

CHINA AND THE SPRATLY ISLANDS: HOW THE DOMINANCE OF THE SOUTH  
CHINA SEA IS VITAL FOR CHINA'S CONTINUED GROWTH

by  
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## **Abstract**

The sharp turn to the Far East, often referred to as the “pivot”, has brought to light China’s secretive attempts to gain ownership of the straits of the South China Sea, mainly by staking claim of several of the Spratly Islands. A central question is “what role do the Spratly Islands play in China's attempts to dominate the South China Sea, more specifically in the One Belt One Road initiative?” The argument that the Spratly Islands are significant is a logical one: as the Spratly Islands are located in the South China Sea, which sees trade that passes through it, specifically the oil, tripling the amount that passes through the Suez Canal, and almost fifteen times the amount that passes through the Panama Canal, it would follow that in order for China to increase its economic (both through trade, and natural resources), diplomatic (the One Belt One Road initiative), and military influence throughout the South China Sea, it would need to gain and maintain dominance in the region. Applying a classical geopolitical approach, along with ancient Chinese teachings of strategy, understanding how and why China has taken certain steps towards its goal of dominance is made clearer. The findings point to the geographic location of the Spratly Islands, because of China’s fear of encirclement, as the biggest reason why the Spratly’s are so significant. The aim was to convey clear ways that the Spratly Islands have already played a major role in China’s global expansion.

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## **Introduction**

For more than a decade, China has discreetly yet forcefully positioned itself across the South China Sea in order to gain control of the trade routes and natural resources offered by the region. Whether it is through the positioning of military outposts, or the creation of entirely new “islands,” China has unapologetically claimed several key territories. The trade that passes through the South China Sea, specifically the oil, is triple the amount that passes through the Suez Canal, and almost fifteen times the amount that passes through the Panama Canal. As one of the fastest growing superpowers, China must fuel itself in order to maintain the fast tempo it has been operating at. However, this power shift has gone largely unnoticed by the American public. While the United States has been distracted by land wars in the Middle East, such as the moral barbarity of Bashar al-Assad’s use of chemical agents in Syria, or Saddam Hussein’s genocide of the Shias in Iraq, military power has been shifting from Europe to Asia. This sharp turn to the Far East, often referred to as the “pivot”, has brought to light China’s secretive attempts to gain ownership of the straits of the South China Sea, mainly by staking claim of several of the Spratly Islands. The aim of this paper is to answer the question “What role do the Spratly Islands play in China's attempts to dominate the South China Sea, more specifically in the One Belt One Road initiative?”

In order to answer this question, this paper tries to clearly identify which methods China has taken to improve its geopolitical standing, primarily focused in the South China Sea region. I use several studies that have depicted China’s strategy of becoming the world’s hegemon, a strategy often referred to as its “100-year marathon”, which

places it as the lead superpower by 2049.<sup>1</sup> This paper will attempt to take the existing data in order to identify the level of significance that the Spratly Islands may or may not hold. Ultimately, this review will present a clear and distinct gap that currently exists in the current literature. Upon presenting my hypothesis (along with the null hypothesis), I will present the data available in order to accurately capture the relationship between the Spratly Islands and China's attempts at controlling the South China Sea. Finally, I will discuss the future challenges that remain for researching the relationship between the Spratly Islands and China's South China Sea dominance.

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<sup>1</sup> Pillsbury, Michael. *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015

## Literature Review

### **Assassin's Mace**

In order to best understand how China sees itself on the world's stage and how it intends on becoming the hegemon, it is necessary to examine key components of its vast history. We examine how China's geopolitical goals mold its actions in the Spratly's, the strategies it employs, and how other countries in its situation have previously behaved. Known as the "*Assassin's Mace*", China's strategy to defeat any competitor stems from thousands of years of military knowledge and tactics. This, along with the mindset on positioning drawn from their game *Go*, has allowed it to obtain geographic locations in the South China Sea to extend their reach and prepare for the next phase of Chinese dominance, the One Belt One Road initiative. Many experts believe that this initiative will further place China inside every major port, city, and country spanning from Asia to Europe as technologies exist today that did not exist when the Silk Road was utilized.

"Whoever dominates the sea dominates world trade; whoever dominates world trade dominates the Golconda [a location of great wealth]; whoever dominates the Golconda dominates the world...Boost the shipping industry to expand the navy, let our national navy keep pace with the big powers and get into the rank of first-class powers. The only way for China to become prosperous is to develop its military arms."<sup>2</sup>

This quote, by Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Republic of China (1912-1949), is a clear insight into the Chinese way of thinking when it comes to its goal of geopolitical domination. This, coupled with President Xi's "New Silk Road" (which will be discussed later on in the paper), are the methods in which China will aim to complete its 100-year plan to becoming the number one global superpower, otherwise known as the

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<sup>2</sup> Yu, Wanli. *The American Factor in China's Maritime Strategy*. The United States, and 21st Century Sea Power. Newport, RI: Naval Institute Press: 2010.

hegemon. In attempts to understand the thinking behind the Chinese strategy, experts turn to the vaguely mentioned *Assassin's Mace*. As explained in Pillsbury's writings, this *assassin's mace* is a weapon in China's folklore that ensure victory against any enemy, especially if that opponent is stronger.<sup>3</sup> This weapon is not one of brute strength and of showmanship but precise and measured steps that are only exposed once it is ready to be used for a striking blow. As Michael Pillsbury states, "while Chinese leaders harbor deep, even paranoid, insecurities about the United States and Western-led efforts to 'encircle' their country, there is little evidence that China seeks to intentionally incite a war with America".<sup>4</sup> This intentional patience and unwillingness to enter into armed conflict yet is part of the stratagem.

An exercise that is held every year at the Naval War College, as Pillsbury explains, saw the United States' first defeat against China as an opponent utilizing this *assassin's mace*. Whenever China attempted to fight the United States in a conventional manner, going to toe-to-toe with the military might of the United States, it lost by a large margin. However, whenever China reverted to its historical lessons of the *assassin's mace*, it was the victor.<sup>5</sup> As mentioned before, *assassin's mace* derives from ancient Chinese folklore, where a hero is confronted by a more powerful enemy. This enemy was gigantic in stature and equipped with the most modern weaponry which made all fear him. In the legend, the hero bore a hidden, short, lightweight, spiked club or mace. This mace did not appear useful or dangerous however, when wielded by the hero, who had

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<sup>3</sup> Pillsbury, Michael. *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Pillsbury, Michael. *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Pillsbury, Michael. *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015.

trained in secret, it resulted in a devastating single blow which led to the hero's victory. The term is originally called *shashoujian*. This term is formed by three Chinese characters meaning “kill”, “hand”, and “mace”, roughly translated to “assassin's mace”.<sup>6</sup> All technologies and strategies related to *assassin's mace* are categorized in the Chinese government as “the Inferior Defeats the Superior”. As with the folklore, China intends on lulling the adversary into complacency, seeming nonthreatening while it collects information vital to the enemy's operations. This information allows China to anticipate any potential moves the adversary may utilize.

The term *assassin's mace* is seen in doctrine titled “The Military Revolution in Naval Warfare”, written by leading Chinese military strategists. In it, these strategists emphasize that “mastery of outer space will be a prerequisite for naval victory”.<sup>7</sup> An emphasis is also placed on using tactical laser weapons which could be used first in anti-ship missile defense systems.<sup>8</sup> Besides a few articles that have been published, very few modern definitions of *shashoujian* have been documented. In Jason Bruzdinski's “*Demystifying Shashoujian: China's 'Assassin's Mace' Concept*”, he states that “the most comprehensive Chinese military statement about *shashoujian*, that resembles a formal definition, came from a PLA Air Force (PLAAF) officer, Senior Colonel Yang Zhib.”<sup>9</sup> Colonel Yang, who served as a deputy researcher at the PLAAF Command College in the Office for Planning and Management Research, stated that “*shashoujian* can be [any]

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<sup>6</sup> Pillsbury, Michael. *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Zhongchang, Shen. *21<sup>st</sup> Century Naval Warfare*. China Military Science, no. 1, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Zhongchang, Shen. *21<sup>st</sup> Century Naval Warfare*. China Military Science, no. 1, 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Bruzdinski, Jason. “*Demystifying Shashoujian: China's 'Assassin's Mace' Concept*.” The MITRE Corporation, September 12, 2013. <https://www.mitre.org/publications/technical-papers/demystifying-shashoujian-chinas-assassins-mace-concept>.

weapon systems and equipment” and/or a certain type of “combat method.”<sup>10</sup> In terms of equipment,” it is not just one or two advanced weapons, it is something that all the services will use”. As Colonel Yang Zhibo stated, “it is an all-army, all-location, composite land, sea, and air system”. It must also be a Chinese program that can use advanced foreign technology, but should not be purchased as a full system from abroad.<sup>11</sup> One reason for not purchasing it from abroad is that these types of technology and tactics are common knowledge to everyone else, including the enemy. The U.S. National Defense University (NDU) in Washington, DC, has a formalized publications-sharing program with the PLA National Defense University.<sup>12</sup> This program was established in 1985 by a U.S.-PRC memorandum of understanding that was re-affirmed in 1995 and was meant as a document exchange program to foster U.S.-PRC military-to-military relationship. However, this has not been a fruitful endeavor as PLA NDU representatives have not demonstrated reciprocity by sharing unclassified PLA NDU military journals and other publications.

Understanding the origins and context of shashoujian is very important for discovering the meaning of the term, realizing its true significance, and assessing the implications of shashoujian for the Chinese government. Correctly translating and interpreting shashoujian are also important to facilitate meaningful research, to establish a baseline of knowledge, and to make new discoveries. Pillsbury’s examination also

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<sup>10</sup> Bruzdinski, Jason. “*Demystifying Shashoujian: China's 'Assassin's Mace' Concept.*” The MITRE Corporation, September 12, 2013. <https://www.mitre.org/publications/technical-papers/demystifying-shashoujian-chinas-assassins-mace-concept>.

<sup>11</sup> Bruzdinski, Jason. “*Demystifying Shashoujian: China's 'Assassin's Mace' Concept.*” The MITRE Corporation, September 12, 2013. <https://www.mitre.org/publications/technical-papers/demystifying-shashoujian-chinas-assassins-mace-concept>.

<sup>12</sup> Bruzdinski, Jason. “*Demystifying Shashoujian: China's 'Assassin's Mace' Concept.*” The MITRE Corporation, September 12, 2013. <https://www.mitre.org/publications/technical-papers/demystifying-shashoujian-chinas-assassins-mace-concept>.

revealed that several articles containing discussions about shashoujian were presented by the commander of the Guangzhou Military Region, commander of the Chengdu Military Region, and commander of the PLA Navy. Pillsbury also obtained a copy of the Journal of the PLA National Defense University where General Liu discussed methods to successfully attack a U.S. aircraft carrier using shashoujian weapons.<sup>13</sup>

It is reported that a couple of days after the September 11 attacks, two military strategists stated this proved “favorable to China” in that it proved that the United States was vulnerable to non-traditional methods of attack.<sup>14</sup> As Pillsbury states in his book, “*assassin’s mace*” is a key component to China’s military strategy in the Hundred-Year Marathon.<sup>15</sup> China follows ancient tradition, following the advice and lessons from the millennia of experience it has. Originating from the Warring States period, *assassin’s mace* arrived around the same time as legendary tactician Sun Tzu. Sun Tzu wrote that “in war the ‘highest excellence’ is never having to fight, for the commencement of battle signifies a political failure”.<sup>16</sup> It is for this reason that China has taken the path of the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative.

Conveniently arranged into the acronym DIME, which stands for *Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic*, there are four instruments of national power<sup>17</sup>. In essence, DIME is a method of categorizing the power, and therefore influence, of a state.

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<sup>13</sup> Bruzdinski, Jason. “*Demystifying Shashoujian: China’s ‘Assassin’s Mace’ Concept.*” The MITRE Corporation, September 12, 2013. <https://www.mitre.org/publications/technical-papers/demystifying-shashoujian-chinas-assassins-mace-concept>.

<sup>14</sup> Gertz, Bill. *The China Threat: How the People’s Republic Targets America*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Pillsbury, Michael. *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China’s Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Kaplan, Robert. *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos*. New York, NY: Random House, 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Interorganizational Cooperation*. Joint Publication 3-08. Washington, D.C., 2016

How much a country can project its power in these four domains clearly define how much of a player that country is on the world's stage. Rarely in today's globalized world will a state solely rely on its *military* or *economic* prowess alone. Sometimes diplomacy alone will solve a problem, but information is always needed to support the other three elements. Economic interaction occurs daily between most states and can be used to project power in different ways, and sometimes military actions are needed, although this does not always necessarily mean war. Economic interaction can be trade and cooperation, development assistance, or sanctions. As we see throughout the actions of the United States, the forms of power are never strictly linear and oftentimes require a blend of two or more aspects of DIME. Though the OBOR initiative is a method of employing a form of *economic power* by almost guaranteeing its presence in all countries from Asia, around the Horn of Africa and into Europe, *diplomatic power* follows in trace. As we will discuss in the next section, all these actions by China that on the surface may not involve its military may inevitably lead to war between it and the United States.

### **Thucydides' Trap**

As will be discussed later in the paper, many countries have submitted to China's rise and power within the region. There is significant debate about countries such as China and how its rise in power will play on the world's stage. Though there are several countries that will bend to China's will, several countries remain challenging the Chinese rise, as explained by Kenneth Waltz, "the question is not 'will both of us gain?' but rather 'who will gain more?'"<sup>18</sup> One perfect example of Waltz's question comes from Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War in the Melian Dialogue, which occurred

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<sup>18</sup> Waltz, Kenneth. "*Theory of International Politics*". New York: McGraw Hill, 1987

“when Athens entered Melos to forcefully take over”. The Athenian envoy told the inhabitants of Melos who were protesting the unfair treatment by the Athenians “right...is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must”.<sup>19</sup> States that become too powerful risk triggering what is called a “security dilemma” which is when a country acquires so much power that other countries choose to form a balancing coalition against the rising power.<sup>20</sup> Another option that other countries in the region may take is to build up their own military power and economic capital. However, the latter attempts may seem futile as countries such as China have resources that almost guarantees a balancing coalition. This coalition does not always come in the form of military might; in 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled in favor of the Philippines in a dispute between it and China in the South China Sea. China “flatly rejected [the] unfavorable ruling...demonstrating [the] ability to combine charm, largesse, bribes, and blackmail to find ‘compromises’”.<sup>21</sup>

Enter the anarchic global structure, which states that anarchy is not chaos or disorder but the absence of a centralized, legitimate authority. In terms of a geopolitical approach, the anarchic global structure generally holds that power is the only currency that matters.<sup>22</sup> Power, soft or hard, is the ability to fend off opposing nations’ wills while imposing one’s own will upon whomever is in the way. In the anarchic international order, “Great Powers seek to establish spheres of influences within their own regions to

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<sup>19</sup> Strassler, Robert B., and Victor Davis Hanson. *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*. Riverside: Free Press, 1998.

<sup>20</sup> Drezner, Daniel W. *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Allison, Graham. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’ Trap?* New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Drezner, Daniel W. *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 2015.

gain security”. Due to the anarchic nature of the international order, states tend to exaggerate each other’s malign intentions.<sup>23</sup> Drawing from the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau and Baruch Spinoza, Waltz suggests that “wars among states are as inevitable as are defects in the nature of man”.<sup>24</sup> The reasons for this is because, unlike the individual man who is limited by disease, sleep, and hunger, states do not suffer such limitations and can therefore continue vying for dominance. States are like men who “display both an urge to live and an inability consistently to order their affairs according to the dictates of reason”.<sup>25</sup>

Power transition theorists also assume anarchy however focus on the relationship between the hegemon and potential challengers to its primacy in world politics. If a hegemon is supplanted by a rising power, the likelihood of all-out war increases dramatically. We can consider the current geopolitical struggle in the South China Sea as either an outcome of the “who will gain most” mindset between major powers, or as an outcome of the security dilemma and the resulting balancing/counterbalancing that arises when one nation grows too powerful, or perhaps both.<sup>26</sup>

This is clearly seen occurring as the United States, the hegemon since the end of the Cold War, has received significant challenge from a rising power, China, as it seeks to shift the power balance in the world. This increase in likelihood towards war is often referred to as the Thucydides’ Trap. This phrase is best explained through Thucydides’

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<sup>23</sup> Baohui, Zhang, and Anders Corr. *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 40, no. 2 (2018): 333-35. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26539185>.

<sup>24</sup> Waltz, Kenneth., and Stephen M Walt. *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Waltz, Kenneth., and Stephen M Walt. *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Baohui, Zhang, and Anders Corr. *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 40, no. 2 (2018): 333-35. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26539185>.

description as to why two leading city-states in the ancient world waged war: “It was the *rise* in Athens and the *fear* that this instilled in Sparta that made war *inevitable*.”<sup>27</sup> To best understand the origins of Thucydides’ Trap, it is necessary to review the struggle for power between a rising Athens and the hegemon Sparta (a geopolitical precursor to China and the United States). In 421 B.C, Athens and Sparta signed a peace treaty that remained fragile at best. Then, not unlike the decision making in antiquity required a mastery of variable “no less numerous and complex than those faced by an American president”.<sup>28</sup> As Thucydides explains, Sparta’s allies in Thrace and Chalcidice refused to become subjects of Athens, which the treaty mandated.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile in the Peloponnesus, Corinth allied with Argos to prevent Sparta’s domination of the region, falling in line with the “security dilemma” brought forth by the anarchistic theorists. Over time, those that forged the peace treaty left office, and new politicians were led by the actions of their lesser allies. It was through the actions of their allies and proxies, and the failure to remember the cost of war that led to the Peloponnesian War, a full-scale conflict between Sparta and Athens that left both sides weaker than they began.

This phenomenon of the almost inevitable conflict between the rising power and the hegemony is referred to the “Thucydides’ Trap”. Thucydides was a Greek historian who wrote the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, an account of the conflict between these two superpowers of the day. According to Graham Allison, author of *Destined For War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’ Trap*, the Thucydides’ Trap is “the

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<sup>27</sup> Allison, Graham. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’ Trap?* New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Strassler, Robert B., and Victor Davis. Hanson. *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*. Riverside: Free Press, 1998.

<sup>29</sup> Allison, Graham. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’ Trap?* New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

severe structural stress caused when a rising power threatens to upend a ruling one”.<sup>30</sup>

Allison argues that this outcome, which was to the detriment of both parties involved, is why China is unlikely to enter a full scale conflict with the United States before its ascension to the number one superpower.

Adding to the significance to the Thucydides’ Trap, Robert Kaplan states that it takes “a shallow grasp of history to believe that solutions exist to most international problems, often there are no solutions, [but] confusion and unsatisfactory choices”.<sup>31</sup> The very word “modern”, as Kaplan suggests, is the attempt of present day strategists to separate today’s state of affairs from the past. To use “modern” theories unwisely is to say that today’s “modern” politics, and ideas are not an “extension of the past, but an outright rejection of the journey that history has taken society in”. There are some analysts that even go as far as to suggest that in this era of globalization, “economic interdependence has rendered great-power geopolitical competition moot”.<sup>32</sup> Geopolitics, as some has proposed, “has been relegated to the dustbin of history”.<sup>33</sup> This is most likely a naïve and unrealistic point of view. Machiavelli stated that if “anyone wish[es] to see what is to be must consider what has been; all the things of this world in every era have their counterparts in ancient times”. We now turn to how the Spratly Islands have already served China’s goals of control of the South China Sea in the past.

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<sup>30</sup> Allison, Graham. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’ Trap?* New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Kaplan, Robert. *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos*. New York, NY: Random House. 2001.

<sup>32</sup> Mackubin Thomas. *In Defense of Classical Geopolitics*, Naval War College Review 52, no. 4, 1999.

<sup>33</sup> Holmes, James R., and Toshi Yoshihara. "China's "Caribbean" in the South China Sea." *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 1. 2006: 79-92. doi:10.1353/sais.2006.0010.

## **Spratly Islands' history in the South China Sea**

Although economically not significant, the land features of the Spratly's may hold military importance for the states occupying or claiming them. The historically high amount of shipping which transits the South China Sea gives significance to the Spratly Islands for sea lane defense, maritime interdiction, early warning, and surveillance.<sup>34</sup> The Spratly's have already demonstrated their value in military strategic placing. During World War II, Japanese imperial forces claimed all of the islands and occupied key parts of the South China Sea, constructing a submarine support base on Itu Aba as part of their efforts to successfully cut Allied shipping in the region.<sup>35</sup> From 1840 to 1949, one Chinese scholar counted 479 attacks launched against China from the sea, with 84 of those being major assaults.<sup>36</sup> This history of military actions taken utilizing the Spratly Islands loom over China's prosperity, as 50% of its petroleum is imported from overseas, and 90% of its foreign trade is through shipping, much through the South China Sea from China's booming southern provinces.<sup>37</sup> As Kaplan states in his writings, "it is not ideas Asians fight over, but space on the map".<sup>38</sup>

As mentioned before, China has taken steps in order to counter this potential threat. China's maritime "near sea strategy" is to neutralize any threat within the "first island chain," defined as a line connecting Borneo with the Philippine, Taiwan, and

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<sup>34</sup> Bouchat, Clarence J., *Dangerous Ground: The Spratly Islands and U.S. Interests and Approaches*. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2013

<sup>35</sup> Bouchat, Clarence J., *Dangerous Ground: The Spratly Islands and U.S. Interests and Approaches*. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2013

<sup>36</sup> Bouchat, Clarence J., *Dangerous Ground: The Spratly Islands and U.S. Interests and Approaches*. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2013

<sup>37</sup> Bouchat, Clarence J., *Dangerous Ground: The Spratly Islands and U.S. Interests and Approaches*. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2013

<sup>38</sup> Kaplan, Robert. *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and The End of a Stable Pacific*. New York, NY: Random House, 2014.

Japanese Islands, to ensure access to the Pacific Ocean and prevent a “Great Wall in reverse.”<sup>39</sup> Having actually sustained attacks from the Spratly Islands, other South China Sea states also want to control some or all of the Spratly features for their own protection. For instance, since the 1980s, the Philippine government considers the adjacent Spratly group “vital to the defense of its western perimeter” and to its economic survival.<sup>40</sup>

During this time, China occupied Mischief Reef without the Philippine navy being aware and constructed a three-story building, and several concrete structures that were primarily designed for military use.<sup>41</sup> On Johnson Reef, China emplaced heavy machine guns that would disrupt any enemy activity within the area. As Kaplan argues, “while the rest of the world leans head first towards globalization, where territorial disputes are a thing of the past and to be repudiated, the South China Sea becomes more akin to early 1900s western hemisphere”.<sup>42</sup> Though activities within the South China Sea are more similar to the Caribbean during the days of President Theodore Roosevelt, the actual Sea itself holds a more crucial role on a global scale.

There is a current school of thought that believes that Alfred Thayer Mahan, often referred to as the “evangelist of sea power” may be the source of inspiration for China’s wading into maritime strategies.<sup>43</sup> Currently, 40% of the world lives within 60 miles of

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<sup>39</sup> Bouchat, Clarence J., *Dangerous Ground: The Spratly Islands and U.S. Interests and Approaches*. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2013

<sup>40</sup> Bouchat, Clarence J., *Dangerous Ground: The Spratly Islands and U.S. Interests and Approaches*. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2013

<sup>41</sup> Kaplan, Robert. *Asia’s Cauldron: The South China Sea and The End of a Stable Pacific*. New York, NY: Random House, 2014.

<sup>42</sup> Kaplan, Robert. *Asia’s Cauldron: The South China Sea and The End of a Stable Pacific*. New York, NY: Random House, 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Holmes, James R., and Toshi Yoshihara. "China's "Caribbean" in the South China Sea." *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 1. 2006: 79-92. doi:10.1353/sais.2006.0010.

the coast, otherwise known as littorals.<sup>44</sup> As it was centuries ago, those who today hold maritime dominance will enjoy unimpeded growth and trade. Mahan believed that in order to build up sea power, the United States had to base its operations on three pillars of “*overseas commerce, naval and merchant fleets, and naval bases*”<sup>45</sup> As will be discussed later, the necessity for naval bases has directly led to the creation of entire new islands within the South China Sea, with the capability of serving as either a port or landing site for Chinese commercial and military assets.

Mahan’s arguments for sea dominance is support by the United States’ own history in its fledging years. By controlling major trade routes, and preventing any foreign powers from meddling in its own backyard, the United States was able to gather resources, exercise naval superiority, and establish stability in its area of operations. The United States, with the control of the Caribbean Sea, enjoyed decades of prosperity because there were no significant threats to its trade. As Kaplan states, “the Caribbean was far from the main sea lines of communication, while the South China Sea is at the heart of them.”<sup>46</sup>

### **Summary**

Of what has been covered during this literature, there are a few gaps that remain that could offer more insight of China’s strategy for the control of the South China Sea. The first and most glaring challenge is actually collecting the data that supports and/or proves that China’s is utilizing its *assassin’s mace* strategy. As mentioned before, this

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<sup>44</sup> “The Ocean Conference | 5-9 June 2017 Programme.” United Nations, June 5, 2017. <https://oceanconference.un.org/programme>.

<sup>45</sup> Holmes, James R., and Toshi Yoshihara. "China's "Caribbean" in the South China Sea." SAIS Review of International Affairs 26, no. 1. 2006: 79-92. doi:10.1353/sais.2006.0010.

<sup>46</sup> Kaplan, Robert. *Asia’s Cauldron: The South China Sea and The End of a Stable Pacific*. New York, NY: Random House, 2014.

strategy is rarely found in any shared document between the United States and China. The geopolitical schools of thought covered are good starting points to dealing with China's rise in the region however some discussion must be had for when countries decide to simply accept to fall in line with a rising power's influence. There is also some confusion and deliberate masking as to how China's actions in the South China Sea and the disinformation campaign its government is conducting.

## **Hypothesis/Argument**

The relationship I am examining is between the significance of the Spratly Islands and China's path towards dominating the South China Sea.

Null Hypothesis: My default hypothesis is to assume that no relationship exists between the Chinese government claiming and operating within the Spratly Islands and China's dominance with the South China Sea.

Alternative Hypothesis: I hypothesize that the Spratly Islands play a significant role in China's plan for South China Sea domination. In particular, I believe that the more China dominates and controls the Spratly Islands, China's overall geopolitical, economic and military strength increases.

$H_0$  = The Spratly Islands hold no significance in China's plans for dominance in the South China Sea and are therefore merely another avenue of power instead of a key part of its plan.

$H_a$  = Positive correlation between China owning more of the Spratly Islands and China's control within the South China Sea.

This argument is a logical one: as the Spratly Islands are located in the South China Sea, which sees trade that passes through it, specifically the oil, amounting to triple the amount that passes through the Suez Canal, and almost fifteen times the amount that passes through the Panama Canal<sup>47</sup>, it would follow that in order for China to increase its economic (both through trade, and natural resources), diplomatic (the One Belt One Road initiative), and military influence throughout the South China Sea, it would need to gain and maintain dominance in the region.

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<sup>47</sup> Kaplan, Robert. *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and The End of a Stable Pacific*. New York, NY: Random House, 2014.

The connection between my independent variables and my dependent variable will conclude if the relationship between the variables has any significance. My prediction is that this variable will have a significant impact on the influence that China will hold in the South China Sea. The dominance of the Spratly Islands will cause an increase in military power, diplomatic influence, and economic superiority in the region and extending out further into Africa and Europe.

## Data

### **One Belt One Road Initiative**

The One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR)<sup>48</sup> finds its origins from the ancient “Silk Road”, “the overland route stretching from China’s inland and western provinces across central Asia, through the Middle East and ending in the Europe”<sup>49</sup>. Another prominent road is the “21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road”, which stretches from China’s Coast, through the Malacca Straits (which will be examined later), around the Horn of Africa, and up through the Red Sea into the Mediterranean, ending in Venice.<sup>50</sup> This initiative covers around 65 percent of the world’s population and one third of the world’s GDP. This OBOR project involves billions of dollars in infrastructure developments in dozens of countries (most notably countries along the African coast) and ensures that its influence is felt globally, positioning itself where its success is the world’s success.

The OBOR and its proliferation of Chinese influence is the result of a Chinese way of strategic thinking that has demonstrated a more forward in time view than that of the Western world. Phased into three parts, China’s method of peacefully ascending to global hegemony is a demonstrated of intentional patience. Following the Deng Xiaoping maxim of “watch cautiously, hold our ground, meet the danger calmly, hide our capacity, while also getting something done” perfectly demonstrates how the *assassin’s mace* strategy emits out of China.<sup>51</sup> Phase One of the OBOR strategy is the Tao Guang

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<sup>48</sup> OBOR is often referred to as the Belt Road initiative (BRI) in the military. It is interchangeable with OBOR.

<sup>49</sup> Xing, Li. *Mapping China’s One Belt One Road Initiative*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019.

<sup>50</sup> Xing, Li. *Mapping China’s One Belt One Road Initiative*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019.

<sup>51</sup> Xing, Li. *Mapping China’s One Belt One Road Initiative*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019.

Tang Hui “Rule-follower” phase. During this phase we saw China reenter the world stage, opening up relationship with the United States during the Nixon presidency, and during this phase China is joining the global division of labor. During this phase, it is understood that China will fall in line with Japan’s “flying geese” regional economic structure<sup>52</sup>. This economic structure was developed by Kaname Akamatsu in the 1930s as a theory of how industrialization could be promoted within Asia, with Japan in the lead. Phase Two is You Sou Zou Wei’s “Rule-player”, this is where we currently see China. During this phase China is seen building infrastructure across dozens of countries, furthering its ties and making itself indispensable to the global economy. Finally, Phase Three is the “Chinese Dream and global re-ordering; Rule Shaper”. This is the final step in China’s emergence as global hegemony. We are already seeing China’s maneuvers in becoming a rule-shaper by the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which is a response to the hesitant banks of the West.



Figure 1: “Internal-external nexus in China’s development strategy”<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Akamatsu, Kaname. *Trend of Japanese Trade in Woollen Goods*. Journal of Nagoya Higher Commercial School. 1935

<sup>53</sup> Xing, Li. *Mapping China's One Belt One Road Initiative*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019.

With the OBOR now briefly explained, we turn to the actual data that has been collected to demonstrate how nations has already become ensnared in this influence and opportunities of the OBOR. According to several sources, China’s OBOR unites the Maritime Silk Road and Silk Road Economic Belt into one project, and plans on uniting 177 countries within its purview.



Figure 2: Main countries that have agreed to participate in “One Belt and One Road”, AIIB<sup>54</sup>

China must import 60% of the oil it consumes because of its rapid development and industrialization. This need, along with multiple adversarial threats within the South China Sea region, make transportation pathways of vital importance in its plan for future sustainment. Most of the imported oil is transported to China via the Strait of Hormuz

<sup>54</sup> Xing, Li. *Mapping China’s One Belt One Road Initiative*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019: Seen above is the depiction from one of the experts showing all the countries that have agreed to participate and those that are part of the AIIB. Countries in green boxes are founding members of the AIIB, countries in boxes with black lines are in partnership relations with China. Those countries in yellow boxes of ASEAN+3 and SCO are involved in the two regional arrangements respectively. Finally, countries in purple boxes are included in “One Belt and One Road” but are not founding members of AIIB.

and the Strait of Malacca, which “have been identified by many Chinese scholars as unstable transportation pathways that are subject to the US influence and to emerging security issues such as pirates and terrorists”.<sup>55</sup>

This necessity to secure the lines of transportation in order to increase energy security plays a pivotal role in China’s recent shift to naval superiority, “strengthening China’s sea power is the long-term strategy, especially against traditional maritime powers such as the US”<sup>56</sup>. As mentioned before, Kaplan believes that Asia is a matter of seascape instead of the traditional European landscape mentality that has dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. This is mirrored in Xi Jinping proposal that “the great revival of the Chinese nation as a sea power is connected with the Chinese nation’s general revival”.<sup>57</sup>

During the past several years, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has “increased the frequency and complexity of its deployments to the Western Pacific”.<sup>58</sup> It has since integrated fixed-wing aircraft into Philippine Sea exercises, normalizing its Philippine Sea and Indian Ocean deployments. During these deployments, there has been an increase in counterpiracy operations. The operations within the Indian Ocean are not considered “near sea defense”, which “could suggest the deployment represents nascent PLAN efforts to apply the lessons learned from its routinized operations in the near seas

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<sup>55</sup> Xing, Li. *Mapping China’s One Belt One Road Initiative*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019

<sup>56</sup> Xing, Li. *Mapping China’s One Belt One Road Initiative*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019

<sup>57</sup> Wang, Hongying. “From ‘Taoguang Yanghui’ to ‘Yousuo Zuowei’: China’s Engagement in Financial Minilateralism.” Centre for International Governance Innovation, December 12, 2014. <https://www.cigionline.org/publications/taoguang-yanghui-yousuo-zuowei-chinas-engagement-financial-minilateralism>.

<sup>58</sup> Sharman, Christopher H. *China Moves Out: Stepping Stones Toward a New Maritime Strategy*. Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2015.

to development of a far seas defense capability”, further projecting its power and limiting the negative effects of piracy.<sup>59</sup>

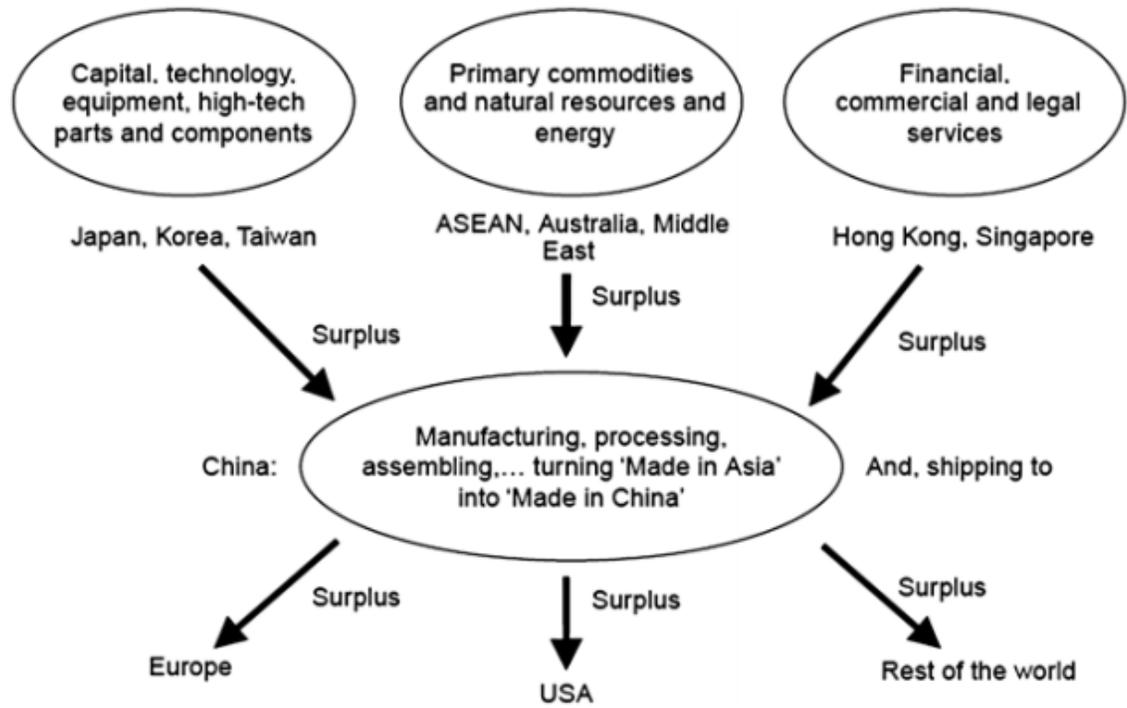


Figure 3: The gradual return of China’s historical position as the region’s gravity<sup>60</sup>

## Spratly Islands and their benefits

### Trade Routes

The main domain that East Asia will be operated within is the sea and because of this, geography has set priorities that argue for a naval century<sup>61</sup>. This trend towards the naval domain has already fostered a growth of navies. However, though military power has begun to move to Asia, there is the “stopping power of water” that has and will

<sup>59</sup> Sharman, Christopher H. *China Moves Out: Stepping Stones Toward a New Maritime Strategy*. Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Wong, John. *A China-Centric Economic Order in East Asia*. Asia Pacific Business Review, no. 19, 2013.

<sup>61</sup> Kaplan, Robert. *Asia’s Cauldron: The South China Sea and The End of a Stable Pacific*. New York, NY: Random House, 2014. The only exception to this argument is land warfare on the Korean peninsula.

continue to impede any invasion.<sup>62</sup> Much like the United States experienced in its infancy, allowing it to develop as a country while figuring out its foreign policies, China has been able to utilize the South China Sea with little to no obstruction.

In the 1990s, the Chinese leadership was beginning to worry about the pace at which its own country was growing. After being self-sufficient for 30 years, due to its inland field at Daqing, Premier Li Peng's economic reforms were leading China to outstrip production.<sup>63</sup> China was in need of new sources of supply and so the search led to the South China Sea. The South China Sea holds a key geographic role that has largely gone unnoticed until only recently. The South China Sea, as Kaplan writes, "functions as the *throat* of the Western Pacific and Indian oceans"<sup>64</sup> Filled with straits such as the Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Makassar straits. The oil that travels through the Malacca Strait alone is triple the amount that travels through the Suez Canal and fifteen times the amount that travels through the Panama Canal.<sup>65</sup> More specifically, more than 80% of China's crude oil imports come directly through the South China Sea.<sup>66</sup> Though responsible for 10% of the world oil production and more than 20% of all energy consumption, China only produces 1.1% of the world's total oil reserves. This lack of self-sufficiency in terms of oil and natural gas has added to the lure of a favorable

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<sup>62</sup> Kaplan, Robert. *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and The End of a Stable Pacific*. New York, NY: Random House, 2014.

<sup>63</sup> Hayton, Bill. *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*. Yale University Press Publication: 121-230, 2014

<sup>64</sup> Kaplan, Robert. *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and The End of a Stable Pacific*. New York, NY: Random House, 2014.

<sup>65</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration. *South China Sea: Oil and Natural Gas*, 2008.

<sup>66</sup> Regional Program on Partnerships in Environmental Management for the Seas of East Asia. *Current Activities in GEF-UNDP-IMO PEMSEA Programme Relating to Maritime Safety and Security*: Center for a New American Security, *The South China Sea: The First Testing Ground of a Multipolar Age*, Washington, D.C., 2010

avenue of approach for foreign crude oil, that is the potential for a large oil reserve in the South China Sea itself.

As the world's leading consumer of oil, China, like any superpower, is continually seeking to find a reserve of oil that can support its astronomical growth. The South China Sea has proven oil reserves of seven billion barrels, and an estimated 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.<sup>67</sup> This vast amount of crude oil and natural gas amounts to a reserve that contains more than any area of the globe with the exemption of Saudi Arabia. This potential treasure trove provides China an answer to what Kaplan refers to as the "Malacca dilemma".<sup>68</sup> This dilemma refers to China's reliance on the narrow and vulnerable Strait of Malacca (refer to Figure 4) for much of its oil travelling from the Middle East. The Malacca dilemma in the South China Sea is the reason for the significance of the Spratly Islands (Figure 5). If the Strait were to be closed, trade would likely continue to flow, just at a slower pace at a higher cost. "While the financial burden of a short-term peacetime closure at the Strait of Malacca may be manageable, the second-order effects make it difficult to apply the offered estimates to long-term closure lasting several weeks or longer".<sup>69</sup>

An example scenario of this would be if the Strait of Malacca was designated a war risk area due to ongoing unrest, the price of war risk premiums – insurance bought to protect against the risk of loss in likely conflict zones – would dramatically increase. War

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<sup>67</sup> Kaplan, Robert. *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and The End of a Stable Pacific*. New York, NY: Random House, 2014.

<sup>68</sup> Kaplan, Robert. *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and The End of a Stable Pacific*. New York, NY: Random House, 2014.

<sup>69</sup> "How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?" ChinaPower Project, October 27, 2017. <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>

risk premiums correlate to hull values, and in many cases a starting point for coverage is pegged at 0.1 percent of a vessel's hull value.<sup>70</sup>

Hull pricing information is limited, but figures provided by UNCTAD in 2011 suggest that monthly war risk coverage for all traffic transiting the Strait of Malacca in that year would start at a cost of roughly \$167 million.<sup>71</sup> This should be understood as a rather low estimate as traffic through the waterway has increased 13.9 percent since 2011 and these costs would likely rise in the event of a prolonged conflict.<sup>72</sup> These costs, in combination with the multitudinous risks associated with sailing through a conflict zone, may prompt shippers to significantly reroute commercial traffic.<sup>73</sup> If the Strait of Malacca were to close long-term, there could be significant, global supply chain disruptions, especially among interregional trade routes and multinational production hubs that are geographically tied to the South China Sea. The countries of Southeast Asia would be particularly vulnerable. This brings the question back to the Spratly Islands.

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<sup>70</sup> “The Economic Cost of Somali Piracy 2011.” *Oceans Beyond Piracy*, 2012

<sup>71</sup> “How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?” ChinaPower Project, October 27, 2017. <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>

<sup>72</sup> “The Economic Cost of Somali Piracy 2011.” *Oceans Beyond Piracy*, 2012  
After the Gulf of Aden was classified as a war risk area due to piracy in 2008, war risk premiums surged from \$20,000 to \$150,000 per voyage in 2010.

<sup>73</sup> “How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?” ChinaPower Project, October 27, 2017. <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>



Figure 4: The Strait of Malacca<sup>74</sup>

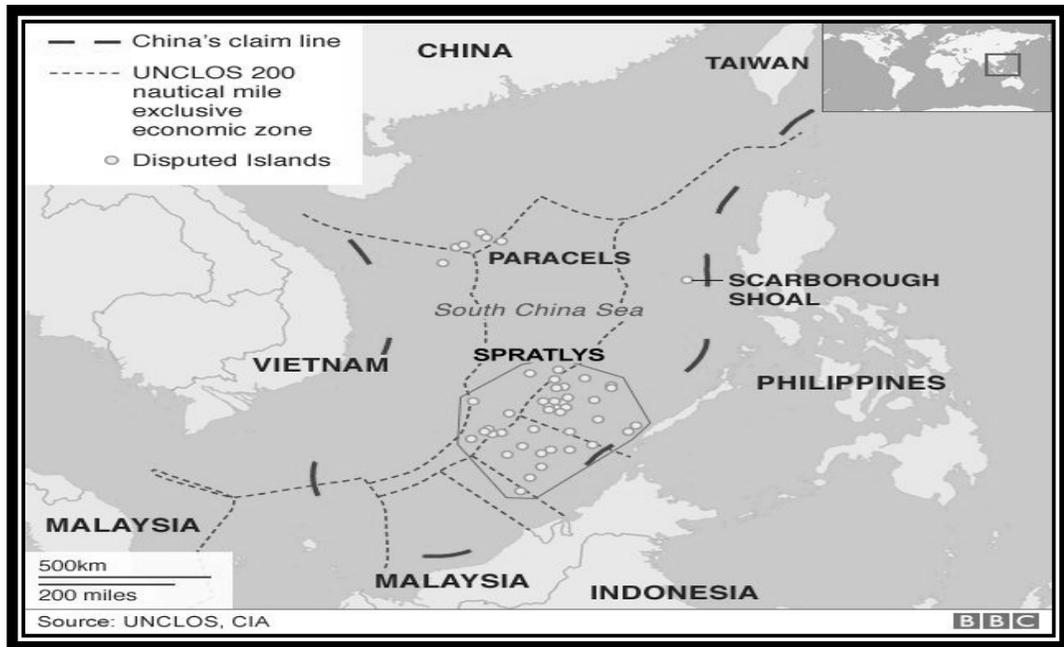


Figure 5: Spratly Islands<sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Puigrefagut, A. “China and India fight for the gates of the Strait of Malacca”, University of Navarra, Global Affairs Strategic Studies. Retrieved on August 20, 2019, from <https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/detalle/-/blogs/china-and-india-fight-for-the-gates-of-the-strait-of-malacca>, 2018

<sup>75</sup> BBC. “Why is the South China Sea contentious?”, BBC News. Retrieved September 1, 2019, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-13748349>, 2016

## Natural Resources

According to the Chinese media, the Spratly Islands specifically contained 25 billion cubic meters of natural gas and 105 billion barrels of oil.<sup>76</sup> Premier Deng and his officials began looking towards the islands as the potential answer to their energy crisis. This view of the Spratly Islands quickly gave way to a nationalistic mentality as China's newspaper for the People's Liberation Army, *Jiefangjun bao*, began referring to the islands as sacred national territory that must be defended at all cost.<sup>77</sup> However, China's attempts to control the Spratly Islands would be challenged by several nations within the South China Sea.

The Spratly Islands are a series of islands that populate the South China Sea and are the grounds for a major territorial dispute between several countries within the area. While the Chinese claims much of these and the Parcel Islands, Vietnam and Taiwan lay similar claims. The Philippines also claim eight islands in the Spratly's, to include vast portions of the South China Sea. Joined in this dispute are Malaysia and Brunei, each claiming a few islands within the Spratly's. What separates China from other sovereign nations in this territory dispute is its history, more specifically the "historic line"; the "cow's tongue" shaped loop at the heart of the entire South China Sea<sup>78</sup>. This loop covers the island group of the Spratly's from China's Hainan Island south 1,200 miles to near Singapore and Malaysia.

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<sup>76</sup> Hayton, Bill. *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*. Yale University Press Publication: 121-230, 2014

<sup>77</sup> Hayton, Bill. *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*. Yale University Press Publication: 121-230, 2014

<sup>78</sup> Kaplan, Robert. *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and The End of a Stable Pacific*. New York, NY: Random House, 2014.

The Spratly's, with their significant oil and natural gas deposits, have led China to expose its own ambitions and complete irreverence for other sovereign nation's territorial claims if it impedes on its own goals. Opposed to what the Chinese National Offshore Oil Company (CNOOC) estimated 125 billion barrels (bbl) of oil and 500 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of gas in the Spratly region<sup>79</sup>, the U.S. Energy Information Administrations (USEIA) gives probable reserves at virtually none for oil and only .1 trillion tcf. This significant difference may be because China must encourage investments in the region for its own positioning reasons.

The Philippines has since “intruded into relevant maritime areas of China's Nansha Qundao [Nansha Islands] to carry out illegal oil and gas exploratory drilling and bidding and has repeatedly harassed and attacked Chinese fishermen and fishing boats conducting routine fishing operations”, according to a white paper that China released in 2016.<sup>80</sup> After repeated offenses from the Philippines, China reasserted that its territorial sovereignty has historical precedent and that it would not recognize any foreign entity to claim otherwise.

### **Strategic Military Presence**

In order to see what steps China has taken in order to increase its presence in the Spratly Islands, I turn to the United States-China Economic and Security Review Commission's report, titled “*China's First Airstrip in the Spratly Islands Likely at Fiery Cross Reef*”. This report on China's first likely airstrip in the Spratly Islands, more

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<sup>79</sup> Bouchat, Clarence J., *Dangerous Ground: The Spratly Islands and U.S. Interests and Approaches*. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2013.

<sup>80</sup> Economic Times. “China Releases White Paper, Reasserts Claim over South China Sea.” Retrieved November 10, 2019, from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/china-releases-white-paper-reasserts-claim-over-south-china-sea/articleshow/53187848.cms>. 2016.

specifically on the Fiery Cross Reef, demonstrates how China has operated in order to expand its reaches in the South China Sea by way of the Spratly Islands. Through a process called dredging, where sand is utilized to create man-made islands out of existing reefs, China has been able to increase its logistical capabilities that would allow for forces (specifically military, but also commercial) to flow through and provide a more reactive reaction force. In this report, it is stated that China's reclamation activities at Fiery Cross Reef resulted in the expansion of the reef into an artificial island that measured around three kilometers in length and 200-300 meters wide.<sup>81</sup> Of note, this artificial island is larger and longer than China's three other "land reclamation" projects. The significance of this increase in size is that it is the only one capable of supporting an airstrip. The United States has already publicly criticized China for this clear step towards Anti-access Area Denial (A2AD), stating "we urge China to stop its land reclamation program, and engage in diplomatic initiatives to encourage all sides to restrain themselves in these sorts of activities".<sup>82</sup>

China did not accept any criticism for its creation of new islands, almost directly responding to a statement from the U.S. Department of Defense. "Anyone in the outside world has no right to make irresponsible remarks on China-related activities ... The construction-related activities undertaken by China on the islands are primarily to improve the living conditions of personnel stationed there and to better fulfill our international responsibilities and obligations in terms of search and rescue and the

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<sup>81</sup> Meick, E. (2014). *China's First Airstrip in the Spratly Islands Likely at Fiery Cross Reef*. Bethesda, MD: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Report.

<sup>82</sup> Chan, M. (2014). US Asks China to Stop Building Spratly Island Which Could Host Airfield." South China Morning Post (Hong Kong), Retrieved August 25, 2019 from <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1646025/us-asks-china-stop-building-spratly-island-which-could-host-airfield>

provision of public services."<sup>83</sup> This attempt to cover any actions of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has mostly fallen short because the airstrip itself is as long as 3,000 meters, which allows almost all of PLA's combat and support aircraft to use it. This new airstrip also provides the PLA command, control, communications, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR). In addition to providing logistical support to the forces establish at the Fiery Cross, which already increasing China's projection of power, the air strip affords the PLA the ability to provide air defense for its Navy's surface and amphibious ships operating in the southern portions of the South China Sea.<sup>84</sup>

In the analysis, the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission reported that most of the PLA's combat and support aircraft lack the range required to conduct decisive air operations within the South China Sea. The closest aviation base is located 600 nautical miles away, while being more than 400 miles away from Woody Island, China's airstrip in the Parcel Islands.<sup>85</sup> The airstrip on Woody Island only supports a limited amount of supplies and fuel, suggesting that the Fiery Cross Reef airstrip would provide another cache the PLA could utilize to conduct interdiction operations. Though the airstrip seems like an invaluable asset to the PLA's ability to affect the South China Sea, as Robert Kaplan states in his book, "East Asia a seascape". The ability to project its naval forces within their area of operation would best help China achieve its goal, and this is where the Fiery Cross Reef also hold a valuable position. As seen in Figure 6, China appears to have built a sea port at the Fiery Cross Reef.

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<sup>83</sup> Reuters. "China Defies U.S. Call to Stop Project in South China Sea," Retrieved August 25, 2019, from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/24/us-china-usa-southchinasea-idUSKCN0J80LH20141124>, 2014

<sup>84</sup> Meick, Eric. *China's First Airstrip in the Spratly Islands Likely at Fiery Cross Reef*. Bethesda, MD: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Report, 2014.

<sup>85</sup> Meick, Eric. *China's First Airstrip in the Spratly Islands Likely at Fiery Cross Reef*. Bethesda, MD: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Report, 2014.

According to *IHS Jane's*'s analysis, this harbor may be large enough to allow larger Chinese naval and maritime forces to dock and replenish supplies.<sup>86</sup> Though it is clear how the Spratly Island's hold value in terms of military positioning, they may play a role in a strategy that China's President Xi has begun, and that is the "One Road, One Belt" proposal mentioned earlier.

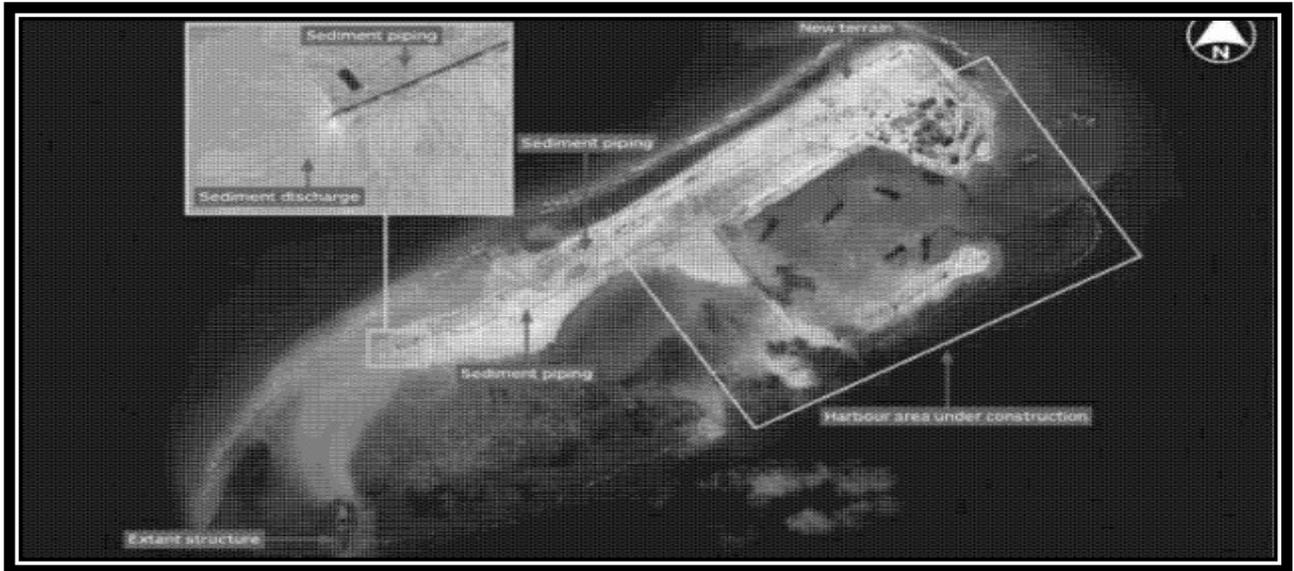


Figure 6: China's First Airstrip in the Spratly Islands Likely at Fiery Cross Reef<sup>87</sup>

In recent years, there has been an adherence to Admiral Mahan's writings, as the PLAN has begun shifting some of its combat power and projections in the region. According to one study, "the PLAN is likely to gradually increase the frequency of combat readiness patrol deployments to the far seas over the next 5 to 7 years".<sup>88</sup> During

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<sup>86</sup> Hardy, J., O'Connor, S. "China Building Airstrip-capable Island on Fiery Cross Reef," *IHS Jane's*. Retrieved September 1, 2019, from <http://www.janes.com/article/46083/china-building-airstrip-capable-island-on-fiery-cross-reef>; Hardy, J., O'Connor, S. "China Goes All Out with Major Island Building Project in Spratlys," *IHS Jane's*, Retrieved September 1, 2019, from <http://www.janes.com/article/39716/china-goes-all-out-with-major-island-building-project-in-spratlys>

<sup>87</sup> Meick, Eric. *China's First Airstrip in the Spratly Islands Likely at Fiery Cross Reef*. Bethesda, MD: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Report, 2014.

<sup>88</sup> Sharman, Christopher H. *China Moves Out: Stepping Stones Toward a New Maritime Strategy*. Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2015.

these deployments, there will be an increase in the exercising of anti-submarine, anti-air, and anti-surface warfare, all which are aspects of Anti Access/Area Denial (A2AD). What the PLAN considers “near sea defense” is primarily what it believes is “under China’s legitimate jurisdiction, as well as any area that can be used by an enemy to threaten China.” This is of significance when pertaining to the debates about whether or not the Spratly Islands fall under Chinese jurisdiction as it will dictate where China prioritizes its’ Navy. China’s navy commander from 1982 to 1988, Admiral Liu Huaqing Liu’s considered “operations east of Taiwan or in the Philippine Sea, throughout the South China Sea and Spratly Islands, as well as at strategic chokepoints such as the Bashi Channel and Miyako Strait” as vital focal point for the PLAN.<sup>89</sup> The Gulf of Aden, Indian Ocean, or well into the Pacific are considered to be part of those “far seas” operations.

China’s 2006, 2008, and 2010 Defense White Papers “highlighted PLAN moves to expand its operating range”.<sup>90</sup> The Defense White Paper released in 2013 went further and stated that the PLAN was “developing blue water capabilities of conducting mobile operations, carrying out international cooperation, and countering non-traditional security threats, and enhanc[ing] its capabilities of strategic deterrence and counterattack.”<sup>91</sup> This move to more frequent blue water operations also pushed the PLAN to further develop its capabilities in order to implement the new maritime strategy that can defend China’s interests in the far seas. The Spratly Islands play a role in enabling the PLAN to project

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<sup>89</sup> Sharman, Christopher H. *China Moves Out: Stepping Stones Toward a New Maritime Strategy*. Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2015.

<sup>90</sup> Sharman, Christopher H. *China Moves Out: Stepping Stones Toward a New Maritime Strategy*. Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2015.

<sup>91</sup> Sharman, Christopher H. *China Moves Out: Stepping Stones Toward a New Maritime Strategy*. Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2015.

its power far greater than before, as the resources, ports, and airfields will serve in China's power projection and overall control of the South China Sea.

## Discussion

The OBOR initiative can be seen as one of China's many *assassin's mace* efforts because it has served as a somewhat quiet initiative with a bold endstate; to unite countries across Asia, Africa, and Europe in a global trading route that places China at the heart of all major ports along the Road. This will ensure that hostile action or even perceived non-compliance as a possible outcome will be seen with reluctance from the many nations that will allow China to become a significant trading partner, one with territory strategically placed throughout the globe. If the OBOR initiative is seen as one of the *assassin's mace* efforts, then the Spratly Islands must be seen as the initial fighting ground for such an initiative. If the Road cannot stretch from China out towards the Horn of Africa, and eventually Europe, then China loses a significant trading route. The negative effects from a loss of control of the South China Sea extend beyond the economic sphere but into diplomatic and military power as well. If China cannot control the South China Sea then it will not be able to keep its enemies out of its backyard. The more space between China and the United States, the more time it allows China to react to any perceived hostile action or preparation of hostile action taken by the United States and its allies. This is also part of the fear of encirclement that Michael Pillsbury refers to.

We see the importance in the Thucydides Trap because China does not want to go to war with the United States while it is still on its way on becoming the next hegemon. The assassin's mace strategy is used to convey patience and understanding that going toe-to-toe with the world's largest military is unwise for any country. As Michael Pillsbury addressed during his "red-cell" during the wargame, China won out only when it employed the assassin's mace strategy.

There may exist some debate about why exactly the Spratly Islands matter to China in its attempts to control the South China Sea. Some believe that there are massive untapped reserves of oil and natural gas, while others believe the amount there is insignificant and not enough to satisfy the requirements of a rapidly growing China. Whether the natural resources in the region or significant or not pose little importance for two reasons. The first reason is that China has convinced itself that there *is* a substantial amount of natural resources in the area. That is enough for a growing country to decide to dedicate research and funds to something as perception is often seen as reality. As discussed earlier, China has already published why it believes that exploring this option is not only a Chinese opportunity but a Chinese duty. The second reason is that China believes it is the rightful owner of the territory and any resource found on its grounds. As we see currently developing, China will move almost unapologetically on territory it has already deemed to be part of its own. Through the riots in Hong Kong, the Chinese influence on local elections, and the ever-increasing shadow cast upon Hong Kong, we see the “one country, two systems” policy slowly losing its power as the suspense set by Great Britain inevitably approaches. Similar with Taiwan, where China has requested other sovereign nations to deny acknowledgement of Taiwan as a government, once China believes a piece of land belongs to it, it will ruthlessly act upon that fact. China’s history, more specifically the “historic line”; the “cow’s tongue” shaped loop at the heart of the entire South China Sea<sup>92</sup>. This loop covers the island group of the Spratly’s from China’s Hainan Island south 1,200 miles to near Singapore and Malaysia. This is why

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<sup>92</sup> Kaplan, Robert. *Asia’s Cauldron: The South China Sea and The End of a Stable Pacific*. New York, NY: Random House, 2014.

whether or not there is oil in the area matters little, it is because the Spratly Islands, according to China, falls under its purview is why China can do what it wants.

However, in a “major diplomatic blow to China, the tribunal working under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) struck down the Communist giant's claims in the strategic waters”.<sup>93</sup> The tribunal said China violated Philippines’ sovereign rights, adding that China had caused "severe harm to the coral reef environment" by building artificial islands.<sup>94</sup> But as previously mentioned, China has already stated that it will not recognize any challenges to its historical sovereignty claims.

Michael Pillsbury maintains that there are nine principal elements that play into China’s “Hundred-Year Marathon”. Of those nine elements, four are essential to the maneuvers done in the South China Sea<sup>95</sup>. First, “*be patient, for decades, or longer, to achieve victory*” plays a role in how China has begun the OBOR initiative that stretches from the Straits of the South China Sea, around the Horn of Africa and into Europe. By laying the foundations of an organization (AIIB) and a trade agreement that connects all to China, China is ensuring its smooth transition into its “Rule-Shaper” phase. The second element, “*recognize that the hegemon will take extreme, even reckless action to retain its dominant position*”, is why we will not see much military conflict between China and the United States yet. However, this does not stop them from creating new islands in order to project its power further out into the South China Sea. Much like the

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<sup>93</sup> Economic Times. “China Releases White Paper, Reasserts Claim over South China Sea.” Retrieved November 10, 2019, from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/china-releases-white-paper-reasserts-claim-over-south-china-sea/articleshow/53187848.cms>. 2016.

<sup>94</sup> Economic Times. “China Releases White Paper, Reasserts Claim over South China Sea.” Retrieved November 10, 2019, from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/china-releases-white-paper-reasserts-claim-over-south-china-sea/articleshow/53187848.cms>. 2016.

<sup>95</sup> Pillsbury, Michael. *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015.

United States continues to have a strong military presence in South Korea against North Korea, and a strong military presence in Okinawa, Japan to combat China, China has projected its power through use of the islands in the Spratly's. Due to the close ties between Taiwan, what China considers a rebellious yet nonetheless part of China, China must place its military in positions advantageous to quick deployment.

However, China's third element considers the other three parts of DIME, stating "*military might is not the critical factor for winning a long-term competition*". This element plays into the assassin's mace strategy because it focuses not on brute military strength but on how to overcome a seemingly overpowered adversary with a simple mace. As Thucydides saw in his day, when the hegemon and the rising contender finally come to conflict, both sides tend to lose much in terms of resources, and citizens. Especially being surrounded by potential adversaries in the South China Sea, China cannot afford to be left weak by an armed conflict with the United States. This precaution leads to the final relevant element, "*always be vigilant to avoid being encircled or deceived by others*". As mentioned under Waltz's contributions, nations are typically wary of others and quick to assume malintent towards them. This mentality that its adversaries are continually trying to encircle them is what led to China's involvement in the Korean War. When the United States reached the Yalu river, China began to see the elements of *Wei qi (Go)* being played out in front of them. As it was during the Warring States era in Chinese history, "today China's leaders operate on the belief that rival state are fundamentally out to encircle one another, the same objective as in *Wei*

qi”.<sup>96</sup> This strategic fear of being encircled is what I believe to be the main reason China is so desperate to own the Spratly Islands.

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<sup>96</sup> Pillsbury, Michael. *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis addressed the methods in which China has utilized the Spratly Islands as a means of continuing its growth and overall dominance of the South China Sea, often expanding beyond this region. It is clear that the Spratly Islands play a significant role in China's "hundred-year marathon", the question remained to be for what reason do they play such a significant role. By employing geopolitical theories and more China-specific schools of thought, this paper attempted to clear present why the geographic location of the Spratly Islands, because of China's fear of encirclement, was the biggest reason why the Spratly's are so significant.

The goal of this paper was to provide a potential answer as to why the Spratly Islands are so important for China is its efforts to control the South China Sea. The aim was to convey clear ways that the Spratly Islands have already played a major role in China's global expansion, through the establishment of the OBOR initiative, the resources in the region, and the resource security it provided through military and commercial seaports.

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## Curriculum Vita

Moises E. Navas is a Captain in the United States Marine Corps where he serves as an Infantry Officer. He served with Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 8th Marines from 2015-2018 where he held various leadership positions. During this time, Moises served as 1st Platoon Commander, and later as a Theater Security Cooperation Team Leader during Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force Crisis Response Africa 16.2 (SPMAGTF-CR-AF-16.2). During this deployment, he and his Marines travelled throughout the African continent and instructed basic infantry tactics for the 64<sup>th</sup> Ghanaian Infantry, the Forces Armées Togolaises, and Cameroon's Armed Forces in a military advisor capacity. Upon returning from this deployment he became the Executive Officer and led the company of more than 210 Marines and Sailors. He also served as the Company Commander for a portion of this time. Currently, Moises serves as the Training Officer and Anti-terrorism/Force Protection Officer for Combat Logistics Regiment 37 where he ensures all personnel maintain a high state of readiness against adversarial actions. Moises holds a Bachelor's of Science degree in Psychology from Jacksonville University. He and his wife, Stephanie, live in Okinawa, Japan with their three children, Lucas, Tahlia, and Caleb.