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## CHINA'S LEADERSHIP STRATEGY THROUGH MARITIME SILK ROAD INFLUENCE ON THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE

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Submission: March 26, 2025 | Revised: May 7, 2025 | Accepted: May 9, 2025

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the strategic motivations behind China's claims in the South China Sea (SCS), utilizing Alfred Thayer Mahan's maritime geopolitics and John P. Lovell's foreign policy theories. Through a qualitative explanatory approach, findings show the SCS holds immense strategic, economic, and geopolitical value due to its resources and critical shipping lanes. China demonstrates a firm commitment to its unilateral claims via militarization, artificial island construction, and economic diplomacy like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The analysis indicates China's policy transcends historical or security drivers, aiming instead for long-term maritime dominance as a key instrument of national power and leverages economic strength and regional diplomacy to secure cooperation from ASEAN nations while simultaneously avoiding international legal pressure.

Keywords: South China Sea, Leadership Strategy, Maritime Geopolitics, Belt and Road Initiative

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### ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menganalisis motivasi strategis di balik klaim Tiongkok di Laut Cina Selatan (LCS), dengan memanfaatkan teori geopolitik maritim Alfred Thayer Mahan dan teori kebijakan luar negeri John P. Lovell. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif-eksplanatif, temuan menunjukkan LCS memiliki nilai strategis, ekonomi, dan geopolitik yang sangat besar karena sumber daya dan jalur pelayaran kritisnya. Tiongkok menunjukkan komitmen kuat terhadap klaim unilateralnya melalui militerisasi, pembangunan pulau buatan, dan diplomasi ekonomi seperti *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI). Analisis mengindikasikan bahwa kebijakan Tiongkok melampaui faktor pendorong historis atau keamanan, dan bertujuan untuk mencapai dominasi maritim jangka panjang sebagai instrumen utama kekuatan nasional dan memanfaatkan kekuatan ekonomi dan diplomasi regional untuk mengamankan kerja sama dari negara-negara ASEAN seraya menghindari tekanan hukum internasional.

Kata Kunci: Laut Cina Selatan, Strategi Kepemimpinan, Geopolitik Maritim, *Belt and Road Initiative*

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## BACKGROUND

The South China Sea (SCS) is a strategic region that is at the center of the world's attention because of its position as a major trade route and rich in natural resources. However, the geopolitical dynamics in this region continue to be a crucial issue due to disputes over territorial claims, militarization by several parties, and the involvement of major powers such as the US. Therefore, the SCS region has become one of the most interesting and highlighted security issues of the 21st century. The SCS is a sea basin that borders countries in East Asia, namely China and Taiwan, as well as four countries in Southeast Asia, namely the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei (Maksum, 2017). The SCS has two main islands, the Paracel and Spratly Island, however the Spratly Island dispute is more prominent than the other islands because the Spratly Islands dispute involves claimant state.

Disputes in SCS are triggered by overlapping claims from six parties, namely China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan. The claims cover the two islands of Paracel and Spratly. The nine dash line map by China, claims almost 90% of the SCS. Since post World War II, China has essentially claimed the area as part of their territory (Garcia, 2019). China's claim is based on the ancient Han Dynasty era, they were considered part of China for 2,000 years. They strengthened the claim by referring to the border agreement with France in 1887, which stated that the Spratly and Paracel Islands were included in Chinese territory (LINH, 2018). However, China's claim was rejected by several countries in East Asia and Southeast Asia. Taiwan, formerly part of China, also claims the area as part of their territory, on similar historical grounds. In addition, four Southeast Asian countries Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei are also fighting over the Spratly Islands, each considering part of their territory (Denoon & Brams, 2018).

Lately, China has increasingly strengthened their presence in the SCS by building military infrastructure on artificial and hybrid islands, such as radar facilities, runways and military ports (Pasandideh, 2021). This step is part of China's strategy to emphasize their territorial claims in the region. Data from the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (2020) shows that China has built more than 3,200 hectares of artificial islands in the Spratly Islands. This development is complemented by the installation of anti-ship missiles and air defense systems capable of reaching the maritime territory of other countries, such as the Philippines and Vietnam. Such militarization not only exacerbates tensions with other countries that also claim the territory, but also provokes strong reactions from the international community. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruled that China's claims had no legal basis, but China rejected the ruling and

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continued their militarization projects in the region(Pietrasiak, 2020).

China's massive actions in committing to claim SCS have triggered widespread condemnation from the international community. China, through their policies and intense military activities, has not only faced opposition from countries involved in the dispute but has also come under pressure from major countries and international organizations (Johnston, 2019). The United Nations (UN) has highlighted serious concerns regarding the tensions generated by China's territorial claims. In general, the UN supports the principle of freedom of navigation and the rights of coastal states set out in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 1982. China's actions that violate freedom of navigation in international waters are considered contrary to the provisions of UNCLOS, which stipulates that the free sea must be open to ships from all countries. In addition, the United States with their alliance, namely Japan and Australia, is present as a Balance of Power and shows their existence in the geopolitical dynamics in SCS (Alenezi, 2024). With a strategic interest in maintaining freedom of navigation and deterring Chinese domination, the United States and Japan routinely conduct freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the disputed area. In addition, the United States is also strengthening their alliances with ASEAN countries, especially those involved in disputes, namely the Philippines, to counter China's influence (Bao et al., 2024). The involvement of the United States ultimately triggered Chinese concerns, prompting China to accelerate military development and expand their influence through diplomatic initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the Maritime Silk Road Initiative, and economic diplomacy with countries in the Southeast Asian region (Kusumawardhana, 2023).

In current regional and international developments, China has an increasingly strong influence in various regions, especially in the Asia-Pacific. In an effort to maintain their unilateral territorial claims over the SCS region, Beijing has to deal with a number of neighboring countries that have overlapping territorial boundaries and have not reached an agreement. Nevertheless, China is well aware of the importance of maintaining good relations with neighboring countries, especially ASEAN members, as strategic partners in the economic, political and security fields of the region. To that end, China continues to encourage the establishment of political trust with Southeast Asian countries, while actively expanding their influence through a planned foreign policy. One of the concrete steps taken is to rebuild the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aimed not only at improving maritime connectivity and trade access to various major ports in Southeast Asia, but also at strengthening China's geopolitical position in the region. (Nouwens, 2019).

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The complexity of the issues prompted the author to conduct this research. China's increasingly active and strategic behavior in utilizing the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) indicates a systematic effort to influence the countries involved in the regional dispute. This research is important because their main focus is to analyze China's geopolitical strategy through MSRI in influencing the dynamics of resistance of claimant states. Unlike previous studies that highlighted the military or historical aspects, this research uses Alfred Thayer Mahan's maritime geopolitical approach and John P. Lovell's foreign policy strategy theory to see how China builds influence through economic diplomacy and maritime infrastructure. So based on the explanation above, this research aims to identify "Why does China use the Maritime Silk Road Initiative strategy in influencing resistance to the South China Sea dispute?"

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a lot of research and writing on international maritime and security studies. However, there is still little literature that specifically describes the dynamics of China's foreign policy strategy as a unilateral claim strategy in SCS, especially from a maritime geopolitical perspective that links the dimensions of maritime power with long-term domination ambitions. There are a number of literatures related to the subject matter to be studied in this research. this research. With this foundation, this research will deepen the analysis of how China builds and maintains their claims through foreign policy strategies and maritime geopolitical approaches.

The first research is "Dinamika Laut Cina Selatan dalam Perspektif Realisme Dunia Internasional" written by Andrian Rizky Moranta and Abdul Rivai Ras. This research uses the perspective of realism theory, emphasizing the dynamics of international power that occur due to China's claims to SCS (Moranta & Ras, 2022). Realism theory, which focuses on the state as the main actor acting based on national interests and power, provides an overview of how China uses force to fight for their claims in the region, despite rejection from other countries. One of the phenomena described is China's rejection of an international arbitration ruling in favour of the Philippines in the SCS dispute, which shows China's attitude of distrusting other countries and prioritizing their national interests.

Moranta & Ras' research uses a classical realism approach that emphasizes the dynamics of power between states and national interests in an anarchic international system. Meanwhile, the author's research uses John P. Lovell's theory of foreign policy strategy and Alfred Thayer Mahan's concept of maritime geopolitics. Lovell emphasizes that a country's foreign strategy is strongly

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influenced by their bargaining position, a country that has a superior position tends to use a leadership strategy to shape the regional order in accordance with their interests. On the other hand, Mahan emphasized the importance of sea control as a national power through military fleets, control of trade routes, and control of strategic areas. By using these theories and concepts, this research illustrates how China utilizes the Maritime Silk Road Initiative as a means to lead and strengthen their maritime dominance, in contrast to the classical realism approach which only sees conflict from the side of military power alone.

The second research is "Kebijakan Luar Negeri Cina dalam Sengketa Laut Cina Selatan Tahun 2014 - 2018 berdasarkan Tinjauan Perspektif Offensive Realism" written by Adiva Pramesti. This research focuses on China's foreign policy in the context of the SCS dispute, using an offensive realism perspective to analyze these dynamics (PRAMESTI, 2020). This perspective emphasizes that states act to increase power and strengthen their position in an anarchic international system, where there is no authority higher than the state. In this case, China seeks to increase power through their more aggressive foreign policy in the SCS region. This research highlights the factors that drive China's foreign policy, one of which is the Chinese Dream concept promoted by President Xi Jinping. The Chinese Dream, as a national vision that emphasizes China's rise as a great power, focuses on enhancing China's military, economic and political power. Xi Jinping, within this framework, seeks to make China a dominant power in Asia and the world.

Pramesti's research uses an offensive realism perspective, which emphasizes the motivation of states to continually expand power as a means of achieving security in an anarchic international system. The main focus is on analyzing China's foreign policy, specifically how the Chinese Dream vision drives China's aggressive actions in the SCS dispute. Meanwhile, in contrast to this study, this research uses Alfred Thayer Mahan's geopolitical concept to explain China's maritime strategy as part of efforts to control strategic maritime territory. As such, it highlights the role of global trade routes, maritime fleet building and control over natural resource-rich territories as tangible manifestations of China's maritime geopolitical ambitions. In addition, this research also uses John P. Lovell's theory of foreign policy strategy to analyze how China, as a country with a high bargaining position, chooses to exercise leadership strategy through economic diplomacy and connectivity initiatives such as the Maritime Silk Road. This approach shows that China's expansion of influence is not merely a form of aggression, but a structured leadership strategy to shape a more politically and economically favorable regional order.

The third previous research is "Strategi RRC dalam Dinamika Konflik di Laut

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China Selatan" conducted by Ade Priangani and Jeremy Aldi Rezki Hattu in 2020. The results showed that the dynamics of conflict SCS have been ongoing since China's claim in 1947 and involve competition between major countries in the region, for instance Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, Brunei Darussalam, and Malaysia (Priangani & Hattu, 2020). ASEAN has endeavored to maintain peace and stability over the past 50 years, despite differences of opinion among their members on this sensitive issue. This conflict triggered persuasive diplomacy efforts from China to restore relations with ASEAN and the region in general. The approach used in this research is strategy theory, which highlights how conflict dynamics affect the foreign policy strategies of related countries. In addition, conflict resolution mechanisms through diplomatic and juridical channels are also part of the analysis, including the role of regional organizations such as ASEAN and international institutions such as the Court of Arbitration.

The main difference between this study and the research conducted by Priangani & Hattu lies in the theoretical approach and focus of the analytical study. Their research uses strategy theory, focusing on conflict dynamics, diplomatic mechanisms, and China's response in the context of multilateral relations with ASEAN countries. The main focus of the research is on the negotiation process and China's diplomatic strategy in maintaining regional stability, as well as the involvement of international institutions in dispute resolution. Meanwhile, this research uses Alfred Thayer Mahan's geopolitical concept, focusing on China's maritime strategy in the context of the struggle for maritime routes and resources. It sees SCS as an economically and militarily vital strategic space, and explains how China's maritime dominance is part of a maritime-based geopolitical doctrine. In addition, this research also uses John P. Lovell's foreign policy strategy theory to explain how China implements a leadership strategy through economic diplomacy and regional influence. Thus, while Priangani & Hattu focuses on conflict resolution and normative processes, this study focuses more on structural and long-term strategies of maritime power and regional leadership.

The fourth previous research is "Kekuatan Nasional Tiongkok Dalam Sengketa Laut Tiongkok Selatan" conducted by Sukawarsini Djelantik in 2021. The results showed that China's national power in the SCS dispute was influenced by Diplomacy, Information, Military and Economic (DIME) instruments (Djelantik, 2021). China actively uses various strategies such as artificial island construction, military modernization, strengthening cyber power, and economic diplomacy through the Belt and Road initiative. This research uses a descriptive qualitative study approach with data collection through documentation studies from books, journals, media, and reports. The underlying theory is the concept of national power which includes the four aspects of DIME, which helps understand how China

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utilizes power to strengthen their territorial claims and global influence to strengthen their territorial claims and global influence. This approach highlights the role of governmental and nongovernmental institutions in the context of international conflicts and complex geopolitical strategies in the Southeast Asian region and the world.

Djelantik's research examines the dispute through a national power approach with the concept of DIME (Diplomacy, Information, Military and Economy), which emphasizes how instruments of state power are used simultaneously by China to strengthen their territorial claims. The focus is on the use of comprehensive power (hard and soft power) to enlarge regional and global influence. Meanwhile, this research uses Alfred Thayer Mahan's concept of maritime geopolitics, with an emphasis on the control of shipping lanes and control of sea space as the foundation of state power. In addition, John P. Lovell's theory of foreign policy strategy is also used, which sees China's actions as part of a leadership strategy where economic power and diplomacy are used to shape regional order without direct confrontation. Thus, while Djelantik provides a broad overview of national power instruments in general, this study emphasizes maritime strategy and regional leadership as the core of China's domination ambitions in SCS.

The fifth previous research is "Strategi China dalam Melindungi Keamanan Nasionalnya di Wilayah Sengketa Laut China Selatan" conducted by Kinanti, Ismah, Ahmad in 2022. The results showed that China's strategy in protecting their national interests in the SCS region is based on the use of national power both military and latent power, including political, economic, and non-military policy aspects (Sabilla et al., 2022). Two main concepts used in this research are national interest and national power. National interest refers to the main interests of a country that become the reason and basis for determining foreign policy, including security, economic and political aspects. Meanwhile, national power includes the total power of a country that combines elements such as military power, economy, demography, and social aspects, which are used to achieve and protect these national interests.

The main difference between Kinanti, Ismah, and Ahmad's research and this study lies in the theoretical focus and analytical point of view. Their research focuses on China's strategy in protecting national security through the national interest and national power approaches, by identifying various elements of state power, both military and nonmilitary, to defend national interests. This research uses John P. Lovell's foreign policy strategy theory, which sees China's actions as part of a leadership strategy where economic power and diplomacy are used to shape regional order without direct confrontation. In addition, the use of Alfred T. Mahan's concept of maritime geopolitics in the research is used to analyze the

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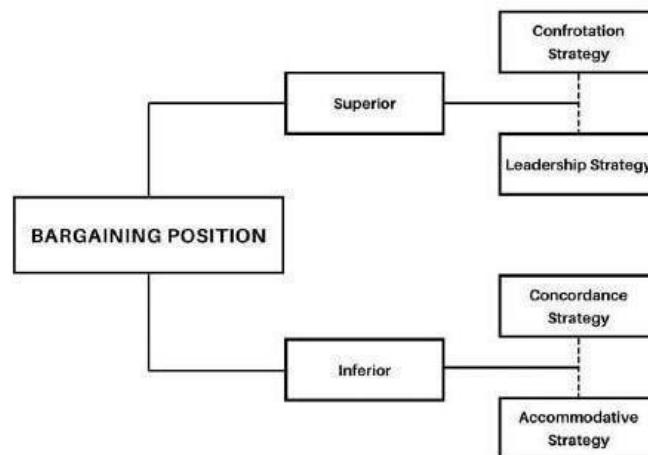
emphasis on control of shipping lanes and control of sea space as the foundation of state power. Therefore, this research does not only consider the use of force as the only means of protection, but there are also foreign policies and diplomacy that can be used as a strategy of maritime hegemony and regional leadership diplomacy carried out by China in an effort to shape the regional order in accordance with their interests.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Foreign Policy Strategy**

To elaborate on the variables of China's commitment in claiming SCS as their territory, the theoretical framework used is the theory of foreign policy strategy by John P. Lovell. Lovell specifically explains that a country's foreign policy is not only determined by domestic political needs, but also by responses to other countries in the international system, as well as the bargaining position of each country. Lovell considers a country's bargaining position in international relations as a factor that determines the type of foreign policy that will be implemented (Lovell, 1970). Countries with strong bargaining positions tend to use more dominant strategies, while countries with weak bargaining positions tend to use more accommodating strategies. Continuing this explanation, Lovell uses 4 typologies of strategies to help analyze the strategies used by a country in carrying out their foreign policy, consisting of leadership strategy, confrontation strategy, concordance strategy, and accommodative strategy.





Organized by the author based on the source: John P. Lovell, "Foreign Policy in Perspective"

According to Lovell, the emergence of the concept of superior and inferior countries is explained by looking at the bargaining position. Countries that are in a superior position will tend to have a typology of confrontation and leadership strategies. In relation to the concept of strong and weak countries put forward by John P. Lovell, in this position China is on the strong side (superior) because it is related to the bargaining position with other countries in addressing this issue. The Chinese government as a rational actor then carries out various strategies/policies oriented towards leadership strategy. The implementation of China's diplomacy and foreign promotion in the Belt and Road Initiative and Maritime Silk Road Initiative policies is a manifestation of this leadership strategy, where China not only seeks to expand their economic and infrastructure influence to the Southeast Asian region, but also builds maritime domination that is systemic and structured.

Through this policy initiative, China positions themselves as a regional power center capable of regulating trade flows, developing strategic logistics networks, which ultimately strengthens claims under the pretext of global economic interests. This reflects that China's foreign policy is not just a response to international dynamics, but part of a long-term strategy to shape a regional order that is more favorable to their position as a superior country in the East Pacific region.

### Maritime Geopolitics

In explaining the variables of China's geopolitical views on maritime control and domination in the SCS region, the concept used in this research is the maritime

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geopolitics concept formulated by Alfred T. Mahan. According to Mahan's view, a country's power can be measured through their capabilities and abilities in maritime control where maritime control includes dominance over the development of maritime military fleets, establishment of maritime bases, and protection of international maritime trade (Sumida, 2014). This theory states the basic assumption that countries that control the maritime will have military, economic, and political advantages at the global level. Mahan clearly states that there are six basic concepts needed to build a great maritime power: geographical area, physical configuration, land area, population characteristics, population size, and government characteristics (Mahan, 2014).

The six basic concepts put forward by Mahan are interrelated in shaping a country's maritime power. First, geographical territory refers to a country's strategic geographical location on international shipping lanes. A country with this geographical position will have great potential to control global trade flows. Second, physical conformation refers to the physical condition of the territory such as the length of the coastline, the presence of natural harbors, and the accessibility to open waters, all of which determine the ability for sustainable maritime access and operations. Third, the extent of territory reflects the logistical capacity and resources that can support the expansion and maintenance of a maritime fleet.

Next, undefined refers to the culture, spirit and long-term orientation of the business, with a focus on future growth and sustainability. Fifth, the number of population emphasizes the importance of population as a labor base, both for the merchant shipping and maritime defense sectors. Sixth, character of government refers to a country's government having strategic policies that support the development of maritime power, including the political will to invest in a maritime fleet and supporting infrastructure. Mahan emphasizes that maritime power is not only shaped by military power alone, but also by a combination of geographical, social, economic and institutional factors. So this theory is relevant to analyze how major countries, such as China, design their foreign and defense policies to secure strategic positions.

Mahan's theory offers concrete geographical and strategic dimensions to analyze state behavior in the struggle for maritime space. SCS is not just a disputed territory, but a strategic space that has great economic value, and is symbolic for China. Through control of this region, China not only secures logistics and energy routes, but also demonstrates their capability to project power into the Indo-Pacific region. This theory also provides an effective analytical tool to link China's domestic behavior and foreign policy. As Mahan argued, a country that has a government that supports maritime expansion will tend to prioritize maritime power building

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as part of the national agenda.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This research uses the cause-and-effect explanation method, which is research that seeks to explain the causes of observed phenomena (Ramdhan, 2021). In the causal explanation method, there are two types of variables consisting of dependent variables or units of analysis and independent variables or units of explanation. The unit of analysis is the phenomenon that is the object of study or being analyzed. Meanwhile, the unit of explanation is the behavior to be observed, which serves to explain the analyzed phenomenon (Mas' oed, 1994). Simply put, the unit of explanation serves as an explanation of the unit of analysis. In this research, China's foreign policy strategy serves as the unit of analysis. The unit of explanation in this study includes China's Geopolitical views on maritime control and control over regions that have great natural resource potential.

The data collection process begins with analyzing sources that can provide information relevant to the research topic. After that, researchers searched and collected data from sources including websites, journals, books, theses and other official documents, while ensuring that the data obtained was valid and reliable. After the data is collected, the researcher processes and analyzes it by grouping, categorizing, and analyzing the themes and titles that appear. The tools used by the author in processing data include Mendeley, Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar and Publish or Perish. This technique allows researchers to collect in depth information and helps explain the geopolitical dynamics in the Asia Pacific Region, especially the SCS.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Overview of the Value and Potential of Resources in the South China Sea Region**

The ocean constitutes a vast reservoir of natural resources, covering approximately 70 percent of the Earth's surface (Vamsi, 2020). It is home to a wide range of valuable materials, including fish, oil, gas, and various minerals, all of which are essential to human sustenance and development. Among these, oil stands out as a particularly strategic resource, significantly influencing a nation's economic advancement, political stability, and security posture. The industrial sector, heavily reliant on natural resources such as oil and gas, plays a critical role in driving national economic growth. Accordingly, it is unsurprising that major powers like Russia, the United States, and China actively seek to secure adequate access to these

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resources in order to sustain their economic ambitions (Friedberg, 2018).

The SCS is a resource rich region and holds critical importance as a strategic maritime corridor. As a rising global power, China now comparable in influence to other major states seeks to assert control over the region's resources, a strategy that mirrors the United States' engagement in the Middle East. For China, the SCS represents not only a source of vital natural resources but also a gateway to establishing regional hegemony in Southeast Asia (Lai & Kuik, 2021). The abundance of resources and the strategic significance of the SCS have consequently drawn the interest of numerous surrounding states, intensifying geopolitical competition in the area. Given China's substantial and growing demand for natural resources, it is unsurprising that the country began implementing policies in 1993 to facilitate resource imports. In response to the escalating reliance on foreign imports, China increasingly views the SCS as a viable source of domestic resource extraction and a crucial maritime trade route (Quyet, 2023).

Geographically, the SCS region comprises both small and large island formations, among which the Paracel and Spratly Islands are the most hotly contested by claimant states. Despite their limited economic utility in terms of natural resource abundance and habitability being composed primarily of rocks, sand, and infertile soil unsuitable for agriculture these islands hold significant strategic and economic value. The Paracel and Spratly Islands, while lacking in immediate resource richness, represent highly profitable assets due to their geopolitical importance and associated maritime rights. There are 2 things that make these two islands of strategic value, namely; first, these two islands, especially the Spratly Islands, determine the boundary line of the country that will own these islands and also determine the extent of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) for the country that will own these islands. Second, the Spratly Islands are a route of international traffic for both military and trade (Kusuma et al., 2021).

The discovery of natural resources in the SCS began in earnest in 1968, marking a turning point in the region's geopolitical significance. Initial estimates suggested the presence of approximately 7.5 billion barrels of oil within the SCS, accompanied by a rise in oil production among littoral states. Subsequent exploration and growing output have fueled speculation that the region may hold as much as 213 billion barrels in oil reserves. According to various sources referenced by the author, the Spratly Islands alone are believed to contain around 2.5 billion barrels of petroleum. These developments have substantially elevated the economic value of the Spratly Islands, which were previously regarded primarily for their strategic utility (Koga, 2022).

In addition to its substantial petroleum reserves, the SCS region is also rich

in natural gas resources, particularly in the form of hydrocarbons. In fact, it is estimated that the hydrocarbon potential in the SCS exceeds that of its oil reserves. Studies indicate that approximately 60 to 70 percent of the SCS area contains hydrocarbon deposits, positioning the region as a significant source of natural gas. The total volume of hydrocarbon resources in the SCS is estimated to reach around 190 trillion cubic feet (TcF) (Ambarwati et al., 2023). The following table illustrates the distribution and estimated quantities of natural resources within the SCS region:

Region of South China Sea	Potential Oil and Gas Reserves
Southern China	1500 million barrels
South of Hainan Island	210 million barrels
Gulf of Tonkin	95 million barrels
South Vietnam	2847 million barrels
Sunda Shelf	180 million barrels
Borneo / Sarawak	9260 million barrels
Philippines	409 million barrels

*Source: American Security Project*

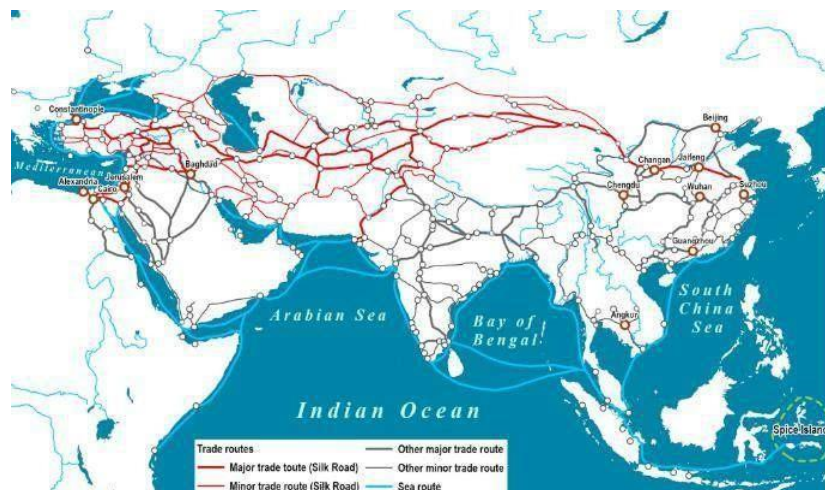
As infrastructure development activities in the SCS region are increasing, especially in the Spratly Islands, this in turn also adds to the strategic value of these islands. Even the countries that own the Spratly Islands themselves will eventually benefit from the infrastructure they build considering that this will make it easier for them to explore natural resources and distribute them (Ambarwati et al., 2023).

For Southeast Asian countries, the SCS is a crucial part of their trade routes. It acts as a key maritime link connecting Southeast Asia with East Asia, South Asia, and parts of Europe. Because of this strategic importance, it's no surprise that the SCS is the second busiest shipping lane in the world. Globally, about one-third of maritime trade passes through the SCS. In terms of economic value, trade through the SCS amounted to approximately US\$5.3 trillion in 2019 (Miranda & Maljak, 2022). This highlights why the SCS attracts attention not only from countries within the region but also from external powers especially China, which is pursuing regional dominance through their Belt and Road Initiative. Consequently, ASEAN and Southeast Asian nations are inevitably drawn into the conflicts surrounding the SCS, given their significant role in the region.

### **The Effect of the Belt Road Initiative and Maritime Silk Road Policy Strategy**

## on the Dynamics of the Alliance of Disputing Countries

Since the announcement of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) policy in 2013 with SCS as one of the areas that can support the achievement of the policy component, namely the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), China has sought to cooperate, especially in the maritime sector. The existence of some of these policies aims as a diplomatic approach strategy to influence the position of ASEAN countries in the dispute in the SCS (Le Thu, 2019). China presents themselves as a friendly development partner and adheres to the concept of common destiny. The Chinese government has emphasized the importance of synergy between the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the ASEAN Master Plan on Connectivity 2025 (MPAC 2025). ASEAN collectively expects the BRI to support and complement their multilateral projects by strengthening connectivity and collaborating on shared priorities identified in MPAC 2025 and China's BRI (Guo & Yang, 2021). However, the BRI is still perceived as something that could pose certain problems for ASEAN and their member states.



Source: [transportgeography.org](http://transportgeography.org)

One of the concerns raised by ASEAN collectively and per member state is the fear that the BRI could undermine ASEAN's centrality and unity due to China's more bilateral approach (Kuik, 2021). In China's efforts to get closer to ASEAN through the BRI, they often take a bilateral approach with member states rather than taking a multilateral approach with ASEAN. This is considered to weaken the current

ASEAN led alliance model of regionalism and is feared to lead to a more China-

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centric model of regionalism. China considers bilateral dialogue to be its “main channel for policy communication,” while also “emphasizing the importance of maintaining and strengthening the role of multilateral mechanisms and conducting dialogue through multilateral platforms” (Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative 2017). Based on the concrete projects that have been implemented so far, it is clear that bilateral cooperation remains dominant in the cooperation between ASEAN countries and China. (Bi, 2021).

In addition to the concerns mentioned above, the growing trade imbalance, which is considered to be beneficial to China, has also caused increasing concern in ASEAN about China's strategic influence. In general, there are views in the region and its institutions that unequal economic interdependence will become more apparent and enable China to convert its economic power into political influence for its strategic interests (Nye Jr, 2020). According to many Southeast Asian experts, a trade network dominated by China has been established, and the BRI will further expand China's trade influence in the region. As an example, the trade deficit of ASEAN countries reached USD 80,988.99 million in 2016 (Gong, 2019). The potential for BRI to further widen the trade imbalance in China's favor adds to the concerns of ASEAN countries (except Thailand and Malaysia, which have a trade surplus with China) regarding their growing trade deficits with China. The increasing deficits and economic dependence on China could have a significant impact on their domestic economies, sovereignty, and propensity to maintain good relations with China. (Nye Jr, 2020).

China's investment in important strategic projects, which is a cause for concern, could lead to “debt trap diplomacy” in which partner countries become trapped in debt to China, thereby strengthening China's political influence. (Liu, 2023). The return on capital and economic benefits of investing in large-scale infrastructure projects are generally known to be slow and risky. According to analysts from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Vietnam, China's lending rates are not actually low. (Kueh & Soo, 2020). In this regard, various partner countries that are developing countries affected by debt recognize that significant debt burdens have the potential to lead to the transfer of strategic national assets into Chinese control.

Ultimately, countries that enjoyed the benefits of cooperation with China show a weakening attitude towards disputes in the SCS. Therefore, the weakening stance of major countries such as Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia, which were previously very resistant to China in the SCS, may affect how ASEAN institutionally responds to China. Previously, there were differences of opinion on the measures and mechanisms used to confront China. Some countries showed strong resistance,

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but some tended to be weak or even sided with China. With the construction of the BRI, the author sees that there is a possibility that there will be a weakening of ASEAN's stance, caused by the increasingly cooperative member states towards China. This is because, when referring to China's foreign policy strategy, it can be analyzed using John P. Lovell's theory, which emphasizes the relationship between a country's bargaining position and the strategy it chooses. Based on this theory, China, as a country with a strong bargaining position in the region, carries out a strategy that is included in the leadership strategy typology. This strategy places China as a dominant actor that not only influences the direction of other countries' policies through economic power and investment, but also shapes regional structures and dynamics according to their interests. Through bilateral approaches within the BRI and MSR frameworks, China demonstrates the characteristics of a leadership strategy by using economic power as a tool of persuasion and long-term political influence. This reflects China's role as a superior country in the international system, which uses their strategic capacities and advantages to shape a more favorable regional order for it, as a superior country in the international system, which uses their strategic capacities and advantages to shape a more favorable regional order for them.

### **China's Attitude in Affirming the South China Sea as their Territory**

Referring through maritime geopolitics concept that formulated by Alfred T. Mahan, China's moves to claim the SCS can be understood as a strategic effort to build maritime-based national power (sea power). Mahan emphasized that a country's dominance at the global level depends on the extent to which it is able to control strategic maritime areas, including through the development of a military fleet, control of international shipping lanes, and the establishment of permanent maritime bases. (Mahan, 2014). Xi Jinping views the SCS not only as a disputed territory, but as a strategic arena in China's grand project to establish regional supremacy and challenge US dominance in the Asia-Pacific region. Whether through economic approaches within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), or through military approaches with the construction of artificial islands and strategic defense infrastructure, China demonstrates a foreign policy direction consistent with Mahan's principles of maritime power. Therefore, China's consistent stance in the SCS cannot be separated from their ambition to make this region a geopolitical foundation in their efforts to achieve the status of a global superpower.

One example of China's assertive and consistent stance in the SCS is that China builds military bases on strategically located artificial islands in the middle of the disputed territory. The presence of these military bases has significant



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geopolitical implications, as they give China a strategic advantage in terms of control

of the sea and airspace. With military infrastructure such as runways, hangars, radar, and missile defense systems, China gains the ability to project its military power directly, potentially disrupting international freedom of navigation and overflight. (Darmawan & Ardhaneswari, 2024).

China's military presence has raised concerns among ASEAN countries, particularly those with claimant states. Specifically, the base has four main implications, first, an increase in regional tensions due to China's aggressive Military presence in disputed territory, triggering military and diplomatic responses from neighboring countries. Second, the threat to global trade flows, as the SCS is one of the busiest maritime trade routes in the world; disruptions to freedom of navigation can have far-reaching effects on regional and global logistics and economies. Third, the presence of the base fuels the militarization of the region and increases the risk of an arms race between the countries of Southeast Asia, especially those that feel their sovereignty is threatened. Fourthly, the sovereignty of ASEAN countries is directly called into question as the military base is being built on territory that is claimed by more than one country under international law.

China has now built at least seven artificial islands in the Spratly Islands region, including three large military bases on Mischief Reef, Subi Reef, and Fiery Cross Reef. They are on average two kilometers long and one kilometer wide, equipped with runways, radar stations, aircraft hangars, and anti-aircraft missile launch systems. (Roy MA, 2021). These militarization initiatives mark an escalation in China's strategy to transform natural geographic features into permanent defense installations, which not only challenge other countries' sovereignty claims, but also change the maritime security status quo in the Asia Pacific region (Malik, 2014). This strategy is in line with Mahan's sea power principle, which states that sea bases and control of strategic points are key pillars in establishing regional maritime primacy.

1. Subi

3. Mischief



## 2. Fiery Cross Reef



*Sources : BBC*

There are at least three reasons why China wants hegemony in Southeast Asia. First, Southeast Asia is a region with a population of around 600 million, half of whom are under the age of 30 (Hermawan, 2013). Of course, Southeast Asia for China economically is an area that is currently a growing market with cheap labor wages and ultimately makes the Chinese industry interested in Southeast Asia. Second, in several years the economy in Southeast Asia has increased significantly. The increase in the economy has ultimately helped to increase the middle class in Southeast Asia (Ahmad et al., 2019). China therefore sees this as a great opportunity to build infrastructure because they assume that the middle class will generally live in urban areas that require good and modern public facilities and facilities. The existence of this economic improvement is ultimately an attraction for China. Third, there are policies in several Southeast Asian countries that seek to improve the condition of the business sector in the country, one example of such policies is the simplification of the tax system or even a decrease in taxes (Chongvilaivan & Chooi, 2021). This ultimately makes the Southeast Asian region attractive to investors from large countries, one of which is China.

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In the SCS conflict, China's efforts to dominate Southeast Asia are evident in their indifference and disregard for other major countries that have intervened in the conflict. China has also succeeded in maintaining the non-binding and ambiguous Declaration of Conduct (DOC) and delaying the implementation of the Code of Conduct (COC). (Jorgensen, 2021). In fact, the existence of the Belt and Road Initiative passing through the SCS region is essentially part of China's soft diplomacy strategy in their efforts to establish hegemony in Southeast Asia, as it is an important region for China in terms of investment. In addition, we can also see the characteristics of Chinese hegemony in the deployment of Chinese military forces in the Spratly and Paracel Islands (Darmawan & Ardhaneswari, 2024).

### **International Response to Resistance China's Stance**

In the SCS dispute, the role of the rule of international law should be the main foundation in determining a fair and peaceful settlement. However, in reality, China has shown no compliance with applicable legal mechanisms. China's disregard for the concept of international rules, particularly the 2016 arbitral award, triggered a new conflict in international relations. The July 2016 international arbitration award in the Philippines v. China case filed with the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague, legally rejected the basis of China's "Nine-Dash Line" claim. In its ruling, the PCA held that China's historical claims have no legal basis in UNCLOS and China has violated the Philippines' sovereign rights in their Exclusive Economic Zone (Fatmawati & Aprina, 2019).

China's behavior in SCS has triggered various reactions from the international community. Major countries outside the region such as the US with their allies, Australia, Japan, responded in the form of military deployment, as well as strengthening strategic alliances with countries involved in the dispute. The US has consistently rejected China's claims by conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the disputed area. This operation aims to emphasize that the sea is a freely navigable international territory, and maintain the principle of Freedom of Sail as stipulated in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Bahri, 2020).

Regional responses have also emerged through strengthening security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. Australia, Japan and India together with the United States formed the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), one of whose objectives is to maintain openness and stability in the security of waters in the Indo-Pacific, including the SCS. (Eisentraut & Gaens, 2018). In addition, the AUKUS partnership (Australia, UK, and US) also addresses China's increasing military presence in the

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SCS. Essentially, AUKUS aims to strengthen regional defense capabilities through the exchange of cutting-edge military technology, including the development of nuclear- powered submarines for Australia, as well as improved cyber and maritime surveillance capabilities. The presence of AUKUS is seen as a strong signal from Western countries to balance power and prevent China's sole dominance(Cheng, 2022).

Despite the international backlash against China, the Chinese government has remained consistent in defending their territorial claims. However, instead of taking a fully confrontational path, China implements a leadership-oriented foreign policy strategy as described by John P. Lovell. As a country with a high bargaining position and an ambition to maintain their status as a dominant global power, China seeks to maintain their positive image in the eyes of regional countries by encouraging economic cooperation, infrastructure investment, and intensive bilateral diplomacy. This approach not only aims to obscure criticism of non-compliance with international law, but also creates economic and diplomatic dependence that makes disputants more cooperative with China's position. China's leadership strategy is reflected through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Maritime Silk Road, which serve to systemically enhance their maritime geopolitical power. China's view of maritime geopolitics is not limited to the physical control of territorial waters, but also includes the control of trade flows, the construction of strategic logistics channels, and the establishment of a regional order oriented towards their national interests. By building a network of influence in Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific, China articulates maritime power as a legitimate instrument of regional hegemony.

China's stance in rejecting the decision of the international arbitration court shows that China is reluctant to submit to multilateral legal mechanisms that are considered to threaten their central position. (Kardon, 2018). Instead, China prefers to take the negotiation route with ASEAN, as reflected in the various steps taken in the development of the SCS Code of Conduct (CoC). Although the initial agreement to establish a CoC was made in 2002, the initial code of conduct discussions took 15 years and progress has been very slow. China recognizes that negotiating with ASEAN provides a greater opportunity for a more negotiable and strategically beneficial outcome(Ling, 2021). This is because many ASEAN countries have high economic dependence on China, whether through direct investment, trade, or projects in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This dependence makes most ASEAN countries tend to take a more lenient or neutral stance towards China, meaning that China's confidence to solve problems through ASEAN is not only because the regional approach is considered more effective, but also because of China's more politically and economically dominant bargaining position among their partners.

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## CONCLUSIONS

China's strategic commitment in defending their claims to the SCS cannot be separated from their ambition to establish maritime dominance as part of their national power. Using the conceptual framework of maritime geopolitics and foreign policy strategy theory, China's actions in the region are not only driven by historical claims or defense interests, but are an expression of a leadership strategy exercised by a superior state in the international system. China utilizes their strong bargaining position to carry out diplomacy and economic strategies, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) which have become instruments of influence over Southeast Asian countries. This approach has created economic and political dependencies that have resulted in cooperative attitudes of some ASEAN countries towards China's claims, as well as obscuring international pressure on China. China's consistent bilateral strategy proves that dispute resolution is more focused on politically negotiable channels, rather than being subject to binding legal mechanisms. As such, the SCS is a reflection of the contemporary maritime geopolitical arena where economic dominance, military power and diplomatic influence are consolidated to shape the regional order in China's favor, while challenging prevailing principles of international law and governance.

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