to express its claims more assertively because of the

growing interest in the region's resources. Buszynski (2012, 139) adds that with a rising global need for energy and a growing access to the sea's natural resources, including oil, gas reserves and fish, China's and Vietnam's competing claims started to be more problematic in the 1990s.

China has transitioned in the past two decades "from being an exporter of raw materials and minerals to a large-scale importer" (Carmody & Taylor 2010, 496). Zweig and Jianhai explain that the "booming domestic economy, rapid urbanization, increased export processing, and the Chinese people's voracious appetite for cars are increasing the country's demand for oil and natural gas, industrial and construction materials, foreign capital and technology" (2005, online). As early as 2003, Hu Jintao perceived the need to emphasize energy security. As the South China Sea is believed to contain a wealth of natural resources, Hu notably encouraged the development of the South China Sea fleet (Li 2010, 37). China has indeed been very active in its pursuit of resources, as "an active player and generous lender in Africa, Central Asia, Latin America, Russia and Southeast Asia" (Cáceres & Ear 2012, 48). Authors, including David Zweig and Bi Jianhai, believe that much of China's foreign policy is focused on "an unprecedented need for resources" (2005, online).

The 2008 financial turmoil has arguably made the situation even more urgent for the CCP to secure its influence over the South China Sea area if ever positive estimates, such as the fact that the "oil and gas reserves in the South China Sea could account for one-third of the total energy reserves of China" (Zhang 2013, 20), were to be confirmed. The global financial turmoil has also made it more time sensitive for the CCP to encourage the exploration of this region to locate and confirm these resources. "China's appetite for these products and commodities suggests that it might in the future consider expansion to secure its access to vital resources, such

as petroleum or arable land” (Fravel 2010, 513). The 2008-2009 financial downturn led China to seek greater security for its resources, such as petroleum and fishing stocks, to alleviate the pressure. “In 2009, China became the second largest consumer of oil after the United States, and its consumption is likely to double by 2030” (Buszynski 2012, 141). China is facing a growing dependence on energy supplies and a global economic downturn contributes to a sense of insecurity about resource inputs.

With China’s resource needs in mind, the South China Sea represents an instrumental region that could allow China to secure some of its growing needs. The estimated quantities of resources differ depending on the study, but “Chinese analysts generally believe that the maritime domain is a critically important source of energy for China’s long-term economic development” (Zhang 2013, 20). Scholars including Johnston have observed a clear shift in focus under the Hu Jintao regime towards energy security strategies (2013, 41). This has led China to become a much more active player on the international resource scene. “China’s aggressive search for oil and gas, [...], has alarmed big as well as small countries in the Asia-Pacific and other regions” (Wu 2007, 235). China has been objecting to foreign oil producers and explorations. For example, China was quick to protest after India’s Oil and Natural Gas Corp (ONGC), with which Vietnam has struck a cooperation agreement, when ONGC started exploration around the Paracel Islands (Buszynski 2012, 143).

Another dimension of the resource need factor is food security. China appears to have been making many foreign policy decisions based on its need to secure food reserves. With growing rates of urbanization, China is trying to establish a strategy that will ensure food security. The South China Sea could be part of the solution, offering deep reserves of fishing

stocks at close proximity. According to some estimates, the South China Sea region “may account for as much as one tenth of the global landed catch” (Kaplan 2014, 71). This need to ensure diverse food sources may partly account for China’s assertive actions in the South China Sea over the past years. Sutter and Huang note, “China showed stronger resolve to exploit fishing resources in the South China Sea with the announced deployment of one of the world’s largest fish processing ships to the area” (2012, 1). Furthermore, China has new fishery regulations that “require foreign fishing vessels to obtain prior Chinese approval to operate in the waters within the nine dash line” (Pedrozo 2014, 2). Some Chinese advocates have strongly argued for more protection of Chinese fishermen (Raine 2011, 74). These examples demonstrate that China has been quite aggressive when it comes to fish stock protection in the South China Sea.

Since 2009, the Chinese authorities have taken extensive measures to assert their control over the South China Sea (Sutter & Huang 2012, 1), including many manoeuvres related to fishing security. As China also claims the waters surrounding the Paracel Islands, it has imposed an annual fishing ban, whose length was further extended since 2009 to May 16 to August 1, from the customary June to July since 1999 (Buszynski 2012, 143). This manoeuvre is very intrusive because it directly affects the livelihood of Vietnam’s fisherman (Buszynski 2012, 143). In 2010, China announced major modernizations of its navy. In September 2010, it deployed its “newest and fastest fishery administration vessel, equipped to carry a helicopter, and the announcement in October 2010 that China would build 36 more vessels for maritime law enforcement” (Raine 2011, 74). The period since the financial crisis is clearly associated with a growing sense of insecurity encouraging the CCP to be more proactive regarding the resources found in the Paracel Islands waters.

Constant need for resources and the CCP. The South China Sea is geographically a logical and strategic area for China to focus on, as a natural resource reserve and as the sea-lanes carrying “more than half of the world’s shipping tonnage” (Zhao 2008, 220). Since natural resources are limited and demand is infinite, this creates a situation where countries are pitted against each other in a global resource quest. As China has transitioned to the status of a net importer of primary resources, it has been very active in trying to secure its natural resource needs. As these water routes see impressive amounts of merchant fleet tonnage yearly, it becomes vital for China to secure safe passage of its imported resources in these lanes, especially its natural resources and food supplies. The CCP has to secure the waterways from competition to ensure safe passage of these goods and the free use of the natural resources.

After decades of rapid growth, the 2008 global financial crisis caused China to “experience the worst economic turmoil since the 1960s” (Ross 2013, 74), creating a breeding ground for instability. The CCP feared that further rising inflation rates, soaring unemployment and a widening inequality gap could bring forth social and political instability. Indeed, “the unemployment and inequality produced just the kind of unrest Beijing feared it would” (Ross 2013, 75), including a hike in the number of incidents of public unrest. Since much of the CCP’s political legitimacy rests on economic development, improving the population’s living conditions and ensuring a strong China internationally, the post-2008 financial crisis period has been a testing ground for the Party. The combination of an already considerable resource need and a difficult world economic situation has made it even more pressing for the CCP to focus its efforts on the resource quest. The quest for energy and other resources has become a political and security issue in China, as “China’s future economic growth and political stability depends more

and more on continued economic growth fuelled by readily available, affordable energy supplies from foreign sources” (Zhao 2008, 208).

The CCP faces many challenges to its governance, but the most crucial is to stabilize its legitimacy at the head of the country. The CCP “has adopted a very pragmatic strategy of performance legitimacy” (Zhu 2011, 124). A pillar of the CCP’s performance legitimacy is its ability to achieve impressive economic targets. Li (2013, 41) attributes the CCP’s longevity and popular appeal to China’s incredible growth over the past decades. The author points to a 2011 poll by the Pew Research Center asking Chinese people about their satisfaction with the direction of their nation: “87 percent of respondents noted satisfaction with the general direction of the country, 66 percent reported significant progress in their lives in the past five years, and a whopping 74 percent said they expected the future to be even better” (Li 2013, 41). The CCP is thus under a great deal of pressure to continuously improve China’s economic performance and the living standards of its people. China’s growth has also been accompanied by growing inequalities and corruption, which the CCP will have to improve as Chinese people also expect a higher quality of living out of performance legitimacy. China’s “dependency on imported resources and open sea lines of communication” (Jakobson 2013, 13) therefore create a great sense of insecurity for the CCP. The CCP’s need to ensure rapid economic development for political legitimacy combined with a growing need for resources is heightening its sense of insecurity.

Growing nationalism

Historical review. China’s nationalism has not grown out of a call to ethnicity or culture, but out of a need for retribution, a specific mission to correct past wrongs. This sentiment is widely

shared among Chinese people who feel that they have suffered injustice over the past hundred years, specifically with regard to the West's imposition of unequal treaties and to the Japanese occupation. For example, Suisheng Zhao evokes how painful the defeat to Japan was in 1895, as "the fear of the loss or the death of China...took hold" among elites (2004, 17). This led China to develop longstanding distrust towards the Western powers and Japan (Zhao 2013, 535). There has consequently been a strong trace in the political rhetoric of twentieth and twenty-first century Chinese leaders, of redeeming past humiliations and retrieving pride and glory, notably via "taking back all lost territories" (Zhao 2013, 535).

China's leaders have adopted divergent tactics when it comes to Chinese nationalism and China's quest for redemption. Mao Zedong favoured the promotion of patriotism, so as to not have the dilemma of justifying the clashing concepts of nationalism and the internationalist communist mission (Chen 2005, 41), while Deng Xiaoping turned his attention directly to nationalism, giving it a positive spin. Positive nationalism was meant to be pragmatic, putting forward the image of a more secure China, conscious of its future soaring role in the international arena (Chen 2005, 48). Deng's pragmatic nationalism also promoted the ever-present sense of injustice vis-à-vis the West. This has made it possible for Chinese leaders to summon at will this sentiment to their advantage. For example, although the 1989 Tiananmen tragedy could have logically been a hard blow to the nationalism promoted by the CCP, there was actually a surge of nationalism and patriotism because of the sanctions Western countries adopted against China as a result. Liu Xiaobo's quote is quite telling in this respect: "since June 4, 1989, China has suddenly been engulfed in a wave of nationalism and patriotism, which reaches every corner of the land and involves every person" (Zhao 2004, 8).

A notable change in Chinese nationalism over the past years has been the way it can be generated. It has shifted from an exclusively top-down construction to a more dynamic relationship between the population and the State, although still mostly led by the CCP. The Party in the 1990s could “decide the direction, content and intensity of Chinese nationalism, and then mobilize the people” (Chen 2005, 50). The State was able to use nationalism to shift public opinion through security and propaganda government agencies organizing education campaigns (Cabestan 2009, 90). The propaganda education notably spurred the rise of anti-Western sentiment among the population and promulgated the idea that the CCP was the sole guarantor of the national interest.

While the CCP dominated the popular feeling of pragmatic nationalism in the 1990s, this same decade also saw the development of bottom-up nationalism. More importantly, there was a rise of overall popular nationalism, which meant that CCP officials could not monopolize the nationalist discourse in the same way as before (Chen 2005, 52). Popular nationalism was stimulated by the events of the US bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999 and the publication of several very popular books such as “The China that Can Say No, The China that Still Can Say No and How China Can Say No” (Zhao 2013, 539). The events of 1999 led to “major cities in China having seen their biggest and angriest demonstrations for years” (BBC 2014), with many of the protesters being young and angry students. Jessica Chen Weiss (2013) explains that the CCP has had to assess the gains and costs of allowing these popular nationalist protests, deciding that “if the students were not allowed by the police or the military to vent their anger...students would turn hostile on them, accusing them of being unpatriotic” (as cited in Weiss 2013, 19). The Chinese economic boom helped to foster the development of national popular sentiment promulgated by intellectuals and “launched the Chinese colossus into global

competition to achieve an international status commensurate with the country's vast capacities and the Chinese people's conception of their country's rightful place in the world" (Zhao 2013, 539). There has therefore been a development of societal forces initiating their own nationalism, which Zhao (2013, 539) qualifies as having two features: the first tends to promote liberal ideas including political participation and human rights accountability; the second is more aligned with the government's vision of China as a powerful independent country capable of opposing Western powers. Many of these anti-Western nationalists are "more vocal and emotional than the state in criticism of Western evil intentions" (Zhao 2013, 539).

The growing impact of nationalist influences on Chinese foreign policy has been viewed with apprehension by Western powers. "This development could become alarming to Western countries and China's neighbours as Chinese nationalism is powered by the conviction that China has been treated unjustly and its territory and related sovereign rights have been exploited by other powers" (Zhao 2013, 553). Many believe that a stronger popular nationalist component could make it harder for China to compromise with foreign partners, as many popular nationalist voices call for a tougher stance in pursuing core interests, which includes defending territorial integrity.

The years 2008-2009 were significant in China because of internal and international turmoil. It saw "the uprising in Tibet, the devastation of the Sichuan earthquake and the tragedy of the Sanlu milk formula scandal" (Hughes 2011, 602). These were all events that made the population question the legitimacy of the CCP. The 2008 financial crisis also sparked fear within the CCP since a lesser economic performance could lead to political instability and a decline in the Party's legitimacy. Robert Ross emphasizes the struggle of the CCP: "when the global

financial crisis hit in 2008, however, Beijing could no longer simply rely on economic success [and] meanwhile, nationalism was on the rise” (2013, 75). Indeed, the aforementioned unrest was coupled with increasingly brash popular nationalism as stated by Hughes: “2008, the high point of patriotic hubris generated partly by the Beijing Games and partly by the deepening of the economic crisis in the United States” (2011, 602).

With the slow and steady rise of popular nationalism over the past decade, voices have gotten stronger due to economic development and the rise of technology. With more Chinese having their basic needs provided for, it seems normal that they would have more time to reflect on other issues. Technology, notably through social media, has also made it easier for the population to express their views, to influence others and to get together with similar minds. Zhao further acknowledges the rise of popular nationalism since “connected by new information technology, particularly the Internet, the youth popular nationalist movement gained momentum in the 2000s” (2013, 539). The rise of popular nationalism with a strong medium has opened the CCP to criticism, including its stance on the Paracel Islands dispute. Criticisms have been made, not only by “angry youth”, but also by “active-duty military officers and scholars at state-run think tanks and universities” (Christensen 2011, 60). Zhao argues that the “post-2008 hubris has made China’s leaders more susceptible to the pressure exerted by [the nationalist] discourse” (2013, 535), leading to greater political insecurity, which in part, explains the CCP’s more assertive actions in the Paracel Islands dispute.

Not only is popular nationalism on the rise in China, but the country is also known for already having high levels of national pride. “A multiple country and region survey in 2008 found that ‘China has one of the highest levels of popular nationalism in the world’” (Zhao 2013,

543). This combination of factors, a highly nationalistic population and access to new technologies to express its views, has allowed popular nationalism's influence to increase within China. Popular nationalism has the tendency to demand that the government be less lenient when it comes to China's territorial disputes, and since 2008, there has been a "convergence of Chinese state nationalism and popular nationalism" (Zhao 2013, 536).

Rising popular nationalism and the CCP. Nationalism gained significance as an indispensable political tool for the CCP when Deng focused the country's attention on the importance of economic development with the launch of his reforms in 1978. Zhao (2005) argues that because Deng was insisting on a market-oriented strategy, communist ideology was losing its meaning and its rallying power, forcing the CCP to find a new way to legitimize its role at the head of the state. The new "get rich" mentality promoted by the Party, a confusingly polar opposite to communism, led to much discontent, which contributed to dissatisfaction manifested in the Tiananmen massacres. It therefore became a necessity for the Party's survival to find a way to legitimize its role at the helm of a market-oriented China. "Finding a way to restore legitimacy [...] became the most serious challenge facing China's leadership" (Zhao 2002, 134). The CCP turned to nationalism as a tool to recover its legitimacy deficit. The Party has been able to create nationalism, giving the Party the role of the defender of China against the West and any other opponents. State propaganda has presented the CCP as the "representative of China's national interest and the defender of Chinese national pride" (Zhao 2004, 8). For example, official CCP propaganda was able to turn Tiananmen into a promotional opportunity for Chinese nationalism, blaming the West for wanting to suppress Chinese growth with sanctions, demonstrating just how nationalism "remains [the CCP's] most reliable claim to the people's loyalty" (Zhao 2004, 8). Zhao makes an important point, stating that "when communist leaders called upon the Chinese

people to work hard to build a prosperous and strong China and said that China was bullied and humiliated by foreign powers, they indicated that China's economic under-development should share some of the blame" (Zhao 2013, 537). This predicament seems to have created an unspoken contract between the population and the State: support would be given to the CCP as long as it delivered high economic growth and, consequently, a more powerful China.

The societal changes resulting from growing popular nationalism have had a particular effect on the CCP after the unsettling economic context of 2008-2009. Authors like Zhao maintain that "the pragmatic control of popular nationalism, however, began to loosen up after the global economy sputtered in 2008" (2013, 543). The Chinese State, wanting to ensure internal stability, has been more attentive to popular nationalism. As State and popular nationalism sometimes converge when it comes to foreign policy matters, the CCP has not silenced aggressive popular nationalism and has put forward a more assertive and tougher international stance, especially when it comes to core interest and sovereignty issues. Zhao (2013) summarizes this interpretation, explaining the 2008 change in the way the CCP takes into account popular nationalist opinions for foreign policy decisions: "it has become increasingly reluctant to constrain the expression of popular nationalism and more willing to follow the popular nationalist calls for confrontation against the Western powers and its neighbors, including the repeated use of paramilitary forces, economic sanctions, fishing and oil ventures, and other intimidating means, to deal with territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas" (Zhao 2013, 536).

Nationalism is an important dimension of the CCP's legitimacy. With the financial troubles of 2008-2009, the CCP saw itself relying more on popular nationalism to assert its rule, out of fear of the political instability resulting from an economic slowdown. Zhao (2013, 546)

explains how this shift has affected foreign relations, notably regarding China's core interests and territorial integrity. For Wang & Wang (2014, 225), "The Chinese government has become more willing to comply with the popular nationalist calls, and thus the impact of media filled with sensational coverage of Chinese foreign policy is only logical". In this way, the CCP's sense of domestic insecurity and scrutiny by popular nationalism following the economic crisis has contributed to "Beijing's uncompromising posture" (Ross 2013, 76). This has "alienated not only China's neighbors but also countries around the world" (Ross 2013, 76). With more domestic pressure, the CCP has less flexibility to deal with the South China Sea region in general and the Paracel Islands dispute in particular.

Increasing lack of internal political coordination

Historical review. China's actual political and foreign policy decision-making process is still very unclear to outside observers. Yahuda (2013, 456) notes that world leaders criticize China's lack of transparency when it comes to the military's decisional process, its acquisitions, its numbers and its strategies. This is quite worrying for China's neighbours, especially Vietnam, as China's military apparatus is obviously growing rapidly. Cabestan (2009), Christensen (2010), Raine (2011), Yahuda 2013, and Wang & Wang (2014) have observed that, over the past decade, new actors seem to have been influencing China's actions on the international scene. The Politburo of the CCP is China's leading political decisional body, but when it comes to foreign policy decisions, Cabestan (2009, 66) considers that they probably do not meet often enough to approve most of China's international actions. The Party's Secretary General still plays the key decisional role as the "Chinese 'General Secretary-President-Commander in Chief' enjoys manoeuvre room in orienting the debate, carefully preparing foreign- and security-policy decisions to be made, and presumably, in most cases, imposing his choices" (Cabestan 2009, 66).

Wang & Wang (2014, 222) point to professionalization and pluralization as transformational factors of Chinese foreign policy decision-making. There has been a great push towards the professionalization of China's army, the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Chinese economic growth has allowed for a modernization push of the PLA. Blasko (2012, 224) observes that the military reforms have taken place over many decades, but there has been a greater drive for modernization since 1999. "China's military expenditures have increased significantly over the past ten years, and although they do not rival the defense spending of the United States, they are the second largest defense budget in the world" (Dorminey & Gray 2014, 13). The modernization of the army has included the development of new equipment, revised military strategies and improved conditions and education for military personnel. There has been a particular focus on developing China's naval capabilities, which Dorminey & Gray (2014, 13) attribute to the CCP's desire to project power abroad. A shift in priorities can be seen as China has been prioritizing its South Sea Fleet, out of its three naval fleets (North, East and South). The "South Sea Fleet, which patrols the South China Sea, has historically been the last of China's three fleets to modernize, it was often the first to receive new combatives for much of the last decade" (Chang 2012, 23). Additions include two nuclear attack submarines, a diesel-electric submarine, and two landing platform docks that allow for missions to extend far into the South China Sea (Chang 2012, 23). China has also "constructed a major naval base at Yalong Bay at the southern tip of Hainan" (Chang 2012, 24), able to house its nuclear submarines and modernized fleet. While proximity can favour Vietnam in the Paracel Islands dispute, it has not been able to modernize its naval and overall military capacities to the same extent as China.

Professionalizing the PLA also means more independence for the military apparatus and its commanders. Professionalization encourages the military elite to acquire very specific

knowledge that makes them better positioned to advise the CCP. “The PLA has developed its own system of international relations (if not diplomacy) based mainly on arms transfers (acquisitions and sales), joint military exercises with an increased number of nations, and a growing participation in Peace-Keeping Operations” (Cabestan 2009, 74). While officially the CCP is at the centre of each international action taken by China, these PLA actions are probably not directly sanctioned by the central political power. Indeed, “that the General Secretary-Commander in Chief persists as the only link between the Party and the Army; obviously, this is a weak link in the chain of command” (Cabestan 2009, 92). There seems to be a clear decentralization of the decision-making, as the CCP has to “rely on the information provided by specialized bureaucracies and organizations” (Raine 2011, 82).

Decentralization has led to a pluralization of actors in foreign policy making in China. “Upper tiers delegate the authority to the lower tiers (such as provinces), and tolerate their growing autonomy despite the increasing number of actors that affect Chinese foreign policy making” (Wang & Wang 2014, 222). Local governments during Hu Jintao’s leadership have multiplied their independent international networks, such as the sister-city agreements (Cabestan 2009, 86-87). Christensen (2011, 60) adds that actors in China’s foreign policy now also include, apart from the military and regional party elites, energy companies and major exporters of manufactured goods. It can become quite tricky for the CCP to reconcile the interests of all these actors in a grand strategy. Some actors might benefit from a more cooperative relationship with Vietnam while others would want to assert themselves in the Asian seas. The media has also been gaining influence over foreign policy decisions. It has some power to “shape the agenda for foreign policy makers, narrow down the set of policy options, change the pace of policy making and implementation, and influence the direction of the final decisions” (Wang & Wang 2014,

216). While the CCP can still largely influence media, the relationship is no longer only one-way; there is more interaction and consideration of popular opinions (Wang & Wang 2014, 216). With so many different actors vying for influence on foreign policy decision-making, the CCP has not yet found a way to coordinate all these different interests in a general policy guideline.

In terms of the Paracel Islands dispute, Yahuda suggests that “there are at least five different agencies involved in coast guard duties and there appears to be little or poor coordination between them” (2013, 453). These agencies work under varying governmental ministries, including Foreign Affairs and Agriculture for example, and the PLA is also very active in the South China Sea region. Provincial and municipal levels also operate their own patrol boats with regard to fishing activities. There does not seem to be a clear chain of command or an explicit guideline issued by the CCP, so it can be hard to discern which agency has sanctioned which action and it leaves many openings for accidental incidents. The professionalization of the army and the decentralization of powers highlight the complexity of internal decision-making for the CCP on foreign policy dealing with the Paracel Islands dispute.

Increasing lack of internal political coordination and the CCP. Internal political coordination by the CCP for foreign policy has been weakened as other agencies have gained independence, have professionalized and have gained power from a constrained decentralization. The multiplication of actors has created tensions among agencies. Cabestan underlines three types of tensions: “diplomatic vs. commercial, diplomatic vs. military, and commercial vs. military” (2009, 89). While diplomatic and commercial interests are mostly aligned, as economic growth is crucial for the CCP, it is more complex to reconcile the PLA with commercial and even diplomatic goals. For example, “in the second half of 2010, Hu Jintao reportedly issued orders for PLA

commentators to exercise more self-restraint,” as some colonels had publicly asserted their xenophobia or advocated China’s hegemonic role (Johnston 2013, 44). The coordination of the different agencies creates an additional layer of pressure on the CCP in the foreign policy decision-making process. If the CCP is not able to coordinate or restrain the agencies’ actions in the South China Sea, it weakens its legitimacy. Indeed, Cabestan (2009, 88) recalls the example of the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) which tried to strike a deal to purchase an American oil company, as a purely economic strategic move. CNOOC did not take into account the “sensitive diplomatic and strategic dimensions of the deal,” which made the US furious and “the bid a fiasco, due to a lack of foreign ministry input in the initial discussions” (Cabestan 2009, 88). The CCP is therefore always wary with regard to what its more independent agents moves might be, leading to the Party’s greater insecurity.

The CCP must also carefully manage its relationship with the agencies as they are granted more independence, in order to secure their allegiance. The CCP’s legitimacy does not only rely on good economic performance and nationalism. Performance legitimacy is also based on good governance and maintaining national unity. “Any failure in governance is closely monitored and noticed; and the operational cost to maintain good performance and to correct bad performance is also very high, therefore legitimacy is very fragile and hard to sustain” (Zhu 2011, 134). The CPP cannot govern securely without the PLA’s loyalty. Hu has to “grant the PLA greater benefits than did either Mao or Deng, in order to secure its allegiance” (Cabestan 2009, 73). The CCP also has to be wary of how to deal with Chinese media, as it has had some success in rallying the public so as to apply pressure on the government on a foreign policy issue (Wang & Wang 2014, 223). This has been especially apparent since the advent of social media. “Social media effectively allows growing numbers of Chinese netizens, ranging from elites to the grassroots public, to exert

an unprecedented impact on the government and foreign policy makers” (Wang & Wang 2014). This phenomenon has forced CCP officials to seek a better understanding of the population’s foreign policy concerns. It can become quite sensitive if the CCP adopts an unpopular foreign policy action, as social media acts very rapidly and can lead to street spill overs, exacerbating a sense of insecurity as regards the CCP’s hold on power. It does not appear that China is yet at a stage where companies, the military, media and localities can exert more independence without compromising the CCP’s legitimacy and hold on power.

2. External structural factors

The external structural factors considered in the reactive approach are twofold: first, Vietnam’s attempts to legalize and internationalize its claims in the South China Sea; second, the greater focus of the US in Asia. Each acts as a trigger on the CCP’s growing sense of insecurity and in turn, contributes to greater Chinese foreign policy assertiveness in the Paracel Islands dispute.

First trigger: Vietnam’s attempts to legalize and internationalize its claims

Vietnam’s hard-line position towards this territorial dispute has been ever present since the 2008 financial crisis. The CCP has been reacting to Vietnam’s attempts to legalize its claims and internationalize the conflict. Both these actions would have the potential to change the status quo in the dispute.

China has always insisted on dealing with its South China Sea conflicts bilaterally. A two-way negotiation gives China more leverage as the dominant economic partner with the more

powerful military and naval capabilities. Since 2008, structural conditions have allowed Vietnam to attempt to legalize its claims and to internationalize the territorial dispute with China, as Vietnam knows that this would be to its advantage. China has reacted very strongly to Vietnam's efforts, first to the United Nations claims in 2009 and second to Vietnam's efforts during its chairmanship of ASEAN in 2010.

The United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf set May 2009 as the deadline for countries to submit their claims for extended continental shelves beyond the general 200-mile limit for exclusive economic zones, pursuant to article 76, paragraph 8, of the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982*. This prompted Vietnam to submit a Partial Submission regarding its continental shelf area beyond 200 nautical miles in the "North Area" of the South China Sea and a Joint Submission with Malaysia for the "Southern Part" of the South China Sea. These actions would help legalize and internationalize Vietnam's claims to the Paracel Islands since the procedures of a submission entail that "a communication is circulated to all Member States of the United Nations, as well as States Parties to the Convention, in order to make public the executive summary of the joint submission, including all charts and coordinates contained in that summary" (United Nations 2012, online). Both Vietnam and China's claims to the Paracels are based on historical factors. If Vietnam were able to add legal rights through the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*, it would strengthen its claims greatly compared to those of China.

China reacted strongly to protest Vietnam's claims and reiterated its own claims, making 2009 a tumultuous year for incidents surrounding the Paracels. China first reacted to the 2009 submissions "through two Notes-CML/17/2009 and CML/18/2009- to the UN Secretary-General,

including a map of the South China Sea displaying the nine dashed lines” and stating its undeniable sovereignty over the Paracels and its neighbouring waters, noting its “sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof” (Amer 2014, 24). Zhang (2013, 23) believes that the extensiveness of the nine dashed lines map as well as its vagueness constitute a sign of China’s rising assertiveness. There is certain aggressiveness when the country does not deem it necessary to explain its very broad claims, leaving the other claimant perplexed and angered. Other assertive behaviour surrounding Vietnam’s attempt to add legal precedents to its claims included the CCP’s pre-emptive strike allowing the announcement of tourism tours in the Paracels in March 2009 (Amer 2014, 20). China also confirmed a fishing ban in the waters surrounding the islands from May 16th to August 1st. This led to Vietnamese street protests. Vietnam claimed that fishing boats were seized by Chinese patrol forces in the Paracel archipelago in June and August (Amer 2014, 20). Raine (2011), Johnson (2013), Amer (2014) and Li (2014) believe that Vietnam’s submissions prompted China to increase its assertive behaviour in the Paracel Islands dispute. China’s actions were a reaction to Vietnam’s legal efforts to bring attention to the dispute. Indeed, through these actions, China was able to show its resolve to the Chinese population, Vietnam and the international community. The nine-dashed line map confirmed domestically and internationally that China would fully pursue and defend its claims. The fishing ban and detainment of Vietnamese boats represent direct pressure to stop Vietnam’s engagement in the Paracels. By stalling Vietnam’s activities in the islands, China also weakens Vietnam’s claims to the disputed area.

The second example of Vietnam’s actions operating as a trigger to China’s growing assertiveness is its efforts in internationalizing the dispute during its tenure as Chair of ASEAN in 2010. As stated by Luttwak, Vietnam “used their 2010 chairmanship of ASEAN to

'internationalize' the maritime disputes by forming a multicountry negotiation forum" (2012, 152). This forces the CCP to deviate from its preferred bilateral mode of dealing with the dispute. While there have been some improvements in the relationship between ASEAN and China over the past years, when it comes to the South China Sea, this progress receded in 2010 as "Vietnam became chair of ASEAN in 2010 and pushed to place the disputes on the ASEAN-China agenda" (Raine 2011, 75). Vietnam first pushed for the territorial conflict to be part of the agenda. It also sought to internationalize the conflict by involving other countries. For example, between 2009 and 2011, "Vietnam became the locus of a whole new set of partnerships that linked Hanoi with India, South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Australia" (Kaplan 2014, 175). Vietnam's strategic partnerships also include deals with foreign oil companies "to deploy advanced survey ships and push ahead with extensive exploration and survey work on the disputed continental shelf" (Zhao 2013, 548). To summarize, Vietnam's strategy, launched in 2009, is to internationalize the conflict by involving foreign partners in the disputed area and slowly gaining support from the international community.

This internationalization strategy adopted by Vietnam prompted China to display its diplomatic assertiveness. The actions undertaken by Vietnam can make the CCP feel encircled and look weak if it does not respond. Vietnam's pursuit of this internationalization strategy led to "China swiftly [expanding] its increasingly large and aggressive flotilla of marine surveillance and patrol ships to enforce its claims in the disputed waters" (Zhao 2013, 548). China also displayed a series of naval exercises in the disputed waters. The greater presence of Chinese boats in the sea demonstrates aggressive behaviour that can more swiftly lead to incidents between the countries. Luttwak (2012, 157) lists a few examples: in February 2010, a Chinese patrol boat halted and seized a Vietnamese fisherman's catch and equipment; in March 2010,

Chinese naval patrols detained a Vietnamese fishing crew and their boat as they were harbouring in the Parcel Islands for which Chinese authorities requested a US\$10,000 fine; in April 2010, Chinese patrol boats seized another Vietnamese fishing boat near the Paracels, detained its crew and asked for a US\$10,000 fine; in May 2010, a Vietnamese fishing boat was apprehended in the Paracels by Chinese Fishery Administration officials demanding US\$8,000 in payment; in June 2010, three Vietnamese fishing boats were seized and the crew arrested near the disputed waters. China also conducted seismic explorations in the Parcel archipelago, renewed its fishing ban and passed a 10-year plan to develop tourism in the Paracels. All of these actions were greatly deplored by Vietnamese authorities (Amer 2014, 21).

The tensions between Vietnam's internationalization strategy and China's reactive assertiveness continued in 2011. A vicious cycle seems to have taken place where both countries react to each other's potentially status quo changing actions. Buszynski (2012, 141) explains that as a reaction to ASEAN claimants' growing presence in the South China Sea, particularly that of Vietnam, China has seen fit to assert its claims. Yahuda demonstrates this by noting that "the nationalistic Global Times in both its Chinese and English language publications (i.e. addressing both domestic and international audiences) warned both Vietnam and the Philippines on 25 October 2011, that if they did not change their ways 'they will need to prepare mentally for the sounds of cannons'" (2013, 452-453).

Second trigger: the renewed interest of the US in the Asia Pacific region

The United States' renewed interest in the Asia-Pacific region since 2008-2009 acts as the second external trigger explaining China's general assertiveness in the South China Sea and in the Parcel Islands dispute. Christensen (2011, 63) explains that the CCP first assumed that the

new Obama government would seek greater cooperation by being accommodating towards China, but in early 2010 the tendency shifted. Christensen (2011) and Ross (2013) maintain that the United States in fact triggered China's assertive reaction by renewing US interests and multiplying US actions in Asia under the Obama administration. Ross (2013, 77) believes that the US' focus on Asia is meant to reassure Asian allies of its continuing reliability as a counterbalance to China's rise, even after the US economic downturn and China's impressive growth. With regards to the South China Sea, the US needs to protect the free transit of military and commercial boats through the sea-lanes for economic and strategic considerations. "Each year, \$5.3 trillion of trade passes through the South China Sea; U.S. trade accounts for \$1.2 trillion of this total" (Glaser 2012, 4). Disputes in these sea-lanes would be very economically costly with "an increase in insurance rates and longer transits" (Galser 2012, 4). Strategically, "such passage is vital for America's self-ascribed position as a resident power in Asia, for the credibility of its regional security umbrella and for its ability to monitor Chinese military developments" (Raine 2011, 70). China has been reacting to the US's potentially status quo changing actions in the Asian region. The triggers include internationalizing the Paracel Islands conflict, changing the balance of power and encirclement efforts. These US actions have contributed to Beijing's high levels of mistrust and undermined the CCP's domestic legitimacy. These security sensitivities have pushed China to assert itself in the region, thereby having a direct impact on its territorial conflict with Vietnam.

The greater US focus on the Asian region has been labelled the "pivot to Asia". As Ross explains, "In 2010, the Obama administration initiated what it called a 'pivot' to Asia, a shift in strategy aimed at bolstering the United States' defense ties with countries throughout the region and expanding the US naval presence there" (2012, 72). The pivot has increased China's

perception of insecurity by cultivating the already existing distrust between the two countries. Washington and Beijing also face a fundamental clash in ideologies. Lieberthal & Wang (2012, 13) believe that the growing distrust has prompted several top CCP officials to view the US as China's greatest national security threat. Recent developments, including the continuous flow of US weapons to Taiwan, have only furthered this sentiment. "The distrust is reflected not only in some official pronouncements, but also, and most strikingly, in the news media, the internet and blogosphere, and the educational system" (Lieberthal & Wang 2012, 8). The official discourse and public sentiment thus mutually feed their perceptions of a deceitful United States.

ASEAN countries bordering the South China Sea, including Vietnam, view the US presence in the region as a guarantee of security, whereas China perceives the US presence as that of an agitator since the Paracels dispute is a bilateral conflict. China stresses that the US has no grounds to meddle with its affairs regarding the dispute with Vietnam, but US actions since 2008-2009 have, like those of Vietnam, also contributed to internationalizing the South China Sea dispute. For example, in July 2010, the US directly interfered in the Paracels conflict when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced at the ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi that it supported the "negotiating positions of the Philippines and Vietnam" (Ross 2013, 77) and the US had a "national interest in open access to Asia's maritime commons and respect for international law in the South China Sea" (Raine 2011, 72). China's Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi was quick to react: "Beijing strongly opposed any effort to internationalise the issue" (Raine 2011, 72). China also insisted that freedom of navigation had suffered no such threat as mentioned by the US (Lieberthal 2011) and, putting diplomacy aside, Yang Jiechi demanded that "Southeast Asian countries do nothing to encourage [US national interest in the South China Sea], pointedly reminding them of China's presence in the region" (Raine 2011, 75). The US positions on the

conflict prompted an assertive reaction on the part of China and solidified China's distrust of the Obama administration.

Another facet of the pivot to Asia is the US military presence in the region. The American military engagement shifts the balance of power in the region. Indeed, Vietnam's military capability is much smaller than China's, but the US possesses a stronger projection of power. This worries China as its military forces are not comparable to the US military machine and the South China Sea represents a strategic security buffer. In 2011, "Obama declared unequivocally on this trip that he will protect America's Asian security investments from any future cutbacks in overall U.S. military spending" (Lieberthal 2011). This trip, with the Defense Secretary Leon Panetta's visit to the region, cemented Washington's security focus on Asia. The Defense Secretary stressed: "the United States is going to remain a presence in the Pacific for a long time" (Ross 2012, 72). He also promised military capabilities to the region. For example, the US Navy and Air Force have increased their China surveillance, which is deemed confrontational by the PLA (Lieberthal & Wang 2012, 13). As a reaction, notably to the US military presence in its claimed territorial waters, "Chinese national oil companies announced unprecedented plans to drill for oil in disputed waters [...] and the PLA formed a new military garrison charged with defending the country's territorial claims in the South China Sea" (Ross 2012, 80). The US pivot has not only caused a greater presence of military aircrafts and ships in the South China Sea, but has heightened Beijing's insecurity. This has made the CCP more aggressive and increased the risk of rapid escalation.

The third trigger for China's assertiveness in the Paracel Islands dispute is the US's attempts to encircle China, through its alliances with Asian nations. This factor arises from

geopolitical considerations where the “key element is an approach to state competition in which the territorialisation of space is presented as an expression of conflicting political forces and is held in tension by them” (Hughes 2011, 603). While Washington and Beijing have improved relations and have cooperated over the past decades, it is interesting to note the US’s parallel geopolitical security engagements. Lee (2014, 6) believes that containment is a viable option as a way to counter Beijing’s quest for great power status, notably through military expansion. Beijing therefore resorts to greater assertiveness as Washington has been showing that it can build a comprehensive security defense in the region without China’s cooperation (Christensen 2011, 66). “The CCP believes that the US attempts to keep Asia under its thumb and arrogantly throws its massive power projection capacity around” (Kaplan 2014, 166).

China is first reacting to Washington’s growing security ties with Vietnam. Luttwak (2012, 157) notes that Washington and Vietnam seem to be unlikely partners because of ideological differences, the Vietnamese Communist Party’s violations of human rights and democratic political rights, and their mutual history as enemies during the Vietnam War. The reason for their unlikely alliance is explained by Carlyle A. Thayer: “both Vietnam and the US share an interest in preventing China [...] from dominating seaborne trade routes and enforcing territorial claims through coercion” (Kaplan 2014, 55). China has encouraged the alliance between Vietnam and the US without intending to do so. For example, Ross (2012, 78) points out that past US governments have rejected Vietnam’s offers of increasing security ties in order to favour closer ties with China, but China’s growing strength has pushed the US to accept an alliance with Vietnam.

Signs of US-Vietnam cooperation in the South China Sea started to take shape in 2009, at the same time as the global economic downturn. Luttwak (2012, 159) points to the “Lower Mekong Initiative” as a starting point for the alliance, where the US, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand met to discuss water management. This alliance interestingly excluded China and was negotiated between the foreign ministers of each country, a sign of the importance given to the initiative, according to Luttwak, and a type of “light encirclement”. In 2010, “a de facto American-Vietnamese strategic partnership was, in effect, announced [...] at an ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Hanoi” (Kaplan 2014, 62). The US-Vietnam rapprochement was seen in Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visiting Hanoi twice in 2010 and then Secretary of Defence Robert Gates also flying to Hanoi for talks that same year (Ross 2012, 78).

These signs of partnership between Vietnam and the US are bound to increase China’s insecurity, as this alliance will translate into an even stronger presence of US armed forces in the South China Sea and based in Vietnam. For example, in August 2010, the John S McCain destroyer and the George Washington carrier held “unprecedented joint military exercises with the Vietnamese Navy” (Luttwak 2012, 162-163). “Since then, the US Navy has held annual exercises with the Vietnamese navy” (Ross 2012, 78). Furthermore, in September 2012, a Memorandum of Understanding for advancing bilateral defence cooperation was signed between the US and Vietnam, with one of the five areas of support being maritime security cooperation. A spillover effect of the growing relationship between the US and Vietnam could be to “embolden Hanoi to be more confrontational with China on the South China Sea issue” (Glaser 2012, 2). Indeed, as noted by Johnston (2013, 19), China has been more active militarily in the South China Sea in 2009 and 2010 than before. China is most likely reacting to the US presence in the South China Sea, pushing it to be more assertive. As outlined in the section dealing with internal

structural factors above, such assertiveness enabled China to stake its claims and to counter any containment attempts. Given the internal uncertainties it faces, it has become necessary for China to show a strong front in the Paracels dispute.

The United States has also been reinforcing its security ties with China's Pacific neighbours. The US has existing alliances with Australia, South Korea and Japan, whereas China has supported the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization which brings together the North Western Asian countries (Wilkins 2010, 393). Glaser (2011, 81) explains that some authors believe that the US's closer ties with India act as a trigger for China's more assertive behaviour in the South China Sea. While the US has been strengthening its ties with the ASEAN countries, the ASEAN countries have also signed around nineteen new defence agreements between 2009 and 2011 (Kaplan 2014, 175). Parallel to the US and ASEAN strengthening their alliances in the region, Christensen (2011) notes that "over the past two years, in a departure from the policy of reassurance it adopted in the late 1990s, China has managed to damage relations with most of its neighbors and with the United States" (2011, 54). This situation can definitely lead China to feel encircled. For Chinese leaders, the US has abandoned its policy of strategic engagement, dismissing "China's legitimate security interests in its border regions, including even those that are not vital to US security" (Ross 2013, 81). Ross (2013, 81) maintains that this behaviour is seen as threatening to China and this leads the CCP to conclude that only assertive policies can be a guarantee of security. Fravel (2010, 517) argues that Chinese leaders are alert to signs of encirclement as this tactic has been used in the past to conquer China. With the US strengthening its alliance with Asian countries and crafting a partnership with Vietnam, China will want to maintain its buffer zone, which is the South China Sea, as manifested in its actions on the Paracel Islands.

Conclusion

To summarize, the reactive approach focuses on the different lines of analysis to explain China's greater assertiveness in the Paracel Islands dispute since 2008-2009. By breaking down the sequence of causality in two steps, it becomes clear that no single factor is sufficient to explain this greater assertiveness and that both internal and external factors are at play in the CCP's decision-making process. The CCP is first reacting to structural internal factors which are causing the Party to feel greater levels of insecurity. The CCP's insecurity is related to uncertainties regarding its political and performance legitimacy mechanisms. Without this heightened insecurity the CCP would not be reacting so assertively to the external triggers. Vietnam's status quo changing actions and the US pivot to Asia add a second layer to the Chinese decision-makers' perception of security. The CCP is reacting assertively to the triggers because of the additional insecurity they bring about and their potential to impact negatively on the CCP's domestic legitimacy. Assertive actions have the advantage of appeasing domestic actors and exhibiting a clear stance towards external actors to halt further status quo changing actions.

Conclusion

With China's increasing capacities, including rising military power and a dominating economy, South China Sea claimants, and notably Vietnam in the Paracel Islands dispute, will have to become more alert to potential Chinese spikes of assertiveness in the region. The reactive approach outlined in this essay offers insight into China's own security perception regarding the Paracel Islands dispute since the 2008-2009 financial crisis. The two-step model reactive approach of looking inward, then outward, highlights that the CCP is making decisions in a setting of high domestic insecurity. The status-quo changing external triggers put even more pressure on the CCP, leading the decision-makers to react assertively to triggers in the territorial dispute, notably to avoid signs of CCP weakness. The CCP is therefore first reacting to the internal factors leading to greater legitimacy insecurity, then to the external triggers creating the second layer of insecurity, leading to assertiveness.

Five limitations should be taken into consideration regarding the reactive approach to China's growing assertiveness in the Paracel Islands conflict since the global financial turmoil of 2008-2009. The first is methodological in nature. This study attempts to evaluate China's security perception of the conflict. Because of language restrictions, most sources used involved translated quotes or already formulated analysis of Chinese behaviour. There were, moreover, difficulties associated with studying the rationale behind the CCP's foreign policy due to the lack of transparency in its decision-making process. The second limitation involves the application of the reactive approach model advanced in this essay to only one case. The reactive approach is used to explain China's actions in the Paracels on the basis of specific internal structural factors

(resource needs, popular nationalism, uncoordinated decision-making) and “red line” trigger factors, namely actions on the part of Vietnam and the US likely to alter the status quo. This specific model may or may not be applicable to China’s other maritime conflicts. It would be worthwhile to attempt to apply the general causal links between internal insecurity and international trigger factors to explain other instances of assertiveness. A third limitation concerns the limited time period, the five years since the 2008-2009 financial crisis, used to explore this reactive approach. It would also be useful to see how the internal and trigger factors might be modified when a longer time period is taken into consideration. The fourth limitation is that the reactive approach gives a general explanation of China’s more frequent assertiveness in the Paracels. It does not specifically explain the causal logic behind each of China’s assertive actions. The reactive approach’s two-step causal logic allows for a more general explanation of China’s insecurities and how they are triggered. Again, it would be worth considering a wider range of cases in more varied settings. For example, could such an analysis be applied to other communist regimes, one-party states or even multi-party states facing internal issues of legitimacy in territorial disputes? The final limitation concerns the complexity of establishing lines of causality. This is always difficult in social sciences and even more so here because of strong interrelationships between the variables. Further analysis might reveal that the causality works in a different way from one incident to another – some sparked more by the lack of internal coordination, others by planned assertiveness in relation to popular nationalism or by overriding concerns about resource quests in changing international circumstances (ex. how what is happening with the Spratlys might impact the Paracels or how the influence of US pivot might impact on rising popular nationalism).

This essay has sought to provide an integrated approach that unpacks causality, i.e. how the second-step triggers strengthen the effects of the first-step internal structural factors on the CCP, and that all the factors seem to be working in the same direction since 2008-2009. The two-step model illustrates the importance of studying the effects of both internal and external factors, and how they all tend to encourage greater assertiveness from the CCP in the Paracel Islands dispute since 2008-2009. The internal factors encourage the CCP's greater insecurity and the external factors act in addition to this structural condition to spur an assertive reaction to external triggers. Further research might seek to apply the two-step model to China's other territorial conflicts such as the Spratly Islands dispute, for example, which involves not only Vietnam but also other ASEAN countries, to establish if a pattern exists. It would be interesting to uncover the external reactive triggers involved in the case of the Spratly Islands and whether they provoke similar reactions from CCP decision-makers.

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