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THESIS

**DRIVERS BEHIND CHINESE LAND RECLAMATION IN
THE SPRATLYS**

by

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December 2016

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DRIVERS BEHIND CHINESE LAND RECLAMATION IN THE SPRATLYS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the motivations behind China's decision to conduct extensive land reclamation and outpost construction projects at seven locations in the Spratlys beginning in late 2013. I examined two hypotheses: first, China's actions were mainly undertaken in reaction to the actions of rival claimants and the United States; and second, China acted primarily to extend its power projection capabilities. The evidence shows that China's decision to commence reclamation projects was ultimately driven by a desire to increase its power projection capabilities in the South China Sea. This desire predates the internationalization of the South China Sea dispute in 2009 and was a result of China's military growth and its enhancements to its own power projection capabilities. The proximate cause of China's decision to begin these activities in late 2013 was a perceived need to react to its rivals, which from China's perception had grown increasingly willing to confront China on its South China Sea sovereignty claims. Ultimately, whether China continues pursuit of enhanced power projection capabilities will be determined by how China perceives the threat environment and the actions of others. Continued perceived provocations from China's rivals may drive China toward further enhancement of its military power projection capabilities.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

A2AD	anti-access, area denial
ADIZ	air defense identification zone
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CCG	China Coast Guard
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
DOC	declaration of conduct
ECS	extended continental shelves
EEZ	exclusive economic zone
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
MDA	maritime domain awareness
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
SAR	search and rescue
SCS	South China Sea
SLOC	sea lines of communication
UNCLOS	The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

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I. INTRODUCTION

China, in roughly September 2013, began large-scale reclamation and construction projects on the seven reefs it controls in the Spratly Islands. According to a 2015 U.S. Congressional Research Service report, “each of the areas under reclamation—including Cuarteron Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, Gaven Reef, Hughes Reef, Johnson South Reef, Mischief Reef, and Subi Reef—is disputed between China and at least one other claimant, including the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Taiwan.”¹ In a May 30, 2015, speech, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter said that “China had created over 2,000 acres of land in the South China Sea in the past 18 months, more than all other claimants combined ... and more than in the entire history of the region.”² A 2015 *New York Times* article highlighted the construction being done on the islands, stating that China has “constructed port facilities, military buildings, and an airstrip on the islands, with recent imagery showing evidence of two more airstrips under construction.”³ Creation of these artificial islands and the new military bases being constructed upon them arguably changes the balance of power within the Spratlys in China’s favor.

This thesis examines two prominent explanations to explain China’s broader behavior in the South China Sea and applies them to the Chinese government’s decision to conduct extensive land reclamation and outpost expansion projects. These explanations are that China’s reclamation activities are 1) in response to the actions of the other Spratly Island claimants and the United States, and 2) are driven by a desire to increase China’s ability to project military power within the South China Sea.

¹ Ben Dolven et al., *Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea: Implications and Policy Options* (CRS Report No. R44072) (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2015), 4, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44072.pdf>.

² United States Department of Defense, “IISS Shangri-la Dialogue: A Regional Security Architecture Where Everyone Rises,” May 30, 2015, accessed December 7, 2016, <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1945>.

³ Derek Watkins, “What China Has Been Building in the South China Sea,” *New York Times*, last modified October 27, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/07/30/world/asia/what-china-has-been-building-in-the-south-china-sea.html?_r=1.

My findings are that China, in deciding to commence its reclamation projects in the South China Sea, was ultimately driven by a desire to increase its power projection capabilities in the South China Sea. This desire predates the internationalization of the South China Sea dispute in 2009 and was an outcome of China's military growth and its enhancements to its own power projection capabilities. The timing of China's projects, in late 2013, however, were proximately caused by a desire to react to its rivals, which from China's perception had grown increasingly willing to confront China on its South China Sea sovereignty claims. These actions by China's rivals and the overall upsetting of the balance quo in the South China Sea served as the catalyst for China's decision to conduct its land reclamation and outpost expansion projects.

A. IMPORTANCE OF THIS STUDY

China's reclamation activities and outpost construction/expansion within the Spratlys directly impacts current U.S. policy and interests within the South China Sea. According to the statements Admiral Samuel L. Locklear III—former Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command—in his testimony before the U.S. House Appropriations Committee on March 18, 2015, land reclamation in the South China Sea will have a negative impact on regional security, and “will give China the ability for greater presence, increase dwell time for military and coast guard assets, and expand the areas covered by surveillance and area-denial systems.”⁴ According to Pham Lan Dun and Tran Huu Duy Minh, two leading Vietnamese scholars, “the massive land reclamation and construction activities by China have caused tensions and have escalated disputes, because it changed the status quo of the dispute.”⁵ The Spratlys are contested amongst six claimants, including the Philippines whom with the United States shares a mutual defense treaty. Actions within these disputed territories by any of the rival claimants has the potential to upset the status quo and spark a broader military build-up capable of

⁴ Admiral Samuel L. Locklear III, *U.S. House Appropriations Committee*, Hearing, March 18, 2015, 2–3.

⁵ Pham Lan Dung and Tran Huu Duy Minh, “Some Legal Aspects of Current Developments in the South China Sea,” in *Examining the South China Sea Disputes: Papers from the Fifth Annual CSIS South China Sea Conference*, ed. Murray Hiebert, Phuong Nguyen, and Gregory B. Polling (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 67.

destabilizing the region. At the heart of U.S. concern over China's reclamation efforts is if they will negatively affect U.S. interests in the region and decrease regional security by providing China with a capability to exert additional combat power into vital South China Sea shipping lanes and possibly disrupt the shipping, disrupting the balance of power in the South China Sea in favor of China and weakening the claims of rival claimants, decreasing U.S. military power and influence in the region, and potentially weakening U.S. relationships with other countries in the region. Additionally, China's actions in the South China Sea can possibly be seen as a way to gauge China's intentions for the region and overall whether China intends to rise peacefully or whether it is intent on assertively challenging the status quo and U.S. influence.

Furthermore, determining the primary drivers behind China's reclamation activity and outpost construction will enhance U.S. understanding of China's actions and perhaps provide some insight into how far China is likely to go in pressing, strengthening, or defending its claims. It is difficult to have an effective response plan that shapes and affects China's behavior without understanding the motivations of that behavior. With better understanding of the reasons behind China's actions, U.S. policymakers can better formulate a tailored response plan that is in line with overarching U.S. objectives and best capable of facilitating desired changes to the current environment.

There are several implications arising from analysis of this subject, and which this analysis will aid in answering. First is how important the reclamation activity is for China and the United States in terms of foreign policy and diplomatic relations. This research will shed light on the applications for defense and military activities provided by the reclamation. The research will help in determining the effects of the reclamation on the existing status quo of power relationships between China, the United States, and the Spratly claimant nations. It will help in determining whether China's reclamation has the potential to harm US regional interests, adding to the body of knowledge which seeks to assist U.S. foreign policy makers in formulating the US response plan. Finally, the research will add to the analysis on the effect that China's reclamation activity could have on US commerce and how likely China would be to decide to close off the South China.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand why China, since roughly 2013, conducted large-scale reclamation and outpost expansion at its Spratly Island outposts in the South China Sea, one must examine the explanations behind such actions. At first glance, one could separate the drivers behind China's broader assertiveness in the South China Sea and those drivers linked to China's reclamations activities over the past couple years in the Spratlys; however, these drivers are directly linked. Therefore, in identifying the drivers behind China's reclamation activities that began in 2013, one must also consider the drivers that various scholars have argued impact China's actions in the South China Sea since roughly 2009.

This literature review introduces two prominent explanations for China's behavior in the South China Sea, which are covered more in depth in the subsequent chapters of this thesis, as well as summarizes five other explanations scholars have proposed to explain China's behavior in the South China Sea, as well as China's recent land reclamation and outpost expansion projects within the Spratlys. The other explanations covered—which are not be covered in the other chapters of this thesis but which still deserve merit and further research and analysis—are: actions as a result of China's increased power, an outcome of Chinese nationalism, an outcome of a rogue PLA, and, finally, that China's actions are benign and aimed at increasing regional maritime security.

1. Reaction to Actions by Other Claimants and the United States

The first explanation, covered in Chapter III, is that China's actions are in reaction to the actions of the other South China Sea claimants and those of the United States. From this perspective, "Beijing has been more reactive than assertive; it is responding to [what it considers] provocative behavior by others [and] to gaps in the existing international order."⁶

⁶ Harry Harding, "Has U.S. China Policy Failed?" *The Washington Quarterly*, Fall (2015), 100.

2. Force Projection Enhancement

The second explanation, covered in Chapter IV, is that China's actions in the South China Sea overall, and more specifically within the Spratlys, are calculated actions aimed at increasing its ability to project power within the South China Sea. China's "efforts in the region reflect a broader set of strategic priorities: to strengthen maritime force projection capability; to raise the level of difficulty and cost to any opposing military force operating in the region; and to broaden options open to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in any future contingency."⁷ China commenced its reclamation and outpost expansions projects to better defend its southern maritime approaches and contested territorial claims, while simultaneously providing a wider array of options available for responding to external challenges in the South China Sea.

3. Result of China's Increasing Power

A third explanation, which is not further examined in this thesis, is that China's actions in the South China Sea and in the Spratlys more specifically are arguably a reflection of the confidence increased military power affords China's decision makers, providing new and alternative means for China to influence the strategic environment. Aaron Freidberg asserts that "the recent increase in Chinese assertiveness...is a result of increasingly favorable leadership assessments of the nation's relative power and of the threats and opportunities that it confronts."⁸ Phillip Saunders argues that "increasing PLA strength means that China now has the ability to demonstrate its military capabilities in order to intimidate less powerful countries."⁹ From this mindset, China's reclamation activities and outpost construction in the Spratlys could be interpreted as being aimed at

⁷ Peter Jennings, "The International Community and the Strategic Balance in the South China Sea," in *Examining the South China Sea Disputes: Papers from the Fifth Annual CSIS South China Sea Conference*, ed. Murray Hiebert, Phuong Nguyen, and Gregory B. Polling (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 51.

⁸ Aaron L. Friedberg, "The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Explaining Beijing's Assertiveness," *The Washington Quarterly* (Winter 2015): 143.

⁹ Phillip C. Saunders, "The Role of the Chinese Military in the South China Sea," in *Perspectives on the South China Sea: Diplomatic, Legal, and Security Dimensions of the Dispute*, ed. Murray Hiebert, Phuong Nguyen, and Gregory B. Polling (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 132.

enhancing China's power vis-à-vis the other South China Sea claimants, thus solidifying China's position as the dominant regional power.

This explanation is not being covered in the thesis, despite its merit, because the explanation is incomplete because it fails to account for the full range of China's actions in the South China Sea and within the Spratlys. Aaron Friedberg captures probably the most salient counterargument to this argument by reflecting on the instances when China's behavior has been restrained in dealing with rival claimants. Friedberg writes that, "following 2010, China did not simply plow ahead with a policy of omnidirectional assertiveness, but instead tempered its behavior in certain respects in response to the reactions of others. As we have seen, by the end of that year the CCP regime had already begun to make conciliatory gestures toward the United States, followed by efforts to soothe relations with most members of ASEAN."¹⁰ If China was solely driven by power, it would not choose to temper its responses. This asserts a certain rationality to Chinese behavior, as previously covered in the cost-benefit explanation, that seemingly disproves any argument that China is singularly driven to assertiveness in the South China Sea and elsewhere by its power status.

4. Nationalism

A fourth explanation, which is not examined further in this thesis, is that China's reclamation projects were the result of increased nationalism in China. Many scholars assert that nationalism is on the rise in China. According to Raine and Le Miere, "the pride of being a rising or returning power—whose people are repeatedly told about their centre-stage role in the twenty-first century—and the memory by that same power of a previous 'century of humiliation,' provides an important undercurrent for nationalism in the South China Sea."¹¹ Writing about the place that nationalism occupies in Chinese society, Susan Shirk writes that "the Communist Party has embraced nationalism as its new ideology in an age when almost nobody believes in communism anymore ... [and]

¹⁰ Friedberg, "The Sources of Chinese Conduct," 145.

¹¹ Sarah Raine and Christian Le Miere, *Regional Disorder: The South China Sea Disputes* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 95.

whenever the public pays close attention to an issue, leaders feel they have to act tough to show how strong they are.”¹²

Mark Valencia links nationalism to the Spratly Island issue, writing “that the Spratly archipelago has been part of the motherland since ancient times is embedded in the national psyche; if, after losing territory to Western powers in the last century, China should now lose territory to regional states, national pride and the very legitimacy of the government would be severely damaged.”¹³

Scholars also argue that there are negative consequences for Beijing decision-makers appearing weak on foreign policy issues, including the South China Sea and Spratlys. Aaron Friedberg examines this argument and writes that “territorial disputes are important because they involve tangible manifestations of the injustices inflicted on China when it was relatively weak; having done so much to call them into existence, the regime now arguably finds itself driven and sometimes trapped by strong feelings of national pride and resentment.”¹⁴ Linda Jakobson correspondingly writes that “Chinese leaders are criticized relentlessly for being too weak and bowing to international pressure on Chinese internet chat sites, [and] Chinese authorities are keenly aware of how quickly this dissatisfaction can give rise to questioning of the CCP’s ability to govern.”¹⁵

There is an ongoing debate as to whether scholars believe that nationalism affects Chinese foreign policy decision, and the lack of supporting evidence behind the relationship between nationalism and Chinese foreign policy decision-making is why this argument will not be one of the explanations covered in the thesis.

Alastair Ian Johnston challenges nationalism as a driver, stating that “proponents of the nationalism argument offer no theory about how popular sentiments are translated into foreign policy, [and] the explanation makes an assumption about the hypersensitivity

¹² Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 11.

¹³ Mark J. Valencia, *China and the South China Sea Disputes* (London: Oxford University Press, 1995), 15.

¹⁴ Friedberg, “The Sources of Chinese Conduct,” 138–139.

¹⁵ Linda Jakobson, *China’s Unpredictable Maritime Security Actors* (Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2014), 26.

of the top leadership to nationalist public opinion for which there is almost no systematic evidence as yet.”¹⁶

Aaron Friedberg takes Johnston’s criticism of nationalism as a driver of China’s South China Sea policy one step further, arguing that “there is very little to indicate that, at least to date, the leadership has ever felt compelled by public sentiment to take positions or pursue policies different than those it might otherwise have chosen; to the contrary, the evidence suggests that, in addition to its skill in stirring popular passions, the regime has become adept at modulating and directing them to serve its own purposes.”¹⁷

5. Rogue PLA

A fifth explanation, which is not examined further in this thesis, is that China’s foreign policy and maritime actions are being guided by China’s military—the PLA—, which is operating independently and with little oversight by the central government. An International Crisis Group report describes the PLA, stating that it structurally “sits outside of the civilian bureaucracy for South China Sea policy but has the potential to undermine the government’s efforts to manage tensions.”¹⁸ Alastair Iain Johnston highlights the PLA’s relative autonomy, stating that “the PLA has a near monopoly of expertise on operational issues and considerable institutional autonomy from other civilian institutions; this means there is limited civilian oversight of PLA operational activities.”¹⁹

Aaron Friedberg explains how some scholars believe that the PLA uses this autonomy to act outside central government direction, stating that “of all the bureaucratic actors involved, none has greater prestige or more resources at its disposal than the PLA, [and] some analysts speculate that it now plays a larger role in making foreign as well as

¹⁶ Alastair Iain Johnston, “How New and Assertive is China’s New Assertiveness?,” *International Security* 37, no. 4 (2013): 37.

¹⁷ Friedberg, “The Sources of Chinese Conduct,” 141.

¹⁸ International Crisis Group, “Stirring up the South China Sea (I),” *Asia Report*, no. 223 (23 April 2012), 15.

¹⁹ Johnston, “How New and Assertive is China’s New Assertiveness?,” 41.

strictly military policy, with the result that China's overall posture has shifted toward a tougher and more confrontational stance."²⁰

This explanation is not worth pursuing further because there is little evidence to support this claim. Some scholars go so far as to argue that evidence supports the opposite conclusion—that PLA actions are actually in alignment with central government direction and policies. Alastair Iain Johnston's argues that the "rogue PLA" theory is "speculative" and that "no one really knows the working relationship between the top political leadership and the PLA, as one hears different versions in Beijing."²¹ He continues by stating that, "as an institution, the PLA is not publicly expressing views on major policy issues and strategic orientation that are far from the CCP's message."²² Aaron Friedberg raises similar concerns, stating that "there is virtually no evidence of significant splits between civilian and military leaders on the most important questions of foreign and defense policy; to the contrary, all signs point to the existence of a broad consensus on national objectives, strategy, and tactics."²³

6. Benign and Aimed at Increasing Regional Maritime Security

A sixth explanation, which is not examined further in this thesis, is that China's actions have been relatively benevolent and aimed at increasing China's capabilities to enforce maritime security in the South China for all relevant nations, a motive in line with its status as a great nation and responsible actor. Arguing on behalf of this hypothesis, Wu Shicun writes that "China's reclamation work in the South China Sea is aimed at improving China's capacity to deliver maritime public services, maintaining maritime safety and security, offering support to search and rescue operations and scientific research, and improving the living and working conditions of fishermen and other people stationed on the islands and reefs; these objectives befit China's

²⁰ Friedberg, "The Sources of Chinese Conduct," 140.

²¹ Johnston, "How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?," 39.

²² Ibid., 42.

²³ Friedberg, "The Sources of Chinese Conduct," 142.

international and regional responsibility as a big country.”²⁴ Ian Storey, in addressing China’s position writes that China argues that “the facilities under construction are designed ... to provide public goods such as search and rescue services, disaster relief, marine scientific research, weather forecasting and typhoon shelters for fishermen.”²⁵ Ben Dolven et al. write that “bases in the Spratlys could enhance China’s ability to conduct search and rescue (SAR) operations in surrounding waters.”²⁶

This explanation does not explain China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea nor explain the military applications of the expanded outposts. China likely will use these outposts for the peaceful purposes it proclaims, but these outposts likely will also be used for their military applications. They enhance China’s regional strategic position and could provide significant logistical support for any future military activities in the southern South China Sea.

C. HYPOTHESES

There are two hypotheses that I have chosen to examine in this thesis and which help to understand China’s decision to conduct its land reclamation and outpost expansion projects in the Spratlys in late 2013. The first hypothesis and explanation examined is that China’s land reclamation has been driven by its need to react to the actions of others—namely the other Spratly claimants and the United States. This explanation has the deepest impact on the foreign policy decisions and actions made by the United States, as well as the other Spratly claimants, because it effectively argues that those foreign policy decisions and actions have the ability to affect, and potentially even change, China’s foreign policy decisions. Additionally, I will explore what has occurred, in terms of reclamation and other related actions in the Spratlys by the other claimants, to examine the merits of the reactive explanation.

²⁴ Wu Shicun, “Recent Developments in the South China Sea: A Chinese Perspective,” in *Examining the South China Sea Disputes: Papers from the Fifth Annual CSIS South China Sea Conference*, ed. Murray Hiebert, Phuong Nguyen, and Gregory B. Polling (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 80.)

²⁵ Ian Storey, “China’s Terraforming in the Spratlys: A Game Changer in the South China Sea?,” *ISEAS Perspective* 29 (2015): 4.

²⁶ Dolven et al., *Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea*, 10.

The second hypothesis and explanation examined is China's reclamation and outpost expansion is part of a strategic calculation in which China is seeking to enhance its capabilities to project military power in the South China Sea and in the region. This explanation focuses on the power projection enhancement motivations behind the creation of these expanded outposts. This explanation also examines the benefits such bases will provide the People's Liberation Army as well as the China Coast Guard in performing their duties in order to better discern China's motivations. I also will examine how these new outposts will affect that status quo among the various claimants from a military capabilities standpoint.

D. METHODS AND SOURCES

In order to assess the value of the explanations provided by leading scholars on the subject, I have focused on the two explanation that I have determined to be most prominent and best able to describe China's behaviors. To further examine the merit of these two explanations, I have conducted a thorough exploration of the supporting evidence in order to determine the strength of the explanations and the extent to which these explanations are able to provide an understanding as to why China is acting the way that it is in the South China Sea. For the reactivity explanation, evidence of actions by other rival claimants and/or the U.S. that occurs prior to China's land reclamation and can be either directly or indirectly linked to subsequent actions by China will bolster the merit of this explanation, whereas evidence that China's actions are either deemed to have been disproportionate, pre-planned, or poorly associated to specific actions taken by the US or a rival claimant hurts the merits of this explanation. Regarding the explanation that China's actions are the result of a strategic calculation on the part of China whereas it sees the reclamation and outpost expansion as necessary to achieve a goal of projection additional military power in the South China Sea region, evidence supporting the claim that these outposts will provide significant benefits to China's military and paramilitary forces as well as enhance its ability to project power abroad will support this argument. Evidence that determines that such impacts will not enhance China's capabilities in these regards, or that reclamation will spur a regional arms buildup that will negate any relative

advantage China would stand to gain from its reclamation activities would weaken the argument.

For both of these explanations, I have examined the timeline of events surrounding China's reclamation to look for associations between China's actions and the actions of others, as well look for any evidence to suggest that China's actions are part of a much larger trend of increasing Chinese militarization of the Spratlys. Additionally, I have examined what Chinese officials and leading scholars have said about the reclamation in order to discern whether what China has effectively been saying matches up with the reality of what is occurring in the South China Sea. Finally, I also have explored the depth of China's reclamation and outpost construction activities in order to best determine what these outposts likely will be used for, which will shed light on China's reasoning for conducting the activities in the first place.

E. THESIS OVERVIEW

The main findings of this thesis are that China's decision in 2013 to commence its reclamation and outpost expansion projects in the Spratlys was the result of both explanations. The timing of China's decision was driven by a desire to react to its rivals and the overall upsetting of the status quo in the South China Sea. Ultimately, however, China's actions were driven by a desire to increase its power projection capabilities both inside and outside the region. These new outposts will significantly enhance China's power projection capabilities, especially in the South China Sea region.

This thesis is organized in four additional chapters. The second chapter briefly highlights the importance of the Spratlys and surrounding South China Sea waters, provides a summary of what China has done as far as reclamation and outpost expansion within the South China Sea, and summarizes the primary events leading up to the reclamation work in 2013 that have characterized China's assertive behavior in the South China Sea since 2009. The third chapter focuses on the first explanation to describe China's Spratly Island reclamation and outpost expansion projects—that China's actions have largely been in reaction to the actions of others. The fourth chapter focuses on the second explanation—that China's actions are the result of a strategic calculation whereas

China has determined these actions to be necessary to facilitate power projection in the South China Sea. The fifth and final chapter serves as the conclusion to the thesis and weighs the evidence for each explanation and identifies implications of the findings for future Chinese behaviors in the South China Sea and for U.S. policy there.

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II. CHINA'S LAND RECLAMATION ACTIVITIES

China, beginning in roughly late 2013, commenced large-scale reclamation and construction projects on its seven controlled reefs within the Spratlys (see Figure 1). The precise commencement date is unclear and the rough start time is based on initial discovery of reclamation efforts by China in the Spratlys via imagery. This reclamation activity has occurred during a period, which roughly began in 2009, in which China has been perceived by its neighbors and the United States as acting aggressively in how it has acted in matters concerning the South China Sea. In this chapter I will briefly highlight the importance of the Spratlys and surrounding South China Sea waters, and summarize the reclamation and construction that China has conducted and the primary events leading up to the reclamation work in 2013 that have characterized China's assertive behavior in the South China Sea since 2009.

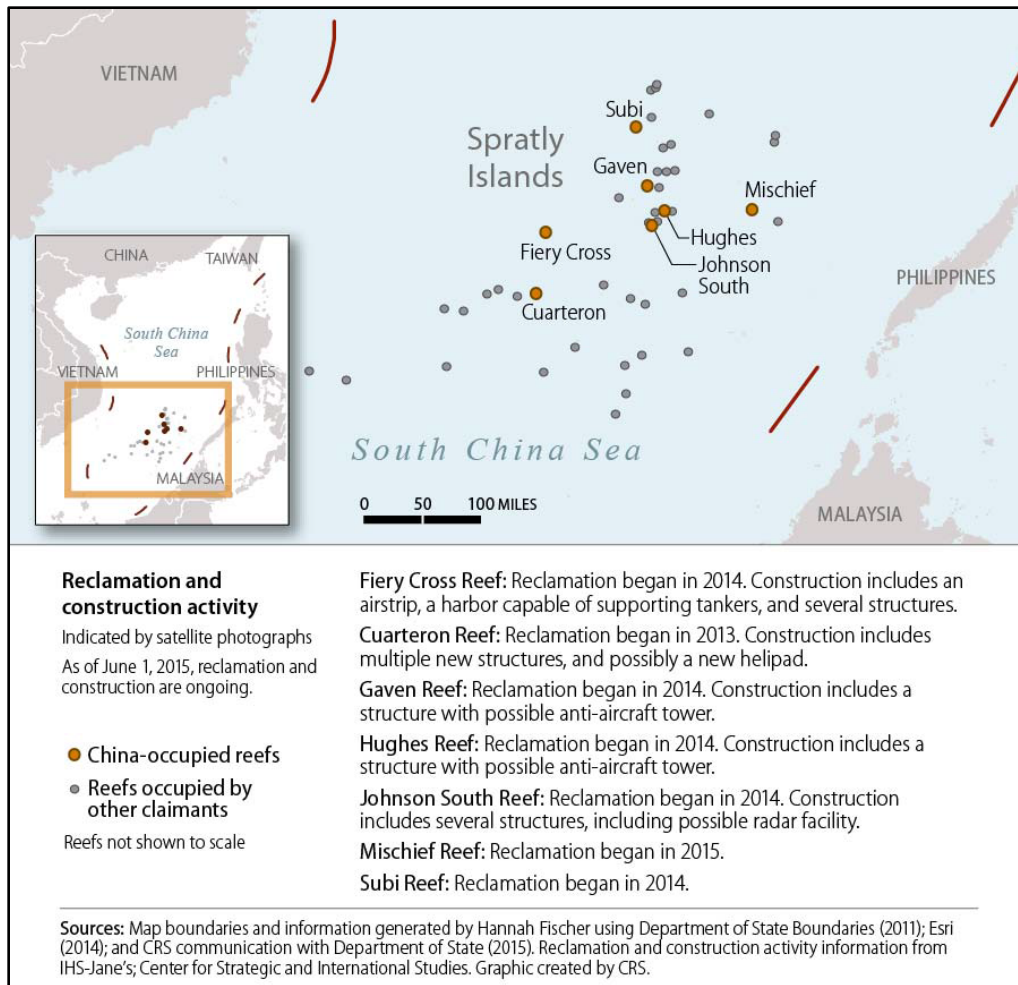


Figure 1. Locations of Chinese Reclamation Sites in the Spratlys²⁷

A. SIGNIFICANCE

The Spratlys are strategically located in the southern portion of the South China Sea, and “each of the areas under reclamation—including Cuarteron Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, Gaven Reef, Hughes Reef, Johnson South Reef, Mischief Reef, and Subi Reef—is disputed between China and at least one other claimant, including the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Taiwan.”²⁸ Ownership of the Spratly Islands group within the South China Sea is disputed among six countries—Brunei, China, Malaysia, the

²⁷ Source: Dolven et al., *Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea*, 3.

²⁸ Ibid., 4.

Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam—which all have made individual, and often overlapping, claims to at least a portion of these disputed waters (see Figure 2).

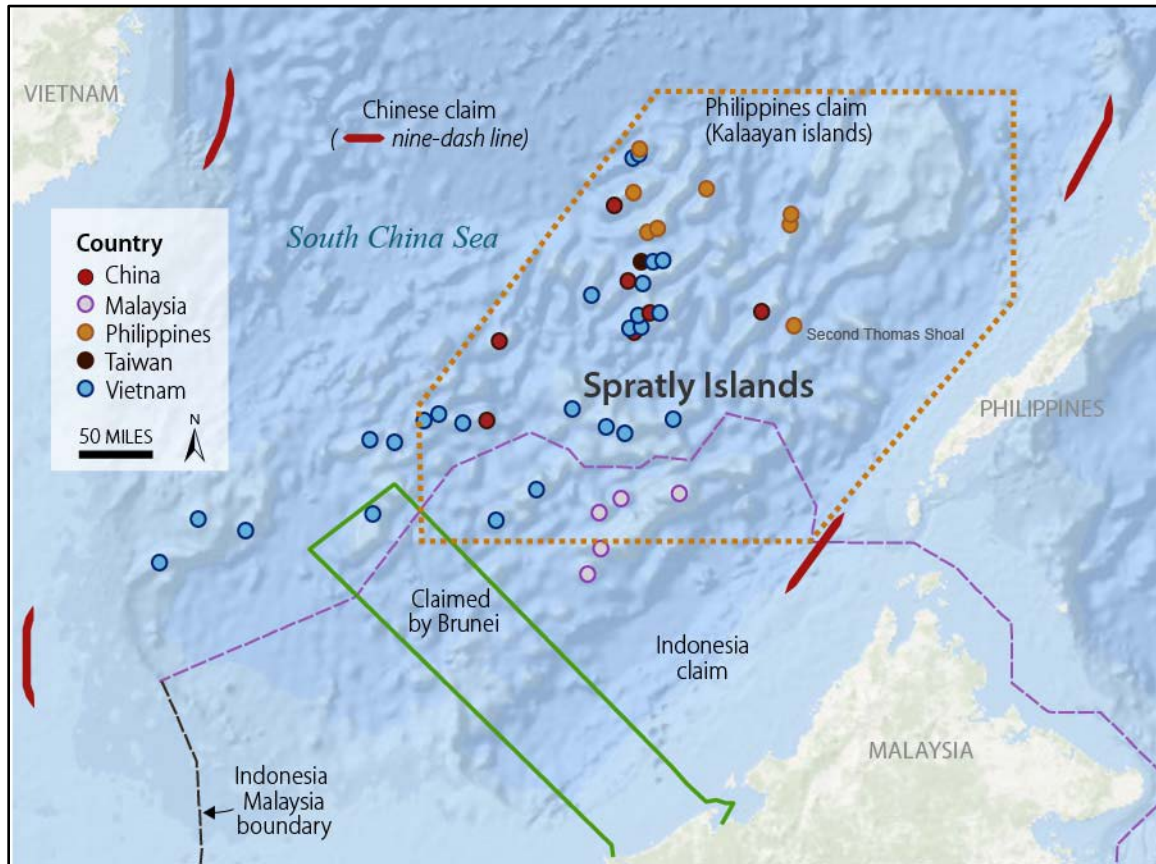


Figure 2. Depiction of Occupied Territories and Overlapping Claims in the Spratlys²⁹

The Spratlys are a group of maritime features, including reefs, banks, and cays. Most of these features are either completely submerged under water or partially submerged with some portion of the feature sticking out above water at low tide. The claimant nations have established military outposts on some of these islands, reefs, and other maritime features.

The South China Sea is arguably host to an abundance of natural resources, and the claim to the waters around these islands, reefs, and other maritime features is worth a

²⁹ Source: Dolven et al., *Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea*, 18.

considerable amount if a country's claim to them is ever internationally recognized and a country is therefore able to exploit the resources in the area. The South China Sea is believed to hold significant reserves of both oil and natural gas in addition to its valuable fishing resources. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, there are approximately 11 billion barrels of oil in the South China Sea out of an estimated 1.47 trillion barrels worldwide and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in the South China Sea out of an estimated 6.7 quadrillion cubic feet worldwide.³⁰ Alan Dupont, writing on the linkages between the claims to the territories and resources, states that the "occupation and demonstrated connections with these maritime features are considered by the claimants...to be part of their respective territorial claims including control of the underlying oil, gas, and marine living resources."³¹

Perhaps even more importantly, the Spratlys are also situated near vital shipping lanes that connect East Asia westward to the rest of the world. Dupont, writing on the strategic importance of the South China Sea to maritime trade, writes that "the South China Sea has long been a maritime highway for intra-Asian trade, commerce, and contact, as well as a bridge to Europe and the Middle East, but its strategic and trade significance now exceeds that of all other seas because of Asia's rise and the enormous and increasing volumes of trade and energy that flow through it to and from the rest of the world."³² Raine and Le Miere write that the South China Sea "carries more than half of the world's annual merchant-fleet tonnage and a third of all maritime traffic; a growing dynamic of intra-regional as well as inter-regional trade ensures a regular flow of raw materials and commodities across its waters, enveloping both Southeast and Northeast Asia in concerns over sea lines of communications (SLOCs) within these waters."³³ Similarly, Dupont writes that "the South China Sea carries more than 40 percent of world trade and 50 percent of energy trade, with the gateway Malacca Strait having overtaken

³⁰ "China's Maritime Disputes," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed December 7, 2016, [http://www.cfr.org/asia-and-pacific/chinas-maritime-disputes/p31345#/#/](http://www.cfr.org/asia-and-pacific/chinas-maritime-disputes/p31345#/).

³¹ Alan Dupont, "Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea: ASEAN's Dilemma," in *Perspectives on the South China Sea: Diplomatic, Legal, and Security Dimensions of the Dispute*, ed. Murray Hiebert, Phuong Nguyen, and Gregory B. Polling (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 46.

³² *Ibid.*, 45.

³³ Raine and Le Miere, *Regional Disorder*, 12.

the Suez Canal, the Panama Canal, and the Straits of Hormuz as the world's most critical waterway, [and] the amount of oil exported through the Malacca Strait is triple that through the Suez Canal and 15 times greater than the volume of oil that transits the Panama Canal.”³⁴

B. OVERVIEW OF CHINESE RECLAMATION AND OUTPOST EXPANSION

Since reclamation work began in 2013, China has reclaimed approximately 3,200 total acres of new land at its seven controlled territories within the Spratlys, according to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.³⁵ Putting in context the total amount of land reclaimed during a May 30, 2015, speech, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter said that China had reclaimed “more than all other claimants combined...and more than in the entire history of the region.”³⁶ While Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines have all conducted their own reclamation efforts around the outposts and maritime features that they claim and maintain de facto control of within the Spratlys, these efforts are significantly less in comparison to what China has accomplished over the last two years.

To date, 976 acres have been reclaimed at Subi Reef (see Figure 3), 1,379 acres at Mischief Reef (see Figure 4), 27 acres at Johnson Reef (see Figure 5), 19 acres at Hughes Reef (see Figure 6), 34 acres at Gaven Reefs (see Figure 7), 677 acres at Fiery Cross Reef (see Figure 8), and 56 acres at Cuarteron Reef (see Figure 9).³⁷ On June 16, 2015, a China Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson announced that China was concluding its reclamation work, stating that, “as planned, the land reclamation project of China’s construction on some stationed islands and reefs of the Nansha Islands will be completed in the upcoming days.”³⁸

³⁴ Dupont, “Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea,” 45–46.

³⁵ “Chinese Occupied Features,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, accessed October 24, 2016, <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/chinese-occupied-features/>.

³⁶ Dolven et al., *Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea*, 4.

³⁷ “Chinese Occupied Features,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

³⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Foreign Ministry Spokesman Lu Kang’s Remarks on Issues Relating to China’s Construction Activities on the Nansha Islands and Reefs,” June 16, 2015, accessed December 7, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1273370.shtml.



Figure 3. Subi Reef—24 July 2016³⁹

³⁹ Source: “Chinese Occupied Features,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.



Figure 4. Mischief Reef—22 July 2016⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Source: “Chinese Occupied Features,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

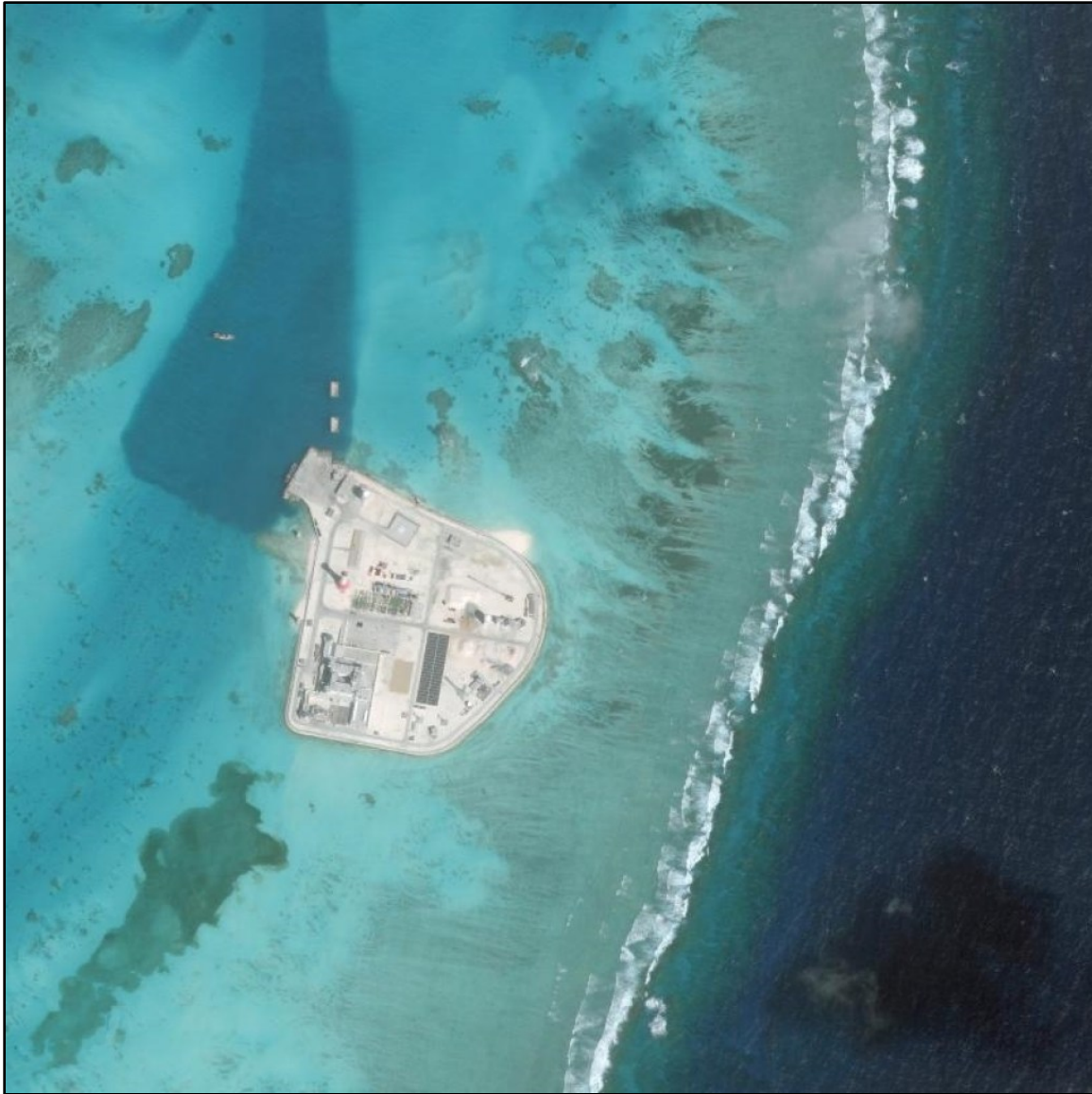


Figure 5. Johnson Reef—09 February 2016⁴¹

⁴¹ Source: “Chinese Occupied Features,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.



Figure 6. Hughes Reef—07 February 2016⁴²



Figure 7. Gaven Reefs—12 February 2016⁴³

⁴² Source: “Chinese Occupied Features,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

⁴³ Source: “Chinese Occupied Features,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.



Figure 8. Fiery Cross Reef—03 June 2016⁴⁴



Figure 9. Cuarteron Reef—24 January 2016⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Source: “Chinese Occupied Features,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

⁴⁵ Source: “Chinese Occupied Features,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

China is currently constructing minor military bases on the islands that accommodate port facilities and airfields of varying sizes.⁴⁶ Bonnie Glaser writes that, “as islands are completed, China is erecting buildings, deploying troops, building harbors and airstrips, and installing radar and surveillance systems.”⁴⁷ At Fiery Cross Reef, China’s largest reclamation site in the Spratlys, China has constructed “an airstrip that is long enough to allow the country to land any plane, from fighter jets to large transport aircraft.”⁴⁸ China has also constructed airstrips at Subi Reef and Mischief Reef, and “civilian planes landed on Subi and Mischief reefs for the first time on July 12, giving China three operational runways in the disputed Spratly Islands.”⁴⁹ At each these three reclaimed islands upon which China has constructed airfields, it is assessed that China will “have hangar space for 24 fighter-jets plus 3–4 larger planes.”⁵⁰

C. HIGHLIGHTED EVENTS LEADING UP TO CHINA’S RECLAMATION PROJECTS

Before China commenced its island reclamation and outpost expansion projects in the Spratlys in late 2013, the situation in the South China Sea had devolved into a wider regional crisis amongst the rival claimant nations. There were several incidents, beginning in 2009, that characterize this negative trend toward heightened regional disputes over ownership of and rights within the disputes waters and territories of the South China Sea. The ones I have deemed to be most critical, and which will be briefly summarized in the paragraphs that follow, are China’s 2009 submission of its maritime claims in the South China Sea to the United Nations, the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident, the 2013 Philippines-initiated arbitration case, the 2014 Second Thomas Shoal incident, and the 2014 Chinese oil rig incident.

⁴⁶ Watkins, “What China Has Been Building in the South China Sea.”

⁴⁷ Bonnie S. Glaser, “China’s Island Building in the Spratly Islands: For What Purpose?,” in *Examining the South China Sea Disputes: Papers from the Fifth Annual CSIS South China Sea Conference*, ed. Murray Hiebert, Phuong Nguyen, and Gregory B. Polling (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 31.

⁴⁸ Watkins, “What China Has Been Building in the South China Sea.”

⁴⁹ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, “Build it and They Will Come,” August 1, 2016, accessed December 4, 2016, <https://amti.csis.org/build-it-and-they-will-come/>.

⁵⁰ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, “Build it and They Will Come.”

China claims that it has indisputable sovereignty over a large portion of the South China Sea, including the disputed Spratlys. While many of the islands, reefs, and maritime features within the Spratlys were occupied by the different claimant nations in the 1980s, China officially notified the other nations of its claims over the entirety of the islands in 2009, when two Notes Verbales were sent to the UN Secretary General with a request that they be given to all UN member states. The notes “contained China’s objections to the submissions by Vietnam and Malaysia (jointly) and Vietnam (individually) to the [United Nations] Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf.”⁵¹ Furthermore, the notes relayed China’s official position that it “has indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters, and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof.”⁵² The two notes were issued alongside a map that depicted nine dashed lines drawn around the majority of the South China Sea; this marked China’s first use of its ‘Nine Dashed Line’ claim to the South China Sea and everything within it, including the disputed Spratlys. To date, China has not yet clarified the full extent or legality of its Nine Dashed Line claim over the South China Sea.

In April 2012, a confrontation between China and the Philippines occurred at the contested Scarborough Shoal when the Philippines responded to what they saw as illegal Chinese fishing there by deploying the *Gregio del Pilar* Philippine coast guard cutter to arrest the Chinese fishermen.⁵³ Chinese maritime law enforcement vessels arrived and placed themselves between the Chinese fishing vessels and the *Gregio del Pilar* to impede its efforts to arrest the Chinese fishermen, resulting in a maritime stand-off between ships belonging to both countries. The result was that the Philippines recalled their coast guard cutter but China maintained, and continues to do so, a maritime law enforcement presence at Scarborough Shoal, essentially seizing control of the territory

⁵¹ United States Department of State, Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, “China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea,” *Limits in the Seas*, no. 143 (2014), 1, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/234936.pdf>.

⁵² United States Department of State, Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, “China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea,” 1.

⁵³ Dupont, “Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea,” 47.

from the Philippines.⁵⁴ This incident remains unresolved, though China appears to have asserted de fact control over the territory.

In January 2013, the Philippines initiated an arbitration case against China that was settled by a United Nations international tribunal at The Hague. China declined to participate in the case, refusing to recognize the court's jurisdiction over the issue. The case was settled in July 2016, largely in favor of the Philippines. The tribunal ruled that "that there was no legal basis for China to claim historic rights to resources within the sea areas falling within the 'nine-dash line.'"⁵⁵ The tribunal ruled that "none of the features claimed by China was capable of generating an exclusive economic zone."⁵⁶ The tribunal also stated that China had "violated the Philippines' sovereign rights in its exclusive economic zone by (a) interfering with Philippine fishing and petroleum exploration, (b) constructing artificial islands and (c) failing to prevent Chinese fishermen from fishing in the zone."⁵⁷

In March 2014, a maritime incident between China and the Philippines occurred at Second Thomas Shoal (for location, see Figure 2). Chinese maritime law enforcement ships entered the surrounding waters in order to deter the Philippines from resupplying their military outpost there, which is a deteriorating World War 2-era LST that the Philippine Navy grounded there in 1999 and has since used as its outpost. This incident resulted in a standoff between China and the Philippines. Glaser summarizes the event as an incident where "where Chinese coast guard vessels have attempted to thwart the delivery of supplies to Filipino marines deployed on a rusting warship that has been in place since it was deliberately beached on the submerged reef in 1999."⁵⁸ According to Dupont, "resupply ships from the Philippines have since been chased away by Chinese paramilitary shups, making it abundantly clear that this reef also falls within China's

⁵⁴ Ibid., 47–48.

⁵⁵ Santos, "Philippines Wins Arbitration Case vs. China over South China Sea."

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Santos, "Philippines Wins Arbitration Case vs. China over South China Sea."

⁵⁸ Bonnie S. Glaser, "U.S. Strategy Seeks to Calm the Roiled Waters of the South China Sea," in *Perspectives on the South China Sea: Diplomatic, Legal, and Security Dimensions of the Dispute*, ed. Murray Hiebert, Phuong Nguyen, and Gregory B. Polling (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 53.

ambit claim to more than 80 percent of the South China Sea.”⁵⁹ China maintains a Coast Guard vessel presence in the area and this incident remains unresolved.

In May 2014, China deployed a nearly US\$1 billion deep-sea mega oil rig, Haiyang Shiyou 981, to a location “around 17 nautical miles from Triton, about 120 nautical miles from Vietnam’s Ly So Island, and about 180 nautical miles from Hainan Island.”⁶⁰ This was an attempt by China to conduct oil and natural gas exploration in waters disputed between China and Vietnam, resulting in an incident pitting Chinese and Vietnamese paramilitary ships against each other. During the incident, “China declared a 3 nautical mile security radius around the oil rig” and used its ships to form a protective ring around the oil rig and to ward off intervention in its operations by Vietnamese Coast Guard ships.⁶¹ Vu Hai Dang described the incident as “constant, if not daily, confrontation between Vietnamese and Chinese vessels, [and] these confrontations consist of ships chasing, running into each other, colliding, ramming, and firing water cannons.”⁶² Additionally, “beginning May 11, Vietnam erupted in anti-China protests, [and] the protests resulted in Chinese businesses being harassed and attacked; several foreign-owned factories were damaged as part of the protests.”⁶³ China withdrew the rig in July 2014, marking the end of the incident.

These events over the past several years represent the general trend toward a heightening of tensions between the rival claimants in the South China Sea that have generally been characterized as a regional crisis. China’s reclamation and outpost expansion projects in the South China Sea are the latest in this series of events, whether China intended this to be the case or not.

⁵⁹ Dupont, “Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea,” 48.

⁶⁰ Vu Hai Dang, “Disputes between Vietnam and China in the South China Sea: A Legal Analysis,” in *Perspectives on the South China Sea: Diplomatic, Legal, and Security Dimensions of the Dispute*, ed. Murray Hiebert, Phuong Nguyen, and Gregory B. Polling (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 40.

⁶¹ Ankit Panda, “1 Year Later: Reflections on China’s Oil Rig ‘Sovereignty-Making’ in the South China Sea,” *The Diplomat*, May 12, 2015, accessed, December 2, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/05/1-year-later-reflections-on-chinas-oil-rig-sovereignty-making-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

⁶² Dang, “Disputes between Vietnam and China in the South China Sea,” 41.

⁶³ Panda, “1 Year Later.”

III. THE REACTIVE EXPLANATION FOR CHINESE SPRATLY RECLAMATION

One explanation for China's assertive actions in the South China Sea, including its land reclamation and outpost expansion projects in the Spratlys, is that China's actions are in reaction to the provocative actions taken by the other South China Sea claimants and the United States. Furthermore, these provocative actions have forced China to react. From this perspective, "Beijing has been more reactive than assertive; it is responding to provocative behavior by others, to gaps in the existing international order, and to the limits that others have placed on Beijing's role in international financial institutions."⁶⁴

From the Chinese perspective, China was content with the status quo in the South China Sea and only when pushed to defend its claims by its neighbors, emboldened by outside parties such as the United States, has China responded in ways that have been deemed to have been assertive in nature. Authors Sarah Raine and Christian Le Miere write that "some have identified a Chinese policy of 'reactive assertiveness,' whereby Beijing has not looked to force the pace on contentious issues but rather robustly to defend its standpoint when others have come encroaching."⁶⁵

In this chapter I will examine and assess the evidence supporting the reactive argument, including both the actions taken by China's rival Spratly claimants and the United States, as well as official statements from Chinese leadership and both Chinese and Western scholars on the subject. First, I will examine the overarching reactive argument and supporting evidence as provided by many Chinese officials and scholars that support the interpretation that China's assertive behavior since 2009 has largely been in response to the provocative actions taken by China's rival claimants and the United States. I have grouped the supporting evidence for the overarching reactive explanation into five sections: the submission of maritime claims and arbitration case, national legislation, incidents at sea, a breakdown in regional dispute settlement, and interference by the United States. I will then apply the reactive argument to China's decision to

⁶⁴ Harding, "Has U.S. China Policy Failed?" 100.

⁶⁵ Raine and Le Miere, *Regional Disorder*, 56.

conduct extensive land reclamation and outpost expansion at all its Spratly outposts beginning in 2013.

Finally, I will conclude with my analysis of the both the Chinese reactive arguments and its supporting evidence, both in the context of the greater South China Sea conflict and as it applies to China's Spratly reclamation. I argue the following: first, since 2009 but before reclamation work commenced in roughly late 2013, there is strong and clear evidence to support the argument that China's assertive actions in the South China Sea have, at least in part, been in response to the actions of others, despite China's decision to often respond disproportionately. Second, in the case of China's Spratly reclamation, there was not a clear proximate provocation undertaken by one of the claimants that explains the timing of the reclamation or the need to commence the reclamation projects in 2013, despite China's overarching grievances with the actions of its rivals that have upset regional stability and the status quo in the Spratlys. China's Spratly reclamation and outpost expansion projects are aimed at preventing any further disruptions to the balance of power in the Spratlys and safeguarding China's claims and interests in the region.

A. BROADER APPLICATION TO PAST SOUTH CHINA SEA BEHAVIOR

Something changed in 2009 when China's actions in the South China Sea became more assertive amidst a general change in balance and status-quo in the region that had been achieved through the 1990s and which culminated in the 2002 Declaration of Conduct. A regional dispute over claims to the Spratlys is not new, but from the Chinese perspective, the rival claimants had managed to address the situation peacefully without the conflict transforming into a regional crisis. At the most basic level, the reactive argument is that the peaceful status-quo in the South China Sea was upset by the actions of other regional claimants and the involvement of the United States, forcing China to act more assertively to restore the status quo and regional stability. In this section, I will examine statements and supporting evidence of the Chinese reactive argument provided by Chinese officials and experts, and some American analysts, that emphasize the provocative actions by others that have forced China to react by defending its maritime

interests and that the source of instability is in the actions by others. Additionally, I will examine and assess the evidence behind the Chinese interpretation of the events leading up to this current South China Sea crisis.

The Spratly dispute has been ongoing for at several decades, but the rival claimants had managed to achieve a status quo in the dispute without it devolving into a greater regional conflict. According to Zhang Haiwen, the director general of the Department of International Cooperation at China's State Oceanic Administration, the South China Sea dispute "has existed for decades before it became a regional hotspot issue."⁶⁶ Xu Bu, the Chinese Ambassador to ASEAN, writes that "China and some littoral countries of the South China Sea have had disputes over territorial and maritime interests for more than three decades, but China and the relevant claimant countries have managed to address differences and control risks, not letting the issue hinder the sustained growth of bilateral ties among them and China-ASEAN relations at large."⁶⁷ Chu Shulong writes that "the Chinese believe that the situation in the South China Sea, including territorial disputes, has been basically stable and peaceful since 2002, when China and ASEAN reached an agreement on the DOC."⁶⁸

From the Chinese perspective, the dispute over the Spratlys, since the beginning, has been due to the assertive actions by the other Spratly claimants. According to Zhang, "the South China Sea dispute began in [the] 1970s [and] since then, contesting states like Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia have invaded some islands and reefs of the Nansha Islands of China, causing the South China Sea dispute."⁶⁹ The Nansha Islands is the Chinese name for the Spratlys.

⁶⁶ Zhang Haiwen, *The South China Sea and Its Islands* (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2014), 82.

⁶⁷ Xu Bu, "US 'Rebalancing' is Fishing in S. China Sea's Troubled Waters," *The Straits Times*, May 19, 2016, accessed December 7 2016, http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/us-rebalancing-is-fishing-in-s-china-seas-troubled-waters?utm_content=bufferabd50&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer.

⁶⁸ Chu Shulong, "China's View on U.S. Policy in the South China Sea," in *Perspectives on the South China Sea: Diplomatic, Legal, and Security Dimensions of the Dispute*, ed. Murray Hiebert, Phuong Nguyen, and Gregory B. Polling (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 13.

⁶⁹ Haiwen, *The South China Sea and Its Islands*, 64.

Chinese scholars and officials also assert that China has and remains committed to peaceful management of a status quo in the Spratlys, but that China's peaceful approach toward its neighbors has been taken advantage of. Zhang accuses the other Spratly Island claimants of "taking advantage" of China when, in the 1990s, it was more focused on maintaining regional stability.⁷⁰ Despite China's peaceful approach, Zhang claims that the rival claimants "intensified their infringing activities in the South China Sea, not only by consolidating and building on the illegally-occupied island and reefs, but also by continuously introducing western oil and gas companies to grasp oil and gas resources in the South China Sea."⁷¹ Similarly, Chinese scholars Fu Ying and Wu Shicun argue that "in nearly ten years after the introduction of the DOC, China was the only keen abider of the document, [and] it refrained from taking actions that might escalate the dispute in the South China Sea and kept pushing for peace and cooperation and joint development in disputed areas."⁷²

Addressing claims that China has stepped up its naval and paramilitary presence in the South China Sea and near the Spratlys, Swaine and Fravel once again provide the reactive argument. They acknowledge that "China has increased its overall presence and deployed a greater number of more sophisticated military, fisheries administration, and State Oceanographic Administration marine surveillance vessels in the South China Sea since roughly 2005 ... [and] taken more direct action against other claimants" but, that "these activities...have taken place in response to what China views as growing and more assertive challenges to its claim occurring since roughly 2007, challenges that require a response in turn."⁷³ Zhang asserts that the United States misinterpreted "China's countermeasures to the offensive activities of Vietnam and the Philippines...as China's

⁷⁰ Haiwen, *The South China Sea and Its Islands*, 70.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁷² Fu Ying and Wu Shicun, "South China Sea: How We Got to This Stage," *The National Interest*, May 09 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/south-china-sea-how-we-got-stage-16118?page=8>.

⁷³ Michael D. Swaine and M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Assertive Behavior Part Two: The Maritime Periphery," *China Leadership Monitor* 35 (2011): 7.

expansion in the South China Sea” and “China’s legitimate claim for rights in the South China Sea as a kind of ‘threat’ which might evolve into a large-scale military conflict.”⁷⁴

Another component of the reactive argument is that China has not changed its commitment to stability and maintenance of a South China Sea status quo, but has only had to react more frequently and more aggressively because of actions taken by China’s rivals that have prompted an assertive Chinese response. Swaine and Fravel explain the rationale behind China’s overarching reactive strategy, stating that “China has not altered its basic, longstanding two-sided strategy of a) avoiding conflict while deferring the resolution of difficult disputes in favor of negotiation and cautious management, while b) maintaining a resolute defense against perceived attempts by others to undermine China’s diplomatic, legal, political, economic, and military position.”⁷⁵ Furthermore, Alastair Iain Johnston writes that China’s actions are “in response to more proactive diplomacy by other claimants to establish the legal boundaries of their claims in the region.”⁷⁶

In justifying its actions as reactive, China has primarily emphasized behaviors by Vietnam and the Philippines. Chu Shulong captures the Chinese belief that widespread criticism of its actions by the United States is unfair, writing that “for more than 20 years, Vietnam has been exploiting oil and gas resources in the disputed areas with China in the South China Sea, yet the United States never said anything about unilateral actions taken in disputed areas by the Vietnamese.”⁷⁷ Swaine and Fravel assert that “more generally, China has sought to grapple with Vietnam’s declared strategy of internationalizing the dispute launched at the end of 2009, namely, efforts to draw attention to and support from the international community for Vietnam’s claims.”⁷⁸ According to Wu Xinbo, professor and deputy director at the Center for American Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai, “as both the Philippines and Vietnam try to take advantage of the US pivot to push their respective claims in the South China Sea, Beijing is applying a tit-for-tat strategy,” and,

⁷⁴ Haiwen, *The South China Sea and Its Islands*, 70–71.

⁷⁵ Swaine and Fravel, “China’s Assertive Behavior Part Two,” 15.

⁷⁶ Alastair Iain Johnston, “How New and Assertive is China’s New Assertiveness?,” 19.

⁷⁷ Shulong, “China’s View on U.S. Policy in the South China Sea,” 18.

⁷⁸ Swaine and Fravel, “China’s Assertive Behavior Part Two,” 7.

“by standing firm against the Philippines and Vietnam, Beijing is sending a signal to Manila and Hanoi that they should not expect to push China around in the South China Sea with US assistance.”⁷⁹

The Chinese narrative for the change in its behaviors can be summarized as being the victim in this period of heightened tensions that roughly began in 2009. It has been forced to both respond and respond aggressively to defend its claims and interests. It is clear that China has a grievance with the recent action taken by its rivals.

1. Examining the Evidence

Wu Shicun, the president of the National Institute for South China Sea, attributes the evolution of the South China Sea dispute into an international crisis as being due to five interrelated factors: the initial submission of maritime claims and Philippine-initiated arbitration case, national legislation, maritime incidents, a breakdown in dispute settlement, and involvement and interference by the United States.⁸⁰ I will use his factors as a framework to examine the basis for the Chinese claim that its actions were spurred by the actions of others.

a. Submission of Maritime Claims and Arbitration Case

The first section of evidence surrounds the assertion that the relatively peaceful, status quo in the region was upset in the diplomatic realm with the 2009 submission of maritime claims by Vietnam and Malaysia, as well the 2013 arbitration case submitted by the Philippines and which has recently been decided in favor of the Philippines. The evidence here is strong in that, in these two examples, China’s rival claimants acted first.

Aaron Friedberg asserts that China’s maritime claims submissions in 2009 were “part of a larger diplomatic and legal game in which other states ... made the opening moves.”⁸¹ According to Wu, “information submitted by states to the Commission on the

⁷⁹ Wu Xinbo, “Not Backing Down: China Responds to the U.S. Rebalance to Asia,” *Global Asia*, 7, no. 4 (Winter 2012), 19–20.

⁸⁰ Wu Shicun, *Solving Disputes for Regional Cooperation and Development in the South China Sea: A Chinese Perspective* (Philadelphia: Chandos Publishing, 2013), 152.

⁸¹ Friedberg, “The Sources of Chinese Conduct,” 135.

Limits of the Continental Shelf ... is rightly seen as a trigger for the deterioration in the situation since 2009.”⁸² In 2009, Spratly claimants “made submissions to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf to reserve their rights for possible continental shelf claims beyond 200nm.”⁸³ Swaine and Fravel assert that China’s first maritime claims submission in 2009 through a Note Verbale to the Secretary General of the United Nations “was a reaction to submissions to the UN’s Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf made by Malaysia and Vietnam, which were in turn taken in response to a UN deadline for nations to submit technical information on claims to extended continental shelves beyond 200 nautical miles.”⁸⁴ Wu, commenting on the initial claims submitted by Malaysia and Vietnam asserts that China’s submissions “reignited the tension” in the South China Sea dispute.⁸⁵

Swaine and Fravel argue that the maritime claims were “congruent with China’s longstanding position on the issue,” and “were all taken in response to requests for information made by the UN with specific deadlines or in reaction to the actions of other nations.”⁸⁶ Swaine and Fravel argue that China’s subsequent “preliminary declaration of claims to an extended continental shelf” in 2009 was “submitted in response to a UN request to present claims for ECS [(extended continental shelves)] by May 13, 2009.”⁸⁷ Finally, Swaine and Fravel contend that China’s April 2011 Note Verbale submitted to the UN was “submitted in response to a Note Verbale submitted by the Philippines in April 2011 objecting to China’s May 2009 Note Verbale and the dotted-line map.”⁸⁸

Furthermore, the dispute was internationalized further when, “on 22 January 2013, the Philippines sent China a note verbale, attached with a notification, to initiate international arbitration proceedings against China regarding SCS issues.”⁸⁹ After

⁸² Shicun, *Solving Disputes for Regional Cooperation and Development*, 152.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸⁴ Swaine and Fravel, “China’s Assertive Behavior Part Two,” 3.

⁸⁵ Shicun, *Solving Disputes for Regional Cooperation and Development*, 152.

⁸⁶ Swaine and Fravel, “China’s Assertive Behavior Part Two,” 3–4.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Shicun, *Solving Disputes for Regional Cooperation and Development*, 161.

rejection by China, “the Philippines then unilaterally submitted the SCS dispute to a UNCLOS Annex VI arbitral submission.”⁹⁰ Despite China proclaiming that it would not abide by any resolutions coming out of the arbitration, and it hasn’t since the case was resolved in favor of the Philippines, the highly publicized case has only exacerbated the South China Sea dispute.

b. National Legislation

The second section of evidence surrounds rival national legislation that has only served to add additional tension and nationalistic fervor to the dispute. According to Wu, the dispute was further propelled into a crisis by national legislation passed by Vietnam and the Philippines.⁹¹ With regards to the Philippines, Wu points to February 2009, when the Philippine Congress “passed Republic Act No. 9522, incorporating Huangyan Island and several of the Nansha Islands for the first time, in order to consolidate its claims on those features.”⁹² Huangyan Island is the Chinese name for Scarborough Shoal. Wu also highlights when, on 5 September 2012, “Philippine President Benigno S. Aquino III signed Administrative Order No. 29, officially naming portions of the South China Sea west of the Philippine archipelagos as the West Philippine Sea, and instructed the national mapping authority to produce and publish a new official map in a bid to support the Philippine claim to certain islands and reefs and their adjacent waters in the SCS.”⁹³

With regard to Vietnam, Wu points to when on June 21, 2012, the Vietnamese president “officially announced the approval of the Law of the Sea of Vietnam, amid escalating tensions in the region; the law explicitly refers to the Xisha and Nansha Islands, and entered into force from January 2013.”⁹⁴ According to Wu, it was in “reaction to Vietnam’s move of enacting domestic laws” that “China’s Ministry of Civil

⁹⁰ Shicun, *Solving Disputes for Regional Cooperation and Development*, 161.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Affairs announced the State Council's approval of the establishment of Sansha City on Yongxing Island (Woody Island)."⁹⁵

c. Incidents at Sea

The third section of evidence surrounds the incidents at sea that Chinese officials and scholars believe have also further fueled tensions within the broader South China Sea crisis. Wu attributes crisis escalation in the South China Sea to being exacerbated by a series of maritime incidents amongst the rival claimants and China, as well as between China and the United States. In these incidents, the Chinese perspective argues that they were all initiated by others, compelling China to respond. These incidents at sea include a June 2009 incident between Chinese fishing boats and a Vietnamese oil-exploring vessel that resulted in the Vietnamese oil-exploring vessel having its cables cut, a May 26, 2011 incident between a Vietnamese oil survey ship and Chinese maritime patrol vessels that resulted in the Chinese ships "cutting the cables of a Vietnamese oil survey ship," and the Scarborough Shoal incident between China and the Philippines that began in April 2012 and ended in Chinese expulsion of Philippine ships from the area and establishment of de facto Chinese control over the Scarborough Shoal.⁹⁶ According to Wu, representing the Chinese perspective, the Scarborough Shoal incident was instigated by the Philippines when "a Philippine warship entered waters off Huangyan Island (Scarborough Shoal) and its soldiers boarded and searched Chinese fishing boats seeking shelter from bad weather in the lagoon."⁹⁷

Wu also claims that the highly publicized 2009 *USNS IMPECCABLE* incident, which was marked by a series of unsafe and unprecedented reactions by several Chinese ships in the vicinity of USNS ship, was the fault of the United States. Wu asserts that "U.S. activities were to a large extent responsible for the escalation of tension in the South China Sea; the United States conflates these intelligence, surveillance, and

⁹⁵ Shicun, *Solving Disputes for Regional Cooperation and Development*, 153.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

reconnaissance activities with commercial navigation.”⁹⁸ From the Chinese perspective, the incident was the result of Chinese protest over U.S. surveillance near China’s coast. Wu asserts the incident was caused by a disagreement with the United States over whether a nation has the “freedom to conduct military research and other survey activities in a foreign state’s EEZ.”⁹⁹ Swaine and Fravel highlight China’s opposition to U.S. surveillance activities in the vicinity of the Chinese mainland, which China deems illegal, writing that “the Chinese government argues that foreign military vessels must provide prior notification before entering an EEZ and that foreign military activities involving hydrography, surveys, and intelligence gathering within the EEZ are illegal because they signify hostile intent and thus violate the—peaceful purposes provisions of UNCLOS.”¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, they claim that “from Beijing’s perspective, the above interpretation has provided a legal underpinning to the official statements and actions China has taken over the past decade opposing the activities of U.S. military platforms operating within China’s EEZ.”¹⁰¹

d. Breakdown in Regional Dispute Settlement

The fourth section of supporting evidence surrounds the attribution of blame for the evolution of the South China Sea conflict into a crisis on a lack of ability in the relevant South China Sea parties to peacefully manage their dispute. From the Chinese perspective, there was a break-down in regional dispute settlement that had begun with the signing of the 2002 ASEAN declaration on the conduct of parties (DOC), “confirming the signatories’ intent to promote pragmatic cooperation and ultimately reach a code of conduct in the South China Sea.”¹⁰² According to Wu Shicun, “the South China Sea has long been considered as one of the flashpoints in the Asia-Pacific region,” but “there was a precious peaceful time in the region from 2002 to 2009, mainly due to

⁹⁸ Shicun, “Recent Developments in the South China Sea,” 67.

⁹⁹ Shicun, *Solving Disputes for Regional Cooperation and Development*, 156.

¹⁰⁰ Swaine and Fravel, “China’s Assertive Behavior Part Two,” 11.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Shicun, *Solving Disputes for Regional Cooperation and Development*, 156.

the political framework provided by the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea between China and ASEAN.”¹⁰³

Despite this initial success, the rival claimants were unable to capitalize on the declaration and come to agreement on a more binding South China Sea code of conduct as the ASEAN members became entangled in the South China Sea dispute. From the Chinese perspective, this has been because the other parties have failed to abide by the agreement, leading to a breakdown in adherence to the status quo. Wu writes that “despite all efforts, 2012 witnessed failure to issue a joint communique at the ASEAN Regional Forum in July—the first such failure in ASEAN’s 45-year history, and resulting from divergence over whether the Huangyan Island standoff should be included.”¹⁰⁴

Wu pins the blame on this failure on the Philippines and Vietnam, who he asserts had “been urging ASEAN countries to speak with one voice against China.”¹⁰⁵ Zhang points to the Philippines as a driver behind the escalation of the South China Sea dispute, stating that “within ASEAN, the Philippines spare[s] no effort to force other ASEAN countries to unite with them and to stand against China.”¹⁰⁶ According to Zhang, in “taking advantage of the South China Sea dispute as a ‘tool,’ the United States, together with Vietnam and the Philippines, make use of a series of meetings of the ASEAN Forum and jointly try to create an illusion that China ‘starts to carry out maritime expansion’ and ‘tries to change the current situation of the South China Sea unilaterally’ so as to perplex the ASEAN countries and to induce them to oppose China.”¹⁰⁷ Additionally, Chinese officials and scholars points to actions by the other Spratly claimants, including land reclamation and outpost expansion, as being in violation of the spirit, if not exact wording, of the 2002 DOC. The land reclamation in the Spratlys by China’s rival claimants, which support this argument, will be addressed in a later section.

¹⁰³ Shicun, *Solving Disputes for Regional Cooperation and Development*, 151.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Haiwen, *The South China Sea and Its Islands*, 67.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

e. Interference by the United States

The fifth section of supporting evidence will examine evidence supporting claims by Chinese officials and scholars alike that point to interference in the South China Sea dispute by the United States as one, if not the, primary catalyst for escalation into the crisis it has become. From the Chinese perspective it was a change in U.S. policy in the Asia Pacific region, beginning much earlier than the 2011 proclaimed U.S. rebalance to Asia, that prompted the change in China's behavior in 2009, and the United States is "the invisible hand behind the rising tension in the South China Sea ... [and] is increasingly targeting at China as it steps up its Asia-Pacific rebalance strategy."¹⁰⁸ Chinese scholars Fu Ying and Wu Shicun write that "in China, it is widely believed that it is the US's Asia-Pacific rebalance strategy, its taking sides on disputes in the South China Sea, and its direct intervention that have escalated the tensions and made the issue more complicated."¹⁰⁹

From the Chinese perspective, peaceful adherence to a status quo in the South China Sea began to breakdown in roughly 2009, partly driven by the U.S. rebalance to Asia. Michael Swaine writes that "many characterize what Westerners regard as potentially dangerous efforts to confront and challenge the U.S. and Western norms as a less threatening but totally justified response to Western (and especially U.S.) provocations."¹¹⁰ According to the Zhang Haiwen, "since [the] 1970s, the situation of the South China Sea was under the effective control of China and its neighboring countries" and was "peaceful and stable in the whole" until when "in about 2009, the United States adjusted its global strategy and enhanced its strategic deployment in [the] Asian-Pacific region."¹¹¹ According to Chu Shulong, "since the U.S. 'pivot' to Asia, more troubles have been taking place in the region and tensions among Asians have risen higher, not lower."¹¹² Xu Bu asserts that "since 2009, some US senior officials have

¹⁰⁸ Ying and Shicun, "South China Sea: How We Got to This Stage."

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Michael D. Swaine, "Perceptions of an Assertive China," *China Leadership Monitor* 32 (2010): 9.

¹¹¹ Haiwen, *The South China Sea and Its Islands*, 65.

¹¹² Shulong, "China's View on U.S. Policy in the South China Sea," 15.

repeatedly made irresponsible remarks about China's policy, rendered support to the countries having disputes with China, and gone even further to drive wedges between China and South-east Asian countries.”¹¹³

Wu writes that “in view of ‘at risk’ American national interest in the SCS, the Obama administration has adjusted its pivot towards the region, engaged comprehensively in regional affairs since 2009, and become a new key player that complicates the situation.”¹¹⁴ Yun Sun writes that “policy analysts in China overwhelmingly blame the United States for the rising tension in the South China Sea. In their views, the United States exploited the South China Sea issue to alienate China’s friendship with neighboring countries, strengthen America’s military alliance with the Philippines, and develop a strategic partnership with Vietnam so as to contain China’s growing influence and maintain U.S. superpower status in the region.”¹¹⁵

Zhang pits blame for the escalation of the South China Sea conflict on the United States, stating that “taking the rapidly-developing China as its potential strategic rival, the United States turned its strategic focus to the Asian-Pacific region, [and] intervened [in] the South China Sea disputes by taking advantage of this occasion and implemented the containment strategy toward China.”¹¹⁶ According to Zhang, the South China Sea issue was “calmly controlled” by the various rival claimants until the United States decided to intervene in the dispute, emboldening some of the other claimants to attempt to “jointly counterbalance China.”¹¹⁷ Wu further asserts that “the US ‘rebalance’ strategy has turned Southeast Asia into a competition ground for major powers.”¹¹⁸

Wu asserts that a change in US policy that began in “2009 can be seen as a turning point” in the South China Sea dispute and U.S. involvement.¹¹⁹ Chinese sources

¹¹³ Bu, “US ‘Rebalancing’ is Fishing in S. China Sea’s Troubled Waters.”

¹¹⁴ Shicun, *Solving Disputes for Regional Cooperation and Development*, 157.

¹¹⁵ Yun Sun, “Studying the South China Sea: The Chinese Perspective,” *Center for a New American Security*, East and South China Seas Bulletin 1, January 9 2012, accessed December 7, 2016, 3.

¹¹⁶ Haiwen, *The South China Sea and Its Islands*, 65.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹¹⁸ Shicun, *Solving Disputes for Regional Cooperation and Development*, 138.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

point to 2010, when U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced a U.S. return to the Asia Pacific region and subsequently brought up the South China Sea dispute as “a topic in the several ASEAN Regional Forum Foreign Ministers’ Meetings,” leading to the South China Sea dispute becoming a “‘hot spot’ for international media to speculate.”¹²⁰ Wu also points to July 2009, when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton “signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation at the Sixteenth ASEAN Regional Forum. This event is often seen as a starting point for later actions by the Obama administration indicating a US strategic pivot shift towards the Asia-Pacific.”¹²¹

Wu Shicun asserts that “the United States has also strengthened its alliance with the Philippines and military cooperation with Vietnam; this indicates that the United States aims at fencing China for its own strategic purposes, and has shifted away from its previous commitment to stay neutral and not take sides in the South China Sea dispute...further complicating the disputes and regional situation.”¹²² Wu also singles out U.S. Secretary of State Clinton’s speech on November 16, 2011 “at the sixtieth anniversary of the Philippine–US Mutual Defense Treaty held on the *USS FITZGERALD* docked in Manila Bay, reaffirming the strong military relationships between the two countries and reiterating the great US concern about peaceful resolution of the SCS dispute,” “her presence on board a US warship, and use of ‘West Philippine Sea’ instead of SCS” as being “interpreted as US support of the Philippines against China in the SCS issue.”¹²³

Zhang accuses the United States of deliberately enhancing its relationship with Vietnam and the Philippines in order to “make them willingly play the roles of ‘agents’ to challenge and openly oppose China in the South China Sea.”¹²⁴ Zhang asserts that the

¹²⁰ Haiwen, *The South China Sea and Its Islands*, 66.

¹²¹ Shicun, *Solving Disputes for Regional Cooperation and Development*, 158.

¹²² Shicun, “Recent Developments in the South China Sea,” 81.

¹²³ Shicun, *Solving Disputes for Regional Cooperation and Development*, 133–134.

¹²⁴ Haiwen, *The South China Sea and Its Islands*, 73.

United States, “by means of incitation, instigation, and cover support, encourages Vietnam and the Philippines to continuously provoke and oppose China.”¹²⁵

2. Assessment of Evidence

The evidence in support of China’s claim that its aggressive behaviors since roughly 2009 have been in reaction to the actions of its regional rivals and the United States is both compelling and strong, specifically in cases such as with the 2009 submission of claims to the United Nation wherein China can clearly point to specific actions taken by claimants that were followed by actions of China. When China has decided to react, however, it has not acted to simply restore the status quo in the South China Sea disrupted by the provocations of others, but rather to create a new one that is more favorable to China. China often acts disproportionately to the actions of its rivals, such as in the previously covered incidents at sea section wherein those incidents China responded with significantly greater shows of force and numbers. In the Spratlys, this can be seen in the extent of its reclamation, which has far exceeded that of its rivals. This has only heightened perceptions of Chinese assertiveness and a belief, while misconstrued and oversimplified, that China is solely responsible for the heightened tensions and proclaimed regional crisis.

B. APPLICATION TO RECLAMATION IN SPRATLYS

In 2013, China commenced large-scale land reclamation and outpost expansion projects at all seven of it occupied territories within the Spratlys. The Chinese narrative is that, in the case of Spratly reclamation, China is the victim and is acting to address the deteriorating regional status quo by bolstering its position, allowing China to catch up to its rivals and better defend its territorial claims. Fu Ying and Wu Shicun, addressing China’s decision to commence Spratlys reclamation, state that “in view of the changing situation in the South China Sea, and to meet the civil and defense needs on the islands and to defend its sovereignty, China launched reclamation projects on its controlled

¹²⁵ Haiwen, *The South China Sea and Its Islands*, 73–74.

Nansha islands.”¹²⁶ Chinese officials and scholars also attribute this activity to China “playing catch-up to rival claimants, who are portrayed as having engaged in decades of construction and land reclamation work on features in the sea, as well as exploitation of economic resources, including oil.”¹²⁷

The official Chinese narrative is that the Spratly’s are historically and indisputably the sole property of China, and the very presence of foreign outposts on the Spratly features by China’s rivals undermine China’s claims. Furthermore, any actions by China’s rival claimants to upgrade existing facilities in the territories within the Spratlys which they control are seen by China to upset the status quo. In March 2015, a spokesperson for China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs responding to questions about the intentions behind China’s reclamation activities in the Spratlys stated that “China is carrying out necessary construction on its own islands and reefs. The construction does not target or affect anyone. We are not like some countries, who engage in illegal construction in another person’s house. And we do not accept criticism from others when we are merely building facilities in our own yard. We have every right to do things that are lawful and justified.”¹²⁸ From the Chinese perspective, China’s reclamation activities are a result of provocative actions taken by China’s rival claimants and, as the Spratlys are the sole property of China, China’s reclamation activities are beyond reproach.

Chinese officials and scholars attribute China’s land reclamation projects in the Spratlys as being in response to both a general upsetting of the status quo in the South China Sea and provocative actions by China’s rivals and the United States that have compelled China to act to better defend its maritime and territorial claims. These provocative actions include all the areas of grievance addressed in the preceding section that Chinese officials and scholars attribute to escalation into a regional crisis. From this perspective, China’s actions, if they are indeed reactive and not independently deliberate, are more of a reaction to a perceive trend away from the status quo that now favors

¹²⁶ Ying and Shicun, “South China Sea: How We Got to This Stage.”

¹²⁷ Dolven et al., *Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea*, 16.

¹²⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press,” March 8, 2015, accessed December 7, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1243662.shtml.

China's rivals, thus forcing China's to react, as opposed to being due to a specific catalytic event that would make China's decision to commence reclamation more easily attributable.

Admiral Sun Jianguo of China's People's Liberation Army Navy commented in his official remarks at the 2016 IISS Shangri-La Dialogue that "the present intensification of the South China Sea issue is due to individual countries deliberately causing provocation for their own interests."¹²⁹ Additionally, he also commented that "we don't cause trouble, and we are not afraid of getting into trouble. China cannot swallow painful consequences, evil consequences; it cannot permit its sovereignty and security rights and interests to be encroached upon; it cannot sit idly and watch a minority of countries stir up trouble in the South China Sea."¹³⁰ From this perspective, China's reactive actions have been defensive in nature.

Chinese scholars Fu Ying and Wu Shicun argue that, "from the Chinese perspective ... the US's dramatically altered policy on the South China Sea has heightened China's fears that its interests would be further undermined, thus inspiring its determination and measures to defend them."¹³¹ These defensive measures include China's reclamation and outpost construction projects which will enhance China's ability to respond to any future provocative actions which China may see as attempts to upset regional stability and the status quo. Furthermore, Fu and Wu also argue that "the US has accelerated provocative and coercive actions that are clearly targeted at China."¹³² As evidence, Fu and Wu assert that "the number of sorties flown by the US planes to conduct close-in reconnaissance at the South China Sea Islands has increased from about 260 in 2009 to over 1,200 in 2014."¹³³

¹²⁹ Sun Jianguo, "The Challenges of Conflict Resolution" (speech, Singapore, SGP, June 05, 2016), The IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri-la%20dialogue/archive/shangri-la-dialogue-2016-4a4b/plenary4-6c15/jianguo-6391>.

¹³⁰ Jianguo, "The Challenges of Conflict Resolution."

¹³¹ Ying and Shicun, "South China Sea: How We Got to This Stage."

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

To support China's claim of its reclamation as being responsive, Chinese officials and scholars also claim that China's reclamation efforts are in direct response to similar such reclamation activities that have been undertaken by rival Spratly Island claimants, asserting that "other claimants, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Taiwan, have also reclaimed land and fortified features in the area, that...Vietnam, occupies considerably more features in the Spratlys than China does, and that others have constructed airstrips and based troops on features they control."¹³⁴ Ian Storey writes that "Beijing has argued that it is playing catch up with other claimants; as the Philippines undertook reclamation activities in the 1970s, Malaysia in the 1980s, Taiwan on Itu Aba in 2014 and Vietnam over the past two years, China has accused critics of hypocrisy and applying double standards."¹³⁵ According to Ma Shikun, a senior commentator at the People's Daily:

China is just catching up with longstanding efforts by others to build out South China Sea islands and reefs. For two years, the Philippines has been engaged in land reclamation and build-out on islands and reefs taken from China. For five years, Vietnam has been engaged in massive construction activities—including building harbor basins, runways, barracks, missile positions and helipads—on more than 20 islands and reefs seized from China.¹³⁶

China Greg Austin writes that "in the past 20 years...China has not physically occupied additional features. By contrast, Vietnam has doubled its holdings, and much of that activity has occurred recently, [and] the Vietnamese occupations appear to have increased from 30 to 48 in the last six years."¹³⁷ According to David Shear, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs, in his statement before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in May 2015, "between 2009 and

¹³⁴ Dolven et al., *Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea*, 2.

¹³⁵ Ian Storey, "China's Terraforming in the Spratlys," 4.

¹³⁶ Ma Shikun, "Why China's Land Reclamation Is Legitimate and Justified," *China-US Focus*, September 7 2015, accessed December 7, 2016, <http://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/why-chinas-land-reclamation-is-legitimate-and-justified/>.

¹³⁷ Greg Austin, "Who is the Biggest Aggressor in the South China Sea?," *The Diplomat*, June 18, 2015, http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/south-china-sea-who-claims-what-in-the-spratlys/?utm_content=buffer97609&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer.

2014, Vietnam was the most active claimant in terms of both outpost upgrades and land reclamation, reclaiming approximately 60 acres, [and] all territorial claimants, with the exception of China and Brunei, have also already built airstrips of varying sizes and functionality on disputed features in the Spratlys.”¹³⁸

While the evidence of occupation and number of outposts is separate from the evidence of reclamation, it supports China’s grievance of having a weaker position in the Spratlys. Shear stated that, “in the Spratly Islands, Vietnam has 48 outposts; the Philippines, 8; China, 8; Malaysia, 5; and Taiwan, 1.”¹³⁹ Additionally, Shear stated that all of China’s rival claimants in the Spratlys “have also engaged in construction activity of differing scope and degree.”¹⁴⁰ Addressing China’s airfield construction in the Spratlys, Dolven et al. write that “even before China’s recent reported construction of an airstrip on Fiery Cross Reef, four other claimants had already built airfields big enough for large fighter planes on features they control in the Spratly Islands.”¹⁴¹ Furthermore, Vietnam reportedly has “carried out large-scale reclamation on over 20 maritime features’ in the Spratly Islands and ‘built on them a considerable amount of fixed facilities such as harbor basins, airstrip, missile bases, office buildings, barracks, hotels and lighthouses.”¹⁴² AMTI analysis of Vietnam’s reclamation activities in the Spratlys revealed that “Vietnam has created just over 120 acres of new land in the South China Sea, mostly at Spratly Island, Southwest Cay, Sin Cowe Island, and West Reef, [and] the majority of this work has occurred in the last two years. By comparison, China has created almost 3,000 acres of new land at the seven features it occupies in the Spratly Islands.”¹⁴³ All this data leads credence to China’s claims that it is not the only country

¹³⁸ David Shear, U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Hearing, May 13, 2015, http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/051315_Shear_Testimony.pdf.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Dolven et al., *Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea*, 17.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, “Vietnam’s Island Building: Double Standard or Drop in the Bucket?” CSIS, May 11, 2016, accessed December 7, 2016, <http://amti.csis.org/vietnams-island-building/>.

with military outposts in the Spratlys, nor is it the only claimant to have conducted reclamation and outpost expansion.

The biggest problem with China's addressed occupation and reclamation grievances against its rival claimants being used to support the decision for China to conduct its own reclamation is that these activities by China's rivals have been ongoing for several decades and occurred amidst the period of stable relations that China argues has been disrupted by its rivals. Therefore, China's grievances with the actions of its rivals predate the shift toward increased regional tensions beginning in roughly 2009. If China indeed decided to conduct reclamation as a reaction to the actions of others, it appears to be a decision based in fear that they are losing in the balance of power conflict in the South China Sea.

C. CONCLUSION

It is not easy to differentiate between the instigator and the respondent in an ongoing crisis such as the Spratly crisis. All relevant parties share the blame in the escalation of the crisis. This chapter, however, sought to shed light on the evidence behind China's claims that it is reacting to others when it is conducting its proclaimed assertive actions.

It does appear that prior to the U.S. rebalance to the Pacific, the Spratly Island dispute was better managed amongst the claimants. Additionally, actions by rival claimants, largely by Vietnam and the Philippines, seem to have driven much of China's behavior which has been deemed to have been assertive in the years since 2009. While China's actions have often had the effect of projecting China's relative dominance onto its neighbors, it is often provoked into acting. China, in disproportionately responding to the crises as they occur, seemingly is attempting to stave off further perceived acts that threaten China's maritime claims in the South China Sea and within the Spratlys.

This has continued into the Spratlys where China, feeling that its maritime claims are under threat, has conducted reclamation activities of its own in order to counteract the actions of others and establish primacy for its own claims over the disputed territories and waters in the South China Sea. However, in the Spratlys, the evidence to support a

Chinese reactive approach are weaker in that there is no clear catalyst which prompted Chinese actions that has occurred since the shift toward increased regional tensions in 2009. Instead China has pointed to the actions of its rivals over a series of years in which it had not, until 2013, sought to respond to in kind. To me, this seemingly suggests that Chinese officials, with a well-founded and evidenced grievance against its rivals that had for years been conducting activities in violation of the 2002 DOC, decided to significantly improve China's position in the Spratlys through a massive land reclamation and outpost expansion program. Separate from merely reacting, China's sought to better its position rather than simply responding to a specific catalytic event. It was more of a response to the greater South China Sea crisis and a need by Chinese officials that China's stake in the region was strengthened, bettering China's position to address the wider regional crisis on China's terms.

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IV. POWER PROJECTION ENHANCEMENT AS THE DRIVER BEHIND CHINESE SPRATLY RECLAMATION

China's actions in the South China Sea overall, and more specifically within the Spratlys, were driven by a desire to increase its ability to project military power within the South China Sea. The desired effect is that China will better be able to defend its southern maritime approaches and contested territorial claims, while simultaneously having a wider array of options available for responding to external challenges in the South China Sea.

From a strategic perspective, China arguably needed to continue expansion into the South China Sea—including its Spratly reclamation and outpost expansion projects—in order to further expand its relative military advantage over the other claimants and support China's greater regional ambitions. Peter Jennings, the executive director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, asserts that China's "efforts in the region reflect a broader set of strategic priorities: to strengthen maritime force projection capability; to raise the level of difficulty and cost to any opposing military force operating in the region; and to broaden options open to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in any future contingency."¹⁴⁴ According to Ian Storey, a senior fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, "the gap that existed two decades ago between the military power of the People's Republic of China and the countries of Southeast Asia has widened into a chasm."¹⁴⁵

This chapter examines the second explanation for China's land reclamation and outpost expansion project at its controlled territories in the South China Sea contested Spratlys: the new outposts on these reclaimed islands were deliberately created to enhance China's capability to project military power in the South China Sea and beyond, the primary driver behind its actions. First, I will examine the supporting evidence

¹⁴⁴ Peter Jennings, "The International Community and the Strategic Balance in the South China Sea," 51.

¹⁴⁵ Ian Storey, "The Regional Military and Paramilitary Balance," in *Examining the South China Sea Disputes: Papers from the Fifth Annual CSIS South China Sea Conference*, ed. Murray Hiebert, Phuong Nguyen, and Gregory B. Polling (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 71.

behind China's general desire to increase its power projection capabilities in the South China Sea. Secondly, I will examine China's actions in the broader South China Sea through the lens of power projection as the driver behind Chinese actions. Thirdly, I will examine the enhancements these expanded outposts and reclaimed islands will provide to China's capability to project military power further from the mainland: increased offensive military capabilities in the South China Sea; enhanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities; and enhanced logistics support and forward basing for military assets. This does not mean to suggest that China will use these enhanced capabilities, as they bolster both offensive and defensive military options. It is certain, however, that these outposts will further increase China's military capabilities in the South China Sea relative to its neighbors.

A. CHINA'S GOAL: INCREASE CAPABILITY TO PROJECT POWER IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

China recognizes the importance of the South China Sea and the importance of protecting its interests there. Alan Dupont, a nonresident fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy highlights the South China Sea's importance, stating that "the South China Sea carries more than 40 percent of world trade and 50 percent of energy trade, with the gateway Malacca Strait having overtaken the Suez Canal, the Panama Canal, and the Straits of Hormuz as the world's most critical waterway."¹⁴⁶ Oriana Skylar Mastro, an assistant professor of security studies at Georgetown University writes that "the burgeoning need to protect commercial assets and Chinese nationals abroad will lead the country to develop some global power-projection capabilities."¹⁴⁷ Taking her argument one step further, the economic importance of the South China Sea has, in part, driven China to increase its capability to project power there.

In 2013, China issued a defense white paper that showcased the growing importance China placed on the maritime domain, stating that:

¹⁴⁶ Dupont, "Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea," 45–46.

¹⁴⁷ Oriana Skylar Mastro, "China Can't Stay Home," *The National Interest* (January/February 2015), 38.

China is a major maritime as well as land country. The seas and oceans provide immense space and abundant resources for China's sustainable development, and thus are of vital importance to the people's wellbeing and China's future. It is an essential national development strategy to exploit, utilize, and protect the seas and oceans, and build China into a maritime power. It is an important duty for the PLA to resolutely safeguard China's maritime rights and interests.¹⁴⁸

John Mearsheimer, arguing on behalf of the rationale for China's shift toward focusing on bolstering its capabilities to project power within the South China Sea, argues that "for understandable reasons, they want to be able to protect their sea lanes and not have to depend on the American navy to handle that mission for them."¹⁴⁹

To support China's capabilities to protect its interests in this vital area, in China's 2015 Defense White paper, the Chinese Navy was tasked to "gradually shift its focus from 'offshore waters defense' to the combination of 'offshore waters defense' with 'open seas protection.'"¹⁵⁰ The 2015 Defense White Paper proclaimed that China's armed forces will "get ready to safeguard national sovereignty and security, protect the country's maritime rights and interests, and deal with armed conflicts and emergencies."¹⁵¹ The White Paper also stated that it is a "long-standing task for China to safeguard its maritime rights and interests."¹⁵² Furthermore, in addressing a need the White Paper highlighted the need for the PLA to increase its capabilities to project power, stating that "with the growth of China's national interests, its national security is more vulnerable to international and regional turmoil, terrorism, piracy, serious natural disasters and epidemics, and the security of overseas interests concerning energy and resources, strategic sea lines of communication (SLOCs), as well as institutions,

¹⁴⁸ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces* (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, April 2013), http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/2013-04/16/content_4442755.htm.

¹⁴⁹ John J. Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to U.S. Power in Asia," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 4 (2010), p.384.

¹⁵⁰ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "China's Military Strategy," May 2015, accessed December 7, 2016, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/index.htm>.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

personnel and assets abroad, has become an imminent issue.”¹⁵³ These excerpts, taken together, reflect a general emphasis placed on enhancing China’s capability to project military power further from the Chinese coast, to provide enhanced protection for China’s national interests in the region and further abroad.

China is shifting from a more defensive military power to one that is more capable of power projection into areas of vital interest away from the Chinese mainland, such as the South China Sea. Ian Storey writes that “China’s leaders have determined to transform the country into a global maritime power, and to that end the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is emerging as Asia’s largest and most capable navy.”¹⁵⁴ Similarly, the Office of the U.S. Secretary of Defense argued in its 2015 China Military Power Report that, “as China’s global footprint and international interests grow, its military modernization program has become more focused on investments and infrastructure to support a range of missions beyond China’s periphery, including power projection.”¹⁵⁵

This is all, according to one expert, part of “China’s long-term strategy to strengthen its position.”¹⁵⁶ Despite attempts by other regional powers to bolster their own capabilities, China has emerged as the dominant regional power. Ian Storey writes that “while Southeast Asian countries have ramped up their defense budgets over the past few years, and acquired new, larger, and more lethal assets, their navies, and especially their coast guards, are dwarfed by China’s; neither individually nor collectively can the countries of Southeast Asia match China’s growing military power.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s Military Strategy.”

¹⁵⁴ Storey, “The Regional Military and Paramilitary Balance,” 71.

¹⁵⁵ Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2015,” May 2015, accessed December 7, 2016, http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2015_China_Military_Power_Report.pdf.

¹⁵⁶ Patrick M. Cronin, “The Military Balance and Regional Order in the South China Sea,” in *Examining the South China Sea Disputes: Papers from the Fifth Annual CSIS South China Sea Conference*, ed. Murray Hiebert, Phuong Nguyen, and Gregory B. Polling (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 30.

¹⁵⁷ Storey, “The Regional Military and Paramilitary Balance,” 71.

B. BROADER APPLICATION TO PAST SOUTH CHINA SEA BEHAVIOR

China has been building up a robust military capability that predates the devolution of the South China Sea territorial dispute into a broader regional crisis. China's military growth has quickly accelerated with the growth of the Chinese economy. Renato Cruz de Castro, a professor at De La Salle University in Manila, wrote in 2015 that "China has had an annual double-digit increase in defense spending since 2006."¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, Cruz de Castro contends that "China's aggressive pursuit of claims in the South China Sea has increased in tandem with the expansion of its navy and maritime services."¹⁵⁹ Chu Shulong, a professor at Tsinghua University in China, acknowledges China's growing military capabilities in the region and writes that "China will keep rising...[and] the rise of China does include its growing military strength and activities in the western Pacific, including in the South China Sea."¹⁶⁰

The internationalization and widening of China's maritime disputes with its rivals, beginning in roughly 2009, also led to a realization that China needed to further enhance its military capabilities to better enable China's military force to respond to increasingly more frequent crisis situations in the South China Sea that, from a Chinese perspective, threaten its security and regional interests. Cruz de Castro contends that "China views the consolidation of its claim over the South China Sea as contributing to its territorial integrity and national security."¹⁶¹ Furthermore, Cruz de Castro argues that Chinese officials believe that by having a "strong People's Liberation Army (PLA), China can boldly advance its 'core interests' in the maritime domain."¹⁶² Cruz de Castro views the Chinese desire to project military power in the region as driving "China's insistence on an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, the conduct

¹⁵⁸ Renato Cruz de Castro, "The Impact of Strategic Balance in East Asia on a Small Power's Defense Policy: The Case of the Philippines in the Face of the South China Sea Dispute," in *Examining the South China Sea Disputes: Papers from the Fifth Annual CSIS South China Sea Conference*, ed. Murray Hiebert, Phuong Nguyen, and Gregory B. Polling (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 4.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶⁰ Shulong, "China's View on U.S. Policy in the South China Sea," 18.

¹⁶¹ Renato Cruz de Castro, "The Impact of Strategic Balance in East Asia on a Small Power's Defense Policy," 4.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 1.

of live-fire exercise by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and the People's Liberation Air Force in the Western Pacific, and the lard-line response of the PLAN and other maritime law enforcement agencies during several confrontations with Philippine and Vietnamese civilian ships in the South China Sea.”¹⁶³

China's Navy has been increasing its presence in the South China Sea and further from the Chinese mainland coast, reflective of China's ambition to project greater military power in the South China Sea and region. Phillip Saunders, Director of the Center for Study of Chinese Military Affairs, argues that “the PLA navy has used exercises and extended deployments to demonstrate its improved capability to defend Chinese maritime claims in the South China Sea.”¹⁶⁴ To back up this argument, Saunders references the “March 2013 deployment of a four-ship PLA navy flotilla into the South China Sea, ... the Liaoning's [China's sole aircraft carrier] initial training deployment in November 2013 ... into the South China Sea, [and] ... a January 2014 PLA navy deployment of two Chinese destroyers and one amphibious landing craft in the South China Sea, including through the Paracel Islands and past James Shoal.”¹⁶⁵

The desire to project greater military power within the region by Chinese military and civilian leaders has also led to China's military forces selectively engaging in disputes with its rivals. One example was during the mid-2012 Scarborough Shoal incident between China and the Philippines wherein China “insisted on its authority and control over the contested territory and its related resources and rights. A few days after Chinese and Filipino civilian vessels withdrew from the contested shoal, thus ending the impasse, China deployed military and paramilitary forces in the South China Sea.”¹⁶⁶ From this perspective, China used the Scarborough Shoal incident as an opportunity to assert great dominance within the South China Sea and set the stage for further projection of military power and maritime expansion within the region. Patrick Cronin argues that

¹⁶³ Renato Cruz de Castro, “The Impact of Strategic Balance in East Asia on a Small Power's Defense Policy,” 1–2.

¹⁶⁴ Saunders, “The Role of the Chinese Military in the South China Sea,” 132–133.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 133.

¹⁶⁶ Renato Cruz de Castro, “The Impact of Strategic Balance in East Asia on a Small Power's Defense Policy,” 6.

“China has exploited moves by neighbors in order to justify greater Chinese assertiveness.”¹⁶⁷

C. MILITARY APPLICATION OF SPRATLY RECLAMATION

China’s extensive land reclamation and outpost expansion projects within the Spratlys were conducted primarily to enhance its military capabilities in the region and further China’s ability to assert greater control over the South China Sea. Ben Dolven et al. assert that, “for China, the operational value of building islands in the Spratlys would derive from the islands’ location in the east-central part of the South China Sea, several hundred miles south of China’s mainland, and from the facilities that China would place on them.”¹⁶⁸ According to Storey, “the ongoing reclamation projects in the Spratly Islands will enable China to project decisive power into the very heart of maritime Southeast Asia with the ultimate goal of achieving dominance within the so-called nine-dash line.”¹⁶⁹ Storey also asserts that this enhanced power projection capabilities will “assist the PLA in two of its core missions: first, defending the country’s maritime trade routes that pass through the South China Sea; and second, forward-deployed PLA-Navy ships and aircraft could be used as part of what the United States calls China’s anti-access/area denial strategy to deter or defeat third-party (i.e. American) intervention in military contingencies in the Taiwan Straits or Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.”¹⁷⁰ From this perspective, land reclamation in the Spratlys was just the next step that would allow China to continue improving its position in the region by bolstering its capabilities to project military power further from the Chinese mainland. Jennings, commenting on the purpose of the expanded outposts upon the reclaimed islands argues that “the most obvious strategic utility of the island construction is simply to assert Chinese presence in peacetime.”¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁷ Cronin, “The Military Balance and Regional Order in the South China Sea,” 31.

¹⁶⁸ Dolven et al., *Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea*, 7.

¹⁶⁹ Storey, “The Regional Military and Paramilitary Balance,” 71.

¹⁷⁰ Storey, “China’s Terraforming in the Spratlys,” 5.

¹⁷¹ Jennings, “The International Community and the Strategic Balance in the South China Sea,” 51.

China has avoided discussing, especially in detail, how these bases will specifically be used to support China's military capabilities. Dolven et al. write that "the Chinese government did not comment substantively on the work until March 2015 and did not offer any explanation of its intentions for use of the artificial islands it was building until April 2015."¹⁷² Beginning in 2015, however, China began to linking the bases to military capabilities in official statements. In April 2015, China Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying stated that the new facilities would be used for "better safeguarding territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests...[and] after the construction, the islands and reefs will be able to provide all-round and comprehensive services to meet various civilian demands besides satisfying the need of necessary military defense."¹⁷³ Similarly, PLA Admiral Sun Jianguo stated at the 2015 IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore that the expanded outposts and reclaimed islands would, in part, serve the purpose of meeting the "necessary defense needs" of the PLA.¹⁷⁴

While China has publicly confirmed that the new outposts will support military objectives in addition to civilian ones, Chinese officials have not expounded on specifically on how the outposts will perform military functions. One reason for this is a general lack of transparency about China's military capabilities. Patrick Cronin, senior director of the Asia-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security, makes the claim that "Chinese leaders often see transparency as undermining China's authority and core interests."¹⁷⁵ Similarly, Phillip Saunders writes that "China has historically been reluctant to reveal its military capabilities, with Chinese officers arguing

¹⁷² Dolven et al., *Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea*, 13.

¹⁷³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying's regular press conference," April 9, 2015, accessed December 7, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1253488.shtml.

¹⁷⁴ Sun Jianguo, "Strengthening Regional Order in the Asia-Pacific" (speech, Singapore, SGP, May 30, 2015), The IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, <http://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri%20la%20dialogue/archive/shangri-la-dialogue-2015-862b/plenary4-b8e3/sun-0dfc>.

¹⁷⁵ Cronin, "The Military Balance and Regional Order in the South China Sea," 29.

that transparency benefits the strong (who reveal their capabilities) at the expense of the weak (who reveal their vulnerabilities).”¹⁷⁶

An additional reason is that by downplaying the military uses for the bases and highlighting the civilian purposes, China is effectively attempting to portray the projects as less threatening to the other Spratly claimants. Storey comments on China’s proclaimed uses for the island outposts, stating that “despite China’s attempt to put a civilian gloss on the reclamations, they are overwhelmingly strategic in purpose.”¹⁷⁷ While it is near impossible to measure the success of such a strategy, the effect would be a lessened international or regional response to China’s reclamation activities than has occurred. A lack of Chinese official statements does not necessarily weaken this argument, however, because if China did indeed conduct these reclamation projects for primarily defensive purposes, I would expect China to not confirm the military nature of the outposts. China’s relative lack of willingness to discuss the military nature of these reclaimed islands and expanded outposts serves as potential evidence to support such an explanation.

Bonnie Glaser, a senior advisor for Asia in the Freeman Chair in China Studies at CSIS, asserts that “much of the concern [about the Chinese reclamation] is due to fear about the purposes for which China will use the new islands infrastructure.”¹⁷⁸ When construction is finished, the Chinese outposts being constructed upon the reclaimed, artificial islands in the Spratlys “will include harbors, communications and surveillance systems, logistics facilities, and three airfields.”¹⁷⁹

A look at what has been constructed and/or what is currently under construction, reveals that the bases will support China’s capability to project military power in the South China Sea in three interrelated ways, which will be covered more in depth in the sections that follow: increased offensive military capabilities in the South China Sea,

¹⁷⁶ Saunders, “The Role of the Chinese Military in the South China Sea,” 132.

¹⁷⁷ Storey, “The Regional Military and Paramilitary Balance,” 75.

¹⁷⁸ Glaser, “China’s Island Building in the Spratly Islands,” 31.

¹⁷⁹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2015.”

increasing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities (ISR), and logistics support and forward basing for military assets. China needs to increase the number and types of military assets deployed to the South China Sea if it wants to project enhanced military power in that region. A robust ISR capability will allow China to better monitor the force movements of its rivals and to best know where to project force when China feels the need to do so. Finally, an improved logistics capability and chain is necessary to support military operations in both peacetime and wartime by increasing the sustainment of military assets deployed away from the Chinese mainland. The functions these reclaimed islands and expanded outposts will perform sheds light on the true intention behind the projects—the desire to increase China’s power projection capabilities in the South China Sea.

1. Increased Offensive Capabilities

The first overarching way in which the outposts will enhance China’s capability to project military power in the South China Sea is to increase China’s offensive military capabilities further from the Chinese mainland coast. Specifically looking at the advantages these outposts will provide within the South China Sea region, Raine and Le Miere argue that “control, if not sovereignty, over the Spratlys enables the monitoring of traffic through the sea, including the use of some intelligence-gathering capabilities, and the theoretical housing of anti-ship missiles that could threaten larger vessels transiting through the area; ... this strategic importance is reflected in the fact that the South China Sea potentially offers one of the few sanctuaries for China’s naval assets against attack, while also promising the access to the open seas required by larger vessels and submarines through the Luzon Strait.”¹⁸⁰

In a 2015 U.S. Congressional Research Service report on China’s Spratly reclamation, authors Ben Dolven et al. assert that “China could use one or more of the reclamation sites as locations for anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) systems, including radars, electronic listening equipment, surface-to-air missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, and manned and unmanned aircraft in addition [to] small numbers of Chinese navy ships

¹⁸⁰ Raine and Le Miere, *Regional Disorder*, 66.

[which] might be stationed at one or more of the sites, perhaps on a rotation basis.”¹⁸¹ The motivation behind “stationing A2/AD systems such as air defense, ACMs, tactical aircraft, and antisubmarine warfare aircraft at bases in the Spratlys” is to “project elements of China’s A2/AD network further into the South China Sea, and thicken the overall density of the network.”¹⁸²

These outposts, and greater control of the South China Sea will also be advantageous to China’s submarines, an integral component of China’s military power projection capabilities. Glaser writes “the island build-up could be an attempt to establish a defensive perimeter protecting an underground base for nuclear missile submarines at Yulin on the southern coast of Hainan Island, [and] the South China Sea’s deep sea floor with underwater canyons could also provide a sanctuary where Chinese submarines could avoid detection.”¹⁸³

One perspective on the benefits to China’s offensive military capabilities is that the outposts upon the newly reclaimed islands will increase China’s military capability to forcibly take control of rival claimant outposts and territories or force rivals to abandon their respective outposts. Glaser writes that “helicopters, amphibious landing craft, and mobile artillery batteries could be used to conduct assaults on nearby land features.”¹⁸⁴ According to Dolven et al. “basing smaller numbers of Chinese troops on one or more of these islands ... could give China a limited amphibious assault capability: with the use of helicopters and amphibious landing craft, and support from Chinese mobile artillery stationed on the outposts, such troops could be used for conducting assaults on nearby islands held by rival claimants.”¹⁸⁵ China could also use these capabilities to force adversaries to abandon their outposts. Glaser writes that “China could opt to put pressure on rival claimants to abandon some of their outposts.”¹⁸⁶ Similarly, Storey asserts that

¹⁸¹ Dolven et al., *Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea*, 8.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 8, 11.

¹⁸³ Glaser, “China’s Island Building in the Spratly Islands,” 39.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁸⁵ Dolven et al., *Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea*, 11.

¹⁸⁶ Glaser, “China’s Island Building in the Spratly Islands,” 36.

“PLAN and coast guard assets may also be used to increase pressure on the other claimants to vacate the atolls under their control.”¹⁸⁷

An additional perspective is that China’s outposts being constructed on its newly reclaimed ‘islands’ are “the first step to prepare the infrastructure for the establishment of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the South China Sea; the reclaimed features could be the base for an airport and would extend the reach of the Chinese air force to the south of the South China Sea.”¹⁸⁸ According to Glaser, “in November 2013, China unilaterally set up an ADIZ in disputed waters in the East China, [and], at the same time, a PLA major general confided that the Chinese military has long had plans to establish an ADIZ in China’s near seas, including the East China Sea, Yellow Sea, and South China Sea.”¹⁸⁹ Similarly, Storey asserts that “enhanced surveillance capabilities and the presence of combat aircraft raises the prospect that Beijing will establish an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the South China Sea as it controversially did in the East China Sea in 2013.”¹⁹⁰

Whether China will decide to establish an ADIZ over the South China Sea will ultimately be a political decision as much as it is a military one and there are currently no indications that China has definitely decided one way or another in this regard; however, these outposts would increase China’s capabilities in this regard. Looking at the evidence behind the ADIZ assertion, Glaser writes that “an airstrip more than 10,000 feet long has been built on Fiery Cross Reef, which is big enough for virtually all of China’s aircraft, including fighter jets, transport planes, airborne early warning and control, and surveillance and tanker aircraft.”¹⁹¹ Continuing, Glaser writes that “these runways, along with radar and refueling facilities to support operations by intercept aircraft, could increase China’s capability to monitor and patrol an ADIZ.”¹⁹² Dolven et al. write that

¹⁸⁷ Storey, “The Regional Military and Paramilitary Balance,” 75.

¹⁸⁸ Dung and Minh, “Some Legal Aspects of Current Developments in the South China Sea,” 67.

¹⁸⁹ Bonnie S. Glaser, “China’s Island Building in the Spratly Islands,” 38.

¹⁹⁰ Storey, “China’s Terraforming in the Spratlys,” 5.

¹⁹¹ Glaser, “China’s Island Building in the Spratly Islands,” 37.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 38.

“should China at some point declare an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) over the South China Sea, radars stationed at one or more of these sites, and the use of the runway and refueling facilities at Fiery Cross Reef to support operations by intercept aircraft, could enhance the enforcement of that ADIZ.”¹⁹³

Yet another perspective is that the increased offensive capabilities in the Spratlys and southern South China Sea will “provide China with capability to hold U.S. forces at risk at a farther distance than it can at present, [and] this could have implications for a U.S. effort to come to Taiwan’s defense. A U.S. carrier battle group sailing from the Arabian Gulf or Indian Ocean to come [to] Taiwan’s aid would have to pass through the South China Sea.”¹⁹⁴ Glaser continues, writing on how these Spratly outposts would delay U.S. wartime intervention in a scenario pitting China and the United States at odds with one another, writing that “in wartime, the need to attack these sites and the aircraft and ships deploying from them would divert U.S. assets from performing other missions.”¹⁹⁵

2. Increased Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Capabilities

To enhance China’s ability to project power, it needs to develop a robust ISR capability in the South China Sea. Part of power projection is knowing where to project that power. At an International Defense forum in China in 2014, a senior PLA Air Force officer stated that “there is a need for a base to support our radar system and intelligence-gathering activities,” and “there is a need for a base of operations in the South China Sea for state security and to protect national interest.”¹⁹⁶ Glaser asserts that “China’s outposts in the Spratlys will undoubtedly be equipped with radar and electronic listening equipment that will enhance China’s intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and maritime domain awareness capabilities in the South China Sea.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹³ Dolven et al., *Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea*, 11.

¹⁹⁴ Glaser, “China’s Island Building in the Spratly Islands,” 36.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 31.

¹⁹⁶ Jin Zhirui, as quoted by Nanae Kurashige, “Chinese Military Officer Explains Need for Construction in Disputed Spratlys,” *Asahi Shimbun*, November 23, 2014.

¹⁹⁷ Glaser, “China’s Island Building in the Spratly Islands,” 35–36.

Additional ISR capabilities in the Spratlys will significantly improve China's capabilities to monitor to movements of air and sea traffic through the South China Sea. According to Glaser, "depending on what platforms and systems are deployed on these outposts, China could have the ability to monitor most, if not all, of the South China Sea on a 24/7 basis, [and] these enhanced capabilities will provide China advantages over its weaker neighbors and pose challenges to U.S. military activities in the region."¹⁹⁸ Storey writes that "radar, surveillance, and communication systems, together with the presence of fighter jets operating from airfield on Fiery Cross and Subi Reefs, will also enable China to greatly enhance its maritime domain awareness in the South China Sea."¹⁹⁹ Dolven et al. write that "improved MDA and ISR capabilities would support both day-to-day activities and potential combat operations."²⁰⁰ An increased ISR capability will greatly bolster China's capabilities to project power in the South China Sea and would significantly aid China in the monitoring of the movements of its adversaries, including the United States, in the region.

3. Increased Logistics Support and Sustainment

The third and final overarching benefit that the outposts will provide to China's power projection capabilities is to increase the logistics support for and sustainment of Chinese military and paramilitary assets operating in the Spratlys and in the southern South China Sea. Dolven et al. assert that "China's land reclamation efforts in the South China Sea could improve China's ability to maintain ship and aircraft operations in the region on a day-to-day basis," and that "enhanced military facilities in the Spratlys could mitigate the logistical challenges of sustaining operations of navy ships, coast guard cutters, and fishing boats in the southern South China Sea, far from Hainan Island and China's mainland coast."²⁰¹ Commenting on the logistics benefits provided by airfields China is currently constructing in the Spratlys, Glaser asserts that "one or more runways in the Spratlys will support refueling operations for aircraft based on the mainland and

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Storey, "The Regional Military and Paramilitary Balance," 75.

²⁰⁰ Dolven et al., *Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea*, 10.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 7, 9–10.

Hainan Island, extending their operational ranges to encompass the entire South China Sea and beyond.”²⁰²

Once the outposts are completed, China could decide to forward deploy military assets at the artificial island outposts. Dolven et al. write that “small numbers of boats, cutters, and ships might be stationed at one or more of the reclamation sites, perhaps on a rotational basis.”²⁰³ Storey, similarly commenting on the potential for naval forward deployments, writes that “the harbors and other facilities under construction will enable the PLAN and coast guard to maintain a permanent presence in and around the Spratlys, without the need to return to mainland ports for reprovisioning, maintenance, and crew rotation.”²⁰⁴

The forward deployment of military assets at China’s Spratly outposts could be both permanent or rotational, increasing the number of Chinese military ships and equipment in the Spratlys and the southern South China Sea, which would “widen the range of capabilities available to China, and reduce the time required to deploy them.”²⁰⁵ Dolven et al. comment that the outposts “could permit China to maintain a more frequent, denser, and operationally effective presence of fishing boats, coast guard ships, and navy ships in the region, improving China’s ability to use these waters for its own purposes and to enforce its territorial claims over these waters.”²⁰⁶ Storey, commenting on the benefit forward basing will have on China’s power projection capabilities, writes that the “forward deployed PLAN and coast guard vessels can be used to enforce Beijing’s sovereignty and sovereign rights claims in the South China Sea, and to provide protection for Chinese fishing vessels and drilling platforms operating in the EEZs of other coastal states that are within China’s so-called nine-dash line.”²⁰⁷

²⁰² Glaser, “China’s Island Building in the Spratly Islands,” 36.

²⁰³ Dolven et al., *Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea*, 8.

²⁰⁴ Storey, “The Regional Military and Paramilitary Balance,” 74.

²⁰⁵ Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2015.”

²⁰⁶ Dolven et al., *Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea*, 8.

²⁰⁷ Storey, “The Regional Military and Paramilitary Balance,” 74.

In addition to increasing the number of military assets capable of being deployed to area, the stationing of these assets, whether permanently or rotationally, will have the effect of shortening China's response to a wide array of potential crisis scenarios by significantly lessening distances to potential hotspots. Glaser writes that "stepped-up maritime patrols from these newly built-up bases far from China's shores...mean more government ships are on hand to intimidate other nation's fishing fleets and to intervene when other nations' government vessels attempt to arrest Chinese fishers."²⁰⁸ Glaser further asserts that "the ability of Chinese government ships to come quickly to the aid of fishing boats in far-flung portions of the South China Sea is another advantage of remote island outposts capable of hosting and refueling government fleets."²⁰⁹ Glaser also argues that "an enhanced Chinese presence at the eastern and southern edges of the South China Sea would allow for more frequent and larger-scale disruption to energy exploration and drilling operations conducted by claimants...[and] more capability to interfere with such operations...and defend its own oil rigs, which are increasingly being used to assert sovereignty in the waters of the South China Sea."²¹⁰

D. CONCLUSION

An examination of both official Chinese statements and observations on what China has constructed upon its newly reclaimed islands reveals the motivations behind China's desire to conduct these activities, as well as the significant enhancement to China's military power projection capabilities that these new outposts will provide. Rather than being driven by a specific catalytic event that triggered China's decision, the projects are best seen as a continuation of more than a decade of defense spending and the general bolstering of China's military forces that are aimed at increasing China's capability to project military power within the region and further abroad. As China's military and economic power have increased, its need to project such power has also increased as China's interests have increasingly expanded worldwide, making protection

²⁰⁸ Glaser, "China's Island Building in the Spratly Islands," 33.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 34.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 35.

of important sea lines of communication choke points, such as the Strait of Malacca, increasingly prudent for such a rising power.

The evidence for this explanation lies best in China's actions. These bases and reclaimed islands far surpass any similar such activities by China's rivals, and despite arguments by senior Chinese officials to the contrary, appear to fit an ambition much greater than purely handling maritime disputes with China's significantly weaker rivals. Additionally, these land reclamation and outpost expansion projects fit an overarching ambition to enhance China's power projection capabilities that has fueled the explosive growth of China's military capabilities that started well before the South China Sea maritime dispute became more of an international crisis.

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V. CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I examined two competing explanations for why China in 2013 commenced land reclamation and outpost expansion projects at its seven controlled territories in the Spratlys. The first, the reactive explanation, argues that China was driven by a need to react to the perceived provocative actions of its rival Spratly claimants and the United States in the South China Sea. The second, the power projection enhancement explanation, argues that China's decision was driven by an overarching desire to increase its power projection capabilities both within and outside the region.

China's decision to commence reclamation and outpost expansion in the South China Sea was driven by perceived needs to both react to its rivals and to bolster its power projection capabilities. The reactionary argument explains the timing of China's reclamation decision, serving as the proximate cause for this decision, as China since 2009 had increasingly been assertively confronting its rivals in a series of incidents in the South China Sea. The power projection explanation, however, best explains the overall drivers behind China's reclamation and outpost expansion projects and serves as the ultimate cause for why China created these artificial islands and enhanced outposts. The creation of these new outposts are an extension of military growth and enhancements to China's military power projections capabilities that predate 2009 and which have mirrored China's rise to great power status.

In this final chapter, I will summarize my findings and present an argument that integrates these two explanations, and which helps explain China's decision in late 2013 to commence its massive land reclamation and outpost expansion project in the Spratlys, what this means for China's future in the South China Sea, and what this means for U.S. policy.

A. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In 2009, China's behavior in the South China Sea is widely seen by scholars to have changed from being more inclined toward engagement toward an increased willingness to challenge its South China Sea rival claimants. Then in 2013, China decided to conduct large-scale land reclamation and outpost expansion projects at each of its seven controlled territories in the Spratlys. To understand China's change in behavior with regard to the South China Sea and China's land reclamation projects, I examined and evaluated two explanations: China was reacting to its rivals and the United States and that China was acting in order to increase its capability to project military power in the South China Sea region.

In Chapter III, I examined the first explanation: China's actions being driven by a need to react to the actions of others. Chinese officials and scholars pointed to five categories of actions taken by China's rival claimants and the United States which arguably supported China's assertive, but reactionary responses. The five categories of evidence were the following: the 2009 initial submission of maritime claims to the United Nations and the 2013 Philippine initiated arbitration case; national legislation, primarily by Vietnam and the Philippines which directly contested China's territorial claims; maritime incidents between China and primarily Vietnam, the Philippines, and the United States which challenged China's sovereignty over the South China Sea; a breakdown in regional dispute managements following the 2002 ASEAN DOC; and the involvement and interference by the United States which predated the 2011 U.S. announced rebalance to Asia.

I also examined how this explanation applied to China's decision to conduct its reclamation and outpost expansion projects in the Spratlys. Chinese scholars and officials argued that China's actions were driven by the following factors: a general upsetting of the status quo in the South China Sea; reclamation by China's rivals that go back as far as the 1970s; and an occupation by China's rivals of significantly more features in the Spratlys on which they had constructed their own outposts, including in all cases having built or assumed control of an airfield whereas China had none.

In Chapter IV, I examined the second explanation: China's actions as driven by a desire to increase its capability to project military power both within and outside the region. When addressing the overarching South China Sea dispute which became internationalized in 2009, scholars point to the following evidence: a stated national goal to increase China's ability to project power in the South China Sea in official documents and statements, such as China's 2013 and 2015 Defense White Papers; markedly increased defense spending beginning in roughly 2006, and a gradual increasing Chinese military presence in the South China Sea region.

I also examined China's decision to conduct its land reclamation and outpost expansion projects from the lens of the power projection enhancement argument. Evidence to support this argument primarily consisted of official statements referencing the defense applications of the under-construction bases upon the artificial islands in the Spratlys and an analysis of what China had constructed and the impact that these outposts would have on China's power projection capabilities. Specifically, scholars pointed to the following effect that China's new outposts would likely have on China's ability to project military power in the South China Sea region: an increase in offensive capabilities which could support military operations in the region and further abroad, assist with any potentially declared Chinese ADIZ in the South China Sea, and help to combat the United States, or any other adversary, in the event of hostilities; and increase in China's ISR capabilities in the South China Sea; and an increased logistics support and sustainment capability for Chinese navy, Coast Guard, and civilian fishing ships operating in the southern South China Sea. The net result is that China's capability to project military power will be significantly increased by the addition of these newly constructed outposts.

My overall findings and arguments are presented in the following paragraphs. The reactive explanation best explains why, in 2013, China commenced these reclamation and outpost expansion projects from a timing and broader South China Sea dispute perspective. China's claims to the South China Sea and Spratlys were increasingly contested by its rivals. In the diplomatic realm, China had, from its perspective, initially been challenged by its rivals via territorial submissions to the United

Nations in 2009. China opposed these claims by its rivals and did its best to contest them, but this did not deter the Philippines in 2013 from initiating its arbitration case against China over its South China Sea claims. At sea, China confronted the Philippines at Scarborough Shoal in 2012 and it had won. China may have been less capable of deterring its rivals in the diplomatic and legal realms, but, at sea, it had succeeded in countering its rivals with an unparalleled ability to amass ships—naval, Coast Guard, and fishing—in the southern South China Sea to defend its claims at even the slightest of perceived provocations. The timing of China’s decision to commence its reclamation and outpost expansion projects, which will support a significantly increased Chinese presence in these contested South China Sea waters, fits that timeline.

The reactive explanation, however, falls short in explaining China’s reclamation and outpost expansion projects in two ways. First, some of China’s rival claimants had conducted reclamation many years earlier and there was a significant gap between their activities and China’s reaction. Chinese officials reference land reclamation and outpost expansion projects by its rivals that both predate and followed the 2002 DOC. From this perspective, China would have had the justification to act years before the South China Sea dispute became internationalized in 2009. This does not explain the 2013 timing completely, unless one also factors in China’s growing military and economic strength. The reactionary argument thus presents only a proximate explanation for China’s actions.

Second, even without the heightening of the dispute between China and its rivals, China was already on a trajectory toward an increasing military power projection capability and had expressed and demonstrated its intent to further develop additional such capabilities. China’s increasing military growth and expansion of its power projection capabilities further from the Chinese mainland likely would have necessitated the eventual construction of such outposts. China ultimately conducted its reclamation and outpost expansion projects because it could, and because these outposts would be necessary for the further expansion of China’s military power both within and outside the region. These projects are a continuation of more than a decade of increases in defense spending and the general bolstering of China’s military power projection capabilities. As China’s military and economic power have increased, its need to project such power has

also increased. China's interests have increasingly expanded worldwide, making protection of important sea lines of communication choke points, such as the Strait of Malacca, increasingly important for such an emerging global power and regional hegemon.

Furthermore, the construction and reclamation projects likely would have been conducted in the absence of the perceived provocations by China's rivals. These outposts would not have been constructed without the growth of China's military that predated 2009 and which drove the construction of these outposts to further enhance China's ability to project military power abroad. In conclusion, both explanations explain China's decision to conduct its reclamation and outpost expansion projects in the Spratlys, but the reactionary argument best explains the timing for China's actions while the power projection explanation ultimately best describes the overarching motivations behind China's actions.

B. IMPLICATIONS FOR CHINA'S FUTURE IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

As far as China's capabilities are concerned, capabilities do not imply intent and "any projection about future intent and capabilities is by its nature contingent and uncertain."²¹¹ How China uses this enhanced capability will largely be dependent on the situation, the environment, and Chinese political will, and it is uncertain how and whether China will use the capabilities against its rivals in the future. Simply having an increased capability to project power may be enough to aid Chinese leaders in achieving their ambitions for the country. Additionally, what China forward-deploys to the outposts once completed, either on a rotational or permanent basis, will help to reveal how China will use the bases. What is clear, however, is that if China did determine to use force against its rival Spratly claimants, these outposts would bolster China's military offensive and defensive military capabilities. It is also clear, from this research, that China places a significant amount of importance on the development of its military power projection capabilities.

²¹¹ Mastro, "China Can't Stay Home," 45.

Additionally, it is difficult to forecast how events in the South China Sea will unfold over the next several years as China's newly expanded military outposts in the Spratlys are completed and China's military footprint in the region increases. The future of China and the dispute over overlapping territorial claims will largely depend on how China's rivals respond to China's increased military capability in the South China Sea as a result of the reclamation work. The future of the dispute will also be determined by how China decides to use these outposts and whether it continues to aggressively react to perceived provocations by its rivals. If China's rival claimants continue to bolster their own capabilities and further challenge China in incidents at sea, China may decide to respond with force. The amount of military force China could bring to bear in any dispute with its rivals will be significantly greater than the years prior to the construction of these expanded outposts, making it increasingly unlikely China will lose any potential conflicts with its rival South China Sea claimants without involvement of extra-regional powers. China's rivals, however, have seemingly been more successful in challenging China through the internationalization of the dispute and diplomatic and legal actions and any future success in countering China's sovereignty claims over the South China Sea likely will be dependent upon similar such actions.

C. IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

In the introductory chapter, I quoted Admiral Locklear as saying that land reclamation in the Spratlys “may negatively impact stability in the regional and the security environment” and “will give China the ability for greater presence, increase dwell time for military and coast guard assets, and expand the areas covered by surveillance and area-denial systems.”²¹² China's land reclamation has already negatively impacted regional stability and likely will fuel a furthering of the regional arms race that is already under way. The trajectory of the South China Sea crisis, however, currently remains headed in a negative direction.

²¹² Admiral Samuel L. Locklear III, *U.S. House Appropriations Committee*, Hearing, March 18, 2015, 2–3.

This research suggests that China likely would have constructed these expanded outposts with or without the perceived provocations by China's neighbors and the United States. Additionally, it is no longer possible for the United States to deter China's reclamation project as the reclamation work is likely complete and construction on the islands is nearing completion. It is also unclear when, if ever, China will be content with its military power projection capabilities and will thus no longer feel the need to continue expanding them.

China is emerging as the regional hegemon and is seemingly on a trajectory toward becoming a global military power. Efforts by China's rivals do not seem to have stalled the growth of China's military power, and these perceived provocative behaviors by China's rivals may have even provided China with the perceived justification to construct these outposts earlier than it would have otherwise. China does not seem willing to slow or halt its trajectory toward global military power status and it is unlikely efforts to curb such behavior will be successful as long as China sees the benefits of such actions outweighing the costs. To date, the cost of China's actions appears to have been minimal. Ultimately, whether China continues pursuit of enhanced power projection capabilities will be determined by how China perceives the threat environment and the actions of others. Continued perceived provocations may drive China toward further enhancement of its military power projection capabilities.

Whether the South China Sea crisis deteriorates further will largely depend on both how China uses these newly constructed outposts and how others respond to China. It is potentially possible to affect how China utilizes the outposts upon the artificial islands. Bonnie Glaser writes that "there is still a possibility to put a cap on militarization of the islands by China and the other claimants, [and] the deployment of offensive, power projection capabilities by any claimant would be dangerous and destabilizing."²¹³ The United States should actively continue all efforts aimed at curbing the militarization of the South China Sea. This, however, will prove difficult as China appears to be unwilling to stop such activities.

²¹³ Glaser, "China's Island Building in the Spratly Islands," 39.

Finally, the United States Navy should not abandon its commitment to maintaining a presence in the region and to ensuring freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. The United States should continue to patrol the South China Sea and in the vicinity of the Spratly Islands to reinforce that none of these Spratly territories generate EEZ rights under UNCLOS. U.S. Navy patrols should occur in waters claimed by all the claimants to ensure that the United States continues to protect freedom of navigation and international law at sea.

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