

CHAPTER IV

THE NATIONAL INTEREST BEHIND CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY AND ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY ASIA-PACIFIC

Let us take a moment to retrospect. China's international status has been established through a dramatic change in the economic system. The successful economic reform becomes a stepping stone for China to be on the right growth trajectory, outpacing the ever existed development phenomenon throughout the world. With the fastest growing economy in the world, China possesses a powerful bargaining position as a partner of cooperation that is beneficial to anyone around the world. China national power has also been enhanced by the successful military modernization funded by the rapid economic growth. Under the four modernization embraced by Deng Xiaoping, China's defense sector is in the best condition than ever before to the Chinese military eventually became a noteworthy aspect regionally and internationally. It could be said that this state at least favourable to deter the excessive foreign influence in the region. In the sense that China has the very potential to alter the sole domination and important role of the United States in the region. On the other hand, many also see that it is not the United States that its presence should be feared in the region, for several decades the state has successful to maintain a steady and dynamic regional security as part of its commitment in Asia-Pacific. As believed by the realist thinker that behind the political conduct of states, borne the most important of all, an agenda of national interest, behind a 'peaceful rise' Chinese, there is a tendency of state interests associated with power and dominance to restore the past glory. As matter of fact, in spite of the triumph of many international relations theories to explain

the contemporary phenomena, the realist thinking is dominated by the aggressiveness of states to struggle for power, and it has, in fact, dominating the discourse of contemporary China's rising power — although sometimes irrelevant. For example, in this case, such liberalist view that sees the motivation behind the increasing intensity of China's involvement in Asia-Pacific is driven by the motivation of state's cooperation for the sake of equal opportunity and equality of all nations in the Asia-Pacific, although encouraging but it sounded so unreal. Evidently, from the pattern of development and cooperation undertaken by China, there are more reasons than just an economic and political cooperation to ensure the stability of the region. Realist perceives that it already exists in every individual, ego and selfish— the international system is anarchic. Often since states fail to cooperate in the realist self-help system, survival depends on the struggle for power and security.¹

In understanding the reason behind such active engagement of China in contemporary Asia-Pacific, the observation of several important contemporary events in the region is necessary. Based on economic prosperity and the dynamic nature of development in the region, there are numbers of competing national interest striving to dominate the other. As has been mentioned frequently in previous chapters, there are three events worth considered for in discussing the regional implication from the rise of China — the involvement of the United States in the region and territorial dispute of South China Sea East China Sea.

¹Morgenthau, Hans J., Albert A. Michelson, and Leonard Davis. *Politics among Nations the Struggle for Power and Peace.5th Ed.* New York: A. A. Knopf, 1973. Print.

4.1. China ‘Counter-Balance’ and Strategic Partnership in Asia-Pacific

Not only the rise of China gives greater vision for the future of regional order, in the context of the more independent regional affairs, questions, and much scepticism has also been raised by neighbouring countries and American policymakers for the prospect of the development in the future and the real motives behind China’s foreign policy. As matter of fact, the great ambition toward political and military power has always been the nature of Chinese elite for the century and seems to continue to be firmly upheld in every future conduct of the state. This tied closely to China's historical memory of nineteenth and twentieth-century humiliation by Western powers. From this point, one could argue how China eventually being traumatized for not be over the similar path, being humiliated by foreign domination. But instead the rise of China is creating a dilemma—the growing strength of China's military has alarmed the bigger part of the region, which also depends on China for their own economic growth.

They might see Beijing's quest for security is rather creating insecurity for them while improving cross-strait ties in recent months have helped assuage some regional concerns. This has always been a predictable agenda since China began the rapid economic development from a long time ago. Successful economic reform, allows an additional spending on the military sector, in order for China's development to be perfect in every aspect. In this era, the rise of China and China’s foreign policy is a big question whether this revival phenomenon will shift the power from the West to East, if this true, whether the shifting would be the Chinese or Asian? Even though one can only speculate on this phenomenon, yet the pattern is particularly similar with how the United States back in the day

arose as a superpower in global affairs. Principally, the United States in achieving the world's hegemony was relied highly on their capability to surpass other countries. The capability, therefore, is developed into a concept of interdependency, which allowing an exchange of interest, in the sense that to provide assistance and support to partner states, the United States also allowed inducing the nation's values, ideology and interest in general. In China's case, through the successful economic development and China's foreign policy stressed on a strategic partnership among regional countries, the nation transformed as a bigger donator than the United States —particularly toward the developing and third-world countries. More precisely today, China aims to undertake similar path, at least, in the regional level. We might argue from this event, the United States and China demonstrate a competition in a way that both countries consolidate their association with the related alliances and expanding the partnerships.²

Seeing this probability, the United States seeks to keep balance with their political influence in Asia-Pacific, through the establishment of initiatives of such as the TPP, including drawing China back into the circle of cooperation. As matter of fact, earlier in the twentieth century, we have been introduced to this kind of cooperation between the two states, which were drawn together almost exclusively for strategic necessity post-Cold War.³ The strategic complementarities have provided the basis for the long-twenty years of cooperation between both states, but it missed to share the important factors of traditions and common economic and political system that could sustain the cooperation.⁴ As did the United States, China in order to objectify its national

² Chung, 'The Rise of China and East Asia,' p. 53 (footnote: 68).

³ Robert S Ross and Barry Naughton, *After The Cold War* (1st edn., Sharpe 1998).

⁴*ibid.*

interest to shift the global politics from West to East, China tries to suppress the stage of competition through foreign policy in a range of sector and domains such as wider diplomatic, military and economic. If the past records indicated a cooperation based on strategic necessity, today, still with the same framework, both United States and China are more likely and willing to cooperate with each other on issues that are geographically farther away from Asia and less related in nature to hard-security ones.⁵This is why later; China insisted on taking a smooth path and peaceful development, without any pressure and threats to regional stability or the security of certain countries. Even though the weight should be taken by China to alter the regional order, the possibility is even greater than the United States to remain as a sole influence in the region. With the growing importance of China in Asia-Pacific, it becomes clearer the region is no longer in need of the United States' alliances in economic cooperation.

As already been described, and is found in many incalculable kinds of literature examining the rise of China, for China to be in its current metier, China has gone through such gradual development but never in the hollow. In fact, despite the political upheaval having China repeatedly failed, it has also become the turning point for the state to reform in the more successful strategy—as was the case in 1978. The fundamental reason for this phenomenon is because China believes that Asia has the potential step outside from the external interference, to be able to independently develop greater economies to gain a position at the global level. Accordingly, other countries in the region that are equally emerging, conceiving similar faith in the region, including beliefs with great ambitions that they were able to become the super power in the Asia-Pacific region. Hence

⁵ Chung, 'The Rise of China and East Asia,' p. 54 (footnote 68).

encouraging them to compete in developing their own countries, if one looks back to the past decades, the Asia-Pacific region has, apart from the intensive competition on economic development, been remarkably peaceful. This has significantly changed this recent year following the change of axis-alliances and the nature of politics in Asia-Pacific due to the waning influence of the United States amidst the rise of China—the region is challenged with one complex and the uncertain phenomenon of security dilemma in their security issues. Clearly, behind this circumstances, China who recognizes its growing influence and economic capability in both global and regional level, feel the need for a military modernization in the context of capability and strategic-thinking to support domestic interests—including the interests of trade, investment, and other cooperation. One can presume this idea is part of the policy reassurance China had adopted in the late 1990s, In addition, what a depressing reality, realizing how Chinese military had ever been on a glorious moment when it is very much poor and undeveloped nowadays.

China proudly called the military modernization and its foreign policy as a strategic opportunity for a peaceful rise. There are both the optimist and pessimist perspectives that take this phenomenon as one important to examine. The optimist observes the rise of China will lead the world in a long state of peace, the balance of power, even by this phenomenon the world will most likely ever engage in conflict. The opposite sees differently and taking the more cautious approach, hence argue that what the future holds is still cannot be predicted. The pessimist, which encompass the majority of neighbouring countries tend to see this phenomenon has the greatest of bad connotation. If not, it will still be adding too much scepticism the world has addressed in regard to China's potential to bring

pressure that led to the deterioration of security stability of the region. Should be understood from this turn of events, the two opposing point of view turn the agenda of the rise of China becomes problematic and destabilizing. First, China is standing on its idea of nationalism which tends to be assertive, with PLA at the core of defining national identity and security goals.⁶ Second, China is quite tied to root real politic strategic culture adopted since the earlier era, as well as with its repeated use of force in pursuit of national interest.⁷ Therefore, the assertiveness of China in pursuing its national interest the South China Sea and the East China Sea, motivate some of China's neighbours and partner cooperation to betray their confidence in China. These countries began to see China's foreign policy as offensive, and China more likely is their potential competitor, double as a threat to national sovereignty. Therefore, those states began to seek the formation of a balancing coalition to dampen and further counter China's influence which can be seen in the form of keen partnership strategy between these countries and the United States, because they believe only the United States has all the capabilities they need to fight China.

4.2. China's Assertive Involvement in the South China Sea and the East China Sea

Throughout 2015 China has been preoccupied with efforts sovereignty claims over features in the South China Sea and East China Sea. In its involvement in the South China Sea, China recently has turned to be a dominating actor that any of other disputing states such Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines,

⁶ Sujid Dutta, 'China's Emerging Power and Military Role: Implications for South Asia,' available in Jonathan D. Pollack and Richard H. Yang. *In China's Shadow: Regional Perspectives on Chinese Foreign Policy and Military Development* (RAND Corporation 1998).

⁷*ibid.*

Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam. The risk of conflict in the South China Sea is indeed significant, in which many parties have to compete for territorial and jurisdictional claims over the rights to exploit the region's possibly extensive reserves of oil and gas. This regard, China initiated some substantial modernization of its maritime paramilitary forces as well as naval capabilities to, as argued, enforce its sovereignty and jurisdiction claims by force if necessary which instantly further threaten the other states to not enter the disputed zones.

There are several states that being affected mostly by the aggressiveness of China. The Philippines and Vietnam are one of them. This argument has something to do with the dispute involving the two states over natural gas deposits, especially in the disputed area of Reed Bank, which is located in eighty nautical miles from Palawan. Apparently, this protracted territorial and border dispute give no sign to end in near future. As a continuation, China found to be involved in a personal dispute with Vietnam, which started due to China's violation over the Petro Vietnam oil survey ships in the past that were searching for oil and gas deposits in Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Furthermore, in 2011, Vietnam has accused China to deliberately severing the cables of an oil and gas survey vessel in two separate instances.⁸ From this accident, the Vietnam showed persistence to insist on its activities in the aforementioned zone with alliancing with the United States and further encourage confrontational situation for China in the South China Sea with still emphasizing on the absence of military movement.⁹

The dispute over sovereignty claims between China and Philippines over the Reed Bank adding much to the horrible picture of maritime dispute in the

⁸ Glaser, 'Armed Clash in The South China Sea,' p. 2 (footnote 117).

⁹ Glaser, 'Armed Clash in The South China Sea,' p. 8 (footnote 117).

South China Sea. China aggressive movement against the Philippines was started with the harassment of oil survey ships that operating in Reed Bank by Chinese ships. The Reed Bank is located approximately 80 nautical miles northwest of Palawan, which geographically located in the Philippines EEZ territorial. It is crystal clear- the right over the Reed Bank actually falls on the Philippines. For China, one of the sea's important resources, the untapped oil and abundant of gas deposits contained in the Reed Bank, for the area become one of China controlled territory are things worth fighting for. China-based the claim over the area on the nine-dash line China used to mark its territory in the South China Sea, which according to International tribunal is illegitimate and invalid. As matter of fact, not only China sees the wealth of this area, Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei also claimed a share in the zone. For the Philippines, Reed Bank is an important resource for the future energy consumption. The government of Philippines realizes the rigidity that follows in holding one of the highest concentrations of an undiscovered resource.¹⁰ In reality, China has frequently stopped the Philippines attempts to explore Reed Bank on its own, even when there is no such agreement on exploration activity between the two countries.

As matter of fact, China assertive military conduct increasing to the level of outright defiance, in 2013 China began the construction of land reclamation, reclaimed more than 2.900 acres of land in contested islands, equipped with military equipment that allows China to conduct strict supervision surrounding the islands.

In the last few years, China has begun unilaterally establishing indirect control over the contested island groups through a major land reclamation

¹⁰Jeremy Maxie, 'Philippines Faces Post-Arbitration Dilemma over Reed Bank' (*The Diplomat*, 2016) <<http://thediplomat.com/2016/07/philippines-faces-post-arbitration-dilemma-over-reed-bank/>> accessed 21 December 2016.

project, the so-called 'Great wall of sand', including the construction of objects for military use. This has led to ever-increasing tension between the countries involved in the dispute, where a clear anti-China bloc has formed, backed by Japan and the US striving to preserve the right of free navigation in the region.¹¹

Further military conduct of China in its artificial islands become one factor the disputed finally arrived on the international tribunal. In July 2016 the international tribunal in Hague conclude the arbitration by deciding that the nine-dash line claimed by China is incompatible with the UNCLOS, therefore it is illegal and the rule on disputed waters fall on the Philippines. The decision was accepted by most of the disputed parties, but that was not the case with China. China's President, further asserted that China's territorial sovereignty and marine rights would not be affected by the ruling, therefore the verdict was null and void.¹²

The forceful logic of China's presumptive position toward Reed Bank is clear...Through coercion and harassment, China can indefinitely delay the exploration and development of Reed Bank. The Philippines' only rational option is to agree to joint development with China, albeit on China's terms since Philippine companies are unable to develop Reed Bank alone and international partners are reluctant to participate.¹³

This is the real evidence depicting a daunting picture endorsed by those pessimistic about the rise of China. The inescapable tension might as well induce the instability within the region, where the military sector increased abruptly and regional disputes heat up.

Apart from the South China Sea, the dispute between China and Japan in the East Asia Sea is also contributed to the deteriorating instability in the region. Even though the dispute does not involve multiple claimants as in the South China Sea,

¹¹Carlijn Prins and Ksenija Vojevoda, 'Asia-Pacific: The Rise of China in A (Geo)Politically Diverse Continent' (Rabo Research 2016), p. 6.

¹²Katie Hunt, 'Beijing Rejects Tribunal's Ruling in South China Sea Case' (*The Guardian*, 2016) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/12/philippines-wins-south-china-sea-case-against-china>> accessed 27 December 2016.

¹³*ibid.*

this conflict drew so much attention from the international community and become as much as complicated as the dispute in the South China Sea. The uninhabited small islands and rocks in the East China Sea are just one of the long list of disagreement between these two countries. Their mutual relationship is strained due to such factors as their competition for regional leadership and the historical memories of animosity between them.¹⁴Historically, both China and Japan have long engaged in 'imperceptible war' preceded by fundamental issues of nation's identity and the different understanding of future objectives and history.

When politicians talk so much about structural reasons, one should be alarmed because they are essentially shifting the responsibility of conflict to the circumstances beyond their control. It is largely up to the governments and their people to decide how this relationship will evolve. If something tragic happens, the governments should be held accountable.¹⁵

Therefore, an extraordinary military modernization of China holds an assertive and offensive nature of the adversaries. Security dilemma becomes a natural thing in these circumstances. The concern is that when states without hesitation began to show a similar pattern of assertiveness in order to maintain their security, and the most of all preserving their national interest. An increase in defense budget expenditure, the more sophisticated military equipment and war weaponry will furthermore pull the trigger of military escalation and jeopardize the possibility of future arms races. From this phenomenon, the scholars and policymakers have widely considered the Asia-Pacific hazardous rivalry and at risk of intensifying military competition.

¹⁴Andy Yee, 'Maritime Territorial Disputes in East Asia: A Comparative Analysis of the South China Sea and The East China Sea' [2011] *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, pp. 3-5.

¹⁵ Tatshui Arai, Sishoko Goto and Zheng Wang, 'Clash of National Identities: China, Japan, and the East China Sea Territorial Dispute' (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars 2016).

A changing distribution of material capabilities owing primarily to China's rise, coupled with region-wide economic growth, surging military spending, and military modernization, seems to have created an even more volatile climate and a potentially vicious cycle of arming and rearming. Together, the pace and scale of change create uncertainty about the future, which in turn exacerbates extant insecurities. In a reaction of these regional trends, many observers suggest that an arms race is under way in the Asia-Pacific, and some point to the security dilemma as driving this competition.¹⁶

From this point, one could argue, the ambitious political and military conduct China has addressed in the both regional territorial and border disputes is a manifestation of China offensive strategy of territorial expansion, as part of their national interest. Wealth and power is a principle inherent in every of national agenda. Accordingly, as endorsed by the concept of national interest from the perspective of realism, any possible means will be pursued as long as the national interest are maintained and achieved. China did not hesitate to launch a military offensive that has been prepared to date, in order to pursue and maintain the national interest, which also becomes the indicator of China's this trend is growing increasingly day.

¹⁶Adam P. Liff and G. John Ikenberry, 'Racing Toward Tragedy? China's Rise, Military Competition in the Asia Pacific, and the Security Dilemma' (2014) 39 *International Security*, p.52.