

“BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY OF CLUJ-NAPOCA
FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND
SECURITY STUDIES

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- SUMMARY -

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COOPERATION AND CONFLICT IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA:
FOREIGN POLICY OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA
(1978-2019)

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KEY WORDS: South China Sea, cooperation, conflict, foreign policy, The People’s Republic of China, militarization, economic diplomacy, sinocentrism

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND MOTIVATION OF THE RESEARCH

Southeast Asia is a special region on the global stage, due to the socio-political transformations it has experienced over the last century. Whether it has been post-colonial transition, changing economic profile or the emergence of nationalist currents, the potential for conflict in this region has persisted to the present day. But what has particularly attracted international attention has been the accelerated economic and military development of the People's Republic of China (China / PRC) over the past four decades and the possibility of it becoming a regional or even global hegemon with conflicting geopolitical ambitions.

Such a strategic dilemma has emerged in the South China Sea region where the Chinese state has given the impression that it embraces an ambivalent foreign policy, embodied in both peaceful and aggressive behaviour. The PRC has stepped up its regional military presence, particularly under current President Xi Jinping, and has resorted to assertive rhetoric claiming sovereignty over several archipelagos based on historical rights. As a result, numerous territorial disputes have arisen between China and the other littoral countries, resulting in armed clashes or even human casualties. At the same time, China has pursued its regional economic interests, proclaiming itself a peaceful and mature player capable of challenging the influence of the United States. It has engaged in various bilateral and multilateral partnerships, becoming a pole of economic attraction for other countries with limited international reach.

In the light of these considerations, the present paper analyzed the foreign policy promoted by the People's Republic of China in the South China Sea from a military and economic perspective during the chronological interval 1978-2019.

The motivation for this scientific endeavour derived primarily from the conflict substrate that this area has illustrated over the past four decades. Also, the Chinese state's assumption of the role of regional economic pivot has intensified Sino-American rivalry in the Asia-Pacific area. The second reason was the current geopolitical conjuncture in the region, as the South China Sea has become an area where the interests of several state actors and international organisations intersect. On one hand, China is trying to impose its own political vision, while on the other, the US has assumed the role of maintaining a regional security environment. The picture is completed by the presence of five more states (Taiwan, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei) and international entities (ASEAN, IMF) which are trying to provide a formal framework for diplomatic dialogue. The third reason was the strategic importance of the South China Sea in the above geopolitical context. The South China Sea has become one of the busiest trade routes because of the link it creates between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. At the same time, it contains

many underground riches (natural resources and hydrocarbons) attractive to all countries in the area. In China's case, the dependence on oil imports is a strategic vulnerability vis-à-vis the US, so the South China Sea has become a crucial variable for the Chinese state in the context of the possible reconfiguration of power poles in the Asia-Pacific region. China's differing interpretation of international maritime law, in terms of the delimitation of maritime borders and exploitation rights, has contributed to heightened tensions between states.

As a result, the possibility of a deteriorating security climate in the South China Sea is a topical issue for the international academia. At the same time, the expansion of Chinese economic influence allows us to conduct a comprehensive analysis of how the PRC has shaped its foreign policy in the South China Sea region.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to provide a clear exposition in terms of the design of the paper, a few theoretical clarifications regarding how foreign policy analysis is perceived in the international academic sphere are necessary. Although there is no unanimously accepted definition, in a broad sense, foreign policy analysis focuses on the behaviour of the state towards the external environment and how it perceives itself within the international system.¹

The first studies of this kind appeared after the end of the Second World War and had a strong realist influence. They focused on how the international system shapes a state's external actions and on the military means by which it seeks to strengthen its security. This was followed by a period marked by the emergence of behaviouralist and comparativist currents, which promoted the idea that foreign policy actually reflects the decision-making process of the leader or group of leaders. Thus, in order to understand a state's foreign policy, the behaviour of its leaders had to be analysed together with the external context and the domestic challenges they faced. However, the state remained the main unit of analysis within these schools of thought, and so the rational actor model was also taken up in the analysis of individual decision-making. Another novelty was the methodology of foreign policy analysis, which embraced a positivist and empirical approach to data collection and hypothesis testing. In this respect, studies that attempted to outline generally valid theories based on the analysis of observable political and military actions were promoted. The third phase was marked by the development of structuralist currents, which is why the role of economics and the international system became a priority in foreign policy analysis. The paradigm shift was due to the multiplication of non-state actors, the intensification of

¹ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Future of Power*, Public Affairs, New York, 2011, p. 11.

transnational cooperation and the emphasis on global economic interdependence. As a result, the international agenda of states has shifted from a politico-military to a predominantly economic one.² The last phase coincided with the period after the end of the Cold War and strengthened the multidisciplinary view of foreign policy analysis. This perspective emerged in the context of the epistemological crisis of realism and the methodological fragmentation that this school of thought faced. Thus, it perpetuated the idea of using a multi-sided framework of analysis, with conceptual openness also to the historical or socio-cultural features of the state.³ Against this background, foreign policy analysis has increasingly been seen as a discipline subordinated to international relations, in which state actions must be related to both domestic influencing factors and external systemic stimuli.⁴

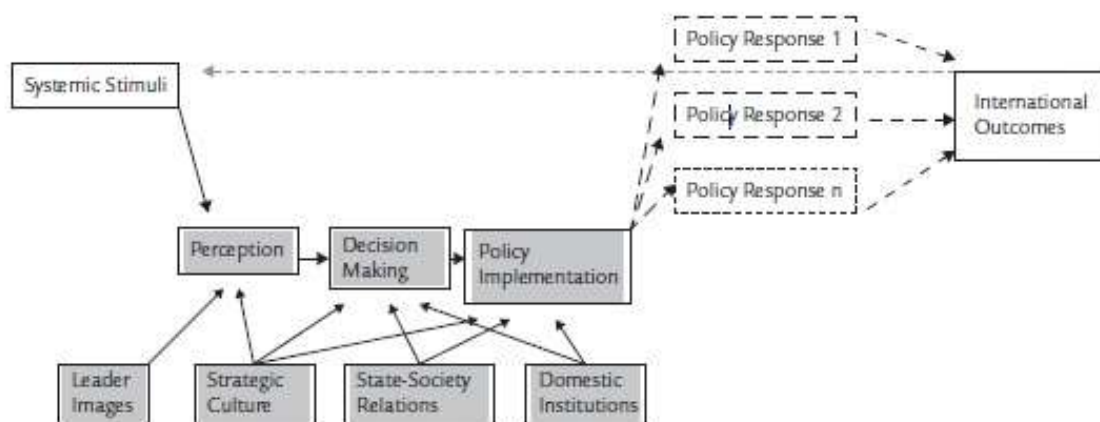


Figure 1 State foreign policy according to the theory of neoclassical realism

(source: Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016, p. 59)

The People's Republic of China is currently a country in full economic and military development, and is considered by most experts to be the only power capable of challenging American supremacy. At the same time, it is among the countries most strongly connected to the past, given the importance of Confucian philosophy in Chinese society. In the light of these observations, the analysis of China's foreign policy in the South China Sea started from the presumption of the rationality of Chinese leaders. This is based on the rational actor model, according to which a state will pursue policies it deems relevant to maximise its power and security within the international system.⁵

² *Ibidem*; Fatih M. Tayfur, "Main approaches to the study of foreign policy: A review", in *METU Studies in Development*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1994, pp. 119, 121, 124, 128-129.

³ Stefano Guzzini, *Realism și Relații Internaționale*, Institutul European, Iași, 1998, pp. 402-405, 408.

⁴ Derek Beach, *Analyzing Foreign Policy*, Palgrave Macmillan, London and New York, 2012, pp. 2-6;

⁵ Marijke Breuning, *Foreign Policy Analysis. A Comparative Introduction*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York and Hampshire, 2007, p. 3, 5.

The thesis also referred to the paradigm of neoclassical realism to explain the military and economic endeavours undertaken by the Chinese state. According to this paradigm, the state's foreign policy is influenced by both the nature of the international system and domestic socio-political circumstances.⁶

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESIS

Given the design and theoretical background outlined, *the main objective* of the thesis was to highlight, in a factual and evolutionary manner, the main strategic shifts in Chinese foreign policy identified through its military and economic projections in the South China Sea. Specifically, it sought to illustrate the mechanisms by which this strategy has evolved over the past four decades from moderation and diplomatic caution to military assertiveness and economic pressure. *The goal* was to illustrate China's perception of its own regional role and how the Chinese state interacts with other state and non-state actors. The study also sought to present an overview of the global direction China is suggesting it is following, starting with its actions in the South China Sea. Achieving the main objective required investigating *in extenso* a number of complementary study directions. As such, a set of *sub-objectives* were established, structured to bridge the gap between the hypothesis and the empirical study.

Sub-objective 1: Identifying the existing geopolitical nexus in the South China Sea in relation to the strategic importance of the region, the actors involved and territorial claims.

Sub-objective 2: Illustrating the legal context through which China has nuanced the legality of its maritime claims.

Sub-objective 3: Summarising China's military and economic endeavours in the South China Sea (1978-2019).

Sub-objective 4: Analysis of China's socio-cultural structure to highlight the influence of domestic factors on its foreign policy.

Sub-objective 5: Examining the Sino-American relationship in relation to their spheres of influence in the South China Sea.

The conflicting actions taken by the Chinese state in the South China Sea were taken into account in setting these objectives. China was offended by the internationalisation of maritime disputes and has ignored the International Court of Justice's 2016 ruling on the illegality of its territorial claims, but has become deeply involved in regional geo-economics. The paper therefore started from the *hypothesis* that Chinese foreign policy proposes a new model of power, based on

⁶ Gideon Rose, „Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy”, in *World Politics*, vol. 51, nr. 1, 1998, pp. 146-147.

both cooperation and conflict. The Chinese state seeks to impose its political will, taking advantage of its new military status. At the same time, it is interested in maintaining favourable economic relations with other countries, aware of the influence that the US has in the region. As such, it seeks to induce deliberate ambiguity in its foreign policy so as not to generate a coordinated international reaction against it. This dichotomy between military and economic actions was tested through a comparative analysis of empirical data collected from real events, statistical data and official documents.

From a theoretical perspective, the hypothesis was built on the concept of “*smart power*”, developed in the early 2000s by J. Nye to draw the attention of American political leaders to the fact that a coherent foreign policy requires a combination of firm military approaches (“hard power”) with a range of economic approaches attractive to other states (“soft power”).⁷

In order to achieve the proposed objectives, we judged that the study should answer the **general research question** “How did the Chinese foreign policy evolved between 1978 and 2019?” and the following **sub-questions**:

Sub-question 1. *What is the balance of power in the South China Sea and the distribution of territorial disputes?*

Sub-question 2. *How has international maritime law influenced the development of Chinese territorial claims?*

Sub-question 3. *Does China propose a model for cooperation and a model for conflict in the South China Sea?*

Sub-question 4. *Which are the domestic factors that have influenced Chinese foreign policy in the South China Sea?*

Sub-question 5. *How is the US regional presence being managed and what are the prospects for Sino-US relations?*

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The establishment of the research methodology was done with the aim of giving the scientific approach a coherent transition between the theoretical and empirical framework. Thus, we framed the work within the **positivist** paradigm as we focused on the analysis of events recorded in press releases, strategic documents, reports, transcripts or declassified archives. Their interpretation was made taking into account the evolution of South China Sea geopolitics over the

⁷ Joseph S. Nye Jr., “Get Smart. Combining Hard and Soft Power”, in *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 88, nr. 4, 2009, p. 160.

last four decades. Thus, we aimed to process the collected data in a regional key, giving the work an interpretative influence.

This approach allowed us a research strategy triangulated around several ways of testing the hypothesis,⁸ and the empirical evidence was carried out using specific scientific procedures to describe, represent and interpolate information.⁹ To determine the conditions for testing the hypothesis we used a *deductive* research strategy. Through it, we have delineated the theoretical background of the paper, and subsequently identified and explained the military and economic initiatives undertaken by China in the South China Sea. As a result, we have outlined a predominantly *explanatory* paper, providing insights into the causes and consequences of Chinese actions. We have also inserted *descriptive* elements into the thesis that were predominantly used in the initial phases of the research (presentation of the geopolitical context and actors in the South China Sea region). In applying this strategy we used *empirical investigation, historical research and comparative analysis* as *scientific methods*. Combining several methods has made it easier to identify the causal link between observable variables (maritime incidents, economic initiatives, official state positions) and unobservable ones (geopolitical context, domestic pressures). We also used *deductive reasoning* and *nomothetic explanation* to draw conclusions and assess the extent to which the Chinese state can apply this type of foreign policy in other regions of the world.

Taking into account this methodological triangulation, the data collection, processing and interpretation techniques were also multiple. Among the *qualitative* tools, we used the *case study* to analyse Chinese military actions, *content analysis* to interpret official documents and *qualitative comparative analysis* to study Chinese economic initiatives. We also used *archival documents* and *memoir literature* to understand the socio-cultural dimension of the Chinese people. From the category of *quantitative* techniques we used *secondary research*, processing existing statistical data in international databases. We also conducted a quantitative *content analysis* of the strategic documents published by the Chinese state.

SUBJECT AND CONDUCT OF THE RESEARCH

Given that the scientific approach was focused around the foreign policy promoted by China in the South China Sea, *the central topic* of the thesis was the Chinese state. According to international literature, the state is one of the three levels of analysis available for studying foreign

⁸ Steffan Larsson, "A pluralist view of generalization in qualitative research", in *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, vol. 32, nr. 1, 2009, pp. 27-28; Audie Klotz, Deepa Prakash, *Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire and New York, 2008, p. 2.

⁹ Guillaume Devin, *Resources and Applied Methods in International Relations*, Palgrave Macmillan, Paris, 2017, pp. 3-4, 8, 11; Mircea Abagian, *Cercetarea calitativă a socialului*, Editura Institutul European, Iași, 2004, p. 29.

policy, alongside the individual and the systemic.¹⁰ Thus, we considered that the state, as an autonomous actor pursuing its own self-interest in the global system, represents the core of international politics and provides a deeper picture of it.

As China is the most powerful state in the region and is directly involved in the territorial conflicts in the South China Sea, it has multiple military and economic levers to overthrow the poles of power in Southeast Asia. Thus, the actions of the Chinese state were first analysed in terms of the military and economic relations developed with the other actors in the South China Sea. The second stage involved highlighting the factors that influenced these actions (socio-cultural landmarks, Sinocentrism, nationalism, factionalism, Sino-American rivalry). Through this approach, we have provided a detailed perspective of how internal and external factors act simultaneously on Chinese foreign policy.

The procedural plan of the research was designed to capture the *longitudinal* evolution of Chinese foreign policy from a military and economic perspective. The chronological interval 1978-2019 was chosen to reflect visible stages in paradigm shifts in the Chinese foreign policy in the post-Maoist period. The approach allowed us to answer the research questions in a valid and concrete way.

Throughout the thesis we have considered the functionality of the hypothesis-theory-concepts-constructs-variables relationship. As such, the study started from the hypothesis that there is a contradiction between China's willingness to assume a proactive economic role in the region and the military initiatives directed against other states in the South China Sea basin. The formulation was based on a series of initial observations taken from various press releases, official documents and scientific publications, thus making a preliminary link between the dependent variables. Hypothesis testing involved outlining *the universe of the study*, through which the research units (unit of analysis, concepts, constructs, variables) were established. The bridges of linkage subsequently discovered were analysed to identify causal relationships in Chinese foreign policy and interpret the results.

Analysis unit	Foreign policy promoted by the PRC in the South China Sea (1978-2019).
Concept (feature of the analysis)	The military-economic dichotomy in Chinese foreign policy.
Constructs (concept feature)	<i>External:</i> geographical and legal context, developments in maritime incidents and Chinese economic initiatives.

¹⁰ Marijke Breuning, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13; Richard Q. Turcsanyi, *Chinese Assertiveness in the South China Sea: Power Sources, Domestic Politics and Reactive Foreign Policy*, Springer, Berlin, 2017, p. 21.

	<i>Internal:</i> China’s socio-cultural structure, the institutional architecture of the Chinese Communist Party.
Variables (empirical values of concepts/constructs)	<i>Independent (cause):</i> China's military and economic power. <i>Intermediate:</i> domestic factors, geopolitical context, US presence. <i>Dependent (effect):</i> China's military and economic behaviour in the South China Sea.

Table 1. The Universe of the study

RESEARCH TOPICALITY AND NOVELTY

The topicality of the present scientific approach was reflected in three aspects. First, territorial disputes and tensions in the South China Sea represent a current challenge to regional security. The international press constantly reports on maritime incidents and conveys official positions of state leaders. Academics are also deeply interested in the subject, organising annual conferences and scientific debates on the latest geopolitical developments. Secondly, the number of actors involved is substantial. Both small and international players have their own political agendas and perceive regional stability differently. This is due to the strategic and economic importance of the South China Sea. Thirdly, the maritime presence of the United States accentuates the potential for conflict in the South China Sea as both powers seek to consolidate their influence in the Asia-Pacific region. An escalation of this competition would also be felt in the global security architecture.

In terms of novelty, the thesis contributes to the enrichment of the international relations literature on Southeast Asia. Taking advantage of the limited national scholarship on the South China Sea, we have used a multidisciplinary approach whereby we have made solid connections between China's foreign policy, international legal context, military actions, economic initiatives and domestic challenges facing the Chinese state.

At the same time, we have resorted to a longitudinal exposition of these linkages to capture the dynamics of Chinese foreign policy in stages. The chosen variant allowed us to trace the conflicts in which China has been involved, to observe the evolution of its integration into the international system and to analyse the political philosophy adopted by Chinese leaders in official documents. As a result, we have moved beyond the usual pattern of studies focusing on China's relations with other states, where the influence of systemic factors or domestic pressures on foreign policy are analysed individually.

Last but not least, we focused mainly on foreign literature for our research. This has given the work an international dynamic as we have integrated theoretical and conceptual approaches from both the Anglo-Saxon and Eastern European spheres.

LIMITATIONS IN CARRYING OUT THE RESEARCH

Like any scientific contribution, this paper illustrates a number of limitations. Firstly, even though international relations are mainly based on the interaction of state actors, behind them there are leaders with different ideas and preconceptions. Therefore, reality can only be known probabilistically by the researcher, and his work focuses on the evolution of socio-political phenomena, highlighting their reproduction tendencies. The author's subjectivity is therefore a weakness regardless of his ability to interpret and contextualise events.

Secondly, the thesis followed the evolution of Chinese foreign policy in the South China Sea, so the model of analysis was built on a series of benchmarks specific to this region. As a consequence, China's regional behaviour can only to some extent be extrapolated to the international level. Although we believe that a state's regional policy illustrates its global vision on a smaller scale, the generalisation of this phenomenon must first capture a number of features common to both levels of analysis (regional and global).

Thirdly, access to primary bibliographic references was conditioned by the visibility of naval conflicts in the international press. Thus, we were only able to analyse incidents that received high enough media and diplomatic attention to generate academic debate. At the same time, even if most Chinese official documents are also published in an international language, it is likely that some (patriotic, nationalistic, anti-Western, propagandistic messages) are kept for internal communication with the Chinese people. Therefore, we could not have full control over the dependent variables.

THESIS STRUCTURE

Taking into account the methodological approach used, the paper was divided into four chapters that combined the theoretical framework with practical applicability. Thus, *the first chapter* focused on illustrating the geopolitical context of the South China Sea and its geostrategic importance. The states involved in the territorial divergences were also presented and ranked based on military and economic capabilities.

Another point of reference has been to go through the theoretical acquisitions related to this area. Although Asian currents have not revolutionised international studies, they have

influenced the way in which states in this region relate to Western paradigms by creating schools of thought that have focused on Eastern socio-cultural landmarks. China has been the most active state from this perspective and has channelled its academic efforts to reshape the dynamics of international theories. At the same time, the analysis of realist, liberalist and constructivist currents allowed us to extract a number of concepts such as power transition, security dilemma, *realpolitik* or economic interdependence. These have been used as benchmarks in the analysis of Chinese foreign policy and have given us a first insight into the deliberate strategic ambiguity that the Chinese state has applied in the South China Sea.

The last part of the chapter was devoted to the conflicts in the South China Sea, presenting the territorial claims of all states and the geographical layout of the disputed archipelagos. With the exception of Brunei and Malaysia, which only invoked legal arguments, the other states focused largely on historical evidence, and China outlined its claims on the basis of a 1947 map (“The Nine-Dash Line”). We also found that the Spratly and Paracel Islands are the subject of most disagreement between these states.

The second chapter focused on international maritime law and how it has been used by China to invoke its historical right to claim territory. As a first step, we noted that there are three major strands of opinion in international academia regarding Chinese state claims. The pro-Chinese camp, made up of scholars from both Asian and Anglo-Saxon backgrounds, supported the idea of Chinese maritime sovereignty. The pro-European camp focused on dismantling China's arguments and tended to attribute archipelagic sovereignty to former colonial powers. The neutral camp avoided taking a position on the issue, citing the ambiguity and inconclusiveness of all states' arguments.

We then carried out an assesment of the international maritime law and found that, although there is customary maritime law codified by the UNCLOS treaty, its implementing rules are not sufficiently clearly regulated. As such, we have been able to identify multiple cases in which international courts have interpreted the custom - treaty symbiosis distinctly. This has encouraged the Chinese state to disregard the 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague that invalidated the historical rights invoked. The authority of the courts has also been undermined by the attitude of several Western states (including the US) who have acted similarly when faced with unfavourable rulings, taking advantage of the fact that there is no coercive mechanism at international level to enforce court decisions. Moreover, the US government has so far failed to ratify UNCLOS, fuelling a groundswell of opinion against US involvement in territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

The third chapter was dedicated to testing the hypothesis of strategic ambiguity applied by the Chinese state in the South China Sea. In doing so, we drew a parallel between the maritime

conflicts provoked by China and the economic initiatives in which the Chinese state has been involved. As a first step, the empirical analysis involved identifying maritime incidents and structuring them thematically. Thus, we were able to observe the onset of assertiveness during Hu Jintao's term of office, which, however, increased significantly with the coming to power of Xi Jinping in 2012. We also found that the PRC has consistently employed paramilitary or civilian forces with no identifying marks to mask its direct involvement in these incidents.

The gradual militarisation of the archipelagos has been another strategy used by China to gain control of the South China Sea. Initially, military leadership was centralised and subordinated to President Xi Jinping, and the defence budget doubled during his term. Then an intensive process of building artificial islands was launched, which were later transformed into military bases equipped with runways, control towers, radars or defence guns. The most substantial expansion took place in the Spratly archipelago, where almost 1300 new hectares of land were developed. The South China Sea militarisation strategy was a step-by-step process, designed by Chinese leaders to gradually diminish other states' naval access without provoking a collective response against it. It therefore complemented the assertive policy manifested by the maritime conflicts in which the Chinese state was involved.

The expansion of Chinese military influence was also achieved through a series of peaceful initiatives that gave the impression of defusing territorial disputes in the region. For example, China joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and signed the Declaration of Conduct in the South China Sea, initiatives aimed at promoting free navigation and peaceful conflict resolution. However, little progress has been made on maritime conflicts as Chinese leaders have avoided discussing the issue.

In antithesis to its military strategy, China has pursued an economic policy aimed at becoming a regional pivot. To this end, the Chinese state has succeeded in establishing trade agreements with each of the littoral states, becoming their main source of imports. China has also made progress in multilateral partnerships where, in addition to the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area, it has sought to implement the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the Belt and Road Initiative. These two projects go beyond the regional level and are intended to highlight China's international maturity in the light of the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

In terms of regional economic integration, China failed to join the ASEAN Economic Community because it would have needed more legal concessions from other countries. However, the situation has not caused China the same negative image that International Monetary Fund policies created for the US during the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s. At the time, the Chinese government proposed a package of measures that helped the affected economies recover and greatly improved China's image on the international economic stage.

The final part of this chapter highlighted the public perception of the South China Sea region states on the impact of China's military and economic actions. Supported by the US, the Philippines and Vietnam have been the main challengers to Chinese territorial claims and have sought to limit the South China Sea occupation process through military, legal and diplomatic means. Malaysia and Brunei have preferred to adopt predominantly neutral attitudes so as not to jeopardise their economic relations with China, while Taiwan has only challenged the legality of China's moves and not the validity of the nine-dash map, as its territorial claims are identical to China's. Economically, China has succeeded in expanding its regional influence, becoming an extremely serious competitor to the US.

Under these circumstances, China has managed to take advantage of the resulting geopolitical context. The Chinese state has gradually extended its control over the South China Sea and has managed to militarise numerous islands without provoking a coordinated reaction against it. At the same time, it has increased the level of dependence of other countries on its economic policies, which have preferred not to engage militarily against China despite the escalation of maritime incidents.

The fourth chapter examined Chinese foreign policy from the perspective of national interest and the domestic challenges facing the Chinese state. Through this neoclassical realism approach, we have shown how domestic pressures and the historical and cultural traits of the Chinese people influence the actions of their leaders. In a first step, we found that the CCP has taken up several socio-political themes related to China's imperial past. Issues such as the Sinocentrist philosophy and the 'tianxia' tributary system have perpetuated the idea that the Chinese state is entitled to regain its regional sphere of influence. As such, many voices in politics and academia have advocated China's assertive behaviour towards competitors in the South China Sea. The 2016 ruling was also seen as a continuation of the damage that colonial powers have done to the Chinese people throughout the “century of humiliation”, with a particular focus on denigrating the US.

The legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party was another element that influenced China's foreign policy. Domestic socio-economic conditions and the regional geopolitical context forced the state's leaders to secure a pool of domestic stability. As a result, the Han middle class became the face of the Party's legitimacy, and the Party sought to ensure its economic well-being was strong enough to use it as an element of stability in society. Among the measures adopted to this end there were themes that were popular with this section of the Chinese people, such as strengthening trade relations with South China Sea states and intensifying nationalist rhetoric on maritime rights.

The Chinese Communist Party was also analysed from the perspective of internal power games, so we were able to understand the dynamics of Chinese foreign policy decision-making. We noticed the lack of cohesion within the party, despite the apparent solidarity it promoted in the public arena. The existence of multiple influence groups also made it difficult to achieve political consensus. The factions of the first two post-Maoist leaders (Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin) took more conservative positions on territorial claims, while the factions of the last two leaders (Huo Jintao and Xi Jinping) advocated for a more assertive stance. A consistent voice has been that of the People's Liberation Army, which has called for China's active involvement in protecting maritime sovereignty. Because of this, its decision-making power has been gradually diminished over the past four decades. Reducing factionalism has become an important theme for current President Xi Jinping, who has embarked on a process of centralising executive structures and redirecting decision-making power within his circle of influence.

All the above-mentioned data highlighted how the Chinese Communist Party had to manage a number of sensitive issues such as nationalism, patriotic education, party legitimacy or the socio-economic stability of the middle class. In the geopolitical context of the South China Sea, these issues have directly influenced Chinese foreign policy, both through proactive economic initiatives and conflict-based military approaches.

The concluding chapter summarized the results obtained throughout the paper, confirming the **research hypothesis**, namely *the deliberate pursuit by the People's Republic of China of a foreign policy focused on both cooperation and conflict in the South China Sea*. Our empirical investigation demonstrated how China has intensified its maritime assertiveness after 2009 through militarization of the South China Sea and constant aggression against foreign vessels. At the same time, it has adopted a proactive economic policy characterized by involvement in numerous regional projects, which has allowed it to expand its control over the South China Sea without compromising its international image.

This smart power strategy has been driven both by China's evolution within the international system and the domestic challenges faced by the Chinese Communist Party. The strategic importance of the South China Sea, interpretable maritime law, China's military power, the vulnerability of other littoral states and the cautious attitude of the United States have directed the Chinese state towards a series of assertive military measures. At the same time, the exacerbation of nationalist tendencies in Chinese society and within factions of the Chinese Communist Party have pushed Chinese leaders towards a foreign policy that illustrates China's ability to defend its maritime interests. At the same time, however, Chinese leaders have taken into account the region's strong economic interdependence, the importance of maintaining cordial relations with the rest of the South China Sea basin, and the need to satisfy as much of the

population as possible economically. For this reason, they have engaged in numerous bilateral and multilateral initiatives, seeking to diminish the pole of the American economic influence. As a result, the PRC has pursued a pragmatic military and economic foreign policy in the South China Sea to consolidate its regional hegemony.

Ideologically, it has maintained a relatively neutral position and has not been actively involved in reshaping the values underlying the international order. Instead, it focused on changing the hierarchy of power within the system, promoting through economic and military means its own vision of state sovereignty and national interest.

The military-economic dynamics of Chinese foreign policy have shown us that the People's Republic of China can expand its economic influence while applying coercive measures. Although other littoral states have been militarily aggressed by Chinese forces, they have avoided engaging in a formal coalition with the United States in order not to jeopardise their developed economic relations with the Chinese state. Similar situations can be found in other parts of the world, where China is launching economic projects focused on infrastructure development, technological exchange or environmental protection. Africa, south-eastern Europe and Latin America are particularly targeted by this strategy, as there are many underdeveloped countries with authoritarian governments or fragile democratic systems that are interested in massive injections of foreign capital.

The Belt and Road Initiative is a prime example, proposing to interconnect China's economy with these regions through various projects tailored to local needs. They take the form of strategic partnerships and aim to acquire companies by integrating Chinese representatives into the ownership structures. Economic influence thus extends into the political sphere, and the countries concerned are forced to offer China political concessions, often aimed at weakening the Euro-Atlantic institutional architecture.

In the light of all these considerations, we are of the opinion that the present paper has produced a factual and evolutionary x-ray of the foreign policy pursued by the People's Republic of China in the South China Sea. At the same time, we believe that the interdisciplinary approach used has generated new bridges of knowledge in the fields of international relations, security studies, history, economics or international law. Thus, the paper complemented the narrow literature devoted to Chinese foreign policy in the South China Sea and contemporary challenges in the Asia-Pacific region, generating multiple directions for future research.

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