

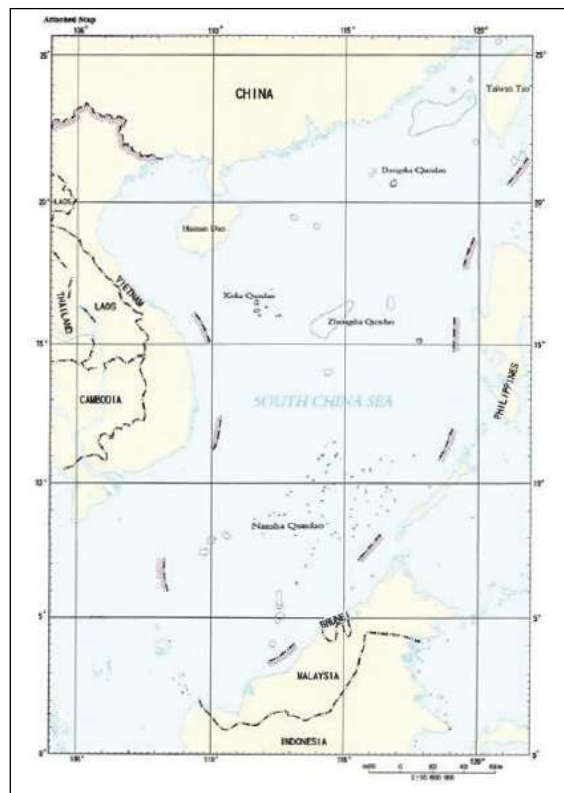
China's Quest to Maximize Status and Sovereignty in the South China Sea

China's strategic goals
by MSgt Marc Arrington

Sir Walter Raleigh once wrote, "For whosoever commands the sea commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself."¹ China's creation of human-made islands and naval military expansion in the South China Sea (SCS) are allowing it to command the vital maritime trade routes. These efforts are part of an attempt to develop hegemony in the region, and they come at the expense of the international community and in defiance of international maritime law.

The SCS dispute is at the forefront of international relations since 2010. The dispute is a significant security challenge for the United States and the international community as a whole. The U.S. Congress's Committee on Foreign Affairs stated in 2016, "the territorial disputes in the South China Sea might represent the most significant long-term security challenge in our shared jurisdiction."² President Obama's National Security Strategy in 2010 spoke of the importance of China's influence on the region and the need to deepen the United States' influence to counter China's economic presence.³ President Trump's National Security Strategy in 2016 mentions China 32 times

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Map 1. China's dashed-line map from notes verbales of 2009. (Map provided by author.)

and speaks of China's intention to displace the United States' geopolitical advantage in the region. Trump goes on to speak of China's military and naval expansion, challenging the international order and encroaching on the sovereignty of its neighbors.⁴

China's naval expansion is of strategic security concern to the region and international order, but one must empathize from a Chinese perspective in order to understand and exploit the reasoning behind the expansion. In order to do this, one must know China's historical disgrace caused by foreign imperial powers. Also, what historical claims does China have to the SCS? What are the goals of China in the SCS and what is the effect on international security if China can obtain hegemony over the SCS?

China's Humiliation during the Opium Wars

China's first humiliation by an

imperial power was at the hand of the British Navy during the Opium Wars of 1839–1842. The British were bringing in opium from India and trading it for Chinese silver in mainland ports when the Qing court attempted to eradicate the trade in 1839.⁵ The Qing emperor then ordered the seizure of British trade ships. The British retaliated against the seizure of their trading vessels by deploying armed frigates. These British Navy frigates attacked port cities and sailed upriver, destroying several historical landmarks—including the Summer Palace of the Qing emperor. The frigates then sailed, undamaged, upriver to port cities on the southern part of China’s mainland.⁶ The British frigates’ ability to travel upriver and against wind easily overwhelmed China’s rudimentary defenses.

Because of the naval defeat, the Qing government was forced to negotiate several embarrassing treaties with the British. The two treaties resulting from the Opium Wars are the Nanjing and Bogue Treaties.⁷ These treaties forced the Qing government to relinquish the territorial rights of Hong Kong to the British, establish five treaty ports for British trade, a policy of extraterritoriality for British nationals residing in the treaty ports, and pay a monetary indemnity of six million for British suffering.⁸ The policy of extraterritoriality was perhaps the most demeaning of all the concessions because of the encroachment on Chinese sovereignty. The policy dictated that British nationals operating in treaty ports were subject to British laws not Chinese. The dishonor of the Qing government at the hands of the British Navy taught the Chinese the importance of naval power.

Miller describes the trauma of the Opium Wars as a transformative historical event for the Chinese people and government.⁹ China suffered from defeat at the hands of the British as well as the French, leading to what is known as the one hundred years of humiliation.¹⁰ Members of the Qing Celestial Court learned from the defeat at the hands of the imperial powers. The Celestial Court concluded that the goals of the European invaders were to exploit

China for economic gains.¹¹ In 1942, one member of the court, Wei Yuan, developed the “Plans for Maritime Defense.”¹² Yuang, in an address to the Chinese court, stated,

Today the British barbarians not only have occupied Hong Kong and accumulated a great deal of wealth as well as a proud face among other barbarians, but have also opened ports and cut down the various charges so to grant favor to other barbarians. We must use barbarians against barbarians. Use France and the United States to build ships. It is proper to use them to learn their superior techniques in order to control them.¹³

From the shame of the Opium Wars, the Chinese developed a plan to take the naval technological expertise from the imperial powers and use it to protect the sovereignty of China. Therefore, one can ascertain the Opium Wars caused a transformative historical event that led China to prioritize naval power for the

hood, as Miller explains, has two goals regarding post-imperial international relations: the first is to maximize territorial sovereignty and the second to maximize status.¹⁶

China’s victimhood as a result of the naval defeats during the Opium Wars correlates via goals of victimhood to the current naval expansion in the SCS. China’s objective for their military build-up in the SCS is to maximize status internationally. The SCS is a crucial sea lane utilized regionally and internationally. China’s ability to alter or disrupt the sea lane gives the nation a higher status internationally, satisfying one goal of post-imperial ideology. China’s claim to the SCS islands and sea lanes shows a strict concept of the sovereignty of its borders, the second goal of victimhood.¹⁷

Therefore, through the lens of a PII, one can see how the historical trauma and the transformative historical event of the Opium Wars are leading contem-

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China’s Goal of Maximizing Sovereignty and Status

The Opium Wars and the subsequent 100 years of humiliation caused China to identify as a victim of imperial powers. Miller discusses how imperialized nations suffer from post-imperial ideology (PII).¹⁴ Miller explains that imperialized nations suffer from a mentality of victimhood that becomes a part of their national identity and thus affects their international outlook.¹⁵ Victim-

porary China to secure its port cities by maximizing sovereignty through naval expansion in the SCS. Chan supports this claim in the following: “Beijing aspires to recover from China’s past humiliations and restore its standing as a great power. Such an aspiration would necessarily suggest questioning and even seeking to alter the status quo.”¹⁸ The status quo for China has been one of subordination to imperial powers’ naval strength. Hence, to alter the status quo, China must create a strong navy with a significant submarine capability to expand its influence in the SCS to protect and expand China’s sovereignty.

Associating borders and territorial possessions with maximizing sovereign-

ty correlates to PII and goals of victimhood. The Nine-Dash Line is a line of nine dashes crudely drawn after World War II on a 1947 map of China's eastern border, the Nine-Dash Line encompassed the Spratly of Nansha ("South Sand Islands" in Chinese) in the SCS.¹⁹ China uses the Nine-Dash Line as a historical justification for its claim over the SCS and utilizes nationalist sentiments for naval expansion in the SCS against international law.²⁰ China must possess the Spratly Islands encompassed by the Nine-Dash Line to gratify its need to maximize sovereignty. Lee explains that "territorial possession is essential in the materialization and meaningful gratification of sovereignty."²¹ The Chinese government looks at the SCS's islands encompassed by the Nine-Dash Line as sovereign territory. The naval expansion provides the means to maximize sovereignty over the islands against the status quo and international law. Also, China looks at international law as a tool of imperial countries and tends to attempt to negotiate territorial conflicts without subjugate territorial conflicts without subjugation to international law.²² The naval expansion provides the military force required to alter the status quo and reclaim China's historical claim via the Nine-Dash Line.

China also seeks to maximize international status through naval expansion in the SCS. As the quote from Sir Walter Read suggests, command of the sea and its riches leads to the command of the world itself. The SCS is one of the world's most utilized and vital maritime shipping lanes. Over half of the world's oil tankers traverse the SCS annually, making it a security concern for regional and international states.²³ China's naval expansion in the SCS provides the military might needed to secure the shipping lanes. If China sought to alter the international status quo, it could then restrict the international community's utilization of the shipping lanes through the SCS. The naval expansion and possible repercussions on international maritime trade maximize China's status internationally. This possible threat was at the forefront of Congress's hearing on the SCS in 2016. Colin Willett, then deputy assistant secretary of state, stated,

I am concerned we have few direct options to counter this type of escalation if China chooses to pursue it. China's network of airstrips, radars, missile batteries constructed across the South China Sea while the rest of the world watched, may prove a capacity—excuse me—may provide a capacity to enforce China's will over the South China Sea.²⁴

The naval build-up in the SCS has placed China in a higher status internationally. Military might may not make right, but it causes the interna-

of dollars' worth of hydrocarbon fuels resting beneath the SCS.²⁶ The claim over those natural resources is a matter of international law. Unfortunately, several countries in the SCS are within the 200-mile EEZ of the SCS, including Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam.²⁷ Hydrocarbon fuels are the lifeblood of nations and allow militaries to function. China seeks to lay claim to the natural resources in the SCS to further legitimize its government and maximize sovereignty and status.²⁸ If China can extract the natural resources

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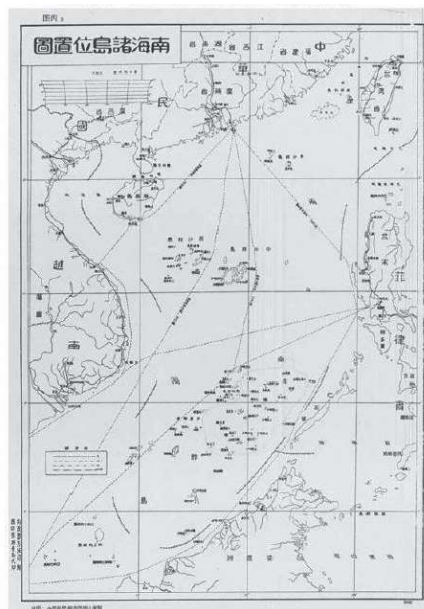
tional community to take notice of China's military prowess, for better or for worse increasing China's international status.²⁵

Another aspect of China's expansion in the SCS is the issue of control over the vast natural resources within the Nine-Dash Line and the 200-mile Economic Exclusionary Zone (EEZ). There are estimated billions, if not trillions,

in the SCS, it will also limit its dependence on imported oil—yet another step in maximizing independence from outside nations.²⁹

Currently, the United Nations has rejected China's claim to the natural resources as well as China's claim over many of the small islands encompassed in the Nine-Dash Line and the 200-mile EEZ. Recently, the United Nations rejected China's claim over the Mischief Reef, siding with the Filipino claim over the reef.³⁰ It is still unknown if China will continue to rebuke the United Nations' ruling in favor of the Filipinos. Looking through a PII perspective, China does not perceive the United Nations as a governing authority over China's claims in the SCS. China's PII perceives outside governing authorities and international laws as maintaining the status quo and thus detrimental to China's sovereignty and status.

Many nations, including the United States, claim China is seeking to become a hegemonic power in the region and perhaps the globe. The Trump Administration, in the *National Security Strategy of 2017*, and the Congressional Foreign Relations Committee have both stated that China seeks to become a hegemonic power at the expense of the international community. Viewed through a PII perspective, however,



Map 2. China's (Kuomintang) 11-dash line map of 1947 entitled "Map of South China Sea Islands." (Map provided by author.)

China's actions in the SCS do not necessarily support the claim China seeks to become a hegemonic power.³¹ Throughout the imperialization of China, starting with the Opium Wars, China was attacked and exploited by imperial powers via seaports and waterways. Therefore, the United States Executive and Legislative branches' assessment of China's intentions in the SCS does not empathize with China's past imperial trauma. China seeks to claim the SCS to strengthen sovereignty and status internationally for its security. China does seek to alter the status quo, but that does not mean China seeks to rule over the region. The status quo, from a Chinese perspective, is superpowers preying on China.³² Therefore, from a Post-Imperial Ideology perspective, China's actions in the SCS do seek to alter the status quo—meaning China is no longer preyed upon by foreign powers from the sea.³³

Conclusion

China's naval expansion into the SCS is a substantial security concern for the international community. The SCS's maritime shipping lanes are a vital artery for oil shipping and international trade. China's regional neighbors and the United States perceive China as a threat. The United States' Congress and President fear China's historic rise and claim China seeks hegemony over the region at the expense of the international committee. Through a PII perspective, however, one can come to a different conclusion regarding China's intentions in the SCS.

China does seek to alter the international status quo. China does seek to maximize status and sovereignty. These are all logical reasons for China's naval expansion in the SCS. Seen through a PII perspective, however, maximizing status and sovereignty and altering the status quo do not necessarily mean China is seeking to become a hegemonic power with regional and global dominance. China's naval expansion in the SCS is to secure China from outside threats—the same threats that forced China to sign treaties surrendering claim to Hong Kong. The treaties also established treaty ports where impe-

rial powers abused Chinese sovereignty. The past imperial transgressions shape China's contemporary actions and will affect how China treats the international community in the future.³⁴ Understanding China's past through a PII perspective provides another means for U.S. policy makers to analyze China's intentions for naval expansion in the SCS.

Notes

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