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A Constructivist Approach to Chinese Interest Formation in the South China Sea

<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/02/02/a-constructivist-approach-to-chinese-interest-formation-in-the-south-china-sea/>

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Introduction

A rising power's influence on the status-quo order has been an issue for geopolitics, geoeconomics, international legal studies and other disciplines for a long time. In recent years, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has stunned the world with a significant expansion in economic, military, geopolitical and cultural aspects. Research in the field of IR and IPE have highlighted the conflicting interests between the US as the current dominating power in the international system and the PRC as a 'newcomer', and addressed the fundamental challenge, dubbed the China Question: Will the Middle Kingdom be a breaker, taker or maker of the global economic order? To develop answers, IPE scholars have applied the concept of the national interest to understand Chinese foreign policy decisions. This paper argues that the concept used by the scholars presented below is too static, too abstract and too vague to understand policy decisions and instead proposes a linguistic-based alternative.

This thesis is structured as follows: after introducing the reader to some authors researching the China Question, I point to the drawbacks of using the static concept of national interest on which those academic works are based. I suggest a different concept of the national interest based on a constructivist approach by Jutta Weldes, which concentrates on the role of language in interest formation. Although this concept was proposed nearly two decades ago, I argue that it can enable the scientific community to retrace China's perspective on the international system and its policy issues. To prove the value of the proposed approach for explaining Chinese foreign policy, the paper provides an analysis of the Chinese understanding of one fundamental geoeconomic/geopolitical issue between the US and the PRC: the territorial disputes in the South China Sea (SCS).

Selected Literature on the China Question

The economic rise of the Middle Kingdom based on annual growth rates of over 5% was initiated during the Open-Door Policy by Deng Xiaoping and since then has expanded China's influence in global affairs. China's continuing rise can be illustrated by several facts. The national GDP in 2016 amounted to 11.999 trillion USD (WorldBank, 2018b), the second largest after the US. Since 2001, China has accumulated massive foreign currency reserves, staggering 3.14 trillion USD as of December 2016 (Reuters, 2018). With the One Belt, One Road Initiative (OBOR), kicked off by president Xi Jinping in 2015, China has started the process of becoming the gatekeeper to a new stream of trade by fostering interregional connections in Asia but also Eurasia, Europe, Africa and Latin America. Creating China-friendly international institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and expanding its influence in American-friendly institutions such as highlighted by the recent IMF quota reform shows the undebatable increase of Chinese influence in the global economic system. The question challenging many scholars is how this journey will come to an end.

It is commonly accepted in the scientific community that since the end of World War II and the replacement of Great Britain by the United States as the guardian of the economic order, the international economic system has been shaped and controlled by the US. The establishment of the Bretton Woods System in the postwar period consolidated this order. Although since 1945 several nations have grown to an extent to be able to challenge the US

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leadership, none have pursued aggressive economic policies to weaken the US rule (Cohen, 2014). West Germany in the 1960s and 70s, Japan in the 1970s and 80s, Saudi Arabia with the oil shocks in the 70s, and to a lesser extent the European Monetary Union at the begin of the 21st century have accommodated themselves into the system (Cohen, 2014). However, Cohen highlights that these four powers were either US client states or allies and benefitted from the US order. They, therefore, did not have strong incentives to challenge the rule.

China's rise, however, might result in a different outcome. Scholars from different schools of thought in IR and IPE have offered various lines of argumentation concentrating on different aspects of the Chinese phenomena. Since the space to present the existent literature is limited in this thesis while the field regarding China Studies and the China question is extensive, I have selected four scholars, which I justify as they represent four dominant lines of argumentation in the literature: realist IPE (Cohen, 2014), critical IPE (Murphy, 2011), institutionalism (Steinberg, 2014) and neo-realism (Allison, 2017). I do apologize for the lack of other academic publications, believe however that these scholars demonstrate the diversity of approaches regarding the rise of the Middle Kingdom.

Understanding the policy choices made by the Chinese administration to expand its influence in the international community requires a look at China's motivations behind its decisions. In line with realist assumptions, Benjamin Cohen highlights the power incentives for the Communist Party of China (CCP) leadership and offers an analytical framework to measure Chinese economic influence based on its monetary power (Cohen, 2014). Since China's grasp for more global influence is limited by the power of the US through American-friendly financial institutions, he unveils when the two power aspirations have clashed and where the existent hegemon has attempted to accommodate China's aspirations into the existent system. He demonstrates this willingness by pointing to the international community's actions, most importantly the IMF quota reform, the transition of power from G7 to G20, and fewer retaliatory measures against the Chinese trade surplus than expected. Economic policies conducted by Chinese state officials seeking a greater role for the renminbi as a reserve currency or creating Chinese-friendly international financial institutions, however, show that the PRC, despite the welcoming gestures, continues to look for greater (monetary) power in the global system.

Critical IPE scholar Taggart Murphy shares Cohen's assumption that China's policy decisions are motivated by power incentives but sees China at the moment not as a challenger to the existent order but rather as a retainer (Murphy, 2011). Comparing the China question to the rise of Japan in the 80s, he argues that Japan essentially sacrificed its economy at the beginning of the Lost Decade to perpetuate American hegemony. Although the PRC will not be as loyal as a retainer as its Asian counterpart, he argues that China also sacrifices part of its purchasing power to support the US dollar and thus the existing power relations.

While both IPE scholars have considered the Chinese state a black box with predetermined motives and rational decision-making, institutionalist David A. Steinberg provides us with an elaborate insight into the domestic political struggle in the decision-making process within the Chinese administrative system (Steinberg, 2014). He shows how different interest groups inside the administration, most notably the People's Bank of China (PBC), the Ministry of Commerce, and the CCP Standing Committee, shape the decision-making process. Steinberg applies his framework onto one central aspect in Chinese monetary policies, the accumulation of large foreign reserves and shows which interest groups favor or oppose the policy. Steinberg concludes that the China Question will be decided in the domestic political struggle.

It is valuable to look for an answer to the China Question in political science. While the above-mentioned scholars have argued that the China questions will be decided by the policy choices of the relevant actors and therefore used an agent-based approach, neorealist scholars Graham Allison points to historical (systemic) correlations. Thucydides' Trap signals that a challenge by a rising power against the status-quo power has always ended in war (Allison, 2017). Although war between the US and the PRC is not inevitable, history offers us sufficient examples where war has been the outcome of Thucydides' Trap (Allison, 2017).

Critique of the Neorealist/Neoliberal Concept of State Interest

Though coming to different conclusions, what these four scholars have in common is the concept of a national

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interest underlying the policy decisions of the PRC. This concept has been criticized by many for lacking precision but this paper, siding with academics such as Martha Finnemore (Finnemore, 1996), sees the concept's value and potential for understanding foreign policy. National interest refers to the central motives which determine why states act the way they do in the international system. National interest, therefore, provides a valuable signpost to analyze foreign policy. However, the conceptualization of the national interest by the above-mentioned authors lacks a critical look at the evolvment and formation of interests. This paper argues that national interests do determine foreign policy decision, but the way to conceptualize national interest used by the above-mentioned scholars entails several problems, which limit its capacity to explain the Chinese policy decision. In the upcoming paragraphs, I will present four points of critique and conclude by presenting a case, which cannot be properly explained by a static concept of national interest.

Most classical scholars "assume rather than problematize state interest" (Finnemore, 1996: 1). In classical theories, interests are either determined by systemic factors such as anarchy (Waltz, 1979) or the anthropological character of the state (Morgenthau, 1948). Power and wealth are considered means for achieving the overarching goal – security, which gains its dominant status by the existence of anarchy and the absence of an overarching authority, always entailing the possibility of war. There are few scholars to argue that states do not aspire power or wealth or security, but this does not make that concept of national interest valuable. Many scholars have offered a critique of the orthodox concept of national preferences. Martha Finnemore points out that states do want to avoid invasion, economic collapse, and other catastrophes, but in most policy-making processes those fears do not narrow down the options (Finnemore, 1996). Therefore, a realist analysis of the international community cannot "convincingly" be related "to specific choices in the world of action" (Rothstein, 1972: 353). Or as Sondermann put it: the realist concept of national interest is "too broad, too general, too vague, too all-inclusive" to explain policy choices (Sondermann, 1987: 60).

Furthermore, Finnemore points out that aspiring power and wealth does not necessarily answer but rather open new questions for state behavior, such as "Power for what ends? What kind of security? What does security mean? How to ensure or obtain it? Similarly, what kind of wealth? Wealth for whom? How do you obtain it?" (Finnemore, 1996: 1-2). She concludes that "Neorealists and neoliberals have no systemic answer for these questions" (Finnemore, 1996: 2).

That the orthodox concept of national interest is too vague has been established. Finnemore presents another argument against the static concept of national preference. In this understanding, the source of interest lay inside the state (Finnemore, 1996). Single country research design as common in institutionalism highlights this ontological assumption, as it attempts to explain interest formation and policy choices through domestic decision-making processes (cf. Steinberg, 2014). What this perspective fails to include can be referred to as Galton's problem, stating that results found through analysis of intrastate dynamics might be distorted by outside, in this case interstate, causal relations (Finnemore, 1996). Preferences are not formed inside a country, neither through domestic decision-making as comparativist academics would argue nor given through the character of the state determined by the system as proposed by neorealists. It is that preference might be influenced by both domestic and systemic factors but are formed and shaped through social interactions in the international community.

A last point of critique is brought forward by Jutta Weldes. It concentrates on the epistemological assumptions of the classical concepts of national interest which propose that state interest as part of an objective reality can be simply observed by outside actors (Weldes, 1996). The entire process of human recognition of a set of facts, which through subjective interpretation establishes a narrative, is left out in the static concept. Observations of the 'world out there' are not objective, they differ based on the cultural, historical and socio-economic background of the observer. Morgenthau's appeal that policymakers should overcome their "aversion to seeing problems of international relations as they are" (Morgenthau, 1951: 7) shows that (neo)realists do not pay sufficient attention to the process of interpretation.

There have been several arguments brought forward against the static concept of state preferences and I would like to demonstrate problems arising from the usage of said concept with one example of Chinese economic policy: the accumulation of large foreign reserves.

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Since 2001, the People's Republic of China has accumulated massive foreign reserves, amounting to 3.14 trillion USD as of December 2016 (Reuters, 2018). The PBC holds US treasury bills worth 1187.7 billion USD as of March 2018 (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2018). Why does the PRC pursue a strategy of massive foreign reserve accumulation? Why did the country's policy-makers choose to become the second biggest foreign creditor to the US? And can those policy choices be explained by the static concept of national interests as wealth and power to achieve security?

The neoliberal explanation states that during the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 central banks around the globe have recognized their vulnerability to speculative attacks without sufficient reserves (Frankel, 2000). Thailand was forced to devalue the baht in June 1997 and entered a spiral of recession (Radelet, Sachs, Cooper, & Bosworth, 1998). Learning from the mistakes of other Asian countries, it makes sense for the PRC leadership to accumulate large foreign reserves to be able to support its undervalued currency. The US treasury bond market is one of the few markets sufficiently grand enough to absorb the Chinese trade surplus (cf. Holland, 2018). Furthermore, since the market is very active US treasury bills can be quickly converted into money when needed. This orthodox explanation points to security as an overachieving goal of states, which the PRC achieves by being able to defend its currency against speculative attacks and protect its economic growth. In addition, one might argue that the large US reserves give the PRC power over the US as a quick sell-off would have terrific consequences for the US economy.

However, those broad concepts of power and security used in the orthodox narrative could also explain completely different policy decisions. The PRC could invest the trade surplus at home, which would foster the development of the Chinese population, create public satisfaction with the CCP and reinforce the party's rule. This policy could cause domestic inflation and would make the Chinese export-business less competitive but would also strengthen and create a stronger domestic market. Alternatively, the PRC could expand the use of its financial means to 'buy' the support of other states with development aid as it is currently done in Asia, Africa and Latin America (cf. Calamur, 2018). While the domestic investment of the trade surplus would result in a better security for the CCP leadership, the latter two options would foster the PRC's security in the international community. In addition, if the PRC would halt its purchases of US treasury bonds, the US purchasing power would be reduced, making it harder for the US to keep up its massive trade deficit. Since the US is China's biggest trading partner (WorldBank, 2018a), the PRC would also suffer a significant economic loss, but arguing in terms of relative power the Eastern power would be better off than the Western.

All scenarios could be explained through the static concepts of power, wealth and security but as shown above, they do not narrow down or exclude policy options. Power and security are too broad concepts and fail to include the following distinctions: economic, political or. military power/security? power/security abroad or at home? relative or absolute power? If the orthodox concept of state preferences fails to explain one policy option over another, I deem it inadequate to offer an answer to the China Question.

This paper offers a very different concept of interests and takes one step back to look at interest formation. For such, intersubjective and linguistic aspects become increasingly relevant. This paper proposes a framework to examine the linguistic practices which each agent in the international community acts upon, often without noticing, and which change and shape the actor's representation of itself, of others and through that of its and other's interests. By using a constructivist approach to interest formation, one gains the ability to understand how CCP policy decisions were affected by linguistic practices and retrace the meaning and connotations of linguistic items for the citizens and the administration of the Middle Kingdom. A constructivist approach helps us to understand whether and if so what kind of power/security the CCP leadership aspires to achieve in geoeconomics.

Constructivism is a school of thought which merges many scholars with even more approaches. As Scott Burchill points out: "there is no one constructivist position, but instead a variety of positions stretching across the theoretical spectrum from conventional-realist variants to more criticalpostmodern perspectives" (Burchill, 2005: 185). Even in the field of national interest formation, there are many contributions to be found concentrating on different aspects of social life. Wendt has concentrated on social interactions and interest formation (Wendt, 1992), Finnemore and Kratochwil on the influence of norms and rules on the formation process (Finnemore, 1996; Kratochwil, 1991), and Widmaier, Pedersen and Campbell among others on the impacts of ideas on national interests (Campbell &

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Pedersen, 2014; Widmaier, 2016). Arguing for a constructivist approach to interest formation, therefore, does not necessarily substantiate the usefulness of examining linguistic practices. Then why do I concentrate on linguistic practices?

My reasons are threefold. Since this is a BA thesis entailing certain limitations, researching the impact of ideas, norms and social interactions would be difficult to achieve since an extensive amount of fieldwork would be required. To research social interaction, one would have to observe those interactions, either through video material or by being present at international summits. Both norms and ideas require a similar amount of work since one would have to trace back the creation and reproduction of those social constructs. Secondly, ideas and norms do not directly impact interest formation, they need to be translated into language. Ideas are articulated to be spread, and norms are either orally or in writing defined, language therefore constrains or at least impacts both factors. Social interaction does partially occur on a non-verbal basis, but the interpretation by the actors in the moment of the interaction as well as the description of the interaction to others later are limited by language. We can only make sense of 'social facts' if we have a concept/category for them, which inevitably requires a label or description. We cannot think without language, as the categories we use to make sense out of the 'world out there' are inherently linguistic. Examining any aspect of social life, be that interaction, ideas or norms, therefore necessarily entails linguistic practices. Last but not least, there have been several contributions to the impact of ideas and norms in the field of IR and foreign policy analysis. Publications concentrating on the linguistic practices and offering such deep insight as done by Jutta Weldes, remain rare in the field of interest formation and are nonexistent in publications regarding the China Questions. Because of those three reasons this paper uses an adapted version of Weldes' concept, although it was proposed nearly 20 years ago.

A Constructivist Approach to Interest Formation

Jutta Weldes has been one prominent IR scholar to research the linguistic practices which help us create representations of actors and objects and make sense out of the world. Weldes does not question the existence of a physical reality but argues that any description we give objects is socially constructed. In her words: "[...] before state officials can act for the state, they need to engage in a process of interpretation in order to understand both what situation the state faces and how they should respond to it" (Weldes, 1996: 276-277).

Language and linguistic items/words are embedded in a system of practices, which include chains of connotation. If one wishes to describe the reality, he interprets the situation based on his socio-economic, cultural, historical and overall subjective background and then uses a linguistic item to describe the phenomenon. The meaning and the connotations of that linguistic item have been socially constructed in a society over time. Articulating any description or opinion presupposes a shared language between the speaker and their audience (Weldes, 1996). In foreign policy, state officials as dominant actors in foreign policy use terminologies which they presuppose their audience, either domestic or international, will understand because of the underlying socially constructed practices. To clarify I would like to give a present example of a chain of connotations. During the presidency of Donald Trump, the word 'immigrant' has been associated with 'Mexican', 'rapist', 'criminal', 'illegal', etc. The linguistic item 'immigrant' therefore does not only express the desire of a human being to permanently move to another country but entails other connotations, such as that a criminal Mexican poses a threat to the American population. This specific understanding of the item 'immigrant' is limited to a certain time, space and sometimes domestic group. The chain of connotations regarding immigrants shared by Trump and his audience helps the president to sell his anti-immigration policies. Would 'immigrant' be associated with 'gain for the US' or 'helping fellow human beings', Trump's speeches and policies would neither be understood nor supported.

Weldes has developed an extensive framework to examine the evolution of connotations and meanings of language items (Weldes, 1996). She draws on the work of Alexander Wendt, who argued: "that people act towards objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meaning that objects have for them" (Wendt, 1992: 396-397). Or as Fay put it: people "act in term of their interpretation of, and intentions towards, their external conditions, rather than being governed directly by them" (Fay, 1975: 85). Weldes' framework enables us to understand the process in which the meaning of objects for and by agents is constructed. Weldes' starting point are representations which she defines as "situation descriptions and problems definitions" (Weldes, 1996: 280). People use representation to filter the

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complexity of the world and to gain an understanding of the processes 'out there'. Weldes points to a three-step process:

At first, actors give objects and other actors descriptive identities. Those representations include certain characteristics, but do not need to be fully articulated. Most US Americans assign the Taliban the identity of a 'terror organization' and attach adjectives such as uncivilized, barbaric, murderous and inhumane. Though this might provide a description of the Taliban, it is rather vague since it does not say much about the motives which make the Taliban members fight Western forces in Afghanistan. Representations can be precise or vague, friendly or adherent, fact-based or not. Identities and representation do not need to be coherent. They do not follow the laws of logic since their meaning is socially constructed and not deductively derived. For example, most US American would describe themselves as democratic and human-rights loving, yet they are aware that during the War on Terror human rights and democracy have been largely ignored by their government. Nevertheless, they do not identify this discrepancy between reality and self-perception.

After representations are established, 'well-defined relations' among these diverse objects are created (Weldes, 1996). Weldes explains this process using the domino theory: "The situation was understood to be such that, had the (constructed, not to say mythical) object 'South Vietnam' succumbed to 'Communist aggression' from (the equally constructed) 'North Vietnam', the surrounding dominos – Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, Formosa, the Philippines, New Zealand, Australia and finally Japan – would ultimately and necessarily have tumbled as well" (Weldes, 1999: 13). Equal to identity formation, these 'well-defined relations' do not need to be causal, Weldes names them quasi-causal. They need to make sense or appear justified to the actors who adopt the representation but do not follow the laws of logic.

The third step does not require any further work. By establishing a representation of different objects, by creating well-defined relations among these different identities, one has created a very subjective understanding of the international system. Weldes argues that the interests automatically derive from the representation and position of actors inside the system. Any representation already entails and defines the national interest (Weldes, 1996). She provides the example that during the Cold War the self-perception of the US as the leader of the free world forced US state officials to combat 'Communist aggression' in neutral states since the US bore the responsibility for global liberty.

After giving an overview of those three steps, Weldes looks closer at the linguistic practices of representation construction, which offers an in-depth description of step one (Weldes, 1996). The process of representations formation includes two dimensions: articulation and interpellation.

Articulation describes the process through which meaning is produced out of linguistic resources. Linguistic resources or items are available in a culture, as they have been historically socially constructed. However, those linguistic items often connote ideas which are not directly connected to the item itself. Meaning is constructed by tying several items together through a chain of connotation. Those chains of association are reproduced through usage and appear natural and contingent after time. It is important to emphasize that those items are neither naturally connected nor contingent. Those chains do not provide an objective description of the world 'out there'. Since these items have been socially constructed to a chain of association, this chain can be broken up at any time and items can be rearranged (Weldes, 1996). The creation of connotations is constrained by reality.

The second dimension is interpellation, a dual concept developed by the philosopher Louis Althusser. The first aspect describes the creation of subject-positions in a system. The second depicts the hailing of a concrete individual into that subject-position (Althusser, 1971). Althusser gives the example of a policeman who yells 'Hey you!' at someone on the street. Through the yelling, the policeman has created the position of a potential criminal in the system of police control. By turning around, a concrete individual accepts that position and role. Everyone creates a subject-position, often at the center of the system, for oneself and diverging subject-positions for others, into which one hails concrete individuals. To clarify this process, one should look at the end of the Cold War. Most policymakers in the US did not foresee the demise of the Soviet Union and were therefore taken by surprise. Since the entire foreign policy of the US was aligned to combat the communist enemy, the omission of the Soviet Union left the

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subject-position of the ideological enemy unfilled. One might argue that the War on Terror was an attempt to hail the Taliban into that position. As soon as an individual accept the subject-position, the representation of the world entailed in this position makes sense to him and appears natural. Often actors accept certain subject-position because they fit with already extant positions (Weldes, 1996).

Analyzing the Linguistic Practices of Interest Formation

As shown above, the linguistic practices during the process of interest construction can be roughly divided into the following steps: creating representations based on articulation and interpellation, establishing quasi-causal relationships and deriving the interests from the constructed identities. It is difficult to distinguish between the different processes as they overlap. For example, both interpellation and articulation not only influence the representation construction but also the subsequent steps.

Jutta Weldes provides us not only with a framework to analyze interest construction but also offers a case study, the Cuban Missile Crisis (Weldes, 1996, 1999). This paper will take a similar, though not identical approach. Weldes argues that to research the linguistic practices of national interest formation one must look at the spaces where the formulation of national interest and foreign policy takes place. As Weldes put it: "Since the state is the central site at which the national interest is defined, the most important language is that of state officials" (Weldes, 1999: 112). Therefore, policy descriptions, statements, and speeches of government officials provide valuable sources for the analysis. Articles by the popular press also provide a valuable source as they demonstrate how the public perceives of policies. As mentioned above, policy-makers use meanings and chains of connotations shared in a culture to convince their audience. Those shared assumptions can be identified by reading the national press.

Speeches, public statements, and policy description by state officials and articles in the popular press will be used as the main sources for analyzing the Chinese national interests. However, those sources need to be filtered. The assumption that all state-officials will share the same understanding of linguistic items is simplified, therefore only those sources will be used which best represent the mainstream opinion and the current policy decisions. In addition, journalists also report critically on government policies and criticize the usage of certain linguistic items. Since this paper looks at the interest construction of the Chinese government, and not of other domestic groups such as the opposition, the analysis will concentrate on writings which defend or explain the policy decisions. The PRC offers a different political and legal environment regarding the freedom of the press than that in Western countries as it controls press institutions through the State Council Information Office and the China International Publishing Group (Bandurski, 2015). In a sense, the censorship lightens my work since it I will not have to distinguish between policy supporting and policy opposing opinions in the popular press.

Weldes uses public and private statements in her analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Using private statements which are by definition not meant to be shared with the public will be impossible to use in this analysis for two reasons. The Chinese government has not established a level of transparency comparable to other countries, mechanisms similar to the Freedom of Information Act in the US are lacking. Secondly, the language barrier prohibits me to analyze any sources which are not provided in the English language. Though the Chinese government publishes several statements by state officials in English, the number of speeches available cannot be compared to that of Western state officials. It would be possible to look at the translation and interpretation of Western journalists of Chinese statements. However, through the processes of translating and interpreting Western journalist use their own chains of connotations and their own meanings to make sense of Chinese statements.

This analysis will proceed as follows: Looking at the abovementioned sources, I will attempt to disclose the representations used by the Chinese government for the dominant actors and the object of interest (SCS). I will then attempt to uncover the quasi-causal relationships among the actors and between the actors and the SCS. My objective will be to uncover the chains of associations and meanings of linguistic items used by the Chinese, and the subject-positions Chinese sources hail actors into.

One might argue that looking at public statements of state officials or other sources in a system with censorship will be useless as those writings are 'mere rhetoric'. John Lewis Gaddis has pointed to the gap between rhetoric and

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reality in foreign policy (Gaddis, 1974). Weldes has provided an extensive response to that critique and as the space in this thesis is limited, I will only present two of her arguments (Weldes, 1999).

Public statements might not realistically portray the government's policy, but those statements are intended to make sense to a national or international audience. Therefore, those statements include an accepted and shared form of reasoning which can be used to understand the structure of meaning (Weldes, 1999). Furthermore, such critique rests upon the assumption that one can draw a clear line between 'word and 'truth". But as Weldes points out: "[...] rhetoric is viewed, most commonly, either as ornamental or as intentionally and self-interestedly manipulative. But all language, whether it is intended to express the truth or to persuade and manipulate, is in fact rhetorical. [...] All language use is in fact an attempt to persuade, that is, to provide 'good reasons,' 'warrantable beliefs,' and 'plausible conclusions' (McCloskey, 1985: 29, quoted in Weldes, 1999: 117).

Case Study: The Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea

As a case study for testing the linguistic approach to interest formation I have chosen the territorial disputes between the PRC, Taiwan, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam in the South China Sea (SCS). I consider this conflict of economic nature as, next to security incentives, the states involved are mainly led by economic motives including control over fishing grounds, over 11 billion barrels of oil and over 190 trillion cubic feet of gas, which are located in the SCS (Council on Foreign Relations, 2018). Furthermore, trade worth 3.37 trillion USD passed through the SCS in 2016 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2018) and both China and the US allies South Korea and Japan are heavily dependent upon the energy supply provided by gas and oil shipments through the Strait of Malacca (China Power Team, 2017; Ji, 2007). In addition, by gaining control over (artificial) island in the SCS China and the other claimants could extend their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) as defined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

There are several other Chinese geoeconomic policies which could be examined in this essay, including the OBOR Initiative, the AIIB or Chinese Investment in Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America. I have chosen the SCS dispute for two reasons. Compared to other topics, there are numerous publications by the Chinese administration and the Chinese press available regarding this topic. Furthermore, China's rise is directly connected to the status and decisions of the US as current hegemon. Examining a case where the US is directly involved, given in the SCS dispute through the US Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), is more suitable than examining conflicts with indirect US involvement. This analysis will first look at the representations, subject-positions, and articulations of the three dominant actors in the SCS dispute from a Chinese perspective. Afterward, objects of interest and their meaning for the PRC will be identified before detecting the quasi-causal relationship between them. Lastly, the national interest of the PRC will be derived from the model.

Representations of actors

The territorial disputes in the SCS are multidimensional and socially very complex. Due to the limitations of a BA thesis, we will concentrate on three actors: the PRC, the US and other Southeast Asian Claimants (SEACs). Grouping together several countries to one actor can be criticized due to the lacking distinction of the different strategies. But looking at primary sources, the PRC's representations of the different countries do not differ significantly and can, therefore, be combined.

The People's Republic of China

The self-perception of the PRC can be pinned down to four themes: a trustworthy member of the international community abiding by its rules, a growing and strong country pursuing a 'defensive' defense-policy, the bearer of historical rights regarding territories in the SCS and a nation pursuing a strict policy of non-interference.

Foreign minister Wang has highlighted on several occasions that the PRC sees itself as a "contributor to global order" (Y. Wang, 2016), "performing its obligations as a responsible country" (MFA, 2016a), and "committed to upholding the freedom of navigation and overflight enjoyed by all other countries under international law" (Y. Wang,

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2016). President Xi stated in 2017: "China will continue to play its part as a major and responsible country [...] and keep contributing Chinese wisdom and strength to global governance" (Xi, 2017). This shows that the PRC considers itself a member of the international community, instead of an outside force against a Western-dominated order. In addition, the PRC refers to itself as a contributor, instead of a (unilateral) sponsor of regional and global order. This shows that the PRC considers itself one member among many in the international system. Relating to the arbitration case brought forward by the Republic of the Philippines against the PRC in 2014, the Chinese administration continues to highlight that it abides by international law. One might argue that the tribunal has proven the contrary in its award (cf. *PH vs. CN Award*, 2016), but the Chinese administration points to its right to "to exclude compulsory arbitration on sovereign disputes and maritime delimitation" (X. Liu, 2016). It is interesting to point out that the linguistic item 'law' seems to be associated with items 'justice', 'legitimacy', 'facts' and 'equity' (cf. Wang, 2016). The PRC does not challenge the existing international norms, portraying international norm as Western shaped and Western power reinforcing as critical legal scholars suggest (cf. Anghie, 2005, 2006; Gathii, 1998; Ikejiaku, 2014). Instead, the PRC considers international norms as important and just rules in the game of international politics. China sees itself to be a law-abiding member of the international community, expecting other countries to do the same. In this context one could point to an underlying bifurcation of the international community, meaning that two international communities exist, one determined by power and one by legal norms. While this is an interesting way to approach the tense relation between power and adherence to norms, none of the Chinese statements indicate a perception of such bifurcation. This analysis does not seek to find the best conceptualization of the international community but rather attempts to uncover the Chinese conceptualization with its semi-causal relations among the representations of subjects and objects. A reconceptualization of the international community which is not portrayed in the Chinese narrative would, therefore, be misplaced in this paper.

The second reoccurring theme in many statements is such of China as a strong, powerful, and growing country. Power is displayed in its different dimensions. During his remarks at the CCP National Congress, Xi refers to China's economic power: "The economy has maintained a medium-high growth rate, making China a leader among the major economies. [...] China has maintained its position as the world's second-largest economy and contributed more than 30 percent of global economic growth" (Xi, 2017). Furthermore, he ties the economic growth to more global influence when stating: "We must actively participate in and promote economic globalization [...] and continue to increase China's economic power and composite strength" (Xi, 2017). Thereby he emphasizes to an international audience that China's economic influence will rise over time. China has worked hard in the last decades to translate its economic power into military force. Xi points to the creation of a stronger PLA "[...] responding to the demands of the day for a strong country with a strong military, we must fully implement the Party's thinking on strengthening the military for the new era and the military strategy for new conditions, build a powerful and modernized army, navy, air force, rocket force, [...] and create a modern combat system with distinctive Chinese characteristics" (Xi, 2017). Many statements point to the path of development which the country is undergoing now (cf. Xi, 2017). This theme is in so far important as the US is often portrayed as the constraint on the Chinese people's development.

Though pointing to its growing influence and strength on a regional and international level, the PRC does not consider itself a threat to other, especially not smaller, countries. The China Daily Newspaper commented: "China follows a 'defensive' defense policy" (Rabi, 2017) and president Xi argued: "China pursues a national defense policy that is in nature defensive. China's development does not pose a threat to any other country. No matter what stage of development it reaches, China will never seek hegemony or engage in expansion." (Xi, 2017). That shows that the PRC associates with itself and its policies the linguistic items 'peaceful', 'defensive' and 'cooperative'. Therefore, the PRC cannot understand that its actions are perceived as aggressive and expansionist and met with fierce resistance by the US and parts of ASEAN. This shows the contrast between the PRC self-perception and the PRC perception of the US.

The third theme deals with the PRC as the bearer of historical rights regarding the SCS and as a country with a rich history. Statements such as "We were the first to discover and name its islands and reefs and the first to govern them" by the Chinese ambassador to Britain Liu (Liu, 2016) or the MFA statement: "The activities of the Chinese people in the South China Sea date back to over 2,000 years ago. China is the first to have discovered, named, and explored and exploited Nanhai Zhudao and relevant waters, and the first to have exercised sovereignty and jurisdiction over them continuously, peacefully and effectively, thus establishing territorial sovereignty and relevant

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rights and interests in the South China Sea" (MFA, 2016b) show, that the Chinese administration points to its long and rich history to substantiate its territorial claims. The meaning of history in China is connected to the linguistic items of 'humiliation', 'outside interference' and 'imperialism'. This has its root in the Century of Humiliation, which began with the First Opium War in 1840 and ended with Mao Zedong's proclamation of the New Republic in 1949 (cf. Kaufman, 2010; Schiavenza, 2013). During the 109 years, the West and Japan humiliated the weak and shattered country through various interventions during the Sino-French War, the Boxer Rebellion, the British Invasion of Tibet, the 21-Demands and the Second Sino-Japanese War. The newly found Republic had no means to defend itself against the imperialist and military superior outside forces. Pointing to its historical rights entails for the PRC that the once preeminent civilization must never be subject to humiliation and outside domination by the West again. Statements such as "China will no longer let the historical sovereignty issues slide; it will not give up an inch of the territory of its ancestors" (China Daily, 2018), "the current China is nothing like the country it was one hundred years ago. Any act that tries to violate China's territorial sovereignty will fail." (X. Wang, 2016) and "The days have long passed when the country [China] was seen as the 'sick man of East Asia', whose fate was at the mercy of a few Western powers" (China Daily, 2016) reveal the historical wounds and the strong determination to avoid a similar fate arising in present-day China. For the Chinese administration, the history is a warning of what can happen when two things come together: interference by outside forces in regional disputes of Southeast Asia and the lacking military ability to defend itself against foreign involvement.

Finally, China has a self-perception of a country which values the fundamental principle of non-interference. President Xi Jinping stressed this theme in his report at the 19th CPC National Congress: "We respect the right of the people of all countries to choose their own development path. We endeavor to uphold international fairness and justice, and oppose acts that impose one's will on others or interfere in the internal affairs of others as well as the practice of the strong bullying the weak." (Xi, 2017). China's foreign policy is dedicated to "promote [...] non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries" (Xu, 2018). This motive is reiterated in many foreign policy statements, not solely directed at issues in Asia but also other continents (cf. Liu, 2018), and often associated with linguistic items such as 'international law', 'justice' or 'bully'. By pursuing a policy of non-interference, the PRC reaps several benefits. Firstly, by adhering to the principle it can demand respect for its sovereignty in the SCS. Secondly, the Chinese administration portrays its respect for international law, as the principle of non-interference is central in UN Charta.

Summarizing, the PRC hails itself into a subject-position of a law-abiding, grand and growing member of the international community, which respects the rules of international relations, most notably the principle of non-interference and territorial integrity. It is that the PRC positions itself as the center of its representation of the international system, as a historical power which attempts to recapture its former status through peaceful and not threatening means while highlighting that it is able to defend itself against bullies, as it was unable to do in the past.

The United States of America

The Chinese representations of the US differ based on the sitting US president and (bilateral) policy issues. The representation shown here is supposed to portray the common ground of the representations of both Obama- and Trump-America. Three themes can be identified in the Chinese sources: The US as a self-declared world police that intrudes and causes tensions outside its hemisphere, the US constraining China's growth and denying China the influence and position in the international system it deserves, and the US as hegemon with little respect for international law.

The US as an intruder to Southeast Asia is a theme which is mentioned regularly. Though being a commentary and therefore provocative, this source portrays the Chinese perspective well: "[...] the United States along with its regional allies [...] have never stopped stirring up trouble in peaceful waters and militarizing the South China Sea. [...] The United States, self-proclaimed world police, itself has developed a habit of putting on a military show of force on China's doorstep. Even though the region is thousands of miles away from its soil, US warplanes and warships have been patrolling dangerously close to Chinese territory. Such behavior is rooted in the mentality of U.S. imperialism and hegemony" (Zhu, 2017). Chinese administrators such as ambassador Liu choose their words more carefully but remark the same message: "The issue of the South China Sea is being ramped up by those in the US and the UK

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who accuse China of causing tension in the region. They proclaim the principle of free navigation and overflight but in reality their prejudice and partiality will only increase tension" (X. Liu, 2016). The US has therefore been attached to the linguistic items 'imperialism', 'suppression', 'arrogance', and 'instigator of trouble'. The territorial disputes are portrayed by the Chinese as diverging interests of the Asian countries which escalated only through US involvement with FONOPs. In the Chinese view, the region would be better off finding a solution in a regional forum, such as ASEAN+1 (cf. MFA, 2016a, 2016b; Zhou, 2018).

The second theme is the US' constraint on Chinese development. The US is considered the hegemon of the world community which does not grant the PRC sufficient opportunity to develop itself economically and gain influence on a global scale. The phrase 'contains', associated with the containment policies of the US against communist Russia, shows that the PRC claims to be isolated in the international forum and limited from cooperation possibilities within Southeast Asia. Wang combines both aspects when writing and quoting: "Chu Yin, a research fellow at the Center for China and Globalization (CCG) said that 'the U.S. escalates the tensions in the South China Sea with an essential purpose of containing China.' For the U.S., sabotaging the relations between China and ASEAN countries is an effective way to hinder China's development [...]." (X. Wang, 2016). Or put differently by the Editor-in-Chief of the News site China.org.cn: "Japan, as an ally of Washington, was also active and enthusiastic in helping the U.S. to suppress China".

The third aspect is the US' lack of respect for international rules, most prevailing the principle of non-interference. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) accused the US of "manipulating the international arbitration tribunal" (X. Wang, 2016) and stated: "The US side shows no respect for sovereignty, security and maritime rights of coastal states and conducts the so-called 'freedom of navigation' operation in other country's territorial waters in violation of international law." (MFA, 2016c). The US is therefore associated with the image of 'too powerful to respect the law', a bully that is unwilling to respect the rights of weaker nations and to comply with the law all other nations adhere to.

Overall the US is hailed into the subject position of the international bully, which uses his strength to suppress the development of the Chinese nation, to interfere in and escalate third-party conflicts, and manipulate the rules of the international community to reach its goals. It is noteworthy that these aspects are the exact contrary of the PRC regarding the respect for international law and the principle of non-interference.

The Other Southeast Asian Claimants

Chinese Premier Li refers to the Southeast Asian Claimants (SEACs), which group together the Philippines, Brunei, Vietnam, Taiwan, and Malaysia, as "good neighbors, good friends and good partners", highlights the cooperation "promoting peace, stability and common prosperity in our region" and values ASEAN "as a high priority in its [China's] neighborhood diplomacy" (Li, 2018). The reason ASEAN is considered the representative of SEACs, though not all ASEAN members are involved in the SCS territorial disputes, is because negotiations (e.g. the Code of Conduct) between the PRC and the SEACs take place in the ASEAN forum (cf. Lee, 2017). The PRC also highlights its good relationship with neighboring countries in statements of bilateral meetings, referring to the bilateral relations to Brunei as "close neighbors across the sea as well as friends and partners with mutual trust" (MFA, 2018) or to Vietnam as "good-neighborly and friendly cooperation" (MFA, 2017).

It is interesting that even the Sino-Filipino relations are described as "becoming as warm as Manila's weather" by Premier Li (Gao, 2017), despite the conflict over the international arbitration tribunal. This is because the PRC blames the US for enticing the Southeast Asian country. In several statements the Chinese administration points to the US behind the Philippines' decision, portraying an image of a 'good friend under bad outside influence'. Foreign minister Wang remarked in 2016: "Plotted and manipulated by certain forces outside the region, the former government of the Philippines unilaterally initiated the arbitration with no consent of the other party" (Y. Wang, 2016).

Though having diverging and conflicting interests in the SCS, the PRC considers the SEACs friends based on historical and cultural bounds, as shown by the connotation of the item 'ASEAN' with 'good-neighborly', 'regional peace and security', 'development' 'unity', 'trust' and 'regional integration' (cf. Li, 2018; Mu, 2017; Xi, 2017). The SEACs are hailed into the subject position of Asian friends, which have an equal relationship with the PRC and jointly

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promote peace and stability as long as outsiders, this subject-position filled by the US, do not intrude and manipulate the regional forces into policy decisions endangering the peace in Southeast Asia.

Representation of the Object of Interest: The South China Sea

Just as for actors, the Chinese government ascribes meaning, significance and connotations to objects of interest, in this case study the South China Sea and hails it into a position of national importance. Looking at the sources, I have identified a historical, a security and a status meaning attributed to the SCS.

As mentioned above, the Chinese historical understanding of parts of the 19th and 20th century can be largely described by the term 'humiliation', caused by the oppression by imperialist powers. The SCS entails special historical significance to the PRC since the British armadas arrived through and blocked the SCS during the First Opium War (Fong, 2018). Letting Western powers or Japan regain control over the South China Sea would, therefore, arouse the debasing memories of the past. The SCS, therefore, contains a warning and a calling for the Chinese administration to never let history repeat itself. The MFA concludes in a statement on the SCS: "To observe China, one should never lose sight of the historical dimension. Though China is growing into a strong country, the painful memory of history is not long gone. The Chinese people have not forgotten that the country stumbled into the 20th century with its capital under the occupation of the imperialists' armies, and for over a century before and after, China suffered the humiliation of foreign invasion and aggression. That is why the Chinese people and government are very sensitive about anything that is related to territorial integrity and would never allow such recurrence even if it's just an inch of land" (Ying Fu & Wu, 2016).

US officials justify the presence of the US and the conduction of FONOPs in the SCS with securing the international freedom of navigation and overflights (cf. Chipman, 2018; Green, Glaser, & Poling, 2015). The region entails (only) strategic significance and possible long-term security threats for the US, instead of an immediate threat to the American population. Looking at statements by US administration, one can identify the linguistic items 'strategic', 'alliances', 'rebalancing', 'architecture' and 'security order' (cf. Clinton, 2011; The White House, 2015). This shows its rational understanding of security, conceiving of it like a game of chess. On the very contrary, the presence of US warships in the SCS, in close distance to China's east coast where the majority of the economic power and grand cities such as Beijing and Shanghai are located (Yiqin Fu, 2014), poses a direct threat to the Chinese people. Security in this sense is not considered a broad global and abstract concept, but rather a topic of protecting citizens, as shown by statements from the MFA: "in an effort to safeguard national security [...]" (Y. Wang, 2017) and "because those activities threaten China's sovereignty and security". While the US perceives the SCS disputes as a threat to freedom of navigation, China sees a direct threat to its sovereignty and security of its people.

For the last aspects, one must read between the lines and examine the actions of the PRC and the US in recent years. Although diplomatic statements would never portray the situation as this, the conflict is the decisive challenging point between the rising power China and the status-quo hegemon US. The PRC does not challenge the US global dominance but aspires to demonstrate that the time when the US interfered in regional conflicts in Southeast Asia without respect for the principle of non-interference and without serious opposition from regional forces is coming to an end.

Overall it is important to notice that the Middle Kingdom attributes emotions to the object 'SCS'. The control over the SCS is therefore not only a security and safety issue but includes the humiliation of the past. The SCS is a breaking point for the Chinese administration where it must prove to its citizens and an international audience that the bullying of the past by Western power does not continue and mark its position in the international order.

The Quasi-causal Relationships Between the Actors and the Object of Interest

The quasi-causal relationships which Weldes establishes between the different representation of actors and objects are mostly entailed in the above-described identities. The PRC considers itself to be a (former) victim of US aggression and shows its willingness and ability to defend itself against the US. The Chinese relations to SEACs are described as friendly and demonstrate the image of an Asian community/family, with cultural and ancient bounds and

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in which communication can solve any regional disputes. Though significantly diverging in size and power, China considers itself to be 'one of them' and sees a relation on eye level. China perceives of the relationship between US and ASEAN as the bully who is manipulating the smaller countries to sabotage the good relations between the PRC and ASEAN and contain China's growth. The SCS perfectly represents US and Western imperialist actions from the past and therefore can be placed as the challenge point between the US and China, where Chinese administration must prove itself and its population that 100 years later, the PRC and the PLA are willing and able to thwart off any attacks on the territories of its ancestors and more abstract on the global position the Middle Kingdom seeks to retake. The relation between ASEAN and the SCS are not elaborated significantly in Chinese statements, but economic interests such as the right to exploit fishing grounds or gas/oil deposits are considered minor which can be resolved through bilateral talks and are not the cause of escalation in the SCS. The US relation to the SCS is portrayed as being dominated by the ambition to militarily control the region. The Western power misuses legal concepts such as the freedom of navigation and overflight to create trouble in the region and constrain China.

Deriving the Chinese national interest in the SCS

What is the Chinese national interest regarding the territorial disputes in the SCS? Can one draw conclusions for an answer to the China Question based on how the PRC perceives of the situation and the involved actors? An answer found by existent literature to the first question is that the PRC aspires power and wealth for the means of security, but is this accurate? Looking at the elaborate analysis of records of the Chinese administration and the censored popular press, the answer offered by this paper is both yes and no. China is looking for control over the SCS to avoid a humiliating domination of Western power in the form of attacks as occurred in the past. In this sense, Cohen and others are corrected. But the security to which the PRC aspires is not just a safety issue that can be compared to the security threat posed by the North Korean Nuclear Program, the US anti-missile system 'Thaad' in South Korea or Japan's rising military expenditures. The SCS issue offers and forces the PRC to prove to a domestic and international audience its power and international status, as its ancient history demands. It offers the breaking point to stop the bullying of the West and confront the various ways in which the US is attempting to constrain the country from development. I argue that more than the security aspects it is the feeling of humiliation and desire for the long-hoped-for pride which marks the PRC policies in the SCS.

What does that mean for the future? Based on the narrative the Chinese sources portray of the territorial disputes, it is unlikely that the PRC will withdraw even to a small extent from its position in the SCS. It aspires control in the region, potentially shared with other regional actors such as ASEAN, but most certainly not with outside forces because it is convinced to be on the right side of history and international law. If the US decides to pursue a more hostile policy against the island construction in the SCS, the PRC would, and after portraying above-described narrative to its citizens, could not do anything different than starting a war against the 'imperialist forces'. Otherwise, it would lose face, as its ancestor did in the past.

The more abstract question is whether the PRC will be a breaker, taker or maker of the global (economic) order. One cannot answer the question at the moment since social actions are not predictable. But looking at the Chinese view on the SCS disputes, certain developments appear more probable than others. Based on the representation of itself being a trustworthy member of the international community and adhering to its rules, it seems unlikely that the PRC will break the global order since it does not reject the (Western-created) order but rather the non-participation in its norms by the US. While the PRC might attempt to reform certain aspects of the order as mentioned by Xi at the 19th National CCP Congress (cf. Xi, 2017), it will not try to replace it. Finally, the PRC seems reluctant to replace the US as a global hegemon. While the PRC does pursue a strategy of global power expansionism, the Chinese understanding of international politics suggests that the PRC would not get involved in other nations or interfere in their political system as the US did and does. The PRC does not aspire to dominate the international system, it attempts to contribute to it and secure its place.

One might argue that the attempt to understand the Chinese perspective by analyzing its propaganda is meaningless as state officials act rational in international negotiations and decision-making processes and as emotions are excluded from the process. But whether the Chinese administration believes its own narrative or not, the narrative has been presented to the domestic audience which has shaped its expectations. The Chinese citizens, who are due

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to censorship and suppression unable to receive an opposing narrative, therefore expect actions from the administration which are in line with the narrative. Even if not acting in line with the narrative because of the lack of convincement, the administration is pushed by public pressure to act according to it. Thus the narrative becomes fulfills itself.

Conclusion

The United States as the status-quo hegemon and the PRC as the rising power are trapped in Thucydides' Trap, with the outcome unknown. To explain China's geoeconomic policy decisions, this paper argued for a constructivist, language-based concept of the national interest to replace the static concept commonly used by classical theory. At For this purpose, this paper introduced the reader to four dominant lines of argumentation regarding the China Question and highlighted the application of the national interest for analyzing policy decisions. But the classical conceptualization of the national interest as pre-determined, located inside the actor and accessible in terms of wealth, power and security limits a theory's capability to explain foreign policy. The points of critique that this concept is too broad and vague, causes more than less questions, ignores the intersubjective process of interest formation and presupposes an objective reality, and is therefore overall unfit to explain policy decision have been demonstrated with the example of the massive accumulation of foreign reserves by the PBC. As an alternative concept, the reader was introduced to a constructivist approach to national interest developed by Jutta Weldes, concentrating on linguistic practices. Weldes proposes a framework in which an individual creates representations of itself, others and objects by the means of the concepts interpellation and articulation, afterwards establishes quasi-causal, well-defined relations among these diverse representations and lastly derives the actors' interests from their representations and positions in the subjectively created system.

To demonstrate this concept's usefulness and advantages in explaining policy decisions, this paper has looked at the Chinese perspective on the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Through an extensive analysis of speeches, public statements, and policy description by Chinese state officials and articles in the popular press, I have identified the representations the PRC narrative entails for itself, the US, SEACs and the SCS, determined the relations among these identities and lastly derived the Chinese national interest in this issue. The representations will not be restated here as this would take up significant space. This paper identified the Chinese national interest as follows: the PRC does not only aspire security and wealth benefits in the SCS but must safe face by defending its historical territorial rights. Emotional aspects such as the humiliation and pain of the past and national pride of the present and future prohibit the Chinese administration to take a 'softer' stand on the issue. The PRC will not back down under more US pressure as it believes to be on the right side of law and history and must avoid a second Century of Humiliation.

Furthermore, this paper has offered one perspective on the China Question. As China considers itself one member of the international community and criticizes the US neglect of international norms instead of their substance, it seems probable that China will continue to integrate itself into the current international system, though shaping and adding to it.

In some sense, it is ironic that the aspect most mainstream theories neglect plays a significant role in understanding China's foreign policy in the SCS: emotions. Humiliation and pain caused by bullying, pride called for by a rich and long history, and extreme caution (and maybe fear) to prevent disclosing weaknesses have been identified as strongly influencing China's decision-making. Broad concepts such as security, power and wealth are not misplaced in an analysis of the SCS conflict but are unable to capture the full extent of the Chinese motivation. Theories which are based on the ontological assumptions of statism, anarchy or classes are unable to grasp the meaning and value 'neutral' objectives such as security and wealth have for the citizens inside the black box of the Chinese state. Understanding why individuals choose to act a certain way by exploring their perspective on an issue, as exposed in their choice of linguistic items and chains of associations, appears more favorable than applying one's subjective frame of analysis onto the actions of others. In the case of the South China Sea, it would be fatal to limit one's analysis to and orient one's action towards the concepts of security, power and wealth, as this approach might achieve the exact opposite and self-fulfill Thucydides' Trap.

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Date written: September 2018*