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Master's Thesis of International Studies

**China as Active Modifier:
Resist, Contest, Unravel**

적극적 현상변경국가로서의 중국:
저항, 경합, 뒤흔들기

August 2022

**Graduate School of International Studies
Seoul National University
International Cooperation Major**

Mathew Yeo Jie Sheng

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국제학석사학위논문

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매튜

China as Active Modifier:

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Abstract

Is China a revisionist or a status quo state? This overarching question has continually dominated research agendas among International Relations scholars studying the implications of China's rise. However, despite the abundance of scholarly work analyzing Chinese behavior over the years, academia is still largely divided in its delineation of China as a revisionist or status quo state. Crucially, beneath this question lies a fundamental issue that must be considered: What constitutes 'revisionism' and 'status quo'?

To be sure, scholarly works have attempted to clarify the terms and clear up the definitional fog. Despite that, the many disparate definitions are often overly simplistic and reductionistic, ignoring the degree of change and the many hidden nuances behind it. In this sense, without a proper apperception of 'revisionism' or 'status quo', efforts by scholars to charge China as categorically revisionist or status quo appear distorted and inconsistent. Importantly, this teases out the central puzzle of the paper: If China is neither status quo nor revisionist, then what epitomizes China's behavior? By extension, how can the uncharted theoretical gap that lies between status quo and revisionism be better conceptualized and understood?

To untangle this theoretical puzzle, the paper proposes a new framework to understand this agnostic nature of China. By arguing that

status quo and revisionism reflect utopian and dystopian points along a continuum, the question of whether China is revisionist or status quo takes a new dimension by becoming how revisionist or status quo China is.

Indeed, as Chinese behavior is never static and consistent, especially across different issues areas and domains, China cannot be simply regarded as status quo or revisionist. In this sense, this paper argues that China is neither status quo nor revisionist but is currently actively modifying the current international order. China, as an 'Active Modifier', would display its extent of modification to the international order by functioning and behaving in 3 different roles - Resister, Contester, and Unraveller. Each role or phase is determined by the Chinese levels of contestation for strategic space, along with its international legal conduct in each domain/issue area. Hence, by examining how intensely China competes for strategic space and assessing the legality of its actions and behaviors in a specific arena, China's extent of modification - Resist, Contest, or Unravel - could be deciphered and comprehended in that particular domain.

Utilizing the proposed framework, this paper then analysed and assessed the levels of modification within the security domain in two highly controversial arenas - the South China Sea and the East China Sea - where China has regarded them as its unofficial 'core interests'. To this end, an extensive database was created to capture fluctuations and actions in the two stipulated domains. The data is then coded with appropriate measures to

accurately situate Chinese modifying behavior amongst the 3 different phases. In short, this paper found that China is currently a *Contester* in the East China Sea, while it functions as an *Unraveller* in the South China Sea.

Keyword : Rise of China, Revisionism, Status Quo, South China Sea, East China Sea, IR Theories, Active Modifier.

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Abbreviations

AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
BOP	Balance of Power
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
ECS	East China Sea
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
PTT	Power Transition Theory
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
US	The United States of America

Chapter I: Introduction

In 1817, French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte proclaimed, “Let China Sleep, for when she wakes, she will shake the world.” The Frankenstein monster ‘created’ by former US President Nixon appears now to have woken, or at least stirred from its deep sleep. Since the start of its economic reforms in 1978, China has amassed an impressive nearly double digits growth rate that has lasted over three decades¹. Its gross domestic product (GDP), valued at \$178 billion in 1979, has skyrocketed and increased one hundredfold to \$17.7 trillion in 2022². This impressive Chinese economic performance has also made it comparatively easier to induce spillover effects into other sectors. In recent years, China’s spending on arms and military equipment, as part of its military modernization and expansion efforts, grew at a remarkable pace; China now stands as the world's top military spender after the US. With such growing capabilities, Yan has noted that China has departed from the stage of standing up and getting rich to its current transition of becoming strong.³

¹ Allison, Graham, Robert D. Blackwill, and Ali Wyne. *Lee Kuan Yew: the grand master's insights on China, the United States, and the world*. MIT Press, 2013. 22

² “Statistical Communiqué of the People's Republic of China on the 2021 National Economic and Social Development”. *National Bureau of Statistics of China*. February 2022.

http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202202/t20220227_1827963.html

³ Xuetong, Yan. "Becoming Strong: The New Chinese Foreign Policy." *Foreign Aff.* 100 (2021): 40.

However, what would a 'strong' China entail? While scholars like Mearsheimer would caution about the 'China Threat'⁴ it possesses,⁵ the fears of China dominating the world have been allayed by its 'Peaceful Rise'⁶ rhetoric advocated by Zheng.⁷ To be sure, there exists a burgeoning literature that attempts to capture the implications of this consequential event in the contemporary era – the rise of China.⁸ These studies generally coalesce into examining the implications of China's ascension on the global stage by addressing one key fundamental question: Is China necessarily a status quo or revisionist state? Yet, despite the abundance of scholarly work examining

⁴ The China threat can be understood as an increasingly powerful and capable China will threaten regional security in the future. For more information on the premises of the China threat, please see Roy, Denny. "The" China threat" issue: Major arguments." *Asian Survey* 36, no. 8 (1996): 758-771.

⁵ Mearsheimer, John J., and Glenn Alterman. *The tragedy of great power politics*. WW Norton & Company, 2001. 361-363

⁶ Peaceful rise denotes the assurance made by China to the world that China's growing power and capabilities will not pose a threat to world peace and security.

⁷ Bijan, Zheng. "China's peaceful rise to great-power status." *Foreign Affairs*. 84 (2005): 18.

⁸ Many scholarly works investigate the implications of China's rise and how the United States can devise suitable policies to manage its rise. For instance, Allison investigated the plausibility of China and the United States falling into the Thucydides's Trap and concluded that war is likely, but not inevitable. See Allison, Graham. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017. Goldstein examined China's Grand Strategy under Premier Xi and traced the implications of China's strategy of national rejuvenation. See Goldstein, Avery. "China's grand strategy under Xi Jinping: reassurance, reform, and resistance." *International Security* 45, no. 1 (2020): 164-201. Friedburg and Boustany Jr. advocated a rethink of US economic policy towards a rising China. They proposed the policy of partial disengagement to better manage the rise of China. See Friedberg, Aaron L., and Charles W. Boustany Jr. "Partial disengagement: A new US strategy for economic competition with China." *The Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (2020): 23-40.

Chinese status quo or revisionist tendencies, the international relations field is no clearer in determining China's status than before.

Johnston attributes this to a lacking of a concise and established definition of 'status quo' and 'revisionism'.⁹ Indeed, even in one of the most important works of International Relations literature – *The Twenty Years Crisis* - Carr failed to define 'status quo' despite mentioning it more than a dozen times.¹⁰ To be sure, scholarly works have ventured into clarifying these terms. Despite that, these definitions are often overly simplistic and reductionistic, ignoring the intensity and the many hidden nuances behind it. Consequently, many disparate studies of China exist. Indeed, much like the Blind Men and an Elephant syndrome,¹¹ all the truths behind the studies, though hugely beneficial to understanding China, are just relative based on individual scholars' interpretation of China.

Thus, to possibly alleviate the effects of this syndrome, there is a need to go beyond the simplistic and overly reductionistic dichotomy between status quo and revisionism. Rather, this paper suggests the essentiality to re-examine the epistemological roots of the revisionism and status quo debate.

⁹ Johnston, Alastair Iain. "Is China a status quo power?." *International security* 27, no. 4 (2003): 5-56. 8.

¹⁰ Carr, Edward Hallett. *The twenty years' crisis, 1919-1939: Reissued with a new preface from Michael Cox*. Springer, 2016.

¹¹ The Blind Men and an Elephant syndrome originated from the story where a group of blind men, having no encounter with an elephant before, proceeded to give its own interpretation of the elephant by touch. As each of the men touched a different part of the elephant, differing interpretations on how the elephant looked like emerged, to which each man regards as the universal truth.

By arguing that revisionism and status quo constitute dystopian and utopian behavior in the international arena, they should be regarded as extreme points along a range of behavior in a single continuum. In this sense, the question of *whether China is revisionist and status quo* takes on a new dimension by becoming *how revisionist or status quo*? Critically, this teases out the central puzzles of this paper: If China is neither perfectly status quo nor revisionist, how can China's behavior be better understood then? By extension, how can the uncharted gap that lies between status quo and revisionism be better conceptualized and comprehended?

To this end, a new theoretical framework would be proposed to examine the missing conceptual gap that is situated within the nexus of 'status-quo' and 'revisionism'. As Chinese behavior is never static and consistent, China cannot be simply regarded as status quo or revisionist. In this sense, this paper contends that China is agnostic and is currently engaging in an 'active modifying phase'. Under this 'modifying phase', China could serve 3 different roles - Resister, Contester, and Unraveller. Each role or sub-phase is determined by the Chinese levels of contestation for strategic space, along with its international conduct in each domain/issue area.

Utilizing the proposed framework, this paper will analyze and assess the levels of modification within the security domain in two highly controversial arenas - the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Through

the historical process-tracing method to scour through primary and secondary sources for evidence of Chinese behaviors and actions in the two stipulated arenas, a dataset is created. The data is then subsequently coded based on Chinese international conduct and its level of contestation globally. Acknowledging that across different issue areas and timeframe, China will likely display variations in behavior, there is a need to adopt a domain/area-specific approach in looking at these modifications. Such variations would then be captured and reflected through the proposed framework. Amidst these variations, the central tendency of the data, which best represent Chinese behavior in that domain, will be identified and made sense of.

This paper will be arranged as follows. The first section reviews the contending debates between China being a revisionist or a status quo state. This debate will then be followed up by a discussion on previous scholarly attempts to clear up the fog that exists within these murky definitions. Establishing the theoretical backdrop of the paper, the second section will then ask the all-important question on what is within the nexus of status quo and revisionism, and how can it be better conceptualized. To this end, a new conceptual framework will then be introduced and explained in the third section. This proposed conceptualized framework would then be utilized to analyze the level of Chinese modification. By applying this framework to two case studies - the South China Sea and the East China Sea, the Chinese

level of modification(s) could be better ascertained, resulting in a more robust and accurate analysis of China.

Chapter II: Literature Review

1. China: Status Quo or Revisionist State?

1.1 *China as a Status Quo Power*

Arguing on the premise that China is largely status-quo, Johnston assessed China through 5 indicators and found little evidence to suggest that China is an explicitly revisionist state.¹² Such rigorous empirical tests were re-attempted in his other influential work, *China in a world of order(s)*. In this analysis, Johnston reattempted to systematically analyze China's status quo or revisionist tendencies by de-constructing the 'international order' into 8 different orders and thereby assessing China's compliance in each order. As found by Johnston, China expressed relatively strong support for existing orders and its norms; its challenge to the international order(s) is not as serious nor in all-encompassing domains.¹³ In short, China is not as revisionist as conventional literature would suggest.

In addition, scholars like Xiao and Chan et al. have also examined how China's status quo tendencies can be evidenced by its portrayal as a more responsible and constructive player in international institutions. Chan et al argued that China's firm support for multilateralism across different

¹² Johnston identifies the 5 indicators as Participation rates in international institutions, free trade, non-proliferation and arms control regime, support for national self-determination, human rights. Johnston, Alastair Iain. "Is China a status quo power?" *International security* 27, no. 4 (2003): 5-56. 49.

¹³ Johnston, Alastair Iain. "China in a world of orders: Rethinking compliance and challenge in Beijing's international relations." *International Security* 44, no. 2 (2019): 9-60. 12.

domains is a testament to its status quo behavior.¹⁴ Arguing along the same strain, by evincing China's continual and integral participation in the G20 as commensurate with its rising status, Xiao noted that it highlighted a desire for China to maintain the current system that has benefitted them.¹⁵ In this sense, although Xiao acknowledges that the current order is flawed, and certain components of the order have to be changed, China's actions are more reflective of attempts to reform the current order than an overhaul of the present system. By extension, China should be better understood as a reform-minded status quo state – a classification between rigid status quo and anti-status quo (revisionism) – rather than simply being termed as a revisionist.

Indeed, concurring with Xiao on the basis that China's version of status quo is different from conventional understanding, Davidson suggests that China is a status-quo state with Chinese characteristics.¹⁶ Through an elaborate examination of Chinese domestic politics, Davidson found that the Chinese political elites prioritize the enhancement of their domestic legitimacy by making China richer, not bigger through territorial expansion. In this sense, this greatly downplays the magnified political influence the

¹⁴ Chan, Steve, Weixing Hu, and Kai He. "Discerning states' revisionist and status-quo orientations: Comparing China and the US." *European Journal of International Relations* 25, no. 2 (2019): 613-640. 635.

¹⁵ Xiao, Ren. "A reform-minded status quo power? China, the G20, and reform of the international financial system." *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 11 (2015): 2023-2043. 2025.

¹⁶ Davidson, Jason. *The origins of revisionist and status-quo states*. Springer, 2016. 136

military and nationalists possess over the Chinese government. Consequently, this translates to the Chinese government not facing significant pressure from domestic actors to engage in more aggressive, or revisionist, policies.

Lastly, providing an alternative reading to this interpretation, Wilson denotes that China has shed its revisionist ambitions and has adopted status-quo behaviors as its attempts to strengthen its global leadership credentials.¹⁷ In his examination of Chinese behaviors in its re-modeling of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Wilson found that China has largely compromised and displayed political flexibility to accommodate its negotiating partners during the negotiations. Ultimately, Wilson argues that such an accommodative stance, coupled with its cooperative overtures towards the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, is a sign of China's maturing leadership role and illuminates a change in the Chinese government strategy - China's foreign policy is flexible, willing to make compromises and adjustments. Thus, by suggesting that China is emerging as a responsible great power, China has transited from pursuance of revisionist ambitions to a more status-quo oriented power.

In sum, by arguing along the vein that China has expressed support and compliance to the current international order - its adoption of a

¹⁷ Wilson, Jeffrey D. "The evolution of China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank: From a revisionist to status-seeking agenda." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 19, no. 1 (2019): 1-30. 25.

constructive role in institutions, adherence to norms, and its desire to preserve the order that has abetted its growth – China is deemed as a status quo country.

1.2 China as a Revisionist Power

However, this school of thought is disputed by other scholars who argue that China is displaying revisionist intentions. The common understanding is that even if China is moderately status quo at the moment, once China possesses enough capacity, it would eventually display its true revisionist ambitions to overturn the current international order. Inherently, the question about Chinese revisionism is not a matter of if, but when.

Advocating this notion based on the premise of offensive realism, Mearsheimer argues that in an anarchic environment, all states are essentially power maximizing and would aspire to become a regional, if not global, hegemon to ensure its survival.¹⁸ The notion of being a regional hegemon has two dimensions: removal of great powers in the region and prevention of other great powers in other geographical regions from achieving regional hegemony.¹⁹ Viewed this way, China would not accept US's continual involvement in Asia, nor would it tolerate a position below

¹⁸ Mearsheimer, John J., and Glenn Alterman. *The tragedy of great power politics*. WW Norton & Company, 2001. 29-54.

¹⁹ Mearsheimer, John J. "The gathering storm: China's challenge to US power in Asia." *The Chinese journal of international politics* 3, no. 4 (2010): 381-396. 388.

the US. As such, China would inevitably partake in more revisionist attempts to alter the status quo.

Such an interpretation of China is concurred by Aaron Friedberg. Interestingly, in a complete reversal of Davidson's earlier point on China being a status quo power with Chinese characteristics, Friedberg referred to China as a hegemony with Chinese characteristics. With both scholars examining and identifying Chinese domestic politics as a key determinant of its behavior, the departure point for Friedberg's work is that he regards the Chinese political system as the prime reason why China is seeking a return to regional preponderance.²⁰ This pursuit for dominance and control would naturally mean a reversal of the status quo.

With the present discussion on the side of China displaying revisionist tendencies having surely marked China's revisionism in the future, what about the question of when? To this end, Lim found that presently, China is already a strong dissatisfied power that is displaying revisionist intentions. Arguing through the theoretical lens of power transition theory, Lim found that the rapid growth and modernization in Chinese military capacities, its successful consolidation over its 'China model', and its general disregard for the rules of regional institutions reflect a net desire to change the East Asian status quo.²¹

²⁰ Friedberg, Aaron L. "Hegemony with Chinese characteristics." *The National Interest* 114 (2011): 18-27. 24.

²¹ Lim, Yves-Heng. "How (dis) satisfied is China? A power transition theory perspective." *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 92 (2015): 280-297. 296.

Arguing in the same vein would be Pillsbury, a consultant of the US Department of Defense. Indeed, as the title of his book, *The Hundred-Year Marathon* suggests, Pillsbury argued that China is currently engaged in a marathon lasting one hundred years since 1949 to displace the US as the hegemon.²² This Chinese strategy, which relies on strong influences from strategies adopted in the Warring States period, is greatly facilitated by Washington's series of misconceptions about China. Pillsbury warned that over time, China would challenge or even displace the US standing in the world. Certainly, Pillsbury is not alone in his discernment of Chinese revisionism. Scholars like Rush Doshi;²³ Robert Spalding;²⁴ Steven Mosher;²⁵ and Bill Gertz;²⁶ all provided their interpretation of how China is slowly maneuvering itself to gain global supremacy.²⁷

²² Pillsbury, Michael. *The hundred-year marathon: China's secret strategy to replace America as the global superpower*. Henry Holt and Company, 2015. 1-16.

²³ Doshi, Rush. *The long game: China's grand strategy to displace American order*. Oxford University Press, 2021.

²⁴ Spalding, Robert. *Stealth War: How China Took Over While America's Elite Slept*. Penguin, 2019.

²⁵ Mosher, Steven W. *Bully of Asia: Why China's Dream is the New Threat to World Order*. Simon and Schuster, 2017.

²⁶ Gertz, Bill. *Deceiving the Sky: Inside Communist China's Drive for Global Supremacy*. Encounter Books, 2021.

²⁷ Rush Doshi in his *The long game: China's grand strategy to displace American order* talked about China using 3 strategies of displacement to usurp US order. Robert Spalding highlighted China has infiltrated and is working to undermine US institutions from within. Steven W Mosher's work on *Bully of Asia: Why China's Dream is the New Threat to World Order* suggested that China baited the US into naively engaging China while China is slowly gaining strength. In Bill Gertz's *Deceiving the Sky: Inside Communist China's Drive for Global Supremacy*, Gertz recounted how China has deceived the west into engagement with China.

In any case, scholars in this school of thought are more concerned with what China will do with its newfound capabilities and capacity. In general, these viewpoints converge on the fact that a confident and modernized China would not stop until it has achieved regional hegemony. By extension, this meant that a change in the status quo is to be expected and hence China should be regarded as a revisionist.

2. Theoretical Conceptualisation of Status Quo and Revisionism

Evidently, despite the good work conducted by these scholars from the two schools of thought, the theoretical fog on whether China is revisionist or status quo is yet to be cleared. On the contrary, more questions could be prompted: Why are there such different and contrasting interpretations of China's tendencies?

The divergent perception of China could be largely attributed to the difference in the scholarly conceptualization of the terms 'status-quo' and 'revisionism'. While a state's display of status quo or revisionist tendencies generally refers to its support or rejection of the international order, the intensity, and level behind its support or rejection is often up to the discretion and interpretation of scholars. In other words, what is considered as slightly anti-status quo could be interpreted both ways. Take the case of China's AIIB for instance, while Davidson may regard China's

accommodative stance in AIIB as status quo, Friedberg regards AIIB as a revisionist initiative that aims to create an alternative, China-centred and led institution that is largely disassociated from the existing order.²⁸ Viewed this way, much like the story of the blind men and an elephant, while all scholars' assessments have their own merits, the vague definitions have clouded the totality of evaluation in China's revisionist/ status quo tendencies. Therefore, there is a need to further theorize and conceptualize the murky definitions of status quo and revisionist.²⁹ Indeed, without a succinct and parsimonious conceptualization of 'revisionism' and 'status-quo', attempts to truly understand Chinese intentions would fundamentally result in many contrasting variations and terminology of the Chinese behavior.

2.1 Balance of Power (BOP)

To be sure, although the provision of a working definition of status quo and revisionism is a tall task, there have been efforts to systematically define 'status quo' and 'revisionism.' In his seminar work, *Politics among Nations*, Hans Morgenthau highlighted that the essence of 'status quo' denotes a clear opposition towards a reversal of power relations among two

²⁸ Oona A. Hathaway et al., "Should Washington Fear the AIIB?," *Foreign Affairs*. August 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-06-11/should-washington-fear-aiib>.

²⁹ Johnston, Alastair Iain. "Is China a status quo power?." *International security* 27, no. 4 (2003): 5-56. 8.

or more states.³⁰ In short, a state would warrant itself as a 'status-quo' state if it maintains a balance of power. Conversely, the state will display revisionist ambitions if it disrupts the balance of power.³¹ While Morgenthau's attempts to shed further light on this murky definition are much appreciated, it is still inherently problematic. In practice, a state like China, which has been registering double-digit growth figures for more than three decades would undoubtedly find itself in a financially better off position than in the past. This acquired wealth would then translate into more material capabilities, which compared relative to the US, would result in a shift in power equilibrium. Hence, by this logic, any other rising powers would most certainly be deemed as displaying revisionist ambitions. Even though Morgenthau does allow 'minor adjustments' to the balance of power, there is little understanding of what constitutes minor or major adjustments.

Moreover, considering status quo and revisionist tendencies purely based upon material capabilities and power politics neglects the factor of institutional compliancy. As contended by scholars like Johnston, Chan et al., and Xiao, a rising state's adherence and compliance to international institutions and law, along with its rules and norms, could also demonstrate its status quo tendencies. Viewed this way, the usage of the Balance of Power Theory, which narrowly defines status quo and revisionism through

³⁰ Morgenthau, Hans J. *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978. 46.

³¹ *Ibid.* 74.

material changes, appears inadequate. By extension, terming states 'revisionist' or 'status quo' through the theoretical lens of the balance of power theory would not clear up the analytic ambiguity that exists in international relations theory.

2.2 Power Transition Theory (PTT)

Proposing an alternative viewpoint, A.F.K Organski attempted to conceptualize 'status quo' and 'revisionism' within the Power Transition Theory. Organski rejected the Balance of Power theory based on the premise that "there is no such thing as a balance" but instead advocated the notion of power preponderance.³² To power transition theorists like him, the international system is inherently hierarchical with the dominant nation functioning as the apex. This dominant state, having the preeminent position in world politics, sets the rules and stands to benefit from the order.³³ As Organski surmised, "the dominant nation is necessarily more satisfied with the existing international order than any other since it is to a large extent its international order."³⁴ Viewed this way, a status quo state is essentially a satisfied power that stands to benefit from the current international order.

Conversely, Organski pointed out that some of the powers, which had little to no role in creating the current international order as they were

³² Organski, Abramo FK. *World politics*. Knopf, 1958. Chapter 11, 297.

³³ *Ibid.* 299-325.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 327.

denied privileges and opportunities by the satisfied powers, are regarded as dissatisfied powers.³⁵ These dissatisfied powers, or challengers, will thus seek to upset the existing order and replace it with a new one that is more befitting of their growing powers. Organski explained that these challengers would prefer to dominate and construct a new order that would grant better benefits and privileges rather than accept a subordinate position in the current order.³⁶ In this sense, their desire to conduct an upheaval of the order reflects revisionism.

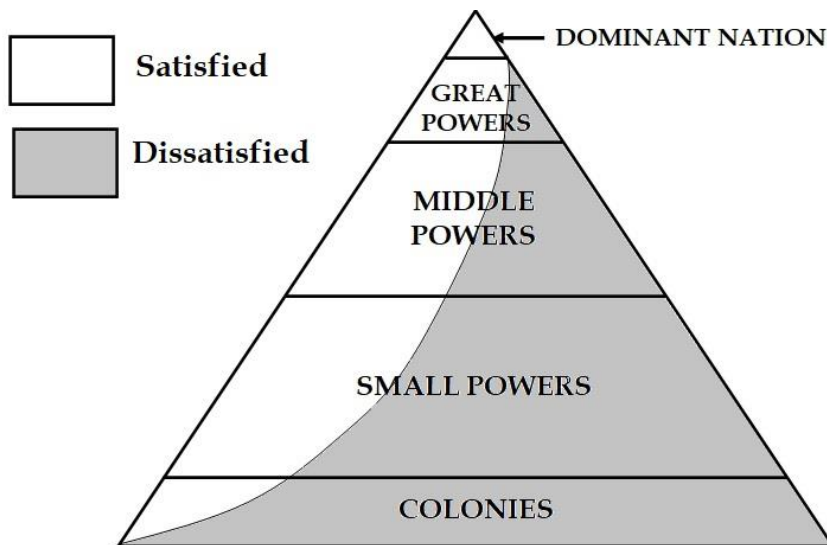


Figure 1: A.F.K. Organiski's classification of satisfied and dissatisfied states within the Power Transition Theory. By A.F.K. Organski.

Organski's delineation of status quo and revisionism based upon their level of satisfaction is elegant, but not without concerns. Beyond considerations that the power transition theory is overly rigid in designating

³⁵ Ibid. 328.

³⁶ Ibid.

the dominant state as a default status quo state lies a fundamental issue: what would a dissatisfied challenger do? Certainly, Organski elaborated that once the dissatisfied power reaches a point where it is as powerful as the dominant state and its allies, would turn to war to change the order.³⁷ However, Organski did not clarify the explicit actions or resistance a dissatisfied power will undertake before the war. A dissatisfied power could be challenging the order while it is growing its capabilities for its eventual upheaval of the order. Moreover, as Schweller noted, rising powers differ in their level of dissatisfaction and thus will differ in their ambitions.³⁸ As such, the extent of challenges imposed by rising dissatisfied power differs across rising powers – states that display slight revisionism than revolutionary would seek marginal changes to the status quo than induce a complete overhaul of the order. In this regard, without a specific sense of the internal dynamics, it is realistically impossible to differentiate a satisfied great power from a dissatisfied great power. Evidently, in practice, it remains problematic to define status quo and revisionism based on the dichotomy of satisfaction/dissatisfaction.

To this end, Schweller and Pu attempted to contribute to the power transition theory's lacking by introducing a notion of a delegitimization phase within the cyclical pattern of power transition. Arguing along the

³⁷ Ibid. 333.

³⁸ Schweller, Randall L. "Managing the rise of great powers: history and theory." In Johnston and Ross, *Engaging China: The management of an emerging power* (1999): 1-31. 18-22

same vein as traditional power transition theorists, the authors agree that a power transition will occur when a challenger attempts and is capable enough to demand a new order befitting of its status. However, prior to the critical inflection point of transition, Schweller and Pu argue that the challenger must first delegitimize the hegemon's authority and order to create favorable conditions for the rise of a counter-hegemonic coalition.³⁹ Through delegitimation and deconcentration strategies meant to resist and undermine the hegemon and its order, a system renewal may be precipitated.⁴⁰ Schweller and Pu stressed that such strategies are by no means a conduct of hard balancing,⁴¹ but more of the practice of resistance to defy the hegemon without violence or direct confrontation.⁴² Such views were concurred by Walt, who views delegitimation as a strategy to instigate antipathy and action against the hegemon so that the hegemon would have to work doubly hard to maintain its legitimacy.⁴³ According to Walt, states can adopt such strategies of opposition to limit the unilateralism tendencies of the hegemon. These strategies do not necessarily seek to usurp the hegemony, but merely aim to complicate the hegemony's conduct of foreign

³⁹ Schweller, Randall L., and Xiaoyu Pu. "After unipolarity: China's visions of international order in an era of US decline." *International security* 36, no. 1 (2011): 41-72, 44-45.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Schweller and Pu identifies the current international structure as a unipolar system, and thus any form of balancing would be regarded as revisionist behavior by the hegemon. Ibid. 45-46

⁴² Ibid. p49

⁴³ Walt, Stephen M. *Taming American power: the global response to US primacy*. WW Norton & Company, 2006. 161.

policies and to broker for a more favorable international environment.⁴⁴ In sum, by recognizing that states do partake in resistance against the hegemon which clarifies the internal dynamics of an order before its transition, Walt, Schweller and Pu contributed massively to the understanding of how a rising state is challenging the hegemon without an explicit display of desire to usurp the order. By extension, this insinuates that to understand revisionism and status quo, a challenging state's range of actions and the intensity of its delegitimation must be closely examined.

2.3 Eclectic Approaches

Certainly, other scholars have also contributed to how status quo/revisionism could be re-interpreted and viewed. Recognizing the theoretical difficulty in defining 'status quo' and 'revisionism', scholars have used alternative methods to circumvent this definitional impasse. Chen and Pu, in their correspondence to Johnston's article on 'Debating China's Assertiveness', suggested a framework to analyze China's behavior through 3 forms of assertiveness: Offensive assertiveness, Defensive assertiveness, and Constructive assertiveness.⁴⁵ Womack proposed a 'status ad quem' in place of 'status quo'.⁴⁶ This 'status ad quem' attempts to measure China's

⁴⁴ The strategies of opposition include the soft balancing, hard balancing, balking, binding, blackmail, and delegitimation. See Ibid. 109-179.

⁴⁵ Chen, Dingding, Xiaoyu Pu, and Alastair Iain Johnston. "Debating China's assertiveness." *International Security* 38, no. 3 (2013): 176-183. 177.

⁴⁶ Womack, Brantly. "China and the future status quo." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 8, no. 2 (2015): 115-137. 135

behavior using a forward-oriented standard that evaluates whether policies are necessarily appropriate and sustainable in the next order.

In any case, these approaches provided alternatives to bypass the impasse. More importantly, these studies appear to operate under the postulation that status quo and revisionist points can be viewed at the extreme ends of a continuum. Given that the quality and quantity of revisionism in any state's policies are never static, a state's behavior could be located anywhere within this continuum. In this sense, such an approach shifts the focus on whether a state's behavior constitutes revisionism or status quo to how revisionist or status quo the state's behavior warrants. Nevertheless, while this approach would provide better clarity in determining the range of behavior, it runs the risk of missing out on the nuances and specificities of a state's behavior if the scope of analysis is overly broad and wide. This is because a state will likely display different behavior in different domains based on its different foreign policy goals. In this regard, to more accurately discern China's net behavior, a post-aggregated domain/arena/issue-based analysis is required than an all-encompassing wide approach.

Chapter III. Theoretical and Conceptual Underpinnings of Proposed New Framework

1. Conceptual Underpinnings

1.1 The Current International Order: Rules-based Liberal International Order

Although the comprehension of what forms and constitutes the international order is of paramount importance to scholars of international relations, the many different conceptions of international order cloud and complicate analysis. Indeed, as pointed out by Lascurettes and Poznansky, international orders exist and vary on several dimensions: thin or thick orders, orders centered upon position or principles, regional or global orders, orders that are issue-specific, or multi issued.⁴⁷ Naturally, these distinctive dimensions result in a multitude of the conception of international order. Tang identifies the international order as the degree of predictability within a social system as the actors and interactions within the system may be under some form of regulations.⁴⁸ Conceptualizing international order in the same vein as Tang, Allan suggests that orders propagate stable and consistent patterns of behavior and relations among agents within the order.⁴⁹ Similarly,

⁴⁷ Lascurettes, Kyle M., and Michael Poznansky. "International Order in Theory and Practice." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. 2021. 1.

⁴⁸ Tang, Shiping. "Order: A conceptual analysis." *Chinese Political Science Review* 1, no. 1 (2016): 30-46. 34.

⁴⁹ Allan, Bentley B. *Scientific cosmology and international orders*. Vol. 147. Cambridge University Press, 2018. 5.

Nexon views the international order as the order that engenders relative patterns and relations.⁵⁰ Evidently, while the conception of international order may differ, these various conceptions possess a common denomination: the international order involves and fosters predictability and stability.

So, where do this stability and predictability come from then? Although the views on how the order emerges and is maintained may differ,⁵¹ scholars generally agree that rules, norms, principles, and institutions form the lynchpin of the current international order. Advocating his notion of a liberal international order, Ikenberry defines the order as a set of “governing arrangements between states, including its fundamental rules, principles, and institutions.”⁵² In a similar vein, Johnston characterizes order as an assortment of institutions, rules, and norms that roughly reflects the dominant state’s interests.⁵³ Even Mearsheimer, who provided a pessimistic

⁵⁰ Nexon, Daniel H. *The struggle for power in early modern Europe*. Princeton University Press, 2009. 31.

⁵¹ Lascurettes summarized the contending debates by offering a typology of orders. In his typology, he identifies 4 types of order: hegemonic, centralized, negotiated, and decentralised. For more information see Lascurettes, Kyle M., and Michael Poznansky. "International Order in Theory and Practice." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. 2021. 1.

Similarly, Ikenberry characterizes 3 types of order: Balance of power-oriented order, order through hegemonic command, and order by consent. See Ikenberry, G. John. *Liberal leviathan*. Princeton University Press, 2011. 47-55. Conversely, Mearsheimer identifies international and bounded orders, along with its sub-divided orders. See Mearsheimer, John J. "Bound to fail: The rise and fall of the liberal international order." *International security* 43, no. 4 (2019): 7-50. 11-16.

⁵² Ikenberry, G. John. *After victory*. Princeton University Press, 2001. 22-23.

⁵³ Johnston, Alastair Iain. "China in a world of orders: Rethinking compliance and challenge in Beijing's international relations." *International Security* 44, no. 2 (2019): 9-60. 13.

view on the nature of the liberal international order, defines the order as an organized group of international institutions that help govern the interactions among member states.⁵⁴ To Mearsheimer, the international institutions are essentially rules that great powers impose on others. Similarly, Kissinger identifies the order as a just arrangement, facilitated by commonly accepted rules, that are paired with a distribution of power that enforces restraint when rules break down.⁵⁵

Seemingly, scholarly works defining the international order appear to converge on the point that the current order entails the workings of institutions, rules, and norms, be it implicitly or explicitly. Therefore, taken as a whole, this paper echoes Mazarr, et al definition of order as “the body of rules, norms, and institutions that govern relations among key players in the international environment”.⁵⁶ To be specific, this paper regards the current international order as a *rules-based* international order that established a stable relationship among states through the combination in working of norms, international rules and law, and international regimes.

⁵⁴ Mearsheimer, John J. "Bound to fail: The rise and fall of the liberal international order." *International security* 43, no. 4 (2019): 7-50. 9-10.

⁵⁵ Kissinger, Henry, and Nicholas Hormann. *World order*. Vol. 9. New York: Penguin Press, 2014. 9.

⁵⁶ Mazarr, Michael J., Miranda Priebe, Andrew Radin, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, *Understanding the Current International Order*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016. 7.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

Fully recognizing the merits of the literature discussed in the previous chapter, this paper attempts to create a new framework to analyze China's status quo/ revisionist tendencies by adopting the positives and refining the deficient aspects of the other approaches. In brief, the extensive literature in the previous section has suggested four key elements that this new framework will excogitate.

Firstly, the Balance of Power theory holds value in suggesting that a power equilibrium indicates status quo, and that power and material capabilities matter in international politics. However, its relative lack of consideration for institutional participation and compliance with rules and norms meant a disregard for an important dimension of Chinese behavior. In this sense, this framework will consider China's level of compliance with international rules and norms.

Secondly, A.F.K Organski's delineation of satisfied and dissatisfied powers is useful to understand the motivations behind the desire to alter/ preserve the current order. However, its internal dynamics are not examined; how a rising state acts to demonstrate its dissatisfaction. Consequently, it is hard to pinpoint what exactly constitutes revisionism and status quo. As such, this framework will consider a range of actions that China may partake in that would signify its status quo and revisionism.

Thirdly, Walt, Schweller and Pu's influential work reiterated the need to view past the rigid dichotomy of revisionism and status quo. Situated in between the two ends consists of a de-concentration and delegitimization phase that entails the use of cost imposing strategies to resist and contradict the hegemon. Thus, to better categorize Chinese behavior, the framework would have to not only examine the Chinese range of actions, but its intensity of modification also must be investigated.

Lastly, although status quo and revisionism remain under-theorized, other approaches have managed to sidestep this theoretical puzzle by viewing revisionism and status quo along a continuum, rather than absolute points. Indeed, the non-static nature of actions and conduct demonstrated by states reflects a need to assess such intricacies on a range to capture the net behavior of the state. To this end, this framework will adopt this line of thinking and assess China's behavior based on the intensity and degree of status quo and revisionist tendencies. In addition, to be precise in picking up the nuances and subtleties of behavior that would affect the degree of status quo/ revisionist tendencies, this paper will adopt a micro and domain-based viewpoint.

All things considered, this paper posits that to better understand China's status quo and revisionist tendencies, the dynamic interaction between China's international conduct in the current order and China's contestation within the order with other states must be examined. Assessing

China's international conduct will satisfy the need to consider China's level of compliance with international rules and norms while looking critically into China's level of contestation within the order could illuminate the range and intensity of behaviors that China undertakes as a rising power. In this sense, this paper argues that adopting these two dimensions – China's legal and material conduct - would satisfy the analytical gap that exists in the current theoretical assessment of 'status quo' and 'revisionism'.

Importantly, examining either dimension in isolation would still run the risk of incurring the blind men and an elephant syndrome as discussed in the earlier section. As such, the interactions between the two dimensions must be examined to prove a complete and holistic assessment of China's behaviors in the current international order. The following section will conceptualize and break down these two broad terms.

2.1 International Conduct in the Current International Order.

Based on this paper's conception of the international order, the importance of rules as a cornerstone in an order is underscored. As noted by Ikenberry, the international order is institutionalized by the dominant state shaping the international environment favorable to itself through rules and institutions.⁵⁷ Given that rules are intimately involved in the management of inter-state relationships and are involved in almost all international regimes

⁵⁷ Ikenberry, G. John. *Liberal leviathan*. Princeton University Press, 2011. 81.

within the order, the importance of rules in a rules-based international order cannot be emphasized enough.

By this argument, to get an accurate sense of China's conduct in the international order, China's extent of violations of international rules should be examined. As rules and institutions alter the environment which the states operate,⁵⁸ China's adherence and violation of international rules would be representative of its conduct in the current order. Specifically, to grant an impartial assessment of China's legal behavior, this paper will refer to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to which China is a signatory and has ratified the convention.

As Ma puts it, the UNCLOS is one of the most comprehensive compilations of the modern law of the sea as it codifies various customary rules of law in the sea and aids in the development of treaty rules in the maritime domain.⁵⁹ Furthermore, UNCLOS is not limited to only the maritime domain, Article 2 of UNCLOS indicates that airspace above the maritime boundary is too under the purview of UNCLOS.⁶⁰ In this sense, utilizing UNCLOS as a referent in this study would be useful given that China's behavior in both the South and East China seas involved maritime and airspace. Hence, this paper will measure China's conduct in the

⁵⁸ Ibid. 91.

⁵⁹ Ma, Xinmin. "China and the UNCLOS: Practices and Policies." *The Chinese Journal of Global Governance* 5, no. 1 (2019): 1-20, 1.

⁶⁰ "United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea". *United Nations*. Undated. https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf . 27.

international order by evaluating its action in both seas against the UNCLOS stipulated terms to determine if international law is violated.

2.2 Contestation for Strategic Space in the International Order

According to Schweller, a rising power is dangerous because they have the temptation to expand.⁶¹ Arguing through the dialects of realism, which denotes that a state under the influence of anarchy, would partake in self-help measures and seek power through material capabilities to survive, Schweller argues that a state would aim to expand – political, territorial, commerce, market, etc - when it believes that doing so will increase its relative power. This rise in relative power would then demand and allow the rising state to redefine its national interests broadly to accommodate its rising status.⁶² Delineating the relationship between growing power and expanding interests, would be Gilpin, who argues for the inevitable nature of a wealthier and powerful state selecting more security and welfare goals than a weaker and less wealthy state.⁶³ Gilpin furthered that with a rise in relative power, the rising state will perceive a change in the relative cost of the security and economic objectives. Thus, the rising states can define these objectives more broadly. Consequently, this induces an eventual change in

⁶¹ Schweller, Randal I. Rise of Great Powers: History and Theory in Johnston, Alastair Iain, and Robert S. Ross, eds. *Engaging China: The management of an emerging power*. Vol. 10. Routledge, 2005. 2.

⁶² Friedberg, Aaron L. "The future of US-China relations: Is conflict inevitable?." *International security* 30, no. 2 (2005): 7-45. 19.

⁶³ Gilpin, Robert. *War and change in world politics*. Cambridge University Press, 1981. 22-23

the rising states' foreign policy and behavior.⁶⁴ Simply surmised, when a state possesses growing powers, its interests will enlarge.⁶⁵ In this sense, as a rising state gets more powerful and richer, the state would demand greater political influence and clout as commensurate with its capacities. This indicates the rising state's temptation or demand for greater influence through expansion, which suggests a need for more strategic space internationally.

Additionally, Schweller identifies that the expansion of power could also be borne out of threats and opportunities in the external environment.⁶⁶ In specific, the relative weakness of neighboring states suggests the possibility power vacuum that arose due to the huge intra-regional power disparity. In this sense, the existence of a power vacuum would produce two types of external impulses that motivate the rising state to expand by filling up the vacuum. Firstly, to avoid other powerful states from filling up this vacuum, a rising state would fill up the power vacuum prior.⁶⁷ Wight explained that if the vacuum is filled up by another powerful state, the weaker and buffer states would then gravitate towards and bandwagon with

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ He, Kai, and Huiyun Feng. "Debating China's assertiveness: Taking China's power and interests seriously." *International Politics* 49, no. 5 (2012): 633-644. 635.

⁶⁶ Schweller, Randal I. *Rise of Great Powers: History and Theory* in Johnston, Alastair Iain, and Robert S. Ross, eds. *Engaging China: The management of an emerging power*. Vol. 10. Routledge, 2005. 3.

⁶⁷ Wolfers, Arnold. *Discord and collaboration: essays on international politics*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962. 14-15.

that state against the rising state.⁶⁸ This would prove disastrous for the rising state as its power and sphere of influence would decline vis-à-vis the coalition of powerful states and weaker states. Secondly, given that weakness in the surrounding state may suggest political instability, a rising power will fill up the power vacuum to avoid and negate the possibility of the threat of the region's instability spilling over regionally.⁶⁹ In both cases, the weakness of the regional states creates a condition that entails the rising power to act and expand itself. Viewed this way, there is a need to look at how the strategic space is being contended with vis-à-vis other regional states.

As the previous paragraph indicates, a rising state may have to expand out of necessity. Rising powers are doubly dangerous when the temptation to expand meets a justification to do by - the need to expand. Another dimension reflecting this need would be the rising states colliding interests from within as it grows. The Theory of Lateral Pressure, developed by Nazli Chourci and Robert North, attempted to explain such a phenomenon by looking at the relationship between national growth and conflict.⁷⁰ In sum, Choucri and North theorized that when a state experiences growth in advanced technology and faces a stronger population pressure, the two factors would necessitate higher demands for the magnitude in type

⁶⁸ Wight, Martin. *Power politics*. A&C Black, 2002. 163.

⁶⁹ Blainey, Geoffrey. *The Causes of War*. Simon and Schuster, 1988. 68-88.

⁷⁰ Choucri, Nazli, and Robert Carver North. *Nations in conflict: National growth and international violence*. San Francisco: WH Freeman, 1975.

and volume of resources. As often the states' domestic resource endowment is unable to meet this rise in demand, a lateral pressure is generated.⁷¹ This lateral pressure thus prompts the rising powers to develop a need to expand externally and pursue expansionist policies to acquire the resources. Nevertheless, given that every industrialized country does possess some form of lateral pressure that shapes its extraterritorial national interests, it is the clash of the respective states' external interests that necessarily lead to war and conflict.⁷²

However, the conduct of expansion to relieve the lateral pressure is not limited to mere territorial conquest. As Choucri and North analyzed, several other factors such as investment, commerce, or exploration could also mitigate this lateral pressure. Hence, the lateral pressured induced expansion does not necessarily indicate a rising state's unilateral inexorable path toward conflict and war. On the contrary, the many mediums to assuage the lateral pressure suggests that a rising state does indeed possess the autonomy and policy options to alter its level of demand and need for expansion. In this light, a range of behavior adopted by a rising state is to be expected.

In light of this discussion on rising states having the temptation and need to expand, China's rapid growth should prompt some concerns about

⁷¹ Ibid. 16-19

⁷² Ibid. 14-28

its possible intention to expand externally and adopt expansionist policies. At the same time, there is also a possibility that China could placate the international community over its expansion by carefully managing its burgeoning interests. In this sense, given that this desire and need to expand could be viewed across both ends, this paper argues that China's rise and expansion of interests should not be simply taken as provocative actions that heighten competitive sentiments in the international arena. Instead, this paper posits that China's rise should be systematically analyzed by looking at how intensely China maneuvers and vie for strategic space in the international realm.

To further unpack this term, this paper conceptualizes the intensity of contestation for strategic space as the level of demand for changes to the status quo in the current international order.⁷³ As a state like China rises, the rising state would seek to assert itself and demand more internationally. The rising powers would at times challenge pre-existing territorial boundaries, international institutional arrangements, and hierarchy of prestige.⁷⁴ As such, contextualizing China's contestation for strategic space by looking at its demands for changes within the current order could be a good indication of its status quo/ revisionist tendencies.

⁷³ Status quo here refers to the present state of affairs in the geopolitical setting. It should not be confused with the status quo nomenclature in the status quo and revisionism debate.

⁷⁴ Friedberg, Aaron L. "The future of US-China relations: Is conflict inevitable?." *International security* 30, no. 2 (2005): 7-45. 19.

To operationalize this, borrowing Schweller and Pu's conception, China's range of modifying actions in both the South and East China sea would be closely examined. Specifically, the Chinese range of actions involving contesting and disputing sovereign boundaries, promotion and/or obstruction of institutional or multilateral arrangements, as well as escalatory actions through diplomatic rhetoric or actual deployment of military assets will be scrutinized. The intensity behind China's range of action will then be determined by the type - political, economic, or military - of force deployed, the extent of force that was being exercised, and the duration in which the force and pressure were employed and maintained. The coding scheme to evaluate China's demand for change in the current order will be discussed in the later section.

Chapter IV. Proposed New Conceptual Framework

1. Overview of Framework

Against the theoretical and conceptual backdrop, the following framework is proposed. By arguing that China is neither perfectly status quo nor revisionist, this paper proposes a new framework to better comprehend the agnostic nature of China.

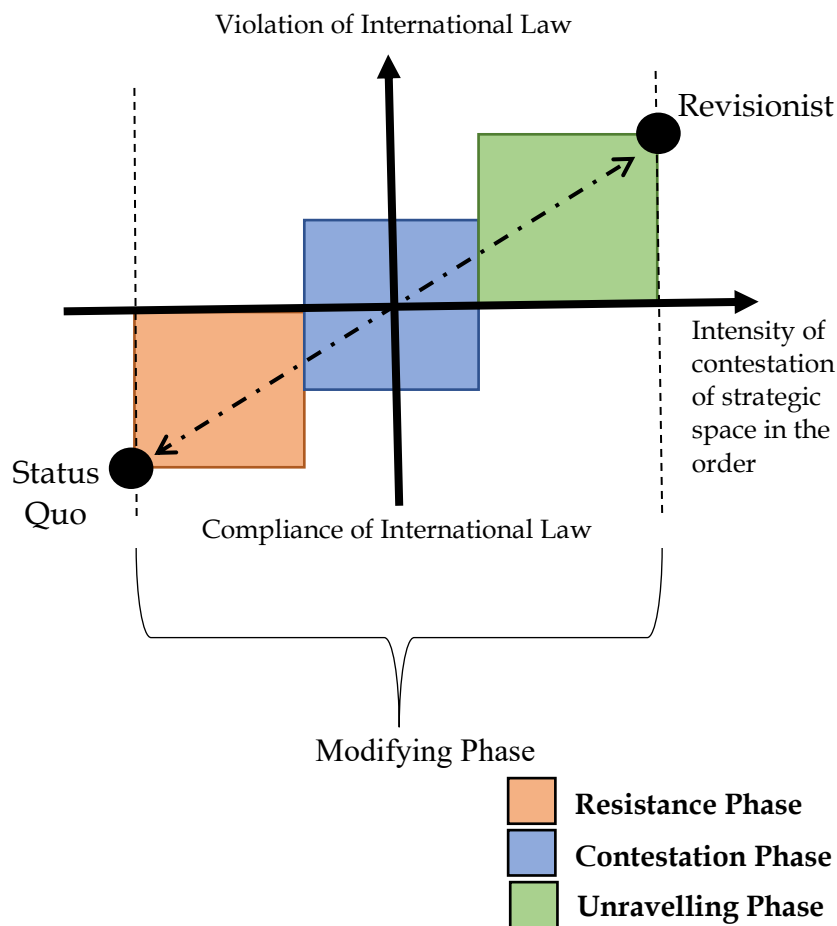


Figure 2: The Proposed Theoretical Framework. By author.

In this framework, status quo and revisionism are conceptualised along a continuum. Given that revisionist or status quo tendencies are never static, a states' behavior can never be purely revisionist or status quo. As such, this framework contends that status quo and revisionist points should be considered as absolute points that symbolize the utopian and dystopian behavior within the current order. In other words, a state can be close to displaying status quo tendencies as it draws closer to the status quo point. However, to be regarded as a status quo would mean a consistent behavior of adherence to international law and zero intensity in maneuvering for strategic space in the current order. In this sense, a rising power's actions and behaviors should alternate between status quo and revisionism, as denoted by the dotted line.

Following this train of thought, this paper further argues that China is currently in a modifying phase. According to Schweller and Pu, China is deemed to be currently engaging in resistance and cost imposing strategies on the US. While such strategies are certainly viable especially in the initial stages of China's rise, the same cannot be said when China raises its demands as it rises. Hence, this paper contends that the act of resisting merely constitutes the lowest level of modification. To clarify, in the case where China is behaving close to revisionist tendencies, China would no longer merely resist or impose costs, but partake in more assertive and force postures to assert its desire for change. For example, Chinese unlawful

construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea certainly reflects more radical actions than resistance. Viewed this way, it is imperative to consider China's range of actions as beyond different intensity of resistance. Thus, within this modifying phase, each sub-phase will its defining mode of action.

Moreover, across this modifying phase, as Chinese actions are never static, China will have different actions and desires. This suggests that China will alternate between status quo and revisionist behavior. In this regard, given the fluctuations and variations in Chinese behavior, there is a need to reflect this phenomenon in the framework. Accordingly, under the framework, there is a positive and negative section of the figure to accommodate such fluctuations of behavior. Naturally, the negative quadrant will suggest general compliance to international rules and norms, as well as minimal contestation for strategic space within the order. Conversely, the positive quadrant will mean possible violations of international rules and norms and contestation within the current order.

However, to what extent and how intensely China is modifying constitutes another dimension the framework must capture. As the pushback of the balance of power theory in the earlier section suggests, mere consideration of power equilibrium is insufficient to assess revisionist or status quo tendencies. Similarly, deducing Chinese behavior simply through its conduct in the international arena runs the risk of being overly

reductionist. Hence, to accurately discern its level of modification, China's conduct within the international order (y-axis), along with its contestation of strategic space in the international (x-axis) must be examined in tandem with each other.

This brings forth the next point: how will Chinese behavior be quantified and assessed? For this reason, the proposed framework argues that in-between status quo and revisionism lies a modifying phase which comprises 3 sub-phases – The Resistance phase, Contestation phase, and Unravelling phase. The 3 sub-phases are categorised by the extent of its international conduct - compliance/ violation of international law (y-axis), and the extent of contestation for strategic space (x-axis). Within the phases, there exist different typologies of modifying behaviors and actions that are consistent with the level of interactions between China's international conduct and its contestation within the order. For instance, in the context of the East China Sea dispute, China's willingness to partake in diplomatic overtures to better relations with Japan through the 4-point consensus suggests compliance with international law and a desire to minimise contestation with Japan. In this case, this interaction between the two variables suggests that, for this particular diplomatic action, China's act reflects that China is resisting current setup; operating within the confines of the Resistance phase. By attempting to locate the interactions between the two variables within one of the phases, a clearer portrayal of Chinese

behavior can be quantified and ascertained. More importantly, when these interactions and placement within the phases are aggregated and taken together, the totality of the behaviors across all phases can be examined to derive the net behavior of China in that particular domain.

2. Active Modification: 3 Sub-Phases

2.1 Resistance Phase

Given that the status quo point reflects a utopian depiction of international politics, the resistance phase (demarcated by orange in Figure 2), which is close to the status quo point, certainly suggests such tendencies. Yet, it differs from pure status quo tendencies as the resistance phase demarcated a shift in behaviour away from complete and total compliance and acceptance of the order. Considering Schweller's point that a rising state faces the temptation and need to expand,⁷⁵ the rising state, aware of its rise and need for more resources, would pursue expansionist policies to be duly accorded with more international influence. While the rising state will tend to signal its intention and desire to prompt a review within the order, inherently the rising state is still rising by the virtue of this current order. As such, the rising state, though potentially possessing grievances with the order and desire influence commensurate with its rising status, would still

⁷⁵ Schweller, Randal I. Rise of Great Powers: History and Theory in Johnston, Alastair Iain, and Robert S. Ross, eds. *Engaging China: The management of an emerging power*. Vol. 10. Routledge, 2005. 2- 6.

recognise the current order as legitimate. In this sense, the rising state would accept the legitimacy of the order but would display subtle and minimal resistance to signal its intention of acquiring more political influence.

Nevertheless, these practice of resistance or struggle against the dominant structure is relatively muted and indirect, as the rising state is merely adopting 'shaping strategies' to mold the international environment to its favor without directly confronting the dominant state or allies.⁷⁶ Thus, within this phase, one can see the practice of low-key resistance such as foot-dragging in international institutions, attribution of blame to the dominant state, engagement in rhetoric that declares its desire to play a larger international role, voting against the dominant state in institutions. Walt attributes this strategy as balking, where he defines it as states undertaking a conscious and deliberate decision to not cooperate with the hegemon.⁷⁷ Consequently, this nominal resistance, although bothersome and frustrating for the dominant state and allies, would not necessarily illicit a response to the rising state as the impact of its resistance is often inconsequential. More importantly, as the rising state complied with international laws in its

⁷⁶ Schweller, Randall L., and Xiaoyu Pu. "After unipolarity: China's visions of international order in an era of US decline." *International security* 36, no. 1 (2011): 41-72. 49.

⁷⁷ Walt identifies 3 forms of balking – by simply refusing to act as what the hegemon requires, doing minimal and as slow as possible, free-riding. See Walt, Stephen M. *Taming American power: the global response to US primacy*. WW Norton & Company, 2006. 141-143.

conduct of such resistance, the dominant state would not have the legal grounds in responding to the rising state.

In sum, this phase entails the gradual awareness of the rising status of the state, which then prompts the necessity for change. As the state continues to rise, it may demand more changes in future. However, currently at this juncture, the rising state would only minimally demand and signal its intention to prompt a review of the order. And in the process of doing so, would not violate any international law. Hence, the main thrust of the modifying behavior under this phase is 'Resist'.

2.2 Contestation Phase

Following the resistance phase would be the contestation phase (demarcated by blue in Figure 2). While the resistance phase reflects more of a rising state's realization of its necessity for more international space if it continues to rise, the rising state in the contestation phase has perfect awareness of its growing international stature and clout. As a result, a rising state within the contestation phase will operate based on desiring more – international space, influence, and resources. In this regard, the rising state would signify a higher level of demand for changes within the international order by departing from merely resisting to contesting and opposing the current international setup. Thus, the unilateral imposition of resistance undertaken by the rising state in the resistance phase would include an

additional dimension of opposition by sourcing and possibly collaborating with like-minded states to collectively object the current setup within the order. To this end, the rising state will carefully interrogate the international surrounding to inquest for other states that have similar grievances with the current order. This may come in the form of strategic probes, trial balloons, and soliciting of diplomatic support and endorsement in international institutions.

To be sure, opposition efforts at this juncture are still indirect and minimal. However, with the involvement of other like-minded states, the resistance effort is aggregated and the diplomatic voice of displeasure within the order becomes louder.⁷⁸ Terming such acts as 'soft balancing,' Walt argues that these soft balancing acts are necessarily self-reinforcing – as more states become aggrieved or concerned over the hegemon, the more these states will form and coordinate a common effort to contain it.⁷⁹ The coordination may functionally expand from minor issues to larger issues which would ultimately establish the trust and platform for an eventual counter-hegemonic coalition.⁸⁰ Indeed, as Schweller and Pu noted, these low-intensity strategies, if aggregated sufficiently, could form a new

⁷⁸ An example would be the Non-Aligned movement during the cold war.

⁷⁹ Walt, Stephen M. *Taming American power: the global response to US primacy*. WW Norton & Company, 2006. 130.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

coherent ideological movement that further threatens the current structure of power and order.⁸¹

Critically, the contestation phase involves the rising state to repeatedly question its role and utility of the international order. Given that the current order has largely contributed to its rise, the rising state may see value in ensuring the continuity and legitimacy of the current order. At the same time, the increased level of its demand for changes as commensurate with its status suggests a possible untenable relationship between the rising state and the current order. As such, the rising state faces an important juncture during this phase: Will it compete more intensely for strategic space, even when international law is violated or will it scale back its opposition efforts and maintain its compliance with the international law.

In any of the two cases, how the rising state decides would determine its closer alignment with revisionist or status quo points. In the case of the former, the rising state would minimally, but positively, violate international law and would clearly and out rightly demand more international space through the mechanism discussed above. Conversely, for the rising state to align itself closer to the status quo and possibly return to the resistance phase, the rising state would curtail its level of contestation and opposition to that of resistance and continue to comply with international law.

⁸¹ Schweller, Randall L., and Xiaoyu Pu. "After unipolarity: China's visions of international order in an era of US decline." *International security* 36, no. 1 (2011): 41-72. 50.

In sum, this phase establishes that the rising state is already keenly aware of its rising status and need for more internationally. Consequently, the state would escalate from resistance to contestation and opposition of the current setup to signal its desire for more space. However, differing from the resistance phase will be that the rising state will probe for support and endorsement from like-minded states in its efforts against the current order. Fundamentally, as the rising state continues to question the utility and its place within the current order, it would have to decide to continually support or oppose the order. Consequently, this decision will subsequently determine if international law is to be violated and if demands for changes and modifying efforts will become more explicit and intense. In any case, this phase will witness a fluctuating low-levelled intensity violation of international law, if any, and nascent contending for global strategic space.

2.3 Unravelling Phase

If the rising state deems the current order as unable to accord it with the space it demands, or that the rate of change of the order does not satisfy the rising state, the state will partake in disruptive efforts against the order. This phase (demarcated by green in Figure 2) is known as the unravelling phase. During this phase, the rising state will not simply oppose. Instead, it will favour visible and explicit disruptive actions against the order to better benefit itself. This can come in the form of the rising state desiring for more

political autonomy and leadership in international institutions by dominating the agenda and soliciting support from other like-minded states to oppose the dominant state.⁸² The subversion or even rejection of multilateralism and international institutions, a key cornerstone of the current order, could also be through the initiation of an alternative multilateral framework by the rising state. By extension, this would mean that the rising state holding the leadership position could thereby establish new rules and norms that are more favourable to itself.⁸³ Additionally, beyond changes in the multilateral settings, the rising state will also be more willing to resort to the deployment of coercive force to compel and induce changes favourable to itself. In this sense, the unravelling phase is closer to the revisionist points as this phase denotes the unravelling and chipping away of the current international setup to broker an arrangement it deems favourable to itself. Nevertheless, the unravelling phase differs from pure revisionist tendencies since the unravelling phase is still inherently making changes and disrupting the established setups *within* the order while the latter case suggests a complete and total overhaul of the order and system.

The increased intensity of modification is attributed to the perception of the rising state that it is facing acute lateral pressure from within and that

⁸² A combination of balking and soft balancing based upon Walt's typology of strategies of opposition. See Walt, Stephen M. *Taming American power: the global response to US primacy*. WW Norton & Company, 2006. 109-179.

⁸³ Ikenberry, G. John, and Darren J. Lim. *China's Emerging Institutional Statecraft: The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Prospects for Counter-hegemony*. Brookings, 2017. 4.

the current order is unable to provide more than it desires. Thus, having questioned the utility and purpose of the current order under the previous phase, the rising state came to an understanding that the current order, although crucial in promoting its rise, is at its end in bettering the rising state's position. As such, to continually stimulate and galvanize its rise, the rising state would provide alternatives, reflective of its vision and demands, to modify and disrupt the international order.

In summary, this phase departs from the mere awareness that the rising state needs more internationally. Instead, the unravelling phase suggests that the rising state is cognizant that the current international order may be deficient in meeting its demand for changes. As a result, the rising state would partake in visible acts of disruption to modify the order to its benefit. Hence, the high level of demands, coupled with the violation of international law in the process, meant that the unravelling phase is the closest to the revisionist point.

3. Summary of Framework

In brief, China's action could, at any point and for any incident, lie within the 3 phases. The following table summarises the key aspects of the 3 phases.




3 Phases of Modification			
Phases	Summary of Phase	Description	Actions ⁸⁴
Resistance Phase (Resist) 	Recognition and awareness that the state should be accorded with more international space/ prestige per its rising status	The state will signal intents and desires to change. - No explicit violation of law, but starts to contend for strategic space	Resisting by - Foot-dragging in international institutions - Attribution of blame - Declaration of status and intent
Contestation Phase (Oppose) 	Attempt to question the utility of the order; crossroads between more assertiveness or scaling back its competition	The state will probe and instigate the plausibility of change - Minimal violation of law and contestation for strategic space intensifies	Opposing through - Strategic probes - Trial balloons - Soliciting of external diplomatic support
Unravelling Phase (Disrupt) 	The state will unravel and chip away current international setup to gain more space after the rate and magnitude of change do not match with state's demands	The state will provide alternatives, reflecting its vision, to change - Violates international law and tight contestation for strategic space	Disrupting through - Agenda setting and/or rejection in international institutions - Re-definition of norms - Coercion

Table 1: Summary of 3 Phases of Modification. (By author)

⁸⁴ Does not have to meet all 3 actions to be deemed as behaving as part of the phase.

4. Caveats of Framework

Several caveats are worth mentioning here. Firstly, although this framework put forth the argument that China is neither entirely status quo nor revisionist, certain actions demonstrated by China do suggest a completely status quo or revisionist act. For instance, China's unilateral action to construct and militarize the islands in the South China Sea would constitute an explicit violation of international law and high levels of contestation within the order. Even though isolated instances of such occurrence exist, the framework considers and assesses the overall net Chinese behavior in a particular domain. This is in line with the second caveat of the framework – the existence of outliers. While the framework was constructed based upon theoretical and practical underpinnings, certain actions in practice may reflect otherwise. For instance, while an action constitutes a firm contestation with the order, it may at best implicitly violate international law. A massive military build-up and subsequent standoff in the disputed area is an example of such an occurrence. In this regard, although it is critical to examine both dimensions, the two aspects should not be assumed to be in lockstep and outliers are to be expected.

Additionally, while this framework does its best to accurately ascertain the range of violations of international law and intensity of competition, the assessment becomes complicated when intensity is factored in. For example, a series of territorial infringements within a short time span,

say one month, would certainly register a higher coding score if contrasted to a single territorial infringement in a calendar year. In any case, adequate caution was exercised to consider the intensity of action – number of assets deployed, nature of rhetoric, number of occurrences, whether simultaneous actions were undertaken etc. This points to the next caveat of this framework – the existence of researcher bias. To be sure, for any studies, particularly those involving coding and the handling of data, the existence of researcher bias is pervading. As such a form of biasness could not be entirely eliminated but could be mitigated, this framework and its data processing process were put through strict adherence to the coding schemes by a single researcher. To this end, concerted efforts were undertaken to ensure an accurate reflection of Chinese behaviors.

Lastly, this framework should not be viewed in relative terms. A country's violation of international law and/or contestation with the order should not generate the assumption of other countries' compliance with international law and/or compliance with the order. In this sense, the framework purely analyses and categorize the behaviors and conduct of a singular state.

Chapter V: China in the East and the South China Sea

1. Significance of the Two Seas

According to the 2011 Chinese whitepaper titled 'China's Peaceful Development', China defined its core interests along the themes of 1) state sovereignty; 2) national security' 3) territorial integrity and national reunification; 4) China's political system established by the constitution and overall social stability, and 5) the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development.⁸⁵ These generic conceptions of 'core interests', which are non-negotiable and not for compromise, are justified with the usage of force.⁸⁶ 3 key matters of contention - Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang – form the crux of China's core interests.

This stands in stark contrast to when China first began making core interest declarations in 2003.⁸⁷ 'Core interest', as reflected in Chinese official statements in 2003, was reactionary to Chinese concerns over the potential independence movement of Taiwan.⁸⁸ Since then, the usage of 'core interests',

⁸⁵ "China Peaceful Development". *The State Council of The People's Republic of China*. September 2011.

http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/09/09/content_281474986284646.htm

⁸⁶ Propper, Eyal. " China's Core Interests and the Rising Tension with the United States:

Implications for the World Order" *Strategic Assessment*, no. 4:23 (2020): 106-112. 23.

⁸⁷ Campbell, Caitlin, Ethan Meick, Kimberly Hsu, and Craig Murray. *China's" core Interests' and the East China Sea*. US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2013. 2.

⁸⁸ In 2003, Chinese Foreign Minister mentioned to then US Secretary of State Colin Powell that the Taiwan issue concerns China's core interest and that handling the

in the Chinese media and policymaking domain started to gain traction.⁸⁹ However, it was only until 2006 that the issue areas of 'core interests' truly expanded, with Tibet and Xinjiang formally incorporated as part of the core interests when separatist movements threatened.⁹⁰

Indeed, as discussed in the previous section on the dynamics of rising powers and enlarging interests, China appears to be interpreting its core interests much wider than before. However, to what end would these interests expand and spread?⁹¹

At first thought, two areas of interest – the South China Sea and the East China Sea – naturally come to mind. Since 2009, when tensions over China's maritime disputes in both seas have heightened, China's maritime claims and its insistence on sovereignty have been magnified. While both seas have not been formally declared as 'core interests' of China, Chinese officials have informally acknowledged its core interest status. During the 2010 Strategic and Economic Dialogue, then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton alleged that Chinese State Councillor Dai Bingguo spoke about the

issue is key to developing US-China relations. See (in Chinese) “唐家璇与鲍威尔举行会谈”。 *Embassy of the People's Republic of China*. February 2003. <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceee//chn/dtxw/t106696.htm>

⁸⁹ Swaine, Michael D. "China's Assertive Behavior. Part One: On 'Core Interests.'" *China Leadership Monitor* 34, no. 22 (2011): 1-25. 3-5

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 8.

⁹¹ Propper proposes the question on whether China's core interests will expand to additional regions and domains. See Propper, Eyal. "China's Core Interests and the Rising Tension with the United States: Implications for the World Order" *Strategic Assessment*, no. 4:23 (2020): 106-112. 107.

South China Sea being one of China's core interests.⁹² This incident follows a private conversation between US and China officials held earlier in March that year, where the same assertions of the South China sea being a core interest was made.⁹³ Similarly, during a discussion on the East China Sea during a visit to China, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Martin Dempsey noted that the Chinese officials had invoked "the phrase core interests several times."⁹⁴ Specifically, it was purported that a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Hua Chunying specified that as the Diaoyu/ Senkaku Islands touches on sovereignty and issues of territorial interests, it is categorically a core interest of China.⁹⁵

Although China has been ambiguous in its identification of both seas as its core interests, its assertive rhetoric pertaining to both seas suggests otherwise. Chinese insistent claims of owning the majority of the South and East China seas, even to the extent of declaring it as its sovereignty and

⁹² Ranger, Stephan. "The Limits of "Assertive" Behavior: U.S.-China Relations and the South China Sea", February 2012.

http://www.eai.or.kr/main/english/program_view.asp?intSeq=17637&code=63&gubun=program

⁹³ Wong, Edward. "Chinese Military Seeks to Extend Its Naval Power". *New York Times*. April 2010.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/24/world/asia/24navy.html>

⁹⁴ Kyoda. "China officially labels Senkakus a 'core interest'". *The Japan Times*. April 2013. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/04/27/national/china-officially-labels-senkakus-a-core-interest/>

⁹⁵ The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs then undertook elaborate steps to either correct or soften the spokesperson's remarks. This was reflected through the transcript that that the spokesperson was then quoted as saying the Island disputes 'touches on' core interests. See Campbell, Caitlin, Ethan Meick, Kimberly Hsu, and Craig Murray. China's 'core Interests' and the East China Sea. US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2013. 5

deploying military assets to preserve it, undisputedly overlaps with the principles of its declared core interests. Viewed this way, even though China did not clarify, both the South China Sea and the East China Sea appears to be under the purview of China's 'core interests', at least unofficially.

In this sense, given China's ambiguous yet conflicting stance on the two seas, China would have to balance between pursuing assertive actions to uphold its claims and protect its 'core interests' while mellowing and blunting its assertiveness to downplay the 'China Threat'.⁹⁶ As a result, the range of behaviors displayed by China would be more prominently elucidated through these two case studies. Thus, this paper attempts to exploit this ambiguity to identify the range of behaviors that would better illuminate China's revisionist or status quo tendencies and its extent of modification.

Having established the rationale for why the South China Sea and the East China Sea are chosen as case studies, the following section will provide a contextual overview and will briefly detail why the 2 arenas are worthy of such contestation and attention.

⁹⁶ China's 2019 White paper titled *China and the World in the New Era* firmly disputes the argument that China is seeking hegemony and is generating a 'China Threat'. On the contrary, based on the White paper, China desires the world to see its development as an opportunity for the world. See "White Paper: China and the World in the New Era". *The State Council of The People's Republic of China*. October 2019. <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cehr/eng/gdxw/t1705713.htm>

1.1 South China Sea (SCS)

With the world comprising more than 100 seas, the South China Sea is the third largest sea in the world, covering 3.7 million square kilometers. This vast sea body is home to more than 250 land features - small islands, rocks, and coral reefs - of which only 36 lie permanently above water. Predominantly, the Paracel Islands and Spratlys Islands account for a great number of these land features while the rest are made up of Pratas Island, Scarborough Shoal, Mischief Reef, and more. The strategic location of the South China Sea cannot be underscored enough. Surmised as the throat of the western Pacific and Indian oceans, the South China Sea is the site where global sea routes coalesce.⁹⁷ The South China Sea accounted for one-third of the world's shipping and 3.37 trillion dollars in trade.⁹⁸ More than 50% of the world's merchant fleet tonnage and close to a third of all maritime traffic travel through this vital sea lane of communication annually. To put things into perspective, transportation of crude oil through this channel is 3 times more than that of the Suez Canal and 15 times of the Panama Canal.⁹⁹ Certainly, with the imports of energy from major East Asian economies

⁹⁷ Kaplan, Robert D. *Asia's cauldron: The South China Sea and the end of a stable Pacific*. Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2015. 9

⁹⁸ The United Nations publication provides indication of the maritime traffic. See "Review of Maritime Transport 2016". *United Nations*. 2016. https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/rmt2016_en.pdf.

Approximation of value of provided by the China project of CSIS. See "How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?". *Centre for Strategic & International Studies*. Undated. <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>

⁹⁹ Kaplan, Robert D. *Asia's cauldron: The South China Sea and the end of a stable Pacific*. Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2015. 9

predominantly passing through the South China Sea, the status of the South China Sea as a vital hub is evident.¹⁰⁰

Thus, given the importance of the South China Sea as an essential maritime crossroads, there is a need to keep the vital sea lanes of communication open. However, the various straits leading to the South China Sea could potentially present a problem. Despite the high maritime traffic passing through, the Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Makassar straits are relatively narrow and with varying levels of depths. For instance, the narrowest and shallowest point within the 600-mile Straits of Malacca, where 83000 vessels pass by annually, is only 1.5 miles wide and 21.8 meters deep respectively.¹⁰¹ As a result, the possibility of accidental collision or even obstructions in these narrow chokepoints is ubiquitous. Based on this train of thought, these straits, along with the sea, are strategic locations that should be kept open and free.

Importantly, beneath this vast waterbody lies tremendous resource potential in terms of fishery stocks and energy resources. Despite only accounting for 12% of the global catch in fish, more than half of the world's fishing vessels operate in the South China Sea and an estimated 3.7 million

¹⁰⁰ 60% of Japanese and Taiwanese, 80% of Chinese, and close to two thirds of South Korean energy imports passes through the South China Sea. See Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ji, GuoXing. "SLOC Security in the Asia Pacific". *Asia Pacific Centre for Security Studies*. February 2000. <https://apcss.org/college/publications/occasional-paper-series-reports/sloc-security-in-the-asia-pacific/>

people work in industries catered related to the South China Sea.¹⁰² In spite of this, the crown jewel would be the energy resource – reported and speculated – that exists in the sea. According to the US Energy Information Administration, the South China Sea has eleven billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in proved and probable under-sea reserves.¹⁰³ With some Chinese observers predicting that the South China Sea has around 130 billion barrels of oil yet undiscovered, the South China Sea has been at the time referred to as the ‘Second Persian Gulf’.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, China, whose oil reserves only account for 1.1% of the world total but consumes over 10% of world oil production and over 20% of the energy consumed in the world,¹⁰⁵ is increasingly desperate for energy and looks to tap into this second Persian Gulf to continually feed its growth. To this end, it has been reported that the China National Offshore Oil Corporation has even invested US\$20 billion based on the hope to uncover the purported enormous deposits of oil in the South China Sea.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Poling, B. Gregory. “Illuminating the South China Sea’s Dark Fishing Fleets” *Centre for Strategic & International Studies*. January 2019. <https://ocean.csis.org/spotlights/illuminating-the-south-china-seas-dark-fishing-fleets/>

¹⁰³ “Contested areas of South China Sea likely have few conventional oil and gas resources”. *U.S. Energy Information Administration*. April 2013. <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=10651>

¹⁰⁴ “The South China Sea Dispute: Prospects for Preventive Diplomacy: A Special Report of the United States Institute of Peace”. *United States Institute of Peace*. 1996. 4

¹⁰⁵ “Statistical Review of World Energy”. *The British Petroleum Company*. 2021. <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2021-full-report.pdf>

¹⁰⁶ Kaplan, Robert D. *Asia's cauldron: The South China Sea and the end of a stable Pacific*. Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2015. 10



Figure 3: South China Sea Map. By Chinasage.¹⁰⁷

Considering the geostrategic importance and resource potential of the South China Sea, the islands located in the South China Sea are subjected to contending claims (see Figure 3). This is because UNCLOS stipulated that a state could claim up to 200 nautical miles of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Article 57) and up to 350 nautical miles of the continental shelf (Article 76) from its the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured.¹⁰⁸ By extension, within an EEZ, the state would possess sovereign rights over all resources, living and non-living, of the waters, seabed, and

¹⁰⁷ "The South China Sea". Chinasage. February 2019. <https://www.chinasage.info/south-china-sea.htm>

¹⁰⁸ "United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea". United Nations. Undated. https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf

subsoil. Following this flow of logic, if a state could prove that it possesses an EEZ over the South China Sea, the state could tap into and own the vast resources. As such, the islands within the South China Sea are deemed highly valuable for this purpose.

Not surprisingly, the various island groups are being claimed by multiple countries in the vicinity. Basing its claims on its nine-dashed line,¹⁰⁹ China has claimed sovereign control over virtually all the waters, which naturally includes all the islands and the resources. To this end, China has even instituted an Air Defense Identification Zone, reclaimed, and militarized islands to solidify its maritime claims. Such claims over the majority of the sea as well as the Spratlys and Paracel island groups have been echoed by Vietnam and Taiwan. The Philippines, on the other hand, is claiming eight islands in the Spratlys and a portion of the sea. Malaysia is laying claims to three islands in the Spratlys while Brunei claims a southern reef of the Spratlys. As evinced, the islands within the South China Sea are heavily contested and this fierce contestation and lingering tensions have, on

¹⁰⁹ The U-shaped line stems back to a map by which then China's Ministry of Interior drafted in 1947. This explains why both the Peoples' Republic of China and Taiwan shares similar claims. For more information on the the formation and evolution of the line, see Wang, Zheng. "Chinese Discourse on the "Nine-Dashed Line" Rights, Interests, and Nationalism." *Asian Survey* 55, no. 3 (2015): 502-524.

repeated occasions, flared up and resulted in at times violent standoffs between the maritime assets of the respective claimant states.

Viewed this way, China's actions to claim the entire sea are certainly no foolhardiness. On the contrary, it elucidated a clear rationale intended to ameliorate the Malacca dilemma – the vulnerability it faces due to its reliance on Middle Eastern oil that flows through the narrow chokepoints of the Straits of Malacca.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, China's outlandish claims of the entire sea, based on dubious historical records and at times enforced by force, have caused substantial anxiety and charges of renewed Chinese aggressions in the region. The US State Department has even termed Chinese coercive moves in the South China Sea as 'interference' that undermines peace and security in the region.¹¹¹ Indeed, bolstered by its economic and military rise vis-à-vis the other claimant states, China has the flexibility to either exercise more assertiveness in claiming the sea or China could also utilise other non-military strategies to achieve the same end to downplay the 'China threat'.

Perhaps best concluded by Emerson's view that although China could institutionalize its maritime primacy to prevent and defeat

¹¹⁰ The Malacca Dilemma was termed by then Chinese Premier Hu Jintao in 2003 who describes Chinese vulnerabilities to an external interdiction in the Malacca Straits. See Lanteigne, Marc. "China's maritime security and the "Malacca Dilemma"." *Asian Security* 4, no. 2 (2008): 143-161.

¹¹¹ Ortagus, Morgan. "Chinese Coercion on Oil and Gas Activity in the South China Sea". *U.S. Department of State*. July 2019. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/chinese-coercion-on-oil-and-gas-activity-in-the-south-china-sea/index.html>

challenges,¹¹² such an option and outcome is neither inevitable nor exclusive. In this sense, China does possess a repertoire of policy options it could rely on amidst this highly charged environment. As such, examining the South China Sea would be ideal to analyze the range of actions and the level of modification displayed by China.

1.2 East China Sea (ECS)

The East China Sea comprises of the Okinawa Trough, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and the continental shelf. Within the 482,000 square miles of waterbody lies many natural resources. According to the US energy information administration, the East China Sea contains around 200 million barrels of oil and 1 to 2 trillion cubic feet (Tcf) of natural gas in proven and probable reserves.¹¹³ It is also reported that the Okinawa Trough could potentially contain a significant pool of metallic sulphites and precious metals.¹¹⁴ However, owing to ongoing disputes, the sea is one of the few remaining unexplored high potential research areas which is located near large markets.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Emmerson, Donald K. *The Deer and the Dragon : Southeast Asia and China in the 21st Century*. Brookings International Press. 2020. 157

¹¹³ "East China Sea". *U.S. Energy Information Administration*. September 2014. https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/regions-of-interest/East_China_Sea

¹¹⁴ Valencia, Mark J. "The East China Sea disputes: history, status, and ways forward." *Asian Perspective* 38, no. 2 (2014): 183-218. 185.

¹¹⁵ Guo, Aibing and Katakey, Rakteem. "Disputed Islands with 45 years of oil splits China and Japan". *Bloomberg*. October 2012. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-10-10/disputed-islands-with-45-years-of-oil-split-china-japan>

The maritime dispute in the East China Sea is multifaceted and interrelated. In a similar vein as the case of the South China Sea territorial dispute, the East China Sea dispute hinges on the desire of claimant states to claim and leverage on the islands' EEZ. Indeed, the ambition of China and Japan to exploit the resource potential of the East China Sea has necessitated and sparked off overlapping jurisdictional and EEZ claims over maritime areas, often by drawing on different principles and laws to define its maritime boundaries. While China claims the maritime boundary based on its principle of natural prolongation of the continental shelf, Japan has rejected such principle and justifies its claims of the 200 nautical miles exclusive economic zone based on the equidistance line.¹¹⁶ As such, what ensues is overlapping EEZ claims as two states claim the full 200 nautical miles when only 360 nautical miles separate the two states from their undisputed territory.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Yu, Peter Kien-hong. "Solving and resolving the East China Sea dispute: Beijing's options." *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 17, no. 3 (2005): 105-127. 122

For more information on Japan's rejection, see "Japan's legal position on the development of natural resources in the East China Sea". *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*. August 2015. https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/page3e_000358.html

¹¹⁷ Strating, Rebecca. "Maritime and Sovereignty Disputes in the East China Sea." *Maritime Awareness Project*. February 2021.

<https://www.nbr.org/publication/maritime-and-sovereignty-disputes-in-the-east-china-sea/>



Figure 4: East China Sea Map. By China Briefing.¹¹⁸

Certainly, the potentiality for disputes over the overlapping interpretation of EEZ is evident. A case to consider would be the Chunxiao Gas Field which is located near the arbitrary equidistance line which both countries have been extracting gas from (see Figure 4). With China drilling closer to the line amidst Japanese fears that China would siphon gas off from the Japanese side,¹¹⁹ Japan raised its concerns to which China rebutted that

¹¹⁸ "East China Sea Map". *China Briefing*. June 2011. <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-territorial-disputes-in-the-south-china-sea-and-east-china-sea/east-china-sea-map/>

¹¹⁹ Prior to 2011, the median line, not the 200nm limit, was assumed to be Japan's claim of EEZ. However, since 2011, Japan has explicitly conveyed a 200nm limit EEZ claim when Japanese foreign minister Takeaki met then Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi. These changes meant that China is now seen to be exercising its EEZ jurisdiction over Japanese claimed maritime sovereignty. See "Overview of the Japan-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting". *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*. July 2011. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/fmm1107.html> and Manicom, James. "China's Energy Development in the East China Sea". *Centre for International Governance Innovation*. September 2013. <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/chinas-energy-development-east-china-sea/>

it is within its EEZ.¹²⁰ Such instances denote the highly charged environment complicated by differing interpretations of territorial and EEZ boundaries. To be fair, the gas field presented opportunities for cooperative endeavors as China and Japan agreed to jointly develop and manage the gas fields in the 2008 Consensus on Resource Development.¹²¹ However, owing to a series of developments,¹²² the agreement began to unravel and broke down before it was set, thereby flaring up tensions again in the region.

In addition, presenting another dimension and compounding tensions in the region would be the dispute over the Diaoyu/ Senkaku Islands. With the islands located strategically near areas with substantial resources, China and Japan have constantly challenged and claimed sovereignty over the islands. Currently, as Japan controls and administers the islands, the islands were used as a justification for extending the Japanese EEZ claim to exploit the resource-rich East China Sea.¹²³ However, given that doubts exist on whether the rocky features could constitute an 'island', the

¹²⁰ Valencia, Mark J. "The East China Sea disputes: history, status, and ways forward." *Asian Perspective* 38, no. 2 (2014): 183-218.185.

¹²¹ Manicom, James. "Sino-Japanese Cooperation in the East China Sea: Limitations and Prospects." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, no. 3 (2008): 455-78. 456.

¹²² For more information, see Manicom, James. "China's Energy Development in the East China Sea". *Centre for International Governance Innovation*. September 2013. <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/chinas-energy-development-east-china-sea/>, Valencia, Mark J. "The East China Sea disputes: history, status, and ways forward." *Asian Perspective* 38, no. 2 (2014): 183-218. 192-195, and Kim, Suk Kyoon. "China and Japan maritime disputes in the East China Sea: A note on recent developments." *Ocean Development & International Law* 43, no. 3 (2012): 296-308. 299-301.

¹²³ Valencia, Mark J. "The East China Sea disputes: history, status, and ways forward." *Asian Perspective* 38, no. 2 (2014): 183-218. 187.

claims of EEZ based on the islands are dubious and debatable.¹²⁴ Evidently, the issues of contestation for resources owing to differing interpretation of territorial and EEZ boundaries presents itself once again.

More importantly, these complexities are compounded by differing interpretations of history. China and Japan have based on its own perspective of history to respectively claim sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.¹²⁵ While China maintains that the islands have been part of the Chinese territory since 1534 and thus should have been duly returned as part of terms under the 1951 San Francisco Treaty,¹²⁶ Japan does not acknowledge any existence of ownership dispute and insisted that the islands have always been an integral part of Japan.¹²⁷ As such, as these differing perspectives of the islands' status hinge upon national autonomy and pride, reactions from either side, fanned by nationalist sentiments are elicited. Terming this as an action-reaction dynamic, Medcalf concurred that the Diaoyu/ Senkaku Islands dispute became a form of national pride that

¹²⁴ Yiallourides, Constantinos. "Senkaku/Diaoyu: Are They Islands?" *The International Lawyer* 50, no. 2 (2017): 347–66. 363.

¹²⁵ For Japanese justification, see "The Basic View on the Sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands". *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*. May 2013

https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/senkaku/basic_view.html. For Chinese interpretation, see "Diaoyu Islands belong to China". *Embassy of the People's Republic of China*. Undated.

<https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cedk/eng/ztbd/dydw/t1036403.htm>

¹²⁶ "Diaoyu Dao, an Inherent Territory of China". *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China*. September 2012.

www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics_665678/diaodao_665718/201209/t20120926_701830.html

¹²⁷ Scovile, Ryan. "Japan: 'No Dispute' Over the Senkaku/Diaoyu". *The Diplomat*. December 2014. <https://thediplomat.com/2014/12/japan-no-dispute-on-the-senkakudiaoyu/>

both governments feel compelled to react to perceived provocations of the other side.¹²⁸ In this sense, provocations surrounding the islands would be retaliated in a tit-for-tat fashion and so the island dispute will continue to remain a hotbed for tensions and conflict in the East China Sea.

Certainly, tension points in the East China sea are not limited to the Chunxiao Gas Field or the Diaoyu/ Senkaku Islands. In fact, several more such as China's implementation of the Air Defense Identification Zone and the private ownership of the disputed islands are worth mentioning. In any case, the East China Sea is a site that is riddled with flashpoints that could easily snowball into a bigger conflict. Hence, with much at stake, China would have to navigate itself through these contentious points - balancing between its core interests and downplaying the threat it possesses. In this light, examining China's range of actions as it deals with the pressure points of the East China sea presents an interesting case study to illuminate China's degree of modification.

2. Summary of Section

Admittedly, this section has provided an overly simplified review of the ongoing maritime dispute in the East and South China sea. Without a doubt, the two disputes stem much further and deeper than presented and

¹²⁸ Lipin, Michael. "Nationalism Fuels Japan-China Island Dispute". *Voice of America*. August 2012. <https://www.voanews.com/a/japan-china-island-dispute-rooted-in-domestic-challenges-nationalist-grievances/1493779.html>

their ontological origins are deserving of much more exploration if space permits. Nevertheless, a recurrent theme behind the two maritime territorial disputes would be the desire for claimant states to exploit the strategic location and resource potential surrounding the islands. However, given that the East Asian states are in semi-enclosed seas, the maritime territorial demarcation is never as simple as that of land-based demarcation. As such, contending and overlapping sovereignty claims ensue much controversies. Such complexities are compounded by nationalist sentiments and different interpretations of law and history, which heavily skews the justification of its respective claims.

As indicated in the previous paragraphs, China has tacitly recognized both seas as its 'core interests'. Indeed, for both seas, China has placed a strong emphasis on claiming it, resorting to a series of actions from justifying its claims through its interpretation of history and international law, to the usage of military assets to compel, and more. Evidently, China possesses a range of actions in both the South and the East China Sea, to which this study will closely examine to ascertain the underlying nature of Chinese behavior and the degree of its modification.

Chapter VI: Data

1. Data Collection

For this study, the historical process tracing will be employed to scour primary and secondary sources for evidence of Chinese behaviors and actions in the two stipulated arenas. Utilizing the data collected from the two sources, a dataset would be created. Data will be first mined from the academic database 'LexisNexis Academic', using keywords such as 'South China Sea', 'East China Sea', 'Senkaku', 'Paracel Islands', 'Spartly Islands', 'Scarborough Shoal', 'Chunxiao Gas' etc. In addition, the dataset will be supplemented by resources from 'Crisis Watch Database' and official releases from the various states' governments. In total, 291 incidents of significance were obtained and recorded out of hundreds of thousands of entries from various data sources.

2. Coding Schemes

After the establishment of the database, a summary of the event/ case for each incident of significance will be summarised and coded using two coding schemes. Importantly, the coding scale will not be static as intensity and the range of actions have to be considered. In this regard, the two coding schemes - China's contestation for strategic space and China's international legal conduct - are developed and follows an interval scale where the scales are equally divided. First, China's contestation for strategic space will be

coded using the following scheme:

Scale	Interpretation - China's contestation for Strategic Space
-2.5	Chinese non-material responses
-1.5	Chinese attempts to garner external support through diplomatic channels
-0.5	Deployment of Chinese military assets, but quickly de-escalated (probes)
+0.5	Deployment of Chinese assets and force was utilized for a minimal period (standoff without damage)
+1.5	Deployment of Chinese assets and force was utilized for an extended period (prolonged standoff with minimal damage) and/ or Rejection of multilateralism efforts
+2.5	Deployment of Chinese assets and force was utilized for an extended period (prolonged standoff with damage) and Rejection of multilateralism efforts

Table 2: Coding Scheme for Intensity of Contestation for Strategic Space (By author)

Considering that the framework will consider China's role as actively modifying the international order, a series of modifying behaviors are derived. This scheme aims to capture the modifying actions that induce the increasing contestation for strategic space vis-à-vis other states.¹²⁹ The scheme will consider a scale range from -2.5 (negative) to +2.5 (positive); where -2.5 to -1.5 reflects actions that denote China's awareness and resistance to the order, -1.5 to +1.5 suggests China's attempt to probe and oppose the current setup, and +1.5 to +2.5 reflects Chinese disruptive efforts. Figure 5 summarises such distinctions within this coding scheme.

¹²⁹ Refer to Chapter 4 for more information on the framework and China's modifying phase

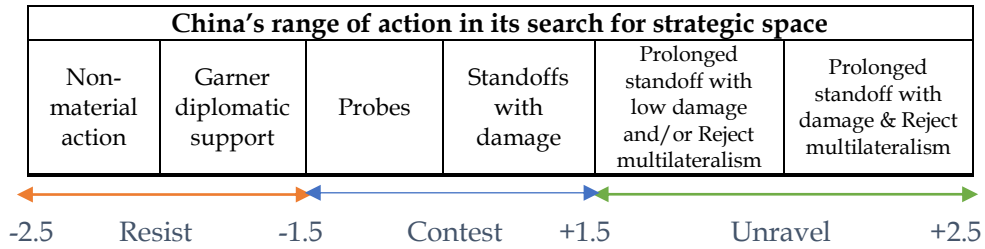


Figure 5: Coding Scheme and phases for Intensity of Contestation for Strategic Space (By author)

Second, to assess China's international legal conduct, the overall level of Chinese violation/ compliance with international law in each development will be coded through this scheme:

Scale	Interpretation - China's International Legal Conduct
-1.5	International law was explicitly adhered to and practiced.
-0.5	International law was implicitly violated (ambiguous violation) ¹³⁰
+0.5	International law was explicitly violated
+1.5	International law was explicitly violated and undermined

Table 3: Coding Scheme for International Legal Conduct (By author)

As mentioned in the earlier sections of the paper, to holistically evaluate China's modifying behavior, China's international conduct has to be viewed and analyzed in tandem with China's contestation of strategic space. Having discussed the coding scheme for the latter, this scheme (Table 3) will consider four differing magnitudes of China's violation of

¹³⁰ Implicit violation refers to the situation where there is a grey area in interpretation of international law. This contrasting interpretation of law by different states results in the unclear situation where international law is unable to be undisputedly declared as explicitly violated. Thus, international law can be said to be ambiguously violated or implicitly violated.

international law. Specifically, China’s international legal conduct can be assessed if international law is explicitly adhered to and practiced; implicitly violated; explicitly violate; or explicitly violated and undermined. When applied to the framework, and as shown in figure 6, the resistance phase reflects the range of -1.5 to 0.0; the contestation phase has a range of -0.5 to +0.5, while the unravelling phase, which denotes an undisputed violation of international law, has a range of 0.0 to +1.5.

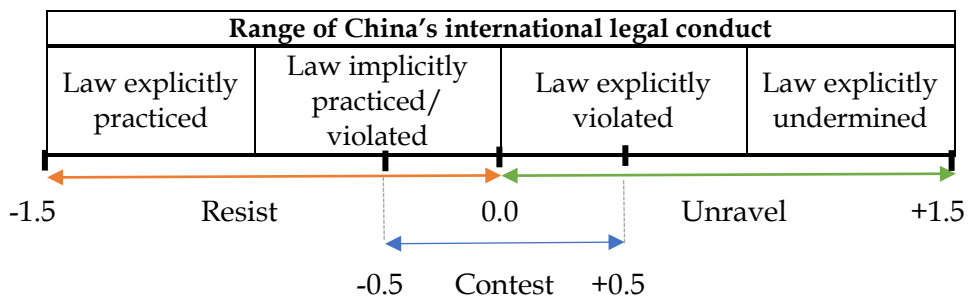


Figure 6: Coding Scheme and phases for Violation of International Law (By author)

In sum, if both components are combined and presented within a model, figure 7 will emerge. The following sub-section will demonstrate an example of how an incident of significance will be coded.

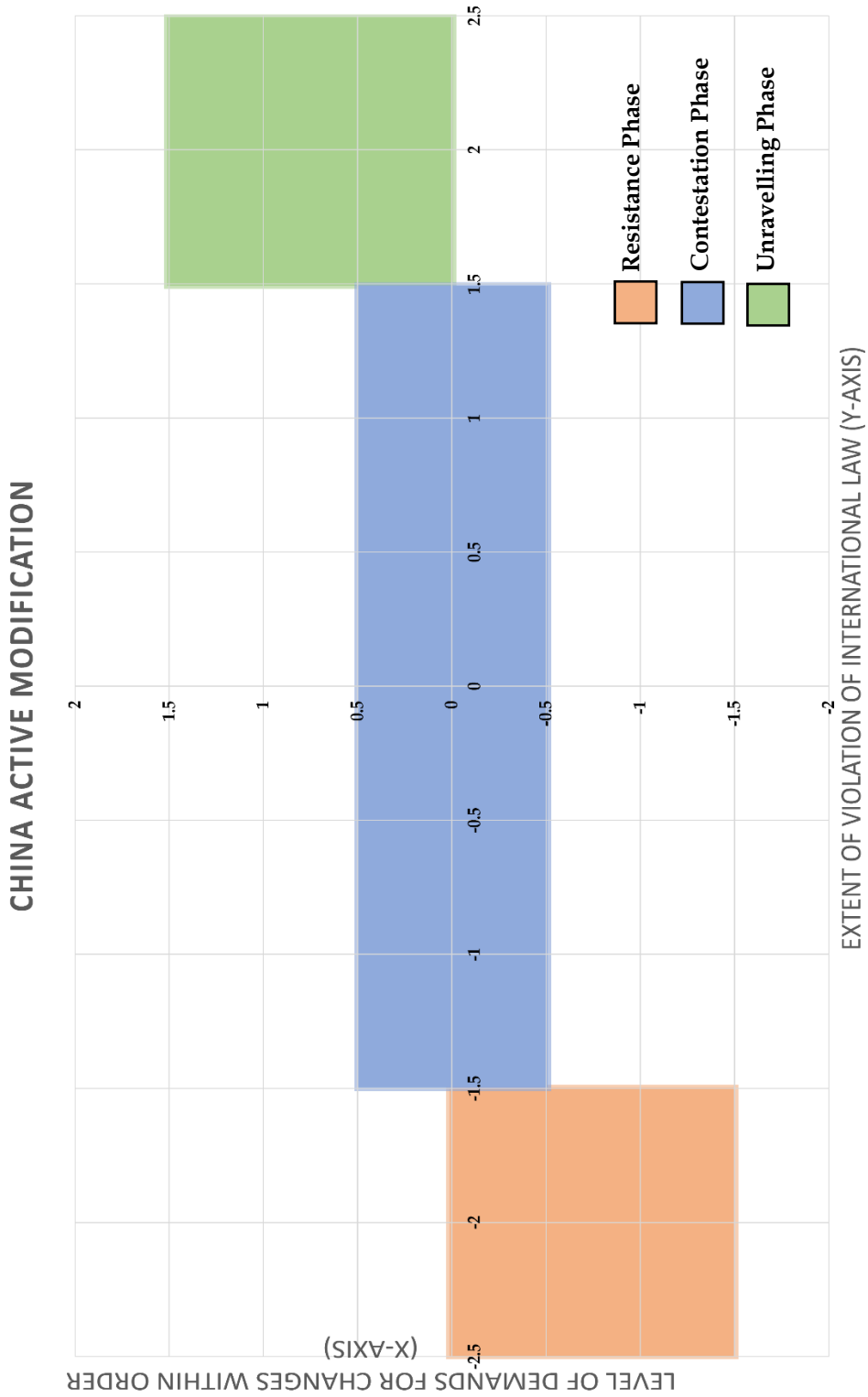


Figure 7: China's Active Modification with scales (By author)

2.1 Coding example

Incident no. 50 is chosen at random to be detailed for this brief exercise. In short, incident no. 50 happened on April 18th 2015, when three Chinese coast guard vessels, including the Haijing 3402, allegedly shot water cannons and damaged the Philippines fishing ships near the Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea.

In assessing China's violation of international law, as the incident happened in the disputed seas, there is a grey area in the interpretation of international law. Thus, it would be erroneous to charge this particular Chinese action as definitively violating international law. However, Chinese actions to compel and deny the access the Filipino anglers categorically violated article 110 and 116 of the UNCLOS. Importantly, considering that such acts in denial of access were not one-offs, and incident no.50 has been the fourth case in 2015, China is regarded as intensely violating international law. In this sense, considering all elements, the violation of international law is approximately coded at +0.80.

With regards to China's contestation of strategic space, it is coded at +1.80. This is because in denying Filipino access to the Scarborough Shoal, China has utilized and deployed its coast guard. Incidentally, the Chinese coast guards deployed water cannons and rammed the Filipino fishing vessels, inflicting damage to the Filipino vessels. This suggests that this act would have passed the threshold of code +1.5. Importantly, although damages were sustained on the Filipino side, Chinese actions did not cause extensive damage nor sink the

vessels; it does not warrant a code close to +2.5. Considering that the Chinese act of ramming vessels is a marked escalation of violence from past events, where China has simply utilized bullhorns and water cannons to police the region, a code of more than +1.5 has to be assigned. Viewed this way, its demands for changes in the current setup puts it at a code of +1.80.

Admittedly, as discussed under the caveats of the framework, given the rather objective nature of the coding scheme, it runs the risk of researcher bias. To this end, concerted efforts were undertaken to ensure an accurate reflection of Chinese behaviors by consistently and strictly adhering to the stipulated coding schemes.¹³¹

3. Data Processing

Using the coded data, scatter plot diagrams were plotted to reflect the results. Importantly, given it is a relatively skewed distribution, the median was used to best accurately capture the central tendency of the dataset.¹³² In this case, the central tendency of the dataset would simply

¹³¹ Refer to Chapter 4.4 for more information on the caveats of the framework

¹³² In terms of reflecting the central tendency of the data, the mean is typically utilised when the distribution is symmetrical, and the median used when the distribution reflects a skewed nature. For more information on why the median is preferred, See "Measures of Central Tendency". *Laerd Statistics*. Undated. <https://statistics.laerd.com/statistical-guides/measures-central-tendency-mean-mode-median.php> and "Central Tendency & Variability". *University of Utah, Sociology 3112*. Undated. <https://soc.utah.edu/sociology3112/central-tendency-variability.php#:~:text=But%20if%20the%20variable%20is,the%20median%20is%20more%20accurate.>

denote China's net modifying behavior by identifying which phase the median point lies.

4. Data Findings

1.1 South China Sea

In brief, the central tendency of China's behavior in the South China Sea reflects that of an unraveller. To be sure, China has its moments of limited contestation and compliance with international law, as evinced by the scatter plots located in the outliers, as well as the Resistance and Contestation phase. However, China's modifying behavior is mostly congregated in the unravelling phase (Figure 8 median point: 1.9, 0.7). Nevertheless, although China is unravelling to satisfy its demand for changes in the international order commensurate with its rising status, it is still inconclusive to deem it as fully revisionist.¹³³ Thus, at best, China can be determined as close to displaying revisionist tendencies.

1.2 East China Sea

The East China Sea reflects contrasting realities from the South China Sea. China's net modifying behavior in the East China Sea is that of contesting. With the central tendency point at (-0.1, 0.1) in Figure 9, China is neither strongly demanding for changes in the current order nor displaying

¹³³ A fully revisionist state would have the median point at (2.50, 1.50).

misconduct in terms of international law. Although outliers and scatter plots exist within the resistance and unravelling phase, the scatter plots are mainly concentrated within the contestation phase. Thus, China is mostly contesting than merely resisting or attempting to unravel the order. Interestingly, as its median point lies close to the origin point, China can be seen as being at an inflection point between demanding more or less in the international order and violating or complying with international law.

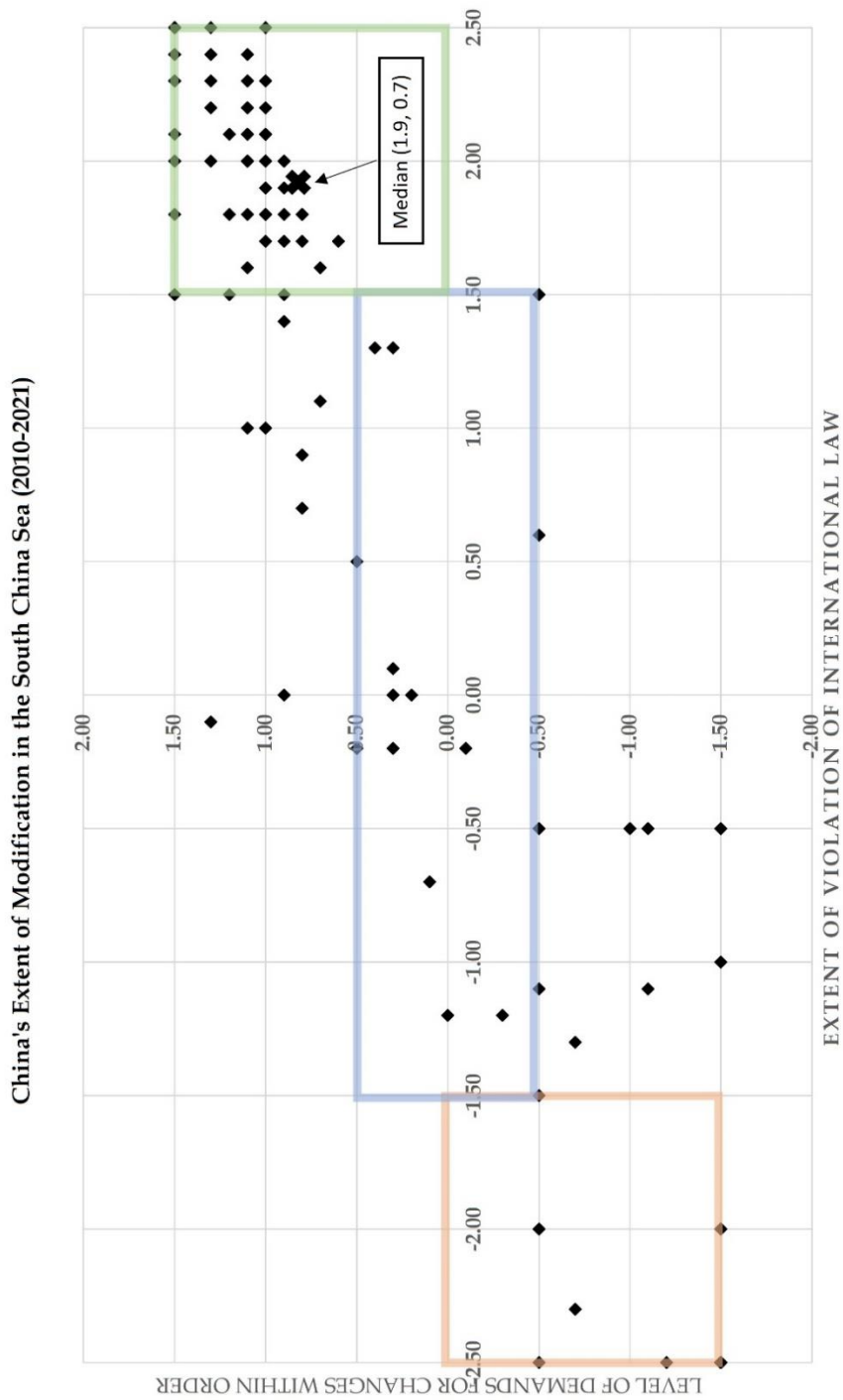


Figure 8: China's Extent of Modification in the South China Sea (2010-2021) (By author)

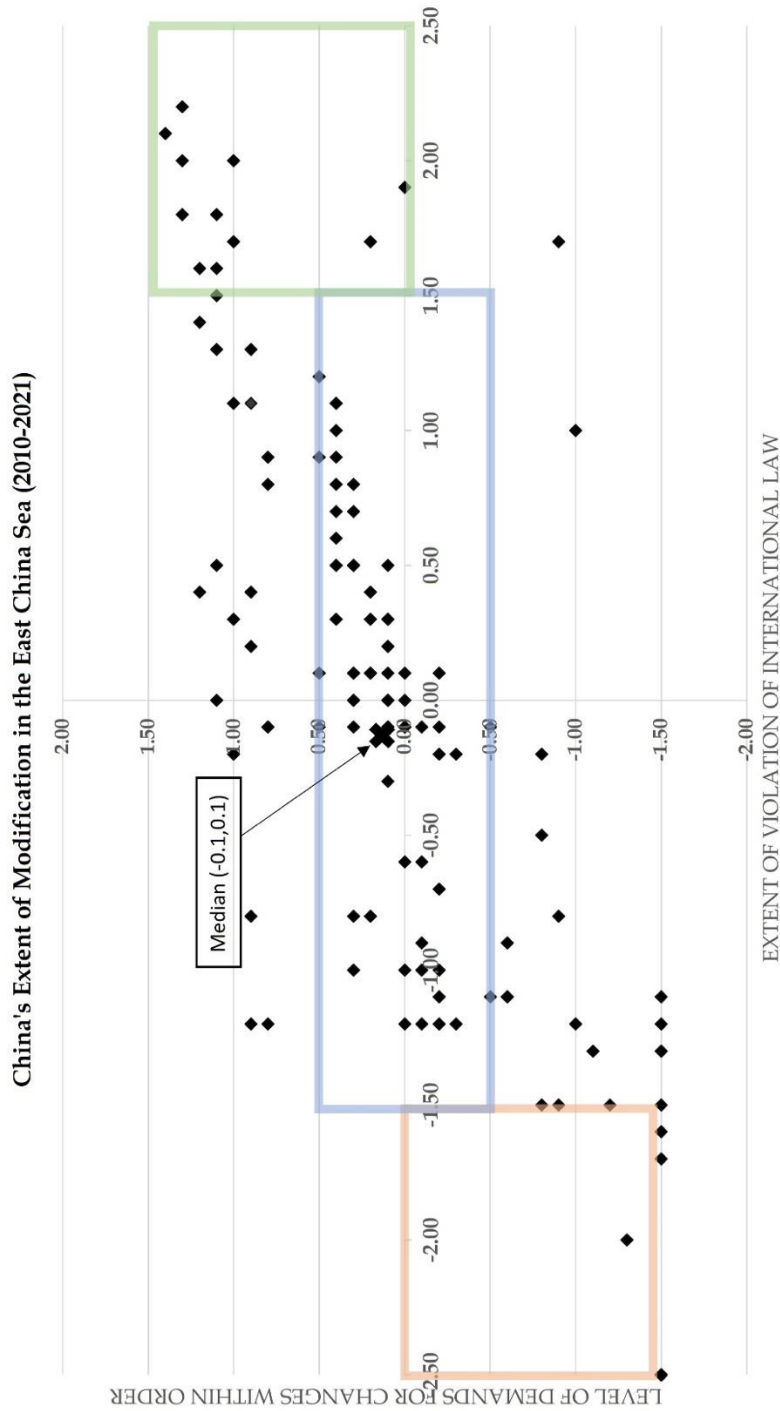


Figure 9: China's Extent of Modification in the East China Sea (2010-2021) (By autho

Chapter VII. Discussion

1. South China Sea: China as an Unraveller

What constitutes and justifies China being a modifier in the unravelling phase within the South China Sea? To answer this question, a closer examination of the extent of Chinese resistance as it vies for and demands for changes, coupled with its international conduct must be scrutinized. In short, to preserve its 'core interests' in the South China Sea, China has adopted escalatory actions with increasingly violent means, supplemented by the deployment of force.

Based on the dataset, China's range of actions in the South China Sea can be surmised in a 3 X 3 matrix diagram featuring varying levels of damage caused through varying levels of the lethality of force deployed.

		Extent of Damage		
		No	Limited	High
Deployment of Force	No	Condemnation on diplomatic mediums.	-	-
	Minimal	Denial of access to SCS Standoff Construction of islands	Cutting of connecting cables of other states Boarding of vessels / boats Seizure of assets	Ramming of fishing boats
	Lethal	Firing of warning shots Extended Standoff Militarizing of islands	Arresting the crew	Sinking of vessels/ boats

Table 4: 3X3 Matrix of China's range of actions in the South China Sea. By author

Granted, it is undeniable that China has used diplomatic channels to assert its 'sovereign control' of the South China Sea. At the same time, China has also deployed its coast guards to ward off fishing vessels from its 'sovereignty' without causing harm or damage. However, since the middle of 2011, China has largely departed from issuing verbal threats and has upped its ante through the escalation of its deployment of assets and usage of force, often to increasingly devastating effects.¹³⁴ During this time, and to a large extent, China has shifted from merely signaling its intent and probing

¹³⁴ While it is beyond the scope of the paper to discuss beyond the actions undertaken by China in this domain, this paper speculates that the more assertive and nationalist based leadership under Chinese Premier Xi Jinping could be a factor. Future research could possibly study on the nuanced implications of Chinese Premier Xi accession on specific areas like the South China Sea.

the plausibility of changing the status quo and order, to one of proactivity and assertiveness, as evinced when its coast guards took on an active policing role in the region. Indeed, more instances where Chinese usage of force to deny others entering and/ or to compel others to leave its 'sovereign waters' were observed since this period. As such, what ensued were more cases of extended standoffs, boarding, arresting, and seizure of vessels and assets, coupled with ramming and firing of shots to deny access. Evidently, increments in the level of lethality of force deployed over time, which then resulted in an augmented affliction of damage in the South China Sea were noticeably picked up. In this sense, a more emphatic demand for changes in the order resulted.

Simultaneously, along with the rise of its proactivity and assertiveness in the South China Sea, international law within that domain experienced more violations as well. Importantly, a clear distinction must be drawn here between Chinese implicit and explicit violation of international law in the South China Sea. Owing to the disputed and overlapping territorial claims by the various claimant states, attempts to assert and claim the waters within the disputed area are considered an implicit violation of the law. An explicit violation of international law, as largely demonstrated by China, would denote the series of aggressive actions it undertook to assert its claims. Thus, while a peaceful standoff or a Chinese denial of entry into the disputed waters would only constitute as an implicit violation, China's

explicitly violated international laws when it boards and/ or exert unwarranted violence on other sovereign entities. Similarly, its arrest, disposal, and seizure of other assets would constitute as explicit violations. Given the nature of these acts, China is deemed to have explicitly violated articles 87, 101, 110, and 116 of UNCLOS. Fundamentally, the Chinese forceful posture in asserting its claims through denial of access and/ or its compulsion of others to leave the area can be seen as continuous efforts by China to have molded and crafted a new normal by juxtaposing Chinese laws and interpretation of international law on top of terms under UNCLOS.

Perhaps the saliency of this point would be best elucidated by examining Chinese artificial construction and subsequent militarization of islands. Since 2013, China has intensified its dredging and construction of artificial islands in the Spratlys and the Paracels Islands.¹³⁵ Although UNCLOS does provide articles permitting a state to construct (article 60) and use its artificial islands (article 57), these actions are permissible only under one's economic exclusive zone.¹³⁶ Thus, given that the islands and its EEZ, under the backdrop of many overlapping claims, are heavily disputed, China does not possess the legitimate right to construct artificial islands in the Spratlys and Paracels. Essentially, China's conduct of *fait accompli*

¹³⁵ "China Island Tracker". *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*. Undated. <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/>

¹³⁶ "United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea". *United Nations*. Undated. https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf. 40-41.

through such construction has explicitly violated and undermined the terms under UNCLOS, as it established a pre-supposition that the islands and the EEZs are part of Chinese sovereignty. In this sense, China has turned a blind eye to international law and its unilateral actions to construct the islands have categorically violated and undermined the terms of UNCLOS.

Therefore, by imposing its own interpretation of law unto other sovereign entities, China is attempting to change the status of the South China Sea from a *de facto* disputed site to a *de jure* Chinese sovereignty. Chinese explicit rejection of the ruling by the International Tribunal of the Hague over the case of the Philippines and China South China Sea Arbitration further highlighted Chinese defiance and disregard towards international law and multilateralism.¹³⁷ Viewed this way, the Chinese increasing assertive modifying behavior has also resulted in more serious violations of international law.

Thus, if the violation of international law and the demand for changes with the order are viewed in tandem, China's unravelling behavior in the South China Sea can be accounted for. Synonymous with the unravelling phase, China appears willing in terms of increasing its assertiveness and proactivity to alter the status quo and order such that its 'core interests' are better protected and promoted. Thus, China displays a net

¹³⁷ Philips, Tom. "Beijing rejects tribunal's ruling in South China Sea case" *The Guardian*. July 2016.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/12/philippines-wins-south-china-sea-case-against-china>

unravelling modifying behavior that is closer to revisionism in the domain of the South China Sea.

2. East China Sea: China as a Contester

Chinese actions in the East China Sea tell a different story from that of the South China Sea. Although regarded too as an unofficial 'core interest', China's modifying behavior in the East China Sea is closely aligned with the 'Contestation Phase'. From the dataset, China's modifying behavior in the East China Sea seems to probe the plausibility of changes rather than instituting changes as it did in the South China Sea. Indeed, in contrast to the myriad of modifying behavior demonstrated in the South China Sea, Chinese actions were mainly limited to probes at sovereignty through air and sea incursions into the disputed territory to challenge and oppose Japanese de-facto control over the islands. As contrasted to Chinese unequivocal use of its military and coast guard assets to assert its sovereignty forcefully in the South China Sea, Chinese air and naval assets were primarily utilized to venture into or near the disputed areas. Between 2016 and 2020, there were reportedly 3122 air incursions and 1156 sea incursions by China into the 'territorial waters' of Japan.¹³⁸ Such frequent

¹³⁸ For the report on Japan air scrambles, see "Joint Staff Press Release". *Japan Ministry of Defense*. April 2021.

https://www.mod.go.jp/js/Press/press2021/press_pdf/p20210409_03.pdf. For Japanese Coast guard deployments in the East China Sea, see (in Japanese) "Japan Coast Guard Annual report 2021". *Japan Coast Guard*. May 2021.

incursions, as argued by Burke et al, would normalize Chinese presence in the Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands, which could then provide a basis for the creation of a new status quo.¹³⁹

Viewing through the lens of international law at Chinese attempts to normalize its presence, given that the probes or even the resource extraction were conducted in the area under dispute,¹⁴⁰ there appear no definite charges of violation of UNCLOS articles. Hence, China has merely implicitly violated international law. To be certain, on several occasions, China has probed beyond the disputed islands and ventured into the contiguous zone of Japan.¹⁴¹ Nevertheless, as the interpretations of contiguous zones are still contentious and challenged by China, Chinese incursions would not necessarily warrant an explicit violation of international law. Viewed this way, China's modifying behavior, though to some extent violates international law, is mostly tacit violations.

<http://www.kaiho.mlit.go.jp/info/books/report2021/html/hajimeni/hajimeni21.html>

¹³⁹ Burke, Edmund J., Timothy R. Heath, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Logan Ma, Lyle J. Morris, and Michael S. Chase. "China's Military Activities in the East China Sea." *Implications for Japan's Air Self-Defense Force*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation (2018). 15.

¹⁴⁰ As discussed in the previous section, charges and counter charges of violation of international law are ambiguous given that state A is subjecting state B to its own interpretation of international law, vice versa. In both cases, there is no explicit violation of international law. For example, state A extracting resources within 12 nautical miles of state's B sovereignty would be an undisputable violation of UNCLOS.

¹⁴¹ Disputed by China

In terms of its desire to enact changes in the order, China appears to have minimal success in that, owing to strong Japanese responses to Chinese assertiveness. From the dataset, Chinese attempts at probing and establishing a new normal in the East China Sea have always been matched by the Japanese Coast Guard and Japan Air Self Defense Force. Whenever China attempts to probe through the deployment of its naval or air assets into the disputed area, Japan will counter and respond with deployments of coast guard vessels or air assets accordingly. Hence, such moves disrupted Chinese attempts in crafting a new status quo in the East China Sea. Indeed, as evinced by the statistics - 3122 scrambles and 1156 coast guard vessels deployment against Chinese incursions -, Japan has responded adequately and appropriately to Chinese probes. To be sure, even though the stark number of incursions and the possibility that the coming together of both states' assets at times ensued in a standoff, such standoffs were often quickly de-escalated; with no further escalation. In any case, such signals of intent and resolve by Japan appeared to have negated Chinese attempts to establish a new normal.

Japanese show of resolve is possible as it possesses the necessary capabilities and capacities to respond to Chinese incursions.¹⁴² Additionally, Japan's convincing responses to Chinese modification is also bolstered by an

¹⁴² The Japanese Coast Guard reported that it has a total of 474 coast guard vessels and 90 aircraft at its disposal. See "Japan Coast Guard brochure". *Japan Coast Guard*. April 2022. https://www.kaiho.mlit.go.jp/e/pdf/r04_panfu_en.pdf

explicit US commitment. Washington has often affirmed that Article V of the U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security applies to the Senkaku Islands. Such commitment was re-asseverated during the 2021 US-Japan Joint Leaders' Statement, where President Biden recognized the Senkaku/ Diaoyu islands as Japanese and that it falls under the purview of the US-Japan alliance.¹⁴³ In this sense, such strong affirmations undoubtedly present a strong and unified stand against Chinese probes.

This stands in contrast with the case of the South China Sea, where the claimant states vis-à-vis Japan does not have the luxury of capabilities or capacities as Japan does to match China's incursions, nor did the US explicitly commit to the defense of any claimant state. Consequently, China was able to normalize and institutionalize its presence in the South China Sea while the East China Sea and its disputed area are still contested. Thus, even though China may possess similar intentions in both domains, the fact that it is unable to extract more from the East China Sea suggests that its actions could be taken as strategic probes for openings in the East China Sea.

To be sure, Chinese actions in the East China Sea are not limited to probes and standoffs. There have been limited instances where the usage of force has exceeded typical levels. To name a few: the 2010 trawler incident, when a Chinese trawler collided, intentionally or unintentionally, with the

¹⁴³ "U.S. - Japan Joint Statement". *The White House*. April 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/16/u-s-japan-joint-leaders-statement-u-s-japan-global-partnership-for-a-new-era/>

Japanese coast guards' vessels; or when China sent its submarine on a reconnaissance mission around the disputed area. Yet, whenever Chinese assertiveness threatens to spill over, reconciliatory attempts to de-escalate and defuse tensions would emerge. In 2014, following months of backchannel diplomacy, China and Japan issued a '4-point consensus'. Point 3 of the consensus attests to the establishment of a common understanding that the dispute surrounding the East China Sea is indeed a point of tension between the two states, and that proper dialogue, consultation, and effective crisis management must be enacted to prevent further deterioration of the situation.¹⁴⁴ While doubts over the effectiveness of the '4 point consensus' have been raised by some scholars, it has certainly prompted cooperative endeavors and extracted a common desire by both states to resolve the dispute peacefully.

Indeed, with the principles of the 4-points consensus operating under the backdrop, a maritime and aerial communication crisis management

¹⁴⁴ The 4 Points consensus notes (1) both sides agree to observe the spirit and principles of four basic documents and continue to strive for "mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests"; (2) domestic political difficulties need to be overcome for both countries based on the spirit of "squarely facing history and advancing toward the future"; (3) both sides **recognize/acknowledge** that they had different views of the tensions in East China Sea, and agree that the further deterioration of the situation needs to be prevented through dialogue and consultation and establish a crisis management mechanism; and (4) both sides agree to generally resume bilateral dialogue in various areas. See Tatsumi, Yuki. "Understanding China and Japan's Four Point Consensus: A Step Forward For Stabilizing Relations". *Stimson*. November 2014. <https://www.stimson.org/2014/understanding-china-and-japans-four-point-consensus-a-step-forward-for-stabilizing-relations/>

mechanism was created in 2018 to prevent accidental collisions and clashes in both air and sea in the East China Sea. This mechanism comprises of the establishment of a hotline that allows senior officials to discuss and de-escalate, along with commitments to hold regular military dialogues so as to better regulate and manage activities in the East China Sea. Essentially, it seeks to prevent a repeat of the 2010 Senkaku/ Diaoyu Boat collision incident. Evidently, Chinese assertive desires to normalize its presence in the East China Sea have also been offset by reconciliatory diplomatic attempts to diffuse tensions. As such, in the East China Sea, China appears to have a relatively muted and nuanced approach as it balances between escalation and de-escalation – shuffling its level of demands in the current international order.

By this train of logic, China in East Asia is at an inflection point as to whether to scale up or down its demands through more drastic and forceful actions or wind down its assertiveness and pursue a more nuanced diplomatic approach. As such, China can be seen to be in the process of re-evaluating the utility of the order within the arena the East China Sea, which accounts for its modifying behavior constituting the Contestation phase.

3. Varying Levels of Modification in the Two Seas

In the consolidation of both cases, although both seas are of huge significance to China, China adopts different approaches in its modifying

behavior. For the South China Sea, China is in the process of unravelling – demanding more from the international order and violating international law explicitly in the process. Conversely, Chinese actions in the East China Sea suggest a relatively tamed and muted modifying behavior that operates along the lines of the Contestation phase.

Beyond what was discussed earlier on several distinctions between China’s action in the South and the East China Sea, a key preliminary deduction between the differing modifying behavior can be made: the Chinese level of control in the two seas. In short, China exerts more control in the South China Sea vis-à-vis the East China Sea. This results in a differing starting point and utility of the Chinese modification behavior.

As reported by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative,¹⁴⁵ China is in control of 20 outposts in the Paracel Islands, 7 outposts in Spratlys Islands, and the entire Scarborough Shoal, and has expanded around 3200 acres of land through artificial island construction. Several of these islands have been equipped with infrastructures to sustain life and support military operations.¹⁴⁶ As such, this de-facto control of most of the South China Sea allows Chinese fishermen, coast guards, and other military assets to operate from and deny the access of other claimant states. Indeed, as concurred by

¹⁴⁵ “China Island Tracker”. *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*. Undated. <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/>

¹⁴⁶ For more information on the specifics of the Islands and its structures, see Winston, Rachel and Sachideva, Ishika. *Raging Waters in the South China Sea: What the Battle for Supremacy Means for Southeast Asia*. Lizard Publishing. 101-106.

Emmerson, the Chinese key strategy in the South China Sea is centered upon control.¹⁴⁷ Emmerson argues that through control of the sea, China could then institutionalize its maritime primacy and inundate any potential challenges.¹⁴⁸ Viewed this way, Chinese behavior in the South China Sea mainly elicits and strengthens its control of the South China Sea. As such, more assertive actions could and would transpire on such a basis.

Conversely, in the East China Sea, the Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands are in de facto control of the Japanese, while territorial demarcations through the median line or from the extension of the continental shelf are still hotly disputed. In this sense, China does not necessarily possess the level of control as it does in the South China Sea. Thus, by examining China's East China Sea strategy as analyzed by Patalona,¹⁴⁹ the Chinese lack of control due to strong Japanese responses meant that it could only stick to the first phase of normalizing its presence and probe for changes.

¹⁴⁷ Emmerson discussed Chinese tactics of annexation, augmentation, construction, militarization, intimidation, ambiguity, co-optation, and prolongation to achieve the strategic goal of control in the South China Sea. For more information, see Emmerson, Donald K. *The Deer and the Dragon: Southeast Asia and China in the 21st Century*. Brookings International Press. 2020. 134-157

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 157

¹⁴⁹ Patalona conceptualised China's strategy in the Senkakus in 3 phases. The first phase entails normalising Chinese presence, the second involves taking control by exercising its sovereign law enforcement rights in the area, and lastly, phase 3 involves the actual taking over of the islands by China. For more information, see Patalona, Alessio. "What is China's Strategy in the Senkaku Islands?". *War on the Rocks*. September 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/09/what-is-chinas-strategy-in-the-senkaku-islands/>

In any case, as it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve further, more rigorous examinations must be undertaken to further shed light on these deductions. In this sense, future studies can utilize the observations and deductions made here to thoroughly investigate the distinction in approaches for Chinese modifying behavior in the South and the East China Sea. More importantly, the two distinctive modifying behavior demonstrated by China presents an unassailable case that the study of Chinese revisionism/ status quo must be done through an issue/ domain-specific approach.

Chapter VII: Conclusion

The rise of China has tremendous implications globally, which international relations scholars have conducted a myriad of studies to analyze its action to predict its future tendencies. Yet, despite that, debates surrounding China as a status quo or revisionist power remain inconclusive. Endorsing that China is a status quo state, scholars like Johnston and Wilson have often pointed out the compatibility and congruency of Chinese behaviors within the current order(s). The justification is that the order that has abetted China's rise would be viewed as legitimate and essential by China. This, in turn, meant that China has value in maintaining and aligning its values with the orders and thus is unlikely to turn on the order that it has largely benefitted from. On the other hand, scholars attributing China as revisionist has pointed out the incompatibility of China's rise with the current international order led by the US as China is deemed to be hegemony seeking. Scholars advocating this strand of thought argue that a status quo China, once fully developed and in possession of enough capacity, would display its true revisionist intentions and pursue its interpretation of order. Thus, to scholars like Pillsbury, even if China appears to be acting like a status quo state concurrently, it is inherently a closet revisionist state.

Beneath this theoretical fog lies a fundamental issue: the differing definitional conception of 'status quo' and 'revisionism'. While scholars typically regard revisionism as a rejection of international order, this

simplistic definitional understanding, without consideration of the intensity of 'rejection' nor its nuanced meaning, runs the risk of an overly reductionistic assessment. Hence, without a systematic and proper working definition, analysis of Chinese revisionism and status quo tendencies is erroneous and possibly fallacious. To be sure, this is not to say that there existed no endeavors to conceptualize these murky definitions. Efforts to conceptualize and properly define 'status quo' and 'revisionism' through the Balance of Power theory, Power Transition Theory, and other eclectic approaches were noted and discussed in the paper. Nevertheless, despite the best efforts of these approaches, there is still no certainty of a singular definition upon which scholars can collectively agree on. Thus, under such shaky theoretical foundations, efforts by International Relations scholars to charge China as categorically revisionist or status quo appear offhanded and inconsistent. Against this backdrop, this brings forth the central puzzles of the paper: If China is neither perfectly status quo nor revisionist, what epitomizes China's behavior then? By extension, how can the uncharted gap that lies between status quo and revisionism be better conceptualized and understood?

To untangle this theoretical puzzle, the paper proposes the argument that China is agnostic and is functioning as an active modifier of the current liberal international order. Beneath this modifying process lies 3 phases - the Resistance phase, the Contestation phase, and the Unravelling phase. These

phases diverge based on its differing levels and intensity of modification as exemplified through the varying levels of international conduct and intensity in its contestation for strategic space globally. In short, the resistance phase involves relatively peaceful co-existence globally and outright compliance with international law; the contestation phase suggests a fluctuating low-level intensity violation of international law and minor contending of global strategic space; the unravelling phase reflects a desire to demand and compete for more strategic space by unravelling the current order and violation of international laws. Within the different phases is the disparate classification of actions – resist, oppose, and disrupt – that best encompass the prime action of its corresponding level of modification. Taken this way, as status quo and revisionism are regarded as utopian and dystopian points respectively along a continuum, the phases will denote how close or far its net behavior is to the extreme points. More importantly, Chinese actions could be approximated and better comprehended through this framework.

The framework is then applied to 2 case studies – the South China Sea and the East China Sea – where China has regarded them as its unofficial ‘core interests’. As China has been trying to downplay the rhetoric of ‘China Threat’, a fascinating blend of the range of modifying behavior would be elucidated as China balances between pursuing assertive actions to uphold its claims and protect its ‘core interests’ while mellowing and blunting its

assertiveness to appear less of a threat. To this end, an extensive database was created to capture such fluctuations and actions in the two stipulated domains. The data is then coded with appropriate measures to accurately situate Chinese modifying behavior amongst the 3 different phases. The central tendency of the data is then calculated to ascertain the extent of China's modification in both arenas.

In short, it was found that China is currently in the contestation phase in the East China Sea, while it functions as an unraveller in the South China Sea. In the latter case, China has largely escalated tensions and utilized force of increasing lethality to protect its interests and solidify its claims, subjugating international law in the process. Chinese usage of force in the South China Sea since early 2011, borne of more proactivity and assertiveness than before, was intended to deny others entry and/ or to compel others to leave its 'sovereign water'. Such forceful posture was coupled with its rejection of multilateral attempts to solve the issue and its conduct of *fait accompli* through artificial island construction. Thus, in doing so, China has crafted a new normal and changed the status of the South China Sea from a *de facto* disputed site to a *de jure* Chinese sovereignty. This exemplifies the unravelling nature of China.

Such observations were at variance with the East China Sea, where China's level of modification is currently in the Contestation phase. In contrast to the Chinese assertive stance in claiming its sovereignty in the sea,

China has often resorted to mere probes at sovereignty through air and sea incursions into the disputed territories. While China appears to have established its presence and is currently instituting changes in favor of itself in the South China Sea, the East China Sea sees China trying to normalize its presence and possibly instigate and probe the plausibility of change – challenging Japanese de-facto control of the islands. Yet, when such probes threaten to escalate into a broader conflict, reconciliatory diplomacy ensued. Hence, with China only implicitly violating international law through its incursions into disputed territories, China is regarded as at an inflection point on whether to escalate its assertiveness or pursue a more tamed and nuanced diplomatic approach in dealing with the issues in the East China Sea. Hence, China’s modifying behavior reflects the Contestation phase.

1. Implications

Bearing these findings and the formulation of a framework, this paper presents 2 theoretical and 1 practical contribution. Firstly, this paper contributed theoretically by offering a new framework to correct the oversimplistic dichotomy of status quo and revisionism. Through the introduction of a modifying process, along with its phases, the missing and unexplored theoretical space between status quo and revisionism is rationalized and filled up. This results in the creation of a new multi-layered theoretical dimension to better understand rising powers which could also

augment existing theories such as the Power transition Theory, while skirting past the definitional fog that exists between revisionism and status quo. Essentially, by filling up this literature gap, scholars can transcend beyond the simplistic labeling of revisionism and status quo into a more substantive analysis of state behavior and modification. Doing so would undoubtedly produce better scholarly work in discerning the status of a rising power and crafting appropriate responses to that matter.

Secondly, through this domain-specific analysis of Chinese behaviors in 2 arenas, Chinese modifications are found to be not consistent across domains as variances can be determined. This suggests that China when it comes to different issue areas with different objectives and policy goals, will undoubtedly display varying degrees of modification and actions. In this regard, this dynamic nature exercised by China illuminates the possibility that more issue and domain-specific studies should be conducted. This is because the totality of all studies involving China on all domains and issues could be combined to form a complete and holistic imagery of Chinese net modification. Taken this way, there is potentiality in using this framework to produce a comprehensive understanding of China, which would further drive discussions on the implications of China. In this sense, this paper has created a new frontier in how studies of China or any rising state should be approached to better comprehend and make sense of its rise.

Lastly, this paper produced a practical implication. As the Biden administration had doubled down on its competitive stance against China, a tight contestation across multiple domains has emerged between the US and China. However, as suggested by scholars from both the Chinese and American sides,¹⁵⁰ not all domains have to be competitive or confrontational as there are avenues for cooperation. In this sense, given that the adoption of this new framework would better categorize the behavior displayed by China, policymakers would have a more comprehensive and accurate analysis of Chinese modifications across multiple domains and issues. This would allow policymakers to better craft issue/ domain/ arena specific policies based upon varying Chinese modifications and look for potentiality for cooperation in amiable domains, before functionally expanding relations. Certainly, by basing policy decisions through a systematic analytical method rather than a mere stipulation of China as 'revisionist' as what the Trump administration has done,¹⁵¹ many potential fault lines that exist between the US and China can be circumvented. As such, examining and comprehending

¹⁵⁰ Yan Xuetong, along with Stephen Hadley and Paula Dobriansky all agreed on issue specific approaches in dealing with the ongoing US-China contestation. For Yan's work, see Xuetong, Yan. "Becoming Strong: The New Chinese Foreign Policy." *Foreign Aff.* 100 (2021): 40. For Hadley & Dobriansky piece, see Hadley, J.S, & Dobriansky, J.P. "Navigating the Growing Russia-China Strategic Alignment". *Atlantic Council*. June 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/SIM-Russia-China-Relationship-FINAL-PDF-1.pdf>

¹⁵¹ In the Trump administration's version of the US National Security Strategy, China and Russia were explicitly named as revisionist powers. See "National Security Strategy of the United States of America". *The White House*. December 2017. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

China through the lens of this framework could potentially culminate in a healthier competition between US and China.

2. Future Studies

As mentioned in the previous section, as this paper attempts to apply the framework to discern Chinese modifying behavior in both the South and the East China Sea, it is beyond the scope of this study to examine the points of divergence within and across the case studies. In other words, this paper acknowledges that more investigative work must be conducted to analyze the driving factors of Chinese modification within a domain/ arena. At the same time, although this paper has briefly suggested the plausibility of the 'level of control' in the seas as a factor for why China's differing modifications in both seas, such deductions are certainly preliminary and in need of further interrogation and examination. These are possible avenues that future studies can tap into to better understand Chinese modifications in the South and the East China Sea.

Lastly, moving beyond the two arenas, future studies can also continue in applying this analytical framework to analyze China or other rising states' actions and behavior in different domains and issues. As more studies of this sort are conducted, China will be examined from multiple angles and dimensions. In turn, a more wholesome and holistic view of China's actions and level of modification will emerge.

Such rigorous endeavors, though intellectually demanding, would produce an immensely fruitful understanding of China. Perhaps only then will the veil of Chinese revisionist/ status quo tendencies be fully shedded, revealing the truest and purest extent of modification by China on the current order. Till then can the world truly comprehends how intensive or radically will the sleeping giant shake the world.

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국문 요약

Abstract in Korean

중국은 수정주의 국가인가, 현상유지 국가인가? 이는 중국의 부상과 그 영향을 연구하는 국제관계학자들을 지속적으로 괴롭혀온 질문이다. 그러나 중국의 행동 양상을 분석하려는 수년간의 노력에도 불구하고 중국이 수정주의 국가인지, 현상유지 국가인지에 대해서는 여전히 학계가 나뉘져 있는 것이 사실이다. 결정적으로, 이 질문에 내포된 더 근본적인 문제는 다음과 같다. ‘수정주의’와 ‘현상유지’는 어떻게 규정할 수 있는가?

그동안의 연구는 사용되는 용어를 명확히 하고 더욱 정확한 정의를 내리기 위한 노력을 이어왔다. 이러한 노력은 문제의 정도나 내포된 뉘앙스를 무시한 채 과도하게 단순하거나 환원주의적(reductionist)인 정의들을 낳게 되었다. 이처럼 ‘수정주의’와 ‘현상유지’에 대한 적절한 통각(統覺) 없이 중국을 수정주의 또는 현상유지 국가로 분류하는 것은 왜곡되거나 일관성이 없는 것으로 보일 것이다. 그렇기에 본 논문은 다음 사안을 중점으로 다루고자 한다. 만약 중국이 현상유지 국가도, 수정주의 국가도 아니라면 중국의 행동은 어떻게 이해될 수 있는가? 나아가, 현상유지와 수정주의 사이의 정의되지 않은 이론적 간극은 어떻게 개념화하고 이해할 수 있는가?

이러한 이론적 궁극증을 해결하기 위해 본 논문은 중국의 불가지론적 특성을 이해하기 위한 새로운 틀(framework)을 제시하고자 한다. 현상유지와 수정주의가 각각 연속체 내 유토피아와 디스토피아의 양극을 차지한다는 것을 전제로 한다면 중국이 수정주의 국가인지, 현상유지 국가인지에 대한 질문은 그 정도에 대한 것으로 변모하게 될 것이다.

중국의 행동은 고정적이지도 일관되지도 않으며 여러 논쟁과 영역에서 다른 양상을 보이기 때문에 단순히 현상유지 또는 수정주의 국가로 정의할 수 없다. 그렇기에 본 논문은 중국이 현상유지 국가도 수정주의 국가도 아닌 일종의 ‘조정의 단계’를 겪고 있다고 주장한다. 중국은 ‘적극적 현상변경 국가(Active)’로서 다음 세 가지의 역할 - 저항자(Resister),

경합자(Contester), 뒤흔드는자(Unraveller) - 로 기능 및 행동하여 국제질서를 변경하고자 한다. 각 역할 또는 단계는 특정 전략적 공간 내 분쟁의 정도에 의해 결정되며 이는 각 영역 및 분쟁지역에서 중국이 국제법을 대하는 자세와도 맞닿아 있다. 다시 말해, 중국의 전략적 공간 내 분쟁 및 취하는 조치의 적법성에 대한 분석, 특정 영역에서의 행동과 관련된 정도를 분석하여 특정 영역에서 중국이 조정하고자 하는 단계 - 판별, 질의 및 타개 - 를 읽어내고 이해하고자 한다.

본 논문은 해당 틀(framework)을 사용하여 안보영역 내 분쟁지역이며 중국이 비공식적으로 ‘핵심 관심지역’으로 선정한 남중국해와 동중국해의 조정 단계를 분석 및 평가했다. 지정된 두 지역에 대한 변동사항과 조치를 파악하기 위해 광범위한 데이터베이스를 생성했으며 중국의 조정 단계를 올바르게 지정하기 위한 부호화 단계를 거쳤다. 결론적으로, 본 논문은 중국이 동중국해에서는 경합자로서, 남중국해에서는 뒤흔드는자로서 그 역할을 수행한다고 주장한다.

핵심어: 수정주의 (revisionism), 현상유지 (status quo), 중국의 부상, 국제관계이론, 남중국해, 동중국해, 적극적 현상변경 국가(Active Modifier)

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