China and the South China Sea Conflict: A Case for Confucian Strategic Culture?*

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Chinese actions in the South China Sea are often viewed as proof of an assertive China, despite the Chinese claims that their Confucian values make China a peaceful power. This paper analyzes the South China Sea conflict through a prism of strategic culture theory and examines both the Chinese narrative on the conflict as well as the actual Chinese behavior in the area. Confucian norms and values provide a powerful rhetoric device utilized by the Chinese policymakers to legitimize the Chinese behavior to the domestic and to some extent also foreign audiences. However, the actual Chinese behavior rarely exhibits strong influences of Confucianism, suggesting that in actual behavior China acts in accord with realist predictions.

Keywords: China; South China Sea; strategic culture; Confucianism; political discourse.

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Introduction

China is currently involved in numerous territorial disputes, such as the one over the islands in the South China Sea (SCS) with several Southeast Asian countries. Large reserves of fossil fuels, abundant maritime fisheries, as well as being one of the world's key sea lines of communication (almost all trade from China as well as Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea is being shipped through SCS) make the SCS an important region both geopolitically and geoeconomically (Fels & Vu, 2015).

Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China has been pursuing a more active policy in the SCS, which includes building up of artificial islands in the disputed areas and their militarization. Naturally, this has fueled outrage among China's Southeast Asian neighbors, most notably Vietnam and the Philippines. In spite of the growing tensions in the SCS region, the conflict has not escalated into a war. This suggests that there is a strong preference among all states involved, including China, for a non-bellicose approach to dispute settlement (Kang, 2003).

On the part of China, this preference for non-bellicose policy has been attributed to its supposedly pacifist culture influenced by Confucian tradition. References to pacifism and Confucianism have been a mainstay of Chinese political discourse for decades.

The SCS conflict is directly related to China's three core interests — preservation of Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rule; sustainable economic growth; and preservation of territorial integrity (sovereignty), with the first core interest being dependent on the other two (Turcsányi, 2015). The economic importance of SCS for China is self-evident as it is a major trading route through which China exports its production to the rest of the world, imports much needed fossil fuels, and even uses it as an important fishery to feed the soaring population. With regard to the interest in preservation of territorial integrity, the SCS is a region that has been claimed by China since the CCP came to power in 1949 as an integral part of its territory but lying outside the CCP's control (Turcsányi, 2015).

The notion of core interests is quite malleable and evolves over time. In China, it was debated at least since 2010 whether SCS is a core interest. Since 2015, this debate has been definitely settled. The 2015 National Security Act has expanded the definition of core interests to include a wide range of territorial claims under which the claims on SCS fall as well (Wong, 2015). Moreover, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs explicitly labeled the SCS claims as core interests alongside the claims on East China Sea and as being on par with Taiwan and Tibet (Tunningley, 2016).

This paper aims to determine the influence of Confucianism on the Chinese foreign and security policy in a case where Chinese core interests are at play. As China has been recently pursuing a more assertive policy in the SCS (which was allowed by modernization of its navy), Chinese behavior appears to contradict the norms of the Confucian culture.

To examine the effects of Confucianism on Chinese policy, the theoretical framework of strategic culture is used. As the following section shows, strategic culture affects the decision-making processes on two distinct levels. It acts as an ideational factor that influences the decision-makers' perception of the world and thus

enables them to carry out certain policies and constrains them in choosing other policy options. Strategic culture also plays a role in the formation of the political discourse. When policies are framed in a narrative influenced by a particular strategic culture to which a majority of the population shows affinity, the policy will be more acceptable to that population and will be deemed to be more legitimate. Narratives derived from a particular strategic culture do not only affect the domestic foreign policy discourse but also exert influence beyond the borders of the state and shape others' perception and their expectations of the actor. If a state would suddenly revert its actions and pursue policies contrary to the previously formulated cultural narrative, that state would suffer from a loss of credibility (Glenn, 2009).

Translating this to China, Confucianism can manifest itself in both the behavioral and discursive levels. A strategic culture's potency will be particularly high if it will manifest at the behavioral level, since in this case it would shape the perception of the decision-makers and influence the policy outcomes in a direct fashion. If the culture manifests at the discursive level only, its impact will be much lower, as its effects would be limited to the shaping of the domestic public opinion and others' perception of the actor. The effects of the strategic culture would be only indirect in such cases. Naturally, the influence of a culture will be biggest if it is present on both levels.

My hypothesis is that when the Chinese core interests are at stake, the Confucian strategic culture has only minor effects on the foreign and security policy-making of China. Its effects are limited mostly to the discursive role, whereas the Confucian culture is used to create narratives legitimizing assertive policy. In order to test the validity of this hypothesis, three sub-questions are asked:

(1) What are the core principles of Confucian strategic culture?
(2) In what way is the Chinese narrative on the SCS conflict framed in terms of Confucian culture?
(3) Is Chinese behavior in SCS in line with the Chinese discourse regarding the SCS conflict?

The research is designed to take the form of a single case study. In the study, the 2010–2016 time frame is analyzed. The year 2010 is chosen as the venture point of the analysis, as in this year the SCS dispute became more prominent compared to in the past, as evidenced by the exponentially larger incidence of the dispute's coverage by both Chinese and foreign media as well as in academic publications (Johnston, 2013). Also, 2016 is the year when the SCS arbitration proceedings were finished.

The data for the analysis were obtained by examining the primary sources such as Chinese military strategy white papers, other Chinese official policy documents,

government communiqués, and speeches of the Chinese leaders, as well as the Chinese media reporting on the SCS conflict. To find out the extent to which the official Chinese discourse on security policy is framed in terms of the Confucian culture, the obtained data were interpreted using the method of discourse analysis. This approach allows to find out the extent to which the official discourse on security policy is framed in terms of Confucian culture. Accordingly, the findings regarding the security policy discourse are compared with the actual Chinese behavior in the SCS. Comparing the discourse with the actual Chinese actions will help to clarify further the influence of the Confucian culture. By using this method, an answer can be given to the question to what extent it determines Chinese SCS policy, or whether it is just a tool used to create a positive narrative in order to justify Chinese policy.

Culture Matters

The concept of strategic culture has about as many definitions as there are scholars dealing with it. Among the more prominent definitions are especially those of first-generation theorists Snyder[1] and Gray,[2] and third-generation theorist Johnston.[3] While these scholars focused on culture's effects on behavior, the post-structuralists of the second generation are focused predominantly on the role of discourse and narratives in justifying the real behavior of states. Strategic culture is thus a tool used to legitimize the strategic choices made by the state's decision-makers.[4] Setting aside these differences, Booth (1990) summed up the definition of strategic culture as a "nation's traditions, values, attitudes, patterns of behavior, habits, symbols, achievements and particular ways of adapting to the environment and solving problems with respect to the threat or use of force."

Based on Booth's definition, strategic culture stems from both material and ideational sources. Among the material sources of strategic culture, the most

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[1]"A sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other" (Snyder, 1977).

[2]"Persisting (though not eternal) socially transmitted ideas, attitudes, traditions, habits of mind, and preferred methods of operation that are more or less specific to a particular geographically based security community that has had a necessarily unique historical experience" (Gray, 1999).

[3]Johnston criticized Gray's inclusion of behavior within the definition of culture, which in his view made the definition tautological in nature. In his view, strategic culture is "collectively held semi-conscious or unconscious images, assumptions, 'codes,' and 'scripts' which define the external environment which enable a group to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration" (Johnston, 1995b).

[4]Strategic culture is viewed as "widely available orientations to violence and to ways in which the state can legitimately use violence against putative enemies" (Klein, 1988).

influential are the state's general geopolitical setting, its geography, climate, availability of resources, and technology. Among ideational sources are the state's historical experience and memory, elite beliefs, political system, and organization of military. Different myths and symbols, while themselves manifestations of culture, also act as (de)stabilizing elements that contribute to the formation of strategic culture (Ball, 1993; Lantis, 2006, 2014).

Strategic culture affects a state's foreign and security policy in two ways. First, it affects the perception of material world by people, which in turn influences their preferences, and in turn their behavior. Second, strategic culture is used by elites to formulate narratives justifying policies to the public both at home and abroad. In this sense, strategic culture is a tool for the legitimization of behavior. Strategic culture is thus both a constraining and an enabling factor at the same time.

The perceptual effects of strategic culture are important as both security and threats are socially constructed realities. The same action is perceived differently when carried out by an ally rather than by an enemy (Wendt, 1992). While objectively a threat arises when an actor has the capabilities and intent to threaten another actor (Rousseau & Garcia-Retamero, 2007), it is the element of perception that makes the threatened actor recognize the threat. This perception influences the reaction of the threatened one (Stein, 2013).

Subjective perceptions of reality are especially important in case of territorial conflicts. Typically, a state will pursue policies aimed at consolidation of its claims and will view them as inherently defensive, while other claimants to the disputed territory will perceive them as offensive and threatening (Fravel, 2014a).

Constitutive norms of cultural identity, which define what the society is and is not, may bias choices, as certain types of behavior will almost never be carried out as they are seen to be contrary to the cultural norms. The logic of appropriateness[5] works also the other way. Certain actions are going to be preferred due to acquiring moral authority as they are in accordance with the cultural norms of a society, which are based on the historical narratives (Rawi et al., 2006; Rousseau & Garcia-Retamero, 2007).

Even though the constitutive norms of a culture constrain actions, the relational comparisons of cultures affect behavior, too. The culturally influenced images of others are preconceived stereotypes derived from selective interpretation of history and one's self-image (Scobell, 2014). Comparisons with others tend to create competitive behavior among actors and potentially lead to conflict. The greater the cultural

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[5]Logic of appropriateness refers to the idea that human and in turn state behavior is determined by a set of norms and identities which prescribe what the appropriate behavior is in a given situation (March & Olsen, 2011).

difference, the higher the probability that the other will be perceived as a threat. This can reach a point when the cultural differences between societies will completely erode the constraining effects of culture. A pacifist society may paradoxically engage in warfare because it will view another society, which does not share its commitment to pacifism, as threatening its pacifist way of life (Gray, 2014; Rawi et al., 2006). Denials of constituting norms of a culture have similar effects. If the other denies the very nature of an actor, it contributes to the erosion of the constituting norms and may lead to cultural change within a society (Gustafsson, 2015).

Narratives have a profound role in carrying out the state's foreign and security policy. Their vital political function lies in their possible utility as a resource in political struggles (Devetak, 2013). Strategic culture, with its constituting components of historical memory, myths, and symbols, is articulated do develop a discourse that serves the state's foreign and security policy. Strategic culture is a resource used to make actions intelligible and legitimate to self and, more importantly, to those who the state seeks to influence. Narratives informed by strategic culture are used to either reconfirm or change the boundaries of what the society deems to be legitimate action (Glenn, 2009). The narratives, or declaratory strategies as labeled by Johnston (1995b), are a tool for legitimizing the authority of strategic decision-makers.

As Putnam (1988) noted, international politics are in essence a two-level game, in which politicians need to reconcile simultaneously domestic and international imperatives. This reconciliation is carried out precisely by deploying culturally in-formed narratives. The narratives' importance increases with the rising dichotomy between dominant cultural norms and the necessary behavior. Herein lie the enabling effects of strategic culture.

However, cultural narratives, once institutionalized within a society, act in the opposite manner, and constrain the state behavior. Advancing a certain narrative creates expectations of a corresponding behavior akin to making a commitment. Here the insights of the credible commitment theory can inspire us. Deviant behavior, which is not in line with the narrative, is thus viewed as breaking a promise. Reneging of one's position embodied in the narrative usually comes at a high political cost. The political costs typically take the form of audience costs arising from the reaction of the domestic public which has an interest in successful handling of foreign affairs by the political elites. Audience costs can also be tied to the foreign audiences when deviant behavior will cause withdrawal of economic aid or cessation of cooperation. It can be thus argued that the higher the audience costs, the lower the chance of behavior which is not in line with previously formulated narratives occurring (Fearon, 1997; Legro, 2000; Simmons & Danner, 2010).

War, Peace, and Confucius

Over the millennia, a vast and nuanced philosophical, political, and cultural tradition was developed in China. Most China scholars and even Chinese policymakers recognize Confucianism as the most influential philosophical and political school of Chinese origin, which has been dominant for almost two millennia. Even though Confucianism was under siege during the era of Mao Zedong, in the post-Mao years Confucius and his teachings are gaining prominence yet again as they are actively supported by the Communist Party. The inclusion of Confucianism, albeit allegorically, in school curricula suggests that Confucian norms and values will play an even greater role in the years to come, as the current youth will be thoroughly socialized into the Confucian norms and values (Scobell, 2014; T. Zhang, 2002).

The Confucian strategic culture is composed of three major elements: non-violence, defensiveness, and righteous war. Together they influence a process in which the Chinese behavior with regard to the use of force is constrained or enabled (Feng, 2007). These principles have shaped a worldview on what is the ideal way to neutralize foreign threats.

The Confucian teachings stress the importance of attraction in international relations rather than coercion. Diplomacy and cultural attraction are the best ways to achieve a state's goals (Y. K. Wang, 2011; T. Zhang, 2002). Confucius stated that "if the remote people are not submissive, all the influences of civil culture and virtue are to be cultivated to attract them to be so" (Liu, 2014). A similar conclusion can be drawn even from Sun Tzu's Art of War: "the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting the wars" (Liu, 2014).

This implies that there should be a preference among Chinese leaders for utilizing policy tools based on the concept of soft power rather than hard power when trying to achieve their foreign policy goals. Unlike hard power which is constituted from military and economic might, soft power rests on the state's ability to shape the interests of others in such a way that they would align with one's own interests by way of co-opting, attracting, and leading by example (Nye, 2004).

However, as most normative systems, Confucianism contains exceptions and permits the use of force under certain circumstances. The Confucian just war theory is such an exception. The theory is actually also based on the principles of virtue, benevolence, and righteousness. Simply put, a just war is a righteous war. There are two situations when using force is justified.

War is justifiable when it is motivated by moral principles rather than national interests. A war that is moral and just will enjoy popular support and thus it will be

successful (Liu, 2014). China would be morally obliged to wage war against a foreign ruler who is morally depraved and mistreats his subjects. Moral norms take precedence over sovereignty, as the result of a just war would be the re-establishment of "virtue" (Y. K. Wang, 2011; T. Zhang, 2002). The type of morality that would justify the use of force will be nowadays labeled as peacekeeping and responsibility to protect.[6]

War is also justified when it is waged in self-defense, though a non-bellicose manner of dealing with threats is still to be given preference (T. Zhang, 2002). Mao Zedong has stated on one occasion that "if someone doesn't attack us, we won't attack them; however if someone does attack us, we will definitely counterattack" (Scobell, 2002). This statement was made in relation to the 1962 border war with India when India refused the Chinese plea for negotiation (Maxwell, 2011).

Confucian strategic culture contains not only norms on when it is justified to fight a war but also norms on how a war ought to be fought. Once China ventures to use force against its enemies, Confucianism dictates that only a limited war is to be fought. Such a war should not be expansive in nature. Rather than annihilating the enemy and occupying its territory, the limited war aims to restore the *status quo ante.* Any military campaign is thus designed to deter the enemy and protect Chinese lines of communication (Y. K. Wang, 2011). To illustrate how the norms of limited war have influenced Chinese behavior in modern history, T. Zhang (2002) notes that during the border wars China fought against India in 1962 and Vietnam in 1979, China withdrew its armies even though it could have occupied foreign territories as Chinese military was in more advantageous position compared to the enemy. Moreover, even when war is already being fought, China always ought to find a way to get behind the negotiation table and find a diplomatic solution to prevent further destruction (Feng, 2007).

The perception of oneself as belonging to the Confucian culture has important ramifications, which are counterintuitive to how pacifist norms ought to influence state behavior. China, even though it views itself as inherently Confucian and pacifist, will not hesitate to use force when necessary.

The proclivity to use force is not necessarily contrary to Confucianism. The judgment whether the conditions call to use force, be it for moral or defensive reasons, is socially constructed. This is true especially for the use of force in self-defense. As was already argued, the definition of threat and deciding how to react to that threat depends on a state's cultural understanding of the international order and the role of

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[6]Responsibility to protect refers to a state's responsibility to protect its inhabitants from genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. Should the state fail to do so, other members of the international community are entitled to intervene and protect the population from these crimes as an option of last resort. See UN (2005).

violence in it. In the case of China, this refers to how the threats are constructed with respect to the Confucian cultural norms.

The self-perception of China as pacifist is a major factor in Chinese view of other states as aggressive and expansionist. This is true especially for Japan and the US. China's selective and stereotypical views of self and others generate high levels of distrust and suspicion (Scobell, 2014). Chinese siege mentality makes the elites view the international arena as filled with threats (Scobell, 2002). As a result, China shows a fascinating predisposition to use force despite the Confucian norms of pacifism. Due to heightened sensitivity to threat, China will use force to deal with situations that will be subjectively viewed as threats to the state, even though in objective terms the "enemy" may not be capable to threaten China. As a result of this heightened threat perception, China is likely to use disproportionate force in dealing with threats. China will always claim that the use of force in such cases was defensive in nature. Scobell (2014) labels this a Chinese "Cult of Defense" wherein China will use force offensively while the self-perception of this offense will be of a defensive nature.

The Cult of Defense has direct ramifications for the Chinese military strategy. When examining the Chinese defense white papers, a concept of "active defense" features quite prominently. The 2015 Defense White Paper defines active defense as "adherence to the unity of strategic defense and operational and tactical offense; adherence to the principles of defense, self-defense and post-emptive strike; and adherence to the stance that 'We will not attack unless we are attacked, but we will surely counterattack if attacked'." In order to implement the concept of active defense, the military is to "foster a strategic posture favorable to China's peaceful development, adhere to the national defense policy that is defensive in nature, persevere in close coordination of political, military, economic and diplomatic work, and positively cope with comprehensive security threats the country possibly encounters." However, as Scobell notes, virtually anything, including a preemptive strike, can be defined as defense under this concept (Scobell, 2002).

This feeling of vulnerability to outside threats stems not only from the self-perception of China as being pacifist unlike the bellicose other nations, but it is further reinforced by specific historical memories of Chinese society. The Opium War of 1839–1842 and the following "century of humiliation," when China was effectively split between several European powers and the US, have shaped the Chinese view of other states (S. Zhang, 1999).

In the discussion of the Confucian strategic culture, we cannot disregard its power in narrative formation. Confucians believe that only a just cause will earn popular support, which is necessary for success in war. Therefore, leaders need to put

forth convincing moral and legal reasons for using force (Liu, 2014). As the Chinese people hold very positive feelings about the moral aspects of China's foreign policy, Chinese leaders need to frame Chinese foreign-policy behavior in accord with these norms (Turcsányi, 2014). That the Chinese population is deeply embedded within the dominant Confucian culture can be evidenced by their opinions on how to handle territorial disputes. A 2014 opinion survey shows that sending in troops to deal with the territorial disputes in SCS and the East China Sea is one of the two least supported policy options; only 41–46% of respondents approved of this option. On the other hand, a compromise through negotiation enjoys high popularity among the Chinese people; 57% of respondents approved of negotiation without and 60% with the UN involvement in the process (Chubb, 2014).

It should be noted that more than a single strand of strategic culture (or sub-culture[7]) can exist within a nation's polity. Indeed, with regard to China, Johnston (1995a) has demonstrated that two sub-cultures have historically influenced Chinese policies and behavior — a Confucian strategic culture and cultural-realist parabellum culture. As this paper deals with the question of effect on Chinese policy of a specific cultural strand, it is not necessary to deal with the issue of (sub-)cultural change and the parabellum culture as such.

Friendly Negotiations and Farcical Arbitration

Official Discourse

The 2002 edition of the defense white paper has described the situation in SCS as "basically stable." This has been attributed to the signing of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the SCS. Moreover, it was stated that China administers the seas under its jurisdiction and safeguards its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights (including SCS) in accordance with relevant international treaties, mainly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and in accordance with the "policy of good neighborliness and friendship." Such a political declaration in the white paper can be seen as highly peaceful. Even though the SCS was already a disputed territory, applying the policy of good neighborliness and friendship suggests there was a will not to use military means to gain an advantage in the dispute. Thus, as

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[7]For a discussion of the concept of strategic sub-cultures and cultural change, see, e.g., Twomey (2008) or Bloomfield (2012).

a point of departure for this study, we have China's statement which exhibits highly Confucian characteristics.

The description of the situation in the SCS has changed in the consequent editions of the defense white paper. While the SCS is not mentioned explicitly, the later editions give progressively more attention to maritime rights and interests. Whenever the maritime rights are discussed in the defense white paper, they are clearly framed in the defensive narrative. When defining the regional security environment, the 2008 edition of the white paper stated that the "conflicting claims over territorial and maritime rights and interests remain serious, regional hotspots are complex." In the subsequent 2010 edition, the Chinese view has shifted and the description of the security situation says that "disputes over territorial and maritime rights and interests flare up occasionally." The 2013 paper takes it even further and describes the situation in the most militaristic, albeit still defensive terms: "China has an arduous task to safeguard its national unification, territorial integrity and development interests. Some country has strengthened its Asia-Pacific military alliances, expanded its military presence in the region, and frequently makes the situation there tenser. On the issues concerning China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, some neighboring countries are taking actions that complicate or exacerbate the situation." Lastly, in the 2015 white paper it is stated that "on the issues concerning China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, some of its offshore neighbors take provocative actions and reinforce their military presence on China's reefs and islands that they have illegally occupied." Moreover, "some external countries are also busy meddling in South China Sea affairs; a tiny few maintain constant close-in air and sea surveillance and reconnaissance against China."

The evolution of the standpoint on the seriousness of the SCS dispute in the defense white papers suggests two things. First, the SCS dispute and the maritime rights and interests have been gaining more prominence in the official strategic discourse in China. Second, the heightened sensitivity to threat, which is a trait of Confucian strategic culture, is evident.

The territorial dispute has been gaining more prominence in the discourse since the publishing of the 2008 edition of the white paper. This coincides also with the labeling of the SCS as a "core interest" (Lanteigne, 2015). The increasing importance of the issue can be further evidenced by the increasing number of mentions of the phrase "maritime rights and interests" in the seven editions of the defense white paper since 2002.

The Confucian trait of heightened threat sensitivity is evident in the official strategic discourse. The later editions of the white papers (2013 and 2015) frame other states, both regional and extra-regional, as aggressors who pursue assertive policies in

the SCS and infringe on Chinese sovereignty, territorial, and maritime rights. Take, for example, the above-cited quote from the 2013 edition of the paper: "Some country has strengthened its Asia-Pacific military alliances, expanded its military presence in the region, and frequently makes the situation there tenser" (State Council Information Office, 2013). Also, the 2015 paper stated, "some external countries are also busy meddling in South China Sea affairs; a tiny few maintain constant close-in air and sea surveillance and reconnaissance against China." The statements are aimed at the US efforts in East Asia, and especially in the SCS. All the US actions in the region are portrayed as threats, though they are not presented as such by the US itself.

An example of this is the conducting of the freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) by the US. The FONOPs conducted by the US (and at times by other Western countries as well) aim at restoring the status quo postulated by the UNCLOS. Under the treaty, different kinds of maritime features generate different kinds of maritime claims. With regard to the SCS conflict, it is important to note islands generate full territorial rights including the exclusive economic zone (EEZ), rocks generate only territorial sea and contiguous zone, while low-tide elevations do not generate any claims at all. Moreover, foreign ships are granted the rights of innocent passage through territorial waters. Despite provisions of UNCLOS, according to Chinese domestic laws, foreign warships are required to notify Chinese authorities prior to entering its territorial sea (Ku, Fravel & Cook, 2016). Whether this practice is contrary to UNCLOS remains disputable, though the language of the convention suggests that China's domestic law on its territorial sea is breaching the relevant provisions of UNCLOS (Ku et al., 2016). In order to affirm the right of innocent passage and challenge extensive claims, the US, after more than two years, resumed FONOPs in October 2015. In reaction to the US FONOPs, Chinese Defense Ministry issued statements in which it labeled the US action as damaging to regional peace and stability.

Moreover, it used FONOP as a justification for the building of defensive constructions in the Spratly Archipelago (Martina, Torode & Blanchard, 2016). The Foreign Ministry stated that "what the US warship has done threatened China's sovereignty and security interests, endangered safety of personnel and facilities on the reef, and jeopardized regional peace and stability. Again, we oppose such move by the US side and will continue to take necessary measures to protect China's sovereignty and security" (Panda, 2016a). This showcases that in the Chinese view, island-building is a legitimate self-defensive activity, regardless of the fact that such activity challenges the regional status quo and claims of other states.

The Chinese view of the US FONOPs is illustrative of the Confucian trait of heightened sensitivity to threat. The very definition of innocent passage holds at its

core that the "passage is innocent so long as it is not prejudicial to the peace, good order or security of the coastal State" (UN, 1982, art. 19). Even though the FONOPs are conducted in accord with the norms of the international law of the sea, to which China has agreed, China views them as a threat, as evidenced by the quotes from the defense white papers and government statements.

Previously, it was noted that the concept of active defense is a specific manifestation of the contemporary Confucian culture. The concept refers to the defense policy based on self-defense but with offensive operations being permitted once the enemy has attacked, and at its core remains quite static. Nevertheless, we can trace the evolution of the object of the defense. In other words, what is to be actively defended has changed over time and has something to say about the role of Confucian strategic culture in China's foreign and security policy-making process.

In the 2002 edition of the defense white paper, the guideline for active defense was "winning local wars under modern, especially high-tech conditions," and stressed "the deterrence of war." The object of active defense is thus very limited. In 2008, the scope of active defense was broadened to include maintaining maritime, cyber, and space security (State Council Information Office, 2008). The 2013 defense white paper then put forth protecting national maritime rights and interests also as the object of active defense. Lastly, the 2015 edition of the paper focused on "maritime military struggle" and maritime PMS.[8]

A gradual shift of the focus of national defense onto the issues of maritime security is quite apparent, in which the SCS plays an integral part. These issues are framed within the discourse on "active defense," a military concept largely influenced by Confucian norms. This suggests that the concept is a highly malleable one, as its object could have been redefined on four different occasions since 2002. The high level of malleability makes it a useful rhetoric device. By framing the issues pertaining to the SCS and maritime security in general in the language of "active defense," any action with regard to these two can be portrayed as being in accord with the norms of the Confucian strategic culture.

In 2009, when Vietnam and Malaysia submitted their claims to the extended continental shelf to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, an exchange of diplomatic notes among the claimant states occurred. In 2011, the Philippines, in a diplomatic note from 2011, laid claim to the Kalayaan Island group (part of the Spratly Archipelago) as an integral part of its territory. In reaction to this, China has stated that it has been claiming the Spratly Archipelago since the 1930s (even though an official map with the Nine-Dash Line had not been published until

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[8]Preparation for military struggle.

1947). Moreover, China asserted that the Philippines did not make any claim, neither in international treaties nor in domestic laws, to the archipelago until the 1970s. According to China, "since 1970s, the Republic of Philippines started to invade and occupy some islands and reefs of China's Nansha Islands [Spratlys] and made relevant territorial claims, to which China strongly objects" (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 2011).

The 2011 Chinese note is yet another evidence of the Chinese claims to the outside world that it is not China who stirs trouble in the SCS, but rather the other states, which breach international law, occupy the SCS islands illegally, and infringe on China's sovereign rights and territorial integrity (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, 2011).

The same narrative is evident also from the official documents related to the SCS arbitration case. After the Philippines filed the case in 2013, China has declined to participate in the arbitration and has disputed the tribunal's jurisdiction. While not officially appearing at the proceedings, China has nevertheless iterated its position in the position paper from December 2014. The overall narrative is based on the previous agreements concluded between China and Philippines, such as the Declaration of Conduct in the South China Sea. In the position paper, China maintained that it was "the first country to discover, name, explore and exploit the resources of the South China Sea Islands and the first to continuously exercise sovereign powers over them" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2014). On the other hand, the Philippines was the one who "since 1970s . . . illegally occupied a number of maritime features of China's Nansha Islands [Spratlys]" and "seriously encroached on China's territorial sovereignty" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2014). In the Chinese view, the Philippines is not only encroaching on Chinese sovereignty on the Spratly Archipelago. In the claim filed with the Permanent Court of Arbitration, the Philippines has "deliberately excluded [. . .] the largest island in the Nansha Islands, Taiping Dao, which is currently controlled by the Taiwan authorities of China. This is a grave violation of the One-China Principle and an infringement of China's sovereignty and territorial integrity" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2014). To support the narrative of a peaceful China, the position paper continuously emphasizes the willingness of China to settle the dispute "peacefully [. . .] through negotiations," "through friendly consultations," "bilateral friendly consultations and negotiations," and "by way of dialogue" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2014).

These Chinese statements actually are in line with the Confucian norms. Confucianism stresses the need for the disputant states to attempt to solve their conflicts

diplomatically even though the hostilities may have already emerged. As the Philippines has undertaken to settle the dispute by the above-cited means, the unilateral initiation of the arbitration proceeding by the Philippines was thus a breach of its commitment to China, and as such an act of bad faith, which contributes to the aggravation of the dispute.

All of these positions were affirmed by China in the aftermath of the verdict's delivery by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in July 2016 when China issued a white paper titled "China Adheres to the Position of Settling through Negotiation the Relevant Disputes between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea" (State Council Information Office, 2016).

Media Discourse

Much can be learned about the state of the SCS discourse by examining the Chinese media. There is virtually no freedom of the press in China. China has been ranked as the fifth least free country by the Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Without Borders, 2016). Most of the media are just government mouthpieces. However, some media, which can be labeled as semi-official (or commercialized), such as *Global Times*, offer insights beyond government propaganda. Interestingly though, they also tend to be more nationalistic than the official media (Turcsányi, 2014). When it comes to informing about the foreign affairs in general and about the SCS conflict in particular, two media stand out both in volume and vocality of the coverage. They are the *Global Times*, the third most read newspaper in China, and *CCTV-4*, an official TV channel (Z. Wang, 2015). Other media, such as the state news agency *Xinhua* and the newspaper *People's Daily* also published critical commentaries on the dispute, especially in the Philippines versus China arbitration at the Permanent Court of Arbitration.

Similarly to the defense white papers, the media in China have started to give more attention to the SCS dispute since 2010. While in 2010 the *Global Times* published only three editorials on the topic, in 2011 it published 26, and in 2012 the amount rose to 56 editorials (Z. Wang, 2015). The same goes for the *CCTV-4* and its airing of programs dedicated to the South China Sea conflict. In 2010, only one news item on the conflict was aired. In 2011, the number increased to 34, and in 2012, further to 45 airings (Z. Wang, 2015).

In April 2012, the Philippines sent in its largest warship, BRP Gregorio del Pilar, to disperse the activities of Chinese fishermen in the Scarborough Shoal. According to the Philippines, the fishermen were fishing illegally. China reacted to this by sending in its own ship. A stalemate occurred, which was ended due to an impending typhoon (Pham, 2015).

The *Global Times*, by means of an editorial, reacted to this incident in the following manner: "if the Philippines naval vessels hadn't dispersed Chinese fishermen around Huangyan Island [Scarborough Shoal], these crises [in the SCS] wouldn't have broken out. China is the biggest power in East Asia, and it's also the main advocate of putting aside disputes and jointly developing disputed areas. As long as other countries don't provoke the status quo, a peaceful relationship with China can be maintained" (Global Times, 2013a).

A similar scenario which involved Taiwanese fishermen and the Philippine navy, and resulted in one Taiwanese fisherman's death, occurred in May 2013 (Pham, 2015). In reaction, the Chinese media stated that "there has long been a stereotype over the South China Sea issue that China is the arrogant party and that other countries including the Philippines are the victims. This stereotype is now being challenged, especially after Taiwan firmly rebuffed the Philippines' provocation" (Global Times, 2013b).

China is thus portrayed as reactionary and defending itself against the provocations of the Philippines. It was already stated that self-defense is a core norm of the Confucian culture. The narrative put forth by *Global Times* is clearly framed in the norm of self-defense thus ensuring that both domestic and foreign audiences view China as the legitimate, responsible claimant to the SCS. Even though in this narrative China is not the aggressor, the media still call "for strong countermeasures" (Global Times, 2013c).

Regarding the Philippines versus China arbitration case, the narrative constructed by the *Global Times* is similar. Just a few days prior to the delivery of the final arbitral awards, the newspaper stated that "all these years China has been reacting to the new circumstances in the South China Sea" (Global Times, 2016a). This statement came with a warning that "if the US and the Philippines act on impulse and carry out flagrant provocation, China will not take a single step back" (Global Times, 2016a). Once again, the reactionary narrative, according to which China is only responding to provocation, is present. However, the narrative is weakened by the claims that China "has become a formidable competitor that deserves respect. No power in the world could split a united China. As long as we stick together, provocateurs are doomed to fail" (Global Times, 2016b). Such comments suggest that China would not hesitate to use excessive amounts of force even in a defensive posture. Such a statement negates the Confucian norm of minimum violence, according to which states should not use more force than the minimum required amount to deal with threats.

Global Times was not the only medium to weigh in on the arbitration debate. The state news agency *Xinhua* has made its stance on the issue quite clear on its special site

dedicated to the dispute which is titled "South China Sea Arbitration: The Farce Should Come to an End" (Xinhua, 2016a). In labeling the arbitration as such, *Xinhua* has simply restated what was previously said by the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, according to whom the "South China Sea arbitration is completely a political farce staged under legal pretext" (Xinhua, 2016b).

The label "farce" is almost omnipresent in the commentaries published by *Xinhua*. According to one commentator, the arbitration was a "political farce in name of law and justice only benefits special interests," and the "special interest groups would be the sole profiteers at the cost of the peoples' wellbeing" (Luo, 2016). Another commentator, following the delivering of the arbitral awards, stated it is "high time to put an end to this farce that has dragged on for too long" (Jiang, 2016).

The norms of the Confucian culture prescribe that disputes, if possible, should be settled peacefully. Arbitration is one of the options to peacefully settling a dispute. It is recognized by both the UNCLOS as well as the Charter of the UN (UN, 1945). Its rejection of arbitration and diminishing it by labeling it a "farce" goes against the Confucian norms prescribing peaceful settlement of disputes.

The anti-arbitration discourse was also embraced by the *People's Daily*. The editorials published under the alias Zhong Sheng[9] were one of the loudest and most critical voices on the arbitration and Philippine policy (Swaine, 2016). The editorials claimed that "Philippines dismembered China's historical rights," and that the arbitration was "full of lies," set "a ridiculous standard for the territorial status of islands and reefs," and produced a "foul atmosphere" (Swaine, 2016). Moreover, the paper has claimed there is "no excuse to tolerate the distortion of right and wrong that has occurred" (Zhong Sheng, 2016a). Obviously, China is the wronged one here. Furthermore, the paper claimed that "peace-loving countries both in and outside the region also voiced their strong support of China's stance that disputes should be resolved through negotiation and consultation [instead of arbitration]" (Zhong Sheng, 2016a). In such a narrative, the countries that supported the Philippines in submitting the case to the Permanent Court of Arbitration are not peaceful, and the arbitration itself is akin to an act of aggression by the Philippines.

Thus, when it comes to the Philippines versus China arbitration case, the media discourse exhibits Confucian traits, but these are weakened by fierce nationalist statements calling for a strong military reaction by China, and statements against the

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[9]In Chinese, *Zhong Sheng* is a homonym for the phrase "voice of China" (中声) and the alias is used by *People's Daily* to publish commentaries written by a group of the newspaper's editors (Swaine, 2016).

arbitration brought forth by the Philippines. Moreover, the heightened threat sensitivity is once again evident in the narrative that views the SCS arbitration case as contrary to peace.

The heightened sensitivity to threat, bordering on paranoia, is evident also in the media coverage of the non-claimant states' involvement in the SCS dispute, most notably the US, though Japan and Australia are also mentioned in this context. There is a persisting motif of US-led anti-Chinese conspiracy. According to the Chinese media, the Philippines and Vietnam are not acting of their own will in the SCS dispute, but are mere puppets in the grand US scheme to contain China (Z. Wang, 2015). A *Global Times* editorial said that "the South China Sea is not the Caribbean. The US should keep that in mind" (Global Times, 2012). The *People's Daily* slammed the US for denouncing Chinese actions in the SCS and called the denouncement a "trick to antagonize China" which "Washington had appeared too eager to use" (Zhong Sheng, 2012).

The *People's Daily* labeled the US military involvement in the SCS (be it FONOPs or military exercises with its allies) a "trick, whereby [USA] repeatedly attempts to scare off its opponents by displaying its military might as a kind of 'security vigilante'" (Zhong Sheng, 2016b), despite the fact that "there is no need for the US to worry about the so-called 'China threat' as the latter always values harmony and treasures peace. China, with no intention to be a superpower or regional leader, will resolutely take a peaceful path. It will never fight with anyone in the so-called 'new strategic playground of geopolitics' as defined by the US" (Zhong Sheng, 2016c). Despite the fact that China does not pose a threat to the US, the media claim that "the US is accelerating its militarization of the seas by flexing its military muscles even as China exercises maximum restraint on the South China Sea issue" (Zhong Sheng, 2016c).

Once again, there is a clear narrative of a peaceful China and a meddling, even aggressive foreign power — the US. This narrative was used also with regard to less powerful actors. Following the delivery of the arbitral award in the SCS case, the Australian Government has endorsed the tribunal and its decision. The *Global Times* reacted to this. It labeled Australia a "unique country with an inglorious history," and a "paper cat," which would be "an ideal target for China to warn and strike" if it "steps into the South China Sea waters" (Zhong Sheng, 2016c).

To sum up, the Chinese media created a narrative in which several Confucian traits are visible. First, they portray China as a peaceful country, which is not challenging the status quo in the region. Second, other countries, both claimants and non-claimants, are portrayed as bellicose. Third, in the portrayal of the other countries, bellicosity is exaggerated, a result of the heightened sensitivity to threat. However, the

Confucian narrative is weakened by two aspects. The calls to use extensive force in order to counter the threats posed to China run contrary to the Confucian norm of minimum violence. The strong anti-arbitration discourse defies the principle of the pacific settlement of disputes, an integral part of Confucian strategic culture.

Chinese Behavior in SCS

In pursuing its interests in the SCS, China relies on the so-called salami-slicing strategy (Chan & Li, 2015). The aim of the strategy is to change the facts on the ground, to gather slowly the evidence on the Chinese enduring presence in the SCS, and thus support its claims to the area. The slowly cumulating actions do not merit to a *casus belli* in their own accord, but added up they amount to a fundamental strategic challenge to the current status quo in the SCS (Haddick, 2012). If China succeeds in creating new facts on the ground, other actors, the US included, would face considerable difficulties in challenging them (Lanteigne, 2015).

The salami-slicing strategy itself does not inform us about the effects of the Confucian strategic culture on Chinese foreign and security policy. However, the strategy is composed of several elements, which can be analyzed with regard to the effects of Confucianism. The following aspects of the salami-slicing strategy are examined in this section: occupation of islands, artificial island-building, and construction on the islands; resource exploitation; violent clashes and standoffs; and dispute settlement.

Island-building

Currently, of all the islands in the SCS, China has a hold of the whole Paracel Archipelago, seven features in the Spratly Archipelago, and since 2012 also the Scarborough Shoal (Glaser, 2015; Lanteigne, 2015; Turcsányi, 2016).

In order to consolidate the Chinese administrative control of the occupied islands, China has established Sansha City in 2012 (Xinhua, 2012). The city is situated in the Paracels on Woody Island, with a current population of approximately 1,500 inhabitants. In 2014, the state news agency *Xinhua* reported that "two years after establishing Sansha City which comprises a group of barren islands in the South China Sea, the Chinese government is working to make the island cluster more habitable for humans and wildlife" (Xinhua, 2014). The island, as of 2016, possessed a desalination plant (Panda, 2016b), and the local government planned to plant some 500,000 trees on the island within a year (Huang & Liu, 2016).

Making the island suitable for human habitation is an important change in the facts on the ground and helps China to reinforce its claim to the area. According to UNCLOS, only islands that can sustain human habitation or economic life of their own generate exclusive economic zones and continental shelves (UN, 1982, art. 121). Prior to the establishment of Sansha City, Woody Island was very hostile to human life as there was no freshwater or arable soil (Xinhua, 2014). Chinese actions thus serve to legitimize the Chinese claim on the Paracel Archipelago and the surrounding seas.

The same goes for the Spratly Archipelago. Here, China has undertaken island-building on all seven of the occupied features. Since 2013, China has reclaimed land at an alarming rate on the seven occupied features, often at high environmental costs (CSIS, 2016a).

Land reclamation activities in SCS also serve another purpose. Thanks to the artificial islands, China can extend the range of its navy, air force, coast guard, and fishing fleet, allowing them to take effective control of the area (Glaser, 2015; Torode, 2015). Continuing construction of military facilities on the Chinese artificial islands serves to improve the Chinese negotiating position vis-à-vis other claimant states, who might not be able to counter the disproportion of military capabilities in the area (Turcsányi, 2015).

China has already started to amass military equipment in the region. In May 2015, China deployed mobile artillery vehicles in the Spratlys (Rosenberg, 2015). In February 2016, China has dispatched two batteries of HQ-9 surface-to-air missiles to the Woody Island in the Paracels. Around the same time, the YJ-62 anti-ship cruise missiles were also deployed here (Collin, 2016). The Shenyang J-11 fighter jets were also spotted on the island. This makes Woody Island the most militarized Chinese outpost in the SCS (Panda, 2016b). Moreover, China has labeled the area surrounding the Spratly Archipelago a military alert zone and is readily issuing warnings to other states' militaries to stay out of the area (Goh, 2015).

With regard to the Confucian strategic culture, the creation of artificial islands is not problematic in itself. After all, even UNCLOS recognizes the right of states to build artificial islands in their exclusive economic zones (UN, 1982, arts. 56 and 60). What makes them problematic is their construction in disputed areas claimed by other states as their own exclusive economic zones. In that sense, the act of building artificial islands can be viewed as an act of aggression, which negates the narrative informed by Confucian norms. Moreover, the militarization of the SCS is in stark contrast with the proclaimed peaceful Confucian values of harmony and non-violence, which ought to constrain Chinese behavior.

Resource Exploitation

The SCS is of tremendous economic importance to China and its economic development, because of the vast abundance of natural resources — oil, natural gas, and seafood. Due to the conflicting maritime claims, which exist also in the form of overlapping exclusive economic zones, conflicts over resource exploitation were bound to happen.

The most common are the conflicts over the fisheries. The typical course of individual conflicts involves one of the claimants accusing fishermen of the other claimant states of fishing illegally in its waters. In the period of 2010–2015, at least 16 fishing disputes have occurred, though the actual number is probably higher as not all incidents are reported due to the sensitivity of the issue on all sides of the conflict (Pham, 2015).

China is actively supporting its fishermen in their activities in the SCS. This support ranges from subsidies on fuel to providing navigation systems based on the Chinese BeiDou satellite system (Fels & Vu, 2015). Chinese troops readily offer assistance to the fishermen in case of clashes (Choi, 2016). To protect its fishing interests, China has readily boarded and detained other countries' fishing boats and their crews and demanded steep fines from the owners for their release (Rogers, 2012).

The second set of resource-related conflicts includes the conflicts regarding oil and natural gas exploration and extraction. In May 2011, the Vietnamese seismic survey ship was conducting operations in the waters which Vietnam considers its exclusive economic zone. To prevent the ship from finishing its tasks, the Chinese Maritime Surveillance ship cut the Vietnamese boat's cable towing the seismic monitoring equipment. Similar incidents occurred also in June 2011 and November 2012 (Pham, 2015).

On May 1, 2014, China National Offshore Oil Company stationed its HD-981 oil-drilling rig only 130 nmi off the coast of Vietnam. The rig was stationed at its position for two and half months, during which the Vietnamese coast guard was repeatedly harassed by Chinese vessels escorting the drilling rig (Pham, 2015).

On several occasions, China has exerted pressure on foreign energy companies that planned to do business either in Vietnam or the Philippines (Fravel, 2011; Turcsányi, 2015, 2016).

The above-described strategy of China, though at times provocative, is not actually contrary to the norms of the Confucian strategic culture. Confucianism holds that a state should pursue its interests by using non-military means, ideally those that are based on cultural attraction. Even though provocative usage of fishermen and oil

and natural gas exploration is nowhere near cultural attraction, they surely qualify as non-military means. In this regard, it can be concluded that Chinese behavior is partially constrained by Confucian norms as it shapes China's preference to pursue its maritime claims in the SCS by using non-military means.

Violent Clashes

The diplomatic disputes over the building of artificial islands and exploitation of resources have at times led to the emergence of violent clashes among China and its two most prominent rivals, Vietnam and the Philippines. Between 2010 and 2016, at least 45 violent clashes and standoffs occurred (Torode, 2016), though the actual number is probably higher due to the lack of reporting on all the cases when violence in SCS occurred. These clashes are often regarded as definitive proof of a rise in Chinese assertiveness. However, it needs to be noted that the increased number of violent clashes has happened following Vietnam and Malaysia's submission of their claims to the extended continental shelves in the SCS to the UN in 2009 (Johnston, 2013; Yahuda, 2013). What is noteworthy about these incidents is that there was a strong involvement of civilian vessels. The Chinese People's Liberation Army was involved in them only rarely (Yahuda, 2013). Coincidentally, the capacity of China's Coast Guard has increased considerably since 2010 (Fels & Vu, 2015).

Among the duties of the Chinese Coast Guard, a strong focus is on the protection of China's maritime rights and territorial integrity (Morris, 2013). To illustrate, of the 45 violent clashes and standoffs that have occurred since 2010, the Chinese Coast Guard (or one of its predecessors) was involved in 71% of them (CSIS, 2016b). With the increasing capabilities of the Chinese Coast Guard, the number of violent clashes and standoffs has also increased. While in 2010 only two incidents happened, 10 incidents were reported in 2015, and in the first half of 2016, 13 incidents occurred (CSIS, 2016b).

Some of the most prominent clashes in the period were the clashes caused by the cutting of cables on Vietnamese seismic exploration ships; Scarborough Shoal standoff; ramming of the Philippine and Vietnamese fishing vessels; standoff involving the HD-981 oil-drilling rig; and harassing of foreign ships and planes (Fravel, 2014b; Pham, 2015).

As a result of the Scarborough Shoal standoff, which started off as a fisheries dispute, China has gained control of the Shoal (Fravel, 2014b; Pham, 2015). In the HD-981 standoff, the largest number of Chinese vessels were involved. In total, China deployed between 120 and 140 fishing, coast guard, and naval vessels to protect the oil rig (Fravel, 2014b; Pham, 2015).

Based on these incidents, there appears to be a dichotomy in the influence of Confucianism and other factors on Chinese engagement in the SCS. On the one hand, the increasing number of violent clashes and standoffs in the SCS suggests that the pacifist values of Confucianism do not constrain Chinese behavior much. Even though as a whole the increased number of incidents may be reactionary, some of the individual incidents, such as the HD-981 oil-rig standoff, can easily be labeled a Chinese provocation. Since many of the Chinese Coast Guard boats are armed and use violent tactics such as ramming to intimidate and chase away the intruders, this argument is null, as the paramilitary nature of such actions is not in line with Confucian norms and values.

Dispute Settlement

The Chinese Government maintains that it wants to resolve the SCS dispute in a peaceful manner. With a bit of simplification, we can distinguish two types of peaceful dispute settlements — a diplomatic and a legal type. Returning to the issue of the Philippines versus China arbitration, by rejecting the jurisdiction of the Permanent Court of Justice, China has deliberately closed off one of the means to resolve the dispute peacefully.

Since signing the Declaration of Conduct in the South China Sea in 2002, China has insisted on settling the dispute by negotiation and consultation with the other disputants (State Council Information Office, 2016). However, the Chinese aim to avoid multilateralization of the dispute to prevent emergence of a strong unified voice in Southeast Asia. In order to achieve this, China has been using Cambodia and other countries as proxies to avoid the involvement of ASEAN as a united opponent (BBC, 2012; Yi, 2016). Since ASEAN members adopt decisions unanimously, a single ASEAN member can block emergence of a united response to Chinese activities in SCS (Mogato, Martina & Blanchard; Parameswaran, 2016a).

Both the four-point consensus and the Cambodian opposition to the ASEAN's engagement in the SCS dispute are clear examples of the Chinese "divide and rule" strategy. This "divide and rule" strategy leaves individual ASEAN members that are involved in the dispute weaker in their negotiating positions vis-à-vis China. By approaching the dispute bilaterally instead of multilaterally, China is able to extend economic pressures on other claimants in order to satisfy the political needs of China (Turcsányi, 2016).

Even though China prefers to negotiate on a bilateral basis, there is an important exception to the rule. In the 2002 Declaration of Conduct, China and ASEAN members undertook to adopt a binding Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. The

discussions on the binding Code of Conduct have been taking place ever since 2002 and dwindled several times, only to be restarted again (Turcsányi, 2016). Skepticism remains about the Chinese intentions with the Code of Conduct, as it was China who repeatedly slowed down the negotiation process (Tiezzi, 2014; Turcsányi, 2016).

What we can gather from the Chinese position on the three possible ways to resolve disputes is that the Confucian maxim does not influence China's stance on the SCS much. If China's position on the resolution of the SCS dispute were truly influenced by the norms of the Confucian culture, it would have embraced peaceful resolution in all its forms. The opposite is true. As China is rejecting arbitration, effectively blocking negotiations in multilateral fora, and doing only very little to move bilateral negotiations forward, it can be proclaimed that Chinese insistence on a peaceful and friendly resolution of a dispute is nothing but a culturally informed narrative, which has no basis in actual behavior.

Conclusion

There is a dichotomy between Chinese proclamations and behavior, whereas China claims to be a pacifist nation seeking harmony and rejecting confrontation, it nevertheless engages in increasingly assertive behavior in the SCS.

Official Chinese discourse with regard to the SCS dispute embodied in defense white papers, diplomatic notes, or policy papers pertaining to the SCS arbitration case initiated by the Philippines against China is strongly influenced by the Confucian strategic culture. In the official narrative, China is portrayed as a peaceful and defense-oriented state, which uses force only in reaction to other states' provocations. The actions of other states are portrayed as overly aggressive, which can be interpreted as a manifestation of the Chinese heightened sensitivity to threat. The official narrative also stresses the need to settle the SCS dispute in a friendly and peaceful way. This discourse seems to continue even in the latest 2019 iteration of the defense white paper. While reacting to the US official reports, the Chinese white paper describes every contentious Chinese activity as just and peaceful (Cordesman, 2019). The "National Defense in the New Era" (as the white paper is titled) maintains that Chinese strategy is based on the concept of active defense and peaceful development (State Council Information Office, 2019). Hence we can expect that the Chinese involvement in the SCS will continue to be framed in the context of the Confucian norms and values in the official discourse.

Analogous findings were also observed in the media discourse. However, the Confucian norm of minimum violence was contradicted in the media discourse, as

media were calling for a strong, exemplary reaction against the foreign incursions to what China regards as its territory. Yet overall, the Chinese narrative is strongly influenced by the norms of Confucian strategic culture.

While the narrative is strongly influenced by Confucianism, the same can only hardly be said about the actual Chinese behavior in the SCS. The massive land reclamation activities in the disputed areas, militarization of the artificial islands, numerous violent clashes and standoffs between Chinese (predominantly civilian) fleet and Vietnam and the Philippines, as well as China's stance on different means of peaceful dispute resolution all show that Confucian strategic culture has only limited effects on the actual Chinese behavior in the SCS dispute, an issue which is strongly related to China's core interests. Although escalation is avoided, it is clear that Chinese actions are quite assertive, despite the fact that China maintains that all its actions are purely defensive and aimed at protecting its maritime rights in the SCS.

These findings thus lead to the conclusion that while Confucianism is a powerful tool for narrative creation, its effects on the actual Chinese behavior regarding the SCS conflict are quite negligible. This means that the effects of Confucian strategic culture are limited mostly to the discursive role, whereas Confucianism is used for the creation of narratives legitimizing assertive policy.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that a different set of cultural norms might be at play when it comes to Chinese behavior, possibly the parabellum strategic culture as proposed by Johnston (1995a). However, the findings of this study should not be interpreted as definitely proving that parabellum norms are the dominant strand in the Chinese strategic culture.

It needs to be stressed that these findings remain true only for situations in which China's core interests are at stake and cannot be taken for granted in other situations in which core interests feature less prominently.

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