

China's Quest in the South and East China Sea: The Struggle Between Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism

La misión de China en el Mar de China Meridional y Oriental: la lucha entre realismo, liberalismo y constructivismo

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Resumen

El tema de las disputas territoriales en Asia, en particular los argumentos del Mar de China Meridional y Oriental, no es nada nuevo en la región. En estos días, la comunidad internacional ha seguido de cerca la situación porque el desacuerdo en las discusiones ha provocado un gran retroceso en las relaciones bilaterales entre los disputantes, así como en la estabilidad de la región. El objetivo principal de este artículo es analizar el problema desde tres perspectivas teóricas: realismo, liberalismo y constructivismo y responder a la siguiente pregunta: ¿cuál de los tres paradigmas proporciona las mejores herramientas teóricas para explicar las acciones asertivas de China en el Mar de China Meridional y Oriental? Aunque todas las teorías contribuyen a comprender el problema, al parecer el constructivismo, relacionado con la teoría de las metanarrativas, ofrece las mejores soluciones sin simplificaciones evidentes.

Palabras clave: China, Mar de China Meridional, Mar de China Oriental, realismo, liberalismo, constructivismo

Abstract

The issue of territorial disputes in Asia, particularly the South and the East China Sea arguments is nothing new in the region. Nowadays, the international community has closely watched the situation because the irresolution of the disputes has caused a major backlash to the bilateral relationships among the disputants as well as the stability of the region. The main aim of this article is to look at the problem from three different theoretical perspectives: realism, liberalism and constructivism and to answer the following question: which of the three paradigms provide best theoretical tools to explain China's quest in the South and East China Sea? Although all theories make important points to help to understand the problem, it seems that constructivists, relating to the theory of metanarratives provides the best solutions, lacking evident simplifications.

Key words: China, South China Sea, East China Sea, Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism

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Introduction

The issue of territorial disputes in Asia, particularly the South and the East China Sea (SCS and ECS) arguments is nothing new in the region. Nowadays, the international community has closely watched the situation because the irresolution of the disputes has caused a major backlash to the bilateral relationships among the disputants as well as the stability of the region. Claimant countries like: China, Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Japan are all trapped over the clash of interests. That is because each claimant is arguing its rights on different grounds (historical/ legal claims) and prefers different treatments (on international, regional or bilateral level). Moreover, ongoing controversy about the "nine-dashed" line of China still doubts other disputants. However, China has denied any challenge upon their historical rights and declared firmly to protect their sovereignty and territorial integrity (Hunt, 2010). Although, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) managed to push claimants to deal with the issue in the SCS by working on the Code of Conduct (CoC) (Hiebert et al., 2013), the pace of the process is rather slow. The same is true with respect to the political willingness of the main claimants like China. Thus, the main aim of this article is to look at the problem from three different theoretical perspectives: realism, liberalism and constructivism and to answer the following question: which of the three paradigms provide best theoretical tools to explain China's quest in the South and East China Sea? Although all theories make important points to help to understand the problem, it seems that constructivists, relating to the theory of metanarratives (or grand narratives) provides the best solutions, lacking evident simplifications. In line with the constructivist approach, it is possible to pose the following hypothesis: perception of the victimized identity led China to be assertive in the South China Sea disputes. The hypothesis indicates that the authors are supposing that the constructivist approach delivers best theoretical tolls to analyze and explain the chosen problem.

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To comprehend the territorial disputes in South and East Asia, one must look back to history to understand how claimant countries use the notion of “historical rights” as a source of legitimacy to claim over the disputed islands. In history, the East-Asia region went through significant changes of the international system, shifting from decolonization to Cold War and a period of power vacuum left by the U.S. and Russia (Tønnesson, 2001). The absence of central authority in the post-Cold War has provided a “window of opportunity” for most of the Asian states to insert their claims over the contested islands in the SCS and ECS. Up to the 19th century, the tensions of the disputes have increased due to the frustration to sort out whether “historical rights” has the same legitimacy as the international law or not.

South China Sea Claimants’ History

The disputes in the SCS are mainly based on the question of the sovereign authority of the large habitable islands such as the Spratly and the Paracel Islands and other smaller inhabitable islands and reefs scattered across the SCS. In the past, there was no particular recognition regarding the maritime delimitations in the SCS. Decolonization has pushed Japan and France out of Asia, which left the U.S. as the only power remained in the SCS. During that time, the United States (U.S.) paid little attention to solving the maritime delimitation issues in the SCS. Besides, the U.S. chooses to focus on the practices in freedom of navigation in order to protect its interest as the only naval power in the region (Tønnesson, 2001), which is one of the key strategic premises for the country.

The post-Cold War period has left a “power and legal” vacuum in the region. Gradually, the South East Asia states and China started the struggle to fill the vacuum. For instance, multiple Asian countries and China began to put forth their individual claims over the islands in the SCS. Three leading countries, namely China, Vietnam and the Philippines, initiated the spark of the disputes. Both China and Vietnam assert their sovereignty over the whole chain of the SCS by referring to “historical rights” gained in the pre-modern era. In other words, China has always perceived the SCS as their historical waters, which dates back to the past practices of navigation and trade during the Qing and Han Dynasty. Likewise, Vietnam referred to the “colonial inheritance rights” that France left for Vietnam after decolonization. Thus, Vietnam believes that it has inherited the sovereign right from France and established its presence in the SCS and named it as the “Eastern Sea” of Vietnam. On the contrary, the Philippines do not base their claims on “historical rights” but on the rights under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) on the notion of *terra nullis* to annex the islands as their territory, since there was no sovereign authority over the islands. Generally, the lack of interest of the past colonial powers to solve the maritime delimitations has given a chance for China to put forth the “historical rights” to challenge the legitimacy of the international law (Tønnesson, 2001). Until now, the internationalization of the disputes has made the situation of the disputes more complicated, at the same time China appears to be more assertive and increases the military presence in the SCS.

The distinctive geography of the SCS is strategically important. The location of the sea provides significant “sea lines of communication” that connect with the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean. For instance, the sea lines are used for the global commerce of goods and energy shipments through the SCS to countries like Japan, Korea, Russia, and China. Regarding security, if China controlled the SCS, it would surely guarantee the security in distant waters. Moreover, China will be able to expand their maritime navigation that will challenge and put a limit to the U.S. maritime dominance and power projection in East Asia (Cronin, 2013; Hossain, 2013).

Moreover, the SCS is rich in living and non-living resources that are used to support the livelihood of the people and contribute to the development of the national economy of China. First, the SCS serves as fishing grounds for Chinese fishermen and people living near the sea. Since 2010, China has become one of the top largest fishing industries in the world that export fish up to 53,7 tons. Not only does fishing industry contribute to significant income to the national economy, but also lets China play an important role in international trade as the biggest exporter of the aquatic products in the world (Hongzhou, 2012). Apart from the richness of fish, the SCS is also rich in energy resources. The U.S. Geological Survey estimated in 2012 that the whole SCS contains around 12 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas (The U.S. Energy Information Administration).

Taking the above into consideration, if we look at the SCS disputes today, the strategic and economic importance of the islands can serve as one of the many explanations of the SCS disputes. As the energy consumption rises for Asian states, the potential energy under the resource present as the cheap or best alternative ways to acquire energy to boost up their economies instead of importing oils from the Arabs states. For instance, China is economically

dependent on oil from the Arabs states, but it would be cheaper if China can get a generous amount of oil in their backyard (Drifte, 2009). Thus, “the South China Sea disputes are more than simple territorial disputes, the modern conflict is a complex tapestry woven together including the notions of historical rights, colonial inheritance, outright territorial annexation and the norms of twentieth-century international law” (Furtado Xavier, 1999: 393). Claimant countries in the SCS mainly focus their claims over the islands either on “historical rights” or the rights under the international law that concerns the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and the continental shelf. The irresolution of the disputes derived from the overlaps of claims over the SCS and the absence of appropriate central authority to rule over the claim of “historical rights.”

Historically, China stated that it was the first country to name and rule over the SCS. First, China has defended its sovereignty over the SCS by referring to the two treaties signed by the past colonial rulers. France signed a boundary agreement to hand over the control of SCS to China. Following the defeat of Japan, China claimed the rights over the Spratly and Paracel islands (Buszynski and Sazland, 2007). During the Cold-War, China admitted that it had lowered its performance in the SCS due to the presence of the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Furthermore, China used the “nine-dash-line” map as a standard symbol for their sovereignty over the whole SCS because there were no protest or disagreements during the declaration of the map (Buszynski and Sazland, 2007). Until now, China remains assertive to claim that it perceived the SCS as its lost territories.

Similarly, Vietnam also claimed its sovereignty over the whole SCS. Vietnam argues on the basis of “historical rights” in two ways. First, they based on the historical exercise over the SCS during the Nguyen dynasty from 16th to the 19th century. Second, Vietnam requested its rights to the SCS again as an inheritance from France after decolonization (Furtado, 1999). Since 1997, Vietnam has started to express its territorial claims over the Spratly and the Paracel Islands in response to the apparent overlapping claims in the SCS (Buszynski and Sazland, 2007).

Despite the tension of the disputes in the SCS, Vietnam has managed to deal with other claimants such as China. In 2009, both countries signed a maritime agreement in the Gulf of Tokin. Furthermore, in 2012, based on the UNCLOS Vietnam concluded its rights regarding their EEZ and continental shelf. It was also stated that Vietnam would only enjoy 200 nautical miles of EEZ and up to 350 nautical miles of the continental shelf from their territorial baseline (Poling, 2013). However, the question of the historical rights over the SCS remains unanswered for Vietnam.

Both China’s and the Republic of China’s (ROC) claims are identical and uphold merely on the notion of “historical rights” over the whole SCS. From the ROC point of view, it was the first to exercise effective control and occupied the whole Spratly chain after the withdrew of Japan. “On the basis of history, geography, international law and the facts, the Spratly Islands have always been part of the inherent territory of Taiwan” (Furtado, 1999: 390). Currently, the search to answer whether China and Taiwan will bring their SCS policies in line with each other is still unclear.

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The Philippines claimed its sovereignty over the Spratly Islands based on the notion of “terra nullis”. In other words, Philippines legally annexed some of the islands in the SCS in the absence of any other authority. Tomás Cloma was the first to land on the Spratly Islands which he named “Kalayaan”, meaning “freedom lands” (Buszynski and Sazland, 2007). To confirm their rights over the Spratly Islands, the Philippines brought the case of their territorial claims to the International Tribunal for the Law of Sea (ITLS) under the UNCLOS. As a result, in 2016, the Philippines gained the legal right to 12 nautical miles of territorial sea and to enjoy 200 nautical miles of EEZ from their national baseline. In the case of the “Kalayaan” Islands (Spratly Islands), Philippines merely claimed the rights only to the water generated by islands and the 200 EEZ around the Kalayaan Islands (Poling, 2013).

Malaysia’s central concern in the SCS lies in the notion of rights over the EEZ and the continental shelf. Currently, their claims have overlapped with the Philippines, Vietnam, and Brunei (Furtado, 1999). In spite of that, Malaysia has conducted delimitation agreements with most of its overlapping claimants. For instance, the country concluded to establish maritime delimitation in the Indonesia Tudjah Archipelago with the Philippines. Moreover, in 2009, Vietnam and Malaysia proposed a joint submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS). As a result, both countries agreed to acknowledge each other’s 200 nautical miles of the EEZ and initiated a joint development in the overlapping portion. Likewise, Brunei and Malaysia settled their disputes over the EEZ by stating that Malaysia would not extend its current continental shelf due to their interest to accommodate Brunei (Poling, 2013).

Finally, the only claim of Brunei in the SCS is the “Louisa Reef” and the rights to the continental shelf under the UNCLOS that overlaps with Malaysia. However, recent agreements have shown that Brunei has dropped its claims (Roach, 2014). As the above analysis shows, China and Vietnam tend to be the most assertive in their territorial claims basing them on different historical rights.

East China Sea Claimants' History

Similar to the SCS disputes, China, Taiwan, and Japan have been arguing over a group of small islands located in the ECS, which were named "Diaoyu" by China/Taiwan, while Japan called the islands "Senkaku". The complication of the disputes derived from three main factors: 1) different interpretations of treaties after the termination of the WWII about which countries have the right to control the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands; 2) the discovery of natural oil in the islands; 3) the rise of nationalism in both countries that affects the outcomes of the policy towards the ECS disputes (Osti, 2013).

The first source of disputes derived from the "different or mistaken interpretations" of treaties signed after the WWII such as the "Cairo Declaration" between the U.K. and Taiwan, according to which "Japan shall return all territories it had taken from China" (Osti, 2013: 6). Another treaty was referring to the defeat of Japan known as the "San Francisco Treaty" which stated that "the U.S. has the right to exercise all powers of administration, legislation, jurisdiction over the territory and inhabitants of these islands, including territorial waters and the "Senkaku" islands" (Osti, 2013: 6). During the period of the U.S. administration, both China and Taiwan did not oppose to the U.S. because of the tense relationships at the beginning of the Cold-War. For instance, there were no diplomatic ties between the U.S. and China/Taiwan. At the end of the Cold War, China based its provision of the "San Francisco Treaty" that China has regained its sovereignty over the Diaoyu islands because the U.S. has returned the administration back to Japan. However, Japan rejected China's sovereignty under the "Treaty of Cairo and San Francisco". Instead, Japan put forth the "Treaty of Shimonoseki" to show that Japan has seized the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands from China after the Japan-Sino war (Ramos-Mrosovsky, 2008). Regardless of the reference to treaties, Japan pointed out that it also has the right to annex the Senkaku islands because there was no sign of Chinese control. Besides, the Senkaku islands were heavily exercised by the Japanese businessmen operating private businesses in some of the islands in the ECS (Ramos-Mrosovsky, 2008).

The second source of disputes refers to the competition over the natural resources within the ECS. Not long ago, the United Nations Economics Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) announced that these islands are rich in oil reserves located under the continental shelf between Taiwan and Japan. Hence, the struggle over the ECS escalates quickly because of the need to exploit them for oils and other natural resources (Osti, 2013).

The last source of disputes is the clash of "passionate nationalism" between right-winged Japan and China that indirectly affects the outcome of the policies towards the ECS disputes. For instance, in 1992 China passed a law to declare on the territorial sea and contiguous zone that sparked the nationalist protest in Taiwan and Japan (Osti, 2013). These issues are clearly politically inspired to some extent, but they still influence the situation and make its resolution more difficult.

Similar to the SCS, the islands in the ECS are rich in hydrocarbon and fishery resources. In 1969, the ECAFE declared that there are rich hydrocarbon resources under the contested areas between China, Japan and Taiwan (Osti, 2013). Hydrocarbon resource like gas, is abundant in the area. The three countries see this opportunity to reduce their dependency on the Arab states. Moreover, it would be cheap and useful to shift their energy use to gas. For instance, China is trying to switch from using coal to using natural gas. Nonetheless, the acquirement of the economic richness under the islands is not easy. The three countries have been having overlapping claims over the islands as well as the continental shelf, and exclusive economic zones (Drifte, 2009).

In terms of its strategic importance, the ECS serves as a vital area for all three claimants including the U.S. In the north of the ECS, there is the entrance towards the Sea of Japan. The south of the ECS is Taiwan, which serves as a contested area between the U.S. and China. Moreover, China perceives Japan's assertive behaviors in the ECS disputes as an attempt to contain China just like the U.S. Thus, the insecurity in the ECS will lead China to be assertive on its claim in the ECS (Valencia, 2007).

If China acquires the islands, it will be successful in closing the security gaps. The islands between Taiwan and Japan can turn into a unique frontier to safeguard China from Japan and the U.S. For instance, Japanese military experts claimed the biggest island in the ECS can be used to establish missile base, radar system and submarine base, which will surely increase China's security (Pan, 2007).

As mentioned before, Japan asserts its claims under the "Treaty of Shimonoseki" and under the UNCLOS notion of *terra nullius* of the "Senkaku" islands in the ECS. Despite China's protests, Japan stated the islands have no sign of authority during the annexation. Moreover, Japan has recognized the disputes over the islands in ECS with China but not towards Taiwan because it does not recognize Taiwan as a state. Therefore, according to Japan, Taiwan does not have the right to insert their sovereignty over the Senkaku islands (Osti, 2013).

As far as China is concerned, it has always rejected Japan's "terra nullius" claim. China backs up its claims based on several historical evidence. During 1885, China argued that there was no record of Japan controlling the Islands in ECS. Instead, it points out a map and documents showing that those islands served as an important defense and landing ground for missionaries that operated near the islands. Regarding Taiwan, China claimed that the Diaoyu Islands had historically belonged to Taiwan, which means that China has the legitimate claim over the islands as well (Osti, 2013).

China Strategy and Policy over South and East China Sea

Historically, China always perceived themselves as being vulnerable at sea. China's security and strategy have failed evidently during the British Opium War and the invasion of Japan, mainly because China's maritime power is weak. Consequently, China was not able to overcome the advanced naval technologies of the West. Since the war, China has shifted its focus to deal mainly with the concern over security in their maritime strategy. For more than two centuries, China has been slowly expanding its power projection and increased its control in the SCS and the ECS (Dutton, 2014).

What does "maritime security" mean for China? The meaning of security is to maintain the regional presence and increase military capabilities so that no great power could challenge China or pose a threat from the sea. Nationally, security was meant to improve the "national power" by enhancing common concerns over the security of China and increase its assertiveness in the sea, if possible. In short, the maritime strategy derived from "deep strategic roots" to secure that no country could attack from the sea (Dutton, 2014).

If we observed China's policy in the SCS and ECS disputes, we would notice that those policies reflect the importance of China's strategic goals and basic guidelines of its maritime strategy. In the past, the goal of its policy for managing its claims in the SCS and ECS was to pursue a strategy of delaying the final outcome of the disputes. In other words, its strategy was to remain consistent with its claims by neither posing act of aggression nor concession. Hence, the delay could generate enough time for China to strengthen its maritime capabilities so that it has more power to pressure other claimants (Fravel, 2011).

The current strategy emphasizes the enhancement of the diplomatic component. During the years 2009-2011, China's choice of diplomacy has increased tensions in both SCS and ECS disputes. Apparently, it was during President Xi Jinping administration that China has become relatively assertive compared to past leaders. Nonetheless, President Xi still upholds the fundamental aim of the previous leader, president Hu Jintao that it is time for China to shift from being a "land power" to "maritime power". Moreover, the Xi's administration still insists on maintaining the practice of the three basic foreign policy priorities, particularly in the SCS. First, settlements of the SCS disputes should be based on bilateral grounds and pushed towards peaceful resolutions. The second aim is to maintain strong resistance to any formal organization that is willing to provide resolutions for the disputes. The third is to keep insisting on Chinese sovereignty over the entire Spratly chain. An additional goal is to encourage cooperation for joint development with other claimants in sharing the resources (Swaine and Henry, 1995).

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In the ECS, China's policy was more of the "crisis management" type rather than directed at proposing final resolutions. As stated by Duchâtel (2016: 13), "China's foreign policy uses crisis management negotiations to secure variety of foreign policy goals linked to sovereignty and balance of power rather than a tool purely to build security and stability by freezing an existing *status quo*". However, the incident of Japan purchasing the three out of five Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands has led China to change its approach towards the ECS to "open confrontation" policy. Such assertive action was regarded as a response to the "unilateral nationalization" on three of the Diaoyu islands by Japan. From then on, China has been regularly sending the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy patrols over the territorial sea and contiguous zone near the Diaoyu islands. Moreover, China declared to increase its air presence on the Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the ECS (Duchâtel, 2016).

Today, the foreign policy of Xi's administration is regarded as a turning point for Chinese foreign policy towards the SCS and ECS disputes. Traditionally, Chinese policy has never been so assertive and willing to "show off" military power as during Xi's administration (Chan and Li, 2015). Despite the protest from the U.S. and Japan, China insisted on improving and reestablishing control over other islands in the SCS that was ignored in the past. At the same time, it started to demonstrate military power in the SCS and ECS: "China's recent moves in the ECS and SCS includes various military deployments, policy proclamations, provocative naval maneuvers and rhetorical stridency that pose serious challenges for how analysts have traditionally perceived China and its foreign Policy pursuits" (Chan and Li, 2015: 42).

Despite the aggressive foreign policy of the Xi's administration, China has also been cautious in its diplomacy to avoid military conflicts that could hinder economic prosperity. For instance, in the SCS, the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs of China has been extremely cautious to avoid such cases as “united front of the ASEAN” (Swaine and Henry, 1995). China’s policy towards the SCS and ECS was coined to “speak loudly and carry a small stick” (Harada, 2012). The diplomatic moves are closely intertwined with their “deep-rooted strategy” to be assertive over the claims in the SCS and ECS. Moreover, China remains committed to solve the disputes bilaterally and peacefully.

Other main claimants such as Vietnam and Philippines have sought to internationalize the disputes and seek ruling or help under the international law, which clearly upsets China. Beijing prefers to settle disputes in the region, using its economic, political and to some extent military power, while smaller countries favor engagement of the international organizations, as they realize their position is much stronger than while confronting with China. Both Vietnam and Philippines have been emphasizing the ASEAN’s advisory and influential role in countering China’s assertiveness in the sea. However, ASEAN’s role is quite restrained to put the issue of the SCS disputes on the table due to the ASEAN respect to the “sensitiveness of China” (Hiebert et al., 2013).

The most recent verdict (rejected by China) of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in favor of the Philippines concerned the legitimacy of China’s “nine-dash-line” claims in the SCS. The court concluded that “China has no legal basis to claim historic rights in the bulk of SCS” (Hunt, 2010). In respond, China firmly declared, “China will not accept any claim or actions based on those awards” (Hunt, 2010).

As mentioned before, current ECS disputes are also driven by the rise of “nationalism” which inspired in both China and Japan to strengthen social support for government’s actions and rise social national awareness. As a result, nationalistic opinions have put pressure on the policymakers and diplomats when dealing with the situation, because such negative reaction from their people can affect the overall performance of the current government. Nonetheless, both countries are trying to reach an agreement on a “joint exercise” over the islands by keeping in mind the fact that they are still dependent on economic relations (Osti, 2013).

What are the concerns of the non-claimants in the SCS and ECS today? Non-claimants of the SCS, such as the U.S., have carefully observed the disputes. Until now, the U.S. has emphasized on the freedom of navigation and attempted to help internationalize the SCS and ECS disputes to settle them according to the international law. Moreover, the U.S. has remained strong ties with Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines, which are the major claimants in SCS and ECS disputes. Recently, in 2016 the U.S. warned China against the military buildup in Woody Island and Parcels Island. So far, China has not opposed or confronted the U.S. involvement in the SCS and ECS disputes (Dutton, 2014).

The Case of China in the South and the East China Sea Disputes: Realism

Throughout the Cold-War period, realism maintained as the dominant theory in describing the relations of states as a struggle for power and engagement in competitive behaviors to survive. Evidently, the Cold-War balance of power between America and the Soviet Block depicts the type of behavior under realist perspective (Walt, 1998). The core assumptions of the realist theory are that the key players in the international politics are “sovereign nation-states”. “Classical realists” such as Hans Morgenthau claim that the innate will of the sovereign nation-states to dominate others causes states to be prone to conflicts. However, neo-realists such as Kenneth Waltz, choose to focus on the international structure that shapes the behaviors of states. Waltz points out that the international system is “anarchic”, which means that states exist in the absence of “world government” that would impose international order to all the states. The lack of the “world order” created the principle of fear among states that led them to maximize their power for the sake of survival in the uncertain world. Consequently, “self-centered” states while faced with an inescapable anarchic international system are forced to compete for power. Such competition will eventually lead to conflict or small states will end up balancing against the powerful states to manage the outbreak of the conflict, which most realists describe as “international anarchy being the permissive cause of war” (Walt, 1998; Weber, 2013; Qianqian, 2010).

Berry Buzan once stated that “the dramatic rise in the realizable economic value of the oceans and the rapid spreads of sovereign states to cover virtually all land areas as the oceans have become areas of intense competition for scarce goods” (Yee 2011: 168). The case of the SCS and ECS disputes fits Buzan’s theory. Most often realist scholars have been caught in explaining the cause of the disputes in two perspectives: 1) expansion of power in the sea or 2) competition over resources. Moreover, the clash of interest between China that presents as the rising power over the region and other countries will lead the smaller ones to balance against China’s aggressive attempt to take holds over the SCS or the ECS (Yee, 2001).

Regarding China’s behaviors in both disputes, realist attempt is to understand China from the perspective of power and resources accumulation. Currently, China is one of the fastest growing and strongest economies in the

world. For realists, the development of economy goes in hand with the increase in the use of energy. To keep the prosperity of economy, realists predict that China might end up in resources competition with its neighbors, mainly for oil. Both the SCS and ECS contains generous amount of oil and natural gas, which is roughly about 20% larger than Kuwait, and serves as important “sea lane” for oil importer countries such as China, Japan, and Korea. Consequently, “oil dependent” economy will aspire China to achieve “energy security” in the SCS and the ECS. As a matter of fact, in 1994, China surpassed Japan and Korea to be one of the major oil importers in Asia. Until now, China has needed a large amount of oil to support their economic development in the 21st century (Calder, 1996; Yee, 2001).

Moreover, Kaplan (2010) describes China’s action towards the SCS and the ECS disputes as economic survival. Firstly, China will maintain its strong stance in claiming the islands to secure energy needs. Secondly, it will establish its presence in the SCS and ECS to ensure that import of oil from the Arab states that passes from the Indian Ocean to the SCS and ECS are safe. Apart from “economic survival”, the struggle to find survival space for the immense population of China is necessary. Currently, China’s population covers 1/5 of the world’s population. The acquisition of the SCS and the ECS will provide the livelihood for the Chinese people, because they will be able to exploit the abundance of fisheries and natural resources (Kaplan, 2010).

However, China’s abilities to exploit the natural resources and secure the sea lanes are still limited. For instance, China is facing a clash of interest with other disputants that undertook oil exploration as well as took control over the islands. Such disputants as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Japan perceive the islands as their territories as China does. Hence, the bitterness of energy competition in Asia will result in an increase in military accumulation to secure national interests of China. In the 1990s, China has initiated various military actions that reflected its strong claims over the islands in the SCS and ECS. For instance, in the SCS, there was the “Mischief Reef” incident between China and the Philippines, with China’s PLA Navy attempts to expel Filipino fishermen off the reef. The Chinese action in the SCS has doubted the Japanese about the ECS because such aggressive behavior of China would have damaged their business interests along with security concerns of Japan, since the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands are right below Okinawa islands of Japan. Eventually, Japan and China confronted each other over China’s unilateral action to operate geological exploration close to the Senkaku Islands (Calder, 1996).

Aggressive behavior of China towards its neighbors or attempts to pursue its interests in the SCS and ECS unilaterally led realist scholars like Mearsheimer (2014) to anticipate that “if China continues its striking economic growth over the next few decades, it is likely to end up in an intense security competition with U.S., and its neighbors” (Mearsheimer, 2014: 4). Moreover, he stated China would come up with their own “Monroe Doctrine” to try to push the U.S. out of the Asia-Pacific region, and most of China’s neighbors will form a U.S.-led balanced coalition against China’s behavior in the SCS and the ECS disputes.

10 In line with Mearsheimer’s predictions, the development of China’s economy has resulted in the increase in the defense expenditure. Before, in 1989 the military budget rose by 10% because of the financial constraints to support the military modernization in the long term (Swaine and Henry, 1995). According to the White Paper of the PRC of 2010, in 2008-2009 military expenditure increased up to 17,5%. In 2010, China’s defense spending reached around \$81 billion and expect to grow more in the 21st century. The primary goal of the China defense spending was to invest in the military modernization of the PLA Navy to ensure that China would have the capabilities to safeguard its interests in distant waters. So far, China has deployed various naval fleets such as the Beihai Fleet (the North Sea fleet), Donghai Fleet (East Sea fleet), and Nanhai Fleet (the South Sea fleet). In 2010, China defense budget was the highest out of all ten ASEAN countries and allowed to increase its naval exercise over the SCS. In response, many Asian countries are also willing to increase their military spending to protect their interests. Taking Malaysia as an example, although it does not have the capability to fight against China, it is trying to develop a military force strong enough to be capable of protecting its interests in the Palawan and Kalayaan, which is the Philippines claim zone in the SCS (Buszynski, 2003).

Japan and Korea are also concerned about China increasing its military deployment in the SCS. Both Japan and Korea rely on the SCS and ECS with respect to oil imports from the Arab-Persian states. Hence, it is most likely that the three countries (China, Japan, and Korea) will end up in a naval arms race to secure their economic needs. To support that assumption, it is worth mentioning that Korea increased its defense budget in the 1990s and attempted to enhance its technical skills. Japan, on the other hand, relied on the U.S. military backup in the ECS. For instance, the U.S. deployed some of the most advanced naval forces in Japan such as destroyers, radar surveillance and tanker aircraft to secure “Japan’s energy lifeline that surpasses the SCS” (Calder, 1996).

Summing up, in the realist perspective, China in the future will still be “self-centered” to achieve its core interests to ensure that its national economy continues to prosper. To maintain strong economic growth, China will strive for energy in the SCS and ECS, mainly to support its industrial sectors to pursue energy security in the SCS and ECS

by increasing the military expenditures, deployments and regular patrols to make sure that the SCS and the ECS straits are free from foreign encroachment. Third, China's action in the SCS and the ECS will create fear among the East Asian countries. This will increase the "security dilemma" mainly between China, Japan, and Korea. Finally, smaller Asian countries will seek to form alliances to keep an eye on Chinese behavior in the SCS and the ECS.

The Case of China in the South and the East China Sea Disputes: Liberalism

Instead of viewing anarchy as a driver for conflictual behaviors, liberals perceive anarchy as enforcer for cooperative relationships between states. Unlike in realism, the human nature is not pessimistic, but rather progressive and optimistic to change for the better. Although each state has its own interests, international institutions can help to find a common interest (Goldstein and Pevehouse, 2001; Walt, 1998; Weber, 2013). Thus, they can contribute to reducing the "selfishness" of each state by encouraging them to cooperate and pursue mutual gains rather than immediate gains. Immanuel Kant said that it would be "rational" for states to work with each other rather than to result in wars. Each state can use the benefit of international cooperation to reduce uncertainties of rival's intentions as well as to work together to achieve the common goods for all parties (Goldstein and Pevehouse, 2001; Magcamit and Tan, 2016).

In liberal sense, it is evident that states sometimes ignore the role of power and focus on the harmony of interest that shapes the relations of states. Liberals believe that cooperation can be achieved by adopting liberal values and the rules of free market. Correspondingly, countries with similar political ideology and economically dependent on each other are less likely to go to war with one another. To support their claims, liberals give their explanation about the "democratic peace theory" that upholds the ideas that democratic countries are inherently peaceful. In other words, democratic states go to war but not with one another. To add on, liberals emphasize on free market because eventually states will benefit from free trade and if states maintained strong bonds of economic interdependences, then those economic relationships can serve as a "peace enforcer" that would harmonize the competing national interest of states in the international system (Goldstein and Pevehouse, 2011; Magcamit and Tan, 2016).

In the case of the disputes in the SCS and the ECS, liberals believe that cooperation can be achieved by engaging China to participate in international institutions, so that those common goals are reached. By using ASEAN as a forum for "open dialogue" between China and other claimants, China will soon realize that the unilateral action towards the SCS will be costly especially to its economic sector and if it continues to behave aggressively, it will soon lose the ASEAN support as well as the connection to the external world. Thus, China will shift its foreign policy goals towards "joint development" where all parties will gain on "shared benefits" rather than follow their self-interests and put their economy at stake. For instance, China has already made a "joint development" offer to Malaysia, Philippines and Japan (Buszynski, 2003).

Apart from the help of international institutions, liberals also argued that economic interdependence would reduce the likelihood of war in the SCS and the ECS disputes. Min Gyo Koo (2009) describes the China-Japan relations as "cold politics and hot economies". The author argues economic interdependence has served to explain the behavior of China and Japan in the ECS disputes: "the liberal peace argument hinges upon an assumption that economic incentives will urge China and Japan to avoid costly military disputes" (Koo, 2009: 206). Hence, the author concludes that as long as the economic relations are profitable for both countries, the economic interdependence will restrain Chinese behavior towards the ECS and SCS disputes.

The economic profiles of East Asian countries have shown that it is one of the most interconnected regions concerning trade. According to the World Trade Organization (2012), China's largest trading partners include countries associated either with the SCS or ECS disputes (Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, U.S. and the European Union). Beyond the bound of merely economic interdependence, Magcamit and Tan (2016) argued that complex interdependence can be used as a pull factor to minimize the aggressive behavior of states. Keohane and Nye (1997) defined complex interdependence as economic interconnectedness that ranges from different channels such as: investments, trade, labor and financial mobility. In other words, East Asian states' interests are significantly bound through the economic interconnectedness from microeconomic to macroeconomic level. For instance, the number of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Asia is considerably high compared to the EU and NAFTA (Magcamit and Tan, 2016).

To sum up, Magacमित and Tan (2016) do not aim to say that economic interdependence will reduce the risk of war. They rather point out that complex relationship will make military conflict a less favorable option in the SCS and ECS disputes. Nonetheless, realists argued that the notion of "economic interdependence" provides an "illusionary perception of parity and connectedness" among Asian countries. Although economic interdependence in Asia is significant, the insecurity in the SCS and the ECS will leave China no choice but to put the goal of defending their sovereignty first, rather than thinking about the cost to their economy. As stated by Waltz: "an increase in

interdependence, state actors under anarchy must worry about what others will gain more from cooperation than they will because they believe that those relative gains will turn into military advantage. Hence the inference that trade promote peace is spurious because they create asymmetric dependence that can foster aggressive action from more dependent countries” (Koo, 2009: 218).

In conclusion, liberals embraced the ideas of international institutions and economic interdependence, claiming that they can help demise or control the behaviors of states in the SCS and the ECS disputes. China and other disputants should continue to develop the idea of market liberalization along with the adaptation of liberal norms, so that all states can still pursue their interests (to develop their economy) and cooperate to reach a win-win solution for the disputes in the SCS and the ECS.

The Case of China in the South and the East China Sea Disputes: Constructivism

While realism and liberalism focus on the materialistic factors, constructivism emphasizes the importance of ideational factors and perceives individuals as the main actors in the international relations (not the states). Constructivists believe that state behaviors are shaped by “collective norms, beliefs and social identities” (Walt, 1998: 38). First, identities are defined as “socially constructed” through the process of socialization with other states that started in the past or exists in the present (Walt, 1998). Then, there are created inter-subjective understandings that distinguish between “perception of self and perception of others” (Friedberg, 2005: 34). Second, beliefs or ideas can be found through the study of the discourse in the society: “discourse(s) reflects ideas, shapes beliefs, interests and establishes accepted norms of behaviors” (Walt, 1998: 40-41). Third, norms are defined as the accepted ideas of the “right and appropriate” actions in the international community (Friedberg, 2005: 34). Moreover, Alexander Wendt points out that states are the key determinants of anarchy, the relationship of states could end up being conflictual or cooperative depending on what kind of identity each state takes hold of (it reinforces certain behaviors) and “anarchy is what makes of it” (Walt, 1998; Weber, 2001; Goldstein and Pevehouse, 2011).

Optimist constructivists point out one of the examples in history to depict the ideas of positive change in the foreign policy of states, for instance, the shift of Soviet’s foreign policy in the post-Cold War period. The Soviets, led by Gorbachev, started to change their beliefs and perceptions about the West. Constructivism claimed the shift arose from the “internal change” that brought about “new concept of self”. Instead of perceiving the West as an enemy, through time Soviet and the West can cooperate and embrace the new norm of “common security” (Walt, 1998: 41). Similarly, the contemporary issues like the SCS and ECS disputes are a sign that China is shifting its assertive foreign policy. Through the repetitive mutual social engagement of China and other claimants, the reciprocal subjective approaches of the countries may change and reduce Chinese aggressiveness over time. Although in the past, most Chinese rulers had a negative view on the “strategic culture” of international politics due to its lack of support towards the belief that the use of force is crucial to deal with other states. Despite this negative thinking, Johnston (2013) claims there is hope that China changes its viewpoint if it interacts with other countries more often. It is expected to observe a shift in China’s behavior on the international arena towards a more liberal approach (Friedberg, 2005).

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Apart from engagement, the role of “norms” established by regional institutions such as the ASEAN can help establish “ordered- like behavior” for China to change its foreign policy goals. The “accepted norms” developed by regional institutions can be used as a tool to indirectly constrain states’ behaviors that are harmful to the international community. “The norms are derived from the mutual expectations of actors and offer a means to restrain behavior to maintain the competition between them within certain tolerable parameters” (Buszynski, 2003: 345; Goldstein and Pevehouse, 2011). Normally, realists would claim that China would use its power to bargain and subordinate the smaller ASEAN states. However, constructivists believe that ASEAN can help shift China’s strategy by focusing on “common-norm building” dialogues to steer its behaviors away from the use of force in the SCS disputes. The 2002 Declaration on the Conduct on the SCS was seen as another step towards the establishment of the code of conduct due to which China could eventually shift its interest towards multilateral negotiations rather than insisting on bilateral solutions (Buszynski, 2003).

However, “constructivist pessimists” point out that the process of change is not as easy as “constructivist optimists” suggested. Particularly, the identities and ideas that were constructed in the past can be hard to change because they have been deeply embedded in the mind and had guided the reaction towards other states for many years. For instance, Thomas Berger points out that China and Korea still hold the perception of a “hostile Japan” or “aggressive Japan”. Likewise, in the case of the SCS and the ECS, Chen Jie (1994) offered thoughtful understanding about China’s identity and perceptions. China’s claims are based on historical rights which refer to the idea that the country was the first to discover and rule over the islands. Through many generations, Chinese people have perceived

the SCS and the ECS as their “motherland territories”. Thus, while neighboring countries are regarding China’s foreign policy as assertive, China claims it has long been assertive to protect its territories that are encroached by their neighbors. Besides, China believes to be the “victim” in both disputes perceiving other claimants as stealing its lands (Jie, 1994).

Moreover, Arai and Wang (2013) claimed that the tensions in the ECS came also from the clash of identities and ideas. The relations between China and Japan have been filled with mistrust and grievances because of the wars. The history of their relations has made China perceive its identity as “victimized country” and construct Japan’s identity as “aggressive Japan”. Those ideas derived from the bitter historical events, such as the “Invasion of Manchuria” and the “Nanjing Massacre”, remain China’s sensitive issues. Until now, Chinese people still hold negative perceptions of Japan, and whenever there is a clash of interests, Chinese people expect Japan to give in because it has a debt to pay for its past actions (Arai and Wang, 2013).

To solve the “identity conflict” between China and Japan, Arai and Wang (2013) point out four recommendations that will bring about conciliation. The first recommendation is based on the transformation of ideas and feelings of both parties to reduce the distrust of China towards Japan. For instance, the media could promote trust by showing regular reports on the Japanese Prime Minister visiting the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall to depict that Japan has never forgotten its behavior in the past and it owes the Chinese people an apology. The second recommendation claims that strengthening of high-level official dialogue could help reduce misunderstandings. Moreover, both governments should create bi-national groups such as: media organizations, educational or industrial groups to enhance the power of communication. Thirdly, it would be advisable to look up to international institutions such as the High-Level China-Japan Council on the East China Sea that functions as a forum to increase the interactions between two countries. Lastly, two governments should reconsider the power of education in the field of history that serves as a base of understanding the relations and creation of ideas of other states: “both sides must realize that history education is not an ordinary subject because it fundamentally defines their national identities” (Arai and Wang, 2013: 104).

Provided the last recommendation Chinese education in history should be more cautious about all sensitive information to prevent any misunderstanding or adoption of nationalist feelings towards the historical animosity between the two countries. As for Japan, education should emphasize the idea of self-critical view of the past actions and the idea of peaceful relations in the future. It is necessary to put the country’s history in a broader context of regional interdependences and cooperation (Arai and Wang, 2013: 106). Accordingly, education in history will enable China to eliminate the idea of being the victim of Japan’s aggressiveness as well as bring these two countries closer to the notion of reconciliation and co-existence in the international system.

Arai and Wang (2013) concluded that China’s behavior in the SCS and ECS could be understood through the ideas and identity China had created over time by looking through the discourses such as historical archives, cultural stories, and educational system. Constructivists observed that the stories originating from Chinese culture or historical texts related to the SCS and the war with Japan or the educational system often presented China as the victim to foreign intruders. Hence, the continuation of such narratives (China as a victim) embedded in the psyche of the Chinese people would bolster the idea that China would lose its territories (the SCS and the ECS) for the benefit of foreign intruders again. Thus, the pressure for an assertive behavior from the government’s side should not be surprising. As Wendt puts it, “the tendency of any structure of beliefs and expectations once established is to become an objective social fact that reinforces certain behaviors and discourages others” (Friedberg, 2005: 38).

All in all, constructivism proposed two types of possible outcomes for both disputes. First, through various social interactions among the states involved in the SCS or the ECS may help China and its neighbors rebuild positive inter-subjective ideas. On the other hand, repetitive interactions may reinforce or deepen the negative perception of other states “frequent contact with others, especially those who challenge existing identities (e.g. Japan challenges its claims in the ECS), can lead to the perception of threats and these may cause resistance to transformations of self and thus to social change” (Friedberg, 2005: 38). Respectively, as Wendt mentioned, states were the key to determine the nature of anarchy. Hence, the disputes in the SCS and the ECS can be cooperative or conflictual, depending on the interests and the willingness of each state.

Conclusions

The aim of the paper was to show how the three theoretical paradigms (realism, liberalism and constructivism) help understanding the complex issue of China’s behavior and attitude towards the SCS and ECS disputes. The starting point was to compare the three approaches and the tools they propose to explain China’s assertiveness. Observation of the research on China’s assertiveness permitted to draw a conclusion that they gave little attention to the ideational factors (Calder, 1996; Yee, 2001; Kaplan, 2010; Mearsheimer, 2014; Buszynski, 2003; Koo, 2009; Magcamit and

Tan, 2009). Neither realism nor liberalism allowed to paint a full picture of the problem. To explain the issue, we need to take into consideration much more than only the power factor (as claimed by realists) and also history has proven that democracies and interdependent (or cooperating) countries can also go to war (i.e. the II World War), although the probability is indeed lower (thus, this contradicts the liberal assumptions). Economic bounds, even if they are very important and strong, they do not explain everything, neither the struggle for power, nor securing the state's interests (as claimed by realists). Although each paradigm explains some part of reality and some behaviors, neither of them is perfect not provides the full explanation. To achieve the objective, the constructivist approach seems to be most appropriate (even though it has particular weaknesses as well¹) due to its concentration on ideas and constructing of behaviors basing on these ideas (narratives). To understand China's assertiveness, it is crucial to take into account the construction of ideas and interest behind China's policy (in constructivist point of view), based on the past interactions and discourses, in particular, the "Century of Humiliation".

Theoretically speaking, constructivist has pointed out that there is a huge "perception gap" between China and other countries regarding the SCS and ECS disputes. While other countries described China's policy as assertive and intend to bully smaller states in the disputes, China considers themselves as "peace-loving" nation and view their country as a victim in the disputes (Wang, 2014). The construction of China's perception of "others" and interest in protecting their "ancestral territories" can be regard as a product of the Chinese government's effort to keep their legitimacy in the post-Tiananmen period. The aim of the Chinese government was to dismiss the Western influence in China by encouraging the Chinese to remember a specific strand of history that is the "Century of Humiliation" and at the same time constructed the idea of being a "victim" of the West and Japan's aggression. Hence, there is no doubt why China regarded its identity as a victim and upheld the norm in protecting its sovereignty and territorial integrity in the SCS and ECS disputes.

Constructivist approach explains partly the assertive behavior of China through the constructed victimized identity – China intends to protect the territories which are perceived to belong to the country, but only with respect to Japan. With respect to other countries, China does not have such strong impulse to construct such ideas. Nevertheless, the victimized identity as a narrative can be extended to provide explanation for all assertive behaviors regardless of the fact towards which country they are directed. Such narratives can be strong enough to be a source for all sovereignty protection actions performed by China. Liberal approach seems not to be very useful here, as economic bounds and established relations in the ASEAN region are fairly strong and basing on such assumption (according to liberals), there should be no aggressive behaviors. Realist approach is useful to some extend here, as the idea of restoring the lost power and position in the region could be a motivation for aggressive behaviors. Nevertheless, the SCS and ECS disputes are rather symbolic in nature rather than providing a real power restoration, which is why constructivist method of explanation seems to be most accurate in this case. The final conclusion is that combining the IR theory (various paradigms) together in order to capture a complete picture of China's policy could lead to finding a comprehensive approach towards the problem of China's assertiveness regarding the SCS and ECS disputes.

¹ The first one is that as being concentrated on ideas, constructivist approach is not the best one to anticipate probable future behaviors. Secondly, it does not take into account possible third-party participation (influence).

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