

China: Reasons Behind Its Political and Military Expression in the South China Sea

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Abstract. *The purpose of this research paper is to prove that China's policy towards the South China Sea represents a preemptive measure based on reducing China's energetic security threat concerning a potential blockade of the Malacca Strait by the US or India, in case of conflict escalation. By proving so, researchers will better understand the issues concerning the South China Sea and give insight into a perspective that is not largely debated. The strategy that was approached in this research and the methodology used was descriptive, analytical deductive. We followed to analyze a wide range of books and articles that are references in the domain. The results seem to prove that China's policy towards the South China Sea is directed towards multiple goals, such as avoiding containment, fighting for resources, protection of its energy security in the Malacca Strait and establishing itself as hegemon in the region. In those aspects, China's action in the South China Sea can be explained on the basis of achieving the means of attaining those certain goals. The hypothesis seems to stand to the degree in which a war would break out. Achieving sovereignty over the region, would endanger the passage of essential energetic inputs for relevant regional actors and for the US, and can be used as a back-up plan of blackmailing those actors in the situation in which China's oil ship imports would be blocked in the Malacca Strait. Until then, China's actions in the South China Sea can be seen as the necessary steps to achieve this leverage in their position with the US and other regional powers. Therefore, we can state that China's policy towards the South China Sea can represent a preemptive measure based on reducing China's energetic security threat concerning a potential blockade of the Malacca Strait by the US or India, in case of conflict escalation.*

Keywords: *South China Sea, Malacca Strait, energy security, national security, Sea Lines of Communications, military development, territorial disputes, resources.*

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Introduction

The international as well as the regional environment, in our case, the Southeast Asia, has been shaped by the transformation that came along with the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold war, bringing new realities to which states have to adapt in order to assure their security and therefore their existence. Timed with the Soviet Union's collapse, the withdrawal of the Soviet Bloc (from Vietnam) and of the US from Indochina created a vacuum of power in the Southeast Asia, which, as history tells us, has to be occupied by another power. Therefore, taking in consideration the delicate situation from the South China Sea, China, as the major actor in the region, opted for a foreign policy that was deemed aggressive by other claimants in order to assert its sovereignty claims over parts of the South China Sea, namely on the Paracel, Spratly, Pratas Islands and the Macclesfield Bank.

Moreover, China's military power has grown considerably, in the same time modernizing its maritime paramilitary forces, as well as their naval capabilities in order to enforce its sovereignty and jurisdiction claims, if necessary, by force in the area under analysis. Furthermore, it is considered that the development of its capabilities renders the US forces useless, further potentially denying access of the US Navy in the western Pacific.

The following research tries to clarify to what extent China's policy towards the South China Sea represents a preemptive measure based on reducing China's energetic security threat concerning a potential blockade of the Malacca Strait by the US or India, in case of conflict escalation. We argue that this may be due to the fact that the Malacca Strait is considered to be Achilles heel. In the case in which a war breaks out, the Malacca Strait could be blocked, therefore endangering China's energy oil supplies from the Middle East that pass through the Strait in a proportion of approximately 80%.

Thus, China's actions in the South China Sea can be seen and understood as a backup plan based on endangering the world trade that passes through the area in the case in which the Malacca Strait would be shut down for its vessels in case of war/conflict escalation. Furthermore, there could be the situation that China's foreign policy considering the South China Sea focuses on the resources that are known to be found in the area. China's interest in the resources can be also based on the situation of the Malacca Strait in case of war, as it can have resources at its near disposal in the case in which its supplies from the Middle East are endangered.

I. Location and geostrategic position and relevance of the South China Sea

1.1. Location

The South China Sea covers around 3.5 million square km, encompassing vital sea routes that link the Indian Ocean to the Pacific. It is bordered in the North by mainland China, in the East by the Philippines, West by Vietnam, Malaysia to the South West and two Malaysian states of Sabah and Saravak to the South as well as Brunei Barussalam

(Rowley, 2013). The four areas of adjacent waters are known to be the Gulf of Thailand located between Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, the Gulf of Tonkin, between Vietnam and China, the Sulu Sea that is located between the Sabah, Palawan Islands and the Sulu archipelago as well as the Visayas and the Strait of Malacca (Rowley, 2013).

In the region, we encounter three groups of islands as well a submerged banks that are known to be disputed by various claimants: Xisha Quando, Nansha Quando, Donsha Quando and Zhongsha Quando, which translated in English are the Paracel Islands, the Spratly Island, the Pratas Islands and the Macclesfield Bank (Rowley, 2013). Six entities have certain claims in the disputed area, including China, which in economic and military terms, is the strongest of all.

There are many issues that are known to have increased the tensions among the adjacent states, two of them and the most relevant and discussed in the specialty literature and media seem to be the resources that the area known to be found and the relevance of the area in terms of the security to regional and world trade (Rowley, 2013).

1.2. Geostrategic position and relevance

As stated above, the South China Sea is known to have an important geostrategic position as it links the Indian Ocean with the Pacific, representing one of the most vital economic routes for global trade and energy shipment. The argument regarding the relevance of its geostrategic position is further strengthening by the existence in the southern part of the area of two major world ports, namely Shanghai and Hong Kong.

Another aspect that is relevant to our research paper is the fact that all principal routes and traffic lanes in the South China Sea (SCS) pass near or over the disputed islands (Paracel). Other islands such as Nansha Islands have the same characteristics and relevance as the Paracel. According to Rowley (2013), "in theory, occupation of the Nansha Islands leads to a direct or indirect control of most transits from the Strait of Malacca to Japan, from Singapore to Honk Kong and from Guangzhou to Manila, thus these features have a strategic stronghold over the entire SCS" (p. 6).

As stated above, the sea lines of communication (SLOC) in the South China Sea are vital for world trade and regional trade. It is known that more than half of the world's merchant fleet (by tonnage) passes thru the region every year, especially thru the Strait of Malacca. More than 40.000 vessels sail thru annually and also a considerably large percentage of fuel is transported by the sea from Middle East and the African continent to Japan, China and South Korea thru the SCS (Rowley, 2013).

Taking in consideration those aspects, the SCS is considered to be of high relevance to the claimants, but we will focus more on China in this research paper. It represents an important corridor that connects China with the outside world. Over 90% of China's foreign trade is sea-borne and more than half of its transactions by value occur via the SCS.

II. The historical background of the geopolitical environment and the Chinese historical perspective

II.1. Geopolitical environment – historical background

Many scholars argue that one important factor that is known to affect the outcomes concerning the SCS issues from mid 1950s until nowadays is the geopolitical environment of the region. Geopolitical issues in this case include power politics expressed between China, USA, the Soviet Union (Russian Federation) and the development of ASEAN, as a regional organization (Rowley, 2013).

When the world was divided into two spheres of influence after the Second World War, namely the communist and non-communist sphere, the two Great Powers (USA and USSR) that represented those sphere did not occupy any feature in the Nansha Islands, but they were involved in the dispute at a different extent, by maintaining the balance of power in the region. By doing so, it can lead to a direct influence of the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region and over the overall international political order. Therefore, an alignment of this type had enormous implications over the region. In those terms, from a strategic point of view, the United States contained China in order to prevent the communist forces from gaining military advantages, as it considered the People's Republic of China to be an ally of the Soviet Union (until the border dispute between China and the Soviet Union from 1969 was known at international level). Thus the USA believed that by containing China they would contain the Soviet Union (Rowley, 2013). In order to do so, the USA signed in 1954 a Mutual Defense Treaty with Taiwan, and entered into Southeast Asia Defense Treaty with other states such as France, Britain, Thailand, the Philippines, Australia, Pakistan and New Zealand in Manila. Therefore, China's policies and actions taken in response to the Paracel disputes seem to meet the constrain of the US containment policy, from 1950s throughout the 1960s. China wished that the USA would maintain its presence in Indochina so as to deter the USSR, the former activating in Vietnam, with which China was in conflict over the Paracel Islands.

The collapses of the Soviet Union lead to a significant change in the regional strategic balance of power, as both Great Powers withdraw from the area. Researchers and scholars believed that this certain well timed dual withdrawal had left the region with a political and military power vacuum. From a geopolitical perspective, this seemed to be the case, but it didn't take long for this vacuum of power to be occupied, as China started to emerge as a strong state entity from an economic and military perspective, filling in the vacuum that was created. It is believed that China started to emerge as a relevant maritime power since 2010. It is from that year that the US started to express its increased interests in the SCS, in order to keep the balance of power or tilt so that China does not hold hegemony over the region (Rowley, 2013).

II.2. Chinese historical perspective

From a Chinese perspective, and based on evidence, the SCS group of islands were first discovered and named by the Chinese state, and remained under its sphere of administration until the colonial occupation. Furthermore, China also recovered after the Second World War four islands groups from Japan, which strengthens those arguments.

Sovereignty and sovereign rights over the four islands groups in the SCS in Chinese perspective are constituted by historical factors as the discovery, naming and continue usage and projection of state authority. From this perspective, China may be entitled to its grievances in what concerns obtaining the sovereignty over the disputed islands (Rowley, 2013). Furthermore, no other state that is involved in the dispute can come up with such strong evidence in order to support its claims of sovereignty over the disputed islands. Many individuals criticized Chinese ancient records due to the fact that they are not sufficiently convincing and strong enough when it comes to supporting such claims of “routine occupation, effective administration or assertion of sovereign control” over the Nansha Islands (Paracel Islands).

Although, an important aspect that has to be taken in consideration when it comes to the weakness of such evidence is the fact that China’s ancestral territorial concept, sovereignty, had its basis on the loyalty of the people that were ruled, and not on a clear delineated national boundary as suggested by the Westphalia system. Moreover, China’s tributary system is strongly related with such a concept, as it is known to have been established with the consent and even the free will of tributary states. Taking in consideration the fact that the dominant international order way back in time in what concerns East Asia was characterized by a Sino centric tributary system, China didn’t need to practice sovereignty based on the criteria of a modern international legal system (Rowley, 2013). Although the UNCLOS does not contain any provision that defines historic rights or relevant regimes to determine sovereignty over the disputed territories, we have to take into consideration that history cannot be overlooked and nation-states cannot abandon such rights when ratifying the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea.

III. The dispute and different perspectives of state entities that clash

III.1. The dispute

The dispute over the political jurisdiction of the Nansha Islands (the Paracel Islands) between the People’s Republic of China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and the Philippines is known to have been triggered by a continuous established human presence and activity on those certain islands and reefs (Martin, 2003).

The dispute is known to be further complicated by the entitlement to a 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ) under the UN Convention on the Law of the SEA

(UNCLOS) from 1982. If we take in consideration the UNCLOS regime of the EEZ, if one gains sovereignty over any part of land of the Paracel Islands it achieves a great strategic relevance. This is due to the fact that if such features are proven to be legitimate, in the end they will generate and provide their own continental shelves and therefore their own EEZ (Rowley, 2013).

China's sovereignty claims regarding the disputed area involves two different types of dispute in which it acts with the other claimants. Its claims in what concerns the Paracel Islands involve a certain degree a bilateral dispute with Vietnam for the areas that are not claimed by other Southeast Asian countries, while having a multilateral dispute over areas that are claimed by the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei. As Chris Rowley states (2013), "even before the land features of the Nansha Islands are proven to be qualified to generate EEZ and continental shelves, potential overlapping claims over the Nansha Islands has become an issue which certainly intensifies the territorial disputes over the islands" (p. 5).

Furthermore, because of the speculations regarding an impressive reserve of hydrocarbon resources, the topic is regarded as being of high relevance in what concerns the natural resources. We will further see that different entities gave different values in what concerns the quantity of hydrocarbon resources known to be found in the seabed of the South China Sea. Therefore the delimitation of the area between disputants is thought to be one of the sources of the conflict in this matter.

III.2. Understanding the importance of the disputes

The view over the situation in the SCS seems to be shared also by Enrico Fels and Truanq Minh Vu (2016), namely that "by attempting to incorporate the SCS into the People's Republic of China as sovereign and undisputed territory, Beijing would essentially be able to put strategic pressure on SLOCs important for three regional US Allies, namely Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, also gaining a potentially energy-rich area at its doorstep, thus further reducing Chinese dependency on ship based energy transports from the Middle East and Africa (which are strategically vulnerable to other nation's naval assets)" (p. 4). We can further argue here that Beijing will not only put pressure on Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, but on the entire world global trade, thus, affecting other major actors such as the US and India. We can state that the former are not that interested in the resources that are found in the SCS rather than on the importance of maintaining the SLOCs secure for their vessels and world trade. In our perspective, as we will further demonstrate in the resource paper, China's reasoning in what concerns the resources can be either secondary as importance or as important as controlling the SLOCs.

It seems that the approach towards the SCS also relates to China's strategic rivalry with the US, as the different perspectives between Beijing and Washington seem to collide in issues related to the freedom of navigation and the ambiguous reliability of the US

alliance system established after 1945, among other things (Fels & Vu, 2016). What is noteworthy, is that China's long and enormous economic growth gave the opportunity and necessary time for Beijing to finance and manage impressive military capabilities, that would allow the PLA to obtain operational abilities and advantages thru which China would prevail in a military encounter close to its borders with US forces, such as the status of Taiwan (Fels & Vu, 2016). By further attaining sovereignty over the disputed areas, those operational abilities and advantages would be considerably increased, as it would maintain at a certain distance from mainland China any foreign army with which it could clash by Sea.

III.3. Pushing the West out

Although the control and domination of the SCS are known to be the main motives for China's actions and behavior, its actions in what concerns the SCS are believed to be based on a desire to settle score arising from extended humiliations.

Following thousands of years of development, China was a progressive civilization that most of the entities envied. In 1949, at the end of the Chinese Civil War, the West contributed to the decline and division of once a great China into two China's. Besides this unfortunate event in the Chinese history, there seem to be other factors that should also be taken into consideration. As the Qing dynasty in East Asia was on the verge of disintegration during the 19th century, China lost parts of its territory to states such as Russia, France, Britain and Japan. Later, Japan is known to have returned to seize Manchuria and the Shandong Peninsula. Therefore, in this so-called century of humiliation, from 1839 to 1949, China experienced considerable losses of sovereignty because of the Western powers, many of which enforced extra-territorial arrangements to facilitate trade and avoid legal prosecution, in the form of treaties. China suffered seriously as a consequence of the behavior of Western powers, so seriously, that by the late 1930s, there were fears that China would cease to exist as a nation. Some state that this dark episode of China's history will not cease until Taiwan is reunified with mainland China. Therefore, we can argue that China's actions and interests in the SCS is a sign, a message that it will no longer abide by the rules of others (Bateman & Emmers, 2008).

It seems that a viable option for China to regain its patrimony, namely Taiwan and the South China Sea, is to push the US out of the Asia Pacific region, as it is the only actor that could deter China at the moment and stand behind their goal. From a broader perspective, if we are looking into China's maritime disputes over the disputed islands, we can observe that beginning with 2002, all its claims reveal that it will work with the countries from ASEAN in order to limit tensions regarding the islands and solve all differences in a peaceful manner. In particular, even doe Taipei is one of the major claimants of these disputed islands and possesses several of them – Taiwan is specifically excluded from this agreement. This seems to pave the way for China to resort to

force in the South China Sea. It reveals that China does not want any foreign power to intervene in those affairs and engages in multilateral discussions with the claimants rather than bilateral (Bateman & Emmers, 2008).

China seems to be carrying out a naval strategy through which it exerts and extends regional maritime control. This statement is based on the development of its communications, intelligence, gathering and naval supply structures found on its bases from the islands of the South China Sea. It wishes to create all-purpose bases on certain strategically placed offshore islands and linked them with a modern electronic communication network instead of investing in a project of which progress would take way too long to put into use. If we take into consideration the past, China will not oscillate or hesitate in whether or not to take a certain action against what it clearly perceives as an threat and constrain to its status of a great power, if a military conflict would erupt. Therefore, we can expect that China can and may adopt a more aggressive policy, based on Chinese surface ships, naval air, submarines and marine forces, taking advantage and making use of these strategic bases located on the islands from the SCS in order to support further expansion (Bateman & Emmers, 2008).

Although the regional climate of competition in the SCS in what concerns the sovereignty of certain islands, together with the memories from the “century of humiliation” that haunts China, makes China’s maritime frontier a strategic necessity, overcoming certain technical shortcomings in its naval forces puts China in a difficult position. In order to guarantee its position and claims, it would have to overcome certain technical shortcoming in its naval forces that are considered to be serious. This is due to the fact that from a military perspective, it cannot engage and challenge simultaneously all of the claimants, but it is perhaps developing a long term maritime strategy in order to overcome those challenges. As the region is known to be an ideal place for a US lead coalition to contain China, the People’s Republic considered that having good relations with ASEAN would keep away the US. Thus, as stated above, the Chinese state proposed that no other foreign entity should intervene in the territorial disputes (Bateman & Emmers, 2008).

Some researchers claim that China may wish to acquire the extensive hegemonic power that the USA wielded over the western hemisphere after securing control of the Caribbean Basin. The reasoning behind this claim may be that if the USA did it, then China can do it as well thru the assets and islands in the SCS. In this perspective, China may imagine a situation in which its neighbors’ are free to act as they wish when it comes to running their own governments, but making clear that Chinese ideas and views need to be given complete consideration and must prevail over and above any proposals by foreign actors. The only difficulty that China may encounter in what concerns this certain wish is Japan’s position, as it will not tolerate Chinese hegemony at any degree (Bateman & Emmers, 2008).

III.4. The “China Threat” Argument – A Chinese perspective

China has started to exert an increase geopolitical pressure on other entities in the region in what concerns its development in political, economic and military terms. The claim that China poses a threat was widely popular and it seems it still is in the Southeast Asia. Various Chinese researches claim that China is perceived as an ambitious rival for dominance over the disputed area, and this is mostly due to the Cold War mentality that seems to be deeply established (Wu & Zou, 2009).

According to Chinese scholars, China represents a constitute force for regional security, as being in the position of an emerging power with a strong sense of responsibility. On various occasions Chinese leaders are known to have expressed that the People's Republic of China has no intention to fill in the “strategic vacuum” left behind after the almost simultaneous retreat of the Great Powers in the 1990s. In those circumstances, we can claim that Chinese arguments towards this perspective are strongly countered by its policy and by the measures taken when acting in the disputed region.

Furthermore, Chinese scholars Wu and Zou (2009) further argue that with the support of China's great economic development and social stability, it has adopted diplomatic measures and initiatives in order to firmly promote a new security perspective, with the purpose of improving the general security situation in the disputed area. They argue that in those aspects, the Chinese leaders have started to visit numerous ASEAN nations, signed political protocols, and also maintain a political position that favors the conduct of dialog and cooperation with all parties concerned (although a counter argument here is that they did not include Taiwan). Moreover, scholars also claim that through the ASEAN Regional Forum, the People's Republic of China seeks to establish a mechanism of confidence building. The Chinese state is following the guidelines and directions of a foreign policy that helps to facilitate higher levels of economic, security and political cooperation in Asia. The foreign policy is based and guided on the friendship and great neighbor policy promoted by President Hu Jintao. Therefore, in Chinese perspective, the People's Republic of China represents opportunity to the Southeast Asia, rather than threats, and that countries concerned should collaborate and work hand in hand with the Chinese state in order to effectively strengthen the security in the region.

IV. Energy and the South China Sea

IV.1. Energy security

The concept of energy security is closely tied to resource security due to the fact that the means of transportation such as vehicles, ships and planes run on hydrocarbons, thus, in order to transport and deliver the inputs you need to use hydrocarbons. Because of the globalized trade and the dependency on it, energy security represents more than an economic problem for states. It is a diplomatic, military and political issue. China's energy insecurity concerns are directly related and connected to its dependence on

foreign oil. The oil is traded in international markets as a commodity and its price is influenced by various factors such as supply and demand dynamics, geopolitics and wars (Caceres, 2013).

Due to the fact that most oil shipments that come to China arrive by sea, Chinese government officials consider that the control and protection of SLOCs is a state priority, particularly choke points that could be interdicted. The probability and the risk of having essential inputs cut off or endangered represents a vital concern for China as it would affect its economy and therefore its development. Taking in consideration those aspects, China's economic engine is considered a strategic vulnerability and, therefore, influences Chinese officials in what concerns the decision making process regarding regional and international relations.

As Chinese supply and demand for key energy sources such as oil is threatened by imbalances and uncertainties, China engages in conflicts with neighbors' over maritime and territorial disputes in the SCS, searching to reduce this energy security threat either by finding alternative source or by assuring the security of the SLOCs in what concerns their inputs. Therefore, China's motives are various and depend on many factors such as resource security, potential income from the sale of the resources, averting the US and Japanese influence in Asia, being perceived as a core (and not as peripheral) point of contact to address regional challenges, and protecting the lifeline of China's economic success: free and open trade with the world (Caceres, 2013).

All types of governments, autocratic, authoritarian or democratic – consider oil security as an inherent component of their national interests. The dominant rationale behind China's energy security policy is its quest to confidently secure foreign oil supplies. This is due to the fact that the Government perceives the increasing dependence on foreign oil as a strategic vulnerability. China's approach towards its oil security is geostrategic and politically driven and it is based on:

1. A pragmatic participation in the international oil market, while at the same time attempting to resist against price volatility and supply disruptions;
2. A strong reliance on state-owned entities, in order to attain national strategic interests and advantageous decision-making that take place within a tactical framework that is designed to deepen and strengthen the dominance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Chinese energy companies (Caceres, 2013).

In order for China to ensure political legitimacy and social stability, it must keep annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth at about 8% and inflation below 5%. For this rate of economic growth to be sustained, Chinese officials need to ensure that oil supply disruptions, or even the risk, are either eliminated or kept at minimum. The Chinese Government has responded to the challenge of potential oil shortages by driving a state-led effort directed to reducing its perceived vulnerabilities.

From a rational point of view, the challenge that the Chinese Government is facing is to better manage its dependence on oil and to define a sustainable energy security path, rather than simply to seek resources beneath the SCS. The fight for resources that may be found beneath the shores of the SCS may not be worth the risk of engaging into conflict with other countries. Thus, this comes as an argument that its actions in the SCS are preemptive and are directed towards assuring a sustainable energy security path, rather than strictly directed towards the resources found in the SCS.

IV.2. The impact of the SCS on the security of China's energy transportation

As stated above, due to the rising oil imports and as well as on the SLOCs, the South China Sea is of great importance to China's energy security. Therefore, in order to protect the security of the SLOCs in what concerns its oil imports, we see that it started to look for other alternative routes, by constructing other ports that would facilitate the shipment of its oil. Such ports that are under construction with Chinese support include Gwadar Port in Pakistan, Shiite Port In Myanmar, and Chittagong Port in Bangladesh and Habantota in Sri Lanka (Bateman & Emmers, 2008). Taking in consideration the strategic importance and relevance of the South China Sea to China's national, economic and energy security, we can expect that it will not give up on its sovereignty claims in the region.

Furthermore, as a strengthening argument to the statement that China's national, economic and energy security interest collide in the SCS, the Vice Chairman of the Military Commission of the Central Committee of the CCP, Liu Huaqing, wanted to develop the Chinese navy in the early 1990s, claiming that the most probable place to wage a war in the near future is the South China Sea. In this situation, he emphasized the need of having an aircraft carrier battle group, which along with assuring its national and economic interests, would also be vital for safeguarding the oceanic rights and benefits of the People's Republic of China, namely its energy security (Bateman & Emmers, 2008).

If an armed conflict would erupt in the SCS because of jurisdictional and territorial disputes, the cut down of SLOCs is a certain probability, and this in turn would severely affect the economic interests of states from the Asia Pacific including the US. This is due to the fact that over half of the worlds' merchant fleet (by tonnage) passes through the South China Sea every year, especially from the Strait of Malacca. China seems to know this, and they act without too much restrains and this could be the reason why they act in the way they do in the SCS. It is a backup plan for them in case its energy supplies coming from the Strait of Malacca would be in danger or blocked in case of conflict escalation in the region. It could be a mean to blackmail in such situations.

States with considerable military and economic capabilities are considered to be reluctant to use force against each other when it comes to the energy sector according to some strategic planners. "Energy security" is considered nowadays to be vital to "national security", to such extent that threats to the former are liable to be reflexively

interpreted as threats to the later. One of the most alarming prospects facing the international system nowadays is considered to be large-scale armed clashes that could arise due to the access to energy resources. This is mostly due to the fact that resources are starting to be scarce and states such as China seem to have a “huge appetite” for those types of resources (Moran & Russell, 2004)

V. Explaining China’s military development

V.1. China’s strategic thinking

China’s strategic thinking is known to be comprehensive and holistic in prospect. It is linked to the country’s internal security, and political and economic needs. In this regard, we can see that China’s primary concern in the post-Cold War era was internal rather than external.

Beijing has further consolidated its strategic position in the SCS through the construction of four concrete structures on Mischief Reef in February 1995. The PLA Navy can monitor closely the passage of ships along the Palawan international waterway, between Mischief Reef and Palawan island (Kim, 1998). China believes that the strategic order in the Asia-Pacific region will be shaped by the US, Russia, Japan and China, who will be the most relevant player in this game. In China’s perspective, China’s strategic concerns shifts from the strategic security challenges it faced from the two superpowers in Northeast Asia in the 1960s to regional and territorial conflicts emerging from East and South East Asia and its southwestern borders. This is mostly due to the shifting towards a multipolar system after the Cold War. Although, China considers that peace is a necessity for it as it can further concentrate on economic growth and military modernization (Kim, 1998).

V.2. China’s military growth

Taking in consideration that in 1991, the USA spent around 25 times more money on defense than China, the Chinese state is now considered to be the 2nd state in the world in what concerns the investment in the military department. The difference between the two states in this perspective has been reduced nowadays, as the US is considered to be spending around three times more than China, which is considered to be a significant progress (640 billion US \$ vs. 188 billion US \$ in 2013). In the period from 2004 to 2013, the US defense budget has grown around 12 %, while the Chinese budget is considered to have grown by 170% in the same timeline (Fels & Vu, 2016).

In 2013 China had almost half of the combined defense budgets of Asian-Pacific nations (407 billion USD). In addition to those described above, it has considerably improved its maritime forces, forces that are considered to be of great importance in its approach in what concerns addressing maritime disputes. Therefore, such dynamics are considered to pose a challenge to the US position in the Asia Pacific.

China's military growth also can be explained to how various officials from the American administration regarded China throughout the years. For example, the Clinton Administration saw China as a "strategic partner", a relation that was filled with tensions since the mid-1990s because of the Taiwan Contingency Crisis and other aspects. George W. Bush Administration saw China as a "strategic competitor", although this certain administration managed to establish a healthy working relationship with China after a couple of years. In the end, the Obama Administration decided for a "pivot to Asia", with the purpose of rebalancing military assets and diplomatic attention. Foreign Policy experts speculate that this would finally lead to the appearance of new points of stress and heighten competition with the Chinese state for influence in the region (Fels & Vu, 2016).

The initiative of Obama Administrations can be better understood if we take in consideration Thomas E. Danilo's statement, at that time Obama's national security advisor, which underlined the importance of Asia-Pacific to the US by stating that "the US is a Pacific power whose interests are inextricably linked with Asia's economic, security and political order. America's success in the 21 century is tied to the success of Asia. Therefore, when analyzing the issues concerning the SCS, we have to take in consideration that in the prospect of a global and regional process of shifting economic and military capabilities, the sovereignty question is just an argument between China and the claimants, but if we look in a broader perspective we see that it also involves the competition between the US and China (Fels & Vu, 2016).

The "rules of the game" that assured the freedom of navigation in the area seem to be challenged by the confrontation of different visions regarding the topic. It seems to be clear that there is an attempt in reshaping the "rules of the game", but the uncertainty that arises is who will exert influence to a greater extent in the region. It is believed that China may form new "rules" that would ultimately seek to limit the ability of foreign vessels to move freely in the region.

This development seems to provide at least four major challenges but I will briefly discuss one that is relevant for the research and which is directly related to US interests (Fels & Vu, 2016).

According to many official and semi-official American documents, the main priority for the USA is to maintain the freedom of navigation in the region. Although the US affirms its position as an outsider to the region without having any sort of claims, it is well known that it has interest in stability of the region and in the norm based behavior. In those circumstances, the US also tries to maintain its neutrality in what concerns the territorial disputes, although, it is very difficult not to take any side in this matter, as your interest collide to some degree with the main player, namely China.

In those circumstances, we can affirm that since 2009, the US is balancing between focusing on the legal upholding of the freedom of navigation while in the same time

remaining neutral to the sovereignty based disputes. As stated above, taking in consideration the pressure that comes from China, such a position would be very difficult to combine and uphold in the long run. Moreover, some argue that the US can only solve this situation if it gives up on its neutrality. Either way, because of the general strategic competition with China, its position of neutrality seems to be compromised. Although the freedom of navigation is of main relevance for the USA in the disagreement with the People's Republic of China, it also has to uphold the defense Treaty signed with Japan and the Philippines against Chinese threats (Fels & Vu, 2016).

As recently stated in the research paper, the economic growth of the People's Republic of China relies in great degree on the imports of raw material and on the export of its products, therefore the security of the SLOCs is of extreme relevance to Chinese shipping. Around 80% of its imported oil passes via the Strait of Malacca, which is portrayed as being the life line of the state. If such strategic SLOCs were to be controlled by certain state entities, the development of the People's Republic of China as well as its national security could be under great threat. Thus, the buildup of Chinese naval capabilities in order to protect its energy security in the Strait of Malacca can only be seen as being of vital interest for the state (Fels & Vu, 2016).

According to a Chinese analyst, taking in consideration the experience of the Second World War, maritime states possess a distinct advantage over continental states in what concerns the ability to mobilize the necessary resources in time of war. According to this statement, we can assume that the reason why China's is building up its naval capabilities is so that it can be prepare to dispatch at any time the necessary resources in case of conflict escalation, so that its energy supply would not be hindered (Fels & Vu, 2016). It seems that more and more security analysts from China seem to share the same vision in what concerns the need of a powerful navy. One states that "if China doesn't have a powerful navy, it will certainly not have a great future". Therefore, more and more security analysts from China argue that the sea power has to be treated with maximum interest and attention, as those who pose such capabilities possess in the same time a stronger position to defeat their enemies, maintain a great power status and also safeguard their security and interests. Such view seems to lead us into acknowledging that the Chinese state is willing to defeat any enemy and maintain their status of great power with all means necessary. Such a view is also shared by the actual president Xi Jinping and the former Hu Jintao, who had advocated the building of China as a naval power in this century (Fels & Vu, 2016).

Developing China as a maritime power is considered to be an important part for Chinese leaders in fulfilling their "China dream". Some authors, such as Robert Ross, argues that the Chinese naval policy is driven by what he calls "naval nationalism", representing a form of "prestige" that is pursued by government in order to seek a greater domestic legitimacy (Fels & Vu, 2016, p. 124).

V.3. China's new security doctrine

Since 1998, China is known to have developed a new National Security Doctrine. The doctrine is based on premises such as:

- Regional dialogue and cooperation as being the best way through which to ensure peace and security, taking in consideration the multipolarity of the Asia-Pacific region and the rest of the world.
- Measures that promote confidence-building and border agreements with neighboring countries in order to improve the existing relations.
- Deeper collaboration with the Russian Federation in order to counterbalance the international posture of the US, related to peace enforcement and weapons control. Here we see China is trying to vanquish the US from the SCS, while in the past it wanted them to stay longer in Indochina at the detriment of Russian retreat.
- Implementing a new regional diplomacy based on "anti-hegemony" so as to shape a regional security environment in which the US alliance system is no longer necessary or relevant (Connors, Davidson, & Rosch, 2004).

Thus we can state that this NSC possesses a direct threat and challenge to the regional security diplomacy promoted by the United States. It also reveals that the main issue between the US and China remains a political-military one, rather than economic in its nature, due to the counter hegemonic behavior and challenges that are directed towards US's traditional dominance in the region (Connors *et al.*, 2004). As security against any external or internal threats is vital for prosperity and stability of any state, China seeks both of them. Power and control of natural resources is providing this sense of security (Caceres, 2013).

Many foreign diplomats and government officials are suspicious and concerned about the significant increase in China's military power. It is here important to underline the fact that taking in consideration China's heavily dependence on foreign oil that comes from the Middle East and Africa, the Chinese state is more concerned and willing to engage with the South China Sea routes that are used by its oil tankers, as well as with the ones from the Indian Ocean, the Strait of Malacca and the Taiwan Strait. Chinese officials believe that in the case in which its oil supply lines are blocked in case of conflict escalation, China will face an energy and economic crisis. Therefore, some argue that the buildup of China's navy is directed to protecting its commercial ships and oil tankers and to verse shared shipping routes (Caceres, 2013).

This new naval strategy is known to encompass defensive as well as offensive approaches. In this aspect, China is focusing on forging strategic relationships along sea lanes that run from the Middle East to the South China Sea, in order to protect its commercial and energy interest. Moreover, it has close collaborations with Pakistan in what concerns future infrastructure projects, with Myanmar so as to establish radar systems and to

build airstrips, and also with Bangladesh in what concerns naval facilities (Caceres, 2013). Furthermore, China has access to several Burnese offshore islands in the Indian Ocean, due to tis military cooperation with Burma. This cooperation gives the Chinese state strategic leverage in the Malacca Strait and in Southeast Asia. If we speculate that China would seize control of the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, it would control the Japanese access to the resources from the Middle East and from European markets (Moran & Russell, 2004). It is obvious that the People's Republic of China wishes to construct its own capabilities to secure critical sea lanes that are vital for its security, but in the same time it seems they are willing to continue to cooperate at a certain degree with Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Europe, Japan and the US in order to keep the SLOCs (including straits) open.

The Strait of Malacca is a narrow, 500-mile stretch of water between the Malay Peninsula and the island of Sumatra, Indonesia. Oil Shipments coming from the Indian Ocean all the way to East Asia have to pass through the Strait of Malacca and the SCS. The volume maritime traffic passing through this strait is reported to be greater than that sailing through the Panama Canal and Suez Canal. In terms of trade, the strait is of significant relevance given that those exports to and imports from Europe and Central, South and West Asia have to pass through those choke points, where there is always the risk of interdiction, mostly in times of conflict escalation in the region. Due to the fact that China depends heavily on oil imports to sustain economic growth, it is easy to understand why China might be interested in controlling or securing this global sea route. Therefore, due to the various potential threats in what concerns the vital sea lanes, China inclines to address this "evolving situation" unilaterally as the Government moves to modernize its military force (Caceres, 2013).

Concerns related to the likelihood of blockages or closure of the Strait of Malacca has also been raise by ASEAN and the international community. Blockages or closure would lead to the immediate increase in sea freight rates that could put some low-cost producers (the case of China) at risk of losing clients and market share because their prices are no longer competitive. If we put this alongside the potential conflict in the SCS, we can certainly argue that claimants will be particularly affected, due to the fact that close to 70% of South Korea's energy imports, approximately three-fifths of Japan's and Taiwan's oil shipments, and nearly four-fifths of China's energy supplies are brought from the Indian Ocean into the Strait of Malacca and pass directly to the SCS (Caceres, 2013). Therefore, we assume that the key geostrategic relevance of the SCS is based on its geographical positioning, its function as a main maritime corridor. The Paracel and Spratly archipelagos are undeniably two of the world's most strategically important inter-ocean basins and the also serve as China's southern maritime frontier.

V.4. China's expanding Maritime Ambitions

As the Strait of Malacca represents a crucial waterway for China's maritime interests, China believes that through close co-operation with Myanmar, Pakistan and Iran, it could guarantee the security of sea-lines of communication in Southeast Asian seas and the Indian Ocean. China's leadership believes that a strategic alliance with these nations is beneficial to counter U.S. hegemony in the region as well as secure the SLOCs. The plan aims not only at China's future economic interests in the region but also at the monitoring of Indian and US naval activities in the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. In those circumstance, in order effectively apply a plan for maritime expansion into the Indian Ocean region, China has been maintaining strategic partnerships with Myanmar, Pakistan and Iran (Hyung, 2002).

In order to secure the existent strategic partnerships, China has supplied about 1.2 billion US\$ worth of weapons and other military equipment to Myanmar. In return, China has secured a profitable market for its huge defense industry and probably access to intelligence on movements from the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca SLOCs. China began to support Myanmar's naval modernization programme by providing six Hainan-class fast attack craft, and by supporting the construction of naval facilities on the Hainggyik and Great Coco Islands between 1992 and 1993. What is noteworthy is the fact that these islands are located at a geographically important point in the shipping lanes between the Bay of Bengal and the Strait of Malacca. Thus, the waterway could become in the future an important passage for commercial goods, weapons, and equipment from China to Myanmar and other Chinese allies. Moreover, if China secured a naval base in Myanmar, the Irrawaddy River waterway could provide China with necessary supplies for its naval force. As Bertil Lintner has noted: "China has already taken several steps towards establishing a trade route through Myanmar to give its Yunnan province an outlet to the Indian Ocean, which neighboring states fear that the Myanmar connection might contribute not just for trade but also for Beijing to play a significant naval role in the Indian Ocean" (Hyung, 2002, p. 553).

China's upgrading of Myanmar's naval bases on the Mergui and Coco Islands caused concerns among India and Japan. While India's concern relates to Coco Island, which is an outlet to the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea and where the Indian Navy had established presence and control, Japan's concern relates to Mergui Island as an entrance to the Malacca Strait which Japan considers to be a lifeline for its economy. China is also interested in naval facilities at Bassein (an island in the Irrawaddy River delta), which might spark-off Sino-Indian naval rivalry and constitute a negative development for ASEAN security (Hyung, 2002). India is concerned that if China were to establish a naval base in Myanmar it would have serious implications for its national security and interests. From India's point of view, the Beijing-Yangon alliance enables China to contain India between China's two allies, Myanmar and Pakistan, and effectively survey India's

naval activities in the Indian Ocean. Myanmar's geostrategic location is also of great importance for the US as well. Washington has imposed sanctions against Yangon since 1998, therefore, Beijing's "military" support directed to Yangon is a cause of concern to the US. More important, is the fact that Beijing-Yangon naval ties pose a potential threat to US naval strategy in the Malacca Strait and the Indian Ocean. If China were to have a naval base in Myanmar, Washington would reconsider its military presence in regional countries (Hyung, 2002).

V.5. China's Navy Extends its Combat Reach to the Indian Ocean

In the beginning of 2014, a Chinese surface action group (SAG) carried out a sophisticated training exercise across the SCS, eastern Indian Ocean, and the Philippine Sea. The 23 day deployment was used by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy to improve operational proficiencies for antisubmarine warfare, air defense, electronic warfare, and expeditionary logistics; train to seize disputed islands and reefs in the SCS; improve its ability to conduct integrated and multi-disciplinary operations; and prove to the Indo-Pacific region that China's combat reach now extends to the eastern Indian Ocean. Although the PLA Navy in the near term likely will not seek to develop the ability to establish sea control or sustain combat operations in the Indian Ocean against a modern navy, PLA Navy operations within weapons range of US bases and operating areas in the region probably will become more frequent as China expands and modernizes its fleet of submarines and surface combatants (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2014).

According to the PLA Navy SAG timeline of activities, in January 20, the SAG departed from a naval base on Hainan Island and then "conducted exercises for the joint submarine-ship breakthrough of "enemy" blockade zones". On the 21 and 22 of the same month, the SAG patrolled the Paracel Islands, including waters surrounding Woody Island, Duncan Island, Prattle Island, Triton Island, Lincoln Island and Momney Island. Multiple helicopters, one hovercraft, and marines from the Changbaishan formed a "vertical assault group" to conduct a "landing training exercise" on an unspecified island in the Paracel Islands (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2014). On the 23rd and 25th of January, the SAG patrolled the Spratly Islands and the SAG commander "[landed] on every reef guarded by China's navy staff". The Haikou "conducted maneuvers against submarines under assumed air threat, and commanded forces guarding reefs to conduct attack and defense drill (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2014, p. 3).

While in the proximity of James Shoal, on the 26th January the SAG personnel "swore an oath of determination to safeguard the country's sovereignty and maritime interests". The next two days the SAG passed through the Sunda Strait. At the beginning of February, the SAG conducted an exercise between Jaa and Christmas Island that "involved antip-

iracy, search and rescue, damage control and combat drills". The Changbaishan simulated an electronic warfare attack and drilled against national "enemy" airplanes and submarines, following a passage through the Lombok and Makassar straits in the next days (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2014, p. 4).

By 7th and 8th of February, the SAG organized "live-fire training" in an unspecified location in the Philippine Sea. The SAG was joined by the replenishment ship The Dongtinghu in order to conduct "logistics support exercises in realistic battle conditions [so as to] inspect comprehensive logistics support capabilities for blue water training". The Changbaishan then simulated an attack by "enemy biological and chemical weapons". After sailing for 23 days, the SAG returned to Zhanjiang Naval Base on 11th of February (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2014, p. 4). It was the first time the PLA Navy conducted a "combat readiness patrol" or "blue-water training" in the Indian Ocean through the deployment of the SAG. Although the PLA Navy has made forays into the region since at least 1985, its presence there has increased considerably over the last five years.

In order to protect Chinese commercial shipping interests, the PLA Navy has sustained counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since January 2009. This operation marked China's first operational deployment of naval forces outside of China's regional waters aside from naval diplomacy. The PLA Navy deployed maritime intelligence collection ships to the Indian Ocean for the first time in 2012. Those ships are supposed to possess equipment that enables them to collect signals and electronic intelligence, map the ocean floor, and gather bathymetric data. This suggests that the PLA Navy may be building the foundation for more routine naval operations in the near future (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2014).

In what concerns the financing and construction of civilian port infrastructure in the Indian Ocean, China has played a large role over the last couple of years. Its support is known to have been directed towards the Port of Colombo in Sri Lanka, the Port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Gwadar Port in Pakistan. Furthermore, PLA Navy counter-piracy task groups have made ports calls in at least 12 regional countries for resupply and replenishment and military-to-military engagements. Chinese investments in commercial ports in the Indian Ocean and Chinese naval diplomacy with countries in the region is considered to improve the PLA Navy's ability to replenish using regional ports and could lay the groundwork for future logistics hubs in the Indian Ocean (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2014). It can be stated that China's desire to improve its ability to combat perceived threats to sea routes vital to its economic development are without doubt reflected by the PLA Navy's growing operations in the Indian Ocean. Most of China's energy and raw materials imports travel through the Indian Ocean, including over 80% of China's crude oil imports.

Furthermore, China is known to develop operational concepts and proficiencies for more traditional expeditionary missions for its amphibious force, such as amphibious raids, direct action operations, airfield and port seizure, and seizure/recovery of personnel and materiel. A US think tank affiliated with the US Army recently issued a report exploring the deployment of land-based anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs) to land choke points in Asia. In order for such a strategy to work and be implemented, regional countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, or South Korea need to acquire systems that could partner with US C4ISR or permit the use of them on their territory. These ASCM batteries could allow the US and its partners to challenge China's maritime freedom movement in critical sea lanes in the Indian Ocean and SCS. The concept is designed to be a "complementary approach" to Air Sea Battle that employs "the same inexpensive... technologies [used in China's anti-access/area-denial strategy] to significantly raise the cost of a conflict for China and, should deterrence fail, to limit China's ability to inflict damage off the Asian mainland. The SAG transit near some of these potential ASCM deployment sites as well as its training for amphibious assaults before it reached the Indian Ocean indicate the PLA Navy is able to deploy adequate assets and combat power to conduct an amphibious raid or air strike against such ASCM batteries, if they are deployed (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2014).

India is concerned as it considers China's growing investment and activity in and around the Indian Ocean a plan designed to encircle India militarily. Most of India's naval modernization program appears to be aimed towards ensuring that India remains the dominant regional maritime power in the Indian Ocean. Over the next decade, the Indian Navy plans to expand its power projection capabilities with additional aircraft carriers, major surface combatants, diesel and nuclear-powered submarines, fighter aircraft, helicopters, and long-range surveillance aircraft. It seems that India considers its security relationship with the US as central to its efforts to deter a considerable Chinese naval presence in its traditional area of influence. The US is India's most frequent partner for security engagements that include military exercises, dialogues and exchanges. Furthermore, India is expanding its purchase of US defense item. While some issues in what concerns the bilateral security relationship exist, India may seek to strengthen cooperation with the US in order to enhance its capabilities in the detriment of China (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2014).

VI. India's implications for Southeast Asia Security and the String of Pearls

VI.1. India's Geopolitics and Southeast Asia Security

The year 2005 was the year when the Indian Navy conducted naval exercises for the first time in the SCS. India's presence in the region was seen by some as a challenge to China, as it entered its strategic waters. INS Viraat, the Indian Aircraft carrier, arrived

for the first time in the ports of Southeast Asia – Singapore, Jakarta in Indonesia and Klang in Malaysia. Two years after, in the spring of 2007, the Indian Navy conducted a series of bilateral and multilateral exercises with a number of nations that included major powers such as the US, Japan, Russia and China as well as regional actors like Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippine's after sailing to Vladivostok (Mohan, 2008).

India also expressed its interest in supporting the efforts of littoral states of the Malacca Strait, including the conduct of bilateral naval patrols, to promote security in this vital sea lane. Its recent military diplomacy is marked by large-scale naval exercises with the US, Japan, Australia, and Singapore in the Bay of Bengal. Although those operations raise awareness about a potential "Asian NATO", we can state that India is focused more on expanding its own regional profile rather than the creation of a new alliance (Mohan, 2008).

From the early 1990s, India proceeded towards a wide and institutionalized cooperation with the combatant establishments of Southeast Asian nations. In this aspect, India and Malaysia signed a memorandum of agreement on defense cooperation in 1993 under which India began to train the air force personnel of Malaysia. Also, the relation between India and Singapore in what concerns the training of Singapore military personnel expanded steadily and ultimately culminated in a more comprehensive arrangement in 2003 when the two countries signed a bilateral defense cooperation agreement. As New Delhi gave Singapore convenient and wider access to training facilities in India, in turn, India obtained for its Navy a useful arrangement through which it could frequently call at the Changi naval base. Some of the more recent agreements signed by India reflect the possibility of going beyond training to transfer of arms. An example in this case could be the strategic partnership issued by the Indian and Vietnamese prime minister in July 2007 (Mohan, 2008).

Indian policy-makers state that their aim is to expand India's strategic weight in the region and not to set up a rivalry with China. Therefore, their main objective is to emerge as a vital element in Asian balance of power. India's focus will be on simultaneous expansion of political and economic relations with all the great powers and avoid choosing sides between them. In those circumstances, we can expect a greater military and strategic content to Indo-US relationship than the Sino-Indian ties in the near future.

VI.2. The string of pearls

Many are concerned that the trade-oriented ports could be upgraded into permanent naval bases. This is mostly due to the large-scale naval modernization program implemented by China's navy. Here, we have a worst-case scenario, in which Beijing could use these bases to threaten India's security, menace global sea lanes and challenge the United States for regional naval primacy (Indian Current Affairs, 2011).

The South Asian harbors and their overland management to China will permit some Chinese-bound tankers to offload Persian Gulf oil without having to sail all the way to East Asian waters. Such arrangements will reduce China's dependence on precarious shipping routes through the Malacca Strait "choke point", where Beijing fears that its tankers could be blockaded in case of conflict escalation by US warships already deployed to the region. In the name of energy security, such facilities offer a degree of flexibility for China's otherwise vulnerable Indian Ocean supply lines- across which roughly 80% percent of Beijing's imported crude oil must travel (Indian Current Affair, 2011).

To establish a "string of pearls" one would face serious practical obstacles. In order to transforming commercial ports into defensible bases, it requires high levels of technical, logistical and strategic expertise. Although China's naval proficiency is growing, such an initiative regarding this strategic task is expected to exceed China's capabilities for at least another decade. China's navy has little experience in force projection, joint operations or sophisticated intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. It would be a difficult task to fortify distant bases with local air defenses, mine-clearing assets or munitions storage facilities, and is likely to be inefficient because of its inflexible command structure. The defense of isolated naval bases from cruise-missile strikes or airborne attacks by potential WE or Indian adversaries are probably impossible. While these scenarios are fictional and seem highly unlikely, why would China invest billions in South Asian bases that would be impotent during wartime? (Indian Current Affair, 2011).

A reason, many argue, may be that China's base-building ambitions and initiatives are largely defensive in nature and are designed to equilibrate China's sea-lane vulnerabilities by deploying naval capabilities to challenge rivals' sea lanes. As China is aware of the constriction threat Indian and US forces pose to Beijing's Indo-Pacific energy supply lines, some Chinese strategists claimed that offshore naval bases are means of protecting China's economic interests. As forward bases would permit Chinese warships to wield some "tit-for-tat" coercive power over Indian and American vessels, Beijing's modest objective would be to project limited sea power for deterrence – not to position itself for great power confrontations (Indian Current Affair, 2011). However, the string of pearls strategy provides a presence for China along the sea lines of communication that connect China directly to the Middle East. The issue that arises both for the US and India is whether China's strategy is intended solely to secure supply lines and trade routes, or whether China will use these in the future in order to enforce regional supremacy (South Asia Journal, 2012).

India is known to have been contributing to the development of the "string of pearls", through its threat to cut off China's choke point for oil and trade – the Malacca Strait in both 1971 and 1999, when it moved to blockade Karachi Port which at the time handled 90% of Pakistan's sea trade, including oil supplies to China.

VII. Conclusion

The South China Sea represents a delicate and a complicate issue. We saw that when engaging with the topic we have to take into consideration numerous and various variables and reasons such as historical background, geostrategic position and relevance, geopolitical environment, China's perspective, the West's perspective, national, economic and energy security, the importance of the SCS to the world and to China's energy transportation, strategic thinking of different actors, military buildups and patterns of behavior in what concerns the PLA Navy, all of which bring about the conflict in the South China Sea.

The literature review reveals the fact that scholars attribute China's behavior in what concerns the South China Sea to various motives that are depended on many factors such as such as the vast amounts of hydrocarbon resources that are found beneath, sovereign and legal claims, avoiding containment from other major powers by averting their influence, being perceived as a core (and not as peripheral) point of contact to address regional challenges, resource security and protecting the SLOCs that are the lifeline of China's economic success. Thus, this reveals that China's policy towards the South China Sea is directed towards multiple goals, such as avoiding containment, fighting for resources, protection of its energy security in the Malacca Strait and establishing itself as hegemon in the region.

From a rational point of view, the challenge that the Chinese Government is facing is to better manage its dependence on oil and to define a sustainable energy security path, rather than simply to seek resources beneath the SCS. According to Fels & Vu (2016), "the amount of resources found beneath the South China Sea varies from one analyst to another. For example, China National Offshore Oil Company (CNOOC) suggested that the SCS would contain approximately 17 billion tons of oil and around 14 billion cubic meter of natural gas, while others claim that the resources found are not that large" (p. 99). Therefore, it is debatable how much of these supplies are viable and worth the risk of getting into conflict with neighboring countries, taking in consideration the past 2014 collapse of global petroleum prices, that made the developing of new drilling projects much more expensive. Either way, the country cannot ignore exploitable energy supplies that are found so close to the state.

China's energy security concerns are known to be related to its dependence on foreign oil. Around 80% of China's oil imports are passing through the Strait of Malacca and to the South China Sea strategic sea lanes. The probability and the risk of having essential inputs cut off or endangered represents a vital concern for China as it would affect its economy and therefore its development. Taking in consideration those aspects, China's economic engine is deemed strategically vulnerable and therefore influences Chinese officials in what concerns the decision making process regarding regional and international relations. Therefore, government officials believe that the control and protection

of SLOCs is a state priority, due to the existence of the risk of having essential inputs cut off.

We saw that China's military underwent relevant modernization through massive investment in what concerns its army and military capabilities. From a Chinese perspective, it is vital to have a strong navy as some believed that a war can break out in the future in the SCS. Such capabilities are considered to be vital in order to safeguard the oceanic right and safeguarding the SLOCs for its oil imports. If the strategic sea lane is controlled by other powers, China's national development and national security could be under serious threat. Thus, it is in Beijing's interest to build up such naval capabilities in order to protect its energy security in the Strait of Malacca and in the South China Sea. In this aspect we can argue that the buildup of China's navy is directed to protecting its commercial ships and oil tankers and oversee the shipping routes.

The flow of crude oil that passes through the Strait of Malacca and through the SCS goes right between the disputed Spratly Islands and Paracel Islands. This means that if China holds sovereign control over the islands it has control over one of the most important economic and energy routes of the globe. The question here is why would it do so? They say for securing its security in what concerns the energy flow that passes through, but, if in current terms the area is represented as being part of international waters it means it is secured, as it affects the world economy.

If China gains sovereignty over the SCS, it will probably attach an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), in order to severely limit the movement of US military close to Chinese shore, which will diminish the military role the US can play in containing China. Although the UNCLOS does not contain any provision that defines historic rights or relevant regimes to determine sovereignty over the disputed territories, we have to take into consideration that history cannot be overlooked and nation-states cannot abandon such rights when ratifying the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (Rowley, 2013).

For the US the most important aspect seems to be the maintenance of the freedom of navigation. It opted for a neutral position in what concerns the sovereign claims, but it is interested in maintaining a norm based behavior. Therefore, the US is stuck between focusing on legally upholding the freedom of navigation and remaining neutral in the sovereignty dispute at the same time. Such a position is difficult to keep because of China's behavior. The US also has to uphold the defense treaty signed with Japan and the Philippines. In this aspect, China is known to have concluded cooperation on different levels with states such as Myanmar, Burma or Pakistan. This cooperation gives the Chinese state strategic leverage in the Malacca Strait and in Southeast Asia. India is known to have contributed to the developments of the Chinese state, as it threaten to cut of China's choke point for oil and trade - the Malacca Strait in both 1971 and 1999, when it moved to blockade Karachi Port which at the time handled 90% of Pakistan's sea trade, including oil supplies to China (Fels & Vu, 2016).

Another interesting argument is proposed by Caceres (2013), that China may tend to act as a hegemonic power in the same way the US did in the Western hemisphere after securing control of the Caribbean Basin. This would create a situation in which Asian neighbors' are free to act as they like when it comes to the running of their own governments but with the clear understanding that Chinese ideas and views need to be given complete consideration, over and above any proposals by foreign actors. The only issue here is that other regional actors such as India or Japan will not tolerate Chinese hegemony. It is clear that through the construct of its own capabilities to secure the SLOCs that are vital for its security, China also tends to act as a hegemon in the region, potentially denying the US presence in the SCS and further keeping from away its mainland any hostile foreign army.

In those aspects, when analyzing the issues concerning the SCS, we have to take in consideration that in the prospect of a global and regional process of shifting economic and military capabilities, the sovereignty question is just an argument between China and the claimants, but if we look in a broader perspective we see that it also involves the competition between the US and China. Therefore, we can claim that China's policy towards the South China Sea is directed towards multiple goals, such as avoiding containment, fighting for resources, protection of its energy security in the Malacca Strait and establishing itself as hegemon in the region. In those aspects, China's action in the South China Sea can be explained on the basis of achieving the means of attaining those certain goals.

Furthermore, it is clear that China's behavior in the South China Sea, and its increased military expenditure, has raised concern among other nations. China is feared as it is unpredictable in its behavior. Although, we must take in consideration that in order for China to put pressure on other nations and uphold its offshore naval bases would take an enormous and considerable military effort, that China cannot afford for the time being.

The hypothesis "China's policy towards the South China Sea represents a preemptive measure based on reducing China's energetic security threat concerning a potential blockade of the Malacca Strait by the US or India, in case of conflict escalation" stands to the degree in which a war would break out. Having sovereign claims over the region, would endanger the passage of essential energetic inputs for relevant regional actors and for the US, and can be used as a back-up plan of blackmailing those actors in the situation in which China's oil ship imports would be blocked in the Malacca Strait. Until then, China's actions in the South China Sea can be seen as the necessary steps to achieve this leverage in their position with the US and other regional powers. Therefore, we can state that China's policy towards the South China Sea can represent a preemptive measure based on reducing China's energetic security threat concerning a potential blockade of the Malacca Strait by the US or India, in case of conflict escalation.

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