

## Working Title: The Southeast Asian Response to Chinese Aggression in the South China Sea

### Project Purpose

In the face of increased Chinese assertions in the South China Sea, the balance of power between China and its smaller Southeast Asian neighbors is constantly in flux. Changes in the regional balance of power give rise to much discussed questions such as: what can ASEAN as a whole and individual Southeast Asian countries do to maintain territorial integrity? Will the US deepen its military and political commitment to upholding international maritime laws and if so, to what effect? How are these countries balancing their security policy objectives with their economic and political goals and what effect do these have on their foreign policy?

This qualitative paper aims to explore how policies regarding territorial disputes in the South China Sea figure in to individual countries' individual overall political objectives and compare the approaches of Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. There is an overwhelming wealth of literature detailing the acts these countries are taking, how this figures into the regional and global balance of power, and what steps should be taken to protect territorial integrity. However, many of these papers seem to be written under the assumption that security issues in the South China Sea are at the top of each country's overarching agenda. I hypothesize many countries prioritize factors such as regime security and economic development over countering Chinese assertions of power. Few quality papers published within the last 10 years examine the actions of individual countries' within the context of their overall political aims. Good policy cannot be formed without first understanding the overarching objectives and capabilities of a country, and this paper will contribute to the discussion on the issue by examining what steps are realistic for each country to take under current political leadership.

I choose to examine Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia for two primary reasons. First, while there are massive security and economic implications for every ASEAN country, these four countries have expressed the most vocal opposition and have the greatest geopolitical interest in the issue due to their geographic proximity to China and economic focuses. Second, China has consistently insisted upon bilateral consultations, which emphasizes the asymmetrical relationship between the countries (Baveira 2016; Goh 2015).

### Project Importance/Background

China has extended seven reefs—3,200 acres in all—in the South China Sea's contested Spratly Island chain and established military bases on them to impose its economic and military control over this disputed region (Panda, 2018). According to one Air Force report, these bases are equipped with military aircraft and defensive systems such as anti-aircraft guns and close-in weapon systems capable of thwarting cruise missile attacks (RAND, 2019). China's H-bomber has circumnavigated the region and Chinese naval ships track and follow American and Japanese warships.

China could impose its control over shipping lanes through which over three trillion dollars of cargo transits the South China Sea and the Malacca Straits each year. This trade includes goods going from Korea and Japan to South Asia, Africa, the Middle East and onto Europe through the Suez Canal (CSIS, 2017).

Chinese assertion of control over the region has increased rapidly. In 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping insisted that China's buildup was "mainly for civilian purposes" (Baviera,

2015). However, by December 2016, the Chinese Ministry of Defense said “it is legitimate for China to deploy necessary defense facilities in the Spratly islands.” (Buckley, 2016)

Further, China has begun exploiting the South China Sea’s rich natural resources, while trying to exclude nationals from Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei and Malaysia from doing the same—all of whose countries have claims to it. China currently exploits the rich fisheries in these seas to support its domestic food demands while harassing and driving away Vietnamese and Japanese fishing boats. Eyeing the estimated 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas untapped below the sea floor, China has taken steps to capture it by deploying an oil rig only 120 miles off Vietnam’s coast (China Power, 2017).

Beijing’s military expansion has had an impact on its influence within the region. The Philippines took China to arbitration before the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) over Beijing’s claim of sovereignty over the islands. In July 2016, UNCLOS largely repudiated China’s claims. China has ignored the ruling, arguing the islands have historically been a part of Chinese territory. As China’s Defense Ministry put it—“if someone makes a show of force at your front door, would you not ready your slingshot?” (Buckley, 2016)

To sweeten its relations with its neighbors, Beijing has offered generous trade packages and other incentives in these and other negotiations to obtain a favorable conclusion and has taken similar approaches with other countries in the region—further establishing itself as the regional power and diminishing US influence (Sutter, 2018). China’s defiance of international laws in the interest of strategic domination of Asia will increase as long as no other equally powerful force challenges China’s domination of the region—and so far, no one really has.

### Project Overview

This qualitative paper will weigh issues in the South China Sea against other domestic and international policy objectives in Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia and compare and contrast their different approaches. I will weigh which prescriptive actions are congruent with these goals, and will draw conclusions by examining a variety of sources including academic articles from both Western and Chinese sources, government white papers accessed online, press releases, and think tank analyses. Conclusions will stem from the "core interests" of current leaders, strategies taken historically, rhetoric in propaganda, and current theories by other scholars. This project is based on a 20 page research paper written in a Southeast Asian politics class about the Vietnamese response to Chinese aggressions.

### Thesis Committee and Qualifications

Faculty Advisor: Eric Hyer

Eric Hyer received his Ph.D in political science from Columbia University and is currently an associate professor in the Political Science Department. He specializes in China’s boundary disputes and the influence of China’s growing political power on US-China relations. He has published book chapters and academic articles on the subject including his recent book, *The Pragmatic Dragon: China’s Grand Strategy and Boundary Settlements*. He is currently a fellow at the State Department but will return to BYU in Fall 2019.

Faculty Reader: Jon Felt

Jon Felt received his PhD from Stanford University in Chinese history and is currently an assistant professor of Chinese History at BYU. He specializes in China's early medieval period and has published articles on Chinese court culture and is publishing a book on geographical thought during this period, including notions of regionalism within China and a reevaluation of traditional Sino-centric world views. His historical research challenges current Chinese narratives about Chinese sovereignty and hegemony in the East Asian sphere of influence.

Faculty Reader: Robert Griffiths

Robert Griffiths is an adjunct professor in the Political Science department and holds a Masters' degree in Public Policy from Harvard University. He is a career Foreign Service Officer and has worked on the American response to Chinese actions in the South China Sea in his roles with the US Foreign Service where he served as the deputy director for Mainland Southeast Asia, in the Asia Policy Office for the Secretary of Defense, as well as the Consulate General in Shanghai.

Honors Coordinator: see Advisor.

#### Project Timeline

April	Submit proposal; begin research
May-August	Research; outlining
August-September	Writing
15 September	Submit first draft to readers
13 October	Submit second draft to readers
30 October	Defense

Funding: none needed.

Culminating experience: none.

Conclusion: none.

## References

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