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# Drivers of China's Assertive South China Sea Strategy

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## I. Introduction

The East Asian region is experiencing a turbulent period in its history. China claims sovereignty and 'historic rights' over all of the disputed islands, the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and continental

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shelf generated by those islands in the South China Sea (SCS). Beijing asserts that it has the right to regulate navigational activities -including the movement of warships- in its EEZ and within the U-shaped Line in the SCS.<sup>1)</sup> China is strengthening its own territorial and jurisdictional claims using the navy and other maritime agencies.

China's astounding economic growth for the last several decades has provided it with the pride of a nation that is, after centuries of humiliation, returning to global preeminence. However, China worries that its lack of sufficient indigenous resources to sustain economic growth and social well-being over the long term could pose a significant threat to its casting off past humiliations and regaining its 'lost' glory. Beijing has been aware of the vulnerability of its economy to a shortage of resources caused by manufacturing, modern living, industrial processes, and transport which all depend on its availability of resources. China's assertiveness toward the territorial and maritime disputes in the SCS is closely related to increased emphasis on resource security.

This paper analyzes the impact of resource scarcity on the strategic environment that drives China's assertive SCS strategy and discusses some aspects of resource scarcity effect on China's stability. This paper also examines the strategic implications of China's resource scarcity at the domestic, regional, and global levels.

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1) "Analysis: China's Nine-dashed Line in the South China Sea," *Reuters*, 25 May 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/25/us-china-sea-boundary-idUBRE84O07520120252>

## II. What Drives China's Assertiveness in the South China Sea

According to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), coastal nations have to (a) an EEZ extending within 200 nautical miles from the coast of the each state's territorial sea or/and (b) claim a continental shelf as far as 350 nautical miles.<sup>2)</sup> Although all the littoral nations of the SCS are signatories to this agreement, several of these nations lay overlapping claims to the SCS including China, Japan, Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei, and Taiwan.

Territorial disputes have been made more complicated over several decades by frequently aggressive behavior by rival claimants. They have occupied and built structures on small islands or shoals far from their coasts, seeking to establish evidence of control and/or habitability, which would give them rights to claim territorial seas or EEZs around the landmasses. China makes the most expansive claims of any of the SCS claimants, making its maps with a broad U-shaped nine dash line that includes most of the SCS.<sup>3)</sup> Its claim is based on the assertion that it has "historic rights" to the area that predates the UNCLOS.<sup>4)</sup> Beijing has also used diplomatic pressure and military

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2) "Under certain geological conditions, nations can make claims that extend beyond their 200 nautical mile EEZ, to the feature that geologists call the "continental margin." If accepted by the Commission on the Continental Shelf, nations enjoy the same rights as they do in the EEZ. Where such resources are exploited in this outer portion of the shelf, the state which, of course has the exclusive right to engage in such exploitation has to pay to the International Sea Bed Authority a proportion of the value or volume of the production at the site after the first five years of exploitation." See: "Maritime Territorial Disputes in the East Asia: Issues for Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, 30 January 2013, pp. 6.

3) "Clarification of China's Claim?", *The Diplomat*, 5 March 2012, <http://thediplomat.com/2012/03/clarification-of-chinas-claim/>

4) "The South China Sea Disputes and Global Offshore Energy Competition," 20 November 2012, <http://www.tigermine.com/2012/11/20/south-china-sea-dispute-global-resource-scarcity>

posturing to bolster its control over the region.

China's economic boom and development has resulted in increasing demands for sources of energy and food. Throughout the 1980s, China was oil self-sufficient, but in 1993 became a net importer of oil and in 2009, became the second largest consumer of oil after the United States; its consumption is likely to double by 2030, resulting in increased import dependence.<sup>5)</sup> As the nation has undergone rapid industrialization and urbanization in recent years, from 1992 to 2005, over 21 percent of China's arable land was put to non-agricultural use, reducing its domestic food supply, while at the same time rising incomes have boosted demand.<sup>6)</sup> According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, in 2011, China's arable land accounted only 8 percent of the world's total, whereas its population makes up 22 percent of the world total.<sup>7)</sup>

Conflicts and tensions in the SCS stem from competing territorial claims among the littoral nations that surround the resource-rich body of water, which according to Chinese estimates could hold as high as 213 billion barrels of oil and 2000 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.<sup>8)</sup> The SCS also accounts for one-tenth of the world's global fisheries catch.<sup>9)</sup> Recent work at Food and Agriculture

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5) Leszwick Buszynski, "The South China Sea: Oil, Maritime Claims, and U.S.-China Strategic Rivalry," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, Spring 2012, pp. 144.

6) William Nobrega, "Why India will beat China," *Business Week*, 22 July 2008, <http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2008-07-22/why-india-will-beat-china-businessweek-business-news-stock-market-and-financial-advice>

7) "Arable Land Area," *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*, <http://faostat.fao.org/site/377/DesktopDefault.aspx?PageID=377#ancor>

8) "South China Sea Oil and Natural Gas," *Global Security*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/spratly-oil.htm>

9) "Fishing Wars: Competition for the South China Sea's Fishery Resources," *Pacific Forum CSIS*, 24 July 2013, <http://isnblog.ethz.ch/security/fishing-wars-competition-for-south-china-seas-fishery-resources>

Organization of the United Nations reports that “Asia accounts for more than 87 percent of the world total with China alone having almost 14 million people (26 percent of the world total) engaged as fishers and fish farmers.”<sup>10)</sup> Fishing and related industries provide either the main or a supplementary source of employment, livelihood and income for many of the region's people.

### III. Resource Scarcity: Effects on the Stability of China

Beijing imposed a unilateral annual fishing ban in the SCS in 1999 and China has consistently opposed Vietnam's attempt to conduct exploration agreements with international oil companies in 2011, Chinese patrol boats harassed an oil exploration ship in the Philippine claim zone.<sup>11)</sup> China's assertive policy over the SCS will likely continue as indicated from President Xi Jinping's first address, in January 2013, on foreign policy after his inauguration. Xi stressed “no country can expect China to negotiate about its core national interests; neither can they hope that China will tolerate losses to its sovereignty, security and development.”<sup>12)</sup> For the Chinese government the country's growing reliance on external resources presents large implications for China's socioeconomic stability and energy security, as the government—the party—is expected to provide a better life for its citizens.

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10) “The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture—2012,” *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*, 2012, pp. 11.

11) Leszek Buszynski, “The South China Sea: Oil, Maritime Claims, and U.S.–China Strategic Rivalry,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, Spring 2012, pp. 141–144.

12) “100 Days in Power of Xi Jinping and Maritime Issues,” 28 January 2013, <http://southchinasea.com/analysis/436-100-days-in-power-of-xi-jinping-and-maritime-issues.html>

First, Chinese leadership regards oil imports as a strategic vulnerability that could be exploited by foreign powers to influence China. Beijing's interest in energy security can be traced back to Sino-China split in 1960 and the withdrawal of Soviet advisers from China's oil sector. The loss of Soviet assistance contributed to economic collapse.<sup>13)</sup> China's unhappy experience has contributed to the suspicion that its dependence on energy imports is dangerous.

Second, additional vulnerabilities arise from conditions in important foreign sources of energy supplies. China's major energy suppliers are located in turbulent and volatile regions such as the Persian Gulf, Africa and Central Asia. Since China obtains more than half of its energy imports from the Persian Gulf, Beijing is concerned that these flows are vulnerable to regional political instability.<sup>14)</sup>

Third, the enormous scale of prospective energy demands raises great concern about resource adequacy. China shifted from a net oil exporter to a net oil importer in 1993, its dependence on imported oil rose from 56.7 percent in 2011 to a surprising 58.6 percent in 2012.<sup>15)</sup> Growing import dependence imposes burdens on the economy. China is a developing consumer country with an economy reliant on fossil fuel, and is very susceptible to rising oil prices.<sup>16)</sup>

Fourth, rising oil import dependency is likely to make Beijing more

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13) Erica Strecker Downs, "China's Quest for Energy Security," RAND, 2000, pp. 11-13

14) Rech and Weitz, "China's Strategy on Energy Security," *World Politics Review*, 9 November 2010,

<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/6989/chinas-strategy-on-energy-security>

15) "China and Its Oil Dependency - How Well is The CCP Approaching The Crisis?", *The Voice of Russia*, 3 December 2012,

[http://voiceofrussia.com/2012\\_12\\_03/China-and-its-oil-dependency-how-well-is-the-CCP-approaching-the-crisis](http://voiceofrussia.com/2012_12_03/China-and-its-oil-dependency-how-well-is-the-CCP-approaching-the-crisis)

16) Xuecheng Liu, "China's Energy Security and Its Grand Strategy," *The Stanly Foundation Policy Analysis Brief*, September 2006, pp. 2-3.

supportive of offshore drilling, which risks inflaming maritime disputes. Exploratory drilling in deepwater areas of the SCS has yielded significant oil and natural gas finds.<sup>17)</sup> This encourages China's neighboring countries; Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines and its other maritime neighbors are reluctant to engage in deepwater exploration, China's activities are viewed as a threat by other nations.<sup>18)</sup>

Finally, dwindling fisheries around coastal area have driven South East Asian fishermen farther into disputed areas to search for fish, which leads to confrontations at sea.<sup>19)</sup> As a result, fishing has now become a politically sensitive and emotionally-charged national security issue for claimant countries. China has to feed 22 percent of the world population with just 8 percent of the world's arable land. China's middle class is projected to grow 40 percent by 2020.<sup>20)</sup> Rising incomes will boost food demand. China will certainly have to increase food imports, resulting in increased import dependence. Fluctuations of food supply and prices may have grim consequences for China. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Beijing considers maintaining a comparatively high level of food self-sufficiency, avoiding supply fluctuation, and stabilizing prices, as matters of national security and stability.<sup>21)</sup> David Rosenberg, professor of political science at Middlebury

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17) "South China Sea," *The U.S. Energy Information Administration*,  
<http://www.eia.gov/countries/regions-topics.cfm?fips=SCS>

18) Ian Storey, "Japan's Maritime Security Interest in Southeast Asia and the South China Sea Dispute," *Institute of Southeast Asian Studies*, 2013,  
[http://www.academia.edu/5350311/Japans\\_maritime\\_security\\_interests\\_in\\_Southeast\\_Asia\\_and\\_the\\_South\\_China\\_Sea\\_dispute](http://www.academia.edu/5350311/Japans_maritime_security_interests_in_Southeast_Asia_and_the_South_China_Sea_dispute), pp.142-149.

19) Thomas Kane and Lawrence Serewicz, "China's Hunger: The Consequences of a Rising Demand for Food and Energy," *Parameters*, Autumn 2001, pp. 63-75,  
<http://strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/articles/01autumn/Kane.htm>

20) "China's Food Challenge: Demand Rises as the Nation Becomes Wealthier, While Domestic Supply Dwindles," *International Business Times*, 2 October 2013,  
<http://www.ibtimes.com/chinas-food-challenge-demand-rises-nation-becomes-wealthier-while-domestic-supply-dwindles-1413754>

21) "Agricultural Policy and Food Security in China," *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*, <http://www.fao.org/docrep/004/AB981E/ab981e0c.htm>

College, said that “1.5 billion people live there and rely heavily on fisheries for food and jobs. That is where most of the conflict goes on.”<sup>22)</sup>

## IV. Implication on Domestic, Regional, and International Environments

### Implication on Domestic Environment

China’s maritime strategy had been based on building the capability to support a major land-campaign. However, the growth of its domestic economy and China’s efforts to secure a steady supply of resources compel Chinese leaders to pay attention to developing maritime power.<sup>23)</sup> Beijing is departing from Deng Xiaoping’s Axiom; “Hide our capabilities, Bide our time.”

Over the past two decades, China has steadily modified its maritime strategy and developed its naval power. It is clear that Beijing is making every effort to keep the SCS off limits to other regional actors. China’s efforts can be read from former Chinese President Hu Jintao’s report to the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012; “we should enhance our capacity for exploiting marine resources, resolutely safeguard China’s maritime rights and interests, and build China into a maritime power.”<sup>24)</sup>

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22) Beina Xu, “South China Sea Tensions,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 11 January 2013, <http://www.cfr.org/china/south-china-sea-tensions>

23) Phillip Saunders et al., *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles* (National Defense University Press, 2011), pp. 109–135.

24) “China should become ‘Maritime Power’, Hu Jintao says,” *South China Morning Post*, 8 November 2012, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1077858/china-should-become-maritime-power-hu-jintao-says>

In July 2013, President Xi Jinping repeated the main strategy themes from the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress at a study session of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Center Committee. Xi's remarks enrich China's maritime power strategy. It calls for increased efforts to exploit marine resources, protect the maritime environment, and safeguard the country's maritime rights and interests.<sup>25)</sup> China will use its maritime power to assert or defend China's claims in maritime territorial disputes and China's interpretation of international laws relating to freedom of navigation in exclusive economic zones.

## Implication on Region and International Environment

China's excessive strategy to achieve its strategic goal of exercising full control over the SCS has major regional and global implications. One of the most significant results is that China's assertiveness has driven ASEAN countries to concentrate on building up their navies' capabilities.

The Philippine navy, with the U.S. military assistance plan, is going to add two more warships to its fleet.<sup>26)</sup> The first of Vietnam's six Kilo-class diesel-electric submarines arrived in December 2013 and Vietnam ordered two more Gepard-Class frigates from Russia.<sup>27)</sup> In January 2012, Indonesia signed a \$1.1 billion deal to build three

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25) "Xi Jinping and China's Maritime Disputes," 15 August 2013,

<http://taylorfravel.com/2013/08/xi-jinping-and-chinas-maritime-disputes/>

26) "ASEAN Navies Expand in Response to China's Territorial Claims in the South China Sea," *The Diplomat*, 17 January 2014,

<http://thediplomat.com/2014/01/philippine-navy-adds-to-regional-arms-build-up/>

27) "Vietnam's Russian Restocking," *Defense Industry Daily*, 7 April 2014,

<http://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/Vietnam-Reportedly-Set-to-Buy-Russian-Kilo-Class-Subs-05396/>

diesel-electric submarines from South Korea.<sup>28)</sup> According to the *Economist*, South-East Asian countries together increased defense spending by 13.5 percent in 2011, to \$24.5 billion. The figure is projected to rise to \$40 billion by 2016. Arms deliveries to Malaysia jumped eightfold in 2005-09, compared with the previous five years, while Indonesia's spending grew by 84 percent in that period. Singapore spent about \$9.7 billion, or 24 percent of the national budget, on defense in 2011.<sup>29)</sup>

Japan is unwilling to yield its position in the region and territorial tensions have led to a more assertive posture on defense. In February 2013, Tokyo announced a roughly \$83 billion increase to its defense budget, the first increase in 11 years.<sup>30)</sup> Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has expressed a desire to revise Japan's pacifist constitution. Japan's policy over China's tough SCS strategy can be read from Prime Minister Abe's remark, in February 2013, that "Japan is not, and will never be, a tier-two country".<sup>31)</sup>

The U.S. policy over the SCS dispute has been challenged by China's assertive actions and declaration of the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ECS ADIZ). The U.S. publicly rejected China's use of its "nine-dash line" as a legitimate basis for China's territorial claim in the SCS<sup>32)</sup> and has moved to strengthen defense

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28) "Submarines for Indonesia," *Defense Industry Daily*, 18 February 2014, <http://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/submarines-for-indonesia-07004/>

29) "Asia Is Undergoing The Fastest Military Buildup On The Planet," *The Economist*, 26 March 2012, [http://www.businessinsider.com/vw\\_vw\\_main\\_20120324t162000\\_0025\\_xml\\_xml#ixzz2x70dxtab](http://www.businessinsider.com/vw_vw_main_20120324t162000_0025_xml_xml#ixzz2x70dxtab)

30) "Japan Defense Budget to Increase for First Time in 11 Years," *Bloomberg*, 30 Jan 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-01-29/japan-s-defense-spending-to-increase-for-first-time-in-11-years.html>

31) Shinzo Abe, "Speech at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies," 22 February 2013, <https://csis.org/event/statesmens-forum-he-shinzo-abe-prime-minister-japan>

32) "Getting Tough in the South China Sea," *The National Interest*, 25 February 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/getting-tough-the-south-china-sea-9946?page=1>

ties with ASEAN states. As the U.S. strengthens its stance in the region, ASEAN claimants could become more emboldened to resist China's muscular strategy.<sup>33)</sup>

European Union (EU) nations are, after China, ASEAN's second largest trading partner, and the EU accounts for around 11 percent of ASEAN's total trade.<sup>34)</sup> According to the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs, the EU released a statement that it supports "the peaceful settlement of disputes in the SCS in accordance with international law, including the UNCLOS."<sup>35)</sup> The global community is committed to the security of the "global commons" and to the "freedom of the high seas" and no country has a right to dominate them.

## V. Conclusion

China greatly worries its insufficient indigenous resource could undermine its vibrant growth and social stability. Beijing is determined to secure its energy and fishery resources. As China has emerged as a regional power, these demands and China's national pride give Beijing reasons to employ all the tools of aggression to achieve its strategic goal of exercising full control of the SCS, according to a Congressional Research Service Report on the East

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33) Leszek Buszynski, "The South China Sea: Oil, Maritime Claims, and U.S.-China Strategic Rivalry," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, Spring 2012, pp. 148-150.

34) "Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)," European Commission, <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/regions/asean/>

35) "EU Lends its Support to ASEAN Over South China Sea Disputes," 24 May 2013, <http://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/2013/05/24/eu-lends-its-support-to-asean-over-south-china-sea-disputes.html#sthash.WbtcOfU4.dpuf>

Asia maritime disputes.<sup>36)</sup>

China's resource scarcity has political and strategic consequences for the global community. Since 2010, Beijing has stated several times that the SCS represents a "core interest" of China.<sup>37)</sup> In this regard, Xi Jinping's address clearly demonstrated a tough policy on the SCS issues. Beijing's fear of resource vulnerability is driving its assertive SCS strategy. This aggressive strategy has prompted ASEAN claimants to draw in the U.S. and to engage in their own naval modernization programs.

Beijing will deny that its policy is resource driven and instead stress its lofty reasons of historical rights. However, a hungry dragon will not stand on ceremony and it takes many resources to maintain a stable and content nation of more than 1.5 billion citizens. During the revolutionary war, Mao Zedong believed "Power grows out of the barrel of a gun."<sup>38)</sup> Today's Chinese leaders believe "Power grows out of the barrel of oil and the food warehouse."

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36) "Maritime Territorial Disputes in the East Asia: Issues for Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, 30 January 2013, pp. 20-23.

37) "China Hedges Over Whether South China Sea Is a 'Core Interest' Worth War," *The New York Times*, 30 March 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/31/world/asia/31beijing.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/31/world/asia/31beijing.html?_r=0)

38) "In 1927, the KMT's military leader Chiang Kai-shek broke the alliance and set about on an anti-communist purge. At an emergency meeting of the Chinese Communist Party, convened in Hankou, future Party Chairman Mao Zedong made the oft-quoted statement that "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." See: "Top 10 famous quotes of Mao Zedong," <http://www.chinawhisper.com/top-10-famous-quotes-of-mao-zedong/>

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<http://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/submarines-for-indonesia-07004/>
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## 요 약

## 중국의 공세적 남중국해 전략의 동인(動因)

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중국의 남중국해의 분쟁 도서 및 이에 속하는 배타적 경제수역과 대륙사면에 대한 주권과 ‘역사적 권리’ 주장이 동아시아를 격변의 시기로 몰고 있다. 지난 수 십 년간의 중국의 놀라운 경제성장은 100년의 굴욕을 벗어나 ‘세계 강대국 복귀’라는 중국의 자부심 제고에 크게 기여했다. 그러나, 중국 정부는 지속적인 경제성장과 사회적 만족 유지에 필요한 자원 부족이 잃어버린 중국의 영광을 되찾는데 심각한 위협이 될 수 있음을 염려하고 있으며, 외국자원에 대한 의존성 증가를 그들의 사회적이며 경제적 안정과 자원안보의 심각한 도전으로 인식하고 있다. 2010년 이후 중국은 수차례에 걸쳐 남중국해를 중국의 “핵심 가치”라고 주장하고 있으며, 자원 부족이 중국에게 강압적 남중국해 전략 추진을 강요하고 있다. 본 논문은 자원부족이 중국에게 강압적인 남중국해 전략을 추진하도록 종용하고 있는 전략 환경에 끼친 영향을 분석해 보았으며, 또한 중국정부가 염려하고 있는 중국의 안정에 미치는 영향을 살펴보았다. 그리고, 중국의 자원부족과 이에 따른 강압정책이 중국, 동아시아 및 국제 사회에 미친 전략적 영향을 고찰해 보았다.

**핵심 주제어:** 중국 부상, 중국 위협, 해양영유권 분쟁, 핵심가치, 지역안보, 해양안보

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