The rise of China and its impact on East Asia: a case study of territorial disputes in the South China Sea

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Abstract

“China is a sleeping giant. Let her sleep, for when she wakes, she will shake the world” - Napoleon Bonaparte. The rise of China is a phenomenon in the 21st century. The rise of China is one of the most significant contributions to the restructuring of the world order as well as the Asian Pacific order. Although the United States remains one of the most powerful countries in the world, its regional and global hegemony has been considerably challenged by China. This paper contains three main objectives: (1) to present an overview on the miraculous growth of Chinese economy; (2) to identify the challenges from China's rise posing on the regional and international system; and (3) to make an analysis on the case of the South China Sea disputes in order to clarify the reaction of the system towards the China's rise.

Keywords: China, South China Sea, disputes, power

INTRODUCTION

More than half a century ago, the East Asian region captured the scant attention of the international community. However, after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the bipolar order between the United States and the Soviet Union, East Asia has emerged as one of the most influential regions in the world. East Asia has superseded Europe to become the dynamism of international development. In a World Bank Policy Research Report published in 1993, the World Bank called the economic growth of East Asia 'East Asian Miracle'. Economically, the region includes the world's top leading economies as well as rapidly growing countries such as China, South Korea, Japan, and ASEAN nations (ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations).

In terms of international political affairs, East Asia has many hot spots in which the United States and China are two key players. For example, the Taiwan Issue and North Korea's nuclear program have been the source tensions between these two great powers. The United States and China have yet reached a consensus on the political status of Taiwan. Although North Korea's nuclear program is a serious menace to the stability, security, and prosperity of the Korean Peninsula, the prospects for the complete denuclearization of remain uncertain, this is because China has a close relationship with North Korea, so China can use North Korea's nuclear program to put pressure on the

United States. The rise of China has provoked considerable anxieties for the United States and its allies in the region. The 2008 pivot to Asia policy established under the Obama administration perfectly exemplifies this situation while the heart of the United States foreign policy had been the Middle East before that time. There are various issues about the rise of China. Therefore, this research will examine the impact of China's rise in East Asia by carrying out a case study of the territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

Does China Matter? This used to be a challenging question for politicians and scholars. In the article Does China Matter published in 1999, Gerald Segal (1999, p. 25) considered China just as a middle power, and "China is a small market that matters relatively little to the world." After nearly 20 years from the article's publication, China is now a superpower.

PURPOSE AND AIMS

This research will aim to identify the key characteristics and assess the impact of China's rise in the East Asian region. The debate over the rise of China is intense. While Chinese leaders have insisted that China is rising peacefully, the leaders and scholars of other countries, especially Western countries, do not think that. Although I am of the opinion that China cannot rise peacefully, I believe that sometimes Western countries such as the United States are paranoid about the rise of China. I think that the rapid economic growth of China can give many implications and lessons for developing countries. For example, there have been ideas that China could be a model for North Korea's economic reform. Through this research, I will exhibit a more comprehensive of the upsurge of China's power. I will also trace back to Deng Xiaoping's Open Door policy in order to provide the context of China's reforms. I think this research will be beneficial to those who are interested in great powers politics. Although the literature about China's rise is voluminous, I hope that my viewpoints will contribute to the study of China as well as major powers. I will analyze the rise of China and its impact on East Asia from various aspects, so it will not be a one-sided/biased research. My main research question is: Why does the rise of China cause apprehensions for other countries? I will use three sub-questions in order to address the main one.

- + Why did China succeed in reforming its economy and becoming a major power, in other words, what are the origins of China's rise?

- + How does the rise of China challenge the global and regional system?

- + How does the international system react to the rise of China through the territorial disputes in the South China Sea's case study?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As mentioned above, the literature about the rise of China is extensive. In general, it can be categorized into three groups: the works on economic/domestic perspectives, regional and international security/power approach, and the lenses of Chinese identities. It is evident that the rise of China is "a very complex phenomenon," but one of the biggest problems for students of international relations is that they must choose a 'parsimonious' theory which "should explain a lot with a little" (Garlick, 2016, p. 284). In terms of security/power approach, one of the most famous mainstream theories is Neorealism, especially Offensive Realism by John J. Mearsheimer. There are two schools of thought in Neorealism: Offensive Realism and Defensive Realism. The basic difference between them is that while Offensive Realism scholars argue that states seek to maximize their power,

Defensive Realists believe that states tend to maintain the 'status quo' in the international system. Mearsheimer, as well as Neorealists, highlight the importance of the interaction between states in the international system, especially major states such as China and the United States. In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer (2014) argues that hegemony is the ultimate goal of great powers, so they always seek to maximize their powers in the anarchic system. China wants to be a regional and global hegemon, which means that its ambition clashes with that of the United States. Therefore, it cannot rise peacefully. However, the significant weakness of Neorealism is that it pays much attention to international politics, while internal factors are neglected. I am convinced that domestic politics also plays a critical role. For example, in this research, it will be an inadequate understanding of China's rise if its domestic factors are not mentioned, especially individuals such as Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping.

The leaders of China usually talk about the 'Chinese Dream' with the pillars such as the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and One Belt One Road initiative (OBOR). In order to understand what the Chinese Dream is, it is required to identify China's identities. Shaun Breslin (2009) discusses the main sources of China's growth and the rise of Chinese 'soft power'. Benjamin Ho (2014) provides a different approach by exploring 'Chinese Exceptionalism.' He analyzes this concept from Chinese nationalistic discourse by emphasizing the goodness and greatness about China, and he also argues that Chinese exceptionalism "provide Chinese policymakers substantial traction and legitimacy in the manner in which they choose to frame China's interactions with the outside world" (Ho, 2014, p. 164). Although these works succeed in introducing and elaborating on the fundamental elements which China uses to formulate its foreign policy, it is less able to explain the behaviors of this country in the international system.

Regarding the economic/domestic political approach, it is believed that China's rapid economic growth has reconfigured its own image and regional and international political economy. While some scholars are convinced that the Chinese economy will continue to thrive and even replace the position of the United States, others argue that there have been signs of the Chinese economic bubble. Mark Beeson (2009) argues that the accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) is a significant milestone for China's integration into the global economy. However, he believes that the United States and the extant geopolitical order will suffer from dramatic effects because of the development of China's form of 'state capitalism' (Beeson, 2009, p. 729). Shaun Breslin (2005, p. 753) argues that while there is no doubt that China's economic growth is impressive and important for the global economy as well as the East Asian region, its development is relatively unsustainable because of its low-cost production.

In this research, I will give an insight into the case study of territorial claims in the South China Sea in which China is a key actor. There is a wide range of studies on South China Sea disputes. Amit Singh (2012) presents the reason why the South China Sea's disputes are a regional issue but able to catch the attention of the world. David Guo Xiong Han (2017) highlights the relationship between China and ASEAN. Han (2017) argues that China has sought to be recognized as a 'normative power' by this bloc. Broadly speaking, scholars, especially from Western countries, do not take sides in the disputes. However, most of them agree that China's militarization in the South China Sea poses a

threat to the freedom of navigation of the East Asian region, and they urged claimants to stick to the rules of UNCLOS (The United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea).

Overall, it can be seen that China's rise has aroused lively controversies among scholars. However, I think that Eurocentrism is still the dominant viewpoint. Xiaoming Zhang (2011) reviews the English School's engagements with the evolution of China's power. He argues there has been a Eurocentric bias towards China's status in the conception of international society (Zhang, 2011, p. 763). This means that Western scholars have not considered China as a 'civilized' state by applying Western standards. Although I agree that it is necessary to look at the rise of China from non-Western assumptions, Zhang's article did not make detailed suggestions to improve that situation. In this research, I will use various approaches rather than confined to a specific theoretical framework; however, there will be an inclination towards Neorealism's principles because I want to underline the reactions of the international system toward the rise of China.

METHOD

In this project, I will use numerous research methods. The first one is foreign policy analysis. It is obvious that the understandings of Chinese foreign policy play a critical role in explaining China's strategy, moves, and behaviors in the international system. The second method is qualitative analysis. This research also adopts the process-tracing method. Process-tracing is a vital method in the study of international relations because it helps discover variables in causal relations based on chronological order. Particularly in this research, it will analyze the foreign policy of China as well as the origins of its economic miracle, so it is needed to illustrate both domestic and external factors. Additionally, discourse analysis will be taken into account because this research will also contain primary sources such as high-level officials' statements and speeches. Last but not least, case study analysis is applied to take a deeper look into territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

SOURCES

This research use both primary sources and secondary sources, and secondary sources will play a more prominent role. Primary sources include officially published documents of the Chinese government and the communist party of China (CPC), speeches, and statements of Chinese leaders such as Deng Xiaoping, Xi Jinping. Social networks such as Twitter and Facebook are also valuable sources in today's society when many leaders of countries use them to express their opinions. Secondary sources consist of journal articles and books. These materials are accessible through both traditional library and digital/online systems such as Sussex Library, Google Scholar, and official websites

This research will be designed as the following structure: Title page, Abstract, Table of contents, Acknowledgements, Introduction, Literature Review, Discussion, and Conclusion. In the introduction, the research aims to catch the reader's attention by explaining why this study matters. I will put the topic into the context of the discipline of International Relations. I will also introduce my arguments and research questions in this section before presenting a brief overview of the structure of the paper. The literature review is significantly important. In this section, the research will critically analyze and summarize key debates on the rise of China and its impact on East Asia as well as the tensions in the South China Sea. The discussion section will be divided into two sub-sections. The first

one will be dedicated to the analysis of China's economic growth. The second part will be the center of the research, where I will thoroughly examine the impact of China's rise in East Asia and the case study of South China Sea disputes. In conclusion, I will summarize and restate my arguments before giving some implications and lessons.

THE DRAMATIC RISE OF CHINA

The rise of China has been a predominant topic in the study of various disciplines such as Economics, International Political Economy, and International Relations, to mention but a few. In December 1978, the People's Republic of China started carrying out one of the most important, comprehensive reforms in its history led by Deng Xiaoping – the most powerful leader of this country from 1978 to 1992 after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. Forty years of open-door policy has transformed China, and the country is currently the world's second-largest economy. There are many speculations that China would replace the United States as the biggest economy in the not too distant future.

It is undeniable that China has been emerging as a regional and international superpower. According to the data of the World Bank, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of China rose dramatically from \$150 billion in 1978 to \$13 trillion in 2018. The economic development has resulted in the improvement in living standards of Chinese people, for example, life expectancy at birth increased from 43.725 years old in 1960 to 76.41 years old in 2017 (World Bank, n.d.-c). However, the economic boom has also led to negative consequences, especially in terms of environmental issues. For instance, CO₂ emissions (metric tons per capita) experienced a surge from 1.17 in 1960 to 7.544 in 2014. There have been concerns that pollution is a serious problem for the sustainable development of China. (World Bank, n.d.-a)

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to the collapse of Eastern Bloc. It was expected that the collapse would create a domino effect that forced other communist countries such as China and Vietnam, to change their political institutions. Contrary to almost all predictions, however, the communist governments of China and Vietnam did not fall (Vuong Quan Hoang et al., 2019). China did not follow the path of the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, which underlined the political changes like perestroika but highlighted the importance of boosting the economy. Chinese ruling elite has succeeded in bringing the country out of stagnation and maintaining its political grip simultaneously. While many theories argue that economic changes are the heralds of political liberalization, Gallagher (2002, p. 339) argues that "the timing and sequencing of its foreign direct investment (FDI) liberalization" make China exceptional. According to Gallagher (2002), the Chinese pattern of ownership diversification and mode of integration into the global economy are the main variables that make China different from other East Asian developmental states such as South Korea and Taiwan. The role of the private sector can exemplify this argument. In the development's stages of Taiwan and South Korea, private firms have always acted as the catalyst while the position of them in China was underrated due to the liberalization of FDI (Gallagher, 2002). Therefore, the prospects for political democratization in China will remain daunting.

In the process of Chinese integration into the global economy, the accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) is a significant milestone. On 17 September 2001, WTO Ministerial

Conference-approved China's accession, and China has strengthened its position in the global economy since then. This event was widely believed as a landslide victory not only for China but also for the US because many expected that WTO would put the Chinese government under pressure to comply with the general rules of global trade, in other words, China had to accept Western norms and standards. Another landmark in the history of the Chinese economy is the entry of its yuan into the International Monetary Fund's basket of reserve currencies in 2016. This can be seen as a worldwide recognition for the economic power of China. Since then, the yuan has been a part of IMF's special drawing rights (SDR) basket, along with the US dollar, the euro, the yen (Japan), and the British pound. There is no doubt that WTO's membership has improved Chinese position, but the US and its allies failed to align China with liberal norms. The current trade war between the US and China has raised questions that whether the West should have let China into the WTO because it "seemingly enabled Beijing to prosper even as it engaged in questionable behavior" (Levy, 2018). On the one hand, China has achieved economic prosperity thanks to the accession to the WTO, as impressive figures have shown. On the other hand, China has received the benefit of acceding to the WTO, as illustrated by its current power in the international political economy. From an outsider, China has become a chief actor in (re)shaping the international system and be able to threaten the US hegemony (Beeson, 2009).

Nevertheless, it will not be easy for China to overtake and surpass the US anytime soon despite the rapid pace of its economic growth as well as the recession of the US economy after the 2008 global financial crisis. One of the most identifying characteristics of China's economy is the dependence on exports, which means that it needs a big market size. According to the data of the United States Census Bureau in 2019, China is the most populous country with around 1,4 billion people, accounting for nearly 18 percent of the world population. This is a competitive advantage of China in comparison with other countries. The large size of the domestic market has created many opportunities for Chinese companies and attracted foreign direct investment. In terms of China's trading partners, the US is the most important one. China has been one of the biggest goods trading partners with the US for many years. According to The Office of the United States Trade Representative, the total of the US goods and services trade with China was estimated at \$737.1 billion in 2018, in which exports made up \$179.3 billion, and imports were \$557.9 billion. These numbers indicate that the US had a trade deficit with China (\$378.6 billion in 2018). However, the trade relations between the two superpowers also show the dependence of China on American market which could make China "vulnerable to any turbulence in the global economy" because the US is the leading player in international economy; therefore, an event in the US can have a big impact on global scale (Ho-Fung, 2009).

The escalating trade war between the US and China has revealed the vulnerability of the Chinese economy. On 1st August 2019, the US President Donald Trump announced that he would impose a new 10% tariff on another \$300 billion of Chinese goods starting on 1st September 2019. In order to retaliate against the new move of Trump administration, the Chinese government decided to devalue the yuan below 7 per U.S dollar – its weakest since 2008. In the short term, it may help China to offset the impact of the US trade tariffs as well as improve the competitiveness of Chinese goods since its price will be lower due to the devaluation. In the long term, however, 7 yuan per U.S

dollar is a psychological threshold, in which the Chinese domestic market will be in turmoil if it is exceeded. For instance, China may witness large-scale capital outflows. In response to the yuan depreciation, the US has labeled China a currency manipulator. These tit-for-tat moves between the US and China could trigger a currency war that would bog down the trade relationship between the two countries. As aforementioned, China has a heavy dependence on the American market; therefore, it will be detrimental to its export-oriented economic policy.

In terms of the grand strategy of China, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was initially called One Belt One Road (OBOR), is an indispensable part. This audacious, ambitious plan was proposed by China's President Xi Jinping in his speech at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan, in 2013. The BRI comprises two main parts. The Belt is the Silk Road Economic Belt, referring to the overland corridors connecting western China to Central Asia and Europe (Population and Development Review, 2017). The Road refers to the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which aims at linking China to Southeast Asia and the Middle East by building sea lanes from the main ports of many countries (Population and Development Review, 2017). It is clear that the BRI encompasses a large area, which means that it will require a collective effort and enormous resources. The plan illustrates the determination of China "to move from a norm/system taker towards a norm/system shaper" (Zeng, 2017). However, the ambition of China's BRI is not merely economic. In order to increase the influence on the region, China has been investing billions of dollars in infrastructure development in other countries. For developing countries such as Pakistan and Mongolia, building infrastructure will cost them a huge amount of money that they cannot afford. Therefore, they are in need of foreign investments and loans. However, it is unlikely for those countries to clear their debts any time soon due to poor fiscal health. Hence, they need to give China many privileges, such as the management of ports. The Gwadar port of Pakistan perfectly exemplifies this situation. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor plays a crucial role in the BRI. The main goal of this cooperation is "to build an economic corridor running from Kashgar, Xinjiang to Pakistan's Gwadar port" (Population and Development Review, 2017). This port is currently under the control of China, and when it is completed, the Chinese Navy could use it as a military base. There are also similar cases in Sri Lanka and Djibouti. In 2017, China and Sri Lanka signed a 99-year lease, which allowed China to use the Hambantota Port. It is predicted that China could turn it into a naval base thanks to the strategic location. Djibouti, a country in Africa, is currently burdened with public debt. It accounts for approximately 80% of the country's GDP, and China takes the "lion's share" (Green, 2019). While Djibouti is unlikely to repay China, the first and only overseas military base of China to date is located in Djibouti, which has been operated since 2017, and many believe that this is not a coincidence (Green, 2019).

On the one hand, BRI could help participating countries boost their economy. On the other hand, China's financial loans entail serious, long-term risks that could hold those countries captive in the debt trap. This is generally called the Chinese "debt-trap diplomacy." Although recipient countries could be conscious that Chinese loans are detrimental to the sustainable development of their economy, it is not easy for them to refuse Chinese offers because of the high demand for capital. The BRI is a very useful tool for Xi Jinping and his aides to fulfill the Chinese dream. Moreover, it is also the instrument for Xi to maintain his power. The consolidation of Xi's power has spanned for years

with various methods. For instance, domestically, Xi Jinping has led an unprecedented anti-corruption campaign, which is usually called "tigers and flies." The campaign has given Xi a pretext to remove his political opponents. Many high-level officials have been cracked down, such as Zhou Yongkang – the former member of the Politburo Standing Committee. Moreover, on March 11, 2018, the Chinese parliament ratified a constitutional amendment for the first time in 14 years, which paved the way for Xi Jinping to rule indefinitely. The proposal had been drafted secretly from the beginning to the end in order to avoid public discourse (Ken, 2018). Additionally, the BRI is reminiscent of the ancient Silk Road, which is supposedly established during the Han Dynasty of China. Xi Jinping has also reiterated the term 'Chinese Dream.' In October 2017, at the 19th National Congress of the CCP, the "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in a New Era" was enshrined in the country's constitution. The constitutional amendment has put Xi Jinping on the pedestal. Since then, this 14-principles doctrine has become the guiding ideology for the development of China. All the evidence implicates the personal ambition of Xi Jinping to become a new emperor of China.

Briefly, it is indisputable that China has achieved dramatic progress since Mao Zedong's era. Although China is widely labeled a superpower, its influence in the rules of the international system has not been as powerful as the US yet, especially in the international economy. Therefore, in order to turn from a rule-taker into a rule-maker, China needs to create new models and institutions. Therefore, the BRI, along with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the New Development Bank (NDB), was born to try to entice other countries to follow China's path. The rise of China has caused deep concerns for other countries, especially the US.

THE IMPACT OF CHINA'S RISE ON THE REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

The explosive growth of China has undoubtedly shaken the international system, which has been dominated by Western rules for a very long time. Why does the rise of China can cause considerable apprehensions for Western countries, especially the US? I argue that there are two main reasons. Firstly, the ambition of China is to become a regional and global hegemon. The Chinese hegemonic dream unquestionably challenges the US hegemony, and it explains why China cannot rise peacefully. John Mearsheimer, the founding father of offensive realism theory, is one of the most eminent scholars who has consistently asserted that China cannot rise peacefully. In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer (2014) lays out five principal assumptions: (1) states are the main actors; (2) the international system is anarchic; (3) states are rational actors; (4) all states have some offensive military capabilities, but the level of aggression varies from state to state; (5) states always feel uncertain about each other. Additionally, in terms of great power politics, he argues that major states such as the US and China have the same goal: regional/global hegemony. They will try to maximize their power, which finally leads to inevitable conflicts. The current international system has been dominated by the US since the collapse of the Soviet Union; therefore, if China wants to rule the order, it must surpass the US economically and militarily. The point (5) is rather important because it theoretically answers the concerns of the West about China's rise. From the beginning of China's

remarkable development, the debate on whether China can rise peacefully has aroused a lot of interest. In the article, China's "Peaceful Rise" to Great-Power Status, Zheng Bijian (2005) believes that China's peaceful rise would be beneficial to the world economy as "its population can serve as a growing market for the rest of the world." Zheng Bijian (2011) reasserts that China would follow the peaceful path. He argues that one of the most important prerequisites is that China must maintain its internal stability. Internationally, China should build "communities of interests" with other countries. His explanation is that globalization has brought all the countries closer, so they may share many interests and concerns. He adds that in the second decade of the 21st century, the biggest challenges to major states are not external affairs but domestic ones. However, empirical evidence demonstrates that China has been seeking regional and international hegemony. For example, economically, China has been using debt-trap diplomacy to put recipient countries under pressure, so China can exert its influence in various regions. Also, the BRI has helped China increase and maintain its military presence.

Secondly, as aforementioned, China is not following the game rules set by the West, so it has been forming new institutions in order to reshape the world order. The rapid growth of China raised many concerns over the rigidity of the Western-centered system led by the US. John Ikenberry (2008, p. 24) argues that this system is "hard to overturn and easy to join," and the integration of China into the global economy will be accelerated by the system. Similar to Zheng Bijian, Ikenberry believes that China is seeking a defensive policy, which means that the country does not have any malign intention to overthrow the existing order but becoming a part of it. However, China's ambition is much bigger. Ikenberry (2009) makes a further argument that the current international order, which he calls liberal internationalism 2.0, is in crisis. The 2008 global crisis weakened the US. The European Union (EU) has been split over the immigration crisis. The crisis puts a serious question mark over the future of the EU, especially after the departure of the United Kingdom (Brexit). China has taken the chance to increase its influence in Europe. On March 23, 2019, in Rome, Italy, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and President Xi Jinping witnessed the signing ceremony on the BRI. This was a significant milestone not only for these both countries but also for the EU because it marked the first EU member to join the BRI. There is no doubt that this event has worried about the EU and the US. Many have criticized the decision of the Italian government and argued that "the move is likely to exacerbate tensions between Italy and its neighbors" (Ellyatt, 2019). Before this event, there had been opinions that Europe had played "a marginalized role" in China's strategy (Zeng, 2017). Zeng (2017) believes that the number one priority of China's 'one belt one road' and 'new type of great power relations' is the US. In the article China, the European Union, and the Fragile World Order, Zhimin Chen (2016) argues that European countries are following more pragmatic policies while China is pursuing global ones.

The rationale behind the reorientation of European countries is that they are struggling to find solutions to "internal growth and cohesion problems" (Chen, 2016, p. 788). Noticeably, the world has witnessed the surge of populism over the past few years (Figueira, 2018). In the 2016 US election, Donald Trump had the landslide victory over the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. Europe also registered the emergence of many populist figures such as the leader of Italy's right-wing League Matteo Salvini, French far-right leader Marine Le Pen, and the far-right Alternative for Germany

party. The prevalence of populism in the world has alarmed that it would erode the stability of liberal democracies (Kyle and Mounk, 2018). For instance, there were worries that the American first policy of Trump administration would turn the US back to its isolationist policy as it had been, and it would decrease the presence and influence of the US in other areas. Therefore, China would capitalize on the situation to replace the position of the US. The competition of global environmental leadership perfectly exemplifies this assumption. The rapid growth of China has led to catastrophic consequences for the environment. However, China has been reluctant to reduce its carbon emissions due to the development of its heavy industry. Under the era of Mao Zedong, his Second Five Year Plan, which is usually known as the Great Leap Forward, caused disaster to China's environment (Percival, 2011). Until today, heavy industry is still a push for the Chinese economy. Regarding the composition of China's GDP, in 2018, the industry sector constituted 40.7 percent, while the figures of the agricultural sector and service sectors were 7.2 percent and 52.2 percent, respectively (Han, 2019; Statista Research Department, 2020). China has been criticized frequently because of its lack of effort in protecting the environment despite some remarkable achievements. However, the withdrawal of the US from the Paris Agreement has given China an unprecedented opportunity to have a step-up in its role in environmental governance. Raising a louder voice in the global environmental agenda will be advantageous to China. On the one hand, moving towards sustainable development is irreversible. On the other hand, it will help China restore "the government's legitimacy" as well as "build an image of responsible rising power" (Sun, p. 53).

In terms of China's foreign policy, its formulation is based on five principles: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence (Xinhua, 2005). These principles were first introduced in 1954 by former Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai during his visit to India and Myanmar. Since then, they have become the core of Chinese foreign policy. China has also developed a policy called New Security Concept (NSC) since 1998, which directly threatens the US regional security diplomacy in the Asia Pacific region (Tow and Hay, 2001). There are three basic principles of the NSC (Tow and Hay, 2001, p. 47): (1) building relations with its neighboring countries through border agreements and confidence-building solutions; (2) increasing cooperation with Russia to counterbalance US international security postures related to arms control and peace enforcement; and (3) implementing a regional diplomacy of 'anti-hegemony' to shape a regional security environment where the systems led by the US and its allies will no longer be relevant or necessary. Drawing a comparison between the five principles and the NSC, it can be argued that China has been trying to dominate the Asia Pacific region and mitigating the influence of the US in the region. Therefore, China has developed a foreign policy of peaceful coexistence to show that China is a trustable partner to other countries. For example, it underlines the terms such as 'non-interference, non-aggression, and territorial integrity.' Actually, the NSC is just the reaffirmation and reinvigoration of the five principles of peaceful coexistence. The post-Cold War structure has pushed China and Russia closer together. During the visit of President Xi Jinping to Moscow in June 2019, China and Russia agreed to upgrade their relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership (Xinhua, 2019). However, the NSC also reveals the weaknesses in China's power that China is not strong enough to

counterbalance the US alone. Therefore, China needs to cooperate with Russia and promote multilateral cooperation in order to persuade these countries to follow her.

Another powerful tool for China to wield its influence is the veto, as China is one of five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. The veto power gives not only China but also the others (the US, France, the United Kingdom, and Russia) a stronger voice in the international stage. The usage of veto was first expected that it could maintain international stability. However, it turns out that the veto power is a card for member states to do their political calculations. The abusive use of veto has been a controversial topic. For example, regarding the Syrian Civil War, the UN Security Council was divided into two groups: the US, France, and the United Kingdom versus Russia and China. Many draft resolutions of the Council were blocked or rejected because of the division. Russia, with the support of China, vetoed the draft resolutions many times, which would punish the Bashar al-Assad administration. This also determines the NSC that fostering relations with Russia is a preference in China's foreign policy. Military cooperation is the main focus of China-Russia relations. China is one of the biggest defense partners in Russia. In 2015, they signed a \$2.5 billion deal, which Russia agreed to sell China 24 Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets, making China the first foreign buyer of this newest generation combat aircraft at that time (Lystseva, 2019). China also participated in Vostok 2018 – the largest ever military drill held by Russia. It is expected that China and Russia will have more joint military exercises in the future, such as the upcoming Tsentr 2019. Economically, they are the key members of the BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Russia also takes an integral part of China's BRI. Recently, in the context of the escalating trade war between the US and China, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping have made an effort to reduce the dominance of the US dollar, in which both governments have reached an agreement to "develop bilateral trade using the ruble and the yuan" (Demyanchuk, 2019). However, there have also been opinions that it would be very difficult for China and Russia to forge an alliance as the alliance between the US and Australia, and many other European countries. For instance, increasing military cooperation does not mean that it is impossible for both countries "to start moving in opposite directions" (Korolev, 2018, p. 16). An explanation for this is that neither China nor Russia want a direct confrontation such as a military conflict with the US because they "want to win against the United States without fighting" (Carafano, 2019). However, there is no doubt that both countries will continue to deepen their relations in order to undermine US influence.

In summary, the topic of the rise of China has caught unparalleled attention. Through some analyses above, it can be seen that there are two types of behavior towards China's rise. Some scholars believe that China is already bound by the US-led system with liberal norms. Accordingly, China would not try to destroy the system but make the most of it. On the contrary, realist scholars take a more pessimistic view about the future of the international system. They contend that the status quo will not satisfy China, which means that the country will not accept the dominance of the US over the Asia Pacific region. The recent moves of China have proved the pessimistic viewpoint as China is boosting its expansionism, especially in the South China Sea (SCS). Although Chinese leaders always emphasize that China will not seek hegemony, the countries' acts are totally different. The next section will examine the case of SCS territorial disputes.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION

There have been various opinions that the 21st century will be the Asian Pacific Century. The empirical evidence has demonstrated that the Asia Pacific Century is not a cliché. Europe hit its peak centuries ago when it was the cradle of human civilization, democracy, and the Enlightenment. However, the Old Continent has been suffering serious crises, especially the humanitarian disaster. Therefore, the Asia Pacific in general and East Asian region, in particular, has replaced Europe to become the driving force of the global economy. In October 2011, the Foreign Policy published an article of the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Its name is America's Pacific Century. In the article, Hillary outlines the pivot policy of the Obama administration to the Asian region and determines that "the future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the center of the action" (Clinton, 2011a). In November of the same year, in a speech at the East-West Center in Hawaii, she reasserted that "the world's strategic and economic center of gravity will be the Asia Pacific" in the 21st century and reaffirmed the commitment of the US to the region (Clinton, 2011b). When Donald Trump was elected the 45th President of the US, there were concerns that his America First policies would deteriorate the role of this superpower. However, Trump administration has displayed an even stronger commitment to the Asia Pacific region. In November 2017, Trump arrived in Da Nang, Vietnam, to attend the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit. He delivered remarks at the APEC CEO Summit, in which he pressed the importance of "a free and open Indo-Pacific" (Trump, 2017). The current trade war with China is a convincing proof of the new heights in Trump's foreign policy towards the Asian region.

The Asia Pacific region is the home to many emerging powers such as China and India. However, before the Obama administration, the US had overlooked the region, which the heart of its foreign policy was primarily the Middle East. This underestimation made the US pay a high price because it had given time for China to rise without any containment. The Asia Pacific region has also witnessed the proliferation of multilateral cooperation; in other words, multilateralism is the key characteristic of the region. The region contains many intergovernmental organizations and forums such as the APEC, the ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the SCO. However, unlike Europe, the Asia Pacific region is much more complicated, and it is not easy for all countries to find a common voice. For example, ASEAN includes 10 Southeast Asian countries that have many common characteristics as well as mutual interests. ASEAN has also had a very long history of development since 1967. However, the prospects for a common market and currency like the EU remain unrealistic. This is because that all superpowers and emerging countries have their own interests in the region.

Because of the conflicting interests in the region, major states must face a security dilemma. On the one hand, they try to avoid tensions and conflicts, especially those who could potentially lead to military confrontation. On the other hand, they need to contain each other to achieve the status balance of power. However, as aforementioned, major states are always highly suspicious of each other's motives; hence, the balance of power is precarious. Today, one of the most menacing challenges to the stability and prosperity of the Asia Pacific region is maritime territorial disputes. This paper cannot cover all the disputes but examine further on the SCS disputes.

THE TERRITORIAL DISPUTES IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

There are many reasons to explain the importance of the SCS. The SCS covers an area of 1.4 million square miles or 3.6 million square kilometers (Tweed, 2019). The SCS holds a strategically geopolitical position, which connects the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. The SCS plays a crucial role in the economic policies of many countries as it is a very important trade route that facilitates the oil transportation from the Middle East, Africa, and South America (Quang Minh, 2010, p. 428). According to Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, it is estimated that the SCS holds approximately "190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 11 billion barrels of oil in proved and probable reserves". Also, the SCS is a rich fishing zone which contains more than 3000 species and contributes nearly 12 percent of the global catch (Schofield, 2017). The SCS is currently the source of conflicts since it contains bilateral and multilateral disputes. The disputes mainly revolve around the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands. Regarding the Paracel Islands, they are bilateral disputes between Vietnam and China. China calls the Paracel Islands as the Xisha Islands while it is Hoang Sa Archipelago in Vietnam. In terms of the Spratly Islands, they are many-sided disputes which contain six claimants, including China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Chinese Taipei (Taiwan), and Brunei. The complication of the SCS is also illustrated in the way that countries name the Sea as well as the Sea's islands. Vietnam calls the SCS as Bien Dong (East Sea) while the Philippines call some parts of the SCS as the West Philippine Sea.

One of the root causes of the complication of the SCS disputes is the lack of a mechanism for resolving conflicts (Quang Minh, 2010). The 1982 UNCLOS is the most important document which has been regularly invoked. The signature for the UNCLOS had been held on 10 December 1982 in Jamaica before coming into force on 14 November 1994. However, the US does not take part in the UNCLOS. The Convention serves "as a reflection of customary law" and has been applied many times by the International Court of Justice, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, and arbitral tribunals (Treves, 2008). Although the UNCLOS provides the bedrocks for "an effective regional maritime security dispute," the vagueness of many norms and principles limits its effectiveness (Bateman, 2007). The uncertainty of the UNCLOS could be attributed to the complex maritime geography and the ambiguities of UNCLOS itself (Bateman, 2007, p. 29). The exposed limitations create a grey area in which states could interpret the Convention in favor of their own national interests. China has exploited the limitations in order to implement its assertive policy on the SCS disputes.

The claims of China cover almost entire the SCS, and citing historical records is usually used as a strategy (Singh, 2012). Despite a long history of tension, the contention in the SCS only caught the attention of the international community in 2009 when China summited the Nine-Dash Line to the UN because it overlaps the territorial waters on many Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines. In reality, there had been direct military engagement between Vietnam and China in the Paracel Islands. For example, in 1974, China had used naval force to illegally occupy all the Paracel Islands from the Republic of Vietnam. Since then, China has had de facto control over the Islands. Right away after the submission, at the 17th ARF meeting in July 2010 in Hanoi, Vietnam, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reaffirmed that "the Obama Administration is committed to broad, deep, and sustained engagement in Asia" and the US "has a national interest in freedom of

navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea" (Clinton, 2010). On the one hand, this was considered as the response of the US to the Nine-Dash Line of China. On the other hand, this was the pledge of the US to the region to relieve the anxiety of Southeast Asian partners. ASEAN countries understand that none of them is able to challenge the rising power of China. The US itself also understands that they need to increase its presence in the region; otherwise, it would be a Chinese-dominated region. The US is a naval superpower. The powerful and dynamic naval force helps the US maintain its physical presence all around the world. Therefore, the US cannot let China rise freely in the Asian region. However, on the other hand, the dramatic rise of China is also partly ascribed to the reluctance of the US to interfere in the SCS before 2008. For example, in the 1974 Paracel Islands battle between China and South Vietnam, the US ignored the attack of China.

Another important document in the process of finding solutions for the SCS disputes is the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) signed by ten ASEAN members and China in 2002. The DOC has been a significant achievement to date since it was the "first time that China had accepted a multilateral agreement over the issue," and it provides norms of behavior in resolving the disputes and minimizing the risks of conflict (Buszynski, 2003, p. 343). One of the most important reasons for China to make the decision to sign its very first multilateral agreement is that the DOC could hamper a deeper involvement of the US in the SCS disputes (Quang Minh, 2010). China has insisted that the SCS disputes should be resolved bilaterally and denied what they call the internationalism of the SCS disputes. China's preference in bilateral negotiations is understandable because China can easily overwhelm any Southeast Asian claimants thanks to its power. Hence, China always tries to sow division among ASEAN member states. Until now, the divide and rule policy of China has still demonstrated its effectiveness. Currently, ASEAN member states and China are seeking to replace the DOC by a Code of Conduct (COC) in the SCS because "the DOC has also shown its limitations, especially because of its non-binding nature and the consequent low level of enforcement" (Hiep, 2019, p. 3).

In the SCS disputes, there is no doubt that the ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum have been in the spotlight. The ARF currently has 27 participants, including many superpowers and emerging powers in the world, such as the US, China, India, Australia, and Canada. There are two main objectives of the ARF: (1) to foster constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and concern; and (2) to make significant contributions to efforts towards confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region (ASEAN Regional Forum, n.d.). In other words, the ARF serves as an international dialogue for related parties to propose solutions for unresolved conflicts. The term "confidence-building" or "build trust" has been usually emphasized in various official documents of the ASEAN as well as the speeches of ASEAN member states' politicians. In the article *Confidence Building Measures among ASEAN Navies: An Analysis*, Sumathy Permal and Mohd Nizam Basiron (2010, p. 76) defines that bolstering confidence among ASEAN navies could relieve tensions by "increasing transparency of capabilities and intentions, and improving predictability for the parties involved, clarifying intentions about military force and political activities." At the 12th Asia Security Summit (the Shangri-La Dialogue) in Singapore in May 2013, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung (2013) in his keynote speech stated that "it is a

must to build and consolidate strategic trust" in order to have a peaceful, secured, and prosperous Asia-Pacific region. An explanation for the importance of confidence-building to the SCS disputes is the lack of dispute resolution mechanisms. Moreover, there are numerous national interests and strategic calculators of powerful states in the region, which means that they do not trust each other. Therefore, confidence-building serves as a foundation for related countries to stimulate constructive discussion. However, it seems that confidence-building measures are futile since there is no evidence that China will step back in the SCS disputes, and the country still violates the DOC and the 1982 UNCLOS – the documents in which China is a signatory. China's rejection of the 2013 South China Sea Arbitration illustrates this assumption. On 21 January 2013, the Philippines commenced arbitral proceedings against China to The Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in compliance with Annex VII to the UNCLOS. Although China refused to take part in the arbitration, the PCA confirmed that it had jurisdiction "to deal with the merits of the Philippine submissions" (McDorman, 2016). On July 12, 2016, the PCA issued the final Award, concluding that "there was no legal basis for China to claim historic rights to resources within the sea areas falling within the nine-dash line" (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016, p. 2). Although this-favored Philippines ruling tarnished the international reputation of China, China has still been pushing the militarization in its artificial islands in the SCS.

The year of 2012 registered one of the most dismal failures of the ASEAN. At the 45th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, ten members failed to issue a joint statement on the escalating tensions in the SCS for the first time in its 45-year history. Cambodia, the ASEAN Chairmanship of 2012, was fiercely criticized for deliberately thwarting the attempts of other members to release a joint communique. It was believed that there was evidence of Chinese pressure and manipulation when the Cambodian government shared the same viewpoints with China in the SCS disputes. In the draft statement, the concrete viewpoints of Vietnam and the Philippines were that the final document should have included "the confrontation between the Philippines and China at Scarborough Shoal and Vietnam's desire to address exclusive economic zones (EEZs)"; however, the Cambodian chair, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Hor Nam Hong refused to mention these entities as he contended that "those were bilateral issues" so they could not be proper to be cited in a joint declaration (Bower, 2012). Yet in 2016, Cambodia deterred ASEAN foreign ministers from mentioning the South China Sea Arbitration in the bloc's joint statement. The Philippines and Vietnam wanted to refer the international court in the statement, but their efforts were discouraged because "China's closest ASEAN ally Cambodia opposed the proposed wording, throwing the group into disarray" (Mogato, Martina and Blanchard, 2016).

The 2012 and 2016 failures were the inflictions on the ambition of the bloc to foster its solidarity and to make its motto "One Vision, One Identity, One Community" come true. The failures pointed out the fatal flaws of the ASEAN that it was not tight but fragile. In reality, not all ASEAN member states have territorial disputes in the SCS with China. In terms of the foreign policies of those countries, maintaining their national interests will always be the number one priority. Therefore, it can be seen that China's creeping assertiveness has been working. It is obvious that China has been more assertive in the context of the US pivot to Asia (Fangyin, 2016). However, the aggressive tactics of China in the SCS disputes could cost the country a high price. It can be argued that China has developed an ambiguous foreign policy towards the SCS disputes. On the one side, China shows the

willingness to consult with its Southeast Asian counterparts as well as other great powers such as the US and India to find solutions for the SCS disputes. On the other side, China is speeding up militarization in the SCS regardless of international criticisms. China has been deploying troops, fighter jets, and missiles in various contested islands. In response, the US has been sailing its warships through disputed waters in the SCS in order to reinforce its physical presence and yet demonstrate its continuing commitment to the region. Obviously, China does not welcome the increasing involvement of the US in the region. While the US always asserts that its movements are in conformity with the international law of freedom of navigation, China has warned that the US moves would heighten the tensions in the SCS. There have been concerns that the US and China could take advantage of the SCS disputes to gather forces and to find allies.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is unquestionable that the dramatic rise of China has put many questions for the order of the Asia Pacific region. China has become a superpower with its own unique characteristics. Undoubtedly, China has not risen peacefully and therefore challenged US supremacy. The assertiveness of China in the SCS has given many implications for the Southeast Asian region as well as the US. Firstly, Southeast Asian countries are facing strategic choices on how they can balance the influence between the US and China. Managing relations with major states have never been an easy task for small and medium-sized countries (Hiep, 2017, p. 154). Le Hong Hiep (2017) argues that there are three main choices for the grand strategy of those countries: balancing, bandwagoning, and hedging. The key principle of balancing is a strong military force or an alliance. The less powerful countries can choose to increase its defense budget “to deter the stronger power from pursuing aggressive behavior” or build an alliance (Hiep, 2017, p. 154). Bandwagoning refers to the situation in which weaker states choose not to challenge stronger ones but to pledge obedience and “accept an inferior status in the bilateral relationship” in order to derive economic benefits and being protected (Hiep, 2017, p. 155). Regarding hedging, it is a strategy for small states to deal with the uncertainties in the policies as well as the behaviors of powerful states in the future by “relying on as basket of policy tools.” These tools are a combination of various methods such as “bandwagoning, binding engagement, economic pragmatism, dominance denial, and indirect balancing” (Cheng-Chwee, 2008, cited in Hiep, 2017, p. 156).

The SCS disputes would continue to be one of the toughest challenges to the stability, prosperity, and security of the region. As there have not been any signs of de-escalation in the trade war between the US and China, the SCS would remain a hot spot for both sides to do their own strategic calculations. It is obvious that other states in the region, such as ASEAN countries, cannot stand outside the conflicts between these two superpowers. Their regional governments are facing difficult questions. The uncertainties of the current international system caused by great powers are totally confusing those small and medium-sized countries. Here are some suggestions. On the one hand, regional states should continue to promote dialogues between all related parties through multilateral mechanisms such as the ASEAN, the APEC, and the ARF. These regional intergovernmental institutions need to act more proactively in offering solutions for unresolved conflicts. In reality, there have been signs of deterioration in the influence of regional organizations,

which could lead to a divided region in which states would play down the importance of multilateral cooperation. One more thing is that it is necessary to build legally-binding dispute resolution mechanisms rather than only repeatedly mentioning obscure jargon such as "confidence-building measures" or "trust-building". It is demonstrated that China has always been willing to sacrifice its reputation to achieve its goals. Last but not least, each small state should strengthen its own economy, especially for the claimants in the SCS disputes such as Vietnam. Although there has been proof that some claimants as Vietnam are moving closer towards the US side, they cannot stake the national future on anyone. Although the Asian region is currently involving conflicting interests of great powers, it will remain dynamic and drive the global economy. Furthermore, it is also time for a new phase in the economic development of many economies in the region, especially the developing states, in other words, a transformation in the growth's model in order to catch up with the requirements of the industry 4.0. Broadly speaking, states need to apply a more sustainable model in the context of environmental degradation. The non-traditional security issues such as environment, climate change, migration, poverty, to name but a few are emerging and threatening to the prospects of a bright future for the region and the world, which means that it requires collective efforts from all countries to tackle.

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