

The South China Sea dispute

How much can a country do with force, without crossing the red line? Identify China's strategies for expanding its reach in the South China Sea and the likelihood of it escalating into war.

Besvarelse av bacheloroppgave i POL2900, internasjonal politikk v. Jo Jakobsen.

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Mai, 2019

8,339 ord.

Acknowledgements

Writing this dissertation has proved to be an exciting, interesting and challenging academic journey with many ups and downs. Yet looking back at the process, I realise that I have gained a great deal of experience and knowledge. I wish to take this time to express my genuine thanks to my supervisor, Jo Jakobsen, for providing me with much appreciated guidance and feedback.

Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to identify China's strategies for expanding its reach in the South China Sea (SCS) and the likelihood of the conflict escalating into war. Research included a review of China's use of grey zone tactics such as salami slicing, *fait accompli* and intermediaries; neighbouring states reactions to Chinese expansionism and whether tensions appear to be rising. Through a qualitative document study using 148 newspaper articles from the Guardian, the findings suggest China use a combination of resource exploitation within other states Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), civilian expansionism and militarization of disputed islands to expand its reach in the SCS. The strategies applied are consistent with previous researchers' notion of grey zone tactics. In regards to neighbouring states' reactions to Chinese expansionism, the findings suggest China is increasingly being identified as an aggressor, which has led to some counter-balancing action. However, China has not provoked any overly aggressive reactions, suggesting China has been relatively successful in calculating the degree of aggression applied to stay under the threshold of response. Overall, as both China and the other claimant states has generally avoided the use of force, this seems to indicate that all parties want to avoid escalating the conflict. The chance of a misstep is present, however, due to the significant costs associated with war, the probability of conflict is considered to be relatively low.

Table of contents:

1. Introduction.....	1
2.1. Theoretical framework.....	2
2.1.1. Salami tactics	3
2.1.2. Fait accompli	4
2.1.3. The use of intermediaries.....	4
2.1.4. The dangers with grey zone tactics.....	4
2.1.5. The South China Sea dispute	5
2.1.6. The SCS - a potential flashpoint?	7
3.1. Methodology	7
4.1. Chapter 1:China’s strategies in the SCS.	9
4.1.1. Resource exploitation	10
4.1.2. Civilian expansionism	13
4.1.3. Militarisation.....	14
4.2. Chapter 2: Reactions to Chinese expansionism	15
4.2.1. Militarisation.....	16
4.2.2. Closer alliances with the US.....	16
4.2.3. Closer alliances with China	18
5.1. Discussion.....	18
6. Conclusion	22
References:.....	24
Appendix:.....	27
Dataset:	27

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, China has become a central actor in world politics. Building on its economic success, China has established itself as an influential regional and global power. However, in line with its growing power, China has taken on an increasingly confrontational tone when dealing with smaller neighbouring states, particularly in its handling of the territorial disputes in the South China Sea (SCS). As China is the largest net importer of petroleum in the world, securing control over the SCS and its resources is central. Not to mention the fact that China enhances both its territorial integrity and national security if controlling the island groups in the SCS (Carpio, 2017; De Castro, 2016). However, the problem is that China acts as if they are above international law by seizing, occupying and militarizing disputed islands, at the expense of smaller neighbouring states (Sutter, 2015). In isolation, China's actions are too minor to justify war. Over time, however, China has taken *de facto* control over much of the SCS (Haddick, 2015). As a result, the region is increasingly viewing China as an imminent threat, and steps have been taken to balance Chinese power (Mazarr, 2015). In response, neighbouring states have increased their defence spending and established military presence in the islands they occupy (Meng, 2017). If China continues to overpower the littoral states in the region, the sum of China's expansive actions are feared to push the conflict up the escalatory ladder, leading to progressively more violent forms of confrontation and war (Haddick, 2015; Mazarr, 2015).

Literature indicates that China traditionally has exploited the so-called "grey areas", challenging a defender not where its retaliation commitments are clearest, but rather where its resolve has weaknesses (Jackson, 2017). The aim is to initiate the intrusion on too small a scale to provoke a reaction. Over time, however, the aggressor achieves a dramatic change in the status quo (Takahashi, 2018; Mazarr, 2015). According to Schelling (2008), an inherent danger with grey zone tactics is that the aggressor goes too far, hoping it will pass under the threshold of response, only to see it spark a massive crisis. As most of the countries of Southeast Asia depend heavily on the fishery of the SCS to feed their populations, China's neighbouring states might reach a point of intolerance (Mazarr, 2015). If China underestimates the defender's willingness to hit back, it might spark a spiral of conflict (Mazarr, 2015). As such, through the application of grey zone theories, the overall aims of this research are to:

1. Identify the strategies applied by China to expand its reach in the SCS.

2. Examine neighbouring states' reactions to Chinese expansionism, and whether tensions appear to be rising.
3. Assess the likelihood of war, and whether the strategies employed are likely to spark a massive crisis.

First, in order to achieve greater insight into the SCS dispute, this dissertation will provide a literature review. Here, a summary of the South China Sea dispute will be outlined. This will include a definition of the three grey zone tactics – salami slicing, *fait accompli* and intermediaries. The risks involved in employing grey zone tactics, the key determinants of the SCS dispute, and the potential for the SCS of becoming a major flashpoint, will also be accounted for. Secondly, the methodology will outline how the research was conducted, as well as justify the choice of the methods applied, and how unforeseen challenges/limitations were addressed. The findings are then divided into two chapters; the first chapter describes China's strategies in the SCS, whereby China's use of salami tactics, *fait accompli* operations and intermediaries are examined. The second chapter consists of the neighbouring states reactions to Chinese expansionism. The neighbouring states' balancing behaviour in the form of militarization and alliance patterns will then be addressed, before examining the likelihood of war, and whether the strategies employed are likely to spark a massive crisis. In total, the data indicates that while China's actions have not generated any overly aggressive reactions, evidence indicates that China is increasingly being identified as an aggressor. This has led to balancing behaviour and several claimant states involved in the dispute are militarizing and seeking closer alliances with the US. However, as both China and the other claimant states have generally avoided the use of force, this seems to indicate that they have incentives to keep tensions from escalating. While the chance of a misstep is present, due to the significant costs associated with war, the probability of armed conflict is considered to be relatively low.

2.1. Theoretical framework

As war is at best ugly, costly and dangerous, and at worst, disastrous, the truth is that most countries do not want war and are only willing to fight if they have to. While a threat of war may deter an aggressor, convincing enemies one would use military force under circumstances of great cost and risk, requires more than military capability. It requires communicating those intentions persuasively. When a defender establishes red lines for the sake of credible deterrence, actors can be tempted to test the threshold or explore for

loopholes (Schelling, 2008; Lebow, 1996). Historically, competitive states have exploited the so-called “grey areas”, challenging a defender not where its resolve is clearest, but rather where its retaliation commitments have weaknesses (Jackson, 2017). The aim is to initiate the intrusion on too small a scale to provoke a reaction. Over time, however, the aggressor achieves a dramatic change in the status quo (Takahashi, 2018; Mazarr, 2015). The deterrent threats that first seemed credible and militarily effective, suddenly appear infirm and porous (Wirtz, 2017). Such grey zone tactics came to be known during the cold war, however they are still very much present today (Jackson, 2017).

Three of the most commonly used grey zone tactics includes (1) the salami tactic, which implies the slow-motion erosion of an opponent’s red line commitment; (2) presenting a *fait accompli*, which involves acting and placing facts on the ground before the opponent realize it; and (3) using intermediaries as aggressors (Jackson, 2017). These tactics aim to avoid the defender’s clearest red lines, pressing only where one believes defender commitments have weaknesses. An inherent danger with challenging the *status quo*, however, is the potential for escalation in conflict (Jackson, 2017; Wirtz, 2017; Schelling, 2008).

2.1.1. Salami tactics

The term “salami tactics” originally stems from Thomas C. Schelling’s book *Arms and Influences* from 1966, yet, it has been adopted and developed further by several contemporary scholars (i.e., Takahashi, 2018; Jackson, 2017; Wirtz, 2017; Mazarr, 2015). By salami tactics, Schelling (2008) describes the deliberate erosion of a defenders red line through initiatives that stays below the perceived threshold for reaction. In a sense, the actor seeking to alter the status quo presents the defender with seemingly “innocent” initiatives, none of which in isolation amounts to a *casus belli*. Nonetheless, over time these initiatives add up to a substantial change in the geostrategic picture (Jackson, 2017; Wirtz, 2017). As the challenge is small and gradual, the defender often finds it difficult to justify a retaliatory response (Jackson, 2017). Particularly China and Russia’s use of sub-threshold challenges have become a serious agenda in international security. The SCS, the East China Sea (ECS) and Crimea are cases in point. Deterring such creeping expansion by revisionist powers currently pose a serious challenge in both Europe and Asia (Takahashi, 2018).

2.1.2. *Fait accompli*

The second grey zone tactic is referred to as *fait accompli*. *Fait accompli* is probably the riskiest type of grey zone tactic. In contrast to the salami tactic, the challenger rapidly changes the status quo before anyone can react, eliminating the possibility that the defender can intervene before facts on the ground are changed (Takahashi, 2018; Wirtz, 2017). Like the salami tactic, *fait accompli* confronts the defender with a choice between giving in or escalating the conflict. For example, a *fait accompli* might be a military operation aimed at rapidly seizing and occupying a piece of a territory. Such a non-coercive “land-grab” is both more common and more successful than attempts to acquire territory by coercion (Jackson, 2017). The swift appearance of a Chinese outpost on an unoccupied rock in the SCS, for instance, is a form of *fait accompli* (Mazar, 2015). If successful, *fait accompli* enables the aggressor to establish a new status quo baseline, secure gains at the expense of the defender and shape future bargaining contexts, without creating a crisis or war (Jackson, 2017).

2.1.3. The use of intermediaries

The final grey zone tactic refers to the use of intermediaries. Using intermediaries is a particularly effective method of encroaching on a defender’s red line without crossing it. The main advantage with intermediaries is that the tie between the agent and the state is vague and questionable. Intermediaries are often relatively autonomous agents, which traditionally do not play a significant role in executing “high politics” (Jackson, 2017). For instance, in the SCS, China’s Coast Guard and fishermen play a central role in its creeping expansionism. Similarly, in Crimea, without any sign of national flag, special operations forces were employed as anonymous ‘little green men’, collaborating with the Russian minority in Crimea (Takahashi, 2018). While these paramilitary forces regularly engage in confrontational actions, they are not a war-making instrument of the state. As such, this forces the opponent to consider the extent to which they reflect a deliberately aggressive design by the state, or whether they are acting independently (Jackson, 2017).

2.1.4. The dangers with grey zone tactics

States adopting grey zone tactics generally want to avoid war. However, through a long series of provocative (and sometimes violent actions), grey zone strategies present a range of risks (Green et al., 2017; Mazarr, 2015). The most likely routes to war are through misperception, accident or miscalculation, and grey zone strategies set the stage for all three (Mazarr, 2015). The key challenge with grey zone tactics is that one cannot always perceive what interpretation are put on one’s actions and one does not always understand clearly what

situations the other side would go to war for. This creates challenges in calculating what risks are worth taking, and how to evaluate the risks involved in a course of action (Mazarr, 2015; Schelling, 2008).

Schelling (2008) recognizes that an inherent danger with grey zone tactics is that the aggressor challenges the status quo, hoping it will pass under the threshold of response, only to see it spark a massive crisis. The Soviet-North Korean invasion of South Korea in 1950 is one such example. Several minor attacks prior to the larger intervention had not provoked a significant US response. As such, it was estimated that the US would stay out of the conflict. Rather, it resulted in war (Mazarr, 2015). According to Schelling (2008), no service is done by behaving in a way that undermines one's willingness to act. If one side yields on a series of issues when the matters at stake are not critical, it may be difficult to communicate to the aggressor just when a vital issue has been reached. Few parts of the world are intrinsically worth the risk of war by themselves, but running risks to defend them may preserve one's commitment to action in other parts of the world at later times (ibid.).

2.1.5. The South China Sea dispute

The SCS is perhaps the world's most contested maritime space. The conflict relates to the capacity of maritime features to generate maritime jurisdiction (Schofield, 2016). The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982) provides the legal framework for maritime entitlements, in which China is a signatory. According to UNCLOS, only habitable islands generate exclusive economic zones (EEZ) and continental shelf rights (CSR). EEZ and CSR provide exclusive exploitation rights of natural resources between 200 nautical miles (nm) and 400nm from the baseline. High-tide elevations, such as rocks, can only acquire territorial rights (12nm), while low-tide elevations and entirely subsurface features are incapable of generating maritime claims (Schofield, 2016, Carlson et al. 2013). While most of the maritime features in the SCS are small and uninhabitable, they are potentially rich in methane hydrates, oil and gas reserves. Consequently, this has significantly increased interstate conflict over ownership and exploitation rights (Carpio, 2017; Lysaght, 2017; Meng, 2017; De Castro 2016).

As the biggest among coastal states, China has declared undisputable sovereign rights and jurisdiction to over 80% of the SCS, including the two largest island groups – the Paracels and Spratlys (Carpio, 2017; Meng, 2017; Lysaght, 2017; Schofield, 2016). China's assertion of rights has directly set it up against the other littoral states in the region such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia and Taiwan (Schofield 2016; Jihyun,

2015). In contrast to the other claimant states, however, China asserts its rights beyond what UNCLOS provides, depriving other coastal states of their maritime entitlements (Schofield, 2016).

For years, China has seized, occupied and militarized islands, islets, shoals and reefs in the SCS at the expense of smaller, neighbouring states – in blatant rejection of international law (Carpio, 2017; Sutter, 2015). Though, as China aims to stay below the threshold of reaction, it can take years between each expansive move (Mazarr 2015). This slow-moving approach can be dated back to 1946, when China took over the Amphitrite Group of the Paracel Islands and the Itu Aba in the Spratlys following the defeat of the Japanese. Furthermore, in 1974, China fought a brief, but bloody battle with Vietnam over the Crescent Group of the Paracels. In 1987, China occupied Fiery Cross Reef. In 1988, China forcibly evicted Vietnam from Johnson South Reef, and seized Subi Reef from the Philippines. In 1994-1995, China seized Mischief Reef from the Philippines (Carpio, 2017; Green et al., 2017; Meng, 2017). While China's actions in isolation are too minor to justify major war, over time, China has taken *de facto* control over much of the SCS (Haddick 2015). However, in recent years, China has somewhat altered its behaviour. Since 2012, President Xi Jinping has increasingly turned to “assertive diplomacy” (Jackson, 2017; Meng, 2017; Lai, 2014). Through increasing naval patrols, intimidating and detaining fishing vessels and their crews, producing fines, confiscating equipment and escorting foreign vessels out of disputed waters, China increasingly makes show of force (Green et al., 2017; De Castro, 2016; Carlson et al. 2013). Although Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan and others frequently report coercive Chinese actions, China has typically evaded US defence commitments (Green et al., 2017). This is largely due to China's use of intermediaries. Instead of using its navy, civilian vessels are utilized to challenge and detain fishing boats from other littoral states, to explore and identify sites for Chinese oil drilling in disputed waters, and to prevent other claimant states from deploying their seismic ships in energy-rich areas of the SCS (Carpio, 2017; De Castro, 2016). While China's intentions remain vague, they repeatedly assert their territorial claims to vast parts of the SCS (Haddick, 2015).

In addition to its territorial disputes, China has added 3,200 acres of land to seven uninhabitable features it occupies in the Spratlys (Meng, 2017). While artificial islands cannot generate maritime claims according to UNCLOS, China uses these newly formed “islands” as military bases (Schofield, 2016). One example is the Fiery Cross Reef, a two-square meter high-tide elevation, protruding less than a meter above water at high tide. The

Fiery Cross Reef was in 2014-2015 built into a 270-hectare island, hosting a military airbase with a three-kilometre military grade runway and a seaport (Carpio, 2017). Over the last two decades, China has invested heavily in its military, and designed a modernization program providing highly effective military capabilities (Haddick, 2015). Combined with its land reclamation efforts, China can almost declare an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the SCS. An air and naval base in Scarborough Shoal will complete China's radar coverage of the SCS. This will also secure the Bashi Channel, which is China's outlet to the Pacific (Jackson, 2017; Meng 2017). As such, littoral states in the region could eventually find themselves forced to accept Chinese hegemony (Wirtz 2017).

2.1.6. The SCS - a potential flashpoint?

As the region is increasingly viewing China as an imminent threat, steps have been taken to balance Chinese power (Mazarr, 2015). The US has renewed its presence and strengthened security ties with the Philippines, Vietnam, and to various extents, Malaysia, Indonesia and Taiwan (Meng, 2017). Regional states are increasingly coordinating their responses. All ASEAN states have increased their defence spending, and all claimant-states, except Brunei, have established military presence in the islands they occupy (Meng, 2017; De Castro, 2016). If China continues to overpower the littoral states in the region, the sum of China's expansive actions may push the conflict up the escalatory ladder, leading to progressively more violent forms of confrontation and war (Haddick, 2015; Mazarr, 2015). The aim of this dissertation is therefore to identify how much a country can do with force, without crossing the red line. Through the application of the three grey zone strategies – salami slicing, *fait accompli* and intermediaries – China's strategies for occupying maritime territory in the SCS will be outlined. The literature indicates that China's strategy has become increasingly aggressive. The question is therefore whether China can continue to avoid the other claimant states' red line commitments or risks sparking a massive crisis.

3.1. Methodology

To examine the SCS dispute, which represents one of the world's most contested maritime space, a qualitative method was considered the most suitable approach. As quantitative research often break theories into sets of bivariate or multivariate hypotheses, qualitative research allows for a more open-ended process, in which in-depth, rich and detailed data can emerge (Maoz, 2002). Furthermore, a document study was conducted, wherein newspapers were the primary source of data. Newspapers offered comprehensive

descriptions of events, provided a quick and inexpensive method to access data, and presented time-specific and up-to-date reporting. This allowed the researcher to access data instantly as new events occurred (Tjora, 2017). As no direct interaction with participants was required to generate the data, most ethical considerations were avoided (Burnham et al., 2008).

The SCS were applied as a case study, meaning the data collection was restricted to include events happening in/or around the SCS. In order to collect data, a search for the "South China Sea" in the Guardian's database was conducted, in which 279 articles appeared. All news articles from 2012 and onwards were saved, before a systematic review of every article was conducted. Initially, a broad collection of data was gathered. All events and official statements involving the US, China and the claimant states in the region were included. This reduced the dataset to 148 articles, which became the initial basis for the analysis. Eventually, however, only events involving China and the littoral states involved in the dispute were incorporated. This included the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and Taiwan. The final sample comprised of 42 articles. As Xi Jinping became president in 2012, and China began pushing a more assertive and nationalistic foreign policy in the SCS from this point forward, 2012 was chosen as the starting point for the analysis (Loher, 2017; Meng, 2017). After collecting the data, a search through the Guardian's database was conducted at regular intervals, to collect any new articles being published. In terms of ethics, it must be recognized that all data derived from Western newspapers, and that the press cannot be regarded as providing a neutral record of the SCS dispute (Bryman, 2012). However, as the Guardian is a large news agency, with a reputation for being a credible source of events, this research is based on the assumption that the reported occurrences are, in fact, real happenings. Furthermore, to avoid bias, only descriptive news articles were selected, meaning any editorials or chronicles representing the writer's opinions were excluded from the dataset. It could have been beneficial to include other news agencies' coverage of events to safeguard the accuracy of the Guardian's reporting, yet due to the Guardian's news coverage of the SCS being quite extensive, as well as time and resource limitations, the costs of including more news agencies outweighed the benefits. Nevertheless, to ensure an all-encompassing dataset, some information were gathered from other news agencies, particularly BBC. For instance, as the Guardian's coverage of events in the SCS in 2012 was limited, it was decided to add BBC as another source of information. Another limitation relates to the fact that small events might not be sufficiently covered by the news. One feature which is found to be lacking in the dataset is China's land reclamation activities.

While previous research has documented China's construction of artificial islands, it has not been adequately covered in the dataset. Nonetheless, as the most central events are likely to be included, the analysis will only be based on events that actually reached the media.

To analyse the data, a thematic analysis was conducted. Essentially, a thematic analysis is a method for ordering and synthesizing data. This involves systematically identifying patterns in the data and creating a framework for making comparisons and contrasts between the different themes that emerged (Gomm, 2008). A thematic analysis was considered the most beneficial approach due to the flexibility it provides. This allowed for a detailed, dynamic account of the SCS conflict (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The variables selected included any form of expansive actions, confrontations, military activities, agreements and alliance patterns. Events were further categorized according to the date, actor, type of event, and whether the event contributed to increasing tensions between the actors. Originally, the dataset included official statements, diplomatic, legal and administrative activities, yet as the data was considered too extensive, this was eventually excluded. This, amongst others, excluded the 2016 ruling by the International Court of Arbitration in the Hague, which rejected China's claims to vast parts of the SCS. While it is recognized that this was a highly important ruling, and statements can be an important source of deterrent threats, it was concluded that actions speak louder than words. Thus, due to this being a minor research paper with formal requirements regarding its length, it was considered more important to do an in-depth analysis of the actions of the actors involved in the dispute.

Nevertheless, one limitation with this method is that analysing data becomes a very selective process, during which the researcher actively makes choices about what to include, what to discard and how to interpret events. Arguably, the researcher could influence the selection included and theories could be amended to fit the empirical test (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Yet, overall, despite its limitations, a thematic analysis was considered the most suitable approach due to the flexibility it provides. Moreover, it is important to note, that this research was only based on one case study, which limits the generalisation of the findings.

4.1. Chapter 1: China's strategies in the SCS.

Chinese assertiveness in maritime disputes is not a new phenomenon. However, in recent years, China has somewhat altered its strategy from one of "creeping expansionism" to "assertive diplomacy" (Jackson, 2017; Meng 2017; Lai, 2014). Literature indicates that neighbouring states are now increasingly viewing China as an imminent threat. Research

suggest that if China continues to overpower the littoral states in the region, the sum of China's expansive actions may push the conflict up the escalatory ladder, leading to progressively more violent forms of confrontation and war (Haddick, 2015; Mazarr, 2015). As such, through the application of the three grey zone strategies – salami slicing, *fait accompli* and intermediaries – this dissertation will now examine China's strategies for expanding its reach in the SCS and the reactions provoked by the claimant states involved in the dispute.

In regards to China's strategies for expanding its reach in the SCS, three themes have been discovered; (1) Resource exploitation, (2) civilian expansionism and (3) militarization of disputed maritime features. The data indicates that China regularly engages in resource exploitation within neighbouring states EEZ's to assert its claims to maritime rights. Fishing vessels and oil exploration companies, in theory, represent autonomous actors. If challenged, however, China's Coast Guard intervenes and back up the actors' claims. In a few instances, what initially appeared as resource exploitation ended with the occupation of other states' maritime territories. Secondly, the data indicates China is building civilian infrastructure on several of the islands and reefs it occupies. At first sight, these civilian initiatives appear to be relatively innocent. However, over time, the civilian infrastructure is gradually militarised. In all three themes, grey zone tactics are used interchangeably. The strongest evidence however, suggests China's use of salami slicing and intermediaries. There is only one example of *fait accompli* since 2012.

4.1.1. Resource exploitation

Chinese exploitation of resources within other countries EEZs and CSR happens regularly in the SCS. Whether these civilian agencies are acting independently or reflect a deliberate aggressive design by the state, can be difficult to determine initially (Jackson, 2017). However, a closer examination of each case suggests intermediaries and oil companies are deliberately used to encroach on the defender's red line. For instance, when Chinese vessels were caught fishing illegally near Scarborough Shoal on 10th April 2012, the Philippine navy attempted to detain the anglers, however, they were blocked by two Chinese surveillance ships¹. This prompted the Philippines to deploy a warship, leading to a standoff between China and the Philippines². On 14th April 2012, by agreement, all Chinese

¹ *The Guardian*, 14. April 2012. "China and Philippines end fishing standoff". Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/14/china-philippines-end-fishing-standoff>

² *The Guardian*, 11. April 2012. «Philippine warship in standoff with China vessels». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/11/philippines-china-stand-off-south-china-sea>

and Philippine vessels left the area, leaving only one Chinese maritime survey ship and the Philippine Coast Guard³. A month later, on the 15th of May, the Chinese impounded banana imports from the Philippines⁴. The situation remained unchanged until the 22nd of May 2012, when 96 Chinese vessels reportedly entered the disputed shoal, renewing tensions. Despite a seasonal fishing ban imposed by both countries, Chinese vessels were seen fishing and collecting protected corals⁵. As the Chinese Coast Guard prevented the fishermen's arrest and refused to leave the area, this indicates the fishermen presence near Scarborough Shoal were not a coincident and they were not acting independently.

Similarly, 1st May 2014, China deployed an oil rig near the Paracel Islands 140nm off the coast of Vietnam. The rig was escorted by a flotilla of ships, some in which were armed, preventing foreign ships from coming within a 3-mile radius of the rig. If Vietnamese vessels attempted to approach the rig, they were rammed by high-powered water cannons⁶. Chinese officials made similar claims, stating that Vietnam had dispatched 35 vessels and rammed Chinese ships as many as 171 times⁷. China's placement of the oil rig within Vietnam's EEZ provoked riots in Vietnam, where foreign-owned factories were attacked and Chinese workers targeted. As a result, 20 people were killed and over 100 hospitalised⁸. Yet, despite this, the rig remained in place until 16th July 2014⁹. Once again, China exploited natural resources within another states EEZ, and refused to leave when confronted. This can be considered a classic *fait accompli*. The rig was placed in Vietnamese waters, before Vietnam had time to respond, eliminating Vietnam's possibility of intervening before facts on the ground were changed (Takahashi, 2018). This seemingly reflects a deliberate expansionist design by the state. However, what separates this incident from others is that both actors

³ *The Guardian*, 14. April 2012. "China and Philippines end fishing standoff". Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/14/china-philippines-end-fishing-standoff>

⁴ *ABC News*, 15. May 2012. "200k workers affected by Philippine-China banana trade issue". Available at: <https://news.abs-cbn.com/business/05/15/12/200k-affected-ph-china-banana-trade-issue>

⁵ *The Guardian*, 23. May 2012. "Philippine accuses China of deploying ships in Scarborough Shoal". Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/23/philippines-china-ships-scarborough-shoal>

⁶ *The Guardian*, 7. May 2014. «Tensions rise in South China Sea as Vietnamese boats come under attack». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/07/chinese-vietnamese-vessels-clash-south-china-sea>

⁷ *The Guardian*, 8. May 2014. «China accuses Vietnam of ramming its ships in the South China Sea». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/08/china-accuses-vietnam-ships-south-china-sea-oil-rig>

⁸ *The Guardian*, 15. May 2014. «Anti-China riots turn deadly in Vietnam». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/15/anti-china-riots-turn-deadly-in-vietnam>

⁹ *The Guardian*, 17. July 2014. «Despite oil rig removal, China and Vietnam row still simmers». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/17/oil-rig-china-vietnam-row-south-china-sea>

engaged in the use of force and civilians were killed as a result of the dispute. This is one of the riskiest challenges made by China in recent years, and it could have easily sparked a massive crisis (Schelling, 2008).

Likewise, on the 19th March 2016, a Chinese fishing trawler was arrested for illegally fishing 4.3km off Indonesia's Natuna Islands¹⁰. As it was being towed, the Chinese Coast Guard intervened and "rammed" the trawler, allowing it to escape¹¹. Again, China applied force to assert its claims, indicating that it is becoming increasingly heavy-handed with its neighbours in the territorial dispute (Lai, 2014). In contrast, the Vietnamese seizing of the Chinese vessels on 4th April 2016, said to be carrying more than 100,000 litres of diesel oil, happened quietly with no involvement of the Chinese Coast Guard¹². 20th June 2016, however, Chinese boats were once again illegally fishing near Indonesia's Natuna Islands. This time, Indonesia's navy fired warning shots. Reportedly, one of the Chinese fishing boats were damaged, while another was detained with seven people on board¹³. The Chinese Coast Guard was present, but did not get involved and left the area quietly. This might indicate that Indonesia's aggressive response deterred further Chinese aggressions. More recently, however, on the 5th of April 2019, hundreds of Chinese fishing vessels and Coast Guard ships reportedly "swarmed" the Manila-held Pag-asa Island, also known as Thitu Island. The Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte warned Beijing to back-off from the island, stating "if you touch it, then I will tell my soldiers to prepare for suicide missions"¹⁴. Through this statement, the Philippines established a red line. However, as the Philippines has yielded on a series of issues previously, it may be difficult to persuade China that they now are willing to use military force under circumstances of great cost and risk (Takahashi, 2018; Schelling, 2008). If China once again decides to test the Philippines commitment to action, thinking it will pass under the threshold of response, it could spark a massive crisis, particularly as Philippine soldiers are stationed there (Mazarr, 2015).

¹⁰ *The Guardian*, 21. March 2016. «Indonesia summons Chinese ambassador as fishing dispute escalates». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/21/south-china-sea-indonesia-summons-chinese-ambassador-as-fishing-dispute-escalates>

¹¹ *The Guardian*, 24. March 2016. «Indonesia vows to prosecute Chinese trawler crew in South China Sea dispute». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/24/indonesia-vows-to-prosecute-chinese-trawler-crew-in-south-china-sea-dispute>

¹² *The Guardian*, 4. April 2016. «Vietnam seizes Chinese vessel in South China Sea». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/04/vietnam-seizes-chinese-vessel-detains-crew>

¹³ *The Guardian*, 20. June 2016. «Indonesian navy fires on Chinese fishing boat, injuring one, Beijing claims». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/20/indonesian-navy-fires-on-chinese-fishing-boat-injuring-one-beijing-claims>

¹⁴ *The Guardian*, 5. April 2019. «Duterte warns Beijing of suicide missions to protect disputed island». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/05/south-china-sea-duterte-warns-china-of-suicide-missions-to-protect-disputed-island>

In line with the theoretical framework, the data support the use of all three grey zone tactics; salami slicing, fait accompli and the use of intermediaries. While illegally exploiting resources within other states EEZ are seemingly “innocent” initiatives, it is also an effective method of encroaching on a defender’s red line without crossing it. Overall, while these initiatives could at first sight be mistaken to be mere accidents, a closer examination indicates that these civilian actors work on behalf of the state and their actions reflect a deliberate expansive design by China.

4.1.2. Civilian expansionism

China’s perhaps most successful strategy relates to its civilian expansionism. In essence, the salami slices are cut too thin to generate much response. For instance, 21st June 2012, China announced the establishment of a new city and new local government in Sansha city, on Woody Island, part of the disputed Paracel archipelago¹⁵. Similarly, 14th December 2015, the Chinese oil major Sinopec announced the building of a filling station and storage tank on Woody Island¹⁶. 6th January 2016, China completed two new runways on Fiery Cross reef¹⁷. 11th March 2016, China began civilian flights to and from Sansha city, boosting air traffic services in the region¹⁸. Then, on the 27th of May 2016, the Mayor of Sansha city, announced their plans to use the islands and reefs to accommodate tourists, claiming there would be seaplane trips, island weddings, fishing and diving trips¹⁹. These civilian initiatives are seemingly innocent and have not provoked much response. Isolated, this form of civilian expansionism represents relatively harmless initiatives. However, when analysing the dataset as a whole, the building of civilian infrastructure appears to merely be a first step before militarization.

¹⁵ *BBC*, 22. June 2012. «South China Sea ructions». Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-18546138>

¹⁶ *The Guardian*, 14. December 2015. «China to build filling station on disputed South China Sea island». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/14/china-to-build-filling-station-on-disputed-south-china-sea-island>

¹⁷ *The Guardian*, 7. January 2016. «Chinese civilian jet airliners land at disputed South China Sea island». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/07/chinese-civilian-jet-airliners-land-at-disputed-south-china-sea-island-state-media>

¹⁸ *The Guardian*, 11. March 2016 . «China to begin civilian flights to disputed South China Sea island». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/11/china-to-begin-civilian-flights-to-disputed-south-china-sea-island>

¹⁹ *The Guardian*, 27. May 2016. «Like the Maldives: disputed South China Sea island to become tourism hotspot». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/27/like-the-maldives-disputed-south-china-sea-island-to-become-tourism-hotspot>

4.1.3. Militarisation

Another overarching theme relates to China's militarization of islands and reefs it occupies in the SCS. China's militarization of maritime features has expanded significantly since 2015. Beginning in November 2015, China deployed two J-11 fighters to Woody Island²⁰. 17th February 2016, China positioned eight surface-to-air missile launchers and radar systems on Woody Island²¹. The following day (18th April 2016), a Chinese military aircraft landed at Fiery Cross Reef²². 19th May 2018, a division of the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) organized take-off and landing exercises using bombers on multiple islands and reefs in the SCS²³. Furthermore, satellite images taken 22nd July 2016 revealed that China has built reinforced aircraft hangars, in addition to unidentified towers and hexagonal structures on its holdings on Fiery Cross, Subi and Mischief reef in the Spratly Islands²⁴. Satellite images from November 2016, reveal that China have positioned significant weapons systems, including anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems, on all seven of the artificial islands it occupies in the SCS²⁵. In 2017, China reportedly built 29 hectares (290,000square metres) of new facilities on contested islands, including munition depots, sensor arrays, radar systems and missile shelters²⁶. Later, in April 2018, China installed cruise missiles, surface to air

²⁰ *The Guardian*, 17. February 2016. «Beijing's missile move in South China Sea could make US think twice about getting too close». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/17/beijings-missile-move-in-south-china-sea-could-make-us-think-twice-about-getting-too-close>

²¹ *The Guardian*, 17. February 2016. «China places missile launchers on disputed South China Sea Island». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/17/china-places-missiles-woody-south-china-sea-islands>

²² *The Guardian*, 18. April 2016. «Chinese military plane lands on disputed South China Sea island». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/18/chinese-military-plane-lands-on-disputed-south-china-sea-island-media>

²³ *The Guardian*, 19. May 2018. «China lands nuclear strike-capable bombers on South China Sea islands». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/19/china-says-air-force-lands-bombers-on-south-china-sea-islands>

²⁴ *The Guardian*, 9. August 2016. «Photos suggest China built hangars with room for fighter jets in disputed islands». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/09/south-china-sea-photos-aircraft-hangers-spratly-islands>

²⁵ *The Guardian*, 15. December 2016. «Images show significant Chinese weapons systems in South China Sea». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/15/images-show-significant-chinese-weapons-systems-in-south-china-sea>

²⁶ *The Guardian*, 15. December 2017. «Slow moving crisis as Beijing bolsters South China Sea war platform». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/15/militarisation-beijing-south-china-sea-islands>

missile systems and electronic jammers on Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef and Mischief Reef²⁷. In May 2018, Beijing landed a nuclear-capable bomber aircraft at Woody Island²⁸.

The data indicates that since 2015, most of the maritime features occupied by China in the SCS has been militarised. Despite vows of having no intention of militarizing its artificial islands, this seems to suggest that China is investing heavily in the capacity to wage major warfare, and islands and reefs primarily serves as military bases. While the two new runways on Fiery Cross reef in January 2016 was initially constructed for civilian purposes²⁹ in April 2018, China had installed cruise missiles, surface to air missile systems and electronic jammers there³⁰. China's militarization of artificial islands violate not only UNCLOS but also the 2002 ASEAN – China Declaration of Conduct – which states that the parties should “refrain from...inhabiting presently uninhabited islands, reefs, shoals, cays and other features” (Carpio, 2017). Once again, China presents the defender with small initiatives, none of which in isolation amounts to a *casus belli*, but which over time add up to a substantial change in the geostrategic picture (Jackson, 2017).

4.2. Chapter 2: Reactions to Chinese expansionism

Another overarching theme identified during the course of this analysis is the neighbouring states' reactions to the Chinese expansionism. While China's actions have not generated any overly aggressive reactions, evidence indicates that China is increasingly being identified as an aggressor. This has led to balancing behaviour and several of the claimant states involved in the dispute are militarizing and seeking closer alliances with the US. However, some states, particularly the Philippines and Malaysia, have also decided to realign with China.

²⁷ *The Guardian*, 3. May 2018. «China deploys cruise missiles on South China Sea outposts». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/03/china-deploys-cruise-missiles-on-south-china-sea-outposts-reports>

²⁸ *The Guardian*, 2. June 2018. «Mattis accuses China of intimidation and coercion in South China Sea». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/02/mattis-accuses-china-of-intimidation-and-coercion-in-south-china-sea>

²⁹ *The Guardian*, 7. January 2016. «Chinese civilian jet airliners land at disputed South China Sea Island». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/07/chinese-civilian-jet-airliners-land-at-disputed-south-china-sea-island-state-media>

³⁰ *The Guardian*, 3. May 2018. “China deploys cruise missiles on South China Sea outposts”. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/03/china-deploys-cruise-missiles-on-south-china-sea-outposts-reports>

4.2.1. Militarisation

In response to the Chinese actions, and particularly its militarization of SCS features beginning in 2015, the claimant states in the region have also begun militarising their maritime territories. For instance, in March 2016, Indonesia announced the deployment of more troops, better equipped patrol boats and a strengthening of their naval base in Natuna Island after the presence of the Chinese fishing vessels outside Natuna Island³¹. Likewise, 10th August 2016, it was reported that Vietnam had fortified several of the islands it controlled in the SCS and installed mobile rocket launchers on them³². Then, 18th November 2016, it was reported that Vietnam had extended a runway on Spratly Island from 760metres to more than 1km, in order to accommodate maritime surveillance aircrafts, transport planes and combat aircrafts³³. Similarly, 8th December 2016, Vietnam began dredging work on Ladd Reef in the Spratly Islands, digging a channel between the lagoon and the open sea³⁴. The 17th of January 2017, Taiwan initiated a two-day military drill that simulated an attack by the People's Liberation Army in the Taiwan Strait. Troops tested their combat readiness with tanks, attack helicopters and artillery³⁵.

This indicates that Indonesia and particularly Vietnam are making substantial investments to improve their military capabilities. Likewise, Taiwan displays' its military readiness and signals it will fight should it be attacked. Generally, this might suggest that the littoral states feel threatened. While China remains superior, the costs of any armed conflict are increasing in line with greater military capabilities.

4.2.2. Closer alliances with the US

In regards to alliances, particularly the Philippines, but also Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore and Taiwan has sought support from and closer alliances with the US. This is evident through joint naval exercises, arms sales, military aid and deployment of American troops and equipment. For instance, from 16th to 27th April 2012, the US and the

³¹ *The Guardian*, 24. March 2016. «Indonesia vows to prosecute Chinese trawler crew in South China Sea dispute». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/24/indonesia-vows-to-prosecute-chinese-trawler-crew-in-south-china-sea-dispute>

³² *The Guardian*, 10. August 2016. «Vietnam sends rocket launchers to the South China Sea». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/10/vietnam-sends-rocket-launchers-to-the-south-china-sea>

³³ *The Guardian*, 18. November 2016. «Vietnam expanding South China Sea runway, says Thinkthank». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/18/vietnam-expanding-south-china-sea-runway-says-thinktank>

³⁴ *The Guardian*, 8. December 2016. «Vietnam dredges reef disputed with China». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/08/vietnam-dredges-reef-disputed-with-china>

³⁵ *The Guardian*, 30. June 2017. «US-China honeymoon over: Washington sanctions Chinese banks and sells arms to Taiwan». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/30/us-china-honeymoon-over-washington-arms-taiwan-sanctions-bank>

Philippines held a joint naval exercise³⁶. 6 August 2012, the US transferred two naval vessels, fighter jets, a coastal radar system, and increased the number of American troops on the ground in the Philippines. The US also assisted the Philippines with a system to better monitor the archipelago's Western coast³⁷. 20th October 2012, the nuclear-powered USS George Washington sailed through the SCS with Vietnamese security and government officials on board³⁸. In December 2015, as part of the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) between the US and Singapore, the US P8 Poseidon spy plane were positioned in Singapore³⁹. In January 2016, the Philippines offered the US military the use of eight air and naval bases at Palawan Island⁴⁰. Likewise, in May 2016, Barack Obama promised "Vietnam will have greater access to the equipment it needs to improve their security"⁴¹. In June 2017, the US provided a total of \$1.4 billion in arms sales to Taiwan⁴². Interestingly, in March 2019, the US secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, announced that "any armed attack on any Philippine forces, aircraft or public vessels in the SCS will trigger mutual defence obligations under article IV of our mutual defence treaty". This is the first time any US official openly affirm the US' military commitment to defending Philippine sovereignty over the SCS⁴³.

This indicates that the claimant states in dispute with the Chinese, are forming a more unified front against China and seeking closer alliances with the US, which is a situation China wants to avoid (Lai, 2014). However, these patterns are somewhat misleading as, interestingly enough, evidence also suggests the Philippines and Malaysia recently has realigned with China.

³⁶ *The Guardian*, 8. May 2012. «China stirs up trouble with Philippines». Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/global/2012/may/08/china-philippines-dispute-islands-oil>

³⁷ *The Guardian*, 6. August 2012. «US helps the Philippines improve its military capability». Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/aug/06/us-helps-philippines-improve-military>

³⁸ *The Guardian*, 20. October 2012. «US risks drawing Beijing's ire with military cruise in disputed waters».

Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/20/south-china-sea-disputed-cruise>

³⁹ *The Guardian*, 7. December 2015. «US to deploy Poseidon spy plane amid South China Sea territory tensions». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/07/us-p8-poseidon-spy-plane-territory-tensions-south-china-sea>

⁴⁰ *The Guardian*, 14. January 2016. «Philippines to offer US military use of eight bases». Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/14/philippines-to-offer-us-military-use-of-eight-bases>

⁴¹ *The Guardian*, 24. May 2016. «Obama backs Vietnam in South China Sea dispute with Beijing». Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/24/obama-backs-vietnam-in-south-china-sea-dispute-with-beijing>

⁴² *The Guardian*, 30. June 2017. «US-China honeymoon over: Washington sanctions Chinese bank and sell arms to Taiwan». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/30/us-china-honeymoon-over-washington-arms-taiwan-sanctions-bank>

⁴³ *The Guardian*, 1. March 2019. «US commits to aiding Philippines in South China Sea». Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/01/us-commits-to-aiding-philippines-in-south-china-sea>

4.2.3. Closer alliances with China

A more recent development in alliance patterns indicate that both the Philippines and Malaysia are re-aligning with China. In October 2016, the Philippine president, Rodrigo Duterte, declared his “separation” from the US and stated that the Philippines has realigned with China. Furthermore, it was announced that the Philippines and China would pursue bilateral dialogue in seeking a proper settlement of the SCS issue. While the Philippines assured it would respect its treaty obligations with Washington, the Philippine president called for the removal of all foreign troops from the Philippines within two years. In addition, the Philippines signed a \$13.5 billion commercial deal with China⁴⁴. Furthermore, in December 2016, the Philippine president said he would “set aside” the ruling by the international arbitration tribunal in the Hague from July 2016 that invalidated Beijing’s claims to most of the SCS⁴⁵. Similarly, in November 2016, China and Malaysia signed an agreement saying their navies will cooperate more in the SCS⁴⁶.

This seems to suggest that the Philippines and Malaysia, to some extent, recognise their inferior positions. When faced with a significantly stronger revisionist state, there is little they can do to prevent Chinese expansionism without greater involvement of the US. As the US has previously been hesitant to take sides in the dispute and regularly declares its neutrality, siding with the US could potentially generate larger problems for the smallest states. While the US has challenged China’s claims through freedom of navigation exercises and military operations, the US was nowhere to be seen when China took over Scarborough Shoal in 2012, and neither when China placed its oil rig within Vietnam’s EEZ. As such, this might indicate that the smallest littoral states find it more beneficial to be on a friendly footing with China, rather than the US.

5.1. Discussion

In line with previous research, the data suggests that China favours a patient, indirect approach to expand its reach, and frequently applies grey zone tactics. Using intermediaries in the form of fishing vessels and oil companies, China regularly engages in salami slicing

⁴⁴ *The Guardian*, 20. October 2016. «Duterte: Philippines is separating from US and realigning with China». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/20/china-philippines-resume-dialogue-south-china-sea-dispute>

⁴⁵ *The Guardian*, 17. December 2016. «Philippine to set aside South China Sea tribunal ruling to avoid imposing Beijing». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/17/philippines-to-set-aside-south-china-sea-tribunal-ruling-to-avoid-imposing-on-beijing>

⁴⁶ *The Guardian*, 2. November 2016. «China and Malaysia agree on military cooperation in the South China Sea». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/02/china-and-malaysia-agree-on-military-cooperation-in-the-south-china-sea>

and to some degree, fait accompli operations. The use of grey zone tactics creates uncertainties about the intentions governing these events. Resource exploitation within other countries' EEZ, for instance, is not merely a problem in the SCS, but also happens worldwide (Agnew et al. 2009). However, what differentiates other incidents from the ones in the SCS, is that the Chinese Coast Guard regularly intervenes if Chinese fishermen are confronted by the entitled littoral states. This indicates that these anglers are not acting independently. Rather, due to the frequency of such confrontations and the Chinese Coast Guard's assertiveness, this seems to reflect a deliberate expansionist design. Likewise, although the building of airstrips and other infrastructure for civilian purposes seemingly represent innocent initiatives, the data suggest the infrastructures are increasingly used for military purposes. Moreover, it appears as these small, but frequent challenges have contributed to noteworthy counterbalancing acts, in the form of militarization and closer alliances with the US. Overall, this indicates that tensions are on the rise.

The findings indicate that China's actions has provoked reactions, despite trying to avoid it. By challenging the maritime rights of several littoral states, combined with significant militarization, the sum of the grey zone tools seem to have pushed the conflict up the escalatory ladder (Jihyun, 2015; Mazarr, 2015). The data indicates there is a correlation between China's actions and the counterbalancing behaviour of the other claimant states. For instance, in the immediate aftermath of the Scarborough Shoal dispute, the US transferred two naval vessels, fighter jets, a coastal radar system, and increased the number of American troops on the ground in the Philippines⁴⁷. Likewise, in March 2016, Indonesia announced the deployment of more troops, better equipped patrol boats and a strengthening of their naval base in Natuna Island after the presence of the Chinese fishing vessels outside Natuna Island⁴⁸. Furthermore, China's militarization of maritime features primarily began in 2015. Correspondingly, in 2016, Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore and Taiwan sought closer alliances with the US and beefed-up their military preparedness. This indicates that the claimant states in dispute with China, are forming a more unified front. These initiatives present greater risks for China, as the cost of armed conflict increases in line with greater military capabilities. Moreover, it also increases the likelihood of US involvement in regional disputes.

⁴⁷ *The Guardian*, 6. August 2012. «US helps the Philippines improve its military capability». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/aug/06/us-helps-philippines-improve-military>

⁴⁸ *The Guardian*, 24. March 2016. «Indonesia vows to prosecute Chinese trawler crew in South China Sea dispute». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/24/indonesia-vows-to-prosecute-chinese-trawler-crew-in-south-china-sea-dispute>

Nevertheless, despite some friction, the findings also indicate that China attempts to balance tensions. To stay under the threshold of response, China scales back for a year or more at a time if reactions become too intense (Mazarr, 2015). For instance, after the Scarborough Shoal standoff between the Philippines and China in 2012⁴⁹, China stayed below the radar for two years before challenging Vietnam through its *fait accompli* operation in 2014⁵⁰. Similarly, China waited another two years, before challenging Indonesia outside Natuna Island in March 2016. When confronted by Indonesia's Coast Guard, the Chinese Coast Guard rammed the trawler to prevent the fishermen's arrest⁵¹. Yet, when Chinese fishermen were caught poaching again in June 2016, Indonesia fired warning shots; as such, the Chinese Coast Guard retreated, preventing the situation from escalating⁵². Likewise, in April 2019, three years later, hundreds of Chinese ships swarmed the Philippine-held Thitu Island, indicating this might be the next salami slice on China's agenda. Overall, while these confrontations raised tensions, China successfully prevented tensions from escalating by allowing time to pass between each challenge and retreated if met with excessive aggression. Likewise, none of the other claimant states in the region has actively taken steps to escalate tensions in order to defend their claims. As such, despite some friction, this seems to suggest that all parties want to preserve peace.

Responding to China's grey zone strategies are not easy, as they do not directly overstep any retaliatory boundaries. China's initiatives are often perceived to be relatively "innocent", none of which in isolation amounts to a *casus belli*. While China regularly uses intimidation through a show of force, China leaves it up to the defender to initiate aggression. For instance, China did not force the Philippines to give up Scarborough Shoal in 2012, instead it used a combination of intimidation, economic sanctions and patience until it obtained control. As such, it is unlikely that such initiatives would meet the standard of "armed attack" and allow retaliatory action under the UN Charter, Article 51's guarantee of self-defence (Mazarr, 2015).

⁴⁹ *The Guardian*, 14. April 2012. "China and Philippines end fishing standoff". Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/14/china-philippines-end-fishing-standoff>

⁵⁰ *The Guardian*, 7. May 2014. «Tensions rise in South China Sea as Vietnamese boats come under attack». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/07/chinese-vietnamese-vessels-clash-south-china-sea>

⁵¹ *The Guardian*, 24. March 2016. «Indonesia vows to prosecute Chinese trawler crew in South China Sea dispute». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/24/indonesia-vows-to-prosecute-chinese-trawler-crew-in-south-china-sea-dispute>

⁵² *The Guardian*, 20. June 2016. «Indonesian navy fires on Chinese fishing boat, injuring one, Beijing claims». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/20/indonesian-navy-fires-on-chinese-fishing-boat-injuring-one-beijing-claims>

The challenges in hindering Chinese expansionism could explain why the Philippines and to some extent Malaysia decided to align with China. Wigell and Vihma (2016) argues that if a geopolitical agent is perceived to be so strong that the opponents see no chance of deterring or defeating it, they may decide to “bandwagon” with it. Due to the asymmetric power relationship, the Philippines possibly hoped that being China’s ally would redirect their expansionist focus to other neighbouring states with maritime claims. However, the Philippines decision to realign with China could also be based on economic incentives, as it led to the signing of a \$13.5 billion commercial deal⁵³. Unfortunately, however, their alliance did not prevent China from challenging the Philippines rights to Thitu Island in April 2019⁵⁴. In fact, as the Philippines has distanced itself from the US and increased its economic dependence on China, the Philippines could be considered an easier target.

In regards to assessing whether the strategies employed are likely to spark a massive crisis, this proves to be difficult as the findings point in several directions. On the one hand, an inherent danger with grey zone tactics is to underestimate the defender’s willingness to take decisive or meaningful steps to respond to aggression, only to see it spark a massive crisis (Mazarr, 2015). According to Friedman (2014) the Chinese expansionism is potentially mortal for the countries of Southeast Asia, because they depend heavily on the fishery of the SCS to feed their populations. If China is perceived as having boundless goals, and littoral states fear being taken apart piece by piece through grey zone tactics, they may decide they have no alternative but to escalate – and might do so fairly randomly, at a moment or an issue China has no way to anticipate (Mazarr, 2015). Nevertheless, on the other hand, the findings also indicate that China wants to maintain peace as it generally stays below the threshold for reaction. Likewise, none of the other claimant states has actively taken steps to escalate tensions in order to defend their claims, suggesting they too want to preserve peace. Furthermore, the likelihood that the economic and militarily inferior states would use military force to challenge China under circumstances of great cost and risk is considered relatively small. Overall, while the risk of a misstep and an unintended spiral of conflict is present, the asymmetric power relationship and the cost of war is likely to be more important

⁵³ *The Guardian*, 20. October 2016. «Duterte: Philippines is separating from US and realigning with China». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/20/china-philippines-resume-dialogue-south-china-sea-dispute>

⁵⁴ *The Guardian*, 5. April 2019. «Duterte warns Beijing of suicide missions to protect disputed island». Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/05/south-china-sea-duterte-warns-china-of-suicide-missions-to-protect-disputed-island>

determinants. As all parties seems to desire peace, the likelihood of war is deemed to be relatively low.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is found that China apply gradual, indirect strategies aimed at expanding its reach, while simultaneously staying below the radar. The strategies used are consistent with previous researchers' notion of grey zone tactics. Through its resource exploitation operations, civilian expansionism, and militarization of disputed maritime features, the data support the use of salami slicing, *fait accompli* and intermediaries. While illegally exploiting resources within other states' EEZ are seemingly "innocent" initiatives, the findings indicate that the civilian actors work on behalf of the state and reflect a deliberate expansive design by China. Likewise, China's establishment of cities and infrastructure on disputed islands appears to be a part of a broader salami-slicing tactic and merely represent the last step before militarization. Consistent with the literature, these gradualist strategies have added to a substantial change in the geostrategic picture, in which the islands that initially were to be used to accommodate tourists, ended up as military bases.

In regards to neighbouring states' reactions to Chinese expansionism, the findings suggest that China's confrontational actions have not generated any overly aggressive reactions. Nevertheless, the data suggests that China has increasingly been identified as an aggressor. All claimant states have been found to improve their military capabilities and several claimant states (i.e., the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore and Taiwan) have sought support from and closer alliances with the US. This is evident through joint naval exercises, arms sales, military aid and deployment of American troops and equipment. The claimant states are seemingly forming a uniform front against China. The Philippines, however, decided to realign with China in 2016. Yet, this did not prevent Chinese ships from swarming the waters surrounding the Philippine-held Thitu Island in April 2019. Arguably, China has been relatively successful in calculating the degree of aggression applied to stay under the threshold of response.

Nonetheless, as with all types of research, this dissertation has its limitations. It must be recognized, for instance, that the research is based on data gathered from Western newspapers only. This could potentially cloud the researcher's views, as the data presents an openly "western perspective". While the researcher have attempted to be transparent in the selection and analysis of the data by focusing singularly on facts and events that has taken

place, it is recognized that China is consistently portrayed as the “bad guy”. A more in-depth analysis of China’s rational and perspective on the SCS conflict could possibly have provided a more nuanced picture of the conflict. Furthermore, due to word-limit restrictions, the researcher had to be selective and several topics had to be left out. Ideally, more focus should have been placed on official statements and the involvement of other states from outside the region. This would have provided a more comprehensive insight into the conflict and allowed the researcher to examine more carefully the gradual erosion of red lines.

For further research, it is thus recommended to do a closer examination of Chinese portrayal of events, as this could provide an indication of China’s strategy, rational and genuine goals. Whether China has limited aims or boundless goals is important to comprehend when evaluating the likelihood of armed conflict. Moreover, as the cost of major warfare in contemporary society is high, there is expected an increase in the use of grey zone tactics in the coming years. Consequently, further research on grey zone tactics and how to successfully deter such creeping expansion by revisionist powers is recommended.

Overall, this dissertation concludes that the counter-balancing acts of the regional states indicate that tensions are rising. However, as both China and the other claimant states has generally avoided the use of force, this seems to indicate that they all have incentives to keep tensions from escalating. While the chance of a misstep certainly is present, the probability of armed conflict is considered to be relatively low, due to the significant costs associated with war.

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Appendix:

Dataset:

The dataset presented in table A.1. is created by the researcher, based on the collection of data from primarily, The Guardian. The dataset consists of a chronological overview of the news articles applied in the data analysis. Since many of the news articles refer to the same events, the data presented below only include the articles referred to in the data analysis. If interested, the full dataset and complete references can be obtained through contacting Caroline Antun.

Table A.1.

Date	Article headline	Available at:
11/4 - 2012	‘Philippine warship in standoff with China vessels’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/11/philippines-china-stand-off-south-china-sea
14/4 - 2012	‘China and Philippines end fishing standoff’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/14/china-philippines-end-fishing-standoff
8/5 - 2012	‘China stirs up trouble with Philippines’	https://www.theguardian.com/global/2012/may/08/china-philippines-dispute-islands-oil
15/5 - 2012	‘200k workers affected by Philippine-China banana trade issue’	https://news.abs-cbn.com/business/05/15/12/200k-affected-ph-china-banana-trade-issue
23/5 - 2012	‘Philippine accuses China of deploying ships in Scarborough Shoal’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/23/philippines-china-ships-scarborough-shoal
22/6 - 2012	‘South China Sea ructions’	https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-18546138
6/8 - 2012	‘US helps the Philippines improve its military capability’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/aug/06/us-helps-philippines-improve-military
20/10 - 2012	‘US risks drawing Beijing’s ire with military cruise in disputed waters’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/20/south-china-sea-disputed-cruise
7/5 - 2014	‘Tensions rise in South China Sea as Vietnamese boats come under attack’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/07/chinese-vietnamese-vessels-clash-south-china-sea
8/5 - 2014	‘China accuses Vietnam of ramming its ships in South China Sea’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/08/china-accuses-vietnam-ships-south-china-sea-oil-rig
15/5 - 2014	‘Anti-China riots turn deadly in Vietnam’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/15/anti-china-riots-turn-deadly-in-vietnam
17/7 - 2014	‘Despite oil rig removal, China and Vietnam row still simmers’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/17/oil-rig-china-vietnam-row-south-china-sea
7/12 - 2015	‘US to deploy Poseidon spy plane amid South China Sea	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/07/us-p8-poseidon-spy-plane-

	territory tensions’	territory-tensions-south-china-sea
14/12 - 2015	‘China to build filling station on disputed South China Sea island’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/14/china-to-build-filling-station-on-disputed-south-china-sea-island
7/1 - 2016	‘Chinese civilian jet airliners land at disputed South China Sea Island’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/07/chinese-civilian-jet-airliners-land-at-disputed-south-china-sea-island-state-media
14/1 - 2016	‘Philippines to offer US military use of eight bases’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/14/philippines-to-offer-us-military-use-of-eight-bases
17/2 - 2016	‘China places missile launchers on disputed South China Sea Island’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/17/china-places-missiles-woody-south-china-sea-islands
17/2 - 2016	‘Beijing’s missile move in South China Sea could make US think twice about getting too close’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/17/beijings-missile-move-in-south-china-sea-could-make-us-think-twice-about-getting-too-close
11/3 - 2016	‘China to begin civilian flights to disputed South China Sea island’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/11/china-to-begin-civilian-flights-to-disputed-south-china-sea-island
21/3 - 2016	‘Indonesia summons Chinese ambassador as fishing dispute escalates’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/21/south-china-sea-indonesia-summons-chinese-ambassador-as-fishing-dispute-escalates
24/3 - 2016	‘Indonesia vows to prosecute Chinese trawler crew in South China Sea dispute’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/24/indonesia-vows-to-prosecute-chinese-trawler-crew-in-south-china-sea-dispute
4/4 - 2016	‘Vietnam seizes Chinese vessel in South China Sea’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/04/vietnam-seizes-chinese-vessel-detains-crew
18/4 - 2016	‘Chinese military plane lands on disputed South China Sea island’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/18/chinese-military-plane-lands-on-disputed-south-china-sea-island-media
24/5 - 2016	‘Obama backs Vietnam in South China Sea dispute with Beijing’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/24/obama-backs-vietnam-in-south-china-sea-dispute-with-beijing
27/5 - 2016	‘Like the Maldives: disputed South China Sea island to become tourism hotspot’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/27/like-the-maldives-disputed-south-china-sea-island-to-become-tourism-hotspot
20/6 - 2016	‘Indonesian navy fires on Chinese fishing boat, injuring one, Beijing claims’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/20/indonesian-navy-fires-on-chinese-fishing-boat-injuring-one-beijing-claims
9/8 - 2016	‘Photos suggest China built hangars with room for fighter jets in disputed islands’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/09/south-china-sea-photos-aircraft-hangers-spratly-islands
10/8 - 2016	‘Vietnam sends rocket launchers to the South China Sea’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/10/vietnam-sends-rocket-launchers-to-the-south-china-sea
20/10 - 2016	‘Duterte: Philippines is	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/

	separating from US and realigning with China’	20/china-philippines-resume-dialogue-south-china-sea-dispute
2/11 - 2016	‘China and Malaysia agree on military cooperation in the South China Sea’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/02/china-and-malaysia-agree-on-military-cooperation-in-the-south-china-sea
18/11 - 2016	‘Vietnam expanding South China Sea runway, says Thinkthank’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/18/vietnam-expanding-south-china-sea-runway-says-thinktank
8/12 - 2016	‘Vietnam dredges reef disputed with China’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/08/vietnam-dredges-reef-disputed-with-china
15/12 - 2016	‘Images show significant Chinese weapons systems in South China Sea’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/15/images-show-significant-chinese-weapons-systems-in-south-china-sea
17/12 - 2016	‘Philippine to set aside South China Sea tribunal ruling to avoid imposing Beijing’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/17/philippines-to-set-aside-south-china-sea-tribunal-ruling-to-avoid-imposing-on-beijing
20/12 - 2016	‘China returns US drone seized by navy after friendly consultations’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/20/china-returns-us-drone-navy-after-friendly-consultations
30/6 - 2017	‘US-China honeymoon over: Washington sanctions Chinese banks and sells arms to Taiwan’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/30/us-china-honeymoon-over-washington-arms-taiwan-sanctions-bank
15/12 - 2017	‘Slow moving crisis as Beijing bolsters South China Sea war platform’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/15/militarisation-beijing-south-china-sea-islands
3/5 - 2018	‘China deploys cruise missiles on South China Sea outposts’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/03/china-deploys-cruise-missiles-on-south-china-sea-outposts-reports
19/5 - 2018	‘China lands nuclear strike-capable bombers on South China Sea islands’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/19/china-says-air-force-lands-bombers-on-south-china-sea-islands
2/6 - 2018	‘Mattis accuses China of intimidation and coercion in South China Sea’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/02/mattis-accuses-china-of-intimidation-and-coercion-in-south-china-sea
1/3 - 2019	‘US commits to aiding Philippines in South China Sea’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/01/us-commits-to-aiding-philippines-in-south-china-sea
5/4 - 2019	‘Duterte warns Beijing of suicide missions to protect disputed island’	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/05/south-china-sea-duterte-warns-china-of-suicide-missions-to-protect-disputed-island