



UNDERSTANDING THE POTENTIAL FOR CONFLICT IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Bailey Wong

Abstract

Foreign policymakers, academics, and regional pundits have all acknowledged the importance of the South China Sea. This region, rich in resources and trade, is the subject of intense territorial contest and is perpetually at risk for escalation and confrontation. This research analyzes the potential for conflict in the South China Sea by examining when and why China has used force in its past territorial disputes. Current theories in international relations offer multiple competing explanations for when and why states use force, highlighting different explanatory variables, such as military might, economic interdependence, and regional norms. Current scholarship has yet to conduct a historical analysis and apply these variables to the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. This research will address this gap by offering a qualitative case comparison focusing on three distinct periods of Chinese foreign policy. These cases are analyzed through Mill's method of difference, incorporating historical analysis and quantitative data to analyze explanatory variables for China's use of force in territorial disputes. Evidence collected concludes that economic interdependence is the strongest constraining force in preventing the use of force in the South China Sea. The results of this research will work to aid policymakers in future conflict prevention.

Introduction

This paper analyzes the potential for conflict in the South China Sea by conducting a qualitative case study comparison. My research seeks to help explain China's use of force in territorial disputes—specifically by contrasting China's strategy of escalation in previous decades to the current absence of violent conflict in the South China Sea. This puzzle is supported by prevalent theoretical

BAILEY WONG is a student of International Studies and Economics.

He graduates in May of 2018.

School of International Service (SIS) and College of Arts & Sciences (CAS), American University

Email: bw9738a@student.american.edu

Clocks & Clouds: Journal of National and Global Affairs, 2016, 7 (1): 38-63

<<http://www.edspace.american.edu/clocksandclouds/>>

HBP Publishing <<http://www.hbp.com/>>

explanations and empirical findings. Historically, territory has been the most frequent and consistent cause of violent conflict (Vasquez 1993). It is for this same reason that scholars are concerned with China’s territorial disputes in general (Friedberg 2005). Among Sinologists, understanding China’s past uses of force in territorial disputes thus offers an understanding of the potential for violent conflict in East Asia (Fravel 2008). This research seeks to understand the conditions of conflict in an attempt to help prevent it. This question also more broadly speaks to a larger theoretical debate within international relations: how and when do states decide to use force?

Of course, there are more specific reasons as to why the South China Sea is uniquely important. The South China Sea represents a host of geopolitical interests and territorial disputes, neatly wrapped into an area a little larger than the Caribbean. Current territorial disputes involve China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei, and initially began in 1951 when the People’s Republic of China formally claimed the Spratly and Paracel Islands (Zhou 1990). Why the disputes have persisted for decades becomes clearer upon closer inspection (Fravel 2008). The South China Sea is home to substantial fisheries, potentially vast reserves of energy (some estimates reaching 70.78 billion tons of oil and natural gas) (Wang and Shu-yuan 2013; Guoqiang 2015), and approximately \$5.3 trillion in global trade each year (the Straits of Malacca representing 40% of global trade alone) (Kaplan 2009; Glaser 2012). Such incentives for conflict and control, already considerable, have been significantly exacerbated since 2009, when a new phase of Chinese foreign policy reasserted aggressive Chinese maritime and territorial claims in the region (Tellis et al. 2011). The current situation continues to concern many ASEAN countries and the United States as China has compounded its exorbitant “Nine Dash Line” claim with a massive military buildup and land reclamation efforts in the South China Sea (O’Rourke 2015, Dolven et al. 2015; Raine 2001, 71).

This paper first begins with a review of other scholarly works, analyzing prevailing attempts in international relations theory to explain the use of force. The literature reviewed includes preeminent schools of thought: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. This ongoing debate informs the situation in the South China Sea by offering competing explanations for how and when states decide to use force.

My research thus uses a state’s use of force as the dependent variable, which is tested by three independent variables (Fravel 2011; Li 2013). These independent variables include relative power, regional normative frameworks, and economic interdependence, all of which are supported by literature (Fravel

2008). I then analyze data collected to identify the variables, if any, which share a potentially causal relationship with the constraint of the use of force.

As this research conducts a qualitative case comparison, three cases are analyzed to test for a relationship between the use of force and independent variables: the first period of modern Chinese foreign policy, in which violent conflict did erupt in the South China Sea (1950-1999), a period of increased diplomatic and economic engagement (2000-2008), and another where tensions are arguably at an all-time high, yet no violent conflict has precipitated (2009-2015). Because the present situation is so deeply characterized by Chinese aggression, especially compared to previous conflicts, it is particularly surprising that states have thus far managed to constrain the use of force. This would make the (2009-2015) case deviant from a realist perspective, where one would otherwise expect China to have resorted to force in light of present tensions, and a most likely case from a commercial liberalist or constructivist prediction, where the use of force has been successfully constrained. Using Mill's methods of difference, this paper tests for a causal relationship between economic interdependence and the use of force. A qualitative case comparison became the optimal methodology as comparisons between these cases allow results to infer a case-specific causal mechanism. Such an inference would be more precise than statistical methods, and the number of Chinese territorial disputes are too few to conduct a meaningful statistical analysis. A discourse analysis is not appropriate given the nature of this research's goals, as I aim to inform future studies of Chinese uses of force, and more broadly other conflict models. Such findings will then help build on a larger theoretical debate, as well as contribute to international peacekeeping and conflict prevention efforts.

Literature Review

Three schools of international relations theory offer competing explanations for how and why states act, including when and why states use force. The relevant schools of thought include realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Each offers differing explanatory variables for how and why the use of force is constrained, ranging from military might to normative change.

Realism

Realism, as defined by Hans Morgenthau (2005, 5), is "the concept of interest defined in terms of power." Modern scholars on East Asia have understood this as states' "permanent struggle for power arising from the perennial quest for security" (Tellis 2012, 76). This school of thought is most clearly defined by five

key assumptions: that international politics remains anarchic, that states have offensive capabilities, cannot be entirely certain of the intentions of others, wish to survive, and are rational (Mearsheimer 1994). Realists thereby understand situations in terms of material capabilities, be they militarily, economically, or diplomatically channeled (Slaughter 2011). Scholars have divided the school into several sub-sections, the most prevalent of which include offensive, defensive, and “balance of power” realism.

Offensive realists maintain that states seek to achieve security through domination and hegemony (Mearsheimer 2001). Such a strategy would implicitly require states to offensively maximize their power and influence whenever possible, typically by pursuing an expansionist policy as they acquire or perceive to acquire additional material power (Labs 1997; Hendrickson 1998; Elman 2004). Scholars who have applied tenets of offensive realism to modern China have constructed what is now called the “China threat,” which interprets China’s rise as a considerable threat to Southeast Asian and U.S. national security (Roy 1996, 758). Other scholars have gone as far to say that “Asia’s future is Europe’s past,” arguing that conflict is inevitable due to the region’s sustained disequilibrium and strategic competition (Friedberg 2011, 147).

Defensive realists, by contrast, reject domination as a strategy for survival, as hegemony may lead to dangerous conflict with rivals (Slaughter 2011). Instead, the anarchy of the international arena encourages states to achieve security through defensive and conservative policies, encouraging cultures of “self-help” (Waltz 1979). Such explanations gain increasing gravity when considering China’s unique security environment, in which China shares a border with fourteen separate neighbors. China has waged war with five of these neighbors in the last 70 years, and several of these states are ruled by unstable regimes (Nathan and Scobell 2012). All of this is exacerbated by the fact that none of China’s neighbors share its core national or security interests (Ibid).

Other forms of realism include “balance of power” theories, which claim that stability is best maintained through systems “where a roughly equal distribution of power amongst States ensures that none will risk attacking another” (Slaughter 2011, 2). This form of realism maintains that conflict is not inevitable; conflict can be prevented if states “hedge” or “balance” against a larger threat. For Asia, this would involve ASEAN states balancing against a Chinese threat (Medeiros 2005). Among these “balance of power” realists, the United States is still the dominant actor in Asia, and can help offset China’s rising influence (Sutter 2006; Christensen 2006).

Liberalism

Liberalism in international relations is understood through three underlying principles: its rejection of power politics as the only sensible outcome of international relations, its argument for the possibility of international cooperation between states and the benefits thereof, and its acknowledgement that international organizations and other non-state actors have an influence in shaping state policy preferences (Shiraev 2014). Liberalism emphasizes that national characteristics influence a state's international relations, and the nature and dynamics of the international political economy are important (Slaughter 2011; Acharya 2014). Scholars have divided liberalism into three sub-schools of thought: commercial liberalism, republican liberalism, and liberal institutionalism. Unlike subsets of realist thought, these variants of liberalism are not mutually exclusive (Pempel 2005). All subsets of liberalism collectively hold that the growth of multilateral institutions and deepening interdependence constrain strategic competition (Ikenberry 2013).

The first is commercial liberalism, which holds that “economic interdependence, particularly free trade, reduces the prospect of war by increasing its costs to the parties” (Acharya 2014, 68). Such theorists identify the “performance legitimacy” phenomenon whereby the Chinese government in particular derives ruling legitimacy from the country's economic strength (Ibid, 69). The constraining influence of this economic interdependence was most recently highlighted in China and Japan's Senkaku Islands dispute, where neither side used force. Commercial liberals attribute this constraint to the fact that China is Japan's largest trading partner (Junguo 2012).

Second is republican liberalism, or the “democratic peace” argument, which holds that liberal democracies are more peaceful than autocracies, or at least seldom fight other democracies (Doyle 2005, 463-64). This theory holds limited applicability to potential for conflict in the South China Sea as Asia has relatively few democracies. The ones that do exist are mostly illiberal democracies who focus on “economic growth, performance legitimacy, and sovereignty-protecting institutions” (Acharya 2014, 70).

Lastly is liberal institutionalism, which focuses on “the contribution of international organizations in fostering collective security, managing conflict, and promoting cooperation” (Ibid, 69). Such liberal institutionalism has been seen in the creation of regional security and cooperation frameworks, including many of the ASEAN-centric organization such as ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN+3, and the East Asia Summit (Ibid). Such institutions serve to reinforce

a "liberal peace" and constrains force, given that developing Asian countries have benefited greatly from the existing liberal international order (Ikenberry 2011). This constraint in force is supported by a scholarly consensus, which agrees that China has historically acted as a status quo power (Kent 2007; Johnson 2007).

Constructivism

Constructivism, in the realm of international relations, asserts that state behavior is "constructed" by "a complex and specific mix of history, ideas, norms, and beliefs" (Slaughter 2011, 4). The school of thought is thereby commonly defined through two tenets: "1) that the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces; and 2) that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature" (Wendt 1999, 1). Constructivism also places special emphasis on the role of social interactions, relationships, state identities and interests, and the ability of ideas and concepts to shape state behavior (Wendt 1995). When applied to studying the use of force, two subsets of constructivism are most pertinent: regional institutionalism and constructivist critiques of realism.

The first school of constructivist thought argues that regional institutions are crucial to the development of norms in international relations. These institutions give constructivists and policymakers the opportunity to test the role of ideas, shared identity, and socialization in building cooperation (Acharya 1997; Nischalke 2000; Haacke 2003). These trends have manifested in the form of ASEAN's continual search for a "common and cooperative peace" through the "ASEAN Way" or the "Asia-Pacific Way" (Acharya 2014, 74). Regional efforts thus help to constrain aggression and the use of force through mutual interests and shared identity. Scholars have noted that such institutions have played an instrumental role in improving regional security and developing cooperative norms for a constructive future (Thayer 2012; Thayer 2015).

The second subset of constructivist thought critiques realist assessments of the Southeast Asia security landscape. Most notable has been an intense scholarly debate: some constructivists argue that Southeast Asia represents a bandwagoning environment, conditions inconsistent with certain realist presuppositions (Kang 2003). While not all constructivists agree, there is a general scholarly consensus that constructivism has provided a "mainstream" theoretical alternative to realism (Acharya 2004; Acharya 2014, 76; Karim 2007).

Alternative Models Applied to the South China Sea

As previously discussed, the three primary schools of thought in international relations have competing explanations for why states may choose to use force; however, some authors have proposed distinct and specific models for why states, specifically China, may choose to use force, particularly in the South China Sea. Fravel, in his 2008 article “Power Shifts and Escalation: Explaining China’s Use of Force in Territorial Disputes,” proposes an alternative model which posits that the Chinese use force in territorial disputes when its bargaining power in said disputes declines. The model draws from the preventative war theory, and argues that China will use force to fight “*now* in order to avoid the risks of war under worsening circumstances *later*” (Fravel 2008, 48). Fravel’s model suggests that despite heightening tensions in the South China Sea, China is not inclined to use force because its bargaining power in the dispute remains high.

Another author, Li, offers a competing explanation for China’s use of force in the past. In his 2013 article “The Taming of the Red Dragon: The Militarized Worldview and China’s Use of Force, 1949-2001,” Li argues that China’s previous uses of force have correlated with a more militarized worldview in Chinese leadership. By studying memoirs and various accounts of the Chinese leadership since the formation of the modern Chinese state, Li concludes that Chinese use of force could be previously explained by China’s stance in the international community and Mao’s overestimation of force’s efficacy. Both of these models are specific to China, and are not considered mutually exclusive to the traditional schools of thought in international relations.

Collectively, the literature reviewed informs and improves this research in several ways. Firstly, the schools of thought offered various theoretical models from which to draw variables from. This not only informed my variable selection, but also offered precursors to how said variables would interact in constraining the use of force. This additionally helped refine my research topic in both topic and scope. Specifically, the literature reviewed implies that economic interdependence may hold the greatest constraining force. By analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data, I hope that my findings will test this relationship, building upon an ongoing theoretical debate and potentially helping policymakers in the region.

Case Selection and Justification

There were three cases selected for comparison—all of which examine China’s evolving strategy in the South China Sea territorial dispute from 1950 to

the present. These cases are comprised of three distinct historical timelines, demarcated by very clear shifts in Chinese foreign policy (Zhao 2013). First is the period when China pursued a strategy of aggressive escalation, from 1950-1999. During this period, China demonstrated a willingness to use military force to defend its territorial claims. The second period, known as China's "Charm Offensive" from 2000-2008 (Kurlantzick 2006), signals a substantial shift in foreign policy priorities, where China departed from an attitude of belligerent confrontation to engaging in regional normative frameworks (Ibid). This included China economically intertwining itself with ASEAN states and adopting several regional treaties. The third and final period is the current situation in the South China Sea, defined as all maritime activities (military and commercial) in the South China Sea in 2009-2015. In this period, Chinese policy shifts once again to reasserting previously aggressive Chinese claims, up until the point of using military force (Tellis 2011). Despite discrepancies in the number of years covered per case, cases are divided by periods in foreign policy because of the reactive nature of foreign policy decisions (Heng 2016).

These cases were selected because China's use of force in territorial disputes remains one of the greatest risks of violent escalation in East Asia. Among Sinologists, understanding China's aggressions and strategy in the South China Sea offers precedent to understanding the likelihood of East Asian aggression more generally (Fravel 2008). The cases also collectively represent examples of a *most-likely case* in commercial liberalism literature and a *deviant case* in realist literature. Among liberalists, it only seems natural that the use of force has declined as economic interdependence has increased; but among realists, China's lack of force in territorial disputes against other inferior militaries is puzzling. As a result, understanding the causes and underlying factors in the South China Sea holds larger theoretical implications in understanding the potential for conflict. Analyzing China's current aggressive posture in the South China Sea would help build a broader understanding of the use of force and conflict prevention.

Methodology

The three cases are analyzed using a case study comparison. This research is being conducted through a case study format because the inclusion of qualitative data and analysis allows for a greater understanding of causal mechanism(s) behind the phenomenon (VanEvera 1997). Although case studies can also suffer from spurious correlations and inconclusive results,

its selection is appropriate here as the dependent variable is binary (observed as present or absent), and the values of independent variables are observed to fluctuate over time (Ibid).

Mill's method of comparison is selected as the method of analysis because the method can help eliminate variables which are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions, while identifying variables with potential explanatory power (George and Bennett 2005). This makes the method well-suited for this research, as there are multiple competing theoretical explanations which explain the use of force in the South China Sea. Mill's method of comparison can thereby be useful in testing theories which already identify the variables in causal mechanisms. In total, there are four variables: a dependent variable and three independent variables. By studying the fluctuation of these variables across the three cases, Mill's methods allow some conclusion to be made about which independent variable best explains variation in the dependent variable. Of course, the approach does suffer from a variety of drawbacks. Mill's methods can be subject to false positives and negatives, and lacks explanatory power if other explanatory variables are not initially identified (Ibid).

The limitations of Mill's methods are addressed in this research in two ways. Firstly, a thorough review of the literature guards against unforeseen explanatory variables. All of the primary variables used to explain the use of force in prevailing international relations literature is included in this research. Secondly, the likelihood of a false positive can be mitigated if the dependent variable observed is extreme (VanEvera 1997). Because Chinese use of force is a relatively rare occurrence, its presence is thus extreme by rarity, which helps limit this methodological risk.

Variables

This research examines the relationships between four variables: a dependent variable and three independent variables. The dependent variable is a state's use of force in a territorial dispute (Fravel 2008). "Use of force" is defined to include blockades, raids, clashes, or war, as per the Correlates of War (Palmer et al. 2015). While this dependent variable is binary (present or absent), there are two indicators to observe the use of force. The first is whether or not a disputing state seized territory during the dispute. The second is whether or not a military engagement resulting in injury or loss of life occurred (Singer et al. 1972; Singer 1987). The presence of both of these indicators is necessary to determine if use of force is present within a territorial dispute.

The literature reviewed identifies three independent variables used to explain the use of force (Fravel 2008; Fravel 2011; Li 2013). The first is the relative

power of the states themselves. Relative power is generally understood as the national material capabilities, primarily militarized, which a state has at its disposal. There are two indicators for a state's relative power. The first is the state's aggregated national material capabilities, including factors such as military expenditure, military personnel, energy consumption, iron and steel production, urban population, and total population (Singer et al. 1972). The second indicator of relative power is a country's naval capacity (Tellis et al. 2000). The inclusion of this indicator is necessary, as the aggregated national material capabilities value does not take into consideration more technical capabilities such as naval warfare. Given the nature of this territorial conflict, the inclusion of naval capabilities as a consideration becomes necessary. As relative power increases, states have more militaristic options which make supporting their territorial claims possible; according to realist literature, this makes use of force in territorial disputes more likely.

The second independent variable is the presence of regional normative frameworks. The existence of these regional normative frameworks is determined through two indicators: the negotiated frameworks and institutions themselves, and country's participation and adherence to those frameworks. Evidence of regional normative frameworks can be found through the founding documents of institutions such as ASEAN, and countries' adherence to them can be measured through treaties ratified and violations of those treaties. Both liberalist and constructivist literature argue that the presence of regional normative frameworks helps reduce the transaction costs of negotiation and diplomatic solutions. As a result, their presence and adherence to them would presumably reduce the risk of conflict.

The third independent variable is the economic interdependence of the states in the territorial dispute. There are two indicators: bilateral trade and balance of payment statistics. Bilateral trade is calculated as the amount of bilateral trade between two disputing states as a percentage of GDP in U.S. dollars (Barbieri et al. 2009). Balance of payments measures "for a specific time period, the economic transactions of an economy with the rest of the world" (International Monetary Fund 1995, 6). According to commercial liberalist literature, because commercial activities and intraregional trade activity are ceased in times of war, economic interdependence invariably deters the use of force by raising the cost of conflict for all parties involved (Fravel 2010).

Hypothesis

This research conducts a qualitative case comparison to analyze three distinct periods of Chinese foreign policy. From researching previous scholarly

work on the South China Sea, my hypothesis is that as economic interdependence increases over time, the likelihood of the use of force decreases. This hypothesis is supported by liberalist literature reviewed, which purports economic linkages and interdependent commitments constrain the use of force by raising the cost of conflict for all parties involved. Cross comparison between cases and analysis helps determine which variables, if any, hold explanatory value in the current situation. The results of this research will ultimately help build on an ongoing debate by testing the viability of commercial liberalism.

Findings and Analysis

In comparing the three cases of Chinese foreign policy, three independent variables, relative power, regional normative frameworks, and economic interdependence, were examined. It is important to note that the dependent variable, the use of force, was only observed in the first case. Later cases are characterized by its absence. Aggregated into Table 1, the values assigned to these explanatory variables across all three cases are as follows:¹

Table 1: Variables

	1950-1999	2000-2008	2009-2015
Relative Power	4	6	8
Regional Normative Frameworks	1	4	3
Economic Interdependence	3	5	6
Uses of Force in South China Sea	3	0	0

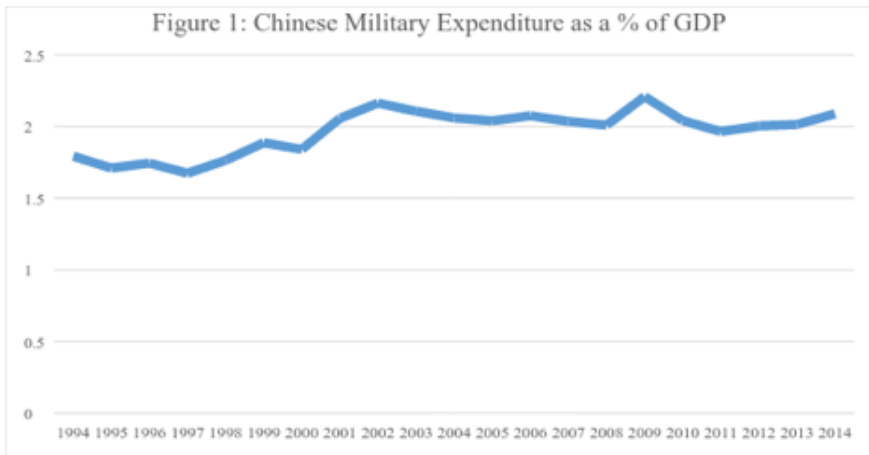
The first period of Chinese foreign policy (1950 to 1999) is best characterized by the creation of multiple disputing claims over the South China Sea, leaving states with various capabilities to assert and defend them. China had relatively strong national capabilities at its disposal during this period; however, its equipment, technological, and naval limitations prevented it from exerting the full extent of its military might, particularly in a territorial dispute which is naval in nature. As a result, the first independent variable of relative power was awarded a value of four in a scale of zero to nine, indicating a “moderate” level of power relative to other disputant countries. The period was also noted for the absence of any substantive regional engagement, and there were no identifiable norms in

¹ The dependent variable, uses of force in the South China Sea, is displayed as an interval variable. The three independent variables are displayed as ordinal variables.

which China engaged during this period, let alone adhered to. This is primarily due to the fact that ASEAN was not created until 1967 (ASEAN Secretariat 2008), and strong Chinese engagement in regional frameworks such as ASEAN did not begin until the late 1990s.² As a result, the influence of regional normative frameworks was given a one on a scale of zero to four, indicating a "low" level of regional normative engagement. The final independent variable, economic interdependence, was assigned a value of three, or "moderate," on a scale from zero to seven. Trade still occurred during 1950 to 1999, developing some economic interdependence, but levels of engagement was not nearly as high as they would eventually reach (World Bank 2016).

Because this period represents the only uses of force in the South China Sea, this first case serves an exceedingly crucial role for case study comparison. The conditions under which Chinese use of force occurred were only observed in this case, and were documented across three instances in the South China Sea: 1974, 1988, and 1994 (Ma 2013; Shipler 1974; *The New York Times* 1974). The period's limited relative power, modest economic interdependence, and absence of regional normative frameworks will thus be compared to the two later cases.

Figure 1: Chinese Military Expenditure as a % of GDP



China's Charm Offensive represents a dramatic departure from previous Chinese foreign policy in the region. The period witnessed no Chinese military provocations and the use of force was entirely constrained. While China still occupied island and reefs won through violent naval contests from the previous period, no new instances of conflict occurred. Instead of engaging

² China's first engagement with ASEAN occurred in 1990, when Malaysia included China in its regional free trade proposal for the East Asia Economic Caucus.

in provocative conflict with other Southeast Asian states, China instead engaged in various diplomatic and economic initiatives. But despite this change in focus, relative power still quietly accumulated, earning a six, or “moderate” amount of relative power. This is largely attributed to an increase in military spending and Chinese efforts to modernize its naval and force projection capabilities. Figure 1 illustrates this increase in military spending—something that persists to the present day (World Bank 2016). Because the Chinese economy as a whole was improving, military spending in RMB amounts rose, despite the fact that these spending increases are regarded as consistent as a percent of China’s rising GDP during this period (Liff and Erickson 2013). However, the period is still called the Charm Offensive for good reason—the presence of regional normative frameworks tremendously improved. China used this period in foreign policy to usher in an unprecedented era of cooperation, resulting in several economic treaties and diplomatic declarations (Minh 2013; Heads of State/Government at the 1st ASEAN Summit 1976, ASEAN Secretariat 2002; Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations n.d.). This is the most obvious change during the Charm Offensive: China’s sudden willingness to negotiate with other disputing states, especially through the engagement of ASEAN. Regional normative frameworks were awarded a four (out of a possible four), indicating a “high” level of engagement. In turn, economic interdependence simultaneously rose, as Figure 2 illustrates the rise of this increased trade activity (Barbieri and Keshk 2012). Note that this trade activity began in the late 1980s, as Chinese use of force in the region was beginning to die down. Trade levels witnessed its most dramatic increase in the early 2000s—an explosion from 1% to almost 2.5%—just as China joined the World Trade Organization and began its economic engagement efforts as a part of the Charm Offensive. As this trade activity has increased, the use of force has historically remained constrained. This earns the period a five, or “moderate” level of trade intertwinement, and such results bode well for constructivist and liberalist theories of how states decide to use force.

The present period of Chinese foreign policy (2009-2015), is best characterized by renewed tensions between disputing nations, ASEAN, and China, exacerbated by China’s renewed, measured territorial reclamations in the South China Sea (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2016). Such reclamations are exceedingly aggressive in nature, and satellite imagery has confirmed Chinese military installations being placed on the island. But while these blatant aggressions violate international norms and represents a clear departure from the good-faith diplomacy in the Charm Offensive, my analysis indicates that such activities fall short of actual deployments of force. The international community and disputant nations have reacted in a number of ways. The Philippines have filed a contest over

such reclamations in an effort to channel regional normative frameworks into a diplomatic solution (Republic of the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs 2013). The United States has exercised Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in an attempt to establish militaristic precedent in the region and violate the maritime and air space "sovereignty" of Chinese reclaimed territory (Perlez 2016). China has responded by adding additional surface-to-air missile platforms to various islands (Hunt et al. 2016). But while the islands and reefs have been militarized, there have been no documented uses of force during this period of Chinese foreign policy. Tensions in this period are instead characterized by the continued use of civilian craft and the harassment of other disputant nations.

Figure 2: Total Trade by Disputant Countries as a Percentage of Chinese GDP



During this period, China's military strength has increased dramatically relative to other disputant nations. This is due to China's increased and sustained military growth and modernization, which has amassed a force far superior to other disputants in the South China Sea (Singer et al. 1972). Relative power thus earns an eight, or "high" level of relative power. Adherence to regional normative frameworks has also very obviously declined. Due to territorial reclamations and dubious activity on disputed territories, China has toed-the-line in regard to declarations of conduct it previously agreed to (Republic of the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs 2013). As a result, the presence of regional normative frameworks earns a three, indicating "high" levels. However, continued economic relations with ASEAN states remained strong, and have assured a close economic interdependence. As such, economic interdependence was awarded a value of six, or "high" level

of economic interdependence.

In comparing the variance of independent variables across the three cases, Mill's methods of comparison would almost immediately eliminate relative power as an explanatory variable for Chinese *use of force*. Historically speaking, the use of force in the South China Sea is a rare occurrence, with only three documented instances, all of which are spread across decades in China's first aggressive period of foreign policy. But as China's relative power increases across these three cases, uses of force decline to zero instances of the use of force, suggesting that relative power has no causal relationship with a state's willingness to use force. Explanations for why this may be true remain relatively consistent with historical expectation. Data indicate that China has enjoyed a relative power advantage compared to other disputant countries for decades, despite having weak and limited naval resources during the early years of the dispute. This advantage in military might, which has only grown for China throughout the years, was thought to incentivize the use of force through presumably more decisive military engagements. However, we see that this has not encouraged additional uses of force. This is particularly evident during the Charm Offensive: a time when China first began to seriously improve its military, especially naval and air, forces. Even as relative power has increased, China has restrained its use of force. If China had been acting in accordance to conventional realist theory, one would expect that a military transgression has already occurred. The fact that one has not occurred indicates that the "China Threat" theorists and relative power have offered an incomplete explanation of conflict in the South China Sea.

However, this is not to say that China's relative power has had no influence on its *aggression* in the region. While not constituting actual uses of force, island reclamation efforts and the militarizing nature of the region would suggest that Chinese aggression has been encouraged, up until force becomes necessary. In current disputes, the Chinese have opted to continue reinforcing progressively aggressive claims and harassing or following the vessels of other nations instead of resorting to the use of outright force (Torbati 2015).

These findings would give credence to the explanatory power of the other two independent variables: regional normative frameworks and economic interdependence. The presence of both of these variables increased dramatically during the Charm Offensive, while relative power gaps only steadily increased, with no instances in the use of force. Given the almost immediate and dramatic effect of this increased economic and diplomatic engagement, it is much more compelling to believe that either of these variables encourage greater levels of restraint. Between these two variables, economic interdependence seems to offer a more compelling

explanation than regional normative frameworks. While regional normative frameworks have played a considerable role since the Charm Offensive, China has demonstrated an increasing disregard for ASEAN security interests. China's pursuit of its expansionist goals in the South China Sea thus illustrates a newfound, more aggressive "toe-the-line" attitude. Through its island reclamations and renewed aggression, the Chinese are operating in spite of the cooperative and peaceful spirit they previously negotiated in. These factors would collectively indicate that regional normative frameworks play a less constraining role than the Charm Offensive would have suggested.

Such findings would give credence to liberalist thinkers, particularly those of school of commercial liberalism, who argue for the constraining influence of economic interdependence. Because trade and commercial cooperation cease in times of war, the economic consequences of conflict raise the costs of war for all parties involved. In today's globalized economy, these costs would run unacceptably high. Such results imply that as trade activity rises, conflict becomes increasingly less likely, despite China's ongoing aggressions and the heightened tensions of the territorial dispute. This further implies that economic interdependence is the single greatest variable in preventing an all-out war. These results collectively indicate that, at present, the potential for conflict in the South China Sea is relatively low, and the use of force should remain constrained so long as economic interdependence and regional norms continue to be consistent, assuming that Chinese foreign policy acts in accordance with previous behavior.

Potential and Alternative Interpretations

This research concludes that economic interdependence plays the single greatest role in constraining the use of force in the South China Sea; however, there are other potential and alternative explanations for the same decline. Data used to analyze China's Charm Offensive would also support constructivist claims that the establishment of regional frameworks (which thus create norms of behavior among states) substantially mitigates the risk of conflict. That said, there are other interpretations among Sinologists and international relations theorists as to how these findings can be interpreted.

Most prominent of dissenting interpretations belong to realist scholars. The evidence collected could tentatively support a nuanced interpretation of the offensive realist's argument: that China's vast accumulation of power could have hegemonic, stabilizing effects on the region. Still, the plausibility of such an explanation is hampered by the disputant states' vigorous opposition

to China's island reclamation activities, and the increasing role of U.S. naval projection, both of which risk escalating the conflict.

Other Sinologists argue that China is using the Charm Offensive and this current period of prolonged economic and diplomatic engagement to cynically bide time for a sustained military buildup and perhaps impending military engagement. Such a buildup would inevitably expand China's growing naval capabilities, which represents a dangerous challenge to U.S. naval primacy, and certainly the security of disputant states (O'Rourke 2016). Data regarding China's military spending and pundit speculation of China's naval ambitions (most notably its pursuit of a second, homegrown aircraft carrier and an increasingly treacherous submarine fleet) would support these claims (Lim 2011; Ross 2009). Such realists allege that China's recent economic parity with the United States and military modernization have allowed China to make the constrained provocations it has in the South China Sea. However, these scholars acknowledge that China is not yet powerful enough to openly engage in a violent conflict over the South China Sea. So long as that remains true, the use of force in the South China Sea will be constrained. However, this interpretation of peace is subject to change should China's military strength—especially relative to the United States and the collective will of ASEAN—rapidly surge. These realists would mostly agree that economic interdependence and regional norms are constraining force for now, but disagree as to whether these factors will continue to hold in the decades to come.

Conclusion

The South China Sea will continue to be a contentious nexus for conflict in Southeast Asia for the foreseeable future. At present, there are no clear solutions to the multiple territorial disputes currently at stake. Regional normative frameworks, primarily propagated through Chinese-ASEAN cooperation, has made diplomatic progress, but remain unlikely to permanently constrain China's aggressive provocations. This is supported by conditions surrounding the Philippines' legal challenge to invasive Chinese claims—a step taken through a legal, normative framework which is widely anticipated to be ignored by the Chinese (Permanent Court of Arbitration 2013). At the same time, relative power does not offer a complete explanation either. Growing Chinese military advantages, especially in defense spending, technology, and geographic proximity may have encouraged recent territorial reclamations, but offer no sign of actual use of force. My analysis thus calls into question the supposedly belligerent nature of states which increase their relative power, and identifies possible contradictions in the influence of regional normative frameworks. Of the three variables analyzed, the increasing

economic interdependence would appear to have the most constraining influence on the use of force by raising the costs of conflict.

This research contributes to an ongoing debate within international relations regarding the factors by which states decide to use force. By identifying economic interdependence as the most plausible constraining influence on the use of force, this research can hopefully provide insight to policymakers regarding the South China Sea and conflict prevention at large. By specifically investigating variables pertinent to prevalent international relations theory, this research can also inform future conflict prevention models. Of course, these findings are subject to methodological limitations. As such, future research regarding the potential for conflict should seek to identify other plausible factors for conflict between states. Such research would have to examine other global hotspots to compare these same variables, and new ones, for explanatory power.

Future research specifically focusing on the South China Sea will have to carefully monitor potential normative and economic solutions for a permanent resolution to the territorial dispute. The data that I collected has demonstrated an unquestionable Chinese military advantage that is widely expected to grow over the coming years. However, all parties involved, including China, have indicated a preference against conflict (at least for now), and a long-term, non-violent solution is viewed to be in everyone's best interest. This combination only makes further research regarding conflict prevention more important. This research can continue to search for and improve operationalization for factors which constrain the use of force. Such research would hopefully help guide security policy into an optimistic future.

Appendix

Table 1A: Dependent Variable 1—Relative Power

	Variable/Indicator	Main Scale/Sub-Scale	Sub/Main Relationship
Main Variable and Scaling	Relative Power	0-3: low levels of military strength 4-6: moderate levels 7-9: high levels	Indicator Scales will be added to result in a score of 0-9 overall.
Indicator 1 Variable and Scaling	China's national material capabilities in comparison to other disputant nations	Disadvantageous: limited capabilities compared to other nations Parity: on par with other disputant nations, at no disadvantage Advantage: substantial advantage over other disputant nations	Disadvantageous = 0 Parity = 1-2 Advantage = 3-4
Indicator 2 Variable and Scaling	China's air and naval resources in comparison to other disputant nations	Disadvantageous: lacking power projection and/or numbers Parity: moderate power projection, relatively equal numbers Advantage: significant air and naval advantage	Low = 0-1 Medium = 2-3 High = 4-5

Table 2A: Dependent Variable 2—Regional Normative Frameworks

	Variable/Indicator	Main Scale/Sub-Scale	Sub/Main Relationship
Main Variable and Scaling	Regional Normative Frameworks established in Southeast Asia	0: minimal strategic benefit 1-2: moderate strategic benefit 3-4: high strategic benefit	Indicator Scales will be added to result in a score of 0-4 overall.
Indicator 1 Variable and Scaling	Economic and diplomatic agreements signed and ratified	Nonexistent: no economic or diplomatic agreements reached Infrequent: some economic or diplomatic agreements reached Frequent: agreements building regional norms frequently reached	Nonexistent = 0 Infrequent = 1 Frequent = 2
Indicator 2 Variable and Scaling	Degree of compliance to those agreements and to other regional normative frameworks	Low: no to minimal amounts of agreement compliance Medium: moderate amount of compliance High: total compliance with agreements	Low = 0 Medium = 1 High = 2

Table 3A: Dependent Variable 3—Economic Interdependence

	Variable/Indicator	Main Scale/Sub-Scale	Sub/Main Relationship
Main Variable and Scaling	Economic Interdependence	0-2: low levels of economic engagement 3-5: moderate levels 6-7: high levels	Indicator Scales will be added to result in a score of 0-7 overall.
Indicator 1 Variable and Scaling	Trade between disputant nations as a % of GDP	Low: low and limited bilateral trade, economic engagement Medium: moderate economic engagement, some trade agreements High: significant economic activity, many trade agreements and mutual dependence	Low = 0-2 Medium = 3-5 High = 6-7

Table 4A: Independent Variable—Use of Force

	Variable/Indicator	Main Scale/Sub-Scale	Sub/Main Relationship
Main Variable and Scaling	Use of Force	0: absent 1: present	Indicator Scales will be added to result in a score of 0-1 overall.
Indicator 1 Variable and Scaling	Territory exchanged during dispute	0: absent 1: present	Absent = 0 Present = 1
Indicator 2 Variable and Scaling	Militarized engagement in which injury or loss of life occurred	0: absent 1: present	Absent = 0 Present = 1

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