Chapter III: The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: How China’s Assertive Strategies in the South China Sea Lead to Foreign-Political Confrontation

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Introduction

The South China Sea has trapped the gaze of the globe onto its waters. As the risk of confrontation lingers on, military buildup is assisting the protection of the economic development of certain key players within this territorial dispute. Composed of an abundance of resources, rising animosity between states, and China’s assertive stance, which loops most of this sea into its territory, the waters of the South China Sea have become fractious. The semi-enclosed sea is located at the foot of China’s southern border, squeezed in between the east of Vietnam and the west of the Philippines, and touches the northern borders of Brunei and Malaysia.

Located centrally within Southeast Asia, the South China Sea is the gravitational center of East Asian economic growth (Buszynski 2015: 2). It acts as the geographical channel connecting Northeast and Southeast Asia. The overlapping claims of several governments, including China and Vietnam among others, to territorial sovereignty and maritime rights constitute the disputes in the South China Sea. China delineates its claims in this sea by its nine-dash line, which envelops 90 percent of it into its exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Situated in these waters are the Paracels and the Spratlys, two uninhabited island groups, the jurisdiction over which—along with the related waters—is disputed by the various claimants involved.

China’s expanding presence in this sea has been met with growing assertiveness from other claimants, such as Vietnam. Resource accumulation and the concern over sovereignty have generated tension, which revolves heavily around the South China Sea—challenging the security and inhibiting the development of the Asia-Pacific region at large. Additionally, the regional maritime dispute has garnered international attention and brought overseas stakeholders in. The involvement of the United States (US) through its “Pivot to Asia,” a strategy which shifts its foreign policy focus to Asia through renewed diplomatic engagement and military redeployment there, has exacerbated the already volatile atmosphere of the region. Through the US’ amplified role, the waters
have turned from thriving trade channels into a platform for conflict (Council on Foreign Relations 2017a).

China relies on the South China Sea for reasons pertaining to its development and security; these are the driving forces behind the state’s chosen strategies. Furthermore, development and security are intimately linked to one another: the presence of one intensifies the other and the absence of one diminishes the other. With China’s focus on exponential growth and the sustainability of its future economic prosperity, the state implements strategies of development and security that aim to solidify its position nationally, regionally, and globally. Those executed in the South China Sea, however, carry the weights of assertion and dominance, and cast a shadow over the prospects of the dispute being resolved amicably. China’s pursuit of its goals and the rise of confrontation and tension are thus synchronous.

Therefore, this essay questions this simultaneity by assessing how Chinese assertive strategies lead to foreign-political confrontation with other claimants of the South China Sea. The essay is structured to assess China’s position along the security-development nexus, as a modern teleological narrative, and to shed light to the consequences of Chinese chosen strategies in the Southeast Asian region—with a particular focus on Vietnam. Through the understanding of the importance of this sea in the context of development and security, the strategies implemented by China will be analyzed and evaluated against those of Vietnam to better depict the former’s methods of instigation and provocation. The dynamics that ensue from the execution of these strategies portray a framework that coerces Vietnam into foreign-political confrontation, while leading China to attain economic dominance, military supremacy, and ultimate power.

The Tether between Development and Security

The interplay of development and security is a vital policy component for China. The country’s roles and actions in the region illustrate a narrative of development and security that not only shows the two concerns’ interconnection, but also their interdependence. A theoretical explanation of this connection can be elucidated through the mapping of this security-development nexus. With the understanding that “development and security are inextricably linked,” the presence of the

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17 Former Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan stated the importance of the connection between security and development in his High-level Panel
nexus in policymaking has become a focal point of research. Stern and Öjendal explain that security and development are tools that are wielded by actors to “prescribe processes and determine outcomes” (2010: 7). Understanding both as aspects of a modern teleological narrative indicates a tether between security and development. Development can be understood as the central strategy for state-building. The implication of improvement is etched into development, and the role of the latter is interlinked within the fortunes of the state: while the state drives development, development is the constitution of the state (ibid.: 11).

The narrative of security is a story of survival through the procurement of a promised safeness. Viewing security through this lens depicts a “narrative of progress” whereby past insecurity “necessitates” the promise of “security (now) and the ultimate achievement [of it]”—as well as any future implication of security (ibid.: 14). Hence, state security is a central component of international politics and the surrounding narrative centralizes its procurement as a vital goal. When attempting to map this linkage, the security-development nexus as a modern teleological narrative highlights the interdependence of both. Promised security is achievable through stable progress, and development is sustained on a foundation of security. Therefore, development begets security and security begets development. Relating the nexus to the context of China illustrates how the concept can be aptly applied to the South China Sea dispute too. The presence of China’s development and security goals demonstrates the existence of a nexus; a connection or linkage between these concepts. The security-development nexus gives insight into the construction of this, and how “different discourses imbue ‘the nexus’ with different meanings” (ibid.: 24).

China’s South China Sea Dilemma: A Struggle for Control

The history of this contestation process has metamorphosed from a regional struggle over maritime claims between businesses to the missing puzzle piece of state completion; the dispute has gained importance in the eyes of the governments involved, as the definition of borders is seen as a symbol of statehood (Buszynski 2015: 1). Aspects of a resource and power struggle are evident in the development of the dispute’s history. Whereas China claimed the inheritance of these borders from its premodern state, claimants such as Vietnam have accepted the ambiguous borders from their previous colonial power. The ambiguity
of these boundaries translates into the complexity of conflicting claims over islands, reefs, and the South China Sea itself. China’s assertive claims on the area sparked the escalation of tension to what is, today, known as the “South China Sea maritime dispute” (Buszynski 2015: 1).

Other than incomplete state-building, much is at stake for China in the event of a loss of control over the area. These stakes portray the importance of the South China Sea in the context of both development and security for China. A look at the implication of gaining control indicates a pattern involving development and security. The developmental aspect relates to the abundance of natural resources present in the South China Sea. The waters are estimated to hold at least seven billion barrels of oil and an approximate 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. Jurisdiction over the regional waters would give China access to these maritime resources, comprising not only of hydrocarbons but also fish. Most economic benefits are derived from fishing (Nguyen 2015: 26). Furthermore, as the gravitational center of East Asian economic growth, China’s utilization of this sea highlights its dependence on the disputed waters. The majority of Chinese trade, including 80 percent of its oil exports, flow through the South China Sea (Buszynski 2012: 145). The sea lanes of communication ensure energy security for China, through the transportation of oil and gas resources. Furthermore, another important feature within this sea is the Maritime Silk Road. This trade route was introduced by China in 2013 as part of the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative to enhance development throughout Southeast Asia, by connecting China to Africa and Europe via the Indian Ocean and South China Sea. Within the region of the contested sea, part of the Maritime Silk Road runs parallel to the coast of Vietnam. Winning a claim over the South China Sea therefore ensures control over key trade routes—and with it, economic prosperity and economic dominance.

Despite the apparent economic benefits, the attraction of the South China Sea is embellished by its geostrategic importance as well. The geographic position of China enables it to use the maritime space as its “gateway to the world” (Nguyen 2015: 26), while simultaneously enhancing its geopolitical vulnerability. The South China Sea has been the battleground for a wide array of conflicts, between different actors across different eras, demonstrating a key security concern for China. Over the last century, China has been invaded by foreign troops seven times through the access provided by seas, most of whom entered the mainland via the South China Sea (Ji 1998: 102). Southeast Asia poses as an advantage point for China’s enemies, given the history of conflicts in the region. In 1997 an Atlas of Shame was published by China,
illustrating all instances of victory over the country in the previous century. The South China Sea represents the weakness of China’s national defense, and its history points to the permeability of the country’s security. Control over the area would allow China to manipulate the South China Sea and form a maritime buffer for its southern provinces. Maintaining a firm grip on this sea would allow China to monitor any movement, exercise its naval forces so as to exhibit power, and therefore secure the state’s defense.

Two key drivers of China’s policies are derived from the assessment of this sea’s importance: development and security. The overall presence of a nexus between them is identifiable within the context of control. The developmental elements of China’s claim to this sea not only aid the apparent economic benefits of the state but secure its position as a rising global power. Similarly, seeking jurisdiction over the South China Sea alleviates the vulnerabilities of China’s defense and develops state-building by enabling the procurement of security. This interplay relates to the first aspect of the security-development nexus as a teleological narrative. Security and development are located in a particular geographical space, the state or a region, and understood as mutually reinforcing one another. This assists an internal confluence between them (Stern and Öjendal 2010: 17). Therefore, the pathway to control over the South China Sea is saturated with essential development and security strategies.

The Strategies of China in the South China Sea

The security-development nexus is present in the discourse surrounding current Chinese policies and strategies. China’s President Xi Jinping states that “development is the foundation of security, and security the precondition of development” (Xi 2014). Therefore, the efficacy of the nexus’ internal confluence can be understood and determined through China’s chosen strategies. Xi’s statement recognizes the interlinkage of security and development, and so the policy approaches pertaining to the South China Sea are grounded in this core understanding. Hence, it is essential not to entirely separate development and security from one another when scrutinizing the strategies taken toward these waters.
Development strategies: Marine capture production and hydrocarbon exploration

As the copious natural resources in the South China Sea attract the potential for development, the competition over them has become a key driver of this dispute. One type of resource prevalent in these waters is fish. The South China Sea is one of the world’s five-leading fishing zones. Some estimates show this sea’s lucrative fisheries to account for 10 percent of the global total. While most of the fish caught are consumed domestically, China is the largest seafood exporter—with its markets extending to Europe and North America as well.

Strengthening supervision of its fishing within the claimed waters is one of the development strategies pursued. China’s leading approach also encompasses the management of its ports, the protection of fishermen, and the enforcement of related laws (Fravel 2011: 304). China has equipped the South Sea Region Fisheries Administration Bureau (SSRFAB) with the task of conducting the aforementioned supervision. This bureau is composed of two units that are responsible for law enforcement. The SSRFAB manages the waters around the Paracel and Spratly Islands, and has begun to organize cruises or “patrols” (xunbang) to enforce Chinese laws (ibid.: 304). Vessels of the fisheries administration monitor areas of the South China Sea, enforce domestic fishing regulations, and assist Chinese ships through the contested waters. While these elements of support add to China’s own development strategy, the patrols are intended “to prevent foreign ships from operating in Chinese waters” (ibid.: 305). These fishery patrol ships, which frequently detain foreign fishing boats, are converted naval vessels that operate in China’s claimed areas of the South China Sea (Buszynski 2012: 144).

An additional strategy that is employed by China is the declaration of fishing bans. Since 1999 Beijing has declared and imposed bans on fishing annually in the South China Sea. This is intended to preserve China’s own fishing fleet (ibid.: 143). Over the years, China has continuously increased its maritime surveillance forces to protect its security and inspect any foreign vessels within Chinese-claimed waters. Instead of depicting a model solely of development, these strategies exude a rather confrontational approach. China is inflicting its laws and claims onto a contested area with these strategies; these impositions can incite conflict.

A second feature of China’s development strategy pertains to the presence of hydrocarbon resources. Tapping into the resource market continues to be a vital component of Chinese strategies and policies, as
oil and gas account for less than half of China’s current energy consumption. The country’s entry into the crude oil market as a net importer in 1993 was argued to potentially lead to a resource war, while other assessments discussed the likelihood of energy security bending Chinese will to comply with international standards. The South China Sea is an example of an external energy source, where competition and cooperation ebb and flow. Although security concerns are an essential element of the dispute, China’s intentions have extended to “preventing the interdiction” of sea lanes that supply China’s domestic economy with necessary energy and raw materials (Yahuda 2013: 449). Over the years and in developing the country, the Chinese leadership has concluded that sufficient energy is not enough to maintain national security—but that the latter can be sustained through energy security (Zha 2006).

Again, the linkages of security and development feed the existence and importance of the nexus between them. The abundance of resources in the South China Sea offers economic opportunity for smaller, littoral states, but also provides much-desired energy security for China’s own expanding economy. Furthermore, if the resources in the South China Sea are properly exploited, China could become less reliant on oil imports from Africa or the Middle East (Cáceres 2014: 25). China could manage some of these energy demands through the exploration and extraction of these hydrocarbon resources. Oil companies are encouraged to increase offshore oil production, and exploitation of oil and gas has intensified through China’s ever-increasing demand for energy (Zou 2009: 90). The 2015 gas discovery, which could yield over one hundred billion cubic meters of natural gas, portrays China’s continuing efforts to extract resources despite contestation with neighboring countries (Parameswaran 2015). On top of the state endorsing these commercial activities, like its fishing pursuits, China asserts authority through similar methods of policing and coercion. The Marine Surveillance Force (MSF) conducts patrols and enforces Chinese maritime laws—thereby protecting the state’s interests. Although the scope of these patrols is not publicly available, the MSF has been involved in multiple incidences where it disrupted activities of other claimants (Fravel 2011: 306).

Development strategies, therefore, protect Chinese interests through the support of domestic entities in the South China Sea. However, the assertion of authority—as a deliberate strategy—over commercial activities in Chinese-claimed waters is designed to deter others from challenging the country’s position. The development goals are protected through security measures, portraying the mutual
reinforcement aspect of the nexus’s internal confluence. While China continues to explore, extract, and benefit from these resources, it simultaneously dissuades others from disrupting its efforts in this regard. However, these strategies can exacerbate hostility and lead to confrontation if other nations are unwilling to comply with China’s stance.

**Security strategy: Naval expansion and military supremacy**

The history of regional conflicts reveals a gaping hole in China’s defense, as illustrated through its *Atlas of Shame*. In response, China has implemented a security strategy to fortify its borders from potential threats that may come through the South China Sea. Furthermore, an essential component of this strategy seeks to secure the transportation routes of Chinese resources amid fear of potential disruptions to the supply lines that run across the South China Sea. Evidently, development and security are intertwined. Where the development strategy generates economic growth, China’s security one facilitates the latter’s defense through continuous military development.

China executes its security strategy primarily through the expansion of its armed forces. The display of its naval and military capacities is a mechanism of deterrence, preventing others from challenging the Chinese state (Fravel 2011: 307). China is not just preparing itself against regional challenges, but also threats from beyond Southeast Asia. One purpose of such a security strategy is strengthening China’s position in the event of a conflict with the US over Taiwan: if the island nation were to declare independence, China would react—while the US would rush to Taiwan’s aid. The inclusion of this factor in its strategy, despite the general history with Taiwan, stems particularly from the crisis of 1995–1996, when the US deployed two aircraft carriers in an exhibition of its power (Buszynski 2012: 145). Securing this sea, therefore, widens China’s area of control.

Over the years, China has deployed several submarines and destroyers to the South China Sea. In the last two decades, China has intended to develop its navy and establish a system of defense to protect its maritime security and national development. This has included the deployment of four new classes of submarines and six new classes of navy destroyers. Furthermore, the number of aircraft carriers has and is planned to increase: China launched its first domestically built 50,000-ton aircraft carrier in April 2017, and a second one is expected to enter service by 2020 (Martina 2017). The modernization of China’s naval forces includes an adding of attack and nuclear-armed submarines to
the already existent ones. The ballistic-missile-carrying submarines, or SSBNs, are expected to be accommodated in the Yulin Naval Base, China’s military base in the South China Sea (Cook 2017). The development and deployment of various components of the country’s naval force represents an ever-increasing expansion thereof. The enlargement of its naval capacity is a necessary attribute of its power status. As China’s economic power increases, its maritime interests also expand—as does its naval capacity (Buszynski 2012: 145). Unlike its development strategy, China’s security strategy empowers the state with the instruments to not only defend but enforce its maritime rights. However, as the security strategy comes with a show of force that creates the grounds for interstate confrontation to take place, China’s security strategy essentially takes the shape of an arms race in the face of its own fear of external threats.

Repercussions from the execution of China’s strategies

The strategies exhibit an incessant interplay of development and security. The fruits of development equip China with the tools to strengthen its security capacities; the dependence of security on development indicates the depth of their interlinkage. If neither aspect were attainable, China would face uncertainty, vulnerability, and its position would be enfeebled. Therefore, these strategies reinforce the internal confluence of the security-development nexus. In addition, both the development and security strategies have resultant repercussions that increase the chances of maritime confrontation ensuing and are fuel to the fire of the territorial dispute.

China’s strategies fulfill the internal confluence of the security-development nexus by implementing methods that benefit both aspects. From this standpoint, China attempts to secure its own position economically and geopolitically. However, Chinese strategies are twofold: where one component of the strategy ensures advantages for China, the other protects its interests through assertive measures. The repercussions of these strategies for actors on the receiving end of them cannot be disregarded. When placed in the same arena, other states’ intentions, claims, and presence clash with strategies that are intended to secure the position of China. Therefore, the strategies may harmonize development and security for the state itself, but thwart any consonance between China and other countries through the cacophony produced by these assertive measures and opposing claims delaying cooperation and hindering conflict resolution. In the following section, the case of
Vietnam—specifically within the context of the South China Sea—will illustrate further how the chosen strategies act as enablers for Chinese intentions. Additionally, it will be demonstrated how the assertive measures pursued by China incite foreign-political confrontation—by inhibiting and provoking the claimants involved.

The security-development nexus works to strengthen the position of China. When applied to the region, however, development and security of one party are implicated in those of another as well. The second aspect of the security-development nexus as a modern teleological narrative refers to “a relation of implication across borders” and bridges “the spatial and temporal divergence”: the security and development of one state is enmeshed in the insecurity and lack of development of another (Stern/Öjendal 2010: 18). Therefore, when considering the strategies implemented in the South China Sea, not only is foreign-political confrontation a consequence but the security and development of another state are also threatened. The investigation of these strategies vis-à-vis the case of Vietnam elucidates how security and development concerns are intertwined between both nations as well as the extent to which foreign-political confrontation is induced by the approaches taken.

**Vietnam’s Counterstrategies: Attempting to Challenge China**

Sino-Vietnamese relations have been tempestuous throughout the course of their history. For centuries, Vietnam’s development has been tethered to the geographic proximity of China. Despite their cultural similarities, Vietnam has spent years resisting Chinese domination at the expense of its own economic development and political compromise. China and Vietnam’s history extends across eras of conflict and cooperation (Ravindran 2012: 112). Although both states continue to improve their diplomatic and economic relations, the territorial dispute over the South China Sea persists as a point of contention. Vietnamese sentiments for China are such that the former would not hesitate to engage in warfare with the latter over the South China Sea (International Crisis Group 2012: 3); distrust of China is deeply rooted among the Vietnamese people (Ravindran 2012: 112).

In the 1980s and 1990s, within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the South China Sea dispute was assumed to be an extension of the longstanding conflict between China and Vietnam (Buszynski 2015: 12). Vietnam claims sovereignty over the Paracel and
Spratly archipelagos, based on factors pertaining to its history and economic development, the maritime boundary along the Vietnamese coast, and its own EEZ. Vietnam’s claims over the South China Sea challenge those of China directly. China’s own claims include all areas of dispute stated by Vietnam, with the Vietnamese EEZ falling under the zone segmented by the nine-dash line. This contributes further friction to the already fluctuating and volatile relationship between both states.

Similar to the reasons behind China’s assertions, Vietnam has tightened its grip on its claims due to geostrategic and economic developmental factors. The geostrategic ones are based on Vietnam’s physical features. Vietnam’s geostrategic importance is carved by these features and the vulnerability that ensues from them. Over 3,200 kilometers of coastline stretches along the Gulf of Thailand and the South China Sea, indicating Vietnam’s susceptibility to seaborne attacks. Vietnamese history depicts instances where Chinese dynasties invaded the nation from the sea. A firm grip on the South China Sea equips Vietnam with the necessary foothold to contain China’s superior forces. The two aforementioned archipelagos serve as geostrategically important areas of defense, as Vietnam’s military assets are based there. A loss of control over these archipelagos would expose Vietnam’s sea lanes to external threat and the state would be powerless to resist a military invasion by China. A naval blockade could be imposed on Vietnam by using force on or around the archipelagos (Hiep 2014: 178). The basis for strengthening its defense, therefore, is mostly in response to China’s ever-expanding military capacities. China’s assertive presence and security strategies figure heavily in Vietnam’s geostrategic interests. Subsequently, China’s security strategies have forced Vietnam to fortify its borders due to both previous and potential foreign-political confrontation.

In recent decades, Vietnam’s economic interests in the South China Sea have become prominent as essential determinants of its development strategy. Vietnam’s economic activities were previously limited to the mainland, with wet rice agriculture being of significance (Hiep 2014: 177). In the 1970s, as the dispute over this sea became more apparent, Vietnam was faced with the struggles for independence and national unification—debilitating the state and preventing the pursuit of economic development (ibid.). With a renewed focus on economic reform a decade later, Vietnam recognized the opportunities within the South China Sea and—like China—has focused on fishing and the extraction of oil and gas.

Vietnam’s sea-related industries have since expanded and become vital elements of the economy. Fishery products compose a large part
of Vietnam’s export market. Vietnam’s seafood market is one of the world’s largest exporter of fishery commodities, following China’s (FAO 2016). The state benefits enormously from the South China Sea in this regard, and offshore fishing is said to become its greatest source of marine capture production (Hiep 2014: 182). Similar to China, Vietnam’s fishing fleets operate around the two archipelagos as a “key measure to defend its sovereignty” (ibid.: 182). When considering hydrocarbon exploration, Vietnam’s oil and gas industry has developed rapidly over the years and continues to contribute to the state’s socioeconomic development unabatedly. In 2008, Vietnam became a net oil importer, leading to increased investment in and exploration of Vietnam’s continental shelf. Consequently, as the national economy moves to expand, Vietnam—like China—is also recognizing its increasing need for energy.

A parallel to China can be additionally drawn from the specific claims made and strategies employed by Vietnam. China and Vietnam embed the justification for their chosen approaches here in the welfare of their respective states. While both nations base their development strategies on economic growth, Vietnam’s security strategies are formulated in the context of foreign-political confrontation with China, thereby equipping the former with the necessary instruments to protect itself and withstand a conflict over the maritime territory with the latter. As depicted earlier, Chinese strategies—both development and security-wise—contain elements of coercion that are exerted over others. Where China’s security strategy intends to protect the state from any foreign threat, Vietnam’s threat is solely China—reinforcing the idea of the latter being the instigator of hostility. The following section will reconsider China’s strategies, taking Vietnam’s presence and activities in these waters into account, and demonstrate how Chinese definitive measures and demands lead to foreign-political confrontation by inhibiting and provoking its neighbor. In light of the security-development nexus as a spatiotemporal bridge, the section will illustrate how China’s advancement is achieved at the expense of Vietnam. China’s assertive presence hovers over the South China Sea and, as it expands, increases the likelihood and actual instances of confrontation with Vietnam.

Forcing Foreign-Political Confrontation

China’s development strategy consists of multiple layers, all of which contribute to the tensions and the likelihood of confrontation. The first aspect to consider is the fishery patrols. These include the supervision
of Chinese vessels, but also enforce domestic laws and often detain fishing boats. Patrols and fishing bans are examples of China’s assertive stance within this territorial dispute. An increase in Vietnamese fishing activity, along with a strengthened SSRFAB, has resulted in confrontation over the years, leading to the expulsion of many Vietnamese boats (Fravel 2011: 305). Chinese authorities have been accused of harassing Vietnamese fishermen and “attacking” them at sea (Holmes 2016). Furthermore, China has detained and beaten Vietnamese fishermen in the past and continues to confiscate hauls as well as seize their equipment, claiming that Vietnamese vessels are operating in its territory (Reuters 2011).

In 2010, Vietnam demanded the immediate release of nine of its fishermen, who had been detained by China in the South China Sea (Bland/Dyer 2010). A Vietnamese newspaper reported that sixty-three fishing vessels with a total of 725 men onboard had been detained by China since 2005 (TN News 2010). Despite these hostile strategies by its neighbor, Vietnam is not deterred. Instead, the hostilities have led Vietnam to engage in the same form of conduct as flaunted by China. Consequently, a Vietnamese newspaper article reported that the state had driven away approximately 9,700 Chinese fishing boats over the last ten years (TN News 2014). Vietnam also made a “rare” move against its “powerful neighbor” last year by seizing a Chinese ship and detaining its captain and two sailors (Holmes 2016). Overall, Chinese strategies vis-à-vis fisheries have induced confrontation and provoked hostile responses.

The second aspect of the pursued development strategy concerns the resource war over hydrocarbons, because, as noted, China and Vietnam both recognize their increasing energy demand. The former’s exponential economic growth is now accompanied with a need to establish energy security. As stated earlier, China is increasing its offshore production of oil and gas; these activities are supported by methods of policing and coercion similar to those found in the fishing industry. Over the years, China has frequently sabotaged the activities of Vietnam’s oil and gas complex. In 2000, Vietnam augmented its offshore petroleum industry by cooperating with other foreign oil companies. China countered this by issuing eighteen diplomatic objections to the involvement of foreign oil companies and, at a later stage, declared third-party development activities to even be illegal (Fravel 2011: 301). A similar, but more forceful, statement was made at a press conference by a spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry in 2012, who stated that any unilateral action taken in the South China Sea infringes on China’s
territorial sovereignty and jurisdiction, and is thus invalid and illicit (cited in Fravel 2011: 301).

China has resorted to more violent strategies as well. In 2014 a Chinese vessel “intentionally rammed” two Vietnamese ships in the South China Sea, near a Chinese oil rig; dozens of navy and coastguard vessels, belonging to both countries, pervade the area surrounding this oil rig (Reuters 2014), making confrontation likely. In mid-July 2017 Vietnam suspended a gas-drilling expedition in the South China Sea, following threats from China. Days after the discovery of a gas field, Vietnam ordered a subsidiary of the Spanish company Repsol to terminate oil drilling (Hayton 2017). Vietnam notified Repsol executives that China had responded to the expedition with warnings that it would attack its neighbor’s bases in the Spratly Islands unless drilling was halted (Thayer 2017).

In this case, it was China that instigated the confrontation. The strategies pursued have economically manipulated Vietnam and suppressed its development. The analysis of China’s development strategies indicates how possessive the state is over the resources in the South China Sea to the extent of directly sabotaging Vietnamese economic activity. However, these approaches are inefficacious, as Vietnam is not deterred from contesting the stance taken by its northern neighbor. Instead, the actions taken have compelled Vietnam to attempt a retaliatory response. Nevertheless, China’s claims on these waters leave no room for compromise, as the threat of an attack executed by its ever-expanding navy coerces Vietnam into submission.

The likelihood of foreign-political confrontation is heightened through the security strategy pursued by China. The three core components of this approach include the strengthening of the defense of its southern border, preventing disruptions to supply lines, and the establishment of a maritime defense system intended to protect development and ensure security. The analysis of its development strategies shows that China utilizes its naval capacity to deter and protect itself against Vietnam. As indicated, the latter has not been entirely dissuaded from abandoning its claims though. Instead, China and Vietnam have witnessed, between 2005 and 2014, a 167 percent and a 170 percent increase in their military spending respectively (Council on Foreign Relations 2017a). Despite Vietnam’s improved military capacities, Chinese forces still eclipse them. China’s own expansion is testing and trying out new technologies to be implemented as part of its security measures. An accidental announcement revealed a leap in Chinese maritime prowess regarding the development of a long-range quantum magnetometer that can detect submarines from a distance of several kilometers rather
than hundreds of meters; this may relate to the drafting of new laws that require foreign submarines to seek Chinese approval before entering its territory (Hambling 2017). Demanding such approval is not a new tactic: in 2011 an unidentified Chinese warship commanded an Indian navy vessel, situated within Vietnam’s EEZ after leaving one of its ports, “to identify itself and explain its presence in Chinese waters” (Bland/Shivakumar 2011).

Vietnam has hereby been pushed to pursue its own military expansion and gain support from other countries so as to strengthen its position and not fall under the expansive shadow of China’s own forces. Vietnam reached out and offered the US the possibility to stretch its naval presence to Vietnam’s Cam Rahn Bay (Karim 2013). Even though the US had already been involved in the dispute in the interest of guaranteeing its sea lanes and preventing disruption to its commerce, the alliance with Vietnam relates back to China’s security strategies. Vietnam has been stopped frequently and silenced rather forcefully recently, despite its efforts to stand up to China. In the event of a further escalation involving the US, Vietnam’s strong ally will not back down. Overall, US-Vietnamese relations have improved “significantly” (Emmers 2015: 154). The involvement of the US adds further layers of complications to the labyrinthine claims and strategies of the different regional actors involved. The increasing power politics in the South China Sea has pitted two great powers against each other.

While it is stated by scholars that China, “triggered by [the] more proactive efforts by other claimants to legalize their claims” (Johnston 2013: 45–46), has been induced to expand its presence in these waters, this dispute commences first with the security strategies adopted. China has attempted to prevent alliances through its assertive behavior, but resorted to fighting fire with fire—no longer just potentially, but rather in practice too. Unable to control the flames, China is now witnessing an alliance between Vietnam and the US. For the first time since the Vietnam War, the US sent an aircraft carrier to Vietnam as a warning sign to China and a symbol of its flourishing alliance with Vietnam (Sampathkumar 2018). Although Washington is not establishing alliance commitments with Hanoi for historical reasons and is avoiding the further antagonization of Beijing (Emmers 2015: 155), the assertiveness projected by China has forged the start of improved bilateral relations between Vietnam and the US. In essence, security strategies that were supposed to deter competition and contestation have in fact been the catalysts to Vietnamese mobilization, an increased number of stakeholders involved in the dispute, and, therefore, foreign-political confrontation. While a myriad number of such incidences have taken place,
China’s security strategy has transformed the South China Sea into a ticking time bomb—where rising tensions will see conflict an inevitability. Furthermore, China—through its fear of losing control—has descended into a paranoid arms race against its own core anxieties.

The depiction of the chosen strategies through the eyes of China itself, as presented in the previous section, portrays the struggles of a nation attempting to overcome its intrinsic issues of security and sustainable (economic) development. The study of these approaches in the context of Sino-Vietnamese relations indicates how they attempt to suffocate Vietnam and constrain the neighboring state’s movements. The strategies executed in the South China Sea are accoutering China with a hegemonic power status, making the state’s presence in the region the key reason for its volatility.

**Shrinking Vietnam’s Room for Maneuver**

China’s endeavor to consolidate its claims is debilitating the position of other states (Fravel 2011: 299). Any intensified foreign-political confrontation between China and Vietnam would drag in the latter’s allies and produce ripple effects across the entire region. Although war is unlikely to break out, ultimately due to economic interdependence (Karim 2013: 101), the territorial dispute with Vietnam is enervating the Southeast Asian region, generating instability while sustaining power asymmetries. A trend of instigating confrontation and the pursuit of a rigid approach to sovereignty over the South China Sea is particularly evident when considering some of the notable foreign-political confrontation, developments, and events in these waters over the last few years (see Table 1 below). The constant fluctuation in tensions is accompanied by China’s assertive stance and coercive methods for gaining control over this sea while Vietnam attempts to defend its own claims.

However, Vietnam is faced with the overpowering influence and capabilities of China, debilitating the former’s position and deterring other states in the region from challenging the latter. Furthermore, 2018 has been dominated by China’s extensive militarization of these waters. As the situation between the states remains strained, such initiatives will only enhance hostility between the actors involved. The effect on the region correlates with the second aspect of the security-development nexus. That is, the assertive stance taken has pushed China’s security and development to be implicated in Vietnam’s insecurity and inhibited the latter’s development via the South China Sea.
Table III.1: Notable Developments and Events in the South China Sea, Focusing on China and Vietnam between 2013 and 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>China releases an updated map with an additional tenth dash on the eastern side of Taiwan, and claims the ten-dash line to be its national boundaries without providing coordinates or legal explanation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Chinese vessels and Vietnamese naval ships collide due to an oil rig set up by China in an area claimed by both states; US prepares to ease arms embargo on Vietnam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>China’s ambassador to the US claims the patrol of an American warship within twelve miles of Chinese-built islands to be a serious political and military provocation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Vietnam protests deployment of Chinese surface-to-air missiles to the Paracels; China builds aircraft hangars on disputed islands; Vietnam moves rocket launchers into disputed waters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>China cancels meeting with Vietnam on South China Sea dispute; China plans to increase patrols in South China Sea; Vietnam urges the ASEAN to take a stronger stance toward China.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>US sends a naval aircraft carrier to Vietnam for the first time since Vietnam War; satellite images reveal show of force by Chinese navy in the disputed area; following pressure and threats of attack from China, Vietnam halts its South China Sea oil-drilling project; China installs equipment capable of jamming communications and radar systems on Spratly Islands.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

The strategies implemented by China have, therefore, directly impeded the security and development of Vietnam, and increasingly limited its ability to act assertively in retaliation. The definitive position taken by China through its security and development strategies has led Vietnam to involve different actors—ones from both inside and outside the region—resulting in a polarization between these respective stakeholders (Karim 2013). Analyzing the actions and strategies of both countries and the subsequent repercussions from them has illustrated that the spatiotemporal bridge of the security-development nexus connects the security of China to the lack of development of Vietnam, and the development of China to the insecurity of Vietnam. At the expense of China’s own internal confluence, the distance spanned by this
The resultant indirect proportionality produces the necessary conditions for foreign-political confrontation to thrive. As of August 31, 2017, the Global Conflict Tracker has depicted the related status of the South China Sea as “worsening” (Council on Foreign Relations 2017b). The most recent update, on January 22, 2019, deems the conflict status to be “unchanging” (Council of Foreign Relations 2019). That is, although tensions between China and Vietnam have subsided, the former continues to conduct naval exercises in these waters and construct “military and industrial outposts on artificial islands it has built” (ibid.). Therefore, actions taken by China uphold its status as the instigator of confrontation and tensions.

China’s Ascendancy: The Rise of a Hegemon

The effects of China’s development and security strategies have sprouted into a canopy of power politics. As China strengthens its economic and security positions, Vietnam is experiencing the consequences of the power asymmetry created through China’s assertive measures. The power game that has ensued from these strategies will complete “China’s re-emergence as a dominant power” (Kim 2016: 28). The emerging power asymmetry begets the question of the role of China within the region. An article penned in 1994 discusses the idea of China as the hegemon on the horizon, and a threat to East Asian security (Roy 1994). By analyzing the context of China, Roy draws certain conclusions based on the state’s potential. If expansion and development were to continue at the then observed pace, China would only be more assertive and uncooperative. The state was said to have the potential to become a force to be reckoned with.

Having analyzed Chinese strategies in the South China Sea and their effects on Vietnam, both elements of Roy’s assessment are apparent. Therefore, the development and security strategies of China are leading to foreign-political confrontation and strengthening the hegemonic position of this state in the region. Protecting its indisputable sovereignty through these approaches, China is adorning itself with hegemonic attributes. The development strategies of China focus on economic prosperity, while the security ones are predominantly intended to protect current economic interests. Even though China justifies its chosen methods by a stipulated commitment to secure itself from any form of threat, the execution of strategies involving the obstruction of Vietnam’s own developmental pursuits alongside threats of violence.
affirm its ultimate supremacy over the South China Sea. These strategies have demonstrated their ability to incite confrontation. China’s disinclination to allow Vietnam to benefit from the South China Sea shows its desire to maintain the status quo. The subsequent escalation of the dispute through the threats made to the Vietnamese state has exhibited China’s hegemony, as well as its bellicosity.

Conclusion

The importance of the South China Sea relates to developmental and security concerns, where control of these waters secures China’s position in both regards. This implication of control has shaped the strategies outlined in this essay. Development and security are intertwined, and deeply embedded in the approaches of China. This recognition has helped map the security-development nexus within the state as well as the region. The strategies implemented by China are intended to achieve an internal confluence. The execution of these, however, has demonstrated the connection of China’s increasing security and development to Vietnam’s insecurity and the obstruction of its own progress. Vietnam has suffered at the hands of China’s security measures, resource acquisition, and with its machinations regarding the former’s economic growth, preventing a holistic achievement of development and security. China’s chosen policies strengthen its economic and geopolitical position at the expense of regional stability. Multiple instances involving Vietnam have emphasized China’s growing tendency to force its rights and regulations onto others through strategies that include economic manipulation and military supremacy. The overlapping claims due to China’s nine-dash line will remain the source of recurrent discord and tension between China and Vietnam (Amer 2014: 28–29), and the strategies implemented by the former to defend its claims of sovereignty will continue to lead to foreign-political confrontation.

The fear of losing control is the puppeteer of China, pulling its strings on its path to achieving the desired internal confluence. While security and development are essential to this route, the strategies adopted enhance the ascendency of the state by preventing the region from dislodging China from its superior position. This trepidation has elongated the spatiotemporal bridge of the security-development nexus. Although economic linkages transcend the geographical connectedness of the region, China’s solitary path of development and security has struck Vietnam between wind and water. The implemented strategies not only incite confrontation but obfuscate the achievement of internal
confluence and strong development and security within the entirety of the Southeast Asia region. As China continues to consolidate its claims, the chasm between it and its neighbors only deepens.

The strategies pursued do not deliberately intend to inhibit other countries from developing, but the protection of Chinese interests at all costs has transformed the quest for energy and national security into a tug of war for power. The firm grip on its claimed territory is causing more assertiveness in strategy implementation. These approaches have enabled China to strengthen its position as the hegemon of the Southeast Asian region, uncompromisingly defending its claims and pursuing its development and security goals. The effects of tensions with Vietnam will eventually and undoubtedly drift onto the shores of other claimants, and their entanglement within this web of dispute will increase. As China continues to implement its strategies and test the malleability of other claims via the showcasing of its economic dominance and military supremacy, confrontation will be inevitable until the power dynamic has shifted wholly to China’s advantage and others have been forced to succumb to its claims.

Based on the conclusions presented in this essay, future research on foreign-political confrontation in East Asia should scrutinize China’s engagement with the other claimants involved and the US in more detail. An analysis of these states will provide further insight into the role of China within this region, the consequences of its rigid pursuit of development and security, and the repercussions from the uncompromising defense of its claims to sovereignty over the South China Sea. Furthermore, as China continues to alienate itself from other claimants, investigating the role of the ASEAN as well as cooperation between states against China’s assertiveness will be vital to the understanding of not just the South China Sea dispute and various other interstate issues within East Asia but overall state behavior at large.
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