

# The Ever-growing China's Maritime Rise and South China Sea Dispute: A Literature Review

Heriawan

Universitas Indonesia

## Abstract

This article explores the implication of China's increasing maritime capability and what it means for the world peace. Is China's maritime expansion a threat or a peaceful one? In this article, the author scrutinies the recent debates and its problematic interpretation of China's maritime rise through the perspective of integrative review and neoclassical realism approach. First, this article describes the concept of rising power in International Relations and provide an overview of South China Sea (SCS) dispute state-of-the-conflict. Second, it would provide a thorough discussion of the China's behaviour and intention in the disputed sea. The discussion extends over several prominent concepts: Rising Power, Global & Regional Order, Strategic Orientation, and National Conception. To conclude, this article argues the ever-expanding China maritime strength has given advantages to China's claim in the disputed sea. China's strategy pushing the limit of aggressiveness under the threshold of war. At the same time reassuring other countries through various cooperative and economical means.

**Keywords:** China, South China Sea, Neoclassical Realism, Foreign Policy Analysis, International Security

*Artikel ini mengeksplorasi implikasi akumulasi kapabilitas kekuatan maritim Tiongkok dan apa artinya terhadap perdamaian dunia. Apakah ekspansi kekuatan maritim Tiongkok adalah sebuah ancaman atau bukan? Pada artikel ini, penulis meneliti perdebatan dan interpretasi problematis terkini mengenai kebangkitan kekuatan maritim Tiongkok melalui perspektif tinjauan integratif dan pendekatan realisme neoklasik. Pertama, artikel ini mendeskripsikan konsep kekuatan yang bangkit dalam Hubungan Internasional dan memberikan gambaran mengenai situasi konflik Laut Tiongkok Selatan (LTS). Kedua, artikel ini menyuguhkan diskusi menyeluruh tentang perilaku dan intensi Tiongkok di laut sengketa. Diskusi mencakup beberapa konsep menonjol, seperti: Kekuatan yang Bangkit, Tata Global & Regional, Orientasi Strategis, dan Konsepsi Nasional. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa kekuatan maritim Tiongkok yang terus meningkat telah memberikan keuntungan bagi klaim Tiongkok di laut sengketa. Strategi Tiongkok secara bersamaan mendorong agresivitas di bawah ambang batas perang sekaligus menenangkan negara lain lewat instrumen ekonomi dan kerja sama.*

**Kata kunci:** Tiongkok, Laut Tiongkok Selatan, Realisme Neoklasik, Kebijakan Luar Negeri, Keamanan Internasional.



## Introduction

For the past years, China has managed to build a greater economy and stronger military than ever before. China's increasing role on the world stage has positioned China as a challenger to the current hegemony, United States. The rhetorical question of "will China's rise lead to war?" Is by no means an exaggeration. Indeed, it is a relevant question in the case of SCS dispute. Typically, the recent development of China's diplomacy in SCS can be sump off in two phrases: assertive and assertiveness (Lin 2019). The behaviour symbolized the efforts of Xi Jinping to envision the so-called "true maritime power"—a meant to secure maritime domain (Yoon 2015). The military reform, together with the impressive modernization and reorganization of its sea power (PLA Navy and CCG) could be a hint of China preparedness for conflict. From the beginning 2020 to early 2021, China has stepped up its assertiveness in the SCS.

The enactment of the new coast guard's law, and the increasing amount of China vessels spotted or involved in the recent incident regarding SCS such as *Haiyang Dizhi 8* are some notable one. For example, in the SCS dispute, the level of tension is continually rising, and it is affecting global concerns. Beijing has become more involved in the region, building a government body in the Paracel Islands and a prefecture-level city on Yongxing Island, one of the SCS's many contested territories, called Sansha city. China has reclaimed the Spratly Islands and built airstrips on three of the islands it controls: the Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and the Mischief Reef zones around the Senkaku Islands in the southern part of the area (Heriawan & Abiwawanti 2022). The constant increasing of China's maritime capability is disadvantages for other countries in the region—first and foremost other claimant states of SCS. But none of them has taking serious balancing act (Goh 2008; Chen & Yang 2013; Liu 2016). Instead of balancing, one could argue that most countries are self-restraint. China strong economic ties with other claimant states limited their range of strategic option in SCS.

The next stage of understanding China foreign and security policy in the SCS dispute is corresponding with China's national interest. Disclosing China's national interest are instrumental for researcher and practitioner of International Relation to understand the current landscape of the international security. Interestingly, recent publication on China's rise is shifted its focus on China's national interest in regard to foreign and security policy. According to Ye (2019), the number of references on China's core interest have grown dramatically from 2008 to 2016. The data provided by Ye show that the concept of national interest is one of the important variables to understand China's interaction with other countries. Breaking down the relations of national interest with foreign and security policy,

we can extend it over a classification of prominent concepts: rising power, global & regional order, strategic orientation, and national conception.

The first two groups of scholars are proposing their conclusion of China's foreign and security policy in SCS as a consequence of its rising power. It argues that China's growing power has allowed the country to escape the limits imposed by the structure. China's rise has changed the existing power structure to be more favourable on its side (Lim 2014). When state's power capabilities increase, naturally it will seek for more influence abroad (Ye 2019). Concerning SCS, two arguments can be drawn. First, China ambition to become a global power, challenging the U.S. to fulfil Mearsheimer's prophesy where the conflict would materialise. Second, far from being a revisionist, China's is more akin to be an existing state of affairs power in the region—being a source of stability in the regional order (Jalil 2019).

The last two groups of scholars are interconnected by a question of “What factors are influential for China to choose such a bizarre and ambiguous foreign and security policy in the SCS?”. First group is scholars who acknowledged strategic orientation; rising power, global and regional order as the driving force for China's behaviours. The strategic nature of SCS has made China taking more aggressive approach (Rahman & Tsamenyi 2010; Fangyin 2016). In addition to diplomatic approach, most of them would argue that China is doing a “long march” by self-restraining itself when it comes to confrontation in SCS (Zhang 2020). The second group of scholars is those who believe that China's behaviour linked to its strategic orientation and national conception such as the Dao of foreign policy (Rosyidin 2019).

Responding to all the previous works and debates, this article will give a closer look on the specific factors of China behaviour in SCS that has been already mentioned. These factors are the systemic and domestic variables, providing an explanation on China's foreign and security policy as an effect of both variables. Neoclassical realism accommodated the arguments by proposing an explanation of the foreign policy as an interplay between systemic and domestic variables, which can be broken as distribution of power and claimant states' responses plus China's core interest. The United States, the current unipolar and the absence of balancing from other claimant states. The epic vision of Xi Jinping's for China: the pursuit of “the Chinese dream” or “road to national rejuvenation”, emphasizing China's aspiration to become the new norm of great power. These factors have transformed the international security landscape in SCS in the pandemic and post pandemic era to become more complicated than ever. The advantages of China's foreign and security policy in the SCS conflict

are pertinent, the acts were strategically designed to limit other contestant responses. Projecting power through assertiveness and keep playing the role as a good neighbour. Maintaining the conflict just 'an inch' under the possibility of war.

## **China's Foreign and Security Policy in the South China Sea Dispute**

### **Rising Power**

This article will begin the discussion by examining one of the most frequently used terms in the last decade when it comes to China, rising power. The term "rising power" is—most of the time—used interchangeably with revisionist and potential conflict starter. There are many articles that signify these issues. The first one is Wang Jisi (2011). The article explained that understanding China's foreign and security policy, or grand strategy, requires considering three aspects. The core interests of China, external forces and potential threats, and national leaders (Jisi, 2011). According to the article, during Hu Jintao's presidency there are three core interests: sovereignty, security, and development. Still, these three core interests are not sufficient to understand the grand strategy of China. External forces, such as the United States, has always seen as an adversary for China, yet it seemed that China is keeping low-profile to avoid direct conflict (Jisi 2011). Even though this article came out before Xi Jinping's administration, Jisi already explained that changes within the national leaders can affect China's diplomacy.

Came out earlier before Jisi's article, Fravel (2010) arguably outstanding work on China rise, *International Relations Theory and China's Rise: Assessing China's potential for Territorial Expansion* marked a milestone on China's foreign and security literature. M. Taylor Fravel argues control over territory is a significant reason for the country to initiate conflict with other states. The East and SCS are crucial for China, but the cost for expansion will not be cheap. Costs of expansion would be coming from every direction: from political, diplomatic, to economic cost (Fravel 2010). Aside from the cost, the benefits of expansion remain uncertain. While many realists claimed that states will maximise their relative power, this is an outdated argument in today's world of international relations (Fravel 2010). Fravel emphasis that China's desired to expand its territory could be motivated by a variety of domestic factors. Nationalism, diversion, and militarism may also be used to pursue China's expansion. However, it is worth noting that China has limited capacity to support its way in expanding their territory, and it is more likely for China to not doing territory expansion other than to Taiwan. Hence, China would be using

using their force for purposes other than territorial control (Fravel 2010).

The next article is by Stephen F. Burgess (2016). The main argument of Burgess's article is that soft balancing could provide the best deal for settling the growing dispute in the SCS. There are three aspects which supported this argument, from the analytical perspectives on China's behaviours and intentions, the American rebalance to Asia, to the disposition of American allies and partners (Burgess 2016). In this case, soft balancing strategy could be done through engaging multilateral diplomacy such as ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF); building a close collaboration with other states in the SCS, such as the Philippines, Japan, and Vietnam to bring China into a binding Code of Conduct (CoC) that will eventually result in the conflict's settlement. Through soft means in rebalancing China as the growing power, the power transition in the international system would be rather slow and progressing gradually. Therefore, the United States should have a persistent presence within the region (Burgess 2016). Burgess makes an intriguing proposition if China remains driven by defensive realism, the administration will avoid inciting war in the region. Thus, the soft balancing by America and its allies can be effective in the long run. Otherwise, soft balancing or even hedging will not be effective to contain China's rise (Burgess 2016).

Su-Yan Pan and Joe Tin-Yau Lo (2017) offer a different approach on explaining China's rising power. Su-Yan Pan and Joe Tin-Yau argue that China's rise will not be a revisionist. The reason is there are four distinct aspects—according to neo-tributary perspective—to explain China rising power: (1) Chinese exceptionalism as a motive; (2) trade and diplomacy as economic instruments; (3) cultural assimilation as political strategy; and (4) image building as a means of defending legitimacy (Pan & Lo 2017). First, China international images is based on exceptionalism, which continues to impact its thoughts, as seen by the country's self-identification as a "great power". China involvement in trade and diplomacy with other countries is to build a global economic interdependence. Third, China uses of cultural assimilation is to strengthen its position in economic and political partnership. Fourth, China appearance as a good-natured government is to guarantee international acceptance and domestic legitimacy, which is why China is reluctant to international criticism (Pan & Lo 2017).

## **Global and Regional Order**

When discussing China's nature and purpose as a rising power: the global and regional order, as well as the role of the great power, are regularly brought up. Beverly Loke (2009) combining English school and

constructivism perspective about global role, stated that China foreign policy is based on national interest and international responsibility. The interaction between national interest and international responsibility is instrumental, with China's responsible behaviour being more heavily influenced by national interest calculations. China's exposure to global norms is a result of the country's increasing involvement with international society, which has prompted the country to take on additional normative obligations—corresponding with its status as a great power (Loke 2009).

Taking the China approach to great power status into account, China behaviours toward SCS contestant can be viewed as a demonstration of power and legitimacy. In *“China's ambition in the South China Sea: Is a legitimate maritime order possible?”*, Katherine Morton (2016) states that China confrontation in the sea reflects its strategic goals: to become a legitimate maritime order. Morton argues China under the leadership of Xi Jinping is undergoing a maritime renaissance to secure its destiny and establish itself as the epicentre of geopolitical power. Aside from domestic factors, China's government assertiveness stems from a lack of alternative foreign and security policies. According to a prevalent realist narrative of China expansionism, the Chinese are primarily concerned with achieving hegemony in the SCS at all costs (Morton 2016). China's excessive geostrategic transformation and capacity building for maritime power exemplify the ambition. The US-China competition over the freedom of the seas is constrained by legitimacy constraints in each country's perspective position. China has made it abundantly clear that it will support freedom of the seas only if a long-standing goal of seeking security is guaranteed. The emergence of China maritime power pushes the United States' rebalancing toward Asia and Asian countries' hedging strategies. This broader transformation of the region's maritime order demonstrates how legitimacy concerns are affecting the SCS's underlying conflict dynamics (Morton 2016).

The following piece of literature in this classification provides an in-depth analysis of China's rise concerning the “peaceful rise” policy. Despite the dominant argument of China ambition to become regional or even global order, according to Jabin T. Jacob (2012), there is contradictory evidence in China's foreign policy, particularly toward its neighbours. Jacob also mentioned that numerous domestic interests affected the output for China's neighbourhood foreign policy. Aside from domestic factors, China's government assertiveness stems from a lack of alternative foreign and security policies (Jacob 2012). China needs to bring an assurance to the international community as the growing economic power that will not be a threat for the global stability. The growing assertiveness of China's



government in the SCS dispute is raising suspicions among its neighbours and jeopardising their diplomatic relations (Jacob 2012).

### **Strategic Orientation**

Decrypting the concept of strategic orientation is critical to comprehending China's foreign and security policies. In 2002, Lee Jae-Hyung describe China's maritime expansion is to enhance its influence as China's leaders recognise the essential role of naval power in pursuing critical economic goals, diplomatic rising, and national prestige (Jae-hyung 2002). Part of it the Southeast Asian Sea-lines of Communication (SLOC) and the SCS is included in this area, along with other Southeast Asia straits (Jae-hyung 2002, 564) Lee Jae-Hyung also mentioned that China wishes to maintain its maritime hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region (Jae-hyung 2002). No doubt, SLOC is important for China. Chris Rahman and Martin Tsamenyi (2010) argues that sea lines of communication, regional naval developments, and the military activities in the SCS's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) are influential to China's perspective (Rahman & Tsamenyi 2010).

As a result, China's posture in the SCS has become more assertive. Not only that, the region lacks a convincing regional mechanism capable of uniting SCS claimant states in cooperation (Rahman & Tsamenyi 2010). This allowed China to project its claim through power in the SCS. Another article from M. Taylor Fravel, (2011)—don't get confused with the one in the "Rising Power" sub-chapter—sees through China behaviour in the SCS from the strategic lens and how the country managing claims over conflict. China is attempting to secure its claim through military means, often times threatening weaker claimants stated via coercive diplomacy (Fravel 2011). Nonetheless, the behaviours will lead to instability or even conflict in the future.

Interestingly, China would be able to compromise if those ties it has with other claimant states could become more important than China's strong grip on the islands and rights in the SCS. Yet, this premise is not likely to happen. Instead, China would be more modest in pursuing its claims, by accepting multilateral mechanisms to control the tension within the area. China might also take the risk to escalate the conflict once its military capabilities have been enhanced and its confidence in pursuing its claims (Fravel 2011). However, on the other hand, Yoshihara and James R. Holmes (2011) argues otherwise. An argument that said Beijing has claimed a "core interest" in the SCS is still debatable and uncertain. Assuming Beijing is pursuing core interest in the SCS, it doesn't mean

danger appear imminently. Yoshihara and James R. Holmes argues that there are three possible strategic implications can emerge: territorial sovereignty is indivisible; China needs armed strength in order to seize the disputed territories; and China must force a new regional order (Yoshihara & Holmes 2011). As of now, achieving the maximum “core interest” is improbable. However, a more modest strategic orientation appears thinkable (Yoshihara & Holmes 2011). Despite the favourable trends in the naval balance for China is, there may be more to it. Consequently, the growing maritime capability of China will push the regional to act.

Recent development of the SCS indicate this chained reaction, resulting in a more ambiguous China. Zhou Fangyin (2016) concluded that China inconsistency in SCS as an effect of the limited strategic goals. The limited strategic goals in the SCS were the main factors which affected China's strategic goal in conflicts inside the SCS. These factors are its diplomatic objectives and the position of the SCS within these objectives; its perception over international environment and its space for building up policies regarding the issue. These factors are not determined and could follow the dynamics within China or within the disputes. Therefore, China opted for a long-term approach on the matter, addressing the issues in a considerable amount of ‘self-restraint’ diplomacy (Fangyin 2016). In the same tune with Zhou Fangyin, Feng Zhang (2020) explained that none of the mainstream realist assumption of “China's strategic orientation” are evidently true. Based on hegemonic realism hypothesis, China wishes to achieve regional hegemony through military means.

In reality, China's foreign policy development do not support this hypothesis. None of the significant aspects of China development reflect the design of hegemony. The argument suffers from a deficiency of empirical evidence (Zhang 2020). Regardless of that, China's ever-growing maritime capability is a different matter. China's new naval strategy presents both challenges and opportunities for China and the rest of the world. Patalano (2018), who shares this view, argues that China's excessive use of power in the disputed sea is a result of a larger strategic objective. While war in Asia has not yet occurred, Chinese maritime coercion exacerbates strategic rivalry and the likelihood of conflict (Patalano 2018).

The last two articles in these classifications scrutinise China's naval and security strategy through the official document of Defense White Paper. The first one is “*China's Maritime Security Strategy: An Assessment of The White Paper On Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation*” written by Dhara P. Shah (2017). The article builds the argument from the Chinese perspective of threat, the necessity for China to develop a maritime security framework that incorporates the interests of all stakeholders in the region, and the



security implications for other countries. It is clear that China aimed to be a “true maritime power” and has started to make it into realisation. China has given a greater emphasis to its People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to safeguard peace and stability in the region while also serving as the principal security provider (Shah 2017).

Which is the sole reason China’s naval power is involved in many clashes in the SCS. The second article is written by a Professor of International Politics from School of International Studies, Renmin University of China, Zhengyu Wu (2019). Wu argues that China’s new naval strategy is a logical response to the country’s growing global interests and asymmetric approach to sea power, as well as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China’s sea power strategy is driven by two national interests: national security and economic development (Wu 2019). Therefore, even though “open seas protection” along with “offshore waters defence” are written in the China’s 10th Defense White Paper as the new naval strategy. China’s assertiveness toward the neighbour countries is stripping away the legitimacy of its declared maritime ambition in the 21st century (Wu 2019).

### **National Conception**

From the domestic perspective, China’s foreign and security policy can be traced back to how the country conceptualised power, responsibility, and grand strategy. What interesting is how in the recent years, the rise of China/East Asia is synonymous with the emerging of Chinese International Relations Theory (IRT) (Do 2015). The debates frequently centre on the concept of ‘Chinese dream,’ a term closely associated with Xi Jinping’s 2012 campaign. Even though the term or concept has existed previously. The ‘Chinese dream’ has appealed to China’s growing nationalism as part of the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (Iida 2020). A new foreign policy under the Xi administration, namely a “major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics” aimed at exercising China’s great power (Iida 2020). This direction of foreign policy has been followed in the majority of China’s foreign affairs. In terms of security, China has resolutely defended its claims in the disputed sea. Iida argues that Xi Jinping’s promotion of the ‘Chinese dream’ will be directed toward tangible achievements in securing the East and South China Seas. The integration of four maritime law enforcement agencies into one China Coast Guard (CCG) and the establishment of the Central National Security Commission exemplify Xi Jinping determination to advance his ‘Chinese dream’ (Iida 2020).

Before Xi Jinping, ‘Chinese dream’ is corresponded with the hope for restoring China’s earlier dynasties’ greatness of literary and intellectual history. In the “*China’s rise and the ‘Chinese dream’ in international*

*relations theory*”, They T. Do (2015) has made a comprehensive summary on the recent debates regarding the ‘Chinese dream’ (*Zhōngguó Mèng*). The article cited Zhao Tingyang’s *Tianxia* thesis, rethinking the world from China’s perspective. The point of *Tianxia* is that the world has no truly coherent civilisation under the universally accepted political institution; or to put it simply, Hobbesian chaos. Creating harmony should be the goal of Chinese dream, all-under-heaven system. China’s rise to great power status has not been fully realised because China is still incapable of becoming a ‘knowledge producer.’ China remains a small state without the ability to ‘conquer’ the world (Do 2015).

Although the thesis painted China in a more harmonious and pacifist way, it was rather a philosophy than IR theory. This shortcoming was addressed by the next wave of Chinese international relations theories, including the Chinese school of IR’ and the *Tsinghua* approach to IR. The common belief between these scholars is the value of Chinese characteristic could sit as an equally valid and partial approaches to Western IR. According to some scholars, it is critical to exclude China from the Western understanding of international relations. Chinese international relations discourse tends to draw the conclusion that China is a new kind of breed. China’s development, great power responsibility, strategic culture and any other related concept are vastly different from its western counterpart. These practices and understanding of China’s rise are what Thuy T. Do claimed as “serving the national interest of the PRC” (Do 2015). The reason for this is that China’s authoritarian political structure unquestionably raises doubts about any attempt to establish a ‘Chinese dream’ in international relations theory.

Concerns over China’s notion of power rise and “great power” (*da guo*) status are another topic of discussion regarding China’s foreign and security policy. David Scott (2010) characterised China’s great power concept with the words “responsible” (*fuzeren*) and “responsibility” (*zeren*). For many years, from Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao, China’s public diplomacy is specifically intended to promote the image of a “responsible great power” by emphasising the “good neighbour policy” (*mulin youhao zhengce*) in Asia and the Pacific (Scott 2010). The argument is consistent with the adage “with great power comes great responsibility”. Unfortunately, this vision does not translate well into the Chinese military context. Military projections of power paint a hazy picture. “The true maritime power” is typically manifested in the SCS through aggression and assertiveness. Sukjoon Yoon (2015) stated that Xi Jinping’s “true maritime power” concept appears to be a middle ground manifestation of traditional and neo-Mahanian theory (Yoon 2015). True maritime power declarations

are intended to secure maritime domains, but they are also a component of a balanced national strategy. Subsequently, China's military activities are inextricably linked to strategic considerations such as sovereignty, regime legitimacy, and major power politics (Yoon 2015).

On the other hand, Chong-Pin Lin (2015) stated that China's policy of "struggle without breaking" has kept the country from engaging in high-intensity conflict in the disputed sea (Lin 2015). This is a common belief among researchers who see China's foreign policy as having a dual strategy. Notable examples are Le Thu (2019) and Rosyidin (2019). In most cases, the dual strategy are coercion and inducement. Coercion can be interpreted as an act intended to intimidate others into engaging in undesirable behaviour or to create a psychological image of such behaviour. While inducement takes the shape of rewarding desired behaviour or creating a psychological image of desired behaviour (Le Thu 2019). Through this examination, China's dual strategy and inducement are successful because they have a psychological effect on neighbouring leaders. When dealing with China, neighbouring countries are more willing to exercise restraint and use non-provocative language (Le Thu 2019). It's worthwhile to note that dual strategies are not uncommon in international relations. According to Rosyidin (2019), China's strategy is unique because it is founded on taoism's philosophical thought. Rosyidin stated taoism is not pacifist doctrine (Rosyidin 2019). Taoism embodied China's complementary strategies that have extremely opposed each other.; *Yin* and *Yang* of foreign policy.

### **Consensus**

Structural realism analysis on China's behaviour is positioning China as a rival of the United States in terms of power capability, which is hampered by a limited view of the nation growing power. The core prediction of structural realism theory is that a powerful country like China, as a threatened state which is dissatisfied with its position in the international system, will rise to challenge the current hegemony. The logic behind this is palpable in the China Defense White Paper 2015 and 2019 in which both are mentioning how threatening the United States unilateralism for international security (Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China 2015; Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China 2019). Neorealist believe growing power will lead to structural changes—rewriting the distribution of power. However, as the literature review explains in detail, analyst have seen a different set of action that does not mirror the prediction of a revisionist power. Interestingly, on the side of classical realism—even though it can't explain China's cooperative efforts and *good neighbour policy*. China has consistently attempted to seize SCS and ECS

in the region using a *realpolitik* approach. From citing historical claims, applying a bilateral strategy to weaken weaker states, to employing a divide-and-rule method to deal with claimant states individually.

Throughout the numerous debates that have been written about China's maritime rise or China's rise in general, realism and structural realism has continued to dominate the argument. However, one cannot rule out the number of articles attempting to explain China's foreign and security policies from the domestic perspective. Some have mentioned the transformations happened within the nation could affect China's grand strategy. While others pointed out that China's rhetoric and behaviour have already triggered a cycle of action and reaction in the region. Utilizing neoclassical realism perspective, this article highlights the two-different sides of internal and external factors on China's foreign and security policies. The flexibility of neoclassical realism is founded on the limitation of the perspective. Focusing only on the foreign and security policy of a country, neoclassical realism is not trying to be a grand theory.

The argument of neoclassical realism is for lack of a better words "value-laden". From the article's findings of all the literatures implied that most scholars are agreed that China rising power is threatened as a threat by other country. Therefore, China is perceived as a revisionist in the current international structure. This is a reasonable judgement since China has maintained remarkable control over the SCS throughout the year by utilizing its maritime militia underneath the threshold of war. China may claim "stronger China poses no threat to other countries..." (Do 2015). But its neighbours disagree with this view of maritime power growth. In Chinese Defense White Paper 2019, the document stated that dispute settlement will be through dialogue and consultation, which in effect implies that China prefers political settlement over rule-based order (Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China 2019). This is where realism and structuralism has overlooked some critical aspect of China's foreign policy.

First is China's "peaceful" diplomacy, which is conducted through a combination of means. China's commitment on regional development since 2010 through a number of agreement with Asian countries is also a significant aspect of China's good neighbour policy (Chatterji 2021). China aspires to seize leadership and establish governance rules and principles throughout Asia. China's aggression has alienated other regional powers, especially those in disputes with China. Consequently, an arms race appears through soft balancing, which bring this article to the second critical aspect: the absence of balancing. Hedging or soft balancing seems to be a trend across Asian countries, not only among

seas contestants. The self-restraint policy from neighbors has enabled China to free ride on coercive and reassuring actions in the disputed sea. The truth in SCS is more convoluted; the anticipated escalation of open military conflict over Asian maritime tensions has not occurred, yet it demonstrates a level of threat which is far from peaceful.

Third, the rise of a domestic or internal perspective and conception on China foreign and security policies indicates that neoclassical realism can bring an interesting discussion to the table. While retaining the complexity of the security issue, neoclassical realism simplified the interaction between domestic and international factors. The core empirical prediction is that, over time, China's maritime rise will shape the extent and ambition or the envelope of China's foreign and security policies. China will search more influence in the disputed seas as its maritime power capabilities increases, and as it falls, China's behavior and objectives are certain to be scaled back accordingly.

The independent variables (structural nature of the international politics) limits China strategic and foreign policy options in the SCS. But the intervening variables (the unit factor of "China"; the exceptionalism of China) provide China with the ambition to become the "new maritime global order". Resulting in an arguably inconsistent foreign policy toward other claimant states of SCS. Interestingly, even though China foreign policy toward claimant states is limited. China security policy in SCS is consistently coherent with the "true maritime power" ambition. The maritime rise is a marathon to claim SCS. China designed its maritime power to able to conduct military action under the threshold of war. As Patalano (2018) stated, "...constabulary coercion is subordinated to the broader objectives of military coercion". Within this context, China's maritime claims is a function of a broader strategic intention.

## Conclusion

The relationship between China's maritime rise and SCS is generally understood in fairly straightforward terms. Much of the literatures assumes that China is now inexorably moving toward imperial expansion. Combining the factors of balance of power and neighbours' country responses and China's core interest, China foreign and security policy is limited by the options available. Arguably, this strategic situation justified China's adversary posture toward the United States and its allied. Another critical point is that by conducting an in-depth examination of the Chinese conception of international relations, China's diplomatic and cooperative actions can be logically dissected. "Chinese dream" is not only about becoming a true global order, but also about being "all under heaven". China projection of pacifist images via the economic and vaccine diplomacy in the time of pandemic has shifted neighbour's attention from the "core interest". China designed the theatre of conflict in the disputed sea to be a grey area, limiting other countries' responses options and benefitting from the current landscape of conflict in SCS with the maritime rise.

The findings of this article indicate that the argument of China's revisionism and Chinese IRT and exceptionalism are becoming more relevant than ever. China rises might be unique, but in terms of security, China pacifist narrative is incompatible with the perceptible assertiveness toward East and South China seas. However, in the SCS and security matter, realism argument remains relevant and will not be discarded. China is not driven by the ambition of Mearsheimer's offensive realism nor defensive realism. The uncertainty and inconsistency of China's foreign and security policy in the SCS is a result of beneficial international structure, dynamic domestic factors, and neighbours' country responses and policy toward China. If no country is sure enough to balance China, under the hood China will remain in the grey area, taking the time to strengthen maritime power and then become the "true maritime power" fulfilling the "Chinese dream" to claim the disputed seas.

## Biography

Heriawan is an M.Sc. candidate in International Relations at Universitas Indonesia. His research focuses on foreign policy, international relations theory, and international security. He also interested in issues that aren't typically associated with his research's focus, such as digital diplomacy, SDGs, democracy, and migration.



### **Notes**

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