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## A Dynamic Strategic Culture Model and China's Behaviour in the South China Sea

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**Abstract:** *This paper provides a new theoretical framework to explain China's strategic behaviour along with its rise and in doing so engages with the debate on strategic culture between Colin Gray and Alastair Johnston. We suggest that China's behaviour is shaped by two variables: Realpolitik realist threat perceptions on the strategic level and Confucian moralist cultural norms on the ideational level. In the case of a high strategic threat, China's behaviour will be heavily influenced by the Realpolitik variable in Chinese culture and become offensive in nature. Under low strategic threat, China's policy will follow the Confucian tradition and thereby emphasise the non-use of force and resort to defensive principles. When external threats change from high to low, Chinese behaviour will feature a combination of 'Realpolitik' and 'Confucianism', that is, a self-constrained offensive policy. China's foreign policy in the South China Sea after the Cold War is a case study that illustrates the utility of this new strategic culture framework.*

### Introduction

As David Shambaugh puts it, 'the rise of China is *the big story* of our era' (2013, ix).<sup>1</sup> The potential transformation of the international system has triggered heated debates over China's foreign policy behaviour and its implications for world politics. Some realist scholars, like Graham Allison (2017), have warned the world about a 'Thucydides' Trap', which means an inevitable conflict between China, a rising power, and the United States—the existing, but declining, hegemon during the power transition. Liberals, such as G. John Ikenberry (2008), optimistically suggest that China has no reason to overthrow the current international order, from which it has benefited tremendously during its rise. Therefore, the US may decline but the liberal order will be sustained. In other words, China's behaviour will be constrained and shaped by the existing liberal order. Constructivists, such as Alastair Johnston (2014) and Jeffrey Legro (2007), also join the debate by highlighting the importance of ideational factors, such as norms and ideas, in shaping China's behaviour. However,

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<sup>1</sup> Emphasis is in original.

their arguments tend to be uncertain and ambiguous about what China will want, as well as what China will do in the future.

Although the existing arguments and debates reveal some elements of truth regarding China's rise and its future behaviour, they suffer from one analytical problem. It is called 'structural bias' which highlights the importance of structural variables in shaping China's behaviour but pays little attention to agency. Power transition realists, for example, suggest that the structural change in the power distribution of the system is more likely to lead to conflicts and wars between China and the outside world, especially with the United States—the existing hegemon (see also Organski 1968; Mearsheimer 2001). Here, the material power distribution among states determines the fate of China's rise. In a similar vein, when liberals argue that China is constrained by the liberal order, they imply that the institutions and rules at the structural level will rein in China's ambition and behaviour. Constructivists also highlight how ideational ideas and norms, such as cooperative security ideas or liberal democracy, at the normative and ideational system, could possibly socialize or be compatible with China's behaviour in the future. However, some suggest that China's ideational challenge is fatal for the current order (for example, Kupchan 2104; Allan, Vucetic and Hopf 2018), while others argue that we should wait and see in the future (Johnston 2014; Legro 2007; Buzan 2010).

Although structure, whether material or ideational, is important in shaping state behaviour, it is by no means the only factor that matters. Agency, especially China's strategic choices, is also significant in determining the future outcome of China's rise in the system. More importantly, the interactions or mutual constitutive nature between agency and structure might lead to unintended consequences in world politics (Wendt 1987; Doty 1997). For example, if China relies on military means to challenge the existing international order, like Germany and Japan did before World War II, then military conflicts between China and the United States as well as other status quo powers might be unavoidable. However, if China uses non-military approaches, such as multilateral institutions, to reshape some components of the international order, as it has done to promote the quota reforms in the IMF (International Monetary Fund), its rise will not lead to inevitable conflicts and wars (He and Walker 2015; He and Feng, forthcoming). In other words, mere structural-level variables will not fully explain the dynamics of China's rise and the future international order.

This paper introduces an agent-driven approach—strategic culture—to shed some light on China's strategic behaviour during the power transition period. In contrast to the existing strategic culture literature that posits strategic culture as the antithesis of realism, this paper suggests a synthesis approach to integrating realism and culturalism in the study of Chinese foreign policy

(Glenn 2009). It suggests that Chinese foreign policy is shaped by two cultural factors: strategic threat perceptions from Chinese realist traditions and moral norms from other Chinese cultural traditions. Under a high level of threat, the Realpolitik strand of Chinese culture will intensify the urgency of the threat and encourage an offensive action with a pre-emptive and even high risk approach. Under a low level of threat, the Confucian part of Chinese culture will highlight the importance of morality and encourage a defensive and non-use-of-force policy. When the external threat is at the middle point, the combination of Realpolitik and Confucianism will lead to limited and constrained offensive behaviour.

This paper is divided into three parts. First, it briefly discusses the state of ‘strategic culture’ in the study of Chinese foreign policy. We suggest that there are two unsolved problems in the study of Chinese strategic culture. These are (1) how to explain China’s behaviour in peacetime and (2) how to single out the unique impact of Confucianism on state behaviour. In order to address these two questions, we introduce a ‘dynamic strategic culture’ framework—based on a neoclassical realist model— which integrates realist and moralist cultural norms in the study of Chinese foreign policy. Second, we employ a case study on Chinese foreign policy in the South China Sea (SCS) to perform a congruence test as a plausibility probe on the validity of this model. In conclusion, we discuss some of the policy implications of our model for understanding China’s rise and its impact on the world order.

### **Strategic Culture and China’s Foreign Policy**

Like all political science concepts, strategic culture has been deemed useful but elusive for scholars and policy makers (Feng 2007; Feng 2009). Ever since Jack Snyder (1977) coined the concept to analyse Soviet strategic behaviour in 1977, its meaning and usefulness have been vigorously debated. As Bloomfield (2012, 437) states, ‘scholars still cannot agree on fundamental matters like what a strategic culture is and what it does’. In empirical studies of Chinese strategic culture, debates dwell on whether Chinese strategic culture is unique, how many strategic cultures there might be in China, and which one would be important in influencing Chinese strategic decisions (see for instance, Johnston 1995a; Feng 2007 and 2009; Liu 2014).

In studies of strategic culture, scholars normally identify three generations of scholarship (Johnston 1995b). The first generation of strategic culture scholars mainly focus on examining national character; most strategic culturalists are area study specialists with an interest in the Soviet Union. Colin Gray (1981) is one leading scholar of this generation who correctly pointed out the cultural differences among states as well as the possible cultural impacts on strategic decisions and behaviour. However, the first generation did not pay attention to specific variables and causal

mechanisms between culture and behaviour. For Gray (1999), strategic behaviour cannot be separated from notions of strategic culture. Instead, strategic culture offers the context within which political leaders make decisions.

The second generation of strategic culture scholars emerged in the mid-1980s and early post-Cold War period. Theoretically, they are critical in nature, following the post-structuralist scholarship of Michael Foucault, R.B.J. Walker, Richard Ashley, and others. Similarly to the first generation, they do not intend to distinguish between strategic culture and strategic behaviour. They suggest that strategic culture can be seen as a tool to justify some strategic behaviour, such as US hegemony (Klein 1988). As Edward Lock (2010, 697) points out, 'the fundamental purpose of utilizing the concept of strategic culture [for the second generation] is to problematize the taken-for-granted status that is typically granted to states and states-system'. In other words, the second generation is not interested in *how* strategic culture can influence strategic behaviour. Instead, they question where strategic culture comes from and how the politics of strategy play out.

The third generation of strategic culturalists follows the positivist research tradition and focuses on examining causal relations between strategic culture and strategic behaviour. However, as Johnston (1995b) criticizes, the third generation hesitates to define what strategic culture is and seems reluctant to recognise the independent role of strategic culture in shaping state behaviour. Consequently, the concept of strategic culture hides behind organisational culture, political culture, as well as military culture. What Johnston contributes to the literature is two-fold. On the one hand, Johnston clearly defines and highlights the independent role of strategic culture in shaping state behaviour. To a certain extent, he upgrades the third generation of strategic culture scholarship to a new level through further screening out other causal mechanisms with more methodological precision. On the other hand, he employs rigorous historical and contemporary case studies of China to test the validity of strategic culture in shaping Chinese strategic behaviour.

Johnston's work has triggered a new round of debate among strategic culturalists, especially from the first generation and second generation (see Gray 1999; Johnston 1999; Poore 2003; Lock 2010). Due to limitations of space, this paper will not engage in the general debate among strategic culturalists. Instead, we focus on the debates over *Chinese* strategic culture inspired by Johnston's work. In his seminal book, Johnston challenges the conventional view of Chinese culture as well as its impacts on state behaviour (Johnston 1995a). Traditionally, Chinese history after the Qin Dynasty is dominated by Confucianism. Therefore, many historians, such as John Fairbank (1965) and Mark Mancall (1984), have argued that the Confucian tradition tends to lead to non-violent, civilized, and moral behaviour. Johnston, however, suggests that China has two strands of strategic culture: Confucian and Parabellum (or Realpolitik). Confucianism, according to Johnston, is

symbolic in nature, which implies pacifist, defensive, and non-expansionist behaviour. However, Johnston suggests that what really matters in shaping China's strategic behaviour is not the symbolic Confucian culture, but the operational Parabellum culture—or Realpolitik, which highlights the importance of material power, offensive tactics, and the utility of the use of force.

In a similar vein, Andrew Scobell (2003) agrees with Johnston that there are two traditions of strategic culture in China. However, he further suggests that both sets of Chinese culture, Confucianism and Realpolitik, are operative in shaping Chinese behaviour. The interaction between the two strands of culture produces a so-called 'Chinese Cult of Defence', which means that Chinese decision makers are more likely to use Confucianism to justify their Realpolitik behaviour. In other words, in the eyes of Chinese elites all the actions they take are defensive in nature even though they choose to use force in the first place, that is, to behave offensively. Similar arguments can be found in Christopher Ford's work, which suggests that China has 'Confucian Flesh but Realist bones' (2016, 42–43).

There are two analytical problems in Johnston's and Scobell's arguments. First, although they follow the positivist tradition in highlighting the causal linkage between Chinese strategic culture and Chinese behaviour, their argument seems static and deterministic in nature. For example, Johnston suggests that 'Parabellum assumptions have persisted across different state systems in Chinese history—from the anarchical Warring States period, to the hierarchical imperial Chinese system, to the increasingly interdependent post-Cold War period' (1995a: 256–257). In other words, for Johnston, China's 'Parabellum' culture has not changed for more than two thousand years (Ghiselli 2018). It should be noted that Johnston highlights how the external environment and Chinese state's power capabilities can interact with the 'Parabellum' strategic culture and shape Chinese security behaviour. This interaction refers to 'flexibility' or '*quanbian*', which is one key component of China's Parabellum strategic culture. However, from a methodological perspective, the causal mechanisms between strategic culture and other variables are not clearly defined by Johnston. In other words, how the relatively static 'Parabellum' culture works together with other variables in shaping Chinese security decision making is still unclear.

Analytically, Johnston's independent variable—strategic culture—does not have a clear variation. As Ghiselli (2018) points out, Johnston's thesis on strategic culture fails to explain how and why strategic culture evolves and influences a state's foreign policy behaviour. By omitting the variation and evolution of strategic culture, Johnston argues that the Parabellum culture leads to China's realist behaviour, mostly offensive in nature. Empirically, however, Johnston's deterministic cultural argument cannot explain China's strategic behaviour in peacetime. It might be true that offensive strategic culture can explain Mao Zedong's decision to enter the Korean

War, but it seems problematic in explaining why Mao decided to seek rapprochement with the United States in the 1970s. Moreover, it cannot explain why Deng Xiaoping chose a 'keeping-low-profile' strategy in the 1980s and even after the Cold War. In other words, Johnston's argument might be valid for explaining China's behaviour during wartime, but the lack of variation in the independent variable constrains its explanatory power in peacetime. A similar criticism also applies to Scobell's 'Cult of Defence' argument because China has not been involved in military conflicts with any country since the end of the Cold War. To be fair, Scobell's argument mainly focuses on China's use of force during wartime so that the scope of his argument is well defined.

Another problem is the dismissive treatment of China's Confucianism. As an ancient system of thought, Confucianism has influenced Chinese people and their country's behaviour for more than two thousand years. The peace-loving and non-violent features of the Confucian tradition are also recognized by many historians and Sinologists. It is true that China has waged wars and conducted offensive military actions in history as well as in the contemporary era. However, it does not mean that Confucianism does not matter at all. If Johnston is right that China's strategic culture is only *Parabellum* or *Realpolitik* without any influence from Confucianism, then his entire strategic culture argument becomes irrelevant. The reason is simple: China's behaviour can be easily explained by realism, which emphasises structural constraints from the international system (Wang 2010). Hence, the cultural approach, especially strategic culture, becomes redundant.

### **A Dynamic Strategic Culture Framework**

This paper introduces a dynamic strategic culture approach to the study of Chinese strategic behaviour by integrating realism and strategic culture. We follow in the footsteps of the third generation of strategic culture scholarship in that we emphasise a causal linkage between strategic culture and strategic behaviour. We also agree with Johnston and Scobell that Chinese strategic culture has two strands: Confucian and *Parabellum* (or *Realpolitik*). While acknowledging that it is important to investigate the origins and evolutions of China's strategic culture (Ghiselli 2018), we focus on how the two strands of China's strategic culture influence China's foreign policy behaviour. In other words, our research does not fundamentally refute the works of Johnston and Scobell. Instead, by building our theoretical model on the basis of their seminal research, we intend to shed additional light on the dynamic relationship between strategic culture and foreign policy. In particular, we argue that both strands of strategic culture matter, but they interact with another realist variable, threat perceptions, in influencing China's foreign policy behaviour.

Our dynamic strategic culture model follows a realist foreign policy framework, neoclassical realism, which suggests that a state's foreign policy behaviour is shaped by both the

structural power distribution in the international system and domestic intervening variables. It is worth noting that neoclassical realism is not a single theory, but a theoretical framework. Neoclassical realism does not specify any particular variables that influence a state's foreign policy behaviour. Instead, it provides a pathway to direct scholars to develop their own middle-range theories in explaining foreign policy puzzles (Rose 1998). For example, Thomas Christensen (1996) introduces a political mobilization model to explain foreign policy decisions of Mao Zedong and Harry Truman in the Korean War. Randall Schweller (1998) develops a balance-of-interest argument to explain foreign policy dynamics among European countries before World War II. It should be noted that some critics argue that neoclassical realism seems to promote *ad hoc* explanations in the studies of foreign policy because of its less-theorized transmission belt of domestic intervening variables that link system-level effects and foreign policy outcomes (Rose 1998).

To address such a criticism, Norrin Ripsman, Jeffery Taliaferro and Steven Lobell (2016) suggest four broad classes of domestic variables as a transmission belt in a neoclassical realist framework: leader image, strategic culture, domestic institutions, and state-society relations. In this research, we highlight the importance of strategic culture in connecting system constraints and policy choices for Chinese leaders. Johnston (1996: 222) defines strategic culture as 'an integrated system of symbols (i.e., causal axioms, languages, analogies, metaphor, etc.) that acts to establish pervasive and long-lasting strategic preferences by formulating concepts of role and efficacy of military forces in international political affairs'. Borrowing Johnston's insights, we argue that strategic culture is operationalized at two levels. In other words, strategic culture can be divided into two words: strategy and culture. At the strategic level, according to realism, especially neorealism, states face structural pressures, namely military threats from others, in the anarchical international system (Waltz 1979). At the cultural level, their strategic behaviour is constrained and shaped by shared culture, norms, and traditions. In the Chinese case, there are two main components of its strategic culture: Confucian and Realpolitik.

Although both strands of Chinese strategic culture matter, they play different roles under different conditions. As neoclassical realism suggests, a state's foreign policy is first constrained by structural pressures in the international system, which are transmitted by the domestic variable—strategic culture in this research—in influencing a state's foreign policy behaviour. In other words, in a realist world, all state leaders face pressures and threats from others originating from the anarchic international system. When facing an immediate threat from others, the Realpolitik sub-culture will prevail because it can help political leaders cope with the external threat more efficiently and effectively. Two old Chinese sayings based on Realpolitik thought suggest that



leaders should ‘overtake advantageousness by striking first’ (*Xian Xiashou Wei Qiang* 先下手为强) or ‘achieve victory by surprising your enemy’ (*Chu Qi Zhi Sheng* 出奇制胜). Both strategies follow the Realpolitik tradition and even promote pre-emptive attack if facing an immediate external threat.

However, when the external threat is not substantial or imminent, the Confucian strand of Chinese strategic culture comes into play. A famous quotation from the *Art of War* by Sun Zi (2003) is ‘the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting the wars’. Moreover, Confucianism emphasises the role of morality in influencing other states. According to the *Analects*, ‘if the remote people are not submissive, all the influences of civil culture and virtue are to be cultivated to attract them to be so’ (Confucius 2007). Here, Confucianism seems to share a similar thought pattern with soft power theorists that emphasizes attraction rather than coercion (Nye 2004). Although Confucius emphasised the importance of attracting and teaching remote people, he did not insist to ‘go out of one’s way’ to spread learning and knowledge to these remote people (来者不拒, 不往教之).

When the external threat is at a medium level, China’s behaviour is constrained by both Confucian and Realpolitik culture. If China has an advantageous situation against its rival, Confucianism will encourage Chinese leaders to restrain their offensive behaviour. If China faces some disadvantages in relation to its rival, the Realpolitik sub-culture will encourage Chinese decision makers to take risky actions to reverse the situation. How to analyse the *Shi* 势 and how to turn the *Shi* then become significant points for decision makers. Therefore, Chinese foreign policy will feature ‘limited offensive behaviour’ when the threat level is medium.

The following are three testable hypotheses from our dynamic strategic culture model, which is illustrated by Figure 1:

[Figure 1 Here]

**H1.** Under the high external threat condition, Chinese leaders will be more likely influenced by the Realpolitik strand of strategic culture and prefer a pre-emptive offensive strategy.

**H2.** Under the low external threat condition, Chinese leaders will be more likely influenced by the Confucian strand of strategic culture and prefer a defensive and non-violent strategy.

**H3.** Under the medium external threat condition, Chinese leaders will be more likely influenced by both Confucian and Realpolitik culture and prefer a limited and self-constrained offensive strategy.

## **China's Strategies in the South China Sea—A Preliminary Test**

In order to test the validity of our 'dynamic strategic culture' model, we conduct a preliminary case study on China's policy orientations in the South China Sea (SCS). In the eyes of Chinese leaders', the SCS issue is related to China's sovereignty and national security. Therefore, China's policy behaviour should offer a useful case to reflect on the impacts of China's strategic culture on foreign policy. By focusing on the evolution of China's SCS policies across different time periods, we can also confidently test how the interplay between threat perception and strategic culture shapes Chinese behaviour.

We measure Chinese leaders' threat perceptions through both objective and subjective criteria. On the one hand, we examine the nature of the external environment that China faces. For example, if China is involved in a military crisis or conflict with a major power, then it is more likely for their leaders to experience a high threat perception. This is the objective measurement of external threats. On the other hand, we also use leaders' statements and public speeches to gauge their threat perceptions. For example, if a leader clearly states that his or her country's security or sovereignty faces serious external threats from another country, no matter if it is true or not in reality or objectively, then we can code this leader's threat perception as high.

One common challenge to a cultural approach to the study of foreign policy is to test causal mechanisms between cultural variables and policy behaviours. In this research, we adopt a congruence test to examine the 'dynamic strategic culture' model in the SCS case. First, we explore Chinese leaders' threat perceptions regarding the SCS issue. Following our model, we discuss what we should expect to happen regarding China's strategic choices. Then we examine China's policy orientations in the SCS. If China's policy choices converge with our model's expectations, then we can suggest that our model succeeds in the congruence test. Otherwise, our model will be falsified by the case study. One problem of this congruence test is that it might omit some alternative variables that are crucial but not included in the model (George and Bennett 2005). In order to address this concern, we will discuss two alternative explanations after our congruence test.

The South China Sea disputes have traditionally involved six parties. China and Taiwan have the same sovereign and maritime claims in the SCS based on historical evidence, especially the controversial nine-dash line drawn on the map by the Republic of China in 1947, which covers

about 62 per cent of the SCS.<sup>2</sup> Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei also claim part of the South China Sea either based on history or the 1982 UN Conventions of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), or both. After World War II, the SCS disputes between China and other claimants started to flare up and reached a peak in the 1970s when the United States and a number of UN survey agencies reported that there might be rich oil and gas reserves on the continental shelves of the SCS in the late 1960s. The signing of the 1982 UNCLOS provided some legal basis for other claimants to assert the 200 nautical-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ), which overlaps with China's nine-dash line. In 1974 and 1988, China engaged in brief military clashes with Vietnam in the Paracels and the Spratlys. After the Cold War the tensions in the South China Sea were relatively well controlled, although there were occasional disputes over fishing and oil exploration rights among claimant states (see Feng and He 2018).

China's strategy toward the South China Sea in the post-Cold War era can be divided into three phases: morally-driven defence in 1990–2010; Realpolitik-oriented offence in 2011–2015; and self-restrained offence in 2016–2018. The division of these three phases is just for analytical convenience. For example, China's SCS policy, especially its land reclamation activities, started to dramatically change in mid-2015 instead of early 2016. Since we gauge the general tendency of China's foreign policy behaviour, not the detailed tit-for-tat tactics between China and other states in the SCS, we delineate the change of China's SCS policy in 2016 rather than mid-2015. As we mentioned above, we will examine China's threat perceptions in the SCS during the three time periods. Then we shall discuss how the different strands of Chinese strategic culture will lead to different policy choices under different threat perceptions according to our model. Last, we examine whether China's foreign policy behaviour is convergent with our model's predictions through a congruence test.

#### *Morally-Driven Defence in the South China Sea in 1990–2010*

After the 1989 Tiananmen incident China faced economic sanctions from the Western countries. For Chinese leaders, the 'peaceful evolution' by the West was seen as the highest threat to national security, especially to regime security under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In order to break the diplomatic embargo from the West, China actively approached several Southeast Asian countries in the early 1990s. China resumed its diplomatic relations with Indonesia in August 1990. In October, China established diplomatic relations with Singapore. For the Chinese leaders,

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<sup>2</sup> Media reports normally suggest that China's claims cover 80–90 per cent of the SCS. However, as the US State Department points out, China's nine-dash line includes 62 per cent of the area in the SCS. See *Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs* (2014).

diplomatic relations with Southeast Asian countries enabled China to break its isolation from the West after the Tiananmen incident. Moreover, China shared many concerns with Southeast Asian countries over Western humanitarian interventions in the name of human rights and democracy in the post-Cold War era. Although the SCS disputes have remained one of the major unsolved problems between China and Southeast Asian countries, Chinese leaders did not see the SCS as an imminent threat to China's national security because of the pressures from the West soon after the Cold War.

In February 1995, China occupied the disputed Mischief Reef, which caused regional outcries in Southeast Asia. China's intentions and behaviour in the South China Sea were the cause of deep concern to worried regional neighbours. The South China Sea disputes therefore became one of the focal points at the 1995 ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting. China faced tremendous diplomatic pressures from other states, especially the united ASEAN countries. However, since Chinese leaders viewed Western interventionism, namely peaceful evolution, as the most imminent threat soon after the Cold War, the SCS issue was downplayed in the minds of Chinese decision makers. In other words, during the 1990s, the SCS issue was not seen as a high-level threat or a diplomatic priority in China's foreign policy agenda.

According to the dynamic strategic culture model, China's foreign policy toward the SCS issue during this time period was operationalized as a low-level threat situation. It followed the Confucian strand of strategic culture in shaping Chinese behaviour. This Confucian-oriented behaviour emphasises the principle of non-use-of-force, morality, and peaceful resolution of disputes. Therefore, China's behaviour in the SCS should be defensive in nature with clear Confucian characteristics.

China's foreign policy toward the SCS converges with the model's predictions. For example, China reiterated its longstanding policy in the SCS, which is 'to shelve the disputes and develop joint exploitation'. Moreover, China after 1995 technically changed its previous, bilateral-talk-based approach and began to discuss the SCS issue at the Senior Official Meetings (SOM) within the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) framework. In 2002, China signed a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea with ASEAN, in which both parties committed to 'resolving their territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means' (ASEAN 2002).

In 2003, China officially acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), a non-aggression pact signed by the original five ASEAN countries in 1976. China was the first non-ASEAN state to endorse the TAC. Although China's charm offensive in Southeast Asia was perceived differently by different parties, it at least shows China's commitment to the non-use-of-force principle, which coincides with the Confucian tradition.

Another Confucian influence is the practice of following moral self-constraints in China's behaviour because Confucianism highlights the importance of commitments and promises. After the Mischief incident, China's SCS policy became defensive, constrained, and even passive in nature. Although other claimants, such as Vietnam, started to work with international oil companies to exploit oil resources in the disputed areas in the South China Sea, China did not follow suit. According to a senior official from the China National Offshore Oil Corp (CNOOC), before 2008, 'China [did] not have any well and oil production in the resource-rich mid-south area of the South China Sea, while other countries have produced more than 50 million tons of oil in the territory' (Gayathri 2012). To a certain extent, this self-constrained behaviour is driven by a deeply-rooted Confucian idea that emphasises morality over economic interests.

#### *Realpolitik-Oriented Offence in 2011–2015*

Following the unsuccessful joint exploitation efforts between China and its neighbouring states in the disputed areas in the South China Sea for many decades, the maritime and territorial disputes eventually flared up in 2009. One direct cause was the deadline of May 2009 when states had to submit claims for extended continental shelves to the UN Commission on Limits of the Continental Shelf. China officially submitted its 9 dash-line U-shaped map to the UN. Although China restrained its behaviour in the South China Sea in the 1990s and the early 2000s, it never gave up its sovereign claims over the South China Sea. Therefore, it is understandable for China to submit its 9 dash-line U-shaped map before the deadline given that other claimants also tabled their territorial claims to the UN.

The previously well managed SCS disputes between China and some Southeast Asian countries, especially Vietnam and the Philippines, started to deteriorate and escalate after 2009. Several incidents took place between China on the one hand and Vietnam and the Philippines on the other. One turning point was the involvement of the United States in the SCS disputes in 2010. The United States is not part of the SCS disputes. The United States had traditionally adopted a 'keep-a-distance' policy toward the SCS, by making it clear that the US government does not take sides on the sovereignty issue in the SCS, while urging a peaceful resolution of the disputes by all claimants.

However, the US started to modify its policy toward the SCS after the continuous escalation of tensions among claimants in 2010 (Fravel 2014). One defining event was Secretary Clinton's statement at the 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum that the United States has a 'national interest in

the freedom of navigation' and opposes 'the use of force by any claimant' in the SCS.<sup>3</sup> Although Clinton did not criticize China by name, it is clear that her statement targeted China, which had engaged in several disputes and incidents with Vietnam and the Philippines as well as with the US naval surveillance ship *Impeccable* in the South China Sea in 2009.

The US involvement in the SCS changed the threat perception of Chinese policy makers toward the SCS issue. Originally, the SCS disputes were only between China and several Southeast Asian states. Although the SCS disputes were a big obstacle to China's diplomatic relations with Southeast Asian countries, they did not pose a real threat due to the power asymmetry between China and these claimant countries. However, with the US involvement Chinese leaders started to feel the strategic pressure from the United States in the SCS.

This strategic pressure is also rooted in the structural power shift in the international system. From 1990 to 2008, China's economic and military power increased dramatically. China's military spending passed Japan's in 2005. Economically, China overtook Japan to become the second-largest economy after the United States in July 2010. With its continuous economic growth, China is anticipated to become the largest economy by 2035.

Against this background, the United States launched its 'pivot toward Asia' policy, later changed to 'rebalance toward Asia', through strengthening its military and security ties in Asia in 2009–2010. Although President Obama and other US officials publicly denied that the US pivot or rebalance policy targeted China, Chinese policy makers and elites did not agree. As aforementioned, Secretary Clinton made her well-known statement regarding US 'vital interests' in the SCS at the 2010 ARF meeting (Senate Committee on Foreign Relations 2012). Given the simmering tension between China and its neighbours in the SCS, Clinton's statement further fuelled the flame against China in the SCS. It was reported that Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi was shocked and furious about Clinton's statement (*The Economist* 2010). In the eyes of Yang and other Asian nations, Secretary Clinton made a public 'threat to China over the SCS'.

Many Chinese scholars draw a causal link between the US pivot policy in Asia and the increasing tensions in the SCS. For example, Fu Ying and Wu Shicun, two well-known members of Chinese foreign policy elite, suggest that the United States should be responsible for the deteriorating situation in the SCS, especially between the United States and China. Through reviewing the current history of the SCS disputes, they argue that, 'it is the US' Asia Pacific

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that 'freedom of navigation' is a longstanding policy of the United States. The State Department issued a policy statement in 1995 that stated: 'maintaining freedom of navigation is a fundamental interest of the United States' in the SCS. Due to China's limited presence in the SCS, the US position did not cause diplomatic tensions between the two states in the 1990s. Although the United States did not change its FON position, its FON operations intensified the US-China competition in the SCS after 2010. See Fravel (2014, 4).

rebalance strategy, its taking sides on disputes in the SCS, and its direct intervention that have escalated the tensions and made the issue more complicated' (Fu and Wu 2016). In a similar vein, some Chinese scholars also suggest that one of the strategic goals of the US pivot or rebalancing strategy is to utilise the SCS disputes as a diplomatic tool to alienate China from Southeast Asian countries and eventually form a containment coalition against China's rise.<sup>4</sup>

In sum, the US involvement in the SCS dramatically changed Chinese leaders' threat perceptions in the SCS. The strategic threats in the SCS changed from the originally low level to a relatively high one after 2010. According to our dynamic strategic culture model, the Realpolitik strand of Chinese strategic culture is more inclined to direct actions under a high-level threat situation. Our model predicts China's policy toward the SCS should become more offensive in nature because of the influence of the Realpolitik sub-culture. As mentioned before, the Realpolitik sub-culture even encourages some pre-emptive actions in order to gain strategic advantages over adversaries. In other words, the interplay between high threat pressures and Realpolitik sub-culture should encourage Chinese leaders to take more offensive actions than normal realists would expect in the SCS.

In reality, China's behaviour in the SCS during this time period indeed became more and more assertive and even pre-emptive in nature, because the Realpolitik strand of Chinese strategic culture emphasises strength in reaction, prompts the use of force for victory, and even accepts risks in order to succeed. Empirically, we are witnessing an increasing assertiveness in China's diplomacy on the SCS issue, which supports the Realpolitik-oriented offensive behaviour suggested by our strategic culture framework. Examples include the *Impeccable* incident between China and the United States as well as China's arrests of Vietnamese fishermen around the Paracel islands in 2009. In 2011, it was reported that China cut the towed sonar cable on a Vietnamese survey vessel operating in the disputed SCS. In the 2012 Scarborough Shoal crisis China conducted a heavy-handed policy toward the Philippines and eventually gained control of the Scarborough Shoal with its fishery administrative and Coast Guard forces.<sup>5</sup> In late 2013 China started its massive land reclamation projects, which further evidenced China's assertiveness in the SCS.

### *Self-Restrained Offense in 2016–2018*

The SCS disputes between China and other claimants started to gradually calm down in mid-2015 after China officially announced that its 18-month island-building projects had been

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<sup>4</sup> It is a prevailing view among Chinese academics. For example, see Ge (2012); Zhou (2016).

<sup>5</sup> For China's use of Coast Guard and civilian forces in the SCS see Erickson and Kennedy (2016).

completed. Although it is not clear why China made this decision, the implication of this announcement is that China will not build new islands in the SCS. Vietnam and the Philippines also started to constrain their behaviour without physically challenging China in the SCS. The Philippines has focused instead on the arbitration case against China's nine-dash line claim in the South China Sea. Although China announced that it would not participate in the arbitration, the arbitral tribunal ruled that it had jurisdiction over the case in October 2015. On 12 July 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague ruled in favour of the Philippines against China over territorial disputes in the South China Sea. China rejected the tribunal's ruling, and reasserted its 'indisputable sovereignty' over the South China Sea. The Chinese Foreign Ministry stated that the tribunal's ruling is invalid and China does not 'accept or recognise it'. Despite the diplomatic setbacks in the arbitration case, there have been no dramatic incidents or crises that involved China with other claimant countries since 2015. One interesting development is the rise of President Duterte in the Philippines, who dramatically changed the Philippine foreign policy toward China, especially on the South China Sea issue in late 2016. Rather than directly challenging China's claims, Duterte actively sought to reconcile the bilateral relations with China in order to boost trade, aid, and investments from China into domestic economic development (Castro 2017). Consequently, diplomatic tensions in the South China Sea disputes have eased between China and the Philippines.

Despite these change in relations, the threat level over the SCS has not decreased to as low a level as in the 1990s. One key issue is that the US has continued its involvement in the SCS through its freedom of navigation (FON) activities. The United States Navy started its first FON operation by entering the waters within 12 nautical miles of the Subi and Mischief reefs where China conducted land reclamation in the disputed Spratly islands on 27 October, 2015. In January and May 2016, the US conducted two more FON operations in the Paracels and Spratlys. As *The New York Times* put it, the major purpose of US FON operations was to 'challenge Beijing's ambitions in the South China Sea', because China's land reclamation projects in the South China Sea 'hamper efforts to manage and resolve territorial and maritime disputes peacefully' (see *The New York Times* 2015; Department of Defense 2015).

Although the United States encouraged other regional powers to join the FON activities, all ASEAN states intentionally stayed away from US FON actions against China. Moreover, ASEAN states actively engaged China to negotiate a legally binding Code of Conduct (COC) in the SCS as a non-confrontational way to address the increasing tensions in the SCS between China and other claimants. China also actively responded to ASEAN's enthusiasm toward the COC although the two parties had different expectations of the COC, which is why negotiations are ongoing.



To a certain extent, the ASEAN's policy choice of not siding with the US in the FON activities reduces the threat level that Chinese leaders perceive in the SCS. Since the US is not part of the SCS disputes, its FON activities are more symbolic in nature in the eyes of Chinese leaders (Feng and He 2018). Therefore, the threat level in the SCS after 2015 has changed from high to medium. According to the dynamic strategic culture model, the medium-level threat will encourage both Confucian and Realpolitik sub-cultures to influence China's strategic behaviour. Consequently, we should see a limited or self-restrained offensive policy by China in the SCS.

In reality, China's policy responses toward the United States also offer some empirical support for this argument. First, China continued its offensive or assertive policy diplomatically and even militarily toward the US in the SCS. Diplomatically, China protested that the US FON operations threatened its sovereignty and security interests in the SCS. In addition, China also responded militarily. In the US FON operation in May 2016, the Chinese Defense Ministry claimed that its Navy dispatched three aircraft and three warships to 'expel' the American vessel from China's waters (Lendon and Scitutto 2016). Moreover, it is also reported that China deployed missiles on Woody or Yongxing Island in the Paracels.

On the other hand, China's behaviour in the SCS was also self-restricted in nature during this time period. Despite its tough counter-measures against US FON operations in the SCS, China kept its promise to cease reclamation activities in the SCS, especially on the Scarborough Shoal. In addition, during his visit to Washington DC in September 2015, Xi made a public commitment for the first time not to 'militarize' artificial islands in the disputed Spratly islands. So far, China has not deployed any military equipment to the Spratlys although the United States has accused China of breaching the non-militarization commitment by deploying missiles on the Paracels. For China, the Spratlys have a different meaning from the Paracels because China admits that there are territorial disputes between China and other states in the former, but not in the latter.

In sum, China's policy toward the SCS after 2015 became one of self-restrained offence. It is offensive in nature because it strengthens its physical control of the man-made islands and increases military presence in the SCS. But it is also self-restrained because it does not pursue new expansion or the militarization of the disputed area in the Spratlys.

### *Alternative Explanations*

There are three alternative explanations that potentially challenge our 'dynamic strategic culture' argument. One is rooted in realism and suggests that China's assertiveness in the SCS is driven by its increase in military and economic power. Based on this power-oriented theorisation, scholars and pundits argue that China has adopted a 'creeping assertiveness' or 'salami slicing' strategy to

gradually gain its strategic advantages over other states in the SCS (see Snyder 1996; Storey 1999). According to this argument, China's temporary retreat in the SCS after 2016 is a result of the US pivot or rebalancing in Asia (see Glaser 2015; Vuving 2014). In a similar vein, some scholars suggest that Chinese elites have viewed the South China Sea issue as China's 'core interest', which demands strong and assertive foreign policies (Hoo 2017). The third popular argument about China's SCS behaviour is based on domestic or bureaucratic politics, which suggests that China's assertive policy reflects the malmanagement or infighting among different governmental agencies, various interest groups, as well as local vs. central governments in China (for example, see Goldstein 2010; International Crisis Group 2012; Jakobson 2014).

Although these three rival explanations reveal some elements of truth regarding China's behaviour in the SCS, there are some analytical problems. First, the realism-based arguments cannot explain why China's policy turned to assertiveness around 2011, not earlier or later. If we compare China's military and economic power with its Southeast Asian neighbours, China became a much stronger power even in the 1990s, especially after the 1998 financial crisis in Southeast Asia. In addition, the argument that the US pivot or rebalancing is the reason for China's retreat in the SCS is also problematic. As mentioned before, China's policy toward the US FON activities in the SCS remains strong both diplomatically and militarily.

Along the same line, the 'core interest' argument has some difficulties in explaining China's relatively peaceful behaviour in the 1990s as well as why China's foreign policy's assertive turn in the SCS after 2011. In other words, why and when China decided to frame the SCS issue as its core interest is an unanswered question. Actually, it is still a debatable question or a diplomatic myth whether Chinese policymakers have indeed listed the SCS as China's core interest or not (Hoo 2017; Nie 2018). According to some Chinese policy analysts, the Chinese government has not officially listed the SCS as one of its core interests which is to be defended with military means. It is just a "misjudgement" of the United States that the SCS is China's core interest (Xue and Xu, 2016).

The bureaucratic argument also suffers some similar dilemmas in explaining the dynamics of China's SCS behaviour. For example, the 'five-dragons-stirring-up-the-sea' phenomenon might have been true in the 1990s and the 2000s when Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao were in power. After Xi Jinping came to power, however, China started to reform its maritime bureaucracies as well as streamline the decision-making process on the SCS issues. Therefore, the argument that focuses on bureaucratic infighting or lack of coordination cannot fully explain the dynamics of China's policies in the SCS after 2010, especially regarding why China changed its assertive policy after

2015. Therefore, we suggest that we need to consider both realist power competition as well as China's unique strategic culture in understanding China's strategies in the SCS.

## **Conclusion**

China's rise and its future behaviour will determine peace and prosperity in the Asia Pacific. Challenging the structural arguments that portray either a pessimistic or an optimistic view on China's rise, we offer an agent-driven approach—a dynamic strategic culture model—to explain China's strategic behaviour. Following in the footsteps of the third generation of strategic culture scholarship, we have found a testable causal linkage between Chinese strategic culture and its behaviour. We have borrowed insights from Johnston and Scobell to suggest that Chinese strategic culture has two strands: Confucian and Realpolitik.<sup>6</sup> In particular, we further specify how and under what conditions these two strands of Chinese strategic culture matter in influencing China's strategic behaviour.

We argue that when China's external threats are low, its policy behaviour is more likely to be dominated by Confucianism, which emphasises peaceful means, non-violence, and a high level of morality. China's morally-driven defensive behaviour toward the SCS in the 1990s and early 2000s vindicates this argument, because China's 'charm offensive' through multilateralism successfully shelved the SCS disputes for decades. However, when China faces a high-level threat, the Parabellum Realpolitik strand will prevail over the Confucian one, encouraging more offensive and even risky, pre-emptive behaviour. China's assertive behaviour in the SCS illustrates how the US 'pivot to Asia' policy as well as the simmering tensions between China and other claimants have unleashed China's Realpolitik culture into action. When the threat level decreases, the interaction between Confucianism and Realpolitik encourages a self-restrained behaviour as we can see from China's limited offensive against US FON operations in the SCS after 2015. It is worth noting that we utilize China's SCS policy after the Cold War to perform a congruence test on the validity of the model. Although the case study shows a congruent result, this paper is only a plausibility probe of the model. Further research is needed to examine the causal mechanisms among China's threat perception, strategic culture, and policy behaviour.

If China's rise is inevitable, other states will need to consider how to deal with China efficiently and strategically. It will be wise to encourage China to follow the Confucian tradition and pursue non-violent and peaceful policies, especially toward security and territorial disputes. It

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that Johnston and Scobell hold different views on which strand of the two strategic culture matters for Chinese behavior. While Johnston highlights the importance of the Realpolitik strand, Scobell argues that both strands are active and have impacts on China's foreign policy behavior.

will be unwise to pressure China collectively, that is, to form an alliance against China as traditional realism would suggest, because it will trigger the Realpolitik strand of Chinese strategic culture and lead to more risky and offensive responses from China. If China is recognised as a unique civilization, other states should consider a unique way to live with it in peace. Understanding Chinese strategic culture is a first step toward doing so.

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