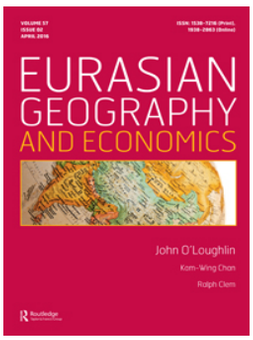

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Eurasian Geography and Economics

ISSN: 1538-7216 (Print) 1938-2863 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rege20

Sovereignty regimes in the South China Sea: assessing contemporary Sino-US relations

Steve Rolf & John Agnew

To cite this article: Steve Rolf & John Agnew (2016) Sovereignty regimes in the South China Sea: assessing contemporary Sino-US relations, Eurasian Geography and Economics, 57:2, 249-273, DOI: 10.1080/15387216.2016.1234403

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2016.1234403

Published online: 23 Sep 2016.

EURASIAN GEOGRAPHY AND ECONOMICS, 2016
VOL. 57, NO. 2, 249–273
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2016.1234403

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Sovereignty regimes in the South China Sea: assessing contemporary Sino-US relations

Steve Rolf[a] and John Agnew[b]

[a]Politics and International Studies (SPAIS), Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, School of Sociology, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK; [b]Department of Geography, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

This article outlines how a materialist understanding of foreign policy predicated on contrasting sovereignty regimes might be applied to current conflicts between China and the United States and its allies in the South China Sea. A stark divergence between liberal and realist commentary, policy prescriptions, and policy practices has emerged in both China and the United States. We provide a critical overview of the dispute before arguing that these disparities are, at root, symptoms of a material contradiction between the benefits and risks of economic interdependence and territorial expansionism. These symptoms are consequently founded upon a real-world paradox, refracted through fundamentally different modalities of practicing state sovereignty, and will ultimately be resolved politically. An intensification of interstate rivalry is fast becoming the outcome of a period of unprecedented economic interconnectedness, to which these variegated sovereignty regimes are contributing.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 8 March 2016
Accepted 29 August 2016

KEYWORDS
South China Sea; Sino-US; US-Sino; IR/global political economy; sovereignty regimes; globalization

Introduction

On 12 July 2016, an arbitral tribunal at the Permanent Court of Arbitration, convened under Annex VII of the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea, delivered a shock decision: a legally binding judgment invalidating China's claimed "historical rights" over the bulk of the South China Sea (SCS). The SCS was confirmed to be largely international waters – open to the right of the U.S. Navy (and other actors) to carry out military patrols and surveillance flights. This decision also guarantees the legal rights of smaller regional U.S. allies such as the Philippines and Vietnam to exploit the hydrocarbon and fish stocks located around their seaboards.

This article takes stock of recent geopolitical developments in the SCS as a means of reflecting upon Sino-US relations under the conceptual rubric of differentiated

CONTACT Steve Rolf steve.rolf@bristol.ac.uk

"sovereignty regimes" (Agnew 2009). China's economic expansion has increased the capacity and desire of the Chinese state to expand its authority in its marine backyard. Wishing to maintain its current system of maritime governance and broader political authority in the Asia-Pacific, the United States is being steadily drawn into dispute with China. The United States engages with China both directly as a unilateral actor and indirectly through its dense institutional and military linkages with virtually all other littoral states in the region, which share varying degrees of concern with the geopolitical impact of China's rise. Developments in the SCS thus appear to have markedly increased the possibility of some kind of conflict between China and its neighbors, or even with the United States directly. The SCS, meanwhile, forms just one example of many regional flashpoints around China's maritime borders including the East China Sea, the Yellow Sea, and – further afield – the Indian Ocean, all of which have seen intensifications of geopolitical rivalries with U.S.-aligned states over the past decade.

Such a potentially dangerous resurgence of conflict between states representing the two largest capitalist economies – at a time of global economic and political turbulence – warrants the sustained attention of critical theorists. Most commentators (in both the United States and China) are, however, presently producing what Robert Cox (1981) might term "problem-solving" theory; advice to state managers on how best to deal with "particular sources of trouble" rather than critical theory concerned with framing issues in their broader political economic context (128).[1] In the English-speaking world, the result is a reproduction of analysis of liberal and realist tropes on Great Power conflicts. In China, similarly, such a schism between expansionary and conciliatory analysis and prescription has also emerged.

To explore the genesis and implications of such bipolarity, this article takes an in-depth look at territorial contestation in the SCS. We begin by surveying the major facts of the dispute. Next, we outline how these contrasting perspectives – in both academic and policy-making circles in China and the West – have informed both commentary and policy. We root this in a real-world contradiction between the benefits of economic integration and the continuing salience of territoriality for nation states, especially under fast-changing technological conditions of territorial practices (explored below) (Bunnell et al. 2012; Grydehøj 2015).

Finally, we demonstrate the explanatory value of a "sovereignty regimes" perspective, prior to a focus on geopolitical strategies and engagements – and thus to typical liberal and realist framings of the conflict. The concept of sovereignty regimes aims to capture, most fundamentally, the inadequacy of methodologically nationalist conceptions of the territoriality of sovereign power. Without writing off states as arguably the primary political agents of contemporary world order, it is equally clear that borders are porous, capitalist production relations are global, and analysis predicated upon the fiction of "absolute popular sovereignty vested in a national/territorial political community rigidly marked off from all others" is largely untenable (Agnew 2009, 98). Instead, we insist upon the contextualization of particular instantiations of geopolitical competition in the broader framework

of contrasting forms of state, class and political fractions, as well as political interdependencies within the global system. This broadened optic calls into question the simplicity of problem-solving theories proposed by those liberal and realist commentators close to the dispute.

Shifting patterns of Sino-US relations

For two decades after 1989, U.S. global leadership experienced a somewhat unexpected revival. Although this period proved unstable, it has now become clear that the United States more or less successfully consolidated large parts of the world under its dollar hegemony following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Gowan 2010; Panitch and Gindin 2012), rendering anticipations of the post-cold war military multi-polarity premature in the process. The contemporary significance of China's rise is, to a large extent, that it represents the first major power to emerge exterior to Washington's hub and spokes system of global imperial alliances since the breakup of the U.S.S.R. This fact has produced a swell of anxiety among realist international relations (IR) theorists (e.g. Mearsheimer 2006).

The challenge of the ascendancy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) comes, moreover, at a moment of generalized crisis for U.S. global leadership. While the Great Recession reduced the United States' projected GDP growth by $1 trillion by the end of 2012, China's own GDP doubled from just over $5 trillion to $10.3 trillion from 2009 to 2014. Whereas prior "contender states" such as Japan and the Federal German Republic became deeply integrated into the United States' sphere of influence in the postwar decades, attempts to subsume China under the institutional architecture of the United States' globalist sovereignty regime have been realized highly unevenly (Van der Pijl 2012). Elements of the Chinese state, such as the foreign affairs and finance ministries, have become significantly responsive to international engagement, but the Communist Party maintains significant geopolitical autonomy – to which the country's increasing economic weight appears to be contributing rather than eroding.

The gravity with which the United States regards China's rise is evidenced by Obama's Asian pivot, originally made a month before the outbreak of the Arab spring in November 2011. In the intervening period, the Middle East and North African (MENA) region has suffered increasingly generalized disorder, while the first major challenge to the European Union–NATO axis was led by Putin's territorial grab in eastern Ukraine in February 2014. Both represent considerable challenges to U.S. strategy in MENA and East Central Europe – regions long regarded as strategic priorities. A laissez-faire approach in both of those cases, however, appears to be inversely correlated with a continual build-up of military forces in East Asia. Despite complaints regarding the pace of the switch (e.g. Parameswaran 2016), the pivot has delivered $9 billion in additional funding for the U.S. Pacific Command and a 22,000-troop increase in American troops stationed in East Asia (to a total of 266,000; Olson 2015), alongside significant progress on the Trans-Pacific

Partnership (TPP) designed to purposively exclude China.[2] There is little pretense now that the prime target of the pivot is not what U.S. interests regard as a dangerously expansionist Middle Kingdom.

In parallel with the US military and multilateral shift has emerged a powerfully centralized new Chinese leadership under Xi Jinping, prepared to significantly strengthen the People's Liberation Army (PLA) while projecting military power outside of Chinese territory (Economist 2016a). As the global financial system collapsed in 2008 and 2009, the PRC leadership appears to have sensed an opportunity to finally dispense with Deng's imperative to "hide your strength, bide your time," opting instead for an assertive foreign policy, now deepened under Xi's increasingly centralized reign. While economic and political multi-polarity have long been features of the post-Cold War international order, the SCS – referred to by Robert Kaplan (2014) as "Asia's Cauldron," represents one major arena of contemporary world order in which military multi-polarity and great power rivalry seem to be re-emerging most strongly.

The SCS and Chinese expansionism

The SCS has for centuries been disputed by both rival regional and colonial powers. Rich in fishing stocks and believed to be host to significant quantities of hydrocarbons, the SCS is now (perhaps most importantly) a critical artery of global trade, carrying an estimated $5 trillion of goods annually. Surrounded by newly industrialized littoral states that have mostly very recently completed their basic processes of "internal" development in terms of political economic stabilization and state capacity building, the ocean is fast becoming a space of contestation between multiple sovereign claimants, drawing in China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Brunei, as well as, more widely, Japan, South Korea, India, and the United States. Although all nine littoral states in the SCS have made competing claims to parts of the waters and its features, it is bilateral disputes between smaller claimants (especially Vietnam and the Philippines) and an expansionary China that forms the most tense contests.

Two major causes lie behind today's maritime border disputes. The first is the coming into effect of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1994, which vastly increased the salience of territorial control over previously insignificant maritime features. Second is China's meteoric economic rise, alongside a transition toward an increasingly activist foreign policy (Breslin 2010).

UNCLOS, produced in 1982 and ratified by 168 states including China and its southeast Asian neighbors (Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore) though not by the United States, became operative as international law in 1994. The law grants states territorial waters of 12 nautical miles and exclusive economic zones (EEZs; granting states unique rights to resource extraction, fishing etc.) of 200 miles from the coast of any landmass both permanently above water and capable of sustaining human habitation (United Nations 1982). UNCLOS

greatly incentivized states to secure their holdings of previously insignificant territorial features. As Fravel (2014, 542) writes:

> Ironically, a regime designed to manage the oceans created new disputes that are similar to those over territory because they involve areas where competing states can claim exclusive rights. UNCLOS increased the value of controlling islands by linking them with the ability to claim broader maritime rights.

Western states were the main protagonists of this territorial drive. Six former colonial powers (United States, France, Australia, Russia, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand) claimed EEZs totaling 54 million square kilometers under UNCLOS, three-quarters of which were based on colonial vestiges separate from their home territories (for instance, the British Virgin and Cayman islands, and French Polynesia). In contrast, the Chinese claims to EEZs totals under 3 m km^2 – less than half that of New Zealand's (Nolan 2013).

Like all international law, UNCLOS remains reliant on national states for its enforcement, opening a space for *realpolitik* in interpretation and practice. This leaves weak states vulnerable to organized transgressions of their sovereignty by other states claiming to be upholding international law. In December 2008, UN Security Council Resolution 1851 granted UN member states the right to tackle "vessels, arms and other related equipment used in the commission of piracy and armed robbery off the coast of Somalia," while reaffirming "respect for the sovereignty territorial integrity, political independence, and unity of Somalia" (cited in Gerstenberger 2013, 358). It is perhaps more than a coincidence of history that sustained Chinese maritime expansion began in 2009, so shortly after this precedent was set – and doubly revealing that China itself sent warships to Somalia to tackle pirates as its first overseas naval engagement in 600 years (Anderlini 2016). China took a lead in violating Somali maritime sovereignty at the very moment it began projecting its own.

Jakobson and Medcalf (2015) read China's claims to the SCS as the outcome of two drives. The first, historical, is a desire to overcome China's "century of [imperialist] humiliation" by asserting control over its once source of weakness in the face of Western imperialism – a lack of naval power. Economic dynamism has gone hand in hand with expansion of the military, itself a major bastion of political power inside the Chinese Communist Party. Mitigating this ambition to exert total control over its seaboards is a sharp pragmatism regarding the current military balance of forces, in which U.S. hegemony in the Asia-Pacific is likely to remain dominant for the forseeable future – as the only large power plausibly capable of enforcing global freedom of navigation and protecting the maritime arteries of world trade from piracy. Therefore, "China's *realistic* strategic maritime objective [emphasis added]," they argue, "is to ensure that it is not denied access to its near seas and what it perceives as its sovereign maritime rights" (2015).

While it is critical to analyze the specificities of the SCS dispute rather than reduce it to one element in a broader Chinese "grand strategy," a move toward territorially expansionist policy by elements of the Chinese state in the SCS does have

parallels in other aspects of contemporary Chinese foreign policy. Breslin (2010, 196) sees "newly assertive Chinese positions" on issues from external violations of sovereignty and territorial claims to power equity in international organizations; a border dispute with India persists while the opening of China's first overseas naval base in Djibouti was agreed in late 2015. In Southeast Asia alone, the SCS marks only one of three significant maritime flashpoints between the United States and its allied states and China. In the East China Sea, historic and recently re-inflamed Sino-Japanese rivalry has come to a head over the Senkaku/Diayou islands.[3] The second, less significant dispute, is found in the Yellow Sea between China and South Korea.[4] Readers should note, then, that although the SCS represents perhaps the most substantial area of conflict activated by China's rise, it should be understood as part of a wider pattern of regional tensions.

U-shaped line

Chinese claims to the SCS rest upon a map published by the Nationalist Guomindang Government in 1948 – the year before its final exile to Taiwan – which showed a line, U-shaped, extending over 1400 miles southward from the southern Chinese coast and demarcating China's claimed maritime territory. Figure 1 demonstrates its scope. Despite falling out of usage during the Mao period, the U-shaped line has since been reincarnated as a line consisting of 9, 11, and most recently, 10 "dashes" (Hayton 2014). Its contemporary resurrection began with its inclusion on maps submitted to a UN tribunal in 2009 following Malaysian and Vietnamese attempts to extend the territorial reach of their coastal shelves. It has since become more widely circulated in Chinese public discourse and is now legally mandated to be included on all published maps (by state and non-state organizations) as well as citizens' passports. It is China's U-shaped line that now lies behind conflictual sovereignty claims in the SCS.

The intended status of the U-shaped line is entirely ambiguous, more so since a tribunal convened under UNCLOS dismissed its legal validity in July 2016 (see below for more). It remains both legally obtuse (it does not explicitly claim the territory as Chinese under any version of international law) and cartographically non-contiguous (leaving gaps of several hundred miles where territorial claims are unmarked). Hayton (2014, 295), drawing on Callahan (2009), situates the source of the claim to a U-shaped line in China's "confused transition from empire to republic," a process by which contemporary policy-makers are bound by legacy of the semi-borderless tributary system and China's incomplete incorporation into the states system. An historical perspective alone, however, perhaps fails to register how this contemporary bout of territorial expansion is being employed as part of a nationalist state project within a broader Westphalian logic.

While the Chinese state is yet to clarify the intention behind its publication, the U-shaped line is perhaps best understood as a discursive redeployment of

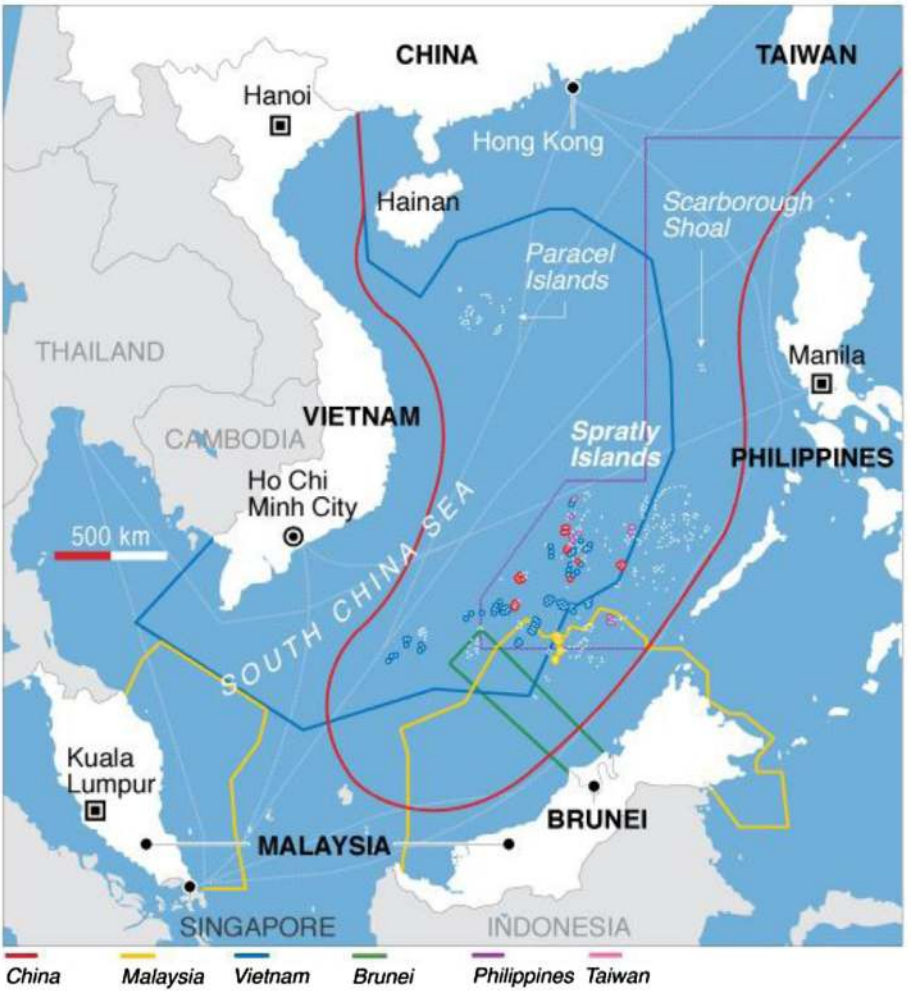

Figure 1. Disputed claims in the South China Sea. Source: Voice of America (2012).

nationalist historical residue, purposively ambiguous in its intended effect, probing of international reactions to maritime expansionism. But – following Duara (1995, 65) – it may also represent a more profound intention to "transform a society with multiple representations of political community into a single social totality… [through] the hardening of social and cultural boundaries around a particular configuration of self in relation to an Other". Crucially, "historical and cultural resources are mobilized in [such a] transformation" in order to manufacture a sense of a linear historical process – the selective resurrection of fragments of a Chinese national consciousness formed during the Nationalist Guomindang Government's nation-building efforts (65).

And one could fruitfully source this political project in the peculiarly potent ethnic component of nationalist Chinese discourse formed in the late nineteenth-century ferment of colonial encroachment, anti-imperialism, and economic

stagnation – traces of which are still evident in, for instance, the contemporary Chinese use of *minzu* as a racially infused importation of the word *nation* (Cooper 2015). There is much to be said for an argument that plays on the significance of the "remembered history" (Zhao 2015) of China's imperial past updated through the socialist lens of recent history, particularly its serial humiliations (Callahan 2015), to reclaim China's place in the world and popular legitimation of the regime at home in China (one of the key objectives of the current leadership; Johnson 2015). But even this more nuanced approach misses the extent to which in Beijing it has been the navy and elements in the Communist party supportive of it that have been opportunistically using the disputes to increase their say (and budgets) within the regime (Khong 2013). The U-shaped line, then, with its intellectual and geographical raw material inextricably rooted in China's "century of humiliation," forms one element in a revival of Han ethno-nationalism as a contemporary state hegemonic project (Minzner 2015). We now turn to the particularities of the dispute its resurrection has helped to bring about.

Inside the cauldron

The U-shaped line incorporates three island chains subjected to significant territorial dispute since 2009: the Paracel Islands, Scarborough Shoal, and the Spratly Islands.

The Paracels – a group of 130 coral reefs and atolls – lie slightly over 400 km from the coast of Hainan Island, China's most southerly province, and have been under the effective control of the PRC since their initial occupation by Chinese naval forces in the 1974. Sansha, a small dwelling of 1500 inhabitants on Woody Island, was upgraded a prefecture-level city by the PRC in 2012 – an administrative status normally granted to cities with over 250,000 urban residents – demarcating it as a locus of governance for the entirety of the U-shaped line (French 2015). This developed in response to a 2012 law ratified by the Vietnamese government claiming Vietnamese sovereignty over the Paracels (as well as the Spratlys), which failed to enforce effective Vietnamese control over the islands. In January 2016, Triton Island was the subject of the second Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP) launched by the U.S. navy (see Subi Reef, below). Perhaps in response, eight anti-aircraft missiles were stationed on nearby Woody Island in February 2016 – the first weaponry to be permanently situated on a disputed SCS island.

Scarborough Shoal, which sits slightly less than 200 km from Philippines' Subic Bay (and thus within its EEZ), was seized by China in 2012. Previously unoccupied, it has since been permanently occupied by Chinese naval forces, who have controlled access and policed fishing rights, proving an acute source of grievance for the government of the Philippines.

The Spratly Islands are the largest of the disputed island groups, consisting of over 750 maritime features. The Spratlys also form the most hotly contested part of the SCS, as China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam all occupy and

effectively administer multiple islands and features in the group, each controlling a military landing strip. Since late 2014, China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has been responsible for a round of artificial island construction, whereby sand dredged from ocean floors is pumped onto reefs, transforming low-tide elevations into permanent islands. The result is large masses of sand capable of hosting military constructions – airstrips, gun turrets, landing pads, communications towers, docks, and naval bases. Three prominent maritime features highlight the major disagreements over the Spratly islands:

- *Subi Reef:* October 2015 witnessed a U.S. destroyer warship conduct a Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP) aimed at negating Chinese sovereignty claims by sailing within 12 nautical miles of the reef. Receiving the support of the Pentagon, the State Department, and the White House, the advent of FONOPs demonstrates coherence within the major branches of the U.S. government responsible for foreign policy around an assertive policy of containment.
- *Fiery Cross reef* is the site of China's first completed air-landing strip on the disputed island chain. China landed a civilian aircraft on the reef on 2 January 2016, to the consternation of the Vietnamese navy. According to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), "in its natural state, Fiery Cross is submerged at high tide, with the exception of two rocks." However in 2014, even before land reclamation activities, Fiery Cross facilities included a garrison housing up to 200 troops. Reclamation work expanded the size of the reef from 0.08 km^2 in August 2014 to 0.96 km^2 in March 2015 (AMTI (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative) 2016a). The third and most recent U.S. FONOP was conducted at Fiery Cross reef in May 2016.
- *Mischief Reef,* north of the Philippines, is the site of another Chinese airstrip. This project began shortly after Xi Jinping's September 2015 visit to the United States and was completed in early 2016. China claimed Mischief Reef in 1994, following the withdrawal of the U.S. Navy from the nearby Philippines in 1991. It is also the site of a standoff around the Sierra Madre, the rusting hull of a Filipino warship run aground on the Second Thomas Shoal in 1999 to reinforce Philippine claims in the region (Himmelman 2013). The vessel remains permanent home to eight troops tasked with monitoring Chinese naval movements and providing a bulwark against territorial expansion in the immediate area.

These cases provide only a flavor of recent developments. Since 2014, China's program of artificial island construction in the Spratly Islands and a gradual military build-up across the three island chains has become the greatest source of tension in the SCS.[5] Further, island building highlights the persistence of territorial concerns of national states into the twenty-first century, as well as and how such concerns are, in turn, being remolded by the advancing scientific and industrial

capacities of states. Comaroff (2014, 138) links contemporary developments specifically to the emergence of trading in large volumes of sand:

> With the rise of sand trading, the nation-state has entered a dangerously fluid phase. With the coastal earthworks that are under way throughout Southeast Asia and the Middle East – a series of reclamations so large that they nearly encroach on sovereign borders – territory has acquired an unprecedented liquidity. The malleability of sand makes it a uniquely volatile substance. Its softness and scalability distinguish it from other modes of infrastructure.… In large quantities, it can be engineered into the most fundamental of all infrastructures: land itself.

As China is now demonstrating, however, trading in sand is unnecessary when the seabed supplies a plentiful supply of materials for dredging. States possessing such resources and technical capacities may bypass potentially tricky supply arrangements altogether, providing them with a comparative advantage against those – such as Singapore – subject to geopolitically motivated restrictions on sand imports by concerned neighbors. As technological capacities exceed legal norms, land reclamation, and the political and geopolitical contestations opening up around the rapidly developing capacity for states (and cities) to expand their territorial boundaries into the oceans are altering the terms upon which sovereignty is conceived and practiced.

Reactions

Both the U-shaped line and the sovereignty of islands – especially the artificial islands – are now significant areas of dispute. The line has become a subject to fierce public challenge from Vietnam, Philippines, and Malaysia, among others. The Philippines lodged a case with the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague in the summer of 2015 challenging Chinese claims to the island chain (including the U-shaped line) under UNCLOS. The UN judged itself capable of ruling on the issue in October 2015, delivering its verdict in July 2016. Most significantly, China's U-shaped line was ruled incompatible with UNCLOS and thus invalid under international law, delegitimizing China's claim to sovereignty over the sea. More broadly, the outcome guaranteed the legal right of the United States to conduct marine patrols without fear of encroaching on Chinese sovereignty, despite the protestations of the PRC government. The court holds no mechanism of enforcement, and China has long refused to abide by any judgment, apparently making de facto settlement the most likely outcome.

The Philippine case against Chinese maritime claims relied upon two injunctions contained within UNCLOS; that maritime features eligible for 200 mile EEZs must be (1) permanently above water, and (2) capable of sustaining human life. None of the features (claimed by China or others) in the Spratlys were deemed to be "islands" by the judgment, which designated the entire chain "rocks." Such maritime features are incompatible with claims of EEZs. Mischief Reef was judged to lie within the Philippines' EEZ despite its continuing occupation by China, and

it was also determined that the Chinese navy unlawfully restricted access to the Scarborough Shoal, also a rock. Land reclamation activities problematize precedent around how maritime features are treated by permitting the creation of both conditions by the nominal sovereigns themselves. But UNCLOS has confirmed the invalidity of any territorial claims made under such conditions. Though the tribunal was not within its remit to pass judgment directly on questions of sovereignty, this appears to implicitly leave China in the unwelcome position of unlawfully occupying maritime features in international waters.

The progressive militarization of the SCS is a disquieting outcome of rival maritime claims, and it is only likely to accelerate following the UNCLOS ruling. The Philippine Supreme Court has ruled to proceed with an Enhanced Defense Agreement with the United States in order to station troops in the country for the first time since 1991 (Wall Street Journal 2016). The agreement will witness the return of U.S. naval ships to Subic Bay in 2016 (25 years after the U.S. base's forcible closure supposedly marked the beginning of the Philippines' postcolonial era). This follows the opening of Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay to Japanese maritime vessels as of November 2015 and the muted return of U.S. weapons facilities to Da Nang Bay. Both states signed a joint strategic partnership in November 2015 aimed at bolstering political, military, and economic ties. At the same time, military budgets have increased across the region: from 2010 to 2014, the Philippines' budget increased by 35%, Vietnam's by 59.1%, and Malaysia's by 27.6%, mirroring a Chinese rise of over 50% in the same period. A naval arms race is underway with the competitive acquisition of warships, submarines, and aircraft carriers the main aim of increased budgets (Stashwick 2015). This has not gone unnoticed by global financial capital. In June, Japanese asset management house, Nomura launched an Asian Arms Race Basket linked to the stock performance of arms producers and heavy industrial firms in Japan, China, and elsewhere (Evans-Pritchard 2016).

It is clear that many littoral SCS states now view China as an imperialist actor to be balanced against with U.S. assistance. Vietnam provides a case in point. Much like China, the modern Vietnamese state has constituted itself upon and in opposition to its experience of imperial subjugation – though with two significant differences. The first is Vietnam's much more recent traumatic experiences of large-scale military land occupation. The second, flowing from this circumstance, is a degree of self-confidence and legitimacy assumed by a regime capable of humbling both the United States (the world's most powerful state at the height of its imperium) and, shortly afterwards in 1979, repelling a major land invasion by the Chinese. The 1986 *Doi Moi* market reforms went a long way toward repairing U.S.–Vietnamese relations through the courting of foreign direct investment (FDI) and a trade relationship, also replicated by Vietnam's transformation into a supplier of China's nascent export platform. The geopolitical space granted by strong economic relations with both the United States and China now permits Vietnam's strong stance on Chinese territorial infractions, informed by a political

consciousness which remains ingrained with the precarity of territoriality and the threat of China as a regional imperial aggressor.

Despite the hostility of nearly all states in the region to China's claims, both economics and politics are playing a role in assuaging hostilities between rival claimants. As a major economic partner of China, the Philippines finds itself in an unexpectedly difficult negotiating position following its U.N. tribunal victory, having been granted legal possession of features currently under Chinese de facto control. Newly installed President Duterte made eager overtures toward negotiations with China over the status of the maritime features, appointing former President Ramos as a special envoy to Beijing to do just this. More broadly, however, the Philippine government has been insistent on the validity of the ruling – rejecting a direct request made by the Chinese foreign minister to disregard the ruling. For Taiwan, meanwhile, geopolitical reasoning appears to be producing an alignment between Beijing and the newly installed Tsai administration (hitherto hostile to the PRC government), as UNCLOS stripped Itu Aba/Taiping – the prime Taiwanese outpost in the Spratly Islands – of its island status, negating Taiwanese and Chinese claims to its EEZ.

Contrasting theoretical lenses

How best to interpret this tense and complex situation? Most commentary on China's contemporary place in the world, particularly its seeming increased importance from economic and military perspectives, tends to reproduce mainstream Western views, either realist or liberal. Given that many Chinese scholars of foreign policy tend to reproduce the positions they learned at graduate school in the United States, it is not surprising that they proffer views and predictions that parallel those on the "other side" (Agnew 2010).

Conventional American and European narratives portray China as either, in realist terms, an emerging Great Power in potential hegemonic succession to the United States because of its burgeoning economy (and the "inevitable" military clout this will bring (e.g. Friedberg 2011) or, in liberal terms, as the linchpin of a new global financial–economic order to which China is now involuntarily bonded (e.g. Hung 2009). The first perspective portrays Chinese foreign policy as necessarily requiring an offensive response from a "stabilizing" United States, as recounted in a critical vein by Kirshner (2012). Similarly, Luttwak (2012) offers a psychoanalysis of state managers' "great-power autism," suggesting that their historical acclimatization to Chinese "solitary great power presence" in Asia (the past century and one-half notwithstanding) renders China's leadership incapable of sensitivity to its rivals' strategic constraints. The second, meanwhile, largely ignores territorial disputes as vestigial attributes of a dying order or regards them as easily resolvable within the confines of, for example, UNCLOS (e.g. Nye 2015).

Though both of these viewpoints are policy-oriented, they point in very distinctive directions for U.S. policy in East Asia. Their common obsession with U.S.

policy, however, reveals them as part of an overall "Sino-Americana" debate about U.S. policy (Anderson 2012) rather than as having connections to Sinology proper. Their premier theme, as Perry Anderson puts it, is: "China – what's in it for us?," not how best to understand the institutional sources and direction of Chinese foreign policy.

Classical geopolitical analysis, such as that of Kaplan (2012), acknowledges the historical basis to those disputes in colonial era claims now being challenged by a newly motivated and nationalist China. The focus is on how the physical geography of the region lends itself to competition for the potential natural resources that the ocean represents, with major population concentrations on all sides facing off in a zero-sum game. Of course, it is exactly the fungible character of the ocean that makes for a greater likelihood of compromises between competing parties (Fravel 2005). Kaplan himself acknowledges that conflict like this in the maritime sphere debars the possibility of it triggering a repetition of 1914 in Europe (Kaplan 2014). That this historical analogy does lurk ominously in the background of classical geopolitical analysis suggests how timeworn it has become.

Outside the academy

Such binary perspectives are also evident in government and policy-making circles, and on both sides of the Pacific. While the White House under Obama's administration has restrained the Pentagon and belligerent branches of the state in favor of a gradual imperial drawdown, more recently, prominent policy-makers and think tanks have begun to argue for a more aggressive U.S. engagement of China (McGregor 2015). The intensification of the Pentagon's SCS operations – alongside the three aforementioned FONOPs and two U.S. B52 bomber flyovers of disputed islands since October 2015 – is dovetailing with a proliferation of voices favoring military deepening in the SCS.

For instance, a major report published by the Council on Foreign Relations in April 2015 argued for a transition from the liberal policy of facilitating China's rise in the hope of encouraging its peaceful incorporation into the international order toward pursuit of an aggressive strategy of containment and intensified military engagements, particularly in the SCS (Blackwill and Tellis 2015). This injunction was repeated more recently in a major Department of Defense commissioned report, *Asia-Pacific Rebalance 2025*, which is evidently aimed at containing a perceived risk from a militarily "capable and more risk-tolerant China," arguing for the executive branch to redouble its efforts in pivoting toward the region and constructing a clear strategy for containment. It recommended the United States take a

> Predictable, credible, and robust forward presence capable of shaping the peacetime security environment and prevailing in the event of conflict. We recommend continuing to implement and resource key posture initiatives; increasing surface fleet presence; improving undersea capacity; deploying within the theater additional amphibious lift to allow enhanced theater-wide engagement and crisis response; continuing to diversify

> air operating locations; bolstering regional missile defenses; advancing and adapting the U.S. Army's Regionally Aligned Forces concept; addressing logistical challenges; stockpiling critical precision munitions; and enhancing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance cooperation with allies within the region. (CSIS (Center for Strategic and International Studies) 2016, ix)

More broadly, the Institute for China–America Studies (ICAS) provides a fortnightly bulletin cataloging the findings of policy-making reports on grand strategy toward China, which demonstrates a balance in favor of those making the case for intensifying U.S. strategy toward China in the guise of containment, defensive engagement, or low-level coercion, variously. Such policy prescriptions are furthered through think tanks' savvy provision of Internet-based tracking systems of Chinese artificial island building. The web now pulsates with eye-catching infographics that thrust the browser into the worldview of an anxious U.S. military strategist tasked with observing detailed satellite images of construction activities on, and the movements of warships around, the three island chains (see, for instance, the Asia Maritime Transparency Institute's "Island Tracker" and the Center for a New American Security's "FLASHPOINTS" series of maps; AMTI (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative) 2016b; CNAS (Center for a New American Security) 2016).

A similar cycle is evident in Chinese policy circles. Several commentators have interpreted from recent pronouncements that China is rebalancing from its aggressive stance toward cooperation with its littoral neighbors – including a resumption of long-delayed negotiations with ASEAN on developing a code of conduct for the SCS (Shirk 2014). China's commitment to the code was firmly reiterated in the aftermath of the UN ruling. In October of 2015, Li Keqiang, China's Prime Minister identified as liberal counterweight to Xi Jinping's authoritarianism, outlined a five-point plan for peace in the SCS (*Economist* 2015). The following November, Xi himself met with Ma Ying-Jeuo, then-president of Taiwan, and Beijing's lenient response to his visit to the contested Itu Aba Island suggested a definite tempering of regional assertiveness (*Economist* 2016b). China's immediate response to the 12 July ruling was to firmly clamp down on nationalist protests rejecting the outcome, to reiterate its support for a Code of Conduct with ASEAN, and – apparently – to seek to open bilateral negotiations with rival claimants.

In contrast to such geniality, however, China's official defense strategy has switched to that of "active defense" since the summer of 2015, and it is ostensibly aimed toward securing the entirety of the "Maritime Silk Road" – a trading route stretching from the SCS to the eastern coasts of Africa and southern Europe (Gady 2015). Moreover, realist think tanks have been established in several universities across China with the apparent aim of exploring legal bases to maritime claims (Tiezzi 2014). The purchase of such geostrategic thinking on the PLA Navy was evident by the announcement in late July that China and Russia would hold joint naval drills in the SCS as early as September – presumably coinciding with the conclusion of the G20 summit in Hangzhou. The liberal/realist dualism is reproduced, then, in China as much as in the West.

Sovereignty regimes in the SCS

Such policy differentiations exist simply because China itself is not a single unitary actor. Within China, today different political factions and institutions vie for influence over foreign policy. As Beeson and Li (2015, 94) state, "There is no clear, unified consensus … among scholars and policy makers in China itself." China is caught between the two distinctive political–economic impulses that liberal and realist positions isolate and reify: the impulse to realize territorial claims and its national "integrity," on the one hand, and the demands of a globalized economy upon which its export-based economic growth has largely depended, on the other. If the former is visible in the claims and counter-claims about Taiwan (e.g. Pan 2010), as well as in the maritime disputes, the latter is at the center of the conundrum over how to manage current economic volatility: whether through liberalizing the economy and sacrificing party control, or reinforcing state control and probably restricting China's role in international institutions and foreign economic development (e.g. Beeson and Li 2015). The politics of the regime will determine the outcome of these tensions, not some a priori set of determinants that can be identified to predict the future.

Analyzing the politics of both regimes is the objective of this concluding section. As we have noted, the kind of game theoretical account of the SCS standoff proffered by institutions like the ICAS methodologically excludes consideration of the qualitatively different state-society complexes at odds in the SCS, and how this might shape the nature of geopolitical competition. As Rosenberg (1994, 30) puts it, the problem of realist analysis is how it "poses the state as a completed social order such that its foreign interests are constituted entirely internationally – thereby removing interpretation of the 'national interest' from domestic political contestation."

We thus begin from the injunction that geographical and geopolitical "facts" are never pre-given. They are themselves products of dynamic social sources; capital accumulation, class struggle, modalities of governance, political strategies, and their discursive mediations all shape the quantity, quality, and political economic significance of natural, industrial, and military assets. This is not to endorse the social constructivist trend in IR theory that anarchy is "what states make of it" (Wendt 1992). For instance, a decade ago high oil prices made the Middle East central to global geopolitical concerns – control over which was viewed as critical by the Pentagon and the Bush administration. A relaxation of U.S. imperial policy in the Middle East will likely now accompany the U.S.' shale revolution and the subsequent collapse of global oil prices. While such physical assets, then, do indeed furnish the material substratum of geopolitical agency, there is no straight line from their existence to the particular strategies of particular states.

Agnew (2009) distinguishes between four ideal types of sovereignty regimes (classic, globalist, integrative, and imperialist) in order to highlight how accumulation systems have tended to cohere into distinctive permutations of territorial

control and political authority.[6] In order to trace how geopolitical "facts" are made geopolitically salient in the case of the SCS, we follow Agnew's (2009) ideal typology of sovereignty regimes and assign the United States-and China-stylized forms of practicing state sovereignty. The period of neoliberal globalization provided a golden opportunity to facilitate the insertion of China's state-controlled economy into the world market. The aim was preservation of Communist Party rule in the context of political upheaval in the Soviet bloc, and the effect was the creation of a class of cadre-capitalists reliant upon a politicized form of export-led capitalism in which boundaries between state and market became blurred. Though China's modality of accumulation was inflected by the high degree of exports and FDI came to represent as shares of GDP, its state remained relatively centralized and strong, and its overt political administration of territory remained high (during a period of deregulation and depoliticization in the advanced capitalist economies).

China may be categorized as a relatively clear case of Westphalian sovereignty in which "despotic and infrastructural power [are] still largely deployed within a bounded state territory" (2009, 130).[7] This is reflected by China's race into the sphere of IR during the past decade, which has frequently witnessed it circumventing multilateral organizations – opting instead to establish a web of bilateral relations with the governments of other states predicated upon a principle of non-interference. This bilateralism, according to Gonzalez-Vicente (2015, 213), "empowers the central governments of China's counterparts, subsequently reinvigorating the role of central state elites as regulators of regional economic governance."

The United States, by contrast, has performed the role of global hegemon since 1945. Following British free-trade imperialism, its borders have more often than not remained open to flows of goods, services, and persons, while its economy has become increasingly dominated by financial services and intermediation following the erosion of manufacturing competitiveness. The U.S. system of managing the global political economy has also largely relied upon non-territorial imperialism rather than formal colonialism – though its rule has also been punctuated by an impulse "toward a scattered imperium (as in Iraq)" (Agnew 2009, 132). It may thus be characterized as a globalist sovereignty regime, concerned equally with managing the world system as with its own domestic issues, or at least constructing an alignment between the two.

While the U.S.' globalist sovereignty regime is broadly characterized by the pursuit of non-territorial imperialism and a de-colonial foreign policy, China's classic regime may be anticipated to be more territorially expansionist in its aims. China's concern to claim maritime territory must be situated within a state-society complex in which political stability and state directed catch-up development remain overarching strategic aims of state policy. This makes China's territorial periphery, as President Xi has put it, "strategically extremely important to our country in terms of geography, natural environment and mutual relations" (cited in Jakobson and Medcalf 2015, 10). Xi thus insists that "islands in the SCS have been China's territory since ancient times, and the Chinese government must take responsibility

to safeguard its territorial sovereignty and legitimate maritime interests" (cited in Wong 2015). Meanwhile, the United States, in its function as global hegemon, attempts to align the interests of other states with its own in order to uphold a positive sum liberal global order. Its overarching global aim, then, is to uphold international maritime law and freedom of navigation rights for all states, a mandate which transcends its own narrow interests.

Sovereignty regimes and their physiognomies, however, exist "in a global relational space rather than in the absolute territorial space with which they are symbolically associated" (Agnew 2009; 144). Taking the example of China's territorialized currency regime, Agnew (2009, 157–158) spells out how China's entry into the world economy has exerted pressure toward liberalization of its exchange rate regime – directly from the U.S. government, but also from economic imbalances generated by excess investment in manufacturing. The renminbi has been on a path of gradual liberalization since the mid-2000s, with a significant relaxation its management announced in August 2015. In the United States, similarly, the flotation of the dollar has been a source of great domestic political strife as its increased value has led to the erosion of manufacturing competitiveness, even while also facilitating the dollar's function as the dominant global currency. The outcome of these disputes has been negotiated attempts to avoid competitive currency devaluations against the dollar by other states, most notably in the Plaza Accord of 1985, as well as rancorous disagreements with the Chinese government over the renminbi's dollar peg during the 2000s.

The SCS is one absolute space in which the Chinese and U.S. sovereignty regimes co-exist in relation to each other. As we have seen – and in apparent contradiction with the liberal inclinations of a globalist regime of sovereignty – the overall trend within the United States has been toward greater assertiveness toward China, with targeted FONOPS, fly-bys, and intelligence gathering – reminiscent of the classical Westphalian practice of sovereignty and geopolitical containment rather than the U.S.' putative policy of "counterbalancing" China. Etzioni (2016, 508) regards FONOPs, in particular, as dangerous and flagrant instances of power projection in the Asia-Pacific, leveling the accusation that "the United States acts as judge, jury, and executioner" in such disputes over freedom of navigation. Conversely, alongside a Chinese trend toward territorial expansionism, we have also noted embryonic conciliatory and cooperative discourses, which encourage compromise and even retreat on disputes in the SCS. The deeper the strategic engagement becomes, the more likely one practice of sovereignty or the other is to dominate both sides (however, it seems unlikely that the Chinese cooperative discourse would win out in the face of ever greater U.S. encroachment). As opposing sovereignty regimes coexist and interact, their modalities of governance cannot be modified by the experience of exogenous forces exerted by the other.

Beyond mutually conditioning interactivity between sovereignty regimes (hitherto treated as self-contained units of analysis), it is also productive to disaggregate state sovereignty, by exploring how institutions within the states involved

demonstrate contradictory tendencies and linkages to civil society actors that go beyond purely national boundaries. To this extent, Hameiri and Jones (2016) make an interesting case for China's SCS policy as an outcome of the fragmentation of the Chinese state under the pressures of neoliberal globalization. Here, "multiple state and quasi-private agencies, having become somewhat autonomous foreign policy actors, are pursuing uncoordinated and sometimes contradictory agendas overseas" (2016, 85). Their account of China's expansionary policy attempts to disaggregate 'the state' as the unitary actor of IR theory by foregrounding the very different roles and material interests of particular (state and non-state) actors: China's national oil and petroleum companies intent on protecting extractive rights for hydrocarbons; the PLA navy and its goal of securing budgetary allocations by manufacturing maritime disputes; and Hainan's provincial government, incentivized to secure fishing and extractive rights against its regional competitors. They also make much of the divisions between the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and more belligerent state institutions, emphasizing the MFA's powerlessness in the face of policy dictation by the armed forces and party apparatuses, as well as avant-garde actions by local SCS interests (2016, 86–89). Their account provides a valuable insight into the micro-foundations shaping the motivations of actors at the vanguard of SCS expansion and challenges any simple ascription of a coherent grand strategy to Chinese policy in the SCS.

Perhaps as a consequence of the intellectual fragmentation of realism's once-mighty grip on IR theory (Agnew 2015), it is no longer only critical theorists who have taken up the significance of disaggregating state institutions and exploring national social bases of international politics. Both Shirk (2014) and Friedberg (2014) – writing, respectively, from liberal and realist perspectives – have considered the significance of domestic politics in determining China's foreign policy imperatives in the SCS, providing dissections of the Chinese state into its constituent parts. Shirk (2014) notes the "stovepiping" of bureaucratic institutions (in which vertical command structures inside ministries debar communications between them) as a major source of incoherence in SCS policy and Friedberg (2014, 138–140) pays due attention to the role of vested nationalist interests and the PLA navy in fomenting the dispute.[8] But such analysis, even as it is delivered from prominent academics of left and right deeply embedded in policy networks, seems to have done little to dissipate the militarization of the dispute on the U.S. side.

Despite the merits of such particularistic interpretations, however, events since 2015 appear to have overtaken their analytical cogency. Although the MFA does appear to have held a delimiting role earlier in the dispute, it is now a vocal opponent of what it sees as U.S. infractions in the SCS. For instance, on 30 January 2016, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs strongly criticized the USS *Curtis Wilber* for conducting a FONOP "in Chinese territorial waters" (Panda 2016). Such bellicosity (now commonly voiced by an increasingly bellicose MFA) contrasts with the timidity of earlier statements highlighted by Hameiri and Jones.

Of note too is the rapidity with which Xi Jinping has effectively centralized political authority in myriad ways; for instance, his self-installation as head of the leading group on Military Reform, his subordination of previously powerful military institutions to the party-chaired Central Military Commission (of which Xi himself is leader), and his assumption of the leadership of the National Security Commission since January 2014. To the extent that Xi has successfully centralized command over policy direction, a reading of the dispute which privileges the particular interests and agency of – for instance – the Hainan provincial government in securing fish stocks for its resident trawlers (whatever its particular role in originating the dispute) no longer seems viable. And recent events seem to bear witness to a centralized SCS policy. Following Xi's much heralded reform of the PLA in early 2016, the army command structure was reduced from seven to five "theater commands." Admiral Wang Jiaocheng, head of the new Southern Command responsible for deployments in the SCS, warned that the Chinese "military will be capable of dealing with any security threat. No country will be allowed to use any excuse or action to threaten China's sovereignty and safety" (Zhou 2016). Responses from the military to the Presidency were unanimous in equally vociferous condemnation of the July UN ruling.

This suggests that short-circuiting the realist policy "feedback loop of power competition" may not be as simple as a matter of improving actors' reflexive interpretations of their situatedness, as many of those writing from a constructivist perspective in IR would have it (cf. Barkin 2010, 90). There exist material pressures, rooted in uneven economic development, political multiplicity, and the various modalities of practicing sovereignty, which encourage states to engage in mutually disciplinary forms of competitive behavior. The system of national states forms an "interactive multiplicity of societies" (Rosenberg 2013, 583), the effects of which "confront capitalists and state managers as 'external' forces," compelling particular forms of interpretation and suggesting particular courses of action (Rolf 2015, 118). These forces are balanced against an expanding and ever more integrated global economy that transcends any supposedly "sovereign" state territories and discourages moves that threaten the stability of markets. Neither side of this dialectic can be decisive while the capitalist world economy continues to reproduce a system of national states, but in the case of the SCS, it certainly appears as though an ineluctable logic of geopolitical competition is taking hold.

Conclusion

China's destabilizing reach into the SCS occurs at the same time as it plays a globalizing, "responsible great power" role in international organizations and claims an ever-greater stake in the U.S.-led system of global capitalism. Meanwhile, the United States increasingly behaves according to the logic of *realpolitik*, building a regional alliance in what increasingly appears as an attempt to contain China's rise. Realism is becoming more deeply embedded in the outlook of state managers,

who seek to defend territorialized interests – threatening to undermine the globalist open-door strategy with exclusionary military and economic practices. U.S. hegemony has suffered the effects of defeat in Iraq and Afghanistan, revolutionary and reactionary turbulence across the MENA region, and Russian territorial expansionism – apparently distracting from Obama's much-vaunted pivot to East Asia in the face of intensified diplomacy elsewhere.

In writings from the West, there currently exists strong pressure to criticize China's flagrant disregard for the UN's ruling. However, there are reasons for critical theorists to remain highly skeptical of the capacity of international law to resolve the dispute in this instance. In a widely circulated recent piece, Graham Allinson (2016) notes that large states have rarely agreed to the terms of a dispute settled by UNCLOS. Indeed, the United States is not even itself a signatory to the convention. International law, in this case, is a vestige of uni-polarity not designed to accommodate the expansive territorial claims of rising powers, and its rhetorical deployment is plainly open to politicization by Western states. This is not to suggest that China has acted justly – but that the current legal framework is manifestly not up to the task of adjudicating in this dispute. On the other side of the debate, those few Western writers such as Nolan (2013) who side with China from a position of anti-imperialism overlook the extent to which China is fast becoming a capable and assertive regional imperial agent in its own right: what else could explain the flight of Vietnam, for instance, into allegiance with the United States? The tensions threatening to bubble over in the SCS may be defused neither by so directly taking sides nor through blind faith in legal precedent established in a bygone age of American uni-polarity.

In this piece, we have attempted to sketch the outlines of how a materialist conception of foreign policy predicated on contrasting sovereignty regimes might be applied to the SCS. Policy and commentary differences on both sides are, at root, symptoms of a material contradiction between the benefits and risks of economic interdependence and territorial expansionism. These are founded upon a real-world contradiction and will be resolved politically. In the SCS, an intensification of interstate rivalry is fast becoming the outcome of a period of unprecedented economic interconnectedness. Those wishing to avoid conflict should widen the scope of their analysis to begin to account for why globalization may not always be the pacifying force its proponents would have us believe.

Notes

1. Or, when such theorists do attempt to contextualize disputes, this is performed inductively. Luttwak (2012) and Friedberg (2011) construct realist grand narratives of Sino-US relations on the basis of game theoretical models of military interactions.
2. At the time of publication, the TPP has been cast into fresh doubt following its firm disavowal by both the Democratic and Republican presidential nominees. This does not preclude its passage under the Obama administration's final months in office. In either event, the potential collapse of the TPP would not corroborate a renewal of U.S.

globalism but rather its obverse – a retreat into U.S. isolationism as a strategic response to the "China threat," among myriad imperial dilemmas.

3. The conflict has led to a major break in Japanese postwar pacifism as the Abe Government has sought to remilitarize in light of a rising China. One response was China's unprecedented unilateral imposition of an Air Defense Identification Zone in September 2013.
4. Repeated and fairly minor skirmishes between coast guards and fishing vessels from both nations have occasionally led to deaths as small trawlers are subjected to ramming by other boats. More serious are the rival military exercises undertaken by China and Russia on one side, and the United States and South Korea on the other, contesting the Ieodo–Suyan reef.
5. It should be noted that Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan, and the Philippines have all engaged in land reclamation activities, though China's effort dwarfs that of its neighboring states. Its activities account for 95% of total acreage reclaimed since 2012 (Erickson and Bond 2015).
6. The classic and globalist regimes are discussed below in the cases of China and the United States. The imperialist regime, meanwhile, is characteristic of many states across the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America, where "central state authority is seriously in question because of external dependence and manipulation as well as corruption and chronic mismanagement…. Infrastructural power is weak or non-existent and despotic power is often effectively in outside hands." (Agnew 2009, 130–131)The integrative regime is best represented by the European Union, in which "many of the founding states of the Westphalian system have thrown in their lot with one another to create a larger and, as yet, politically unclassifiable entity that challenges existing state sovereignty in functionally complex and often times non-territorial ways" (2009, 130–131).
7. China is not, however, simply just another "state" in the "state-is-a-state-is-a-state" catechism of much thinking about foreign policy-making (even as such thinking often and contradictorily assumes an exceptional America). China is much more than a distant heir to a now universal but originally European political form – the nation state (Wang 2014). Among other things, it has employed a common ideographic script for its language (notwithstanding many diverse dialects) for over 3000 years has retained more or less the same borders and ethnic variety since 1800, and its history belies the neat empire versus nation state binary that is central to contemporary American and European thought about political systems.
8. As a realist, however, Friedberg (2014, 140–142) eventually discounts such explanations as supportive but insufficient guides to Chinese strategy, insisting on the analytical primacy of the international dimension.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

Agnew, John. 2009. *Globalization and Sovereignty*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield.

Agnew, John. 2010. "Emerging China and Critical Geopolitics: Between World Politics and Chinese Particularity." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 51: 569–582.

Agnew, John. 2015. "The Geopolitics of Knowledge about World Politics: A Case Study in U.S. Hegemony." In *Geographies of Knowledge and Power*, edited by P. Meusburger, D. Gregory, and L. Suarsana, 235–246. London: Springer.

Allinson, Graham. 2016. "Of Course China, Like All Great Powers, Will Ignore an International Legal Verdict." *The Diplomat*. Accessed July 22. http://thediplomat.com/2016/07/of-course-china-like-all-great-powers-will-ignore-an-international-legal-verdict/

Anderlini, Jamil. 2016. "US Naval History Offers Clues to China's Intent." *Financial Times*, January 27. http://on.ft.com/1nPgoDF.

Anderson, Perry. 2012. "Sino-Americana." *London Review of Books* 34 (Feb.): 20–22.

AMTI (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative). 2016a. *Fiery Cross Reef*. Accessed January 1, 2016. http://amti.csis.org/fiery-cross/

AMTI (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative). 2016b. *Island Tracker*. Accessed January 15, 2016. http://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/

Barkin, J. Samuel. 2010. *Realist Constructivism: Rethinking International Relations Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Beeson, Mark, and Fujian Li. 2015. "What Consensus? Geopolitics and Policy Paradigms in China and the United States." *International Affairs* 91: 93–109.

Blackwill, Robert, and Ashley Tellis. 2015. *Revising US Grand Strategy towards China* New York: Council on Foreign Relations.

Breslin, Shaun. 2010. "China's Emerging Global Role: Dissatisfied Responsible Great Power." *Politics* 30: 52–62.

Bunnell, Tim, Carl Grundy-Warr, James D. Sidaway, and Matthew Sparke. 2012. "Geographies of Power in the Indonesia–Malaysia–Singapore Growth Triangle." In *International Handbook of Globalization and World Cities*, edited by B. Deruder, M. Hoyler, P. Taylor, and F. Witlox, 465–475. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Callahan, William. 2009. "The Cartography of National Humiliation and the Emergence of China's Geobody." *Public Culture* 21: 141–173.

Callahan, William. 2015. "History, Tradition and the China Dream: Socialist Modernization in the World of Great Harmony." *Journal of Contemporary China* 24: 961–1001.

CNAS (Center for a New American Security). 2016. *FLASHPOINTS*. Accessed January 15, 2016. http://www.cnas.org/flashpoints

CSIS (Center for Strategic and International Studies). 2016. *Asia-Pacific Rebalance 2025: Capabilities, Presence, and Partnerships*. Accessed Febuary 9, 2016. http://csis.org/publication/asia-pacific-rebalance-2025

Comaroff, Joshua. 2014. "Built on Sand: Singapore and the New State of Risk." *Harvard Design Magazine* 39: 138.

Cooper, Luke. 2015. "The International Relations of the 'Imagined Community': Explaining the Late Nineteenth-Century Genesis of the Chinese Nation." *Review of International Studies* 41: 477–501.

Cox, Robert W. 1981. "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 10: 126–155.

Duara, Prasenjit. 1995. *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*. London: University of Chicago Press.

Economist. 2015. "Disagreements over the South China Sea Worsen as China Digs In." Accessed February 19, 2016. http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21679265-chinas-hard-line-disputed-waters-shows-no-sign-softening-disagreements-over-south

Economist. 2016a. "Xi's New Model Army." Accessed Feb. 12, 2016. http://www.economist.com/news/china/21688424-xi-jinping-reforms-chinas-armed-forcesto-his-own-advantage-xis-new-model-army?fsrc=scn/tw_ec/xi_s_new_model_army

Economist. 2016b. "Making a Splash." Accessed Jan. 30, 2016. http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21689633-taiwans-outgoing-president-further-roils-troubled-waters-making-splash

Erickson, Andrew S., and Kevin Bond. 2015. "Dredging Under the Radar: China Expands South Sea Foothold." *The National Interest*. Accessed March 1, 2016. http://nationalinterest.org/feature/dredging-under-the-radar-china-expands-south-sea-foothold-13701

Etzioni, Amitai. 2016. "Freedom of Navigation Assertions: The United States as the World's Policeman." *Armed Forces & Society* 42: 501–517.

Evans-Pritchard, Ambrose. 2016. "Global Arms Race Escalates as Sabres Rattle in South China Sea." *Daily Telegraph*, July 12. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/authors/ambrose-evans-pritchard/.

Fravel, Mark T. 2005. "Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation: Explaining China's Compromises in Territorial Disputes." *International Security* 30: 47–83.

Fravel, Mark T. 2014. "Territorial and Maritime Boundary Disputes in Asia." In *Oxford Handbook of the International Relations of Asia*, edited by S. Pekkanen, J. Ravenhill, and R. Foot, 524–546. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

French, Howard. 2015. "What's Behind Beijing's Drive to Control the South China Sea?" *The Guardian*, July 28. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/28/whats-behind-beijings-drive-control-south-china-sea-hainan.

Friedberg, Aaron L.. 2011. *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*. New York: Norton.

Friedberg, Aaron L.. 2014. "The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Explaining Beijing's Assertiveness." *The Washington Quarterly* 37: 133–150.

Gady, Franz-Stefan. 2015. "China to Embrace 'Active Defense' Strategy." *The Diplomat*. Accessed January 21, 2016. http://thediplomat.com/2015/05/china-to-embrace-new-active-defense-strategy/

Gerstenberger, Heidi. 2013. "State, Capital, Crisis." *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 12: 349-365.

Gonzalez-Vicente, Reuben. 2015. "The Limits to China's Non-interference Foreign Policy: Pro-state Interventionism and the Rescaling of Economic Governance." *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 69: 205–223.

Gowan, Peter. 2010. *A Calculus of Power: Grand Strategy in the Twenty-first Century* London: Verso.

Grydehøj, Adam. 2015. "Making Ground, Losing Space: Land Reclamation and Urban Public Space in Island Cities." *Urban Island Studies* 1: 96–117.

Hameiri, Shahar, and Lee Jones. 2016. "Rising Powers and State Transformation: The Case of China." *European Journal of International Relations* 22: 72–98.

Hayton, Bill. 2014. *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Himmelman, Jeff. 2013. "A Game of Shark and Minnow." *New York Times*, October 27. http://www.nytimes.com/newsgraphics/2013/10/27/south-china-sea/.

Hung, Ho-Fung. 2009. "America's Head Servant? The PRC's Dilemma in the Global Crisis." *New Left Review* 60 (Nov.–Dec.): 5–25.

Jakobson, Linda, and Rory Medcalf. 2015. *The Perception Gap: Reading China's Maritime Objectives in Indo-Pacific Asia*. Lowy Institute Report. Accessed January 2, 2016. http://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/reading-chinas-maritime-objectives-indo-pacific-asia-perception-gap

Johnson, Ian. 2015. "Xi's China: The Illusion of Change." *New York Review of Books*, November 27. http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2015/11/24/xi-china-illusion-of-change/

Kaplan, Robert. 2012. *The Revenge of Geography*. New York: Random House.

Kaplan, Robert. 2014. *Asia's Cauldron. The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*. New York: Random House.

Khong, Yuen Foon. 2013. "Primacy or World Order? The United States and China's Rise – A Review Essay." *International Security* 38: 153–175.

Kirshner, J. 2012. "The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Classical Realism and the Rise of China." *European Journal of International Relations* 18: 53–75.

Luttwak, Edward. 2012. *The Rise of China vs. the Logic of Strategy*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

McGregor, Richard. 2015. "Hawks Gain the Upper Hand in US Policy on China." *Financial Times*, September 8. http://blogs.ft.com/the-world/2015/09/hawks-gain-upper-hand-in-us-policy-on-china.

Mearsheimer, John. 2006. "China's Unpeaceful Rise." *Current History* 105: 160–162.

Minzner, Carl. 2015. "China After the Reform Era." *Journal of Democracy* 26: 129–143.

Nolan, Peter. 2013. "Imperial Archipelagos: China, Western Colonialism and the Law of the Sea." *New Left Review* 2: 77–95.

Nye, Joseph. 2015. "Is U.S.–China Conflict Imminent in the South China Sea?" *The Huffington Post*, June 3. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-nye/us-china-south-china-sea_b_7503966.html.

Olson, Wyatt. 2015. "Pacific Pivot Makes Modest Gains in Early Years." *Stars and Stripes*. Accessed February 21, 2016. http://www.stripes.com/news/pacific/the-pacific-pivot/pacific-pivot-makes-modest-gains-in-early-years-1.355216

Pan, Chengxin. 2010. "Westphalia and the Taiwan Conundrum: A Case against the Exclusionist Construction of Sovereignty and Identity." *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 15: 371–389.

Panda, Ankit. .2016. "Return of the FONOP: US Navy Destroyer Asserts Freedom of Navigation in Paracel Islands." *The Diplomat*. Accessed February 2, 2016. http://thediplomat.com/2016/01/return-of-the-fonop-us-navy-destroyer-asserts-freedom-of-navigation-in-paracel-islands/

Panitch, Leo, and Sam Gindin. 2012. *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire*. London: Verso.

Parameswaran, Prashanth. 2016. "US Asia Rebalance Still Lacks Direction, Resources: Study." *The Diplomat*. Accessed January 22, 2016. http://thediplomat.com/2016/01/us-asia-rebalance-still-lacks-direction-resources-study/

Rolf, Steve. 2015. "Locating the State: Uneven and Combined Development, the States System, and the Political." *Research in Political Economy* 30 (A): 113-153.

Rosenberg, Justin. 1994. *The Empire of Civil Society*. London: Verso.

Rosenberg, Justin. 2013. "The 'Philosophical Premises' of Uneven and Combined Development." *Review of International Studies* 39: 569–597.

Shirk, Susan. 2014. "The Domestic Context of Chinese Foreign Security Policies." In *Oxford Handbook of the International Relations of Asia*, edited by S. Pekkanen, J. Ravenhill, and R. Foot, 391–410. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stashwick, Steven. 2015. "Naval Buildups in the South China Sea." *The Diplomat*. Accessed Febuary 12, 2016. http://thediplomat.com/2015/07/naval-buildups-in-the-south-china-sea

Tiezzi, Shannon. 2014. "China's Academic Battle for the South China Sea." *The Diplomat*. Accessed January 7, 2016. http://thediplomat.com/2014/02/chinas-academic-battle-for-the-south-china-sea/

United Nations. 1982. *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*. Accessed January 20, 2016. http://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/closindx.htm

Van der Pijl, Kees. 2012. "Is the East Still Red? The Contender State and Class Struggles in China." *Globalizations* 9: 503–516.

Voice of America. 2012. "Challenging Beijing in the South China Sea." July 31. Accessed January 8, 2016. http://blogs.voanews.com/state-department-news/2012/07/31/challenging-beijing-in-the-south-china-sea/

Wall Street Journal. 2016. "U.S.-Philippine Defense Boost" January 13. http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-philippine-defense-boost-1452731782

Wang, Hui. 2014. *China from Empire to Nation-State*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wendt, Alexander. 1992. "Anarchy is What States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics." *International Organization* 46: 391–425.

Wong, Edward. 2015. "Xi Again Defends China's Claim to South China Sea Islands." *New York Times*, November 7. http://nyti.ms/1iJkmdQ.

Zhao, Suisheng. 2015. "Rethinking the Chinese World Order: The Imperial Cycle and the Rise of China." *Journal of Contemporary China* 24: 961–982.

Zhou, Laura. 2016 "China's Military is Prepared 'To Defend Sovereignty' in South China Sea: Military Chief," *South China Morning Post*, February 28. http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1918436/chinas-military-prepared-defend-sovereignty-south-china#.