

The Value of the South China Sea for China: A Marxist Geopolitics Analysis

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ABSTRACT

China's assertiveness in the South China Sea has often been interpreted as a manifestation of maritime imperial ambitions, a balancing act, or a response to historical grievances. However, such arguments largely overlook the deeper question of why territorial expansion, a rare phenomenon in global politics, occurs in China's case. This research addresses the issue through a Marxist geopolitical lens, framing territorial expansion as a consequence of capitalism's inherent logic of spatial expansion. Using the concept of spatial fixes, it links China's domestic capitalist crises—characterized by overaccumulation and overcapacity—to territorial expansion in Southeast Asia and assertiveness in the South China Sea. Strategies such as the Going Global policy and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have turned Southeast Asia, including the South China Sea, into critical territories for China's capitalist accumulation. However, the historical transformation of China's state structure, coupled with incoherent and fragmented behavior among its internal agents, has led to contradictory yet increasingly assertive actions in the region. This study concludes that China's behaviour in the South China Sea is driven not only by external pressures, such as US involvement, but also by internal capitalist imperatives and state dynamics, offering a nuanced understanding of territorial disputes and state behaviour under capitalism.

Keywords: *South China Sea; China Capitalism; Marxist Geopolitics; State Transformation*

ABSTRAK

Asertivitas Tiongkok di Laut Cina Selatan seringkali ditafsirkan sebagai manifestasi dari ambisi imperial maritim, upaya penyeimbangan kekuasaan, atau respons terhadap luka sejarahnya. Namun, argumen-argumen tersebut cenderung mengabaikan pertanyaan mendasar tentang mengapa ekspansi teritorial—fenomena yang jarang terjadi dalam politik global—dapat terjadi dalam kasus Tiongkok. Penelitian ini membahas isu tersebut melalui kerangka geopolitik Marxis yang memandang ekspansi teritorial sebagai konsekuensi dari logika kapitalisme yang secara inheren mendorong ekspansi teritori. Dengan menggunakan konsep solusi spasial (*spatial fix*), penelitian ini menghubungkan krisis kapitalisme domestik Tiongkok—yang ditandai oleh over akumulasi dan overkapasitas—dengan ekspansi teritorial di Asia Tenggara dan asertivitasnya di Laut Cina Selatan. Strategi seperti kebijakan *Going Global* dan *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) telah menjadikan Asia Tenggara, termasuk Laut Cina Selatan, sebagai wilayah penting bagi akumulasi kapital Tiongkok. Namun, transformasi historis struktur negara Tiongkok, ditambah dengan perilaku yang tidak koheren dan terfragmentasi di antara agen-agenya, telah menyebabkan tindakan yang kontradiktif namun semakin asertif di kawasan tersebut. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa perilaku Tiongkok di Laut Cina Selatan tidak hanya didorong oleh tekanan eksternal seperti keterlibatan Amerika Serikat, tetapi juga oleh imperatif kapitalisme domestik dan dinamika transformasi negara, menawarkan pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang sengketa teritorial dan perilaku negara dalam konteks kapitalisme.

Kata Kunci: Laut Cina Selatan; Kapitalisme Tiongkok; Geopolitik Marxis; Transformasi Negara

Introduction

The South China Sea and China's assertiveness have been of concern both practically and academically. Most of them have been caused by the increasing intensity of Chinese policy across many realms, such as law, economics, and the military.¹ For instance, in 2007-2010, China's maneuver was realized through the ban on foreign fishing activity, granting legal status to the Paracel and Spratly islands as part of Hainan province, expanding its naval fleet, and designating the South China Sea as a

¹ Zhu, F. and Li, L. (2021) 'China's South China Sea Policies', in K. Zou (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of South China Sea*. (Routledge, 2021), pp. 167–183.

core interest.² Meanwhile, in 2012, citing Raditio, China's most insidious territorial maneuver was demonstrated by occupying and effectively controlling Scarborough Shoal.³ Since then, the escalation of conflicts between China and the directly affected countries has continued to intensify. In response to this situation, on a practical level, the discourse has been dominated by tactical analyses of international law (UNCLOS), the dispute's global impact, and policy recommendations derived from it.⁴ On the other hand, in the academic realm, a variety of arguments have been proposed. The primary concern of the prior literature is why China has pursued such an assertive policy in the South China Sea.

The prior literature can be classified into three distinct approaches: realist (offensive or defensive), constructivist, and eclectic. Realism explains China's assertiveness as power expansion, the result of power distribution, and the security dilemma as the primary variable. The centrality of the anarchical nature of world politics and the balance of power become prominent and persistent points. Offensive realism, as Mearsheimer has argued, views the primary driver of China's assertiveness as the consequential nature of rising power and a bid for regional hegemony.⁵ China has been revisionist, but its rising power has enabled it to act assertively in Asia. Accordingly, the main argument of this approach has consistently framed China's maneuver as calculations within the politics of great powers. On the other hand, defensive realism explains these manoeuvres as a consequence of security dilemmas and security seekers.⁶ Stephen Waltz, the leading proponent of this approach, criticizes the inevitability of power accumulation in offensive realism and instead argues that becoming a regional hegemon is unlikely due to balancing constraints—nationalism or counter-coalitions—within the region.⁷ Consequently, assertive expansion is irrational, and China merely seeks security. Other defensive realists also emphasize misperceptions about US involvement and the strong nationalist sentiment within China.⁸ Following the same premise, other literature also examines whether China's rise is revisionist or status-quo seeking.⁹

Furthermore, the constructivist approach frames the issue in terms of certain ideational variables. Freundlieb argues that China's expansion is related to the process of constructing China's identity, shaped by historical ownership claims and colonial-era wounds, which drive China's assertiveness.¹⁰ Rosyidin, instead of power maximisation, emphasises the role of the Daoist concept, in which territorial actions are controlled, calibrated, and symbolic, guided by the logic of yin and yang from Dao, which balances coercion and cooperation.¹¹ Taking a different starting point, David Han also shows the ideational importance of China's changing role from norm-taker to norms-maker in the

² For a complete accord of the events, see chap.1, Raditio, K.H. *Understanding China's Behaviour in the South China Sea: A Defensive Realist Perspective* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019)

³ Raditio, K.H. 'China's Shifting Behaviour in the South China Sea: A Defensive Realist Perspective', *American Journal of Chinese Studies*, Vol. 22, No.2, (2015) pp. 309–328

⁴ See for example, Sofia, K. (2020) 'Sovereignty at Sea: The South China Sea Dispute and UNCLOS Implications', *International Journal of Law Management & Humanities*, Vol. 6, No.4, (2023), 2624-2665

⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, "The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great-Power Politics," *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 6 (November/December 2021): 3–21.

⁶ Raditio, K.H. (2015)

⁷ Stephen M. Walt, "Hedging on Hegemony: The Realist Debate over How to Respond to China," *International Security* 49, no. 4 (2025): 37–70.

⁸ Raditio, K.H. (2019); Turcsányi, R.Q. *Chinese Assertiveness in the South China Sea: Power Sources, Domestic Politics, and Reactive Foreign Policy, Global Power Shift*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

⁹ Triwibowo, Albert. 'China in South China Sea Dispute: Between Status Quo and Revisionist,' *Jurnal Ilmiah Hubungan Internasional*, Vol.10, No. 1, (2014), 1-22

¹⁰ Freundlieb, M. *A Constructivist Approach to Chinese Interest Formation in the South China Sea, E-International Relations*, (E-International, 2019), accessed in <https://www.e-ir.info/2019/02/02/a-constructivist-approach-to-chinese-interest-formation-in-the-south-china-sea/>

¹¹ Mohamad Rosyidin, "The Dao of Foreign Policy: Understanding China's Dual Strategy in the South China Sea," *Contemporary Security Policy*, 32, no. 2 (2019): 214–238.

ASEAN context.¹² His research shows how the growing power of China is accompanied by a changing identity and norms strategy. Another research worth noting comes from the role theory approach, which emphasizes the importance of self-perception (ego) and other-perception (alter) of China in explaining the situation.¹³

Meanwhile, outside the grand paradigm approach, eclectic arguments highlight the partiality of international relations theories in explaining reality, opting instead to synthesize crucial variables to explain China's policies better. Variables such as domestic political competition, the psychological considerations of Chinese elites, or bureaucratic state changes are absent from the conceptual framework of existing international relations theories.¹⁴ Thus, rather than proposing a grand conceptual scheme, this approach aligns more closely with foreign policy analysis, focusing on domestic changes and medium-range explanatory scopes.

However, despite offering a variety of convincing explanations, the previous approaches remain insufficient to explain the connection between assertiveness and territorial expansion. The question of why China engages in territorial expansion is absent from these approaches. Borrowing Agnew's term, international relations theories on the South China Sea issue remain trapped in the 'territorial trap,' which often treats the discourse on a state's space or territory as fixed, inherent, and unchanging attributes.¹⁵ To complicate matters further, at the practical level, the use of force in and for territorial expansion has been regarded as taboo under international law or, at the very least, as an unconventional practice in international relations.¹⁶

Faced with such issues, previous approaches provide partial answers. Realist approaches, whether defensive or offensive, simply assume territorial expansion as a natural consequence of rising power, driven by the logic of great power competition, whether through a security dilemma or shifting power distribution.¹⁷ In realist terms, territorial expansion is easily categorized as part of a sphere of influence or the backyard of a great power.¹⁸ Meanwhile, constructivist arguments, confined to the discursive realm, focus solely on the imaginary construction of a specific territory, self-identity, or norm mobilization and cannot sufficiently explain the causal mechanism underlying the state's territorial expansion.¹⁹ Similarly, eclectic approaches disregard theoretical coherence, offer no substantial alternative, and simply assume territorial expansion as a routine practice for rising powers like China.²⁰

¹² David Guo Xiong Han, "China's Normative Power in Managing South China Sea Disputes," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* Vol.10, no. 3 (2017): 269–297

¹³ Darmawan, Arif. 'Dinamika Isu Laut Tiongkok Selatan: Analisis Sumber-Sumber Kebijakan Luar Negeri Tiongkok dalam Sengketa,' *Jurnal Ilmiah Hubungan Internasional*, Vol. 14, No.1, (2018), 13-35

¹⁴ Regilme, S.S.F. 'Beyond Paradigms: Understanding the South China Sea Dispute Using Analytic Eclecticism', *International Studies*, Vol. 55, No.3, (2018), pp. 213–237 ; Raymond, M. and Welch, D.A. 'What's Really Going On in the South China Sea?', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol.41, No.2, (2022), pp. 214–239.

¹⁵ For the uncritical attitude of IR theories over the change of territoriality practice, see also Ruggie, J.G. 'Territoriality and Beyond: Problematizing Modernity in International Relations', *International Organization*, Vol. 47, No.1, (1993), pp. 139–174; For complete notion of territorial trap, see Agnew, J. and Angeles, L. (1994) 'The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory', *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol.1, No.1, (1994), pp. 53–80

¹⁶ Klein, P. and Koutroulis, V. 'Territorial Dispute and The Use of Force', in M.G. Kohen and M. Hébié (eds) *Research Handbook on Territorial Disputes in International Law*. (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018)

¹⁷ Rolf and Agnew, (2016); Turcsanyi, (2018); Raditio, (2019); Mearsheimer, (2021); Walt, (2025)

¹⁸ This substantially ignores many crucial facts about the dynamics or competition among great powers following World War II. For instance, the United States, even after becoming a hegemon and while competing with other great powers, has never employed territorial expansion tactics in the form of claims over territories beyond its jurisdiction. What US did was a form of benign hegemony where its influence is guaranteed by indirect control. Thus, there is no necessity between sphere of influence and territorial expansion.

¹⁹ Freundlieb, (2019).

²⁰ Regilme, (2018); Raymond and Welch, (2022)

Interestingly, the above problem can, in fact, be addressed by the Marxist tradition, which has long demonstrated a serious causal relationship between the expansionary or war-making behaviour of states and the structural characteristics of the capitalist mode of production. Nevertheless, the Marxist tradition in International Relations has not consistently carried forward this line of argument. Dependency theory, for example, has tended to focus on the problematic terrain of global inequality rooted in capitalism's tendency to obstruct the developmental prospects of certain states.²¹ Neo-Gramscian approaches, pioneered by Cox, concentrate instead on the dialectical relationship between social forces and productive structures in shaping global order.²² Meanwhile, the Frankfurt School emphasizes normative questions of recognition and utopia, often to the point of sidelining any material analysis of capitalism and the crises, economic or political, that it produces at the global level.²³

Taken together, these approaches unfortunately overlook the question of capitalism's spatial expansion and its consequences for relations among states. It is Lenin's theory of imperialism that most directly conceptualizes the relationship between economic variables, such as monopoly or finance capital, and interstate war.²⁴ Nevertheless, even Lenin's framework falls short, for the economic variables he identifies are not linked through a sufficiently rigorous causal mechanism, nor does he provide a conceptual apparatus for theorizing the state's independence and its own rational capacities when adopting confrontational policies.²⁵

Consequently, to address the limitations of prior IR approaches and Marxist tradition in IR, this paper employs a Marxist geopolitical analysis as proposed by Pozo and Colás. Building on David Harvey's argument about capitalism's spatiality, this approach's foundational assumption highlights the significance of the dialectical relationship between space—in this case, territory—and the development of capitalism (in both production and value circulation). This relationship profoundly impacts the state's role in managing capital security and, ultimately, its survival at both domestic and international levels.²⁶

Building on these considerations, the central question this study seeks to answer is: why does China engage in territorial expansion and assertiveness in the South China Sea? In addressing this, the paper explains China's assertiveness and territorial expansion in the South China Sea as a direct consequence of the historical development of Chinese capitalism, positioning the South China Sea as a critical space for resolving its capitalist crisis and as a potential new space of capital accumulation. In this context, China's responses as a state represent a complex, historical, and contradictory process of accommodating the trajectory of Chinese capitalist accumulation.

To elucidate this, the paper is divided into three sections. The first section outlines the analytical framework of Marxist geopolitics, including an explanation of its variables and their operationalization. The second and third sections elaborate on the crucial variables within Marxist geopolitics that interpret the South China Sea as a vital territory for resolving Chinese capitalism crisis

²¹ For a good overview of Dependency School, see Kvangraven, Ingrid Harvold. "Beyond the Stereotype: Restating the Relevance of the Dependency Research Programme." *Development and Change* 51, no. 2 (2020): 1–37.

²² Moolakkattu, J.S. "Robert W. Cox and Critical Theory of International Relations." *International Studies* 46, no. 4 (2009): 439–456.

²³ It is also this very problem that result in the demise of Frankfurt School relevance in contemporary critical IR scholars. For a recognition issue, see Haacke, Jürgen, "The Frankfurt School and International Relations: On the Centrality of Recognition," *Review of International Studies* 31, no. 1 (2005): 181–194; for its critic of idealism, see Schmid, Davide, "The Poverty of Critical Theory in International Relations: Habermas, Linklater and the Failings of Cosmopolitan Critique," *European Journal of International Relations* 23, no. 1 (2017): 1–23.

²⁴ For a review of Lenin's conceptualization and its relevance and importance toward the origin of war in IR, see Oktaviano, Nandito, "Kelahiran Ilmu HI: Di Mana Gerangan Kontribusi Marxisme?" *Jurnal Indoprogres* 3, No.1 (2024): 148-159

²⁵ For Lenin's contemporary relevance and its critics, see Marshall, Alan, "Lenin's Imperialism Nearly 100 Years On: An Outdated Paradigm?" *Critique* 42, no. 3 (2014): 317–333.

²⁶ Colás, A. and Pozo, G. 'The Value of Territory : Towards a Marxist Geopolitics', *Geopolitics*, Vol. 16, No.1, (2011) pp. 211–220.

and providing potential space for new capital accumulation and China's assertive response, arising from the historical contestation of internal Chinese actors aiming to smooth, exploit, or even leverage the trajectory of Chinese capitalism facilitated by the state. Finally, the paper concludes with a general summary of its findings and the theoretical implications of applying Marxist geopolitics to the analysis of international relations phenomena.

Marxist Geopolitics: The Spatiality of Capitalism and Class Antagonism

Marxist geopolitics is an analytical framework that seeks to extrapolate the spatial logic of capitalism and its impact on interstate relations and geopolitical dynamics.²⁷ To fully understand this, it is essential to highlight how capitalism possesses a distinct spatial logic that carries significant consequences for *the organization and production of space* within specific loci.²⁸ As a starting point, this paper generically defines capitalism as a structured system characterized by a complex network of connections between the realms of production, distribution, and consumption (Jessop, 2002).²⁹

The primary driving force of this system is the infinite accumulation of capital or profit. In spatial terms, the systemic logic of capitalism leads to two key outcomes: the annihilation of space by time and territorial expansion. Regarding the first outcome, attention must be paid to ensuring that the process of commodity production and the distribution of these goods to ready markets proceed smoothly and without disruption.³⁰ Consequently, capitalism, driven by the logic of capital accumulation, must ensure that the spaces connecting economic realms are organized so that the production and circulation of value proceed seamlessly, continuously undergoing temporal compression to make the circulation of commodities more effective and efficient.³¹ This process, as Harvey notes, represents the spatial aspect of capitalism known as *socially necessary turnover time* (SNTT).³² Every company strives to compress SNTT to increase profits, and those unable to compete effectively are pushed aside.³³ This capitalist spatial logic ultimately results in the organization and production of specific spaces, manifesting in the development of robust transportation infrastructures (maritime, land, and air), the creation of Exclusive Economic Zones, and the concentration of development in certain regions, often exacerbating inequalities within and between these areas.³⁴

Furthermore, in the second context related to territorial expansion, the spatial aspect of capitalism is fundamentally linked to the inherent tendency of crises within capitalism.³⁵ One such crisis is the overaccumulation crisis within a specific territory. Harvey describes overaccumulation as a condition characterized by surplus labour, which contributes to rising unemployment; surplus capital, manifesting as unsold goods or unused production capacity; and surplus money, which lacks viable investment channels.³⁶ To address this, capital must recreate space for accumulation. In this context, Harvey identifies two approaches: the intensification of capital accumulation within a territory and the extensification of capital accumulation beyond the territory of the existing capitalist system.³⁷ The strategy of intensification involves tactics such as creating new markets for needs, implementing

²⁷ *Ibid*

²⁸ Castree, N. 'The Spatio-Temporality of Capitalism', *Time and Society*, Vol.18, No.1, (2009) pp. 26–61.

²⁹ See chapter 1 in Jessop, B. *The Future of the Capitalist State*. (Polity Press, 2002)

³⁰ Sheppard, E. 'The Spatiality of The Limits to Capital', *Antipode*, Vol.36, No.5, (2004), pp. 470–479.

³¹ Schoenberger, E. 'The Spatial Fix Revisited', *Antipode*, Vol.36, No.5, (2004), pp. 427–433.

³² **Socially Necessary Turnover Time** refers to the average time required for capital to complete its cycle—ranging from investment, production, to realization (profit attainment)—within the specific socio-economic context of a given region. Harvey, D. (2001) *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography*. (Routledge, 2001)

³³ Castree, (2009).

³⁴ Harvey, (2001).

³⁵ Harvey, D. *The Limits to Capital*. (Verso, 2006)

³⁶ Harvey, D. 'The "New" Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession', *Socialist Register*, Vol.40, (2004), pp. 63–87

³⁷ Harvey, (2006).

targeted population and social welfare policies, and exploring underdeveloped areas within the territory.

On the other hand, the extensification of capital accumulation refers to practices like foreign trade, exports, and investments in global markets. At this point, Harvey also crucially emphasizes that as intensification strategies become more challenging to implement, the importance of extensification strategies for capital accumulation grows.³⁸ It is within this latter realm that the logic of capitalism and spatial expansion becomes evident. Substantively, the entirety of these processes and tactics is conceptualized as a *spatial fix*.³⁹

As a consequence of the spatial logic of capitalism, Colás and Pozo, drawing on Harvey, argue that the value of a territory is highly dependent on social infrastructure, including the condition of transportation systems, spatial economic regulations, population policies, and the facilitation of market expansion within that territory.⁴⁰ At this juncture, the role of the sovereign state becomes crucial, as population growth, market expansion, economic regulation, and infrastructure development fall within the state's domain of authority and power.⁴¹ In this regard, these state roles can be categorized as Lefebvre's territorial strategies.⁴² In this case, the state's critical role in capital accumulation should not be interpreted as mere subservience to capitalism. Instead, the state's accommodation of capitalism's spatial needs has always been part of a power calculation aimed at securing its dominant political position domestically—essentially ensuring its survival.⁴³

Regarding domestic political conditions, strong emphasis is also placed on class antagonisms, as reflected in the contestation among various social groups to dominate the state.⁴⁴ In this regard, the conceptual position of Marxist geopolitics underscores the importance of situating the state as a historically specific process that enables the dominance of particular groups.⁴⁵ Within this context, the contestation and subsequent dominance of a specific group are always contingent and vary across scales or levels of governance, from local to regional to national.⁴⁶ In addition, the role of discourse, manifesting through hegemonic tactics, becomes crucial in legitimizing the dominance or interests of specific groups.⁴⁷ Furthermore, various actors possess their own discourses and hegemonic tactics. Thus, the state's overall territorial strategies must be understood as historical products with inherently contradictory natures. The analytical framework explained thus far is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Analytical Framework

³⁸ Harvey, (2001).

³⁹ Schoenberger, (2004).

⁴⁰ Colas and Pozo, (2011).

⁴¹ Jessop, (2002).

⁴² Brenner, N. and Elden, S. 'Henri Lefebvre on State, Space, Territory', *International Political Sociology*, Vol.3, No.4, (2009), pp. 353–377

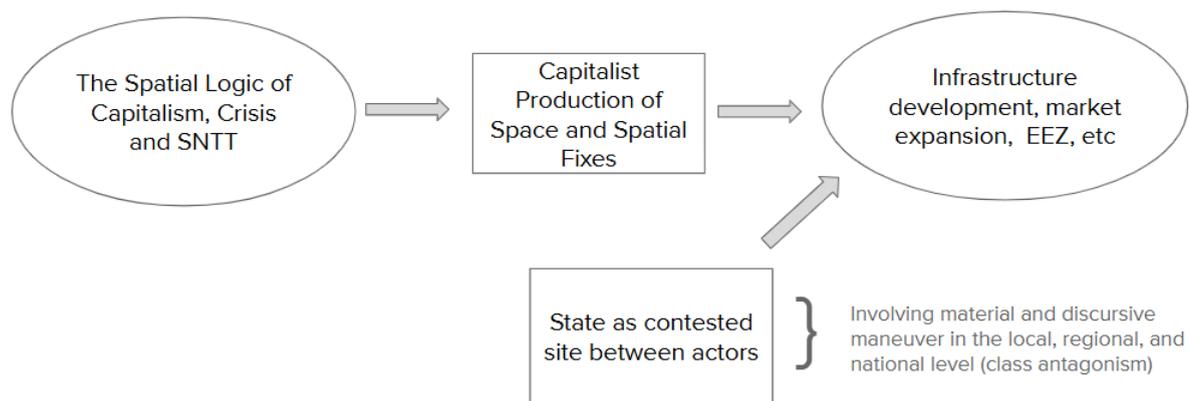
⁴³ Pozo-Martin, G. 'Autonomous or materialist geopolitics?', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol.20, No.4, (2007), pp. 551–563; Brenner, N. and Elden, S., (2009); Colas and Pozo, (2011).

⁴⁴ Colas and Pozo, (2011).

⁴⁵ Tansel, C.B. 'Geopolitics, Social Forces, and the international: Revisiting the "Eastern Question"', in *Review of International Studies*, Vol.42, No. 3, (2016), pp. 492–512; Jessop, B. and Morgan, J. 'The strategic-relational approach, realism and the state: from regulation theory to neoliberalism via Marx and Poulantzas, an interview with Bob Jessop', *Journal of Critical Realism*, Vol.21, No.1, (2022), pp. 83–118.

⁴⁶ Jessop, (2002).

⁴⁷ Jessop, B. 'State', in M. Musto (ed.) *The Marx Revival, Key Concept and New Interpretations*. (Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 289–307.



The theoretical explanations outlined above constitute the analytical framework for examining China's territorial expansion in the South China Sea. In this context, the spatial dimension of capitalism, driven by profit accumulation, serves as the independent variable shaping China's expansion in the region. It forms the starting point of the analysis. Here, the historical process of China's capitalist development and the internal crisis of overaccumulation are positioned as crucial processes that establish the value of the South China Sea for Chinese capitalism. Meanwhile, China's offensive tactics in the region are framed as territorial strategies aimed at facilitating capital accumulation and providing a spatial fix to its overaccumulation crisis (Jessop, 2004, 2007).⁴⁸ Furthermore, the processes and tactical decisions shaping China's territorial strategies in the South China Sea are analysed as the historical outcomes of contestation among various social groups, operating at both material and discursive levels across local, regional, and national scales within China.

Research Method

This research uses a qualitative method with deductive reasoning. The qualitative method focuses on analysing specific phenomena by explaining the causal relations between dependent and independent variables.⁴⁹ To do so, qualitative research will trace the historical, sociological, and political processes that may affect the specific phenomenon.

In line with the research method, data collection and analysis will use process tracing.⁵⁰ Process tracing involves deductive reasoning, meaning that a set of arguments from theoretical exposition becomes the independent and dependent variables. In this case, in line with the prior analytical framework, the independent variable will be Chinese capitalism and its class antagonism. Meanwhile, the dependent variable will be China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. All in all, the causal relations between these should be explicated as a means of analysis.

Analysis

⁴⁸ Jessop, B. 'On the Limits of The Limits to Capital', *Antipode*, Vol.36, No.5,(2004), pp. 480–496; Jessop, B. 'Spatial Fixes, Temporal Fixes, and Spatio-Temporal Fixes', in N. Castree and D. Gregory (eds) *David Harvey, A Critical Reader*, (Blackwell, 2007), pp. 142–166.

⁴⁹ Gonzales-Ocantor, E. 'Designing Qualitative Research Projects: Notes on Theory Building, Case Selection, and Field Research', in Curini, L. and Franzese, R. (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Research Methods in Political Science and International Relations*. 1st ed. (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2020), pp. 104–121.

⁵⁰ Lamont, C. *Research Methods in Politics and International Relations*. 1st ed. (Ed) N. Aguilera and J. Piper, (SAGE Publications, 2015)

a. China's Capitalism Model's Crisis and Its Spatial Fixes: From Going Global to Belt and Road Initiatives

The historical development of Chinese capitalism began with the reforms implemented after Mao's death. In dominant literature, this development is typically categorized into three reform stages, each representing an internal crisis in China's economic model and the resolutions pursued by the Chinese government.⁵¹ This specific historical trajectory of Chinese capitalism is critically important, as the overaccumulation crisis it experienced and the subsequent expansionist spatial fixes that emerged are historical products. Therefore, while capitalism inherently tends toward market expansion, its modalities and manifestations are deeply tied to the specific historical conditions in which it develops.⁵²

China's entire economic reform process was characterized by efforts to decentralize governance and grant local governments greater autonomy in managing their economies.⁵³ These reforms were a response to low productivity in the agricultural and industrial sectors, as well as insufficient technological innovation in industry. Alongside decentralization, the Chinese government provided subsidies to state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and local governments to promote industrialization and boost economic productivity.⁵⁴ Benefiting from Mao's legacy, which created a labour force conducive to industrialization and retained government control over agricultural land, the Chinese government successfully industrialized and significantly improved agricultural productivity.⁵⁵ However, the decentralization and massive government subsidies also led to new crises. Decentralization fostered competition among provinces, with some specializing in agriculture and others in urban industrial sectors, thereby exacerbating income inequality between rural/urban areas and between coastal/inland areas.⁵⁶ Additionally, competition at the industrial level, particularly in technological investment and the lack of coordination across industrial product types, led to overproduction of heavy industrial goods such as steel and cement.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, subsidies to all SOEs, including underperforming ones, led to increased fiscal deficits, culminating in overinvestment.

Figure 2 The Comparison of China Manufacture Industrial Wage with other Asian Countries

⁵¹ Aglietta, M. and Bai, G. *China's Development: Capitalism and Empire*. (Routledge, 2013)

⁵² Jessop, (2004).

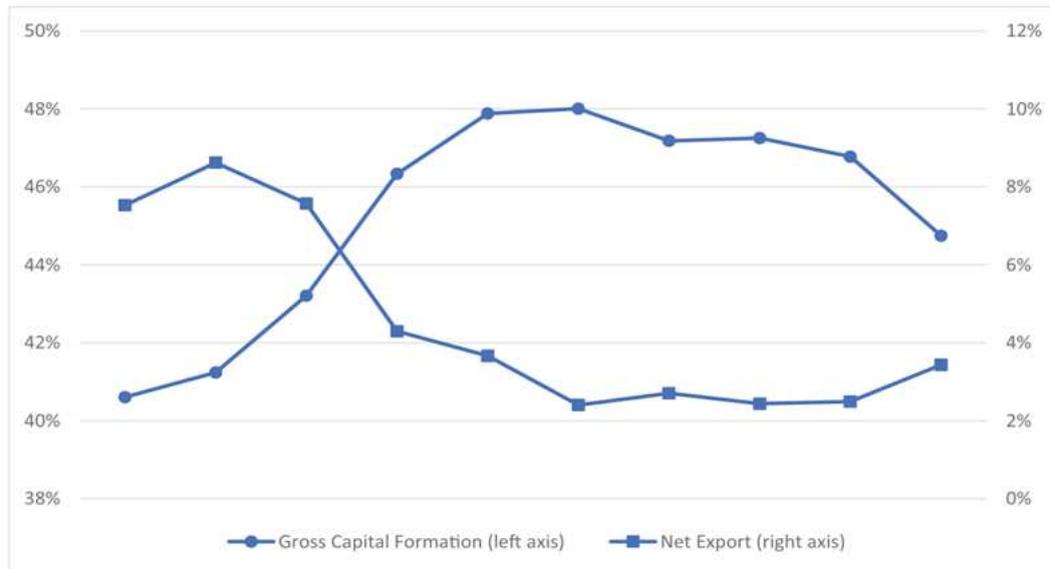
⁵³ Aglietta, M. and Bai, G., (2013).

⁵⁴ Hung, H. 'Crisis and the Rise of China', in G. Hooks (ed.) *The Sociology of Development Handbook*. (University of Calgary Press, 2016), pp. 485–505.

⁵⁵ Ribeiro, V.L. 'Recent Chinese Expansion: State, Capital and Accumulation on a Global Scale 105', in E. Majerowics and E. Parana (eds) *China in Contemporary Capitalism*, (Brill, 2024).

⁵⁶ Aglietta, M. and Bai, G., (2013).

⁵⁷ Hung, H. 'Rise of China and The Global Overaccumulation Crisis', *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol.15, No.2, (2008), pp. 37–41.



Source: Hung, H., (2016)

In response to this crisis, China adopted economic integration into the global market and fiscal discipline as key strategies.⁵⁸ Leveraging its excessive industrial capacity, China achieved success through massive increases in exports and a substantial inflow of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). As a result, China’s economic model became reliant on exports to global markets, often referred to as the *export-growth model*.⁵⁹ At the same time, it is crucial to note that this development process did not address income inequality. Fiscal discipline, which involved restructuring state-owned enterprises, coupled with China’s focus on exporting excess production, led to widespread layoffs and suppressed wages.⁶⁰ Figure 2 compares manufacturing wages in China with those in other Asian countries. Ultimately, this situation led to a weakened domestic consumption capacity in China, often referred to, in Marxian terms, as an underconsumption crisis.

The aforementioned conditions created a critical foundation for the inherent attributes of China’s economy, which were not sustainable in the long term.⁶¹ Over time, reliance on exports made China’s economy increasingly vulnerable to global economic crises, particularly given the significant share of Chinese commodity exports and investments directed toward the United States. Additionally, the inherent crises of Chinese capitalism continued to intensify. In this context, consistent with Marxian conceptions of crisis, the Chinese economy began to experience a decline in profit margins, driven by overinvestment in production factors, such as technology—a phenomenon known as the tendency for the rate of profit to fall.⁶² According to Marxian calculations, profit in the production process originates primarily from labour, and excessive investment to replace labour with technology ultimately leads to declining profit realization, both in production and in consumption, characterized

⁵⁸ Lim, K.F. ‘Geoforum On China’s growing geo-economic influence and the evolution of variegated capitalism’, *Geoforum*, Vol. 41, No. 5, (2010), pp. 677–688; Aglietta, M. and Bai, G., (2013).

⁵⁹ Pauls, R. ‘Capitalist Accumulation, Contradictions and Crisis in China, 1995 – 2015’, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 52, No.2, (2022) pp. 267–295.

⁶⁰ Hung, H., (2016); Pauls, R. (2022).

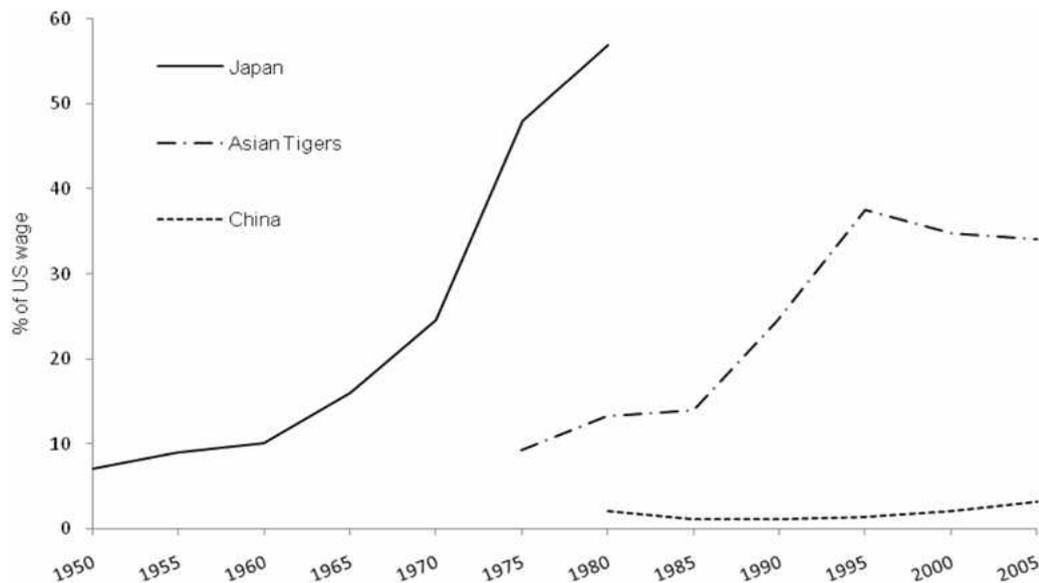
⁶¹ Hung, H., (2008)

⁶² Li, M. *Profit, Accumulation, and Crisis in Capitalism: Long-term Trends in the UK, US, Japan, and China, 1855-2018*. 1st ed. (Routledge, 2020)

by underconsumption.⁶³ Figure 3 illustrates this concept by showing the relationship between increasing technological inputs and declining profitability.

Figure 3 Capital Investment Ratio and the China Export Net in 2008-2010

The crises described above, as defined by Harvey, had reached a state of overaccumulation and overcapacity, either in money reserve or industrial capacity. Ultimately, China faced a surplus of both



Source: Pauls, R., (2016)

money and capital. Empirically, before the turn of the 21st century till the early 2010s, for instance, China's surplus capital exceeded 30 percent in industries such as steel, iron, aluminium, glass, cement, and energy. In contrast, financial surpluses mirrored the productive sector's surplus.⁶⁴ To address this critical situation, a spatial fix to the potential crisis became necessary. In this context, the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) played a crucial role in determining and formulating such spatial solutions. Historically, the CCP's legitimacy has been crucially built on its economic performance.⁶⁵ At this juncture, China's market-expansion orientation in its foreign policy materialized in the Go Global! Initiative Strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) emerged as prominent territorial strategies (Bellabona and Spigarelli, 2007; Carmody, Taylor, and Zajontz, 2022).⁶⁶ Thus, a detailed elaboration of these two territorial strategies becomes critically important.

The Going Global policy is a systematic initiative by the Chinese government to encourage Chinese companies to invest abroad.⁶⁷ Launched in the late 1990s and implemented in the early 21st

⁶³ Harvey, D., (2006).

⁶⁴ Lim, K.F. 'Geoforum On China's Growing Geo-Economic Influence and The Evolution of Variegated capitalism', *Geoforum*, Vol. 41, No.5, (2010), pp. 677-688; Zajontz, T. *The Political Economy of China's Infrastructure Development in Africa: Capital, State Agency, Debt*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023); Bellabona, P. and Spigarelli, F. 'Moving from Open Door to Go Global: China Goes on The World Stage', *International Journal of Chinese Culture and Management*, Vol.1, No.1, (2007), p. 93-107

⁶⁵ For a good overview on the historical development of China economic model and its significant impact on party legitimacy see, Nogueira, I. and Hao, Q. (2024) 'The State and Domestic Capitalists in China's Economic Transition', in E. Majerowicz and E. Parana (eds) *China in Contemporary Capitalism*, (Brill, 2024), pp. 105-42.

⁶⁶ Bellabona, P. and Spigarelli, F., (2007); Carmody, P., Taylor, I. and Zajontz, T. 'China's spatial fix and "debt diplomacy" in Africa: constraining belt or road to economic transformation?', *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, Vol. 56, No.1, (2022), pp. 57-77.

⁶⁷ Bellabona, P. and Spigarelli, F., (2007)

century, this policy was implemented through massive financial support, streamlined export administrative processes, and relaxed regulations to facilitate corporate internationalization.⁶⁸ This marks a historical shift from China's earlier Open Door economic model—characterized by passive reception of foreign investments—toward the Go Global model, which emphasizes proactive investment abroad. As explained before, the primary drivers of this policy stem from domestic economic tensions arising from China's export-driven economic model.⁶⁹ Notably, issues such as overcapacity in China's industrial sector and massive foreign exchange reserves were significant concerns, and outward expansion was considered an effective solution.

Additionally, other factors, such as the search for new resources, access to new markets, technological adoption, and broader economic calculations, also played a role.⁷⁰ Overall, there is strong evidence suggesting that this expansionist policy is a logical consequence of the symptoms of China's capitalist crisis or is driven by China's capital accumulation with its export-oriented economic structure. In the years leading up to and during the initial implementation of this policy, Chinese FDI flows were dominated by the trade sector, accounting for 57.2 percent, which reflects the primary interest of the export sector.⁷¹

Meanwhile, similar to the Go Global policy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), accelerated by the 2008 financial crisis, is also related to China's capitalist structure and serves as a spatial fix for China's overaccumulation crisis. Thus, rather than positioning the BRI solely as a geopolitical project, its economic imperatives are deeply rooted in domestic conditions.⁷² This interpretation is echoed by China's Deputy Foreign Minister, He Yafei, who once argued that,

With the ensuing knock-on effects of the global financial crisis manifesting in the economic stagnation of advanced nations, coupled with the slowdown in China's domestic demand, industrial overcapacity, accumulated over several decades, has been brought into sharp relief [...]. This has resulted in a steep drop in profits, debt accumulation, and near bankruptcy for many companies. If left unchecked, it could lead to bad loans piling up for banks, harm the ecosystem, and push entire sectors into bankruptcy, in turn affecting the transformation of the [Chinese] growth model and the improvement of people's livelihoods. It could even destabilise society. The Chinese government [...] has put forward guidelines for its resolution. The most important thing is to turn the challenge into an opportunity by 'moving out' this overcapacity based on its development strategy abroad and foreign policy⁷³

As a further consequence, China's search for spatial solutions to its domestic economic crisis has led to the integration and compression of diverse territories across various countries, serving as outlets for overcapacity and overaccumulation within Chinese capitalism.⁷⁴ Although this tactic may not immediately restore profit realization, the penetration of Chinese capital through the BRI has, at

⁶⁸ Wong, J. and Chan, S. 'China's Outward Direct Investment: Expanding Worldwide', *China International Journal*, Vol.1, No.2, (2003), pp. 273–301.

⁶⁹ Bellabona, P. and Spigarelli, F., (2007)

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Wong, J. and Chan, S., (2003).

⁷² Passi, R. 'Unpacking Economic Motivations and Non-Economic Consequences of Connectivity Infrastructure Under OBOR', in L. Xing (ed.) *Mapping China's 'One Belt One Road Initiative'*. 1st ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 167–196.

⁷³ He Yafei explain this on South China Morning Post and this research cited it through, Taylor, I. and Zajontz, T. 'In a fix: Africa's place in the Belt and Road Initiative and the reproduction of dependency', *South African Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 22, No.3, (2020), pp. 277–295

⁷⁴ Carmody, P., Taylor, I. and Zajontz, T., (2022).

the very least, secured new spaces for capital accumulation.⁷⁵ Empirically, one notable example is Africa, where Chinese investments provide direct access to natural resources, create long-term debt for African nations, and open new markets for China's infrastructure and energy industries (Zajontz, 2023).⁷⁶ Ultimately, as a general conclusion to this section, the expansionist drive of China that emerged in the early 21st century can be understood as a logical consequence of the evolution of its capitalist system.

b. China Maritime Industry Crisis and The Strategic Value of the South China Sea

Building on the overarching argument that economic imperatives drive China's territorial expansion, this section explains how the spatial logic of Chinese capital has profoundly influenced China's assertive territorial stance in the South China Sea. Central to this argument is the importance of Southeast Asia as a critical territory for resolving the internal crisis and creating a new space for capital accumulation, as manifested in both the *Go Global* policy and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This section will specifically highlight the direct link between the capitalist crisis in the Chinese economy and the South China Sea problem. To do so, this section aims to provide compelling data on the maritime sector's overcapacity problem and how the South China Sea, through the Going Global Policy and the BRI, has been crucial for resolving this issue.

Having outlined the crisis tendencies of Chinese capitalism at the macro level, it is important to note that these systemic pressures are also concretely manifested in specific sectors substantively linked to China's expansion in the South China Sea. Three sectors are particularly affected by structural overcapacity: shipbuilding, fisheries, and offshore petroleum. In the shipbuilding sector, decades of industrial policy intervention enabled China to emerge as a leading global producer.⁷⁷ However, consistent with the export-led character of China's broader developmental model, the expansion of the shipbuilding industry relied heavily on external demand, given the limited absorptive capacity of the domestic market.⁷⁸ By 2009, China's shipbuilding capacity exceeded global demand by approximately 66 million tons, generating a structural imbalance that rendered the industry highly vulnerable to fluctuations and contractions in international orders.⁷⁹ A similar dynamic is evident in the fisheries sector. Intensive exploitation within China's exclusive economic zone, reaching roughly 10 million tonnes annually, has depleted coastal stocks and compelled the sector to seek new fishing grounds beyond China's immediate maritime jurisdiction.⁸⁰

As a result, the number of Chinese fishing vessels operating around the Spratly Islands increased dramatically, from 13 vessels in 1985 to 700 vessels in 2013, reflecting a structural outward expansion driven by ecological exhaustion and industrial overcapacity.⁸¹ Simultaneously, China's National Oil Companies have faced mounting pressure from soaring domestic demand in heavy

⁷⁵ For a critic on overcapacity argument, see Freeman, D. 'The Belt and Road Initiative and the Overcapacity Connection', in M.A. Wouters, C. Jean-Christophe, and D. Jan (eds) *The Belt and Road Initiative and Global Governance*. 1st ed. (Elgar Elsevier, 2021); Meanwhile, for a convincing argument that implicitly debunk this idea, see Carmody, P., Taylor, I. and Zajontz, T., (2022).

⁷⁶ Zajontz, T., (2023).

⁷⁷ For a review if China industrial policy in shipbuilding, see Barwick, P., Kalouptsidi, M., Zahur N., 'Industrial Policy Implementation: Empirical Evidence from China's Shipbuilding Industry,' *The Review of Economic Studies*, Volume 92, Issue 6, November 2025, Pages 3611–3648, <https://doi.org/10.1093/restud/rdaf011>

⁷⁸ Collins, Gabriel and Grubb, Michael C., "A Comprehensive Survey of China's Dynamic Shipbuilding Industry" (2008). CMSI Red Books, Study No. 1.

⁷⁹ S. Ko and T. Shinoda, "The State of China's Shipbuilding Industry: The Challenges Chinese Shipyards Are Facing," in *Proceedings of the Japan Society of Naval Architects and Ocean Engineers*, no. 23 (Paper No. 2016A-GS23-1).

⁸⁰ Pauly, D. and Liang, C. 'The Fisheries of the South China Sea: Major Trends Since 1950', *Marine Policy*, 108, (2019), pp. 1–12.

⁸¹ Zhang, H. and Li, M. 'Fisheries Governance in the South China Sea: Problems, Progress, and Prospects', *Ocean & Coastal Management*, 178, (2019), pp. 1–10.

industrial sectors that depend on petroleum inputs.⁸² Confronted with stagnating onshore production and rising energy requirements, these firms have been compelled to expand overseas, including into offshore zones such as the South China Sea, in search of new reserves and exploration frontiers.⁸³ Collectively, these sectoral dynamics illustrate how macro-level contradictions of overaccumulation and limited domestic demand materialize within China's maritime economy, driving outward expansion as a structural response rather than a discretionary strategic choice. This China maritime sector-wide crisis directly positions the strategic importance of the South China Sea as a crucial space for resolving China's internal capitalist contradictions. At this point, in responding to the problem of overcapacity in this sector, China's two primary strategies, Go Global and the BRI, substantively represent its attempts to address this issue.

Based on the above context of the Go Global policy, China's primary investments, that has concentrated in two sectors, should be understood. Drawing on Wong and Chan's categorization, these sectors are the trade sector, which includes activities in distribution, transportation, communication, and financial infrastructure, and the non-trade sector, encompassing activities in manufacturing (processing and assembly), natural resource exploration, and more.⁸⁴ In these two sectors, individual Southeast Asian countries receive relatively small shares of Chinese investment compared to nations such as the United States, Canada, or Hong Kong. However, on a regional scale, Southeast Asia stands out as the region with the highest volume of non-trade-sector investments. Table 1 illustrates a comparative analysis of Chinese FDI percentages from 1979 to 2001. At this vantage point, one critical conclusion emerges: Southeast Asia has been a vital territory for the development of Chinese capitalism and, together, has created the South China Sea as a central territory for the circulation process of Chinese capitalism.

⁸² Francisco, E. *Petroleum Politics: China and Its National Oil Companies* (Master's thesis, Master in Advanced European and International Studies, Anglophone Branch, 2012–2013), June 26, 2013.

⁸³ Jones, L. and Hameiri, S. *Fractured China: How State Transformation Is Shaping China's Rise*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

⁸⁴ Wong and Chan, (2003).

Table 1 Geographical Distribution of China FDI in Non-Trade Sector from 1979-2001

Country	Projects		Chinese Investment	
	Number	% Share	Cumulative Value (US\$ million)	% Share
<i>Developed Countries</i>				
United States	329	10.6	559	12.6
Canada	95	3.1	392	8.8
European Union*	137	4.4	68	15.3
Hong Kong and Macau	324	10.5	534	12.0
<i>ASEAN¹</i>	<i>537</i>		<i>586</i>	<i>13.2</i>
Thailand	154	5.0	194	4.4
Singapore	94	3.0	33	0.7
Malaysia	82	2.7	33	0.7
Indonesia	45	1.5	58	1.3
Philippines	33	1.1	15	0.3
Vietnam	41	1.3	56	1.3
Cambodia	54	1.7	120	2.7
Laos	11	0.4	30	0.7
Myanmar	23	0.7	47	1.1
<i>East Asia</i>				
Japan	95	3.1	19	0.4
Korea	26	0.8	15	0.3
<i>Rest of Asia</i>				
Australia	118	3.8	351	7.9
New Zealand	17	0.5	47	1.1
India	11	0.4	18	0.4
<i>Others</i>				
Russia	297	9.6	130	2.9
Peru	13	0.4	200	4.5
Mexico	36	1.2	143	3.2

Source: Wong and Chan, (2003)

Meanwhile, within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it is important to note that this spatial fix project targets not only land routes, but also maritime routes. In this regard, the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) is the BRI component focused on maritime pathways. Like the broader BRI, the MSR is driven by economic imperatives closely tied to overaccumulation and overcapacity.⁸⁵ As noted above, China has again faced overcapacity in its shipbuilding industry, with domestic demand accounting for only 1.3 percent of its fishing industry's output.⁸⁶ Discourse within official government documents and epistemic communities aligned with the Chinese government emphasizes

⁸⁵ Zhang, X. 'Chinese Capitalism and the Maritime Silk Road: A World-Systems Perspective Chinese Capitalism and the Maritime Silk Road,' *Geopolitics*, Vol.22, No.2, (2017), pp. 1–22

⁸⁶ Mallory, T.G. 'Preparing for the Ocean Century: China's Changing Political Institutions for Preparing for the Ocean Century: China's Changing Political Institutions for Ocean Governance and Maritime Development', *Issues and Studies*, 51(June 2015), pp. 111–138.

the primacy of economic growth in this project.⁸⁷ Domestically, the MSR is expected to enhance connectivity with China's less-developed southwestern provinces.⁸⁸ For this reason, sub-national participation is heavily emphasized in the project (Blanchard, 2017).⁸⁹ Historically, this strategy can be understood as a product of China's capitalist reforms.

Figure 4 Projection Map of China *Maritime Silk Road*



Source, Blanchard, (2017)

Additionally, the project aims to provide robust maritime infrastructure to enable Chinese companies to access new markets for various metallurgical industrial commodities (Blanchard and Flint, 2017).⁹⁰ Ultimately, the MSR emphasizes the importance of cooperation with the many countries that may be involved in its implementation. Within this context, Southeast Asia, including the South China Sea, once again emerges as a critical territory for Chinese capitalism. Figure 4 provides an abstract map of the MSR project.

c. China's Assertiveness in the South China Sea: Class Antagonism and the State's Structural Transformation

While the above spatial projects are linked only to economic expansion initiatives that emphasize cooperative behaviour, it is still important to examine why such projects can turn into assertive actions. To understand this, viewing these projects as grand and coherent, non-conflictual undertakings by China is not particularly helpful. Instead, greater sensitivity to the domestic governance scale in China, alongside the conflicts of interest within various policy sectors, offers a sharper perspective on the issue.

As a starting point, it is essential to emphasize that the historical structure of Chinese capitalism has significantly shaped how the state manages its economy. This influence manifests in

⁸⁷ Kao, P. and Soong, J. 'China's Marine Political Economy in the South China Sea and Its Development Strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities, Challenges, and Trends on the 14th Five-Year Plan China's Marine Political Economy in the South China Sea and It', *The Chinese Economy*, (2024), pp. 1–13

⁸⁸ Zhang, X., (2017).

⁸⁹ Blanchard, J.F. 'Probing China's Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI): An Examination of MSRI Narratives Probing China's Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road', *Geopolitics*, Vol. 22, No.2, (2017), pp. 246–268.

⁹⁰ Blanchard, J.F. and Flint, C. 'The Geopolitics of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative', *Geopolitics*, Vol.22, No.2, (2017), pp. 223–245.

three phenomena: fragmentation, decentralization, and internationalization.⁹¹ Fragmentation refers to the incoherent distribution of authority among various ministries; decentralization involves the delegation of power to provincial governments; and internationalization describes the shift in which state agencies, previously domestic in scope, suddenly acquire authority and operational jurisdiction at the international level. These realities heavily shape China's ambitious projects, such as *Go Global* and the Belt and Road Initiative.⁹² As a consequence, numerous contradictions arise in the implementation of these projects. Ultimately, these contradictions also spill over into other issues, such as the South China Sea, which is inherently crucial for both initiatives.

Hameiri and Jones's findings provide a valuable framework for understanding this reality. They identify at least four key agencies involved in the South China Sea issue, each with its own sectoral interests.⁹³ *First*, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Communist Party's Politburo for Foreign Affairs advocate for a cooperative approach to handling South China Sea disputes. This vision aligns closely with the cooperative nature of the Maritime Silk Road (MSR). However, in practice, these two agencies do not hold absolute authority or control over the actions of other agencies involved in the South China Sea. *Second*, the Chinese Navy has repeatedly used the South China Sea issue to justify and secure budget increases. The Navy is also the most active in disseminating a nationalist maritime discourse. As a result, its approach to the South China Sea is driven mainly by nationalism and assertiveness.⁹⁴ *Third*, state-owned energy companies such as the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) and the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) have vested interests in energy exploration in the region. Historically, these agencies have gained greater independence due to the Chinese government's facilitation of outward expansion.⁹⁵ For these companies, the South China Sea provides a potential accumulation space free from the monopolistic control of foreign metallurgical firms. Guided by the logic of capital accumulation rather than geopolitics, CNOOC often emphasizes China's claims over the South China Sea (such as the nine-dash line) and continues to expand its concessions, sometimes in defiance of opposition from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁹⁶ *Fourth*, the provincial government of Hainan, which has administrative and legal rights over parts of the nine-dash line, plays a crucial role. In this case, the province plays a pivotal, often underappreciated role in driving China's assertive behavior in the South China Sea, serving as a subnational engine of maritime expansion rooted in local economic imperatives and institutional autonomy. As China's most maritime-dependent province, and after the effects of liberalization reform, in which fisheries alone accounted for over 9 percent of GDP by 2005, Hainan has long been pressured by severe depletion of coastal stocks and chronic overcapacity, compelling it to push fishing fleets ever farther into contested waters.⁹⁷ Moreover, Hainan exercises administrative authority over Sansha City, the municipal entity created in 2012 to govern China's claimed features,

⁹¹ Jones, L. and Zeng, J. (2019) 'Understanding China's "Belt and Road Initiative": Beyond "Grand Strategy" to a State Transformation Analysis', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 8, (2019), pp. 1–26

⁹² On the context of BRI, see Jones and Zeng, (2019); Meanwhile, for the context of *Go Global*, see Lee, C.K. (2022) 'Global China at 20: Why, How and So What?', *China Quarterly*, Vol. 250, (2022), pp. 313–331

⁹³ Hameiri, S. and Jones, L. 'Rising powers and state transformation: The case of China', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 22, No.1, (2016), pp. 72–98.

⁹⁴ Kuik, C. 'Explaining the Contradiction in China's South China Sea Policy: Structural Drivers', *China International Journal*, (2018), pp. 163–186

⁹⁵ Downs, B.E.S. (2008) 'Business Interest Groups in Chinese Politics: The Case of the Oil Companies', in C. Li (ed.) *China's Changing Political Landscape: Prospects for Democracy*, (Brooking Institution Press, 2008), pp. 121–141.

⁹⁶ Downs, B.E.S. *Business and Politics in the South China Sea: Explaining HYSY 981's Foray into Disputed Waters*, (The Brookings Institution, 2014).

⁹⁷ Jones, L. and Hameiri, S. (2021); Ding, J., Ge, X. and Casey, R. "Blue Competition" in China: Current Situation and Challenges', *Marine Policy*, Vol. 44, (2014), pp. 351–359.

giving the province a formal institutional foothold in disputed zones.⁹⁸ Through the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM), primarily organized, trained, and funded at the provincial and county levels, Hainan integrates commercial fishers into paramilitary roles that blur the boundaries between civilian presence and coercive state power.⁹⁹

The competition among these actors highlights fragmented authority and conflicting interests among government agencies (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Navy, and state-owned enterprises), decentralized power to provincial governments, and the internationalization of roles for various agencies. This contradictory nature contributes to China's incoherent policy patterns in the South China Sea, leading to geopolitical disputes with neighbouring countries and major powers, such as the United States. Nonetheless, because these agencies are crucial to the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as in the cases of *Go Global* and the BRI, accommodating their interests through loose policies and a lack of detailed technical guidance has become a quick solution.¹⁰⁰

Ultimately, the South China Sea remains a highly valuable territory for China and its various agencies. This is further evident in the Chinese government's efforts to amplify maritime discourse, often tied to China's so-called *maritime turn*.¹⁰¹ In official government documents, maritime economic sectors, naval strength, and China's historical maritime culture frequently emerge as dominant discourses.¹⁰² Publicly, this maritime discourse is increasingly disseminated through media and education. Alongside this discursive strategy, the Chinese government has begun bureaucratic centralization by establishing the National Maritime Commission, which oversees a newly formed maritime police unit.¹⁰³ On the one hand, this centralization effort can be seen as a move to resolve China's internal incoherence; on the other hand, it further crystallizes maritime issues, such as the South China Sea, as a core national interest.

From these findings, the role of class antagonism becomes evident in understanding the assertive nature of China's actions in the South China Sea. However, these class antagonisms would follow a different trajectory if China's broader capitalist logic did not necessitate spatial fixes in the form of *Go Global* or the MSR. Despite differing interests and approaches, these agencies' general interests converge on the territorial value of the South China Sea, whether for capital accumulation or survival. It is precisely in this context that China's official assertive discourse in the South China Sea must be understood—as a representation of the general interests of its internal agencies.

Conclusion

Since China's assertiveness in the South China Sea emerged, various academic studies have sought to explain its primary imperatives. However, earlier explanations often overlook and fail to address the fundamental question: why is China assertive and intent on claiming territories beyond its sovereign boundaries? In other words, prior research does not sufficiently explain the connection between assertiveness and the territorial expansion of a rising power like China. To address this gap, this paper employs a Marxist geopolitical approach that offers conceptual sensitivity to these issues. Based on the assumption that capitalism inherently tends toward spatial expansion, Marxist

⁹⁸ Li, M. (2019). Hainan Province in China's South China Sea policy: What role does the local government play? *Asian Politics & Policy*, 11(4), 545–564. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12495>

⁹⁹ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 'Behind the Curtain: An Update on Hainan's Maritime Militia', *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 12 December 2024,

<https://amti.csis.org/behind-the-curtain-an-update-on-hainans-maritime-militia/>; see also Zha, D. 'Localizing the South China Sea problem: The Case of China's Hainan', *Pacific Review*, Vol. 14, No. 4, (2001), pp. 575–598

¹⁰⁰ Jakobson, L. *China's Unpredictable Maritime Security Actors*. (Lowy Institute, 2014); Jones, L. 'Theorizing Foreign and Security Policy in an Era of State Transformation: A New Framework and Case Study of China', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4, (2019), pp. 1–19; Jones and Zeng, (2019)

¹⁰¹ Blanchard, (2017).

¹⁰² Kao and Soong, (2014).

¹⁰³ Mallory, (2016).

geopolitical analysis explains China's spatial expansion as a logical consequence of the development and specific crises of Chinese capitalism. While capitalism does not inherently require territorial expansion, the state—as an agency capable of choosing territorial strategies—can become a source of such assertiveness. Reflecting on China's experience, the structural transformation of the state, along with the contestation and incoherence among its internal agencies, has significantly contributed to its assertive stance in the South China Sea. This argument does not disregard the United States' role in the region as a determining factor in China's assertiveness. However, the central point of this paper is to demonstrate that the roots of China's assertiveness and territorial ambitions in the South China Sea lie fundamentally in its capitalist imperatives. While the US's presence in the region may play a crucial role in shaping China's assertive responses, it does not fully explain China's territorial ambitions in the South China Sea.

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