China and the South China Sea Dispute

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Abstract

In this thesis, I attempt to answer the research question ‘What can explain the change in compliant behaviour of the People’s Republic of China’s with the UNCLOS during the conflict with the Republic of the Philippines between 1996 and 2016?’ The thesis will use a case study and process tracing. There are three explanatory factors, derived from previous literature and my theoretical framework, that have potentially influenced China’s changing compliance behaviour in the South China Sea dispute. These elements are: the core principles and interest of China’s policy, China’s rise, and the influence of external threats on China’s behaviour. My analysis shows that all three factors exercise a certain influence on China’s changing behaviour. However, the strongest explanatory factor is China’s changing perception on external threats. The outcome of this study contributes to a better understanding of China’s behaviour, and it provides a contribution to future research on this subject.
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<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of Southeast Asian Nations</td>
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<td>CPG PRC</td>
<td>The Central Peoples Government of the People’s Republic of China</td>
</tr>
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<td>FMPRC</td>
<td>Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCA</td>
<td>Permanent Court of Arbitration, set up under Annex VII of the UNCLOS</td>
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<td>PLA</td>
<td>People’s Liberation Army</td>
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<td>PRC</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>UNCLOS</td>
<td>United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea</td>
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<tr>
<td>SC PRC</td>
<td>The State Council of the People’s Republic of China</td>
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1. Introduction

On January 22, 2013, the government of the Republic of the Philippines surprised China and the rest of the world by announcing that it would unilaterally submit its overlapping territorial claims with China in the South China Sea to the international legal arbitration of the United Nations (UN). This action resulted from the longstanding conflict between the two states, which began because of the increased economic importance of the offshore islands in the South China Sea. Interest in exploring the South China Sea for maritime resources has increased since the 1970s; China established a presence in the Spratly Islands in 1987 (Fravel 2008: 274). The increasing importance of these offshore islands is also illustrated by negotiation of the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982, which laid the foundations for the international maritime regime (Hossain 2013).

Over the years, tensions between the South China Sea claimants were heightened. Negotiations on the Spratly Islands began in 1994 between China and the other claimants, the Philippines and Vietnam. However, China failed to establish a peaceful presence in the South China Sea, and in 1995 reports of Chinese maritime actions in disputed zones of the South China Sea brought international attention to China’s potential for aggression (Lee 1999). The first turning point for China’s compliant behaviour was in 1996, when China ratified the UNCLOS to express its peaceful intentions in the South China Sea. In 1997, China and the Philippines agreed to bilateral agreements in effort to diffuse the tension. In the following years tensions were further increased, which triggered international involvement and the interference of, among others, the United States. This enduring conflict resulted in the initiation of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in 2013, which was set up under the UNCLOS.

The initiation of the PCA was a major development in the longstanding dispute between China and the Philippines, as it was the first time a Southeast Asian state had resorted to legal means to challenge the so-called expansionist behaviour of China (Kim 2016). In response, China rejected the legal arbitration of the UN and adhered to a position of non-participation and non-acceptance (Yu 2016). This noncompliant behaviour towards the PCA is noteworthy because the Philippine initiation
was based on a compulsorily arbitration system of the UNCLOS under which China and the Philippines, both signatories, should accept the arbitration (Yu 2016: 216). China’s decision to ignore the legal arbitration has left the nation open to criticism that it did not commit to the international legal norms of the UNCLOS and the rules-based system of global governance (Storey 2013). It has heightened the political and security tensions in the South China Sea and increased international involvement in the South China Sea issue (Yu 2016). Before the PCA became involved in this conflict, China showed compliant behaviour with the UNCLOS and claimed it had no hegemonic intentions or aspirations to territorial expansion (SC PRC 2005). However, the publication of a position paper against the PCA Arbitration in 2016 that marked China’s noncompliant behaviour has made international society think otherwise (Kim 2016: 27). China’s change in behaviour since the ratification of the UNCLOS in 1996 is remarkable and leads to the following research question:

What can explain the change in compliant behaviour of People’s Republic of China with the UNCLOS during the conflict with the Republic of the Philippines between 1996 and 2016?

The factors used to explain this research question are derived from previous studies. These are: the implications of China’s rise, its core principles and interests, and China’s perception on external threats and pressures during conflict. As previous studies have shown which are discussed in the literature review, there is still no concluding answer to describe the change of China’s behaviour (Hossain 2014; Odeyemi 2015; Feng 2016). Scholars have formerly shown that both China’s rise and the core principles and interests of China’s policy are important factors in explaining the nation’s behaviour, (Mearsheimer 2006; Shih & Yin 2013). However, these factors cannot account for the change in China’s compliance behaviour in this dispute, without recognizing the influence of external threats (Fravel 2008; Feng 2016). Therefore, this study combines explanations of the causal factors in a neoclassical realist framework to attempt to answer the research question. The causal factors are analysed in a case study with the help of process tracing, which attempts to trace the links between intervening processes and the observed outcomes (George & Bennett 2005). The analysis is based on official documents and statements of the Chinese government. This study concludes with the most important findings of the analyses, which show that China’s behaviour is influenced by China’s
economic rise, its core principles and interests, and also by China’s interpretation of external threats. The influence of the final causal factor should be taken into consideration in future policies that have an impact on China, and it provides a line of approach for further studies on this subject.
2. Literature Review

This literature review provides an overview of prior research on the compliance behaviour of states during conflicts. It compares and contrasts different theoretical frameworks and qualitative methods to study the compliance behaviour of states. During this process, the explanatory gaps in prior research are highlighted. This will define the theoretical framework and causal factors that will be used to explain the change in compliance behaviour China with the UNCLOS during the conflict with the Philippines between 1996 and 2016. By doing so, it shows how this study is related to previous studies and how it will contribute to the study of China’s behaviour in the South China Sea dispute.

The causal factors that are used to explain states’ behaviour can be categorized on their level of analysis. Factors of both the systemic and the domestic level of analysis are used in different explanations of the change in states’ compliance behaviour (Rosyidin 2017; Krishner 2010). One of the debates regarding the levels of analysis regards the relative capability of different categories of explanatory factors and how these relate to the levels of analysis (Ray 2001: 355). This debate originates from Singer’s 1961 article ‘The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations,’ in which he concludes that the relationship between propositions about foreign policy, on the one side, and international politics, on the other side, ‘represents different levels of analysis’ (Singer 1961: 29). This relationship can also be found in the behaviour of China towards international society, because the change in compliance behaviour is displayed in its foreign policy, which is influenced, by international pressures and events (Storey 2013). Therefore, this literature review includes research on both the domestic and systemic level of analysis.

The main theory that operates on the systemic level of analysis to explain state behaviour and compliance during conflict is realism (Krishner 2010). According to the offensive realist view (Mearsheimer 2006), the international system has three defining characteristics that influence states’ behaviour: an anarchic international system, states that seek to maximize their power, and the impossibility of states knowing each other’s intentions (Mearsheimer 2014). These systemic characteristics influence the behaviour of states in a way that inhibits cooperation and compliance with institutions, due to two factors: relative gains and the possibility of cheating (Mearsheimer 1994-
However, if this theoretical approach is applied to the situation between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea, it fails to explain why China would comply with the UNCLOS in the first place if China intends to dictate the boundaries of acceptable behaviour for its neighbours itself.

The neorealist approach also attempts to explain state behaviour and the influence of systemic pressures. Although this theory provides a significant contribution to the explanatory variables on the systemic level of analysis, it neglects domestic influences in state behaviour, as neorealists state that ‘the behaviour of states and statesmen is indeterminate’ (Waltz 1979; 69). By ignoring the domestic level, neorealism fails to explain China’s change in compliance behaviour. It considers China’s core principles and interests on peaceful coexistence and the pursuance of international joint development to be irrelevant, because these influential factors are derived from the domestic level of analysis (Shih & Yin 2013; Huang 2014). A purely systemic explanation is therefore not sufficient to account for China’s change in compliance behaviour during the conflict in the South China Sea.

Research on the influence of China’s core interests and principles on its policy study casual factors at the domestic level of analysis (Shih & Yin 2013; Rosyidin 2017; Kim 2016). These studies apply different theoretical frameworks such as strategic culturalism (Rosyidin 2017), or combine elements of grand theories (Kim 2016: 29). The origins of China’s ‘core principles’ and ‘interests’ can be traced back to the Ming Dynasty (Johnston 1996). Deng Xiaoping, one of China’s leading figures, had set China’s core principles in the 1970s, specifically focused on foreign policy. Though Deng Xiaoping was never one of China’s formal leaders, he is considered to be an important leader and ‘comrade’ of the Chinese government, as he is still referred to in recent statements (Cui & Pang 2012: 4). With his principles, Deng Xiaoping advocated for the creation and maintenance of a peaceful international external environment for national development (Huang 2014: 139). On the one hand, he ascertains sovereignty as the core interest of China, but on the other hand he also emphasizes the importance of setting aside disputes and pursuing joint development. These interests influence China’s foreign policy and its behaviour in international society (Shih & Yin 2013). However, this approach cannot explain China’s explicit rejection of the arbitral court of the UNCLOS. This
rejection of the court is an explicit form of noncompliant behaviour and is not in line with the supposed core principle of maintaining a peaceful international environment or joint development. Therefore, the domestic explanation in itself is not sufficient to explain China’s behaviour, and systemic influences should be taken into consideration to explain China’s rejection of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (Fravel 2008; Feng 2016).

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Neither a purely systemic approach, such as that of the neorealists, nor a purely domestic approach, such as that of strategic culturalism, can account for the changing behaviour of China in the South China Sea conflict (Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009: 2). The conflict must be studied with a combination of potential explanations that are derived from both the systemic and domestic level. Whereas neorealism only considers causal factors of the systemic level of analysis as influential, the neoclassical realist approach also takes causal factors of the domestic level of analysis into consideration. It provides a theoretical framework that draws insights from both neorealism and classical realism. The theory attempts to explain specific behaviour from states rather than the general outcome in international relations (Feng 2016). This approach views states as key actors, as during territorial conflicts, such as the South China Sea dispute, the core interests of the state—its national sovereignty and international integrity—are at stake (Fravel 2011). To maintain their integrity and sovereignty a state has to face both internal as external challenges. Thus, the potential explanations for state behaviour are restricted to neither the systemic nor the domestic level of analysis. “The domestic interests in addition to the international interests permit a more nuanced understanding of state behaviour and where it comes from” (Fravel 2008: 280).

The neoclassical realist approach has already been used to explain the changes in China’s behaviour during maritime territorial conflicts (Fravel 2008; 2011; Rathbun 2008). The research conducted by Fravel (2008; 2011) describes three types of strategies a state can apply in conflicts: cooperation, escalation, or delay. The selection for these strategies is triggered by the presence (or absence) of internal and external threats.
There are two types of external threats that trigger states to switch strategy and change their behaviour. Firstly, an external threat to a state’s relative power position from a stronger state might trigger cooperation (Fravel 2008: 17). In light of the current dispute, this would mean that the involvement of, for example, the United States\(^1\) in the South China Sea dispute would trigger China to show compliance behaviour with the international arbitration. Secondly, competition with a specific state may trigger the incentive to cooperate in disputes with third parties (Fravel 2008: 18). This theory does provide some useful insights in the factors that might suddenly change states’ behaviour. Therefore, the main causal factor that is analysed in this study is the external threats that influence China’s behaviour.

However, according to this theory, external threats to security should lead to compromise, whilst China explicitly rejects the arbitration of the UNCLOS. At first glance, these external threats and pressures, including the United States’ military involvement\(^2\), do not trigger compromising behaviour. This discrepancy between the observed behaviour of China and Fravel’s theoretical explanation of the influence of external threats illustrates the explanatory gap on which this study is focused.

To clarify China’s change in behaviour and fill the explanatory gap in earlier research, this study will use the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism and uses causal factors from both systemic and domestic levels of analysis. One of these causal factors used by neoclassical realists (Feng 2016) is the economic rise of China. This development cannot be left unnoticed, as it is subject to many policy debates and theoretical discussions on China’s foreign policy (Mearsheimer 2006; Buzan 2010). China’s economic growth has certain influences on the observed changes in its behaviour (Feng 2016; Mearsheimer 2014; Hossain 2013). Therefore, this study includes the general implications of China’s economic rise to provide an all-encompassing overview. In addition to the influence of China’s rise, this study will also consider the influence of the core interests and principles of China that are included in aforementioned research (Feng 2016; Rosyidin 2017). Both these factors support the influence of the main causal factor: international events and threats that impact China’s behaviour.

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\(^1\) The US is referred to as one of ‘the strongest states in the system’ by Fravel (2008: 18).
\(^2\) This refers to the enhanced military cooperation between the Philippines and the United States, in accordance with their mutual agreement (Kim 2016).
The influence of external threats on China’s compliance behaviour is considered to be of great importance, because this causal factor can suddenly trigger states to change their behaviour, whilst the other two factors gradually influence states’ behaviour (Fravel 2008: 21). The impact of all three causal factors are analysed in the case study and the implications of these results are discussed in the conclusion.
3. Research Design

The goal of this study is analysing China’s changing behaviour and determining what processes during the measurement period have explanatory value. A small-N case study offers the possibility of establishing a more detailed explanation of ‘how their cases relate to the others in a broader universe’ (Seawright & Gerring 2008: 295). This case study covers two decades, between 1996 and 2016. This period is consciously chosen around two turning points in China’s position in the international society and its relationship with the Philippines. In 1996, China ratified the UNCLOS. This convention has been in place since 1982 and was already ratified by the most states in the Asia Pacific community (Lee 1999: 38). China pursued cooperation in the South China Sea by making it known that it would follow the UNCLOS, as will become apparent from the subsequent analyses. The rejection of the decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016 marks another turning point in China’s behaviour, because it explicitly shows non-compliance behaviour with international law and the UNCLOS, and influences China’s position in international society (Yu 2016).

3.1 Case Selection

China’s disregarding the arbitration by the PCA is a unique event. Therefore, the case study will be conducted with the deviant case method. This method selects a case which, by reference to the normal understanding of the particular topic, shows a surprising outcome (Seawright & Gerring 2008: 302). As mentioned above, the analysed conflict is unique due to the fact that it is the first South China Sea conflict to be submitted to an international legal institution, specifically to the Arbitral Court set up under Annex VII of the UNCLOS. China’s (2014) explicit non-acceptance of the legitimacy of the tribunal can be seen as anomalous and therefore as deviant. (McLaughlin Mitchell & Hensell 2007). The deviant character of this case can be determined by the analysis of previous conflicts that were submitted to the arbitration of the Annex VII tribunal of the UNCLOS. Although several procedures are applicable in this legal arbitration tribunal and it gives various rulings, it has never been rejected by a respondent state, as shown by Table 1 (Yu 2016: 216).

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3 In its statement on ‘Award of 12 July 2016 of the Arbitral Tribunal in the South China Sea Arbitration Established at the Request of the Republic of the Philippines 2016’ it also rejected the verdict of the PCA (FMPRC, 12 July 2016).
The purpose of the deviant case analysis is to determine the intervening processes that caused the changes in the noncompliant behaviour during this conflict. If the analysis successfully illustrates causal factors, this study might have explanatory value in other cases of noncompliant states in conflict.

One of the key methods of within-case qualitative analysis is process tracing. The method of process tracing attempts to trace the links between possible causes and observed outcomes (George & Bennett 2005: 6). Even if the outcome of the case is already known, there are detailed processes and sequences that have influenced this outcome which can be identified through process tracing (Bennett 2011: 2135). This method is endorsed by several scholars (Wendt 1999; Hall 2000) as ‘a methodology well-suited to testing theories in a world marked by multiple interaction effects, where it is difficult to explain outcomes in terms of two or three intervening variables’ (George & Bennett 2005: 206). As
any method of analysis has its own particular issues, and one of process tracing’s issues is the question of whether it can lead to generalizable knowledge (Beck 2011). Although the specific explanation of an individual case may not be generalizable to a broader range of cases, the identified causal processes can be proved, through a combination of inductive and deductive methods, to be generalizable (Bennett & Checkel 2014: 7).

Good process tracing features four characteristics. First, it reflects a balance of inductive and deductive reasoning (Waldner 2015: 127), as the tested factors are derived from longstanding theoretical debates. The method of process tracing tests a number of factors rather than testing variables that test one major hypothesis. These causal factors have ‘varying degrees of certitude and uniqueness and therefore can be used to affirm or disconfirm explanations’ (Van Evera 1997: 31-32). Second, it provides a continuous explanation that can be applied to all-important turning points in the case (Bennett 2011). Third, the probative value of evidence must be weighed against other alternative explanations and the plausible biases of this evidence must be taken into consideration. Finally, the evidence used cannot be known prior to the research to protect the researcher from confirmation bias (Bennett 2011: 2138).

3.2 Method of Analysis

The within-case method of analysing processes may provide significant theoretical insights that explain the change in China’s behaviour. This study observes the intervening processes that led to the noncompliant behaviour of China during the conflict with the Philippines. The analysis consists of various documents that are published by the Chinese government. The motivation for the use of these documents is two-fold: On the one hand, it ensures the absence of Western biases in the interpretation of China’s foreign policy. On the other hand, the majority of the research that has been done is based on external views on China’s behaviour during conflict. The analyses of these documents provide therefore a unique view at China’s behaviour during the conflict with the Philippines in the South China Sea.
Conducting this study with this method may present implications that should be taken into consideration. First, the documents that are published by the Chinese government can be biased as well, and this must be considered during the analyses. Secondly, China’s intentions are showed more indirectly in their documents and statements than that we are used to in the Western policy-making and political statements (Cheng 1976; Rozman 2013: 157). This can present difficulties in determining the changes in China’s narrative. Being aware of this fact, this study attempts to find changes in detailed phrases of documents as well as in their overall tendencies. In addition, this study includes objective facts in the analysis that have the potential to show changes in the causal factors.

For each factor, the relevant documents are derived from published documents of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (FMPRC) and the Central’s People Government of the Peoples Republic of China (CPG PRC). If these documents cannot cover the entire period of measurement, secondary sources that include official statements, such as *China and the South China Sea Dialogues* (Lee 1999), are used for further analysis. Some of these official documents are periodical in nature, which enables a temporal comparison. The white papers on national defence are especially valuable, as these are the only regularly published, publicly available, official documents focussing on China’s interests in defence-related matters (Zhang 2012: 883). Other documents are selected from their relevance regarding the measured factors. The most important findings of these analyses are illustrated in the next section.
4. Analyses

4.1 Causal factor 1

*China’s Rise: The importance of the contested areas in China’s economic rise*

China’s rise has become a self-contained subject within international relations (Buzan 2010). The implications of its rise on both domestic and international level have been analysed from different viewing points (Mearsheimer 2006; Odeyemi 2015). Whereas classical realists worry about China’s assertive behaviour, China has stressed its peaceful intentions multiple times. In one of its national defence white papers (SC PRC 2010: II), the Chinese government states that it ‘*will never seek hegemony, nor will it adopt the approach of military expansion now or in the future, no matter how its economy develops.*’ However, according to the neoclassical realist view it is impossible to deny that the rise of China has influenced the nation’s behaviour and policy (Feng 2016: 154).

Because of the all-encompassing character of this causal factor, this analysis is narrowed to particular implications of China’s economic rise. It focuses on the importance of the contested areas to China’s rise. The influence of China’s rise on the importance of the contested areas⁴ shows the connection between the conflict and the change in China’s compliance behaviour towards the initiated arbitration by the Philippines.

China’s rise can be observed in the changes in different policy areas. There are many clear differences, such as China’s GDP growth in comparison to the GDP growth of the United States or the European Union. Moreover, the increased military spending of the Chinese government is often used as supporting evidence for China’s assertive behaviour and hegemonic intentions (Mearsheimer 2014).

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⁴ The overlapping territorial claim of the Philippines and China concern the Spratly Islands. The Philippines submit these overlapping claims to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2013 (PCA 2016).
The following indicators for China’s rise which are relevant to this study provide an interpretation of the excessive growth the Chinese government has had to cope with. In the last twenty years, the Chinese population has increased vastly (Figure 4). In conjunction, the need of natural resources has increased, as shown in Figure 3. This might have influence on the value of the contested maritime rights to the Spratly Islands. Nevertheless, these implications remain assumptions and would gain more value if they were confirmed by the Chinese government itself.

The value of the contested areas seems obvious due to the fact that the entire conflict is based on the maritime rights of these Spratly Islands (Lee 1999; Fravel 2008; Kim 2016). It is a challenge to find official documents in which the Chinese government acknowledges this value. Although there were
not found any official Chinese publications that directly acknowledge the value of the contested area, there are several statements that stress the importance of natural resources for the development of China. Again, this seems obvious, but many of these statements include the significance of maritime rights in the South China Sea to provide these resources to the Chinese people.

For instance, the white paper on China’s peaceful development road (2005: III) states that ‘the main problem facing China in its development is […] the contradiction between economic and social development and the relatively strong pressure of the population, natural resources and the environment’. The need to protect these natural resources is stressed in the section ‘Land and Seaborder Defense’: ‘[China] defends and administers its land borders and seas under its jurisdiction, safeguards the country's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, and secures both its land and sea borders strictly in accordance with treaties and agreements it has signed with neighbouring countries, and the UNCLOS’ (SC PRC 2002: IV). The latest white paper concerning China’s peaceful development calls on regional parties to set aside differences and seek common ground in safeguarding regional peace and stability, including the settling of disputes over territorial claims and maritime rights, to increase trade and economic development (2011: III). This may be a reference to the conflict between China and the Philippines and a link to setting aside disputes and increasing economic development. This should confirm the value of the contested areas to China’s continuing economic rise.

Conclusion

The implications of China’s economic rise are indeed far-reaching and also influence the behaviour of China. The findings of this analysis illustrate the link between China’s development and the increasing value of the contested areas submitted to the PCA tribunal. The official documents do not explicitly discuss the noncompliant behaviour of China, which might be explained by China’s reticent attitude in its official statements and publications. The combination of the general overview and the in-depth analysis shows the linkage between China’s economic rise and its changing behaviour during conflict, but the results fail to provide an airtight causal process for the change in China’s compliance behaviour.
4.2 Causal factor 2

The influence of China’s core interests and principles on its (foreign) policy

China’s ‘core principles’ should be interpreted as norms and values that are of great importance to China’s method of achieving their ‘core interests.’ Although this definition is not completely clear-cut, it is obvious that these interests and principles depend on and interact with each other (Huang 2014; Shih & Yin 2013). In addition, since 1954 the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence have had a prominent place in China’s foreign policy and are still referred to in official state documents. The influence of these core principles and interests on China’s behaviour is analysed in the official documents that are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Analysed Documents: causal factor 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>White Paper</td>
<td>China’s National Defense</td>
<td>CPG PRC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>White Paper</td>
<td>The Development of China’s Marine Environment</td>
<td>CPG PRC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Initiative</td>
<td>China’s Initiation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence</td>
<td>FMPRC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Conference Remarks</td>
<td>Conference on the diplomatic work with neighbouring countries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>President Hu at the UN Summit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>White Paper</td>
<td>China’s Peaceful Development Road</td>
<td>CPG PRC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>White Paper</td>
<td>China’s Peaceful Development</td>
<td>CPG PRC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Conference Remarks</td>
<td>Conference on the diplomatic work with neighbouring countries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>White Paper</td>
<td>Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces</td>
<td>CPG PRC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>White Paper</td>
<td>China’s Military Strategy</td>
<td>SC PRC</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The principles of (1) mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, (2) mutual nonaggression, (3) mutual non-interference, (4) equality and mutual benefit, and (5) peaceful coexistence, originate from the negotiations in 1953-54 between China and India concerning the “Tibet Region of China and India” (CMFA 2000).
The Chinese government published official documents from 1998 until 2010 concerning its national defence, which are publicly available (Zhang 2012). These white papers are used in the analysis of China’s core principles and interests regarding its foreign policy. The sections that include references to China’s interests and principles, specifically on foreign policy, are analysed. The general overview shows that there is an evident decrease in the attention to the International Security Cooperation section. This section contains the principles and interests on which China based its foreign (defence) policy. Where the white paper published in 2000, devotes almost 3000 characters to international security cooperation, the 2010 white paper does not even include an individual section on this topic (Figure 5). Considering the different lengths of the analysed white papers, the coverage percentage of International Security Cooperation decreases significantly over the years (Figure 2). These observations demonstrate that the Chinese government devotes less attention to the so-called international security cooperation. Although it is not explicitly stated, the fact that International Security Cooperation receives less attention in the national defence white papers over the years might suggest that this subject has become less important in China’s defence policy.
The first white paper in 1998 states the focus of China’s defence policy is cooperation. In this white paper, the word ‘cooperation’ is mentioned 48 times and the importance of regional and international security cooperation is emphasized: China unswervingly pursues a national defence policy that is defensive in nature, [...] strengthens international and regional security cooperation and actively participates in the international arms control and disarmament process. [...] Facts show that China is a responsible big country and a firm force safeguarding world peace and stability (CPG PRC 1998: II). The combination of a defensive national defence policy and pursuance of cooperation and joint development is in line with the principles advocated by Dao Xiaoping (Huang 2014). Furthermore, China insists on ‘dealing with its foreign military relations independently and engaging in military exchanges and cooperation based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence’ (CPG PRC 1998: IV). These principles recur in every National Defense white paper and are described in China’s Initiation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (FMPRC 2000).

Whereas the 2000 white paper builds on the familiar concepts and interests (CPG PRC 2000: II), the 2002 white paper shows an important development. It explicitly states for the first time that China’s national interests are ‘the fundamental basis for the formulation of China’s national defense policy’
Prior to this, other factors such as China’s political system, its cultural and historical traditions were thought to be influential on China’s policy (Zhang 2013). This white paper further defines the key national interests of China: ‘(1) safeguarding state sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and security; (2) upholding economic development as the central task and enhancing overall national strength; (3) adhering to and improving the socialist system; (4) maintaining social stability and harmony; and (5) striving for an international environment of lasting peace and a favourable climate in China’s periphery’ (Zhang 2013: 893). After the definition of China’s core interests in 2002, the 2004 white paper emphasized the ‘intensified bilateral and multilateral strategic consultation and dialogues with countries concerned in security and defense fields which contribute to better mutual trust and mutual exchange and cooperation’ (CPG PRC 2004: IX). This reflects the change in leadership of the Chinese Government.

The key message of the 2006 white paper on national defence was concerned with China’s peaceful development. It recognized the critical period of international multi-polarization and adapts its policy, specifically striving for a harmonious international environment: ‘Committed to peace, development and cooperation, China pursues a road of peaceful development, and endeavours to build, together with other countries, a harmonious world of enduring peace and common prosperity. […] Never before has China been so closely bound up with the rest of the world as it is today’ (CPG PRC 2006: preface). It points out that ‘hegemonies and power politics remain key factors undermining international security China’ (CPG PRC 2006: X) and distances itself from competing in arms races or posing military threats. The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence also remain important: In the 2008 white paper, these principles are mentioned in regard to the development of friendly relations. This paper pays less attention to international cooperation and focuses more on the growing importance of China’s national defence strategy and military planning. The white paper published a strategic blueprint for the national military development and for the first time devotes individual chapters to military organizations (CPG PRC 2008).

The 2010 white paper was published amidst heightened concerns of China pursuing expansionist goals in both economic and military areas (Zhang 2013: 895). Therefore, a part of the white paper was
particularly devoted to the non-warfare activities of the People’s liberation Army (PLA) and was committed to building mutual trust between the PLA and foreign counterparts (CPG PRC 2010: IX). Remarkably, the section of International Security Cooperation was absent for the first time in the national defence white paper. The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence are still mentioned in the chapter on national defence policy, and it is explicitly stated that ‘China will never seek hegemony, nor will it adopt the approach of military expansion now or in the future, no matter how its economy develops’ (CPG PRC 2010: II). Nevertheless, pursuance of international cooperation as one of its core principles seems to have lost importance in China’s national defence white papers.

**Other documents**

The 2010 National Defense White Paper was the final officially published document on China’s general national defence policy. In 2013 and 2015 two additional white papers were published on specific military topics. These official publications sketch a new international security situation and present an inward-looking focus with targets such as ‘safeguarding national sovereignty, security and territorial integrity, and supporting the country's peaceful development’ (SC PRC 2013: I). The 2013 white paper also mentions the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in ‘deepening security cooperation and fulfilling international obligations’ (SC PRC 2013: I).

Comparing these documents, the use of the word ‘obligations’ creates a different attitude towards international society from the previously used words ‘development’ and ‘participation.\(^6\) This leads to the conclusion that the Chinese government expresses itself differently towards its interest of joint development. The international security cooperation is no longer approached as a goal that can be reached by strengthening international relations, but as an obligation that needs to be fulfilled. The conversion of China’s principles and interests can also be established in the comparison of the President’s remarks at the Conference on the diplomatic work with neighbouring countries in 2005 and 2013. This comparison provides indications for both continuity and change in China’s core principles and interests. However, the interest in cooperation shifts from international to regional and

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\(^6\) Used in the white papers between 1998 and 2008 regarding the subject of international security cooperation.
domestic cooperation. Overall, the variance in the official documents considering China’s core principles and interests is evidently present.

**Conclusion**

The comparison of the national defence white papers shows both continuity and change. The core principles remain intact, as seen by the continuous recurrence of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. The findings of the analysis of certain paragraphs in the official documents show the changing behaviour of China towards international security cooperation. The white papers pay less attention to this subject. Concluding, China’s attitude towards international cooperation (and towards international society) seems to change according to the content analyses of the official documents.
4.3 Causal factor 3

*External threats and pressures*

The influence of external threats and international pressures on China’s behaviour in conflict has been analysed in previous studies (Fravel 2008; Fravel 2010). In addition to neoclassical realist research, the analysis of this causal factor includes China’s reaction to strategic choices of its rivals and allies. External threats arise from actions taken by other states, such as the unilateral submission of the overlapping territorial claims at the PCA by the Philippine government (Feng 2016). Another example of an external threat is the enhanced cooperation between the United States and the Philippines by reinforcement of the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA)\(^7\) (Kim 2016: 45). These actions occur outside the direct sphere of influence of China but they do shape its position in international society. The same applies to the international pressures that affect China: the international pressure of states, the United Nations, and the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN)\(^8\) to ratify the UNCLOS. Although it was never explicitly stated, signing and ratifying the UNCLOS was an unavoidable act caused by international pressure (Lee 1999: 39).

In the final part of this study, external threats and international pressures that the Chinese government experienced during the conflict between the Philippines and China are analysed. The focus of these analyses is positioned with the Chinese perception of the choices and actions of rivals. Therefore, official statements and documents of Chinese governmental bodies are studied. These are listed in the Table 4.

During the period of measurement, China was involved in several disputes, some of them concerning maritime conflicts in the South China Sea (Lee 1999; Mearsheimer 2014). The analysed documents are directly or indirectly connected to the specific dispute with the Philippines and cover either the actions of the two main actors or on other involved parties, such as Vietnam or the United States (Feng 2016; Kim 2016; Hossain 2017). These documents include official reactions of the Chinese government.

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\(^7\) The Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement is constituted in 2014, as a follow-up of the Visiting Forces Agreement (1999) and is signed by the Philippines and the US. It is a military agreement that allows forces from both states to work closely together. This includes easier access for US forces to Philippine bases and facilities (Armando 2014; Kim 2016).

\(^8\) Regional intergovernmental organization that is established in 1967 to strengthen economic and political cooperation. It also plays an important part in this conflict, but this is not taken into further account in this study.
government or other related bodies on the choices of actors involved. The temporal element of this study determines whether there is any change in China’s position towards its allies and rivals and its behaviour in international society.

Table 3: Analysed Documents: causal factor 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Document type</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>News</td>
<td>China-US Relations in China’s overall diplomacy in the new Era</td>
<td>FMPRC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>FMPRC Statement</td>
<td>Regarding the unilateral submission of the Philippine Government</td>
<td>Storey 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Position Paper</td>
<td>On the matter of jurisdiction of the South China Sea Arbitration initiated by the Republic of the Philippines</td>
<td>FMPRC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>FMPRC Statement</td>
<td>Settling disputes between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea through bilateral negotiations</td>
<td>FMPRC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>FMPRC Statement</td>
<td>Regarding the Award of 12 July 2016 of the Arbitral Tribunal in the South China Sea Arbitration established at the request of the Republic of the Philippine Government</td>
<td>FMPRC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Government Statement</td>
<td>China’s territorial sovereignty and their maritime interests in the South China Sea</td>
<td>FMPRC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When analysing the national defence white papers, the position of China towards certain international actors became apparent in various sections. For instance, the ‘Taiwan Straits’ situation was mentioned in every white paper, in which China’s position continually became more assertive (CPG PRC 1998 - 2002; SC PRC 2004 - 2010). More relevant to this study is the position towards the actors that are involved in the South China Sea conflict. In the 2004 white paper, the position of the US towards the
Taiwan Straits situation is positively mentioned: ‘The United States has on many occasions reaffirmed adherence to the one China policy, observance of the three joint communiqués and opposition to "Taiwan independence."’ (CPG PRC 2004: I). China’s perception of the United States changes in the following white papers, as does the manner of defining its relationship with the US in these white papers. In this general overview, the number of references to the relevant international actors is measured in both positive as negative quality. This analysis is conducted on both the official white papers as the official statements and documents published in the matter of the South China Sea dispute with the Philippines. The changes in China’s approach towards external influences are more specifically analysed in the in-depth analysis.

As is shown, the results of the general overview are not conclusive. The main reason for this inconclusiveness lies with the impossibility of defining concepts that are used to describe the relationship between China and its opposition. Furthermore, these white papers elaborate on China’s national defence and are not created for the purpose of stating China’s opinion regarding international actors. However, it is interesting to see an increase in references to the concepts that are related to China’s external threats during the course of this conflict, and especially after the initiation of the PCA arbitration.
The second analysis covers the statements of official spokespersons’ reactions of the actions of relevant parties during the tribunal. It measures the use of concepts that are related to China’s sovereignty in the South China Sea, and any opposition or threat an actor poses to China’s so-called rights in this maritime area. The documents are retrieved from the publicly available database that include spokespersons remarks on the South China Sea matter. Relative to each other, the results provide no structural change in China’s perception towards its opposition. However, the analysed remarks cover a short period of time, from 2014 until 2016. All of these remarks are published in reaction to the Philippine initiation of the PCA arbitration and the effects of China’s denial of the arbitration. Taking this into consideration, it can be determined that the results deviate from the tenor of China’s official publications before the initiation of the PCA.

Figure 8: Remarks of FMPRC Spokespersons
Table 4: Analysed Documents: Remarks by Chinese Spokespersons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>30/03/14</td>
<td>“Remarks by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson (FMS) Hong Lei on the Philippines' Submission of a Memorial to the Arbitral Tribunal in Relation to Disputes with China in the South China Sea”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>15/07/2014</td>
<td>“FMS Hong Lei's Remarks on the South China Sea-related Comments Made by the US Official”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>12/12/2014</td>
<td>“FMS Hong Lei's Remarks on Vietnam's Statement on the Chinese Government's Position Paper on Rejecting the Jurisdiction of the Arbitral Tribunal Established at the Request of the Philippines for the South China Sea Arbitration”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>13/07/2016</td>
<td>“FMS Lu Kang's Remarks on Statement by Spokesperson of US State Department on South China Sea Arbitration Ruling”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the analysed documents, the Chinese spokespersons stress the importance of China’s territorial sovereignty and rights. On average, indisputable sovereignty is mentioned 2.8 times and 2 of these mentions include China’s maritime rights in the South China Sea. This shows a remarkable change with respect to the South China Sea dialogues between the Philippines and China in the period of bilateral negotiations between 1994 – 1997. During those negotiations, both parties did not publicly claim or contest sovereignty of the Spratly Islands (Lee 1999: 38). Another notable observation is the direct critiques the spokespersons pose to the opposing parties. In its first reaction to the initiation, China urges the Philippines to ‘comprehensively and effectively implement the consensus [...] and return to the right track of settling the disputes through bilateral negotiations’ (Lei 2014). But after the PCA arbitration, China argued that the Philippine government violated international law and accuses the state of ‘a political farce under the cloak of law’ (Kang 2016). The involvement of the United States in the South China Sea dispute is denoted as ‘irresponsible’ and the US is urged to ‘think over its words and deeds, stop advertising the illegal arbitration and meddling with the South China Sea Issue, and cease undermining China’s sovereignty and security interests and escalating regional tensions’ (Kang 2016). According to the Chinese government, the actions of other states obstruct efforts to peacefully resolve the South China Sea disputes.
Conclusion

This analysis shows China’s increasingly assertive tone towards its international opposition. The change in China’s perception of these threats is in line with the change in China’s behaviour during the conflict. China adheres to its original decision to oppose and refuse any ruling of tribunal, and does not acknowledge the jurisdictional power of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the matter. This point of view goes against the tribunal’s verdict, which recognizes the arbitration as legally valid (PCA 2016). China’s perception of other states and their actions therefore have explanatory value for China’s change in compliance behaviour with the UNCLOS.
5. Conclusion

The initiation of the Permanent Court of Arbitration by the Philippines in 2013 added a new element to the South China Sea conflict with China. It also created a unique situation regarding China’s behaviour in conflict, which the existing theoretical approaches could not explain. The explicit noncompliant behaviour that was shown with China’s rejection of the PCA arbitration is not in line with the core principles and interest of China’s policy (Huang 2014), but neither could be explained by a purely systemic approach such as classical realism (Mearsheimer 2006). Therefore, the goal of this study was to provide a more concluding answer to the changes in China’s compliance behaviour by including the influence of external threats.

The research was conducted with the help of a neoclassical realist approach. According to this theoretical framework, causal factors of both the systemic and domestic level of analysis should be included to explain states’ behaviour. The research studied China’s changing behaviour alongside the analyses of three key causal factors, and during the analyses, it became clear that all three key factors showed variance and a certain influence on China’s foreign policy. For instance, some of the core principles and interests are currently losing their significance. The inclusion of the principles of cooperation reduces gradually in the white papers and the importance of these principles decreases, according to the results. The connection between China’s economic rise and its changing behaviour in conflict is less evident, but in the analysis a link is found between settling maritime territorial disputes and increasing economic development. Final, the influence of external threats is shown in China’s increasing assertive tone towards its international opposition. Whereas China did not publicly claim sovereignty in the Spratly Islands during the negotiations with the Philippines in 1994 – 1997, the current spokespersons of the Chinese government stress China’s indisputable sovereignty repeatedly.

The overall conclusion of these analyses is that the change in China’s compliance behaviour cannot be unilaterally explained. All three factors exercise a certain influence on China’s policy. This study provided an empirical foundation for the mutual linkage between the three causal factors and relative to China’s behaviour in the South China Sea dispute. The influence of external threats is important for future policy making of international actors that effect the relation between China and these actors.
Further study of the influences of external threats and pressures on China’s compliance behaviour may provide certain guidelines that can be implemented to future policies that can improve the relationship between China and the international society.
References


