

Rise of China and its behaviours in the South China Sea: an analysis of defensive realism perspective

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Abstract

With the continuous improvement of China's comprehensive national strength, international observers could find that China has become more assertive in dealing with its territorial disputes with its neighbours. The debate about whether China is a revisionist state in the balance of power in its regional affairs is a hot topic and the discussion about her disputes in the South China Sea (SCS) is a subset of this important topic. For Beijing's apex, the significance of the SCS does not need more elaboration because it concerns a series of Chinese interests, especially her national security. Based on the precondition about Chinese security, the article analyses China's behaviours in the SCS to prove that Beijing has not turned aggressive even though it has some so-called assertiveness in its recent actions. The article's purpose is to use defensive realism as an analysis framework to help people think about Beijing's shifting behaviours in territorial disputes, especially when power competition is one factor forming the situation. In investigating the specific cases, the study proves that China's activities in the SCS in recent years are based on self-defence after strength enhancement rather than the beginning of the aggression, especially regarding its regional security and territorial disputes.

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1. Introduction

With the continuous improvement of China's comprehensive national strength, after the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the central government changed the guiding spirit of diplomacy from “keeping a low profile and doing something” to “striving for success” and put forward the idea of “building a strong maritime state.” After the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the slogan of “accelerating the construction of a maritime power” indicates that China is urging itself to adapt to the role based on the current development stage with more active behaviour and will pay more attention to the protection of maritime rights and interests than ever before. Every effective government will take an unassailable attitude to protect its core national interests, such as national security and political independence (Gilpin, 2001; Sherazi et al., 2020). At present, the strategic stability and security of the South China Sea (SCS) is one of China's most concerned issues because if the interests of the SCS are not guaranteed, the other strategies will be greatly hindered in the process of advancing.

As a traditional terrestrial power in farming civilization, coupled with the sea ban policies of successive central governments since the late Ming Dynasty, Chinese maritime strategy has been in a weak position under the state strategic guideline. Until the late Qing Dynasty, when Chinese gate was bombed open from the sea by imperialism, Zuo Zongtang still insisted on the idea of preserving land rights first and recovered Xinjiang. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, although China has also carried out “Battle of Paracel Islands” and “Johnson South Reef Skirmish”, more self-defence wars are based on land borders, such as the counterattack against India in the 1960s and the counterattack against Vietnam in the 1970s. After the battles with India and Vietnam, China did not occupy the areas already controlled by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) but withdrew troops to the border. This reflects Beijing's national will and strength, and also expresses determination not to use force except self-defence. Meanwhile, the rapid withdrawal from the territory after the war goal is achieved shows no interest in occupying the territory of other countries. But comparing with land border disputes, the maintenance of maritime rights and interests needs to rely on stronger national strength support (Zhang, 2013; Usma et al., 2021). The SCS was far away from Chinese mainland, it was beyond reach for a long time, but it was always closely related to Chinese national interests.

Until 2014 reclamation of the six islets in the Spratly islands controlled by China, Beijing did not have any active establishment such as what had been done by the Philippines and Vietnam, which build airstrips on these islets. Based on the application of the “bottom line thinking” put forward by General Secretary Xi Jinping to army building, Chinese territory is Chinese bottom line, because under the current new situation, Chinese national security and social stability are facing increasing challenges and threats, and the army should keep the bottom line of China's interests, effectively guard against risks, and effectively respond to challenges (Guo, 2017; Khatoun et al., 2018). As a result, observers could find China begins to be more assertiveness

in dealing with the territory disputes, whatever the Senkaku Island dispute with Japan, Spratly and Paracel disputes with ASEAN members.

In this article, the research uses defensive realism as the analysis framework to judge Chinese behaviours in the SCS territory disputes to see whether Beijing has a defensive intention. Firstly, the researcher introduces some contemporary opinions from other scholars about Chinese behaviours in the SCS disputes, and most of them are in the recent ten years. Then, the review of structural realism will help readers to get clear with the definition of the difference between offensive realism and defensive realism. Further, the essay will reflect the contemporary value of the SCS to China from a different perspective such as security, geopolitics, SLOCs, and after understanding the value of the SCS for Chinese development right now and even future, we could understand why China will gradually change its attitudes and behaviours in the SCS disputes recent years. Last, the author will investigate some specific cases in the SCS disputes which including different disputing parties, but all with China. In the investigation of the specific cases, the researcher proves that China's activities in the SCS in recent years are based on self-defence after strength enhancement, rather than the beginning of aggression.

2. Literature review

As the strength rises of China, the behaviours of Beijing in the SCS have been argued a lot. Shifrinson (2020) points out China will adopt a more assertive strategy as the rising of comprehensive national strength. In the series of actions, Beijing's military forces provided material support. Other claimants of the SCS sometimes recognize China as a state with an offensive propensity to use military means to control the disputed water (Burgess, 2003). Because of its relatively weak maritime strength, neighbouring claimants are reluctant to have a military conflict with China. China could rely on superior strength to deter other claimants to disrupt the status quo or adjust the situation benefits to itself. Because from the perspective of offensive realists, in the anarchy international system, endless competition for chance to expand is the way to ensure the survival of the state (Mearsheimer, 2001). Military strength, one of useful tool, endows rising states seek to vary the contemporary order. However, China also has to face challenge from alliances or extraterritorial states, such as the U.S., for balance of power (Barry, 2002).

Political figures from states outside the territory, such as the United States, also made their voices heard, for example, Hillary Clinton, who once served as Secretary of State, said that future conflicts in the SCS would be international issues, and the United States would intervene, and based on Obama's "Asia-Pacific rebalancing" strategy, Jeff Bader, former chief China expert in White House, once said that Washington should to adopt operation to curb Beijing's growing self-confidence (Zhang, 2014). For the United States, China's increasingly frequent activities in SCS threat its existing interests and should be contained. But vis-à-vis the probable containment and power balance from the U.S. or the potential joint confrontation by

the south-east states, Beijing still prefers to take the risk to have more power in the SCS for the revisionist state essence (Teixeira, 2018). At the same time, even for economic reasons, China may pick military or “Grey zone” choice in SCS to settle the dispute once and for all. The disputes involve the relationship between China and ASEAN, and Chinese economic sectors have tired of the members of ASEAN using the territory disputes as a bargaining chip and constantly ask for benefits from China (Luo, 2018). Beijing has not used military methods to solve the territory disputes in the recent 20 years, however as a revisionist power, China will finally choose to chase to hegemony status in the region, so the rising will not be peaceful (Alenezi, 2020).

Because of the pessimistic attitude to the rising power, critics suggest China will ultimately control the SCS through unilateral actions. For example, the assertive action done by Chinese civilian ships to the USNS in 2009 while the ships from USNS were on a routine operation, and this could be seen as Beijing tries to threat UNCLOS and revisit the contemporary water order which is called “Freedom of Navigation” (Cordesman, 2014). By unilateral actions, even the U.S. might be dragged into the SCS conflict, although China will prefer to coerce small states, no one could sure the small conflict will not escalate to a war between two major powers (Lebow & Valentino, 2009). The war between two giants which are armed to the teeth is dangerous to the region, even to the world. The suggestion of this situation could be seen as the most dreadful story told from the scholar who suggests China is a state with offensive realism.

Nevertheless, the defensive realists have different opinions with the rising China and its behaviours in the SCS. For example, Nathan and Scobell suggest that China has no tendency to expand, even the reclamation in the SCS which could be seen as a respond to other claimants’ assertiveness actions, and Beijing’s claims regarding the SCS is from the historical recognition rather than offensive realist thinking (Nathan & Scobell, 2014). From the Beijing official statements since 2003, they emphasize that China is on a peaceful rising route, and it will never change (Zheng, 2005). In addition, concerning that the word “rising” will leave the impression of a revisionist state, Beijing adjusted “Peaceful Rising” to “Peaceful Development” in the later (Oliveira, 2021). The adjustment of narrative is in the line with Walt words that some states with strong power prefer to avoid aggressively expression which might be seen as offensive tendency (Walt, 1987). Regarding this adjustment, Zhao (2015) suggests China seeks to conform the state development to the international order and make effort to build friendly cooperation relationship with other states.

From the attitude to the contemporary international order, China reveals satisfaction, and it will maintain it with other states as well (Jyalita, 2021). Revisionist states will not adapt themselves to the contemporary system and maintain the order, however, they will seek to create a new order and dominate it. When China tries to solve the territory disputes, it would like to negotiate with the disputing party rather than forcing other states to admit the proposition, and this shows Beijing follow the international norms to impose restriction on the military operation. Through

the negotiation, the disputing parties could reduce the risk of conflicts and wars, and this effort is not only made by small states like Vietnam but made by China as well (Glaser, 2012). The SCS riparian states have communicated to establish a regional sovereignty to governance the disputing waters, and this a peaceful example to show the effect of negotiation (Blazevic, 2012). The increasing dialogues between claimants is strong evidence to reject the offensive realists' suggestions, and Beijing's power is also balanced by the multilateral cooperation (Christensen, 2002). This is different from revisionist states that they will sacrifice the peace and take advantage of small states to achieve self-goals.

Apparently, there is still a big debate in Chinese rising which whether it breaks the status quo. The article is going to analysis several Chinese behaviours in the SCS, one of the controversial points, to prove that Beijing still belongs to the defensive realism even it has some so-called assertiveness actions in the SCS.

3. Theoretical framework: debate of neo-realism

Power is a necessity in the realism. When we discuss the theory of realism, power is an unavoidable objective. For classical realist, for example, Morgenthau (1960) suggests chasing power is rooted in unchanging human nature, and among all the states' conflicts and wars, the ultimately goal is for power since interest is defined in terms of power. Another influential classical realist Hobbes also holds pessimistic attitude with human nature, and he claims human are selfish and greedy that they are willing to chase power until dead (Korab-Karpowicz, 2018). Nonetheless, structural realist investigates the power in the international relations from another dimension that chasing power is not from human nature but is for the international naturally anarchic structure which prompts states to acquire power to protect their survival (Waltz, 1979). Different from classical realism proposing that power is the aim, in structural realism, power is a mean, and survival is the purpose.

Among structural realism, there are two subsets which are offensive realism and defensive realism. Representative figure in offensive realism school Mearsheimer (2001) suggests that, in an anarchical international structure, a state will pursue the highest security through constant power expansion in the process of pursuing security and because it cannot judge the intentions of other states, and thus being a hegemonic state through constant offensive posture could be the best method to ensure self-security. For the convenience of expansion, states with offensive intensions would like to exploit weaker states by refusing cooperation, and then using military force to coerce endlessly (Blazevic, 2012). Because of dissatisfaction with the current situation, these states would like to challenge status quo to acquire more powers rather than maintain it. These challengers could be seen as revisionists (Jervis, 1999). Moreover, Schweller (1996) uses empirical study to support the offensive realism that during the wars through history, most of them are started by powerful states, and this could suggest these rising powers are more likely to break the status quo to expand.

Different from offensive realists' suggestions, representative figure in the defensive realism school, Waltz (1979) proposes that maximization power to be a hegemony state is not a good choice for states to keep security because the international system will not allow this to happen through balancing power. This has been proved by history times, for example, France in Napoleon's era, Germany in World War II, they are all defeated by alliances united by other powers. Besides power balancing, Waltz (1979) also argues, in a balance of offence-defence, the defensive side could take advantage of situation to defeat the offence side, so the states seeking to have excessive powers will ultimately be thoroughly beaten, and from this lesson, these powerful states turn their attention from expanding to main the status quo. Because defensive side often has an advantage over the offensive side, which makes it extremely difficult to conquer, so ambitious attackers will face a high price, and then restrain their own expansion behaviours, and that kind of aimless expansion behaviours will easily make the states lose their existing power and position in the system (Liu & Chen, 2011). This opinion is also proved in Clausewitz's "On War", and we could find some details in to support Waltz suggestion that defensive could be an advantaged party because farther away from one's own border, the pressure of material transportation and the pressure of management of occupied areas are constantly rising, and another side will make more thorough investment for defending its own survival. Upon this, unless there is great advantage and assurance, the war of invading other state's territories is difficult to sustain.

Furthermore, in today's international system, great power is taboo to gain too much power, because too much power will make other states, especially the powerful states in the second level, jointly oppose it, forcing them to give up some expanded powers, which will be even worse than its initiative to give up increasing power (Liu & Chen, 2011). As a result, it seems to be an outdated practice to gain power blindly through expansion in order to maintain or enhance a state's international status. Moreover, besides gaining power through strength, diplomatic cooperation is also a way for a state to gain security, and a state will adopt gentle, prudent, and restrained behaviour in the process of seeking security, that is, it will not keep on attacking as the offensive realism school suggests (Ross & Zhu, 2008). For most states, a moderate strategy is the best way to achieve security, because a moderate strategy can prevent both sides from falling into a spiral of hostility, and at least one side can show maximum restraint while maintaining security, to avoid unnecessary conflicts (Taliaferro, 2011). Security is not totally from expanding, but from maintaining the status quo.

Then, we could make a very clear line between offensive realism and defensive realism. In offensive realism, endless wars and conquers are full of life, and the states with offensive intention are also revisionists as well, and they prefer unilateral actions to challenge the status quo. Clear distinction is that states tend to defensive realism that they prefer to maintain the status quo, and rather than easily to start a war with others. These states will apply constraint methods and cooperation first because expansion is not a brilliant choice for them. Instead of challenging the international norms, defensive realism states would like to follow the

contemporary rules because they think these rules are good enough to keep their status, however, revisionists will not do this.

4. Methodology

The article adopts the qualitative research method with descriptive and analytical content. Some representative cases are referred and by discussing them, readers can understand the point of view of the article more intuitively. Although defensive realism is not a new concept, it is conducive to be applied to specific cases without being confused with its corresponding offensive realism through a detailed introduction again. The materials used by the author include the literature of China scholars and the literature of western scholars, which can increase the objectivity of the article. At present, scholars have different views on China's behaviour analysis in SCS for different judgments on the value of this area to Beijing. Therefore, the author devotes a paragraph in this article to discussing the value of SCS to China, and concludes that this sea area, although its sovereignty is not yet clear, is indeed related to the vital interests of China. This also provides a basis for us to understand why China will take some seemingly assertive actions.

5. The value of the SCS to China

With the continuous development of Chinese comprehensive national strength, the SCS is playing an increasingly important role in Chinese national strategy, whether it acts as a trade and energy channel, or it can act as a shield to Chinese mainland security, or it can become the winning hand of Chinese efforts to break the encirclement and containment of competing states. The Straits of Malacca, one of the most important straits in the world, is located not far south of the SCS. As the largest user of the Straits of Malacca, 85% of China's imported oil and 50% of its exported materials need to pass through the Straits, therefore, it is not excessive to compare the Straits to China's economic and energy lifeline. However, due to the long-term lack of maritime power in China, Chinese observers suggest the Strait is like "Achilles' heel" to China and become what people call "Malacca Dilemma" (Shi & Shi, 2014).

Nonetheless, if China can actively take advantage of the SCS, it can form an excellent protection for the Straits of Malacca to prevent the potential threat, whether it is maritime terrorism or the blockade of the Straits by major powers. Especially in the face of the blockade by powerful state, such as the "Yinhe" incident in 1992, the U.S. Navy conducted a compulsory inspection on the Chinese merchant ship "Yinhe" on the international water of the Indian Ocean (IO) and detained it. The reason why the United States was able to commit such an act of trampling on the dignity of Chinese civilian trade vessels in such an imposing manner was that China did not have the ability to protect its own vessels in the ocean except diplomatic means at that time. If China launches a unified war against Taiwan in the future, it is very likely that the U.S. Navy will take action against Chinese trade vessels in the Straits of Malacca or the IO. The Diego Garcia base of the U.S. Army in the IO can effectively threaten the Straits of

Malacca, and about 80% of Chinese oil tankers are under the surveillance of the U.S. Army (You, 2007). Because the energy problem is related to whether China can maintain economic development continuously, and it is also the cornerstone of social stability, if the energy channel cannot be safeguarded, the key to Chinese safe development lies in the hands of others. The straight-line distance between the islets in the SCS controlled by China and the Straits of Malacca is about 1,000 kilometres, which is half the distance between Sanya and the Straits of Malacca. Whether sending fighters or warships to deal with emergencies, shortening the journey by half can give China greater initiative in protecting its economic security.

In addition to serving as a springboard for forward defence, the SCS is also a wide shield for Chinese mainland security and can serve as a buffer zone before others try to approach the mainland. For example, when the United States conducts the Freedom of Navigation (FON) by warships or the Freedom of Flight (FOF) by military aircraft, it was close to the 12-nautical-mile baseline in China for many times. If the operation was an innocent passage in line with international practice, then there was no problem, however, if it involved military provocation or military actions, such as collecting Chinese national defence intelligence, it would be an event against international ethics. Moreover, because it was too close to the territorial sea, it was difficult for China to judge whether the U.S. military would have further behaviour to overstep the line (You, 2016). When China can effectively control the SCS to a certain extent, for example, after reclamation, aircrafts can already be deployed on several islets. China can monitor the FOF actions of American military aircraft by means of accompanying flights. If American military aircrafts do cross the border, they can also be driven away in advance, and there is no need to take off from mainland bases for interception.

In the SCS collision incident in 2001, EP-3 of the U.S. military was approaching the exercise area of the SCS Fleet at that time. For a special operation military aircraft with the function of electronic intelligence reconnaissance and search, when it appeared in the exercise area of another country, it could capture the intensive exchange of communication signals between warships and fighters on the spot, and then obtain electromagnetic and spectrum information. This unconventional military behaviour would put the Chinese army in a dangerous situation in the military conflict with the U.S. military, which is why Wang Wei adopted a dangerous way at that time (You, 2016). In terms of the means of eviction, Wang Wei's behaviour did not violate discipline, but accidents will still occur sometimes, which may be due to the PLA's long-term anger against the U.S. military under the flag of FOF, but violation of the principle of innocent passage. However, if the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) can be on duty in the SCS for a long time, this humiliation will be greatly reduced for China, and the soldiers in the front line will become more restrained due to the reduction of anger. At that time, because the Chinese aircrafts did not have the ability to fly back to Hainan Air Force Base after collision, Wang Wei had to choose skydiving. At present, the airports built by China on several islets in the SCS gave China a better choice in the face of emergencies, such as providing material conditions for emergency landing.

The same is against with U.S. warships. Take the USNS Impeccable case as an example, that this US Navy's ocean detection ship, which belongs to USNS Special Mission Program, is used for detecting submarines and underwater equipment. When it came to Yalong Bay Strategic Naval Base of Chinese SCS Fleet 48 kilometres away for later recognized espionage activities, its behaviour had nothing to do with FON, but was an electronic warfare against the PLA Navy (PLAN). Impeccable's intelligence gathering function would put PLAN's 094 strategic nuclear submarine in great danger during the war (You, 2013). This will also pose a threat to Chinese homeland security because the mission of the 094 strategic nuclear submarine is that when other states strike against China by nuclear weapons, China can use it for nuclear counterattack, to deter other nuclear-armed states. Once this means of secondary nuclear counterattack is no longer effective, the balance of nuclear terror will be broken, and other nuclear-armed states will be bolder when considering the strategy of pre-emptive nuclear attack against China (Payne, 1977). Among the several islets in the SCS controlled by China, Mischief Reef is generally recognized as the most suitable for berthing warships, so warships departing from Hainan Military Port can be replenished in the SCS without worrying about the embarrassing situation of running out of materials at sea. Based on this convenience, regular cruises in the SCS can monitor warships from other states with threatening behaviours in advance and drive them away before approaching Chinese important facilities.

From the perspective of geopolitics, the SCS plays a role no less than that as a national frontier line of defence. Whether it is AUKUS, a freshly trilateral security alliance agreement between the United States, Britain and Australia, or QUAD, a quadrilateral mechanism whose cooperation has warmed up in recent years based on the Indo-Pacific strategy, it is a containment means for China based on a larger idea. Taking the QUAD as an example, the implementation of this strategy makes the security situation around China more complicated, and it also has an impact on the promotion of Chinese "the Belt and Road" initiative (BRI). Because Joe Biden is constantly attacked by Republicans that he deals with Chinese cases in weak means, and Biden said that he would lead the United States back to the former multilateralism, QUAD's military cooperation in "Indo-Pacific" will be more actively built in the future to show his toughness towards China (Wang & Zhang, 2021). If China can firmly hold on to the SCS, it can at least ensure that the Indo-Pacific Strategy is still two regions that cannot be integrated geographically, to limit the threat of this strategy to many areas in China, which is different from the mainland security. Here, QUAD will mainly threaten Chinese FON along BRI path. In an interview with Washington Post, Sullivan, the National Security Adviser of the United States, said that because China was not prevented from reefs reclamation in the SCS, it caused great damage to American and alliances' FON, and it was necessary for the U.S. military to highlight its military presence in the SCS in the future in order to defend the right to FON (Anonymous, 2020).

At present, the United States and NATO allies other than QUAD are intending to develop the quadrilateral mechanism into an upgraded version of "4+N." For example, on February 13, 2021, French Defence Minister Parry said that the French attack nuclear submarine "Hernad"

would patrol in the SCS to protect its rights and interests in the region; the British “Elizabeth” aircraft carrier entered the from the perspective of geopolitics, the SCS plays a role no less than that as a national frontier line of defence. Whether it is AUKUS, a freshly trilateral security alliance agreement between the United States, Britain and Australia, or QUAD, a quadrilateral mechanism whose cooperation has warmed up in recent years based on the Indo-Pacific strategy, it is a containment means for China based on a larger idea. Taking the QUAD as an example, the implementation of this strategy makes the security situation around China more complicated, and it also has an impact on the promotion of Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Because Joe Biden is constantly attacked by Republicans that he deals with Chinese cases in weak means, and Biden said that he would lead the United States back to the former multilateralism, QUAD's military cooperation in “Indo-Pacific” will be more actively built in the future to show his toughness towards China (Wang & Zhang, 2021). If China can firmly hold on to the SCS, it can at least ensure that the Indo-Pacific Strategy is still two regions that cannot be integrated geographically, to limit the threat of this strategy to many areas in China, which is different from the mainland security.

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Therefore, the SCS is an important and indispensable region for China, whether it is in the field of totally energy economy, military security, or the development strategy of peaceful rise. For

such a key core interest, China's behaviours in this region are far from being aggressive, even sometimes too conservative, and moderate.

6. China's behaviours in the South China Sea

The values of SCS make it an international hot spot. It is hard to avoid talking about SCS when participating in global geopolitical activities, whether it's a claimant state or an external state. Since the new century, China's national strength has greatly jumped, and the strengthening of its maritime power is closely related to Beijing's claimant in SCS. However, in order to maintain its own peaceful development route, China did not try to participate in the territorial dispute through force directly but remained restrained.

First, according to the data of the Global Firepower index, one of the world-famous authoritative military rankings, in 2021, China had 777 naval vessels and 3,260 aircraft owned by the Air Force, including 741 combat vessels and special ships, and 1,686 combat and electronic reconnaissance aircraft. Taking the navy, which is the most important in maritime disputes, as an example, other countries around the SCS have far less disposable power than China, while Indonesia has 282 ships, 103 in the Philippines, 65 in Vietnam, 61 ships in Malaysia, and 40 ships in Singapore (GFP, 2021). It can be said that the total military power of the states within the SCS territory is inferior to that of China in terms of quantity. Regarding the advanced degree of warships, China is the only state with two aircraft carriers in the region, regardless of other types of ships. By the first half of 2022, it is very likely that China will have the first electromagnetic ejection aircraft carrier, that is, Type 003 aircraft carrier; as for Type 004 aircraft carrier, according to relevant media reports in March 2021, it is highly probable that it will be a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier and will appear in the near future (Ronald, 2021).

PLA Navy (PLAN) development in recent years has firmly grasped the second position in the world, and it can even be said to be one of the most advanced in the world in some fields (Joe, 2019). For example, the Type 055 new destroyer, with a displacement of up to 12,500 tons and 112 general missile vertical launchers, can launch ship-to-air missiles, anti-ship missiles, anti-submarine missiles and land cruise missiles. It is the first truly multi-purpose guided missile destroyer of the PLAN, and some western media will also call it a cruiser; in addition to its excellent firepower, this type of ship is equipped with the world-class 346A active phased array radar, that has a detection distance of 400 kilometres in the air and can track hundreds of targets at the same time, which is the most advanced in the PLAN (Zhang, 2021). These powerful combat ships have already completed the manufacture of the first batch of eight ships in 2020, and there will be a second batch of stronger improvements based on the first batch in the future. In addition, the emergence of 075 amphibious assault ship, an amphibious warship that is more conducive to the PLAN island competition, has completely solved the need of vertical landing operations that the PLAN lacked before. This type of warship has a displacement of 30,000 to 40,000 tons and could take off and land seven ship-borne helicopters at the same time. Its dock

can also accommodate 96A main battle tanks, which gives the PLAN the ability to carry out amphibious operations in ocean (Zhang, 2021). With such a powerful armed force, the PLA did not frequently use these advanced weapons to intervene in disputes in the SCS, but instead adopted diplomatic means such as bilateral negotiations and multilateral dialogues to resolve differences, for example, for the sea disputes with Vietnam, negotiation is always the first choice (Jyalita, 2021). China has ability to solve the disputes through military method, however, China does not impose its claim of territory on other claimants. The limitation of using force reflects Beijing follows the international norms and intends to manage disputes peacefully.

In terms of national territory, Chinese current one is the smallest in 150 years, and the PLA has not used war acts to resolve conflicts for 26 years. Especially after entering the 21st century, the apex level in China cherishes the “strategic opportunity period” of development, and the military also gives absolute “comity” to the development of the state and society. Unless Taiwan Province declares independence or Chinese economic development interests are seriously affected by external influences, the PLA is unlikely to resort to force to make the already tense situation in the surrounding areas become tense (You, 2013). It is precisely because China attaches great importance to economic development that the PLA often plays the role of escort of economic development, rather than “violent thugs.” For example, in the face of Vietnam and the Philippines, which not only having territorial disputes with China in the SCS, but also with noticeable economic contacts, China is always willing to adopt the strategy of sitting down and talking (Strangio, 2022). Unless Vietnam has taken the same action as in 1988, occupied the sovereignty reef declared by China in the Sino-Vietnamese Johnson SCS Reef conflict, and fired at the PLA first, China will continue to negotiate diplomacy.

According to historical tradition, the PLA abides by the rule of “the party commands the gun” (Zhang, 2014). At present, the CPC believes that Chinese primary goal is still to maintain economic growth and adjust the industrial structure, instead of solving the problems left over from the history of those territories, which is why the PLA often stands behind foreign affairs for support, rather than standing in front of the stage immediately. Therefore, only in territorial disputes, when the space for diplomatic compromise is reduced, and the other side continues to exert pressure to force China to make greater concessions, some tactical offensive measures of PLA are just like the logic of active defence put forward by the ancient Chinese military strategist, Sun Tzu, that is, the best way to defend in an unfavourable position is to take offense in exchange for its own living space and maintain the status quo (You, 2013). Because of that, defensive realism states always focus on their own territorial securities and possible conflicts and make plans. When the status quo is broken, they can take deterrent and containment measures to lead the other side back to the negotiating table. In this regard, just like the neo-liberalism advocates solving disputes through dialogue and diplomatic mechanisms to achieve the goal of security. Vietnam also admitted that China is more willing to use bilateral discussions to reach a temporary solution to disputes in the SCS, because China has the idea of trying to reduce the risk of “escalation of disputes.” Chinese striving for a peaceful solution

could be found from many cases such as the agreement on resource sharing and active consultation reached between China and Vietnam in Tokyo Bay in 2004 (Blazevic, 2012).

Some scholars also pointed out that the PLA's increased military presence in the SCS is more to cope with the superiority of the United States in controlling the sea, to protect the safety of its territorial waters and SLOCs, and not all regional states' leaders have expressed concern about Chinese military growth (Parameswaran, 2019). Type 052C destroyer, type 052D destroyer and type 055 destroyer developed in recent years have largely alleviated the predicament that Chinese naval equipment was unable to carry out cruise missions in the SCS in the past, but China has not yet used these weapons to coerce other states. Moreover, the PLA's current strategy for marine operations is still based on the asymmetric operational thinking of "anti-intervention" and "regional refusal", which is also based on the purpose of defence rather than attack (Ding & Wang, 2021). Beijing is worried that the intervention of the United States will make the states in the region more aggressive in the territorial dispute with China, so it needs to do something to reduce the military presence of the United States in the disputed areas. Secondly, due to the declining willingness of the United States to supply regional public security goods during Trump's administration, after accumulating the experience of escort and anti-piracy in the Gulf of Aden and Somalia, China can rely on the currently stronger navy to provide public security goods for states in the region. For example, Philippine President Duterte has made a request to the Chinese government, hoping that China can help the Philippines patrol and fight piracy in its southern waters (Ding & Wang, 2021). Moreover, with the BRI in full swing, combating piracy in the SCS also provides the initiative with a means to counter unconventional security threats (Wu & You, 2020). Helping the regional states with solving public security threats could be seen as a sign of defensive realism which encourages the cooperation rather than unilateral actions.

As for the reefs reclamation criticized by many people, it reflects Chinese behaviour based on defensive realism in the SCS. First, China is the latest state which operates the reclamation on a large scale all sovereign claimants in the SCS. In 1988, because the construction area was too small, it could not be regarded as having defensive functions, while other claimants had airstrips before Chinese officially reclamation in 2014. Secondly, even after the completion of the reclamation work on the reefs, China did not deploy fighters on these islets but deployed special operations aircraft as a tool for cruising in the SCS airspace; as for the port facilities on the islets, China has not yet deployed offensive fleets to garrison here. The reason why China is exercising great restraint in the SCS is that Beijing does not want to get involved in avoidable conflicts, even if its own strength is strong enough (You, 2017). The self-restraint is one of characteristics for a powerful state to adopt the defensive realism.

Under China's national strategic planning, there is also no arrangement for offensive deployment to the SCS. As early as 2002, when Chinese leader signed a friendship treaty with ASEAN states, the treaty had already restricted the PLA from taking warming actions against disputes in the SCS and prevented the PLA from using force to resolve disputes (You, 2013).

As ASEAN's largest trading partner, China has participated in most regional economic organizations that can be covered by its neighbours and is also a core member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. However, China has not yet formed political or military alliances with any neighbouring states. China has a very clear position on itself, that is, it is the largest developing state in the world, and its primary task is still economic development (Wang, 2011). As a state with economic development as its top priority, it is not beneficial for itself to expand its power by adopting offensive realism logic in today's globalization.

Even at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, the spirit of diplomatic work changed from “keeping a low profile and doing something” to “striving for something” and proposed to build a maritime power, but this did not change Chinese consistent practice of taking communication and negotiation as the best option in the SCS disputes. In October 2013, General Secretary Xi stated in the first “Peripheral Diplomacy Symposium” of the Central Committee of the CPC since the founding of the People's Republic of China that the fundamental policy of peripheral diplomacy is “intimate, sincerity, kindness and tolerance”, in which relationship with states in the SCS is a key point, which is why the BRI includes as many states as possible that have disputes with China in the SCS, and the Philippines President Duterte also welcomes this initiative, which not only repairs relations with China, but also leads the Philippines to actively participate (Chen & Wang, 2019). On the basis that the 19th National Congress of the CPC in 2017 further emphasized the need to “speed up the construction of a maritime power” and develop ocean-going navy, China still held the first BRI international cooperation summit forum in the same year. From this point, Beijing’s ocean-going navy plan is not used to solve conventional disputes, but more like an endorsement of security for economic development, and China will continue to deal with disputed states in the spirit of international cooperation and win-win (Wang, 2021). In the new world economic environment, the method of settling territorial disputes by force in the past colonial era has fallen behind, and maintaining stable regional peace is more conducive to economic development, which is why China has resorted to the maritime bureau's rights protection actions in most maritime disputes, because sacrificing regional stability is unfavourable to China, and it is easy to backfire by imposing will on the disputing states (Bai, 2021). However, win-win cooperation does not mean unlimited concession in the field of sovereignty disputes, and “setting aside disputes and pursuing joint development” should not be regarded as a weak attitude. When civil settlement is ineffective, the PLA will exert deterrence and let the other party know China's bottom line, but it has not played the role of handling disputes since the new century.

Some offensive realists believe that China's behaviours in the SCS is the performance of a revisionist power, rather than maintaining the status quo. Especially after the global financial crisis in 2008, due to the decline of the West, China has a comparing better opportunity to break the balance (Alenezi, 2020). First of all, the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008 was not China's responsibility, and when the Federal Reserve implemented quantitative easing, China bought a large amount of U.S. debt, which saved the West. With the acceleration of Chinese rise, China intends to deal with maritime territorial disputes and conflicts by building a new

type of major-power relationship with the United States, based on the principle of “no confrontation, no conflict, mutual respect, mutual benefit and win-win.” However, the United States did not accept Chinese proposal, but joined its allies in the SCS to enhance the “voice” of provocation, which is also the background for Fu Ying, then Vice Foreign Minister, to say in 2012 that “small states cannot invade and provoke big state as well” (Wang, 2021).

In addition, the criticism of Chinese military expenditure growth is endless. Some scholars pointed out that Chinese military spending tripled from 2000 to 2011, which makes China more capable of changing regional balance and becoming a new regional hegemony (Menla-Ali & Dimitraki, 2014). However, this critical opinion shows that the growth rate of Chinese GDP has been neglected. Until 2021, Chinese military expenditure still accounts for less than 2% of GDP, which is obviously less than that of most major powers in the world. The U.S. military expenditure accounts for about 3.2% of GDP, the SCS riparian states such like Vietnam's military expenditure accounts for about 2.5% of GDP, and even peaceful state Singapore's military expenditure accounts for about 3.1% of GDP. In the context of globalization, maritime right is becoming increasingly important for a major power. The growth of Chinese navy in recent years has only made up for shortcomings, far from the strength of seeking hegemony. Therefore, the theory of military expenditure increasing is just a manifestation of creating the "China threat theory" simply through numbers. From the economic benefits of solving problems, Beijing knows that developing stable relations with countries in the region is more beneficial than sending aircraft carriers and fleets (Wu & You, 2020). Therefore, Beijing is motivated to cooperate with states in the region and establish friendly political relations (Stewart, 2018). If China adopts an expansionary policy, how can China provide more and more public economic goods in the region in recent ten years, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

In the grey zone, China made concessions as well. For example, in 1996, the PLA was in the critical stage of upgrading land-based and sea-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, but the postponed research process had an adverse impact on the “Julang 2” submarine-launched missile; in 2012, in response to Vietnam's transformation of disputed waters into maritime boundaries, China announced the establishment of Sansha City, which was delayed by five years than planned, simply because China was worried that making a new announcement rashly would cause tension (You, 2013). In the case of HYSY-981 Drilling Platform in 2014, China could have evacuated on August 11 after 100 days of operation near Paracel Islands as planned, but after the anti-China incident broke out in Vietnam, China ended the work of the platform on July 15. By virtue of Chinese maritime strength gap with Vietnam, if China wants to rely on tough means, even if the drilling platform continues to operate until the agreed date, China is also fully capable of dealing with possible conflicts at sea. During the 73 days of working on the platform, Vietnam has always acted as a hindrance and sabotage. However, China has always refrained from any larger-scale conflict with it (Zhou, 2016). If China still considers that it will not plunge itself into a disadvantageous position of military challenge when trying to avoid conflicts with the United States, then we can only say that China really has no intention

to seek hegemony by force in the SCS when it comes to Vietnam's restraint. Even though offensive realists believe that with the increasing equipment of the Chinese navy, the United States will inevitably be squeezed out by hard power in the SCS, in fact, compared with the United States, the Chinese navy still faces a lack of major capabilities to deal with high-tech wars, such as weak C4IRS and combat network centres, weak ASW capabilities, weak fleet regional air defence capabilities, and weak long-distance logistics supply capabilities. Without these technologies, the fleet will not have strong joint operations capabilities, and under the current world economic downturn, the navy may no longer keep the expansion speed (You, 2012).

7. Conclusion

In the process of rising, China gradually has the ability to better safeguard its existing territorial security, but the improvement of this ability has not been used to change the regional balance. For example, China has not used the new amphibious assault ship to seize the disputed islets and waters that it considers to be its own, nor has it deployed combat units such as fighters on the islets under its control, which to a great extent reflects Beijing's use of defensive realism to deal with territorial disputes in the SCS. The Chinese government tends to negotiate directly with the states concerned in the disputed areas or settle territorial and jurisdictional disputes peacefully through alliance channels (Bai, 2021). However, China is bound to gradually oppose the intervention of the United States in its territorial disputes in the SCS, because with the strengthening of its hard power, China is more powerful than before in opposing various forms of hegemonism and power politics. Judging from apex policies, China maintains a defensive national policy, not only on land but also at sea. At the decision-making end, the PLA's defensive posture can reflect the overall policy preference of China, and this policy preference is to seize disputed territory without force, which is just contrary to the concept of offensive realism (You, 2013). The process of China's transformation from defenceless to defensible is even less likely to be the so-called expansion.

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