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**THESIS**

**THE STOPPING POWER OF WATER: ARE MARITIME  
STATES MORE LIKELY TO BUCK-PASS THAN LAND  
POWERS?**

by

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June 2022

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LIKELY TO BUCK-PASS THAN LAND POWERS?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

While most countries in East Asia have moved closer to the United States to balance against a People's Republic of China that is increasingly flexing its military capability, several island nations of the Western Pacific have remained relatively passive and have carefully avoided picking sides in this nascent Sino-American competition. Vietnam, which shares a land border with China, is a regional actor that has made remarkable efforts to balance against China. The thesis explores the issue of whether land powers are more likely to balance against Chinese military capabilities than island nations; it is intended to determine if the differences in strategic behavior are related to the geographic setting of various states. The thesis asks if maritime states are more likely to pursue a buck-passing strategy than continental nations.

The thesis conducts a comparative study between the strategic behavior of Vietnam as a nation connected to China by a land border and the behavior of Malaysia and the Philippines, which are separated by a maritime obstacle from China. It finds that continental states tend to see "common" threats as more dangerous than do maritime nations. In the language of international relations theory, land powers tend to balance while maritime powers tend to buck-pass. The thesis offers the refinement that as maritime capabilities grow and the "stopping power of water" diminishes, the less viable a buck-passing strategy becomes for island nations.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
IR	International Relations
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
SCS	South China Sea
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

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# I. INTRODUCTION

## A. THE RESEARCH QUESTION AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Ever since U.S. policymakers began considering how to approach the increasingly assertive behavior of the People’s Republic of China (PRC),<sup>1</sup> the idea of leveraging existing and potential alliances and partnerships with regional states became attractive. As early as in the mids-2000s, a key thought, according to Nina Silove was to “shift away from the hub-and-spokes model of asymmetric bilateral alliances that had characterized the security architecture of the region since the end of the Korean War”<sup>2</sup> and instead to pursue the approach of “constructing a federated network model in which the United States would lead a web of more powerful allies and partners with stronger links to one another.”<sup>3</sup> The United States has leveraged regional leaders’ skeptical perceptions of China’s behavior to intensify existing alliances and partnerships. The United States has also reached out to other like-minded states as potential new partners and has increasingly facilitated security connections among them, an approach reflective of the strategic thinking of several U.S. administrations and visible in key policy documents.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, not every potential partner in the region responded with expected enthusiasm to the implicit offer of providing a counterbalancing option against a potentially

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, I refer to the People’s Republic of China as “China,” while I refer to the Republic of China as “Taiwan.”

<sup>2</sup> Nina Silove, “The Pivot before the Pivot: U.S. Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia,” *International Security* 40, no. 4 (Spring 2016): 47.

<sup>3</sup> Silove, 47.

<sup>4</sup> United States government strategy documents over the last three administrations have emphasized the relevance of engaging regional Indo-Pacific actors beyond the current framework and encouraged multilateral approaches to perceived security concerns (as China is explicitly named in some of the documents). See White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, 2015), 24, [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015\\_national\\_security\\_strategy\\_2.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf); White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, 2017), 46–47, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>; White House, *Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* (Washington, DC: White House, 2018), 4–6, <https://sgp.fas.org/news/2021/01/indopac-framework.pdf>; State Department, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision* (Washington, DC: State Department, 2019), 7–11, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>; and White House, *Interim National Security Strategy Guidance* (Washington, DC: White House, 2021), 10, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

threatening China. In East Asia, long-standing U.S. allies like Australia and Japan have increased their mutual and regional security cooperation, with the latter's prime minister Shinzo Abe even going so far as to declare a potential attack on Taiwan as a case where Tokyo "could not stand by."<sup>5</sup> By contrast, Southeast Asian states have been described as preferring to stand aside, careful to avoid taking sides in the unfolding rivalry between China and the United States.<sup>6</sup> Most prominently, at the 34th ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) Conference in October 2019 Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Indonesia's President Joko Widodo expressed their desire to avoid being drawn into one corner or another.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Malaysia has been described as adopting the approach of a "recalibrated equidistance" under the Pakatan Harapan government in 2020, after the previous prime minister had ostensibly favored deepening closer relationships with Beijing.<sup>8</sup> Most remarkably, the Philippines, which had a long-standing close relationship with the United States, shifted policy at the beginning of the term of its current president Rodrigo Duterte, to foster diplomatic relations with China and Russia, at the expense of the Philippines relations with the United States.<sup>9</sup>

By contrast, only Vietnam has not adopted this "even handed" approach to the growth of Beijing's power and assertiveness. Hanoi not only is increasingly concerned about China's policy in its immediate neighborhood, but it also demonstrates a growing

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<sup>5</sup> "Japan, U.S. 'Could Not Stand By: Abe,'" *Taipei Times*, December 2, 2021, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2021/12/02/2003768869>. See also, Bruce Klingner, "Japan's Newfound Boldness on Defending Taiwan," *Japan Times*, July 28, 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2021/07/28/commentary/world-commentary/japan-adopts-tougher-taiwan-stance/>; and Anthony Kuhn, "After Being Silent for Decades, Japan Now Speaks Up about Taiwan - and Angers China," National Public Radio, August 2, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/07/26/1020866539/japans-position-on-defending-taiwan-has-taken-a-remarkable-shift>.

<sup>6</sup> David Martin Jones and Nicole Jenne, "Hedging and Grand Strategy in Southeast Asian Foreign Policy," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 22, no. 2 (May 2022): 219–225.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Stromseth, "Don't Make Us Choose: Southeast Asia in the Throes of US-China Rivalry," Brookings Institution, October 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/dont-make-us-choose-southeast-asia-in-the-throes-of-us-china-rivalry/>.

<sup>8</sup> See Seng Tan, "Consigned to Hedge: South-East Asia and America's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' Strategy," *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (January 2020): 140, <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/96/1/131/5697490>.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Bryan F. Manantan, "Pivot Toward China: A Critical Analysis of the Philippines' Policy Shift on the South China Sea Disputes," *Asian Politics and Policy* 11, no. 4 (October 2019): 644, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/aspp.12498>.

interest effort to deepen security relations with other states in the region, especially with the United States.<sup>10</sup>

Vietnam is one of the two countries in Southeast Asia that shares a land border with China, while the Southeast Asian island nations that are avoiding stronger alignment with the United States are more geographically separate from China. This would suggest that such geographic factors like proximity, an acknowledged consideration in International Relations (IR) Theory, may influence this difference in strategic behavior. This observation is especially interesting since the importance and role of geography as a factor that shapes the strategic behavior of states in a globalized world has come under debate in recent years.<sup>11</sup>

The question posed by this thesis therefore is whether the application of realist theories of International Relations that emphasizes the role of geographic factors can provide an applicable, reasonable explanation for these described differences in the strategic positioning of states in Southeast Asia—specifically, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

This research is of immediate relevance to the Western approach to an assertive PRC in general and to U.S. maritime strategy in particular. A better understanding of the reasons behind strategic behavior of Southeast Asian states can enhance the predictability of their reaction to future developments in the region. The research can also address theoretical debates that currently animate realist approaches to rising great power competition in the Indo-Pacific.

## **B. DEVELOPMENT OF THE HYPOTHESIS**

The issue driving this research centers on China’s apparent quest for hegemony in the Western Pacific that challenges both the status quo and U.S. superiority in the region.

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<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Stromseth and Hunter Marston, “As U.S. Aircraft Carrier Departs Vietnam, What Are the Implications for Regional Security?,” Brookings Institution, March 9, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/03/09/as-a-u-s-aircraft-carrier-departs-vietnam-what-are-the-implications-for-regional-security/>.

<sup>11</sup> Jakub J. Grygiel, *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2007), 13–15, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/3284>.

This topic has gained considerable attention among IR theorists over the past decade. Graham Allison is a proponent of the view that confrontation between a rising China and the regional hegemonic power, the United States, is inevitable. Allison compares it to similar geostrategic circumstances throughout history, beginning with the Peloponnesian War.<sup>12</sup> Arguing from the perspective of offensive realism, according to which great powers inevitably strive for (regional) hegemony as the only reliable security guarantee,<sup>13</sup> John Mearsheimer sides with those who predict an inevitable competition between the United States and China.<sup>14</sup> Such fatalistic perspectives are challenged by authors who note that embedded assumptions in such theoretical perspectives drive outcomes<sup>15</sup> and that circumstantial factors like interdependent trade, a resilient international order, and increasing societal contact can mitigate conflict dynamics.<sup>16</sup> Skeptics also argue that such direct comparisons between developments in separate regions do not sufficiently weigh different geopolitical circumstances. Some observers also note that realists tend to assume that a power transition has, in fact, already happened in Asia.<sup>17</sup>

Just this glimpse into the debate about the implications of China's rising power suggests the complexity and uncertainty surrounding this topic. For the concerned regional states, growing Sino-American competition demands an assessment of their strategic

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<sup>12</sup> Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?*, Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 140–141.

<sup>14</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great-Power Politics," *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 6 (November-December 2021): 48–58.

<sup>15</sup> G. John Ikenberry, Andrew J. Nathan, Susan Thornton, Sun Zhe, and John J. Mearsheimer, "A Rival of America's Making? The Debate over Washington's China Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 101, no. 2 (March-April 2022): 172–188, 178.

<sup>16</sup> Stephan Haggard, "The Liberal View of the International Relations of Asia," in *Oxford Handbook of the International Relations of Asia*, ed. Saadia M. Pekkanen, John Ravenhill, and Rosemary Foot (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199916245.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199916245-e-003>.

<sup>17</sup> David C. Kang and Xinru Ma, "Power Transitions: Thucydides Didn't Live in East Asia," *Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2018): 145–149.

positioning vis-à-vis the major powers. Historical developments,<sup>18</sup> international organizations,<sup>19</sup> economic dependencies,<sup>20</sup> identity factors,<sup>21</sup> and perceived opportunities and risks are among the variables that shape each state's foreign and defense policy formulation processes. Although all of these factors contribute to the complexity of Southeast Asian nation's policy formulation and behavior, this thesis addresses the influence of geography, specifically whether a state adopts or is influenced by a "continental" or a "maritime perspective" in decisions concerning alignment and non-alignment with either the United States or China.

A classic perspective on this topic derives from the balance-of-power assumption, which Kenneth N. Waltz employs to describe how states may choose to increase their security in relation to their neighbors when faced with unequal power.<sup>22</sup> Stephen M. Walt develops this approach by assuming that it is not so much the question of inequality of power that drives states to certain alignment behaviors, but the perception of an imminent security threat that explains how policymakers respond to a growth in other states' military capability.<sup>23</sup> Walt suggests that it is a combination of a state's accumulated and offensive capability, proximity, intentions and record of past performance that makes it appear to be

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<sup>18</sup> For the historical perspective on China's place in a hierarchy instead of an equally organized region, see: David C. Kang, "East Asia When China Was at the Centre. The Tribute System in Early Modern East Asia," in *Routledge Handbook of Asian Regionalism*, ed. Mark Beeson and Richard Stubbs (London, Routledge, 2011), 58–60, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203803608>.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Yeo, *Asia's Regional Architecture: Alliances and Institutions in the Pacific Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 53–54. On the implications of the post-World War security institutions, see: Christopher Hemmer and Peter J. Katzenstein, "Why Is There No NATO in Asia Collective Identity, Regionalism, and the Origins of Multilateralism," *International Organization* 56, no. 3 (2002): 575–608.

<sup>20</sup> On the potential of economic interdependency in Asia for peace and its limitations, see: Benjamin B. E. Goldsmith, "A Liberal Peace in Asia?," *Journal of Peace Research* 44, no. 1 (2007): 22.

<sup>21</sup> On the question of identity policy and its impacts on regional relations, see: Sam Brustad and Ji Young Kim, "Identity Politics and Asia-Pacific Security Relations: Understanding the Foundation of Australia–Japan versus Japan–South Korea Defence Relations," *International Politics* 57, no 4 (September 9, 2019): 663–683.

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2010), 165–169.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (Spring 1985): 3–9

a potential threat.<sup>24</sup> Walt's "balance of threat" theory identifies several factors that may cause the various regional states facing the same amount of Chinese military capability and diplomatic influence to perceive the potential for threat differently.

While an approach that focuses solely on a varying degree of proximity of a state actor towards a potentially threatening state<sup>25</sup> certainly may have some merit, it would miss some important factors that help to define the relationship proximity, offensive power and threat perception. The combination of proximity, offensive power, and offensive intentions are potential criteria suggested by Walt that may provide foundations for a different assessment of regional responses to China's growing capability. Nevertheless, this research attempts to focus on variations in one factor - proximity - to understand whether and why China is perceived as a potential threat by its neighbors in the Asian Pacific by exploring how land and maritime powers respond to an increasingly powerful and assertive PRC.

John Mearsheimer suggests a theoretical link among proximity, the ability to project offensive power over geographical obstacles like oceans, and strategic choices made by threatened states.<sup>26</sup> He describes the difficulties faced by land powers when it comes to projecting power beyond the littorals. For Mearsheimer, island nations would have less to fear than contiguous land powers when it comes to China's growing military might. Mearsheimer notes that from the aggressor's perspective, the increased expense necessary to project power beyond this maritime obstacle would presumably discourage land powers from this undertaking, especially as those expenses would be expected to grow in relation to the size of the obstacle that must be overcome. Based on this assumption, he develops the hypothesis that

a direct border shared by a threatened state with the potential aggressor promotes a balancing behavior, while if a barrier, such as a body of water,

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<sup>24</sup> Walt, 9–13.

<sup>25</sup> Suggested by Stephen M. Walt as one major factor in the alliance behavior of states. Walt, 10–11.

<sup>26</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 114–119.

separates the rivaling states, the threatened state is more encouraged to pursue a buck-passing behavior.<sup>27</sup>

Mearsheimer's hypothesis captures the question posed about Southeast Asian states' strategic behavior. Therefore, this thesis seeks to test the hypothesis by applying it to the behavior of land and maritime national in Southeast Asia.

## C. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1. Development of Regional Polarity

According to Mearsheimer, certain framing conditions are necessary to establish the theoretical relationship between geography and the strategic choices of states engaged in balancing rather than buck-passing behavior.<sup>28</sup> For instance, he emphasized the relevance of polarity in the international environment, suggesting that buck-passing is less likely in a bipolar international power balance, especially for major powers. By contrast, buck-passing is more likely in a multipolar setting.

As the potential for confrontation between China and the United States has grown, so has the body of literature suggesting that the world is increasingly becoming multipolar. While scholars at the beginning of the 2010s often described the international polarity as unipolar, populated by various regional rivalries,<sup>29</sup> recent work has claimed that developments in the last 20 years can justly be described the emerge of a regional multipolarity or a new bipolar setting, in which the PRC and the United States are the two poles. Arguments in favor of the emergence of a regional multipolarity are found in comparisons of differences in the categories of state power, like economic strength and conventional or nuclear weapons capability,<sup>30</sup> while the core argument for a new bilateral regional setting is that the accumulated power of both the United States and China cannot

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<sup>27</sup> Mearsheimer, 271.

<sup>28</sup> Mearsheimer, 269–271.

<sup>29</sup> G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, and William C. Wohlforth, "Introduction: Unipolarity, State Behavior, and Systemic Consequences," *World Politics* 61, no 1 (January 2009): 18–19.

<sup>30</sup> Joshua Shiffrin, "The Rise of China, Balance of Power Theory and U.S. National Security: Reasons for Optimism?," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 2 (December 26, 2018): 191–199, [https://www.jrshiffrin.com/uploads/1/1/1/4/111473729/final\\_the\\_rise\\_of\\_china\\_balance\\_of\\_power\\_theory\\_and\\_us\\_national\\_security\\_reasons\\_for\\_optimism\\_copy.pdf](https://www.jrshiffrin.com/uploads/1/1/1/4/111473729/final_the_rise_of_china_balance_of_power_theory_and_us_national_security_reasons_for_optimism_copy.pdf).

be matched by a third regional actor.<sup>31</sup> This brief literature review suggests that the Western Pacific reflects a multipolar setting that is developing into a new bipolarity, a period of transition that can be categorized as unbalanced multipolarity, since it incorporates developing power asymmetries between major powers.<sup>32</sup>

## 2. Existence of a Regional Buck-Catcher

Mearsheimer states that in a bipolar, and increasingly in a multipolar world, a state would tend to buck-pass if that state's security threats are likely to be absorbed by someone else (a designated buck-catcher).<sup>33</sup>

China's declared intention to integrate the island of Taiwan into the PRC, potentially by force, indicates a strong likelihood that Taiwan will emerge as the primary buck-catcher in the region. Taiwan's ability to maintain its security has become a prominent issue in the strategic competition between China and the United States, Taiwan's primary protector.<sup>34</sup> This alignment of interests between the United States and Taiwan can lead Chinese officials to believe that the United States might intervene if it took action against Taiwan, while the security relationship with Taiwan can lead to concerns in Washington that the United States might be dragged into a conflict between the regional buck-catcher and China.<sup>35</sup>

The importance of Taiwan in Chinese strategic thinking was explained by a geostrategic analysis undertaken by Robert D. Kaplan in 2012.<sup>36</sup> He asserted that China's extensive coastline is a geographic advantage, enabling China to project power in the surrounding maritime area. In this regard, he concluded that Taiwan could be essential to

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<sup>31</sup> Tunsjø Øystein, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics: China, The United States, and Geostructural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), Chapter III.

<sup>32</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 344–345

<sup>33</sup> Mearsheimer, 270–272.

<sup>34</sup> “The Great Obfuscation of One-China,” *The Economist*, March 11, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2017/03/11/the-great-obfuscation-of-one-china>.

<sup>35</sup> “The Great Obfuscation of One-China,” *The Economist*, March 11, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2017/03/11/the-great-obfuscation-of-one-china>.

<sup>36</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2012), 213–216.

allowing Chinese naval power to overcome the de facto barrier comprised by the First Island Chain and to project China's capabilities into the wider Pacific. While Kaplan described China as a historical land power that for centuries had focused on potential threats from the Asian heartland,<sup>37</sup> he noted its recent eastward focus and naval buildup has created new ground for direct confrontation in the maritime domain, which it shares with the superior maritime power in the region, the United States.<sup>38</sup>

This assumption that Taiwan would become the major regional buck-catcher has two direct implications for the use of Mearsheimer's hypothesis to explain the behavior of the states in question. The existence of a buck-catcher would promote a buck-passing behavior by many regional states.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, this assumption may be supported by the fact that Taiwan is a maritime nation — a PRC assault on Taiwan would not necessarily involve other maritime states in the region. Hence, the presence of a buck-catcher in the region may reduce the likelihood that a potential aggressor would commit extensive naval capabilities to objectives other than the buck-catcher and possibly states offering security guarantees.<sup>40</sup>

### **3. Perception of Defensive Advantage**

Mearsheimer places geography and strategic choice into historical perspective when he describes circumstances that promote buck-passing behavior.<sup>41</sup> His primary historical examples focus on major powers in 20th-century Europe, where he assessed, that states only formed an alliance after significant aggression by a threatening power (Germany, Soviet Union). He further observed that a maritime-oriented Britain, perceiving itself in an advantageous defensive position, only joined the alliance when the continental absorber of the threat (i.e., the buck-catcher) seemed likely to fail against the aggressor.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Kaplan, 200–203.

<sup>38</sup> Robert S. Ross, "The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-First Century," *International Security* 23, no. 4 (Spring, 1999): 108, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539295?seq=1>.

<sup>39</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 270–272.

<sup>40</sup> Øystein, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics*, 150–151.

<sup>41</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 271

<sup>42</sup> Mearsheimer, chapters IV, V, and VIII.

States' preference for buck-passing behavior under advantageous defensive conditions is also observed by Waltz. He noted that while the assumed advantage of offensive warfare led to counterbalancing behavior before World War I, the belief that the defense was the dominant form of warfare led to buck-passing behavior before World War II.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, both Mearsheimer's view of that island nations enjoy geographically inherent advantages in defending against a maritime attack<sup>44</sup> and Waltz's contention that the defensive advantage provided by island geography and an island nation's assumed preference for buck-passing behavior offer a potential explanation for the evidence uncovered in this thesis.

In terms of strategic behavior of minor powers that face a potentially threatening major power in a maritime environment, the assumption that the minor powers prefer buck-passing behavior is further supported by other empirical examples. In one study, Rolf Hobson and Tom Kristiansen argued that secondary maritime powers in Europe between the 17th century and World War I, were particularly concerned about threats to their maritime security from primary naval powers. The authors assessed that secondary naval powers (e.g., Sweden, Denmark-Norway, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Venice) mainly tried to avoid getting into conflicts with major naval powers and instead preferred a buck-passing strategy. According to Hobson and Kristiansen, only a couple examples of naval counterbalancing attempts can be identified during that period (both of which can be categorized as "internal balancing" attempts by France and Germany).<sup>45</sup>

#### **4. Expectations for Findings**

The brief review of the existing literature related to IR theory leads to three key observations that frame research expectations. First, an emergent bipolarity in the Western Pacific suggests that both major powers are likely to exert increasing pressure on regional states to align with them.

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<sup>43</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 165–169.

<sup>44</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 114.

<sup>45</sup> Rolf Hobson and Tom Kristiansen, "The National Security of Secondary Maritime Powers within the Classic European States System," in *Twenty-First Century Seapower. Cooperation and Conflict at Sea*, ed. Peter Dutton, Robert Ross, and Øystein Tunsjø (London: Routledge, 2012), 9–17.

Second, the existence of the dedicated buck-catcher increases the potential for nations to buck-pass. Taiwan is assumed to be the focus of the competing major powers (China and the United States). Pressure exercised and options offered by both major powers to other regional states will also be related to the question of Taiwan. Both major powers will care more about the alignment of a regional state that is of higher relevance for the question Taiwan -the buck-catcher- due to its geographical proximity, for instance, rather than the alignment of a regional state based on other considerations.

Third, direct competition between the United States and China culminates predominantly in the maritime domain. Their ability to project maritime power regionally<sup>46</sup> suggests that both powers are limited in their ability to use force to pressure third parties, especially if such an undertaking would require naval forces.

Given the evolving distribution of power in the region, polities in the Western Pacific may alter their strategic positions toward the great powers; the more regional states feel increasing pressure from China and the United States to take one side or the other, the more a bipolar regional power distribution manifests itself. The existence of a buck-catcher as the assumed focus of China and the United States suggests that regional threat perceptions will not be governed by the perception of the overall offensive power of the potential threat, but by the offensive that remains after the PRC or the United States deals with Taiwan, the primary buck-catcher. The individual geographic setting of a threatened state and its assessment of the threatening state's ability to overcome geographic obstacles frame the state's threat perception and strategic behavior (i.e., balancing or buck-passing).

#### **D. RESEARCH DESIGN**

The hypothesis tested explains the different strategic behaviors of regional states in Southeast Asia in response to a perceived threat from China. The hypothesis is drawn from Mearsheimer's work: "a direct border shared by a threatened state with the potential aggressor promotes a balancing behavior, while if a barrier, such as a body of water, separates

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<sup>46</sup> Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020. Annual Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2020), vi-ix, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>.

the rivaling states, the threatened state is more encouraged to pursue a buck-passing behavior.”<sup>47</sup> The independent variable is the nature of the shared border with the potential aggressor. It can either be a direct (land-connected) border, or a border that incorporates a significant geographical obstacle—in Southeast Asia this is a maritime obstacle. The dependent variable suggests that a country sharing a land border with China, for instance, Vietnam, would favor balancing against China, while countries separated from China by the ocean, like the Philippines, Malaysia, or Indonesia, would tend to pursue a buck-passing strategy.

This hypothesis could be falsified because of the impact of China’s growing ability to overcome the geographical obstacle. Thus, research needs to address how the growth of Chinese maritime capability has affected the balancing behavior of states. The study must explore how the threat perception of the states in question has evolved in relation to the development of the naval capabilities of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). The study will also assess whether this changing threat perception affected the decision to adopt a buck-passing or a balancing strategy.

### **1. Determination of Threat Perception**

Threat perception, according to Mearsheimer, can be determined by a state’s offensive military power capabilities and that state’s potential to use them against other states.<sup>48</sup> But while Mearsheimer’s approach recommends a direct comparison of the military capabilities possessed by China and those of the states studied in this thesis, this seems of little immediate value in this case. Even a superficial look at the publicly available data suggests that China has amassed offensive military power far outmatching the defense capabilities of the regional states studied. Furthermore, the existence of a buck-catcher and China’s competition with the United States in the region suggests that China would prefer to commit only limited capabilities to operations not immediately relevant to focal point of Taiwan. Instead, to evaluate the degree to which the countries under consideration perceive China as a threat, this thesis considers two main indicators: (1) recent PRC military activities

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<sup>47</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 271.

<sup>48</sup> Mearsheimer, 43.

directed against the nations considered as actual threats already experienced; and (2) evidence of a perceived intent to achieve regional hegemony.<sup>49</sup> China's longstanding territorial claims in the South China sea, subsumed as the Nine-Dash Line, suggest that the states in question are part of Beijing's plan to achieve regional hegemony. Thus, the geostrategic considerations are examined to assess the threat posed by the PRC.

## **2. Determination of Strategic Behavior**

The hypothesis tested in this thesis suggests that the regional countries examined are likely to choose one of two strategic behaviors. To establish that a state has adopted buck-passing behavior, three indicators are evident: First, the state is seeking good diplomatic relations with the aggressor. Second, the state distances itself from the intended buck-catcher. Third, under certain conditions, the state increases its defensive capabilities (internal balancing) to deter the aggressor.<sup>50</sup>

As the alternative to buck-passing, balancing behavior has the following characteristics: signaling credibly to the aggressor that one is willing to resist a possible aggression, facilitating external balancing steps by showing intentions to potentially join a counterbalancing alliance, and finally, increasing internal balancing efforts to deter or balance the aggressor.<sup>51</sup>

To determine the selected behavior of the states under consideration, the second step in this thesis is to assess each state's position according to three categories of indicators: The first is a general tendency to engage in diplomatic relations with China. The second is a general tendency to engage in diplomatic relations with the United States (representing not only the potential balancing power but also the primary protector of the strategic buck-catcher). The third category includes indicators of a states' efforts of internal balancing with regards to the perceived security threat.

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<sup>49</sup> Mearsheimer, 140–141.

<sup>50</sup> Mearsheimer, 155–164.

<sup>51</sup> Mearsheimer, 156–157.

### 3. Case Selection

This hypothesis is tested by a comparative study of representative regional states in Southeast Asia.<sup>52</sup> The hypothesis variables provide the criteria for their selection. As a result, the state must be in strategically positioned to perceive China as a potential threat to the state's security. Second, the selected state's border geography must separate the state and China.

Among the countries of Southeast Asia, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and as well as Vietnam, have standing territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea (SCS), which provide sufficient ground to assess the existence of a bilateral conflict. Out of these five countries, since 2019 four have reassured their position via reference to the 2016 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) arbitral ruling, by verbal notes to the United Nations, denying the validity of China's nine-dash line claims. Brunei was reportedly attempting to find peaceful solutions with China in 2018, focusing on its financial interests in the face of overwhelming economic reliance upon China.<sup>53</sup>

Vietnam has shown indicators of a potential shift in its international behavior and qualifies as a state to study due to its land-border with China. Moreover, Vietnam can serve as a comparative example to states that share only a maritime border with China.

Since the main effort of this thesis is to examine the potential implications of a natural geographic barrier between China and potentially threatened Southeast Asian states, the size of the geographic obstacle might be a key determining factor in the selection of states as empirical examples. In closest geographic proximity, mainland China is less than 400 nautical miles from the northernmost part of the Philippines, while the distance between Manila and mainland China near Shantou is over 560 nautical miles. By contrast, the distance between Hainan Island and the northern stretch of Malaysia is more than twice to the distance to the Philippines, and significantly greater if the distance to Malaysia's capital is measured.

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<sup>52</sup> Southeast Asia is defined as including the countries Brunei, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

<sup>53</sup> Shannon Tiezzi, "In Brunei, China Woos Rival South China Sea Claimant," *The Diplomat*, November 21, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/in-brunei-china-woos-rival-south-china-sea-claimant/>.

A similar situation can be found in the relative proximity of Indonesia and China, making Indonesia and Malaysia more comparable to each other than to the Philippines.

As part of its strategic decision making, a state must assess the value of maritime obstacles of different sizes. Hence, in this study, Malaysia and the Philippines serve as representative states that have a maritime barrier between them and China.

According to the hypothesis used in this study, Vietnam, which shares a land border with China, would try to balance against its immediate neighbor, while Malaysia and the Philippines would pursue a buck-passing strategy due to the maritime obstacle that separates them from China.

## **E. THESIS OVERVIEW**

This thesis includes five chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter II builds upon the findings from the literature review by further exploring the implications of factors that shape the strategic environment in Southeast Asia and thereby frames the empirical study. Chapter III determines the threat perception of the countries in question towards China. Chapter IV assesses the reactions of the states studied towards this potential Chinese threat, to determine whether their strategic behavior qualifies either as buck-passing or balancing behavior. In Chapter V, the outcomes of the empirical examination are comparatively assessed, to identify similarities as well as differences in the policies and behavior of the states under consideration. The thesis concludes by offering some observations about the value of the hypothesis as an explanation of the strategic positioning of in the nascent bipolar contest in the Western Pacific.

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## II. STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

This chapter describes regional factors that frame the strategic environment of the countries in Southeast Asia selected for this study. These factors provide a framework for the assessment of empirical observations. Second, these factors may shape the relationship between the hypothesis and the research's findings. To address the research question, it is necessary to identify whether potential deviations from the hypothesis' theoretical expectations in the behavior of states are shaped by idiosyncratic regional circumstances.

### A. ECONOMIC INTERDEPENDENCY AND VULNERABILITY

China's central role not only in the global economic system, but also in the Western Pacific is the factor that predominately shapes the strategic environment. While liberal theories in IR propose that deep economic integration has a mitigating effect on political antagonism,<sup>54</sup> realist theories point to a developing trade-security dilemma as a contributing factor in a state's perceived vulnerability and as a trigger for threatening developments.<sup>55</sup>

All three representative states—Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines—have a comparably high economic interdependency with China, which is either the premier or second most important trading partner for each country. For Malaysia, China accounted for 17% of its exports and 23% of its imports in 2020. For Vietnam, exports to China were 18% of overall national exports, and 35% of Vietnam's overall national imports came from China in 2020. Meanwhile, the Philippines traded 16% of its exports and 24% of its imports with China in 2020, while the average trade interdependency between China and the Asian Pacific states overall accounted for 21% of total national exports and 28% of total national imports in 2020. By contrast, the United States was equal to China in terms of Philippine exports in 2020 and ranked fifth in overall imports (7%). In terms of exports, the United States was Vietnam's top trading partner for exports, accounting for 28% of total exports,

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<sup>54</sup> Dale Copeland, *Economic Interdependence and War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 18–19.

<sup>55</sup> Copeland, 45–46.

significantly more important than access to the Chinese market. Finally, Malaysian exports to China and the United States were almost even in 2020, at 16% and 12%, respectively.

From a Chinese perspective, Vietnam was the fourth-largest export market in terms of value in 2020, with Malaysia and the Philippines ranking amongst the top 15 trading partners. Vietnam and Malaysia were among the top ten countries that China imported goods and services from in 2020.<sup>56</sup>

These numbers indicate that the states under consideration have heavy trade dependency on China, and an important trade relationship with the United States. Furthermore, despite their political differences and the issues raised by recent global events, both major powers also remain heavily interdependent on each other economically.<sup>57</sup>

All three regional countries studied in this thesis are participants in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and receive loans either under this umbrella or via the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank.<sup>58</sup> While all three develop their respective relationships with major powers differently, the fact that they receive Chinese-led infrastructure aid can be expected to have an impact on their willingness to take strong balancing measures against the PRC.

This situation has direct implications for not only their perception of threat but also in terms of their posture towards China. The high-level economic interdependence in this region may make each party, including the two major powers, averse to escalating a security conflict to avoid likely economic repercussions. As a result, for most regional

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<sup>56</sup> Cumulated and individual foreign trade data in 2020 from the following countries: Australia, Cambodia, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Macau, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Source: United Nations International Trade Database (accessed April 23, 2022), <https://tradingeconomics.com/countries>.

<sup>57</sup> Anshu Siripurapu, "The Contentious U.S.-China Trade Relationship," *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/background/contentious-us-china-trade-relationship>.

<sup>58</sup> Kevin G. Cai, "The One Belt One Road (OBOR) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB): Beijing's New Strategy of Geoeconomics and Geopolitics," *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 114 (2018): 831–847. Concerning the participating states, see: David Sacks, "Countries in China's Belt and Road Initiative: Who's In and Who's Out," *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 24, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/countries-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-whos-and-whos-out>.

states a high degree of economic interdependence limits the perception of an immediate security threat from China. Nevertheless, because their national economies are highly dependent on their trade relationship with China, these regional states have become increasingly vulnerable to coercive economic measures. During periods of political estrangement over the past decade, Beijing has increasingly applied such coercion to other regional and global trade partners.<sup>59</sup> This development can be assessed as a clear warning signal to other states, including Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines, not to openly offend China by pursuing a visible counterbalancing course.

These states' described dependency on and vulnerability to economic coercion from China are necessarily considered in the assessment of the empirical findings of this thesis, especially in terms of the degree to which the representative states openly engage in balancing behavior against the PRC.

## **B. REGIONAL COOPERATION AND NATIONAL AUTONOMY**

The absence of a regional multilateral security alliance in the Asian-Pacific has already been noted. In the literature reviewed, explanations for this absence ranged from historical-related perspectives on a relatively peaceful period of Sino-centric regional order of coexistence<sup>60</sup> and post–World War II decolonialization and its problematic legacies that continue to impact relations between states in the region,<sup>61</sup> to a more organizational perspective focused on the hub-and spokes system implemented by the United States.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, multiple states in Southeast Asia, including the selected examples in this study,

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<sup>59</sup> Fergus Hanson, Emilia Currey, and Tracey Beattie, “The Chinese Communist Party’s Coercive Diplomacy,” *Policy Brief, Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, no. 36 (2020), [https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/2020-08/The%20CCPs%20coercive%20diplomacy\\_0.pdf?4M\\_JTUAd05Bjek\\_hvHt1NKKdCLts4kbY](https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/2020-08/The%20CCPs%20coercive%20diplomacy_0.pdf?4M_JTUAd05Bjek_hvHt1NKKdCLts4kbY).

<sup>60</sup> Kang, “East Asia When China Was at the Centre,” 58–73.

<sup>61</sup> Daniel Sneider, “Textbooks and Patriotic Education: Wartime Memory Formation in China and Japan,” *Asia-Pacific Review* 20, no. 1 (May 2013): 35–54, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13439006.2013.793065>.

<sup>62</sup> Jae Jeok Park, “The US-led Alliances in the Asia-Pacific: Hedge against Potential Threats or an Undesirable Multilateral Security Order?,” *The Pacific Review* 24, no. 2 (2011): 137–158, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09512748.2011.560957>.

have maintained a strong emphasis on a formal non-alignment policy after World War II.<sup>63</sup> With regards to a rising competition between the United States and China, Southeast Asian countries have been described as continuously seeking to secure strategic autonomy and economic benefits from all partners, including China.<sup>64</sup>

Previous literature on the preferred strategic behavior of Southeast Asian nations has emphasized their preference for soft approaches to potential threats. For example, Yuen Foong Khong has described the choices of Southeast Asian states with regards to the changing international environment as “soft balancing and institution building.”<sup>65</sup> He differentiated this approach from picking a “hard” strategic option in terms of the visibility and impact of the measures undertaken by the respective actor.<sup>66</sup>

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been described as having had only minimal impact during the Cold War, but it was able to serve as a balancing institution to promote regional neutrality during this period.<sup>67</sup> Some observers, however, have stated that ASEAN members are becoming less able to remain autonomous from the Great Power rivalry influencing the region.<sup>68</sup> This is visible in the increasing polarity within the organization -- members sometimes promote the policy of one of the two (external) major powers,<sup>69</sup> or champion alternative regional organizations or forums. Increasingly, these emerging organizations involve one of the two major powers, either

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<sup>63</sup> Steven R. David, “Explaining Third World Alignment,” *World Politics* 43, no. 1 (January 1991): 233–256, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2010472>.

<sup>64</sup> Ann Marie Murphy, “Great Power Rivalries, Domestic Politics and Southeast Asian Foreign Policy,” *Asian Security* 13, no. 3 (August 2017): 165, DOI 10.1080/14799855.2017.1354566.

<sup>65</sup> Yuen Foong Khong, “Coping with Strategic Uncertainty: The Role of Institution and Soft Balancing in Southeast Asia’s Post-Cold War Strategy,” in *Rethinking Security in East Asia: Identity, Power, and Efficiency*, ed. J. J. Suh, Peter J. Katzenstein, and Allen Carlson. Studies in Asian Security (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 174.

<sup>66</sup> Khong, “Coping with Strategic Uncertainty,” 174.

<sup>67</sup> Yeo, *Asia’s Regional Architecture*, 54.

<sup>68</sup> Cheng-Chwee Kuik, “How Do Weaker States Hedge? Unpacking ASEAN States’ Alignment Behavior Towards China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 100 (2016): 512–514.

<sup>69</sup> Charles Dunst, “What to Expect of Cambodia as ASEAN Chair,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 4, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-expect-cambodia-asean-chair>.

economically or in matters of security.<sup>70</sup> In this context, the security posture and approach adopted by Southeast Asian states has often been characterized by the forums to which they belong and the ways in which they react to regional developments.”<sup>71</sup>

Regional partners and allies also have received mixed signals from Washington in recent years, which has led some of them to reassess their strategic choices and ability to balance against China or to search for better alternatives. Observers have noted that some countries have been more focused on increasing their own defense capabilities and are relying on a variety of regional organizations to engage with the rising threat, although the observers did not notice a balancing attempt in these efforts.<sup>72</sup>

These developments suggest that an emerging bipolarity has had an increasing influence on regional international order, which will likely decrease the possibility for the affected states to rely on organizations that promote non-alignment. Meanwhile, in the view of regional officials, the potential balancing major power (the United States) against a potentially threatening regional power (China) may not have provided a consistent and unquestioned reassurance policy in its actions or diplomacy.

All three factors, a national preference for non-alignment, a weakening regional international architecture, and the behavior of the primary balancing state may provide explanations for any deviations in the empirical findings from the tested hypothesis, and such deviations will be included in the assessment of these findings.

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<sup>70</sup> Andrew Yeo, “Only Connect: Why U.S. Alliances and Multilateral Institutions Still Matter in Asia,” *Global Asia* 15, no. 3 (September 2020), [https://globalasia.org/v15no3/feature/only-connect-why-us-alliances-and-multilateral-institutions-still-matter-in-asia\\_andrew-yeo](https://globalasia.org/v15no3/feature/only-connect-why-us-alliances-and-multilateral-institutions-still-matter-in-asia_andrew-yeo).

<sup>71</sup> Evelyn Goh, “Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies,” *International Security* 32, no. 3 (Winter 2007): 116–118. <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2008.32.3.113>.

<sup>72</sup> Jakub J. Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell, *The Unquiet Frontier: Rising Rivals, Vulnerable Allies, and the Crisis of American Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), Chapter 4: “Responses of U.S. Allies.”

### C. BALANCING AND POLITICAL SYSTEMS OF REGIONAL STATES

Stephen M. Walt has suggested that balancing is normal behavior of states in the international environment when they are faced with a threat.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, he has emphasized that states with comparable political systems support alliance-preferring behavior.<sup>74</sup> With regards to Southeast Asia, the United States has pursued a policy of greater openness since President Barack Obama's declaration of the Pivot to Asia.<sup>75</sup>

For testing the hypothesis, this study thus assesses whether regional states with non-democratic regimes like Vietnam would be less likely to balance against a potentially threatening China by reaching out to the United States or other potential allies that are democracies. By comparison, the study would also have to assess whether states that fulfill democratic requirements to a certain degree, like the Philippines and Malaysia, would be more likely to seek cooperation with the United States because of their assumed ideological closeness.<sup>76</sup>

While testing this assumption about the relationship between shared political ideology and strategic balancing is not in the focus of this research, the question of ideological proximity to the potential threat as well as potential primary balancer is assessed as a relevant factor that influences the threat perception and potential behavior of the states under consideration and is therefore part of the evaluation of the empirical findings.

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<sup>73</sup> Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," 15–16.

<sup>74</sup> Walt, 18–21, 33.

<sup>75</sup> Asle Toje, *Will China's Rise Be Peaceful? Security, Stability, and Legitimacy* (New York: Oxford, 2018), 350.

<sup>76</sup> Although Vietnam is described as an authoritarian regime, both Malaysia and the Philippines are labeled as flawed democracies. "The Economist Democracy Index 2022 - Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia," accessed April 22, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/02/09/a-new-low-for-global-democracy>.

### III. DETERMINATION OF THREAT PERCEPTION

In this chapter, evidence of how Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines perceive the threat posed the PRC is explored by identifying their direct experience with the PLA's assertiveness and the implications of this assertiveness from each state's individual geostrategic perspective.

#### A. VIETNAM

Vietnam shares a direct land border with China and a long history of Chinese domination. Rebellion against Chinese occupation is reflected in Vietnamese strategic culture, especially the Vietnamese version of People's War.<sup>77</sup>

##### 1. Historical Perspective

The area of modern Vietnam had its earliest experiences with Chinese expansion in the 7th century.<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, Vietnam maintained a certain degree of autonomy within the pre-modern Chinese tributary system since Annam was able to shrug off Ming hegemony in 1427.<sup>79</sup> In the immediate aftermath of World War II, a brief period of camaraderie was forged between the two socialist states and underlined by Chinese support for the Vietnamese struggle for independence from France. The developing competition between the two communist major powers during the Cold War and Vietnam's balancing policy led to increasing antagonism. Vietnam was able to focus on the disputed Parcel Islands with the conclusion of the war in the South. This further ignited tensions between Hanoi and Beijing,<sup>80</sup> which ultimately led to the first brief conflict over the islands' sovereignty in 1974.<sup>81</sup> This was followed by the limited land war invasion of northern

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<sup>77</sup> James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive, Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971).

<sup>78</sup> Harold M. Tanner, *China: A History (Volume 2): From the Great Qing Empire through The People's Republic of China* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2010), 22.

<sup>79</sup> Tanner, 24.

<sup>80</sup> King C. Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1987), 42.

<sup>81</sup> Chen, 46.

Vietnam by China in 1979, and the Chinese seizure of features in the Paracel and the Johnson South Reef in the Spratly Islands, which both led to Vietnamese casualties.<sup>82</sup> The normalization of relations in 1991 followed a period of increased diplomatic ties. But China's recent assertiveness in the South China Sea began in 2006, setting conditions for the reemergence of a Sino-Vietnamese dispute, when China increasingly dispatched its maritime law enforcement ships and armed maritime militia to expand and consolidate its control over disputed maritime territory claims within the Nine-Dash Line, largely overlapping with Vietnamese territorial and economic claims.<sup>83</sup> Tensions further intensified as China began rapidly constructing artificial islands in the disputed areas.<sup>84</sup> As publicly available data shows, many of the artificial islands have been militarized with anti-air and anti-ship capabilities, maritime surveillance systems, and logistical installations that allow dispatching of surface ships as well as aircraft.<sup>85</sup>

The crisis was further exacerbated politically when Malaysia and Vietnam submitted their case against the Chinese claims in the SCS to the international tribunal under the UNCLOS in 2009 and by Beijing's responses.<sup>86</sup> In early summer 2014, China sent an oilrig together with multiple oil exploration vessels, escorted by a flotilla of smaller craft, into the Vietnamese claimed Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Their goal was to "seize" an oil field previously explored by the Vietnamese.<sup>87</sup> This prompted Vietnam to

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<sup>82</sup> Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (London: Yale University Press, 2014), 83.

<sup>83</sup> Lingqun Li, *China's Policy towards the South China Sea. When Geopolitics Meets the Law of the Sea* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 129.

<sup>84</sup> Zhou Fangyin, "Between Assertiveness and Self-restraint: Understanding China's South China Sea Policy," *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (July 2016): 887, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12657>.

<sup>85</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies, "China Island Tracker," accessed April 22, 2022, <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/>.

<sup>86</sup> Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS). Joint submission by Malaysia and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. Outer Limits of the Continental Shelf beyond 200 Nautical Miles from the Baselines, [https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs\\_new/submissions\\_files/submission\\_mysvnm\\_33\\_2009.htm](https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/submission_mysvnm_33_2009.htm). For an assessment of the implications on political relations, see: Nguyen Hong Thao, "Extended Continental Shelf: A Renewed South China Sea Competition," *Maritime Issues*, April 27, 2020, <http://www.maritimeissues.com/law/extended-continental-shelf-a-renewed-south-china-sea-competition.html>.

<sup>87</sup> Michael Green, Kathleen Hicks, Zack Cooper, John Schaus, and Jake Douglas, "China-Vietnam Oil Rig Standoff," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 12, 2017, <https://amti.csis.org/counter-co-oil-rig-standoff/>.

deploy its maritime law enforcement ships to prevent further Chinese operations, which led to a two-month standoff that culminated in the sinking of a Vietnamese vessel.<sup>88</sup>

In the aftermath of the incident, in 2014 Vietnam experienced pressure not only from Chinese but also international companies that wanted Vietnam to cease any escalatory actions and to maintain the current state of economic stability and reliability.<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, the trade restrictions enacted by China immediately after the oil rig incident led to Vietnam increasing its economic ties with Australia and the United States, with the intent to diversify away from China.<sup>90</sup>

In July 2019, a similar incident between Vietnam and China occurred, when China sent a research vessel on an exploration mission to the Vanguard Bank, again within the Vietnamese claimed EEZ. Using artificial islands as resupply points, the Chinese Coast Guard ships repelled Vietnamese vessels by colliding with them and by blasting them with water cannons.<sup>91</sup>

## **2. Geostategic Perspective**

While both countries continue to engage in low-level violent maritime standoffs, the Chinese military buildup on mutually claimed parts of the Paracel and Spratly Islands, persistent competition for access to resources, and China's diplomatic proximity to countries neighboring Vietnam have significantly altered the geostategic situation from a Vietnamese point of view.

The estimated richness of offshore energy resources in the SCS, especially oil and natural gas,<sup>92</sup> remains a primary motivation for to jockey for position in the SCS, as well as for all neighboring countries with territorial claims. Adding to the value of the resources

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<sup>88</sup> Humphrey Hawksley, *Asian Waters: The Struggle Over the South China Sea & the Strategy of Chinese Expansion* (New York: Overlook Press, 2018), 80.

<sup>89</sup> Toje, *Will China's Rise Be Peaceful? Security, Stability, and Legitimacy*, 92.

<sup>90</sup> Hanson, Currey, and Beattie, "The Chinese Communist Party's Coercive Diplomacy," 47.

<sup>91</sup> Liang Fook Lye and Hoang Hop Ha, "The Vanguard Bank Incident: Developments and What Next?," *Yusof Ishak Institute: Perspective* 2019, no. 69 (September 2019): 2.

<sup>92</sup> Hawksley, *Asian Waters*, 9.

in the SCS are the highly productive fishing zones that have provided a significant amount of the seafood consumed in China, the Philippines, and Vietnam in the last decade.<sup>93</sup> The disputed maritime areas are not only resource-rich, but they are host to major sea trade lanes, which heightens the importance of strategic control over them.<sup>94</sup>

Another factor driving the competition between Beijing and Hanoi for dominance over the Paracel Island features is the proximity of the islands to the entrance of the Taiwan Strait. This makes them strategically relevant to the status of the designated buck-catcher, Taiwan. As publicly available charts of areal outreach reveal, the combined Chinese military outposts on the Paracels as well as the Spratlys enable an almost full aerial surveillance over the SCS.<sup>95</sup> This potentially allows Chinese forces stationed on these islands to provide essential capabilities in securing the southern flank of Chinese offensive maneuvers in the area of Taiwan.<sup>96</sup> This geostrategic relevance could embolden China to act on its claims against Vietnam and others, diminishing the possibilities for Vietnam to find a negotiated settlement without having to concede to Chinese demands.

The geostrategic perspective is even more worrisome for Vietnam. In the past, Vietnam has been described as a foe of China throughout history that possess a large army and important naval bases, which are probably maintained to serve as a hedge against China.<sup>97</sup> Today, China's increased ability to project its military power in the maritime domain has the potential to circumvent Vietnamese military capabilities.

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<sup>93</sup> Clarence J. Bouchat, *Dangerous Ground: The Spratly Islands and United States Interest and Approaches* (Carlisle, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2013), 4.

<sup>94</sup> David Uren, "Southeast Asia Will Take a Major Economic Hit If Shipping Is Blocked in the South China Sea," *The Strategist*, December 8, 2020, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/southeast-asia-willtake-a-major-economic-hit-if-shipping-is-blocked-in-the-south-china-s>.

<sup>95</sup> "By Air, Land and Sea: China's Maritime Power Projection Network," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 15, 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/power-projection-network/>.

<sup>96</sup> "The Economic and Security Implications of China's Activities in the South China Sea," International Institute for Strategic Studies, November 26, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2021.2012068>.

<sup>97</sup> Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography*, 210.

The Sino-Vietnamese land border, Hainan Island, the western limit of the Nine-Dash Line, and a Cambodia that closely aligns with China<sup>98</sup> all add up to a potential geostrategic encircling Vietnam by the PRC. From Hanoi's perspective, this puts China in a position to interfere with Vietnam's access to ocean commerce and its border crossing points. Additionally, this opens potential multiple avenues for incursions, including options on land, supported from sea, that pose direct threats to Hanoi in the event of an escalating conflict.

### **3. Assessment**

The nominal proximity of both countries' ideologies cannot cover the fact that neither the historical experiences nor geostrategic factors make Vietnam any less likely to regard China as a potential threat. Vietnam's historical land threat posed by China crossing has increased along with the development of China's potent maritime capabilities. Enhancement of its maritime capabilities has multiplied the ways that China could put pressure on Vietnam. China's assumed intentions in its competition with Vietnam—access to resources, security for seaborne traffic, military relevance of the Paracel and Spratly islands features for China's maritime capabilities, including their potential with regards to China's claims on Taiwan—indicate that Beijing would not ignore Vietnam's international alignments, given its strategic position, especially its long coastline along the northern straits of the SCS. Hanoi probably believes that if tensions increase, Beijing could utilize the variety of options provided by its growing military capability to put pressure on Vietnam to align more closely with China.

#### **B. MALAYSIA**

In contrast to Vietnam, Malaysia is an island state that benefits from an ocean barrier between itself and the PRC. As result, one would expect that it might take a more measured view of growing Chinese economic and military clout in the Western Pacific.

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<sup>98</sup> Heimkhemra Suy, "No Simple Solution to China's Dominance in Cambodia," East Asia Forum, December 26, 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/12/26/no-simple-solution-to-chinas-dominance-in-cambodia/>.

## 1. Historical Perspective

Malaysia and China saw a steady increase in their diplomatic relations since establishing diplomatic relations in 1974. This was preceded by almost two decades of Cold-War-related antagonism following the independence of Malaya in 1957. Although Malaysia slowly shifted from a close Western ally to a more non-aligned course since the 1950s, the state faced a domestic struggle against a communist insurgency until the early 1990s, and Kuala Lumpur remained concerned by Chinese claims in the SCS. After the Asian financial crisis 1997, Malaysia and China signed their first agreement on economic cooperation, which has increased ever since.<sup>99</sup>

Malaysia also was impacted by Beijing's policy in the SCS. Malaysia, together with Vietnam, filed claims with the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea to extend their respective EEZs, thereby interfering with Chinese maritime claims.<sup>100</sup> Afterwards, China became more assertive in the region. Since 2014, the Chinese Coast Guard has maintained an almost constant presence around Luconia Shoals, while the number of Chinese ships in Malaysia's EEZ has constantly increased.<sup>101</sup> Malaysia, aside from diplomatic statements, did not take immediate action against this PLA presence.<sup>102</sup>

The latest diplomatic crisis that involved Chinese actions in the SCS occurred between December 2019 and April 2020. The exploration ship *West Capella*, operating under Malaysian permission in mutually claimed territories, was harassed by Chinese Coast Guard vessels, which prompted the deployment of the Malaysian Coast Guard. These maritime clashes were accompanied by diplomatic exchanges. In April 2020, the situation

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<sup>99</sup> Ngeow Chow Bing, "Have Friendly Malaysia-China Relations Gone Awry?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 16, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/07/16/have-friendly-malaysia-china-relations-gone-awry-pub-84981>.

<sup>100</sup> Nguyen Hong Thao, "Extended Continental Shelf: A Renewed South China Sea Competition," *Maritime Issues*, April 17, 2020, <http://www.maritimeissues.com/law/extended-continental-shelf-a-renewed-south-china-sea-competition.html>.

<sup>101</sup> Bing, "Have Friendly Malaysia-China Relations Gone Awry?"

<sup>102</sup> Mohammad Ahmad and Azizuddin Mohd Sani, "China's Assertive Posture In Reinforcing Its Territorial and Sovereignty Claims in the South China Sea: An Insight into Malaysia's Stance," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 18, no. 1 (March 2017): 83. ProQuest. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1867908765?pq-origsite=primo&parentSessionId=R9WJBxeA8JdyKufFghrCVhBExbYPd5BSWPxRz1nhDCE=>.

intensified when China deployed the survey vessel Haiyang Dizhi 8 to shadow the West Capella's activities. Malaysia did not appear to react, but the United States publicly condemned Chinese activities and dispatched three U.S. Navy warships in close coordination with an Australian Navy ship to conduct joint exercises in close proximity to the Chinese-Malaysian standoff.

While these incidents have been addressed in public statements by some senior Malaysian officials, the overall diplomatic responses appear to reflect Kuala Lumpur's decision to maintain a non-confrontational approach with China.<sup>103</sup>

## **2. Geostrategic Perspective**

Access to maritime resources remains a key feature in the dispute between China and Malaysia. Malaysia also may perceive maritime activity near its main economic and population centers on Borneo Island as a manifestation of Chinese power projection. Maintaining safe passage for maritime trade remains of utmost importance to China when it comes to its relations to Malaysia -- the strategic importance of the SCS to China in this case centers on the Strait of Malacca, which lies at the entrance to the Indian Ocean.<sup>104</sup> Ship traffic through the Malacca Strait is equally important to the position of Malaysia and Indonesia, while its proximity to mainland China and Taiwan is of lesser concern. In relation to the strategic importance of the Malacca Strait, some have observed BRI projects in Thailand and Pakistan as Chinese efforts to decrease its dependence on the Malacca passage, which would ultimately reflect on Malaysia's relevance.<sup>105</sup>

Whether China's increased naval capacity poses a greater threat to Malaysia than it did in the previously is uncertain. Some authors describe China's ability as too limited to establish sufficient sea control in a hypothetical conflict with Malaysia, claiming that transit times and the length of logistical chains would be the main operational restriction

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<sup>103</sup> Bing, "Have Friendly Malaysia-China Relations Gone Awry?"

<sup>104</sup> Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography*, 220.

<sup>105</sup> Cai, "The One Belt One Road and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank: Beijing's New Strategy of Geoeconomics and Geopolitics," 844.

for China's maritime power projection.<sup>106</sup> The increasing militarization and buildup of facilities on features in the Spratly Islands, however, have led authors to suggest that China now can overcome the obstacle of distance; hence, China's Navy is now better positioned to project power from its primary naval bases on the mainland or on Hainan island.<sup>107</sup>

In any case, Beijing's territorial demands could have long-term security implications for the eastern parts of Malaysia, putting China in a position to exercise control over the sea lanes to Borneo. Sources also have suggested that China's air and rocket capabilities stationed on the various Spratly Island bases now create an immediate threat to Malaysian airspace and military facilities.<sup>108</sup> Although China's continued pursuit of its territorial claims will continue, it is more likely that China will focus its growing military might against Taiwan and in maritime areas further north and east.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, the hypothetical option of a Chinese military threat directed at the Malaysian heartland would require the deployment of significant Chinese maritime assets, something that does not seem beneficial for China, both in relation to the regional balance of forces and the expected costs of such an undertaking.

### 3. Assessment

Malaysian officials probably perceive a heightened threat from China's growing diplomatic, economic, and military capability and activities. Yet, three major factors might moderate this threat perception. Unlike Vietnam, Malaysia has historically been "less critical and more inclined to downplay"<sup>110</sup> China's actions aim to avoid a confrontational

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<sup>106</sup> Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 92.

<sup>107</sup> M. Taylor Fravel and Kacie Miura, "Stormy Seas: The South China Sea in US-China Relations," *MIT Research Paper*, September 21, 2020, 14, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3680649](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3680649).

<sup>108</sup> Ronald O'Rourke, *U.S. -China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report No. R42784 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, September 8, 2021), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R42784/129>.

<sup>109</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies, "By Air, Land and Sea: China's Maritime Power Projection Network."

<sup>110</sup> Ahmad and Sani, "China's Assertive Posture in Reinforcing Its Territorial and Sovereignty Claims in the South China Sea," 67.

stance. Second, given its balancing competition with the U.S. Navy in the region, China is unlikely to invest a large number of its naval resources in exerting an existential threat towards Malaysia. Third, Malaysian control over the Malaccan waterways gives Kuala Lumpur leverage over Beijing, which so far is dependent upon passage through the strait to extend China's naval presence into the Indian Ocean. While Beijing's territorial claims under the Nine-Dash Line remain a source of concern for Kuala Lumpur, especially in light of China's significantly enhanced military capability to project power from and across the sea, political and geostrategic considerations moderate the threat posed by China against the immediate security of Malaysia.

## **C. PHILIPPINES**

Although the Philippines are an island nation, they are in relatively close proximity to both China and to Taiwan. Their close proximity to the buck-catcher could itself serve to heighten threat perceptions in Manila.

### **1. Historical Perspective**

Since gaining independence in 1946, the Republic of the Philippines has, like many allies of the United States, followed warming U.S. relations with the People's Republic of China that started in the early 1970s. Consequently, China and the Philippines have gradually improved relations via several agreements, including joint approaches to explore resources in the SCS.<sup>111</sup> The 1995 Chinese occupation of Mischief Reef as part of contested territories in the Spratly Islands group re-enhanced Philippines' alignment with the United States,<sup>112</sup> although Manila's relations with China improved again since the turn of the century.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> "The JMSU: A Tale of Bilateralism and Secrecy in the South China Sea," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), July 27, 2010, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/jmsu-tale-bilateralism-and-secrecy-south-china-sea>.

<sup>112</sup> Peter Kreuzer, "Facing China: Crises or Peaceful Coexistence in the South China Sea," *Peace Research Institute Frankfurt Report* no. 134, December 2015, 1–35, 16

<sup>113</sup> Heydarian, "Tragedy of small power politics: Duterte and the shifting sands of Philippine foreign policy," 225–226.

Developments in the SCS since the beginning of the 2010s, however, have had a significant impact on bilateral relations. In 2012, a standoff occurred between the Philippine Navy, which attempted to stop Chinese fishing boats, and China's Coast Guard in Philippine's claimed waters. This standoff led to the permanent exclusion of Philippine vessels from the Scarborough Shoal by Chinese maritime units. The Scarborough Shoal lies within the perimeters of the Philippines EEZ and China's claims under the Nine-Dash Line. The incident ignited an exchange of diplomatic accusations and adverse economic actions,<sup>114</sup> and resulted in the Philippines filing a case against China at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2013, which ultimately led to the 2016 ruling in favor of the Philippines.<sup>115</sup> Since then, the frequency of Chinese-Philippine clashes in the area of the Spratly Islands has increased. Also in 2016, China began construction of military installations on three artificially enlarged islands in the Spratly Islands, on Fiery Cross, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef. These installations were reportedly equipped with radars, air defenses, and airstrips in 2022.<sup>116</sup>

In summer 2019, a Chinese fishing vessel rammed and sunk a Philippine fishing boat near Reed Bank in the northern Spratlys.<sup>117</sup> The next Philippine experience with Chinese power projection came in late 2019 and early 2020, when China's Maritime Militia vessels surrounded the island of Thitu. This island feature was originally upgraded by the

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<sup>114</sup> Andrew Higgins, "In Philippines, Banana Growers Feel Effect of South China Sea Dispute," *The Washington Post*, June 10, 2012, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/in-philippines-banana-growers-feel-effect-of-south-china-sea-dispute/2012/06/10/gJQA47WVTV\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-philippines-banana-growers-feel-effect-of-south-china-sea-dispute/2012/06/10/gJQA47WVTV_story.html).

<sup>115</sup> Permanent Court of Arbitration. *The South China Sea Arbitration. The Republic of Philippines v. The People's Republic of China, No. 2013-19* (The Hague: Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016), <https://pca-cpa.org/en/cases/7/>.

<sup>116</sup> Radio Free Asia, "US Says 3 China Bases in South China Sea Now Fully Militarized," *Global Security*, March 21, 2022, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2022/03/mil-220321-rfa01.htm>.

<sup>117</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, "Incident at Reed Bank: A Crisis in the Philippines' China Policy," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 20, 2019, <https://amti.csis.org/incident-at-reed-bank-a-crisis-in-the-philippines-china-policy/>.

Philippines after the presence of Chinese vessel in 2018, but Chinese interference in the activity effectively stopped Philippine efforts for over 450 days.<sup>118</sup>

In November 2021, China's Coast Guard vessels blocked and employed water cannons against Philippine supply ships destined for a Philippine ship grounded near the Second Thomas Shoal.<sup>119</sup> This was preceded by the passing of a Chinese law authorizing its Coast Guard use force, including live fire, against foreign vessels or infrastructure in Chinese claimed waters.<sup>120</sup> In sum, China has forcefully driven the Philippines out of major parts of the Spratly Islands, has increased its own military presence, and has enhanced grey zone activities in the area since 2016.

## 2. Geostrategic Perspective

The Philippines and Vietnam share similar perspectives on China's naval activities in contested areas. In addition to this, the increased Chinese air and naval buildup on the Spratly Islands has brought military power projection capabilities closer to the Philippine mainland. Like Hanoi, Manila now faces the possibility of being within immediate range of Chinese air power.<sup>121</sup> The increased proximity of Chinese air and naval units must be considered with regards to the Philippines' status as an ally of the United States, an ally that hosts a U.S. military presence on its soil. In the event of increased tensions between the two major powers over Taiwan, for example, Manila would have to look at another type of potential threat should it be dragged into such a dispute on the side of the United States. The announcement by the United States that it would support the Philippines' interests in the SCS under the Mutual Defense Treaty in 2019 also gives the Philippines

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<sup>118</sup> The Long Patrol: Staredown at Thitu Island Enters Its Sixteenth Month," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 5, 2020, <https://amti.csis.org/the-long-patrol-staredown-at-thitu-island-enters-its-sixteenth-month/>.

<sup>119</sup> Lucio Blanco Pitlo III, "The Second Thomas Shoal Incident and the Reset in Philippine-U.S. Ties," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 17, 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/the-second-thomas-shoal-incident-and-the-reset-in-philippine-u-s-ties/>.

<sup>120</sup> Yew Lun Tian, "China Authorizes Coast Guard to Fire on Foreign Vessels If Needed," Reuters, January 22, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-coastguard-law/china-authorises-coast-guard-to-fire-on-foreign-vessels-if-needed-idUSKBN29R1ER>.

<sup>121</sup> "By Air, Land and Sea: China's Maritime Power Projection Network," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 15, 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/power-projection-network/>.

potential leverage in a dispute with the PRC. As of Spring 2022, the Duterte government has so far has not utilized this leverage.<sup>122</sup>

### 3. Assessment

The recent experiences of the Philippines with Chinese power projection have been described as a slowly unfolding replication of the Vietnamese experience with an assertive PRC. In 1974 and 1988, China occupied features in the Paracel and Spratlys despite Vietnam's resistance, while the Philippines experienced a similar situation in the Scarborough Shoal in 2012.<sup>123</sup> The increasing frequency of such incidents over the last several years indicate that China poses a greater threat to the Philippines, which also is in the PRC's crosshairs because of its close political-military relationship with the United States. This is at least visible to the public. While the reactions of the affected governments in Manila have differed depending on the sitting president, in popular surveys, the Philippine citizens have cited Chinese incursions into other countries' EEZs as their "top concern."<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> State Department, *Remarks with Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin, Jr. at a Press Availability* (Washington, DC: State Department, 2019), <https://2017-2021.state.gov/remarks-with-philippine-foreign-secretary-teodoro-locsin-jr/index.html>.

<sup>123</sup> Hawksley, *Asian Waters*, 96.

<sup>124</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, "Duterte's Ingratiating Approach to China Has Been a Bust," *World Politics Review*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29697/duterte-s-approach-to-china-philippines-relations-has-been-a-bust>.

## IV. DETERMINATION OF STRATEGIC BEHAVIOR

The previous chapter identified the different threats faced by Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines. This chapter will compare of their strategic behavior towards China, specifically, whether they tend to balance or bandwagon with an increasingly powerful and assertive PRC.

### A. VIETNAM

Vietnam has traditionally tried to carefully balance against the strategic heavyweight it faces in the north by preserving a strong cultural identity and healthy relations with other outside powers, for example, with the Soviet Union during the Cold War.<sup>125</sup> This arms-length relationship changed during the first decade after the Cold War. China and Vietnam worked on improving their relationship; for example, they negotiated an agreement on disputed maritime rights.<sup>126</sup>

Nonetheless, indicators show that Vietnam's approach to China seems to have evolved into a more cautious approach over the last decade. Immediately after the 2014 incident, Hanoi seemed eager to repair diplomatic relations with Beijing. Today, Vietnam's diplomatic stance towards China is described as having become more direct.<sup>127</sup> In terms of economic cooperation, Vietnam has been described as remaining reluctant to get deeply involved in BRI projects, fearing increased Chinese influence domestically.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> For more on Vietnam's role from the broader perspective of the Sino-Soviet Split, see: Sergey Radchenko, "The Sino-Soviet Split," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume II: Crises and Détente*, ed. Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 363–364.

<sup>126</sup> Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: Politics of Asymmetry* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 26–28.

<sup>127</sup> Carlyle Thayer, "Vietnam's Foreign Policy in an Era of Rising Sino-US Competition and Increasing Domestic Political Influence," *Asian Security* 13, no. 3 (September 2017): 185, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2017.1354570>.

<sup>128</sup> Le Hong Hiep, "The Belt and Road Initiative in Vietnam: Challenges and Prospects," *Yusuf Ishak Institute Perspectives*, 2018, no. 18, (March 2018): 3–5, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2018\\_18@50.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2018_18@50.pdf).

Vietnam, along with other claimant parties like the Philippines, is taking a strong stance against China in regional organizations, leading the effort to implement the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea with ASEAN.<sup>129</sup> These diplomatic reservations fall in line with signals from Hanoi to China that China's continued escalatory policy will make Vietnam look for potential external balancing options. Language in Vietnam's published 2019 National Defense Strategy acknowledges Hanoi's willingness to participate in "security and defense cooperation mechanisms [...] including security and defense mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific."<sup>130</sup> Amid growing tensions in the SCS, Vietnam also welcomed port visits by U.S. aircraft carriers USS *Carl Vinson* in 2018<sup>131</sup> and USS *Theodore Roosevelt* 2020.<sup>132</sup> These port visits demonstrate Hanoi's increasing interest in deepening security relations with the United States. Such low-level indicators for potential external balancing must be considered from the perspective of Vietnam's policy of the "three Nos" (no defense alliances, no foreign bases on own soil, and no alignment with another nation against a third), introduced in the 1980s. But they coincide and reinforce visible steps to build bridges to outside powers. When Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang visited India's Prime Minister Modi in 2018, for instance, the two leaders not only agreed upon increased security cooperation and arms procurement for Vietnam, but Quang also explicitly used language close to the concept of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, a core perspective of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue Forum.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Mico Galang, "Opportunities for the Philippines-Vietnam Strategic Partnership," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 1, 2020, <https://amti.csis.org/opportunities-for-the-philippines-vietnam-strategic-partnership/?msclkid=385fe1b6cff111ec933394eb8891fda2>.

<sup>130</sup> Derek Grossman and Christopher Sharman, "How to Read Vietnam's Latest Defense White Paper: A Message to Great Powers," *War on the Rocks*, December 31, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/how-to-read-vietnams-latest-defense-white-paper-a-message-to-great-powers/>.

<sup>131</sup> Jonathan Stromseth and Hunter Marston, "As U.S. Aircraft Carrier Departs Vietnam, What Are the Implications for Regional Security?," Brookings Institution, March 9, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/03/09/as-a-u-s-aircraft-carrier-departs-vietnam-what-are-the-implications-for-regional-security/>.

<sup>132</sup> Matthew Dalton, "Beyond Port Visits, US-Vietnam Relations Can Go Further," *The Diplomat*, March 27, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/beyond-port-visits-us-vietnam-relations-can-go-further/>.

<sup>133</sup> Derek Grossman, "Vietnam's Remarkable Month of Balancing against China in the South China Sea," The Rand Corporation (Blog), March 26, 2018, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2018/03/vietnams-remarkable-month-of-balancing-against-china.html?msclkid=ccc4b0dacfd411ecb70cf240e8b06f9b>.

In terms of internal balancing, Vietnam has significantly increased its expenditures for defense from 840 million in 2011 to 5.5 billion (USD) in 2018. In terms of the share of defense expenditures in relation to GDP, Vietnam, one of the poorest Asian economies, spent around 2.5 % of its GDP on defense in 2020. Vietnam is one of few states in the Western Pacific that has constantly increased its defense spending since the early 2000s and has taken on a substantial burden to shoulder these expenses.<sup>134</sup> Vietnam also has increased its air force and onshore naval defense capabilities, predominantly with Russian weaponry,<sup>135</sup> while its navy remains relatively weak. Hanoi has instead increased the capabilities of its Coast Guard, including purchases from the United States, to be able to “address Chinese incursions ... in a non-escalatory manner.”<sup>136</sup>

Vietnam has taken assertive measures against Chinese incursions into disputed territories during past incidents and, by enhancing its abilities to react on similar incidents in the future, has shown signs of increasing internal balancing. Diplomatic activities—both in regional organizations and reaching out to the United States as potential external balancer—developments in strategic documents, and arms procurement have signaled Vietnamese efforts to engage in low-level balancing against the PRC, while taking precautions not to aggravate China.

## **B. MALAYSIA**

Malaysia has been described as trying to maintain positive relations with China, while trying not to alienate the United States.<sup>137</sup> Its limited responses to Chinese intrusions into Malaysian claimed maritime areas seems to be driven primarily by economic

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<sup>134</sup> World Bank, “Defense Spending in Relation to GDP - Philippines, Malaysia, and Vietnam,” accessed April 22, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?end=2020&locations=VN-ID-MY&start=2011>.

<sup>135</sup> Derek Grossman, “Can Vietnam’s Military Stand Up to China in the South China Sea?” *Asia Policy* 13, no. 1 (January 2018): 117, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26403232?seq=1>.

<sup>136</sup> Janes Defense, “Vietnam Navy,” accessed April 22, 2022, <https://customer.janes.com/SouthEastAsia/Display/JWNA0164-SEA>.

<sup>137</sup> Elina Noor and T. N. Qistina, “Great Power Rivalries, Domestic Politics and Malaysian Foreign Policy,” *Asian Security* 13, no. 3 (September 2017): 206, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2017.1354568>.

reasons.<sup>138</sup> Economic considerations may also account for the relative stability in Malaysian policy in this matter, despite different attempts by some governments to address Malaysia's increasing involvement in the Chinese economic web, including in BRI projects.

For example, in response to the West Capella incident, the Malaysian government released a statement acknowledging that “the presence of warships and vessels in the South China Sea has the potential to increase tensions that in turn may result in a miscalculation.”<sup>139</sup> This statement openly rejected the view expressed in a press release by U.S. State Department, condemning Chinese activities and claims.<sup>140</sup> Nevertheless, a memo that Malaysia passed to the UN Commission on the Limits on the Continental Shelf, shortly after U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo's statement, was reported to include very frank language on Chinese demands in the SCS. The memo was also seen as signaling a solidarity with United States, its decade-long security ally.<sup>141</sup>

But the assessment that Kuala Lumpur is seeking a kind of equidistance between Washington and Beijing remains plausible given Malaysia's recent diplomatic initiatives. After the West Capella incident, the Malaysian government appointed a new special envoy to strengthen diplomatic relations with China<sup>142</sup> and increased its references to the bilateral consultative mechanism on territorial issues, a forum described as being preferred by China when handling these matters.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Noor and Qistina, “Great Power Rivalries, Domestic Politics and Malaysian Foreign Policy,” 207.

<sup>139</sup> Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Press Release on the South China Sea* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020), [https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/speeches-statements/-/asset\\_publisher/mN2jZPwqWjGA/content/press-statement-on-south-china-sea-by-yb-dato-seri-hishammuddin-tun-hussein-minister-of-foreign-affairs-wisma-putra-23-april-2020?inheritRedirect=true](https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/speeches-statements/-/asset_publisher/mN2jZPwqWjGA/content/press-statement-on-south-china-sea-by-yb-dato-seri-hishammuddin-tun-hussein-minister-of-foreign-affairs-wisma-putra-23-april-2020?inheritRedirect=true).

<sup>140</sup> State Department, U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea, Statement by the Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo (Washington, D.C.: State Department, 2020).

<sup>141</sup> Bing, “Have Friendly Malaysia-China Relations Gone Awry?”

<sup>142</sup> “Tiong Welcomes Suggestions on Improving Relationship with China,” *Borneo Post Online*, April 24, 2020, <https://www.theborneopost.com/2020/04/24/tiong-welcomes-suggestions-on-improving-relationship-with-china/>.

<sup>143</sup> Bing, “Have Friendly Malaysia-China Relations Gone Awry?”

In terms of internal balancing, Malaysia's effort has been limited so far. Malaysia has decreased its defense spending from 4.9 billion in 2013 to 3.8 billion (USD) in 2021. In terms of share of defense expenditures in relation to GDP, Malaysia has dropped from over 2% in 2000 to 1.1% in 2020. Malaysia's defense spending has always been relatively low in comparison to other states in the region and it has dropped even further. Additionally, Malaysia seems to remain focused on land operations, especially with regards to threats from irregular violent groups, leaving its naval resources capable of only preserving footholds in the disputed maritime areas.<sup>144</sup> At the same time, arms deals have been reached with both with the United States and China in recent years.<sup>145</sup>

To sum up, Malaysia has shown clear indicators of trying to maintain a political equidistance from China and the United States. Meanwhile, Malaysia has not backed down or caved into China's territorial demands. Kuala Lumpur's limited efforts to increase internal as well as external balancing suggest that due to a limited immediate threat perception, potentially supported by an assumed regional balance of forces by both major powers, Malaysia considers the conditions favorable for maintaining buck-passing behavior when it comes to dealing with a rising PRC.

### C. PHILIPPINES

In terms of balancing options, the Philippine is different from Vietnam and Malaysia because of its longstanding de facto and de jure security alliances with the United States. Over the past decade, however, Manila has more than once shifted between leaning towards Washington and trying to come to terms with Beijing in its stance in the regional power competition.

The Philippines had pledged support to the United States global efforts against terror after the Al Qaeda attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001. This cooperation included participation in the U.S.-led efforts in Iraq in 2003. Yet, the Philippines decision

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<sup>144</sup> Ahmad and Sani, "China's Assertive Posture in Reinforcing Its Territorial and Sovereignty Claims in the South China Sea: An Insight into Malaysia's Stance," 83.

<sup>145</sup> Kuik, Cheng-Chwee, "Malaysia between the United States and China: What Do Weaker States Hedge Against?" *Asian Politics & Policy* 8, no. 1 (January 2016): 163–167, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12240>.

to withdraw from this mission in 2004 caused significant irritation between Manila and Washington. In the aftermath of deteriorating U.S.-Philippine relations, President Arroyo increasingly reached out to China, paying it 15 visits to Beijing over the course of her Presidency. Yet, domestic opposition against moving away from traditional close relations with the United States and increasing tensions over China's declaration of territorial demands under the Nine-Dash-Line in 2009 ended this first period of Sino- Philippine's cooperation.<sup>146</sup>

When President Benigno Aquino initially took office in 2010, he made several visits to Beijing, which suggests Manila's relatively recent interest to find mutually agreeable solutions to ongoing disputes in the SCS.<sup>147</sup> But the Scarborough Shoal incident and China's refusal to withdraw from the area triggered a fundamental shift in Manila's approach to Beijing. On the international stage, it started a multifaceted Philippine response, which included accusations of aggression leveled against China at the UN General Assembly, and the initiation of an arbitration case against China at the international tribunal under the UNCLOS in 2013.<sup>148</sup> Additionally, the Aquino administration moved closer towards the United States, especially in terms of mutual security relations. Most notably was the signing of the mutual Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) in 2014 that allows the United States to maintain five bases in the Philippines. It also initiated a series of bilateral exercises to increase interoperability between U.S. and Filipino forces, and the start of capacity building activities to modernize the Armed Forces of the Philippines.<sup>149</sup> It is noteworthy that the United States did not clarify whether Scarborough Shoal was covered by the mutual defense treaty until 2019, when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo clarified it in favor of a

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<sup>146</sup> Heydarian, "Tragedy of small power politics: Duterte and the shifting sands of Philippine foreign policy," 225–226.

<sup>147</sup> Heydarian, "Tragedy of small power politics: Duterte and the shifting sands of Philippine foreign policy," 227.

<sup>148</sup> Heydarian, "Tragedy of small power politics: Duterte and the shifting sands of Philippine foreign policy," 227–228.

<sup>149</sup> Manantan, "Pivot Toward China: A Critical Analysis of the Philippines' Policy Shift on the South China Sea Disputes," 646.

long-standing request from Manila.<sup>150</sup> Critics argue that America's reaction in 2012 lacked sufficient decisiveness to counter assertive Chinese behavior.<sup>151</sup> This lack of American forcefulness might have promoted Philippine attempts to seek better terms with Beijing in the ensuing years.<sup>152</sup>

The election of President Rodrigo Duterte in 2016 saw yet another shift in the Philippine's policy between China and the United States. Early in his administration, Duterte expressed his desire to improve relations with China, while showing skepticism to the value of Philippine-American relationship.<sup>153</sup> Towards Beijing, his approach was described as ending "Aquino's confrontational stance."<sup>154</sup> He dismissed the importance of Manila's victory at the Permanent Court of Arbitration as "a piece of paper,"<sup>155</sup> while being dedicated to deepen economic ties with Beijing under the BRI.<sup>156</sup> Additionally, he signed an agreement with China on joint exploration of energy resources in the disputed areas. In terms of the United States, he declared the intent to move away from an emphasis on bilateral relations.<sup>157</sup> He ended joint naval patrols in the SCS, as well as joint exercises, vetoed against the EDCA and cancelled the Visiting Forces Agreement in 2020, which had allowed American troops to be deployed in the Philippines.<sup>158</sup> Nevertheless, developments towards the end of Duterte's presidency, including limited economic benefits from

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<sup>150</sup> State Department, Remarks With Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin, Jr. at a Press Availability (Washington, D.C.: State Department, 2019), <https://2017-2021.state.gov/remarks-with-philippine-foreign-secretary-teodoro-locsin-jr/index.html>.

<sup>151</sup> James B. Steinberg, "What Went Wrong? U.S.-China Relations from Tiananmen to Trump," *Texas National Security Review*, 3, no. 1 (Winter 2019/2020): 127–128.

<sup>152</sup> Aileen Baviera, "President Duterte's foreign policy challenges," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 38, no. 2 (2016): 204. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/628452>.

<sup>153</sup> Baviera, "President Duterte's foreign policy challenges," 203–204.

<sup>154</sup> Felix K. Chang, "Hot and Cold: The Philippines' Relations with China (and the United States)," Foreign Policy Research Institute, July 7, 2021. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/07/hot-and-cold-the-philippines-relations-with-china-and-the-united-states/>.

<sup>155</sup> Benjamin Kang Lim, "Philippines' Duterte says South China Sea arbitration case to take 'back seat'," *Reuters*, October 19, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-philippines-idUSKCN12J10S>.

<sup>156</sup> Felix K. Chang, "Hot and Cold: The Philippines' Relations with China (and the United States)."

<sup>157</sup> Felix K. Chang, "Hot and Cold: The Philippines' Relations with China (and the United States)."

<sup>158</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, "Duterte's Ingratiating Approach to China Has Been a Bust," *World Politics Review*, June 2, 2021. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29697/duterte-s-approach-to-china-philippines-relations-has-been-a-bust>.

relations with China, the ongoing militarization of the occupied islands by China, several Chinese-Philippine maritime incidents, the reassurance by Washington concerning the relevance of Scarborough Shoal for the mutual defense treaty, triggered another turn in Manila's posture towards the PRC. Duterte halted the cancellation of the Visiting Forces Agreement, joint U.S.-Philippine exercises were reinstated, and talks on mutual defense cooperation increased.<sup>159</sup> Public diplomatic rhetoric towards China became increasingly reserved.<sup>160</sup> Explanations for this late development vary. While some describe it as reactions to Beijing's increasingly antagonist behavior, others claim Duterte's approach to China could have been a leverage strategy with the intend to increase support from the United States.<sup>161</sup>

In terms of internal balancing, the Philippines defense spending shows a steady increase in absolute amount since 2005, with a first peak in 2013, and a second peak in 2017. Overall Philippine defense spending, however, has remained the roughly the same in relation to its GDP in the same period.<sup>162</sup> This suggests no increased internal balancing efforts.

After the Philippine presidential election on 9th May 2022, the expected winner, Bongbong Marcos, may initiate another shift in Philippine politics towards China. During campaign rallies, he reportedly stressed his intentions to improve relations with China again.<sup>163</sup>

The described shifts in the Philippines' strategic approach towards China testify to the attempts of the various governments in Manila to find a conclusive strategy in the face

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<sup>159</sup> Felix K. Chang, "Hot and Cold: The Philippines' Relations with China (and the United States)."

<sup>160</sup> Kurlantzick, "Duterte's Ingratiating Approach to China Has Been a Bust."

<sup>161</sup> Manantan, "Pivot Toward China: A Critical Analysis of the Philippines' Policy Shift on the South China Sea Disputes," 657–658.

<sup>162</sup> World Bank, Set Philippine Defense Spending, in total and in relation to GDP, accessed April 22, 2022.

<sup>163</sup> "'Bongbong' Marcos set to reshape Philippines' relations with China and US," Reuters, May 11, 2022. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/world/news/bongbong-marcos-set-reshape-philippines-relations-china-and-us-3021386>.

of a vast power asymmetry towards its overwhelming neighbor China. The Philippines attempts to buck-pass, but PRC assertiveness pushes it to balance with its longstanding ally, the United States. While the early conciliatory approach under President Arroyo, including increasing distance to the United States, can, under the assumptions of the tested hypothesis, be described as attempt to buck-pass from the potential threat, Manila showed a clear shift towards visible external balancing efforts after the Scarborough Shoal incident. The succeeding early approaches by President Duterte to find common grounds with Beijing, and his late dismissal of this attempt and rapprochement with Washington, indicate that the Philippines, while likely preferring to maintain a buck-passing strategy, find themselves increasingly exposed to Chinese assertive activities. With the accumulating experience that the PRC is able and operate more effectively on and over the maritime domain, buck-passing as a strategy to ensure security may become increasingly less of an option for Manila.

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## **V. ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSION**

The core research question of this thesis is whether the application of realist theories of International Relations, with an emphasis on the role of geographic factors, can provide a reasonable explanation for differences in the strategic positioning of states in Southeast Asia toward the United States and China.

### **A. GUIDING HYPOTHESIS**

John Mearsheimer has asserted that sharing a direct border with a potential aggressor would promote a balancing behavior by a threatened state. He also asserts that if a barrier, such as a body of water, separates the states, the threatened state would be more likely to pursue a buck-passing behavior. This thesis sought to test Mearsheimer's hypothesis. The hypothesis relies on the assumption that the additional effort to overcome a significant geographical obstacle like a large body of water would discourage a potential aggressor from developing immediate capabilities to project power against the state behind the obstacle, and that the same geographical obstacle's defensive value would decrease the potentially threatened state's perceived necessity to increase its balancing efforts. States that benefit from a maritime obstacle can be expected to adopt buck-passing behavior.

Following the logic of the hypothesis, the initial assumption of this thesis was that a country like Vietnam, which shares a land border with China, would favor balancing against China, while countries like the Philippines and Malaysia that are separated from China by an ocean would tend to pursue a buck-passing strategy. Thus, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines were selected as representative states to test the hypothesis. Theoretical expectations were undermined by China's increasing ability to overcome the maritime geographic obstacle.

### **B. FRAMING ASSUMPTIONS OF THE FINDINGS**

To apply the hypothesis to the Southeast Asian theatre, the issue of regional polarity, the existence of a regional buck-catcher, and the relationship between perceived

geographical defensive value and the aggressor's potential to project power were identified as important regional dynamics that shaped decisions to balance or buck-pass.

First, the Southeast Asian environment shows indicators of a new bipolarity undergoing development. Such a period of transition suggests that the United States and China would likely exert increased pressure on regional states to align with them against the other pole. Meanwhile, the regional states would likely reassess their strategic positions towards each of the great powers. Second, the existence of a maritime buck-catcher in the form of Taiwan, who, combined with its primary assumed protector, the United States, would likely draw the aggressor's primary attention and efforts. Consequently, this would reduce the expected amount of offensive power capabilities the aggressor would be willing to invest elsewhere. In this situation, factors like their geographic proximity to the buck-catcher may be directly relevant to regional states in considering whether to align with either of the major powers. Third, the assumption that the potential aggressor's preoccupation with the status of the buck-catcher will decrease the amount of offensive power the aggressor will direct toward threatened states has immediate and significant implications for their threat perception.

These three framing circumstances were found to have three effects. First, they reduce the relevance of accumulated power as well as overall offensive power possessed by China. Second, they increase the relevance of recent aggressive behavior by China as a factor driving the perception of offensive intent. Third, the scope and nature of China's geostrategic demands drive threat perceptions of regional actors.

In terms of the expected strategic positioning of the selected states, several regional factors were assumed to influence balancing dynamics. First, all three states are highly dependent on continuing economic relations with China, which would presumably deter them from showing strong signs of balancing against the PRC. Second, a regional tradition of political non-alignment, a regional architecture increasingly prone to the influence of major powers, and past decisions by the United States as the primary external balancing option against China would further decrease the potential to find strong balancing behavior by these states. Third, while IR theorists suggest that balancing is the norm for potentially threatened states, that strategic choice may also be influenced by the nature of a nation's

regime (authoritarian or democratic). Therefore, contrary to the guiding hypothesis' assumption about the value of geographical barriers, Vietnam would be less motivated to balance against China than the Philippines or Malaysia.

### **C. ASSESSMENT OF FINDINGS**

As expected, Vietnam's experiences with China as an aggressor were the most severe of the representative states. These experiences included a land war and maritime encounters during the Cold War, resulting in numerous casualties, and continuous maritime encounters over time. In addition, China's military installations on the artificial islands in the mutually disputed territories, especially on the Paracel Island features, are directly relevant to China's potential military options with regard to the regional buck-catcher Taiwan, diminishing the possibilities for Vietnam to find a negotiated settlement without having to concede to Chinese demands. Together, the shared land border, China's close relations with neighboring states, and that major power's maritime territorial demands add up to a potential geostrategic encirclement of Vietnam. Ultimately, the perceived threat from a long-standing potential aggressor across the mutual land border has reemerged over the last decade for Vietnam, and the aggressor's increasing ability to project power in the adjacent maritime domain has only increased the perceived threat to Vietnam posed by China.

For Malaysia, its immediate experience of China's power projection has been limited to several incidents in the disputed maritime territories in 2019 and 2020 (such as the West Capella incident). Yet, China's territorial demands do not present as severe geostrategic threat to Malaysia when compared to the maritime demands leveled against Vietnam and the Philippines. Furthermore, China's offensive power projection abilities are not as immediate a threat to major Malaysian cities, and China's ability to project power across the SCS and close to Malaysia's western mainland remains disputed. Consequently, Malaysia's perception of China as a threat remains limited.

After the Chinese occupation of Mischief Reef in 1995, the Philippines saw the reemergence of China's immediate power projection against them in 2012 at Scarborough Shoal. Since 2016, the Philippine nation has experienced continuous grey zone activities

by China. The buildup of Chinese military installations on the Spratleys have enhanced Beijing's military power projection capabilities against major Philippine centers, including Manila. Furthermore, United States military presence in the Philippines raises questions about that country's alignment, which has direct relevance in terms of the buck-catcher. The Philippine perception of China as a threat has increased over the past decade, in step with the increase in China's capabilities to project power beyond the dividing maritime obstacle during that same period.

Under the conditions of its traditional non-alignment policy, strong economic dependency on China, and contrary to an assumed ideological alignment, Vietnam shows relatively strong indicators of efforts to counterbalance a perceived Chinese threat. Evidence of this effort includes its deteriorating diplomatic relations with China, improving diplomatic relations with the United States, and visible internal balancing reflected in Vietnam's defense spending and armament procurement.

Malaysia, on the other hand, refrains from showing any signs of balancing. In the face of recent experiences with China's power projection, Kuala Lumpur rejected support from the United States in the 2020 West Capella incident, and instead attempted to maintain equal distance in its political and economic relations with both major powers. Nor are their visible indicators of internal balancing by Malaysia in response to China's increased power projection across the maritime domain. All indicators suggest that Malaysia, being separated from China by a large maritime obstacle, maintains a buck-passing behavior.

By contrast, the Philippines have shown signs of constantly shifting between aligning with their ally, the United States, and approaching China in the face of obvious disfavor of the United States. Manila's experiences with China's power projection -- in 2012 and increasingly since 2019 -- seem to have triggered a realignment with the United States, although the Philippines growing economic ties with China may indicate a slowing or reversal of this course. Furthermore, the Philippines show no sign of internal balancing; instead, President Duterte threatened to dismiss security assurance agreements with the United States. These indicators suggest a continuous tendency by the Philippines to favor a buck-passing strategy. But considering the massive growth in China's power projection capability over the maritime obstacle that separates the two countries, and Manila's

experiences with that capability, it would seem that the incentives for Manila to maintain a buck-passing approach are diminishing, which may lead to another shift in the Philippines' behavior toward the two major powers.

#### **D. CONCLUSION ON THE GUIDING HYPOTHESIS**

The guiding hypothesis of this thesis suggests a relation between the independent variable—the nature of the shared border to the threat—and the strategic behavior of a potentially threatened state. The thesis asks whether this hypothesis can provide a valid explanation for the differences in Southeast Asian states' strategic behavior toward China.

Comparing the indicators utilized to assess each individual state's threat perception of China, the thesis finds that Vietnam has the longest experience of China's immediate power projection, including China's offensive power projection over land. In comparison to Malaysia, the Philippines has had a longer history of and has encountered more intense experiences of China's power projection. Furthermore, the geostrategic implications of China's offensive actions are most severe for Vietnam, but less so for the Philippines and Malaysia.

Under the conditions of their assessed threat perception of China, both Vietnam and Malaysia show indications of adopting strategic behavior that correlates with the assumption of the thesis' guiding hypothesis. Vietnam shows indicators of balancing, while Malaysia shows indicators of buck-passing. Both strategies can be related to the small states' respective experiences and perception of China potentially projecting power across the mutual geographic border. The Philippines shows a tendency to favor buck-passing as well. This tendency, however, is frequently interrupted by efforts to align with the United States as an external balancer whenever the Philippines experience assertive Chinese actions. Nevertheless, that balancing behavior is not enduring. Furthermore, Manila shows no efforts of internal balancing.

The hypothesis also assumes that additional effort by the aggressor to overcome the geographical obstacle would encourage a potentially threatened state to pursue a buck-passing behavior. The observed behavior of all three states studied supports this assumption. Even under the impression of the potential aggressor's increased ability to

overcome the geographical barrier, states behind that barrier show clear signs of preferring a buck-passing stance. The hypothesis can therefore be considered to have been supported as a plausible explanation for the different behaviors of the representative states under the conditions examined in this thesis.

This thesis specifically aimed to validate the relevance of geographic factors for states' strategic choices in behavior. Due to this deliberate focus taken by the thesis, its limitations must be acknowledged. States' strategic behavior derives from a variety of factors, and so, geography may only be one of several relevant considerations. Nevertheless, the discovered indicators clearly provide grounds for the validity of the hypothesis as it was applied to the Southeast Asian theatre. The core value of this thesis may therefore be found in its applied methodology, which may serve as the foundation for further studies.

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