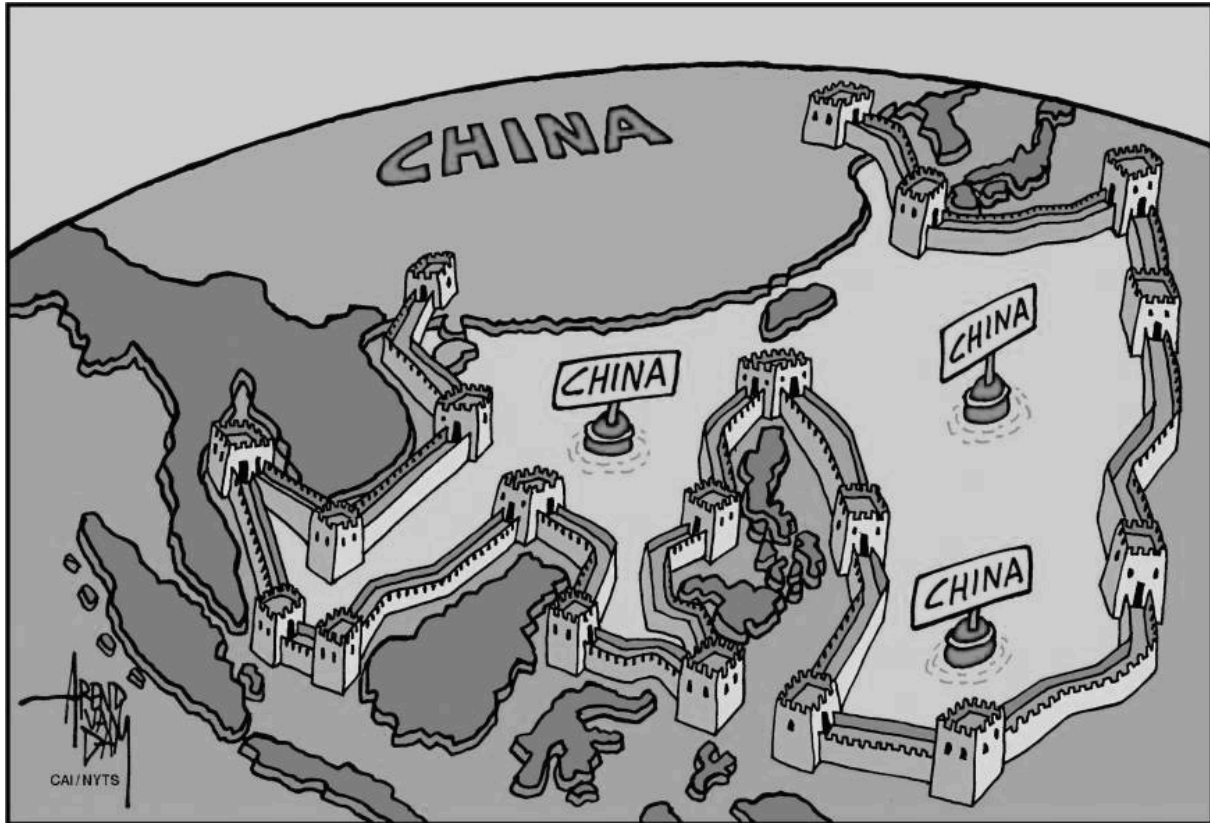


# China's Role in the ASEAN Regional Forum: A Search For Peace?

An Analysis of China's Political Behaviour in the South China Sea Dispute  
Through A Realist Lens



**Figure 1** A cartoon illustrating the territories in the South China Sea that China claims to be its own (cartoon by Arend van Dam, published in *The Japan Times*, June 1, 2015).

MA Thesis International Relations in Historical Perspective

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July 2018

“Cross the river by feeling the stones”<sup>1</sup>  
- Deng Xiaoping (late 1970s)

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<sup>1</sup> Quote by Deng Xiaoping, meaning that even though China was moving forward in new directions, it needed to stay grounded, feel its way forward amidst uncertainty. Source: The Atlantic, “China’s Steve Jobs Debate and Deng Xiaoping,” November 7, 2011, accessed June 25, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/11/chinas-steve-jobs-debate-and-deng-xiaoping/248080/>.

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## **Abstract**

Why, in 1994, did a ‘rising’ China suddenly decide to become an active participant in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), when it was such a strong proponent of bilateral relationships during the Cold War? In this thesis it is argued that this particular foreign policy decision can be seen as part of a strategy in order to strengthen China’s influence in Southeast Asia. First of all, at the end of the Cold War, the Chinese found themselves in a difficult geopolitical position. Not only were they diplomatically isolated by the West due to the events at Tiananmen (1989), they were also involved in several regional territorial disputes in the South China Sea, which forced Beijing to increase its security position in the region. Second, the Chinese government realized all too well that in order to protect its ‘rise’, it needed to reassure its Southeast Asian neighbours of its ‘peaceful’ intentions in the region. It would therefore make sense that the Chinese government officials decided to become involved in the ARF in order to reassure its neighbours. Though, in practice, the Chinese have shown increasingly assertive behaviour in the South China Sea. It is also quite remarkable that a concrete diplomatic solution for this maritime dispute has still not been found in the ARF. Therefore, this thesis will examine China’s post-Cold War foreign policy behaviour in the South China Sea dispute through a realist lens, in order to show how the Chinese seem to have strategically used the ARF as a means to protect their regional interests.

## Introduction

“The Chinese nation ... has stood up grown rich, and became strong”, Chinese President Xi Jinping declared during his address in front of the Chinese Communist Party Congress to celebrate the end of his first term in office.<sup>2</sup> With these words, Xi referred to something that he has hailed as the “Chinese Dream”, a term that refers to a set of ideals and goals that were once set by the Government of China. This term can be closely linked to the so-called ‘rise of China’, which is often used today in popular media and academic circles to describe the phenomenal economic and political development that the country has experienced in the past couple of years. Especially after the economic reforms of 1978, the Chinese have experienced rapid economic and social development. Chinese GDP growth grew with an average of nearly 10 per cent a year and this quick economic growth – together with China’s huge population – has transformed the country into the second largest economy of the world today.<sup>3</sup> Not only were millions of Chinese people lifted out of poverty as a result of this economic policy, but China’s influence also increased with regard to managing the global economy. Though, China’s rapid economic transcendence has also brought with it many challenges and uncertainties for the international community. China has, for example, put an incredible pressure on the share of world resources and is known for being a large contributor to the process of global warming. The environment is, however, not the only source of uncertainty for the international community that has come with the ‘rise of China’. Some scholars, for example, have openly posed the question of whether a powerful China could actually end the so-called ‘American era’ and overthrow the existing global order.<sup>4</sup>

However, it is interesting to note that while China had strongly risen in power (economically, politically and militarily), its foreign policy preferences had also slightly changed. Whereas China has historically been known for being suspicious of multilateral institutions and preferred to maintain foreign relations only on a bilateral basis, in the post-

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Phillips, “Xi Jinping heralds ‘new era’ of Chinese power at Communist party congress,” *The Guardian*, October 18, 2017, accessed May 7, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/18/xi-jinping-speech-new-era-chinese-power-party-congress>.

<sup>3</sup> The World Bank, “The World Bank in China,” accessed May 7, 2018, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview>.

<sup>4</sup> G. John Ikenberry, “The Rise of China and the Future of the West,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2008 Issue, accessed May 7, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2008-01-01/rise-china-and-future-west>.

Cold War period, it slowly started to reach out to its Asian neighbourhood.<sup>5</sup> From the 1970s onwards, the Chinese government had tried to become actively involved with the international community and joined several international organisations, among which the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). China did not only join these organisations, but also offered other member countries the opportunity to help them with their development.<sup>6</sup> By joining these organisations, China became involved in signing international treaties and committed itself to existing international rules and order. This particular foreign policy direction of Beijing was above all introduced in Southeast Asia, where China became involved in several multilateral platforms. One of these platforms was the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), a region-wide Asia-Pacific multilateral forum for official consultations on peace and security issues. Several authors have argued that this Chinese turn to multilateralism can be interpreted as an attempt of the Chinese government to strengthen their desire of playing a larger role in the region and to shape a new security order in Asia.<sup>7</sup> The Chinese government itself, on the other hand, has presented its rise and corresponding foreign policy behaviour to the international community as a “peaceful development” with commitments to “uphold world peace” and “promoting common development and prosperity for all countries” – something that has often been received with great suspicion in the region.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that some Asian countries are uncertain about China’s new foreign policy has for a large part to do with China’s behaviour in the South China Sea dispute. No other state in the region has attracted as much attention as China within this dispute, due to its expansive claims, use of force and growing naval capabilities.<sup>9</sup> The South China Sea dispute is one of Asia’s biggest geopolitical challenges today and involves both territorial and maritime claims among several states in Southeast- and East Asia. The most conflicting claims are between China, Vietnam and the Philippines and involve among others the disputed Spratly and Paracel Islands, which are believed to contain billions (if not trillions) of dollars’ worth of oil

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<sup>5</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, “The Myth of the ASEAN Way? Explaining the Evolution of the ASEAN Regional Forum,” in *Imperfect Unions: Security Institutions over Time and Space*, ed. Helga Haftendorn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 290.

<sup>6</sup> Gerald Chan, “China Eyes ASEAN: Evolving Multilateralism,” *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 2, no. 1 (2015): 75-76.

<sup>7</sup> David L. Shambaugh, “China Engages Asia: Reshaping the Regional Order,” *International Security* 29, no. 3 (Winter 2004-05): 65.

<sup>8</sup> The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s Peaceful Development,” September 6, 2011, accessed May 7, 2018, [http://english.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2014/09/09/content\\_281474986284646.htm](http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/09/09/content_281474986284646.htm).

<sup>9</sup> Taylor Fravel, “China’s Strategy in the South China Sea,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (2011): 292-293.

and natural gas within the sea.<sup>10</sup> China is accused of having illegally occupied some of these islands in the South China Sea and is frequently criticized for their ‘delaying’ behaviour in finding a concrete and legal solution to this conflict during multilateral negotiations. This makes it rather complicated for the countries in China’s Southeast Asian neighbourhood, which on the one hand, want to maintain good trade and investment relations with China, but on the other hand, fear China’s military capabilities and contemporary behaviour in maritime disputes.<sup>11</sup> However, it could be argued that China also would not really benefit from a situation in which their neighbourhood rejects them, if they want to seek a greater role in international politics. Analysing what Beijing’s main motivations were to join regional multilateral institutions therefore becomes very interesting.

In this thesis, the true motivations of the Chinese government to become a dialogue partner of the ARF in 1994 will be examined. To what extent can this Chinese policy change be interpreted as part of some political strategy to gain more influence in the region? In order to answer this question, an analysis will be made on the basis of a case study of China’s involvement in the ARF. Specific focus will thereby be paid on Chinese official rhetoric and behaviour surrounding the South China Sea dispute, a conflict that has been widely discussed during several ARF-meetings, and which also forms an important factor of destabilization to the Asian region. Analysing the behaviour of China during the South China Sea dispute can help to indicate whether the Chinese leadership is pursuing status quo or if it rather wants to pursue revisionist foreign policies.<sup>12</sup> The analysis will start with the 1990s, when China started its multilateral relations with the ASEAN states in the form of the ARF and end with the year 2015, when tensions were increasing very quickly about overlapping claims in the South China Sea.<sup>13</sup> Understanding China’s diplomatic behaviour and their increasing interactions with ASEAN countries is important when analysing their ‘true’ motivations to rise on the global level. Especially because China has been one of the main drivers behind the geopolitical and economic processes in Asia, making Asia one of the world’s new economic centres of gravity.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, analysing China’s rise and its motivations for its

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<sup>10</sup> Christopher L. Daniels, *South China Sea: Energy and Security Conflicts* (United States: The Scarecrow Press, 2014), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Chan, “China Eyes ASEAN,” 76.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor Fravel, “Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation: Explaining China’s Compromises in Territorial Disputes,” *International Security* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 47.

<sup>13</sup> Reuters, “China wants no talk of South China Sea at ASEAN meeting,” August 3, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-asean-malaysia-china/china-wants-no-talk-of-south-china-sea-at-asean-meeting-idUSKCN0Q80VV20150803>.

<sup>14</sup> Zhao Hong, *China and ASEAN: Energy Security, Cooperation and Competition* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2015), 1.



corresponding policies can be interesting due to the fact that most literature on Sino-ASEAN relations is often based on the perspective of the smaller states in Southeast Asia (and how they use multilateral institutions as a means to deal with China's rise), while less attention has been paid to China's perspective. It will be argued that the end of the Cold War and its corresponding changes within the international order has stimulated the Chinese leadership's aspiration to play a larger role in regional and international politics as a way of safeguarding its security interests.

The first chapter of this thesis will discuss the concept of the 'rise of China', the different perspectives that exist to understand this phenomenon and how this concept can be linked to China's broader security strategy in the region. The second chapter will then briefly explain the theoretical framework in which the analysis will take place, which is that of realism and how this theoretical framework can be linked to China's so-called "peaceful development". Subsequently, Chapter Three will discuss the South China Sea dispute (case study) more in detail by providing a short historical overview of the conflict and the most important actors that are involved within this dispute. The chapter will thereby also focus on the rhetoric of important Chinese officials and in particular on the possible solutions that have been provided by the Chinese government in order to create peace in the region. Also, it will discuss to what extent this dispute about the sovereignty of several islands in the South China Sea is bringing difficulties to China's diplomatic relations with its Southeast Asian neighbours. The fourth chapter will examine China's role in the ARF. It will start by briefly explaining the institutional structure and historical development of the ARF and how China has diplomatically behaved during the analysed ARF-meetings and in practice during the South China Sea dispute. These findings will then be combined in order to determine to what extent China's political rhetoric of a 'peaceful development' matches with its behaviour in the context of the South China Sea dispute. The main focus will thereby be on the possible underlying motivations of the Chinese government to act like it did in the conflict. Finally, the conclusion will provide an overview of the motivations that are most likely to have turned the Chinese government towards multilateralism – while being on a path to rise – and discuss the political and security dilemmas that several Southeast Asian states have with a 'rising' China in their neighbourhood.

# 1. The ‘Rise of China’: From Peaceful Development to Security Strategy

The so-called ‘rise of China’ has become one of the most important developments within international politics of the past two decades. In particular, the implications of China’s growing economic and military power has stimulated many debates among scholars, policy-makers and journalists, as several authors have questioned China’s true motivations to rise and to become more involved in the region at the same time. In order to understand this new foreign policy behaviour of the Chinese government, this chapter will focus on the different perspectives that exist to look at the ‘rise of China’. It looks specifically at the ‘rise of China’ as part of a security strategy to increase China’s influence in the Southeast Asian region and to the explanations that several authors have given in order to describe this particular diplomatic behaviour. Furthermore, it will also discuss the historical development of China’s post-Cold War foreign policy and the concept of the ‘peaceful rise’, which is often used by Chinese government officials to present their rise to the international community.

## 1.1 The ‘rise of China’

In the past couple of years, the concept of the ‘rise of China’ has attracted a lot of attention in both academic circles as well as in respected newspapers and journals all over the world. It is mostly used to refer to the phenomenal economic transformation that China has experienced in the late 1970s, whereby the country shifted from a centrally planned to a market-based economy, which brought the country rapid economic and social development. These economic successes were mostly the result of a program of economic reforms, which was launched by reformists within the Communist Party of China, under the supervision of the famous Deng Xiaoping. From this moment onwards, GDP growth in China reached an average of 10 per cent, which made China overtake Japan to become the second largest economy in the world (after the United States) in July 2010.<sup>15</sup> Reports have also shown that China could even become the largest economy in 2035.<sup>16</sup> However, it should be noted that the concept of the ‘rise of China’ encompasses more than just this remarkable economic transformation and can also be applied to other implications and aspects. China’s fast growing economy also brought with it, for example, an increasing military budget, which provided the

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<sup>15</sup> The World Bank, “The World Bank in China,”.

<sup>16</sup> Albert Keidel, “China’s Economic Rise – Fact and Fiction,” *Policy Outlook*, June 8, 2008, accessed May 9, 2018, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2008/07/08/china-s-economic-rise-fact-and-fiction-pub-20279>.

Chinese with access to nuclear weapons and the possibility to rapidly expand and improve their army.<sup>17</sup> As a result of this, the Chinese government was able to project power beyond its borders and became an influential player in international and regional politics. The ‘rise of China’ can thus be considered a broad concept, which covers various aspects of China’s rise, varying from China’s expanding political influence to its economic strength and increasing military power.

## **1.2 Different perspectives on the ‘rise of China’**

When reading the secondary literature on the ‘rise of China’, several authors have mentioned different types of motivations for China’s phenomenal development. Whereas some authors have, for example, tried to explain China’s multilateral approach towards ASEAN as part of a new security concept (resulting from China’s quick growth and development), others have explained the case as a result of China’s historical discourse. In the existing literature on the ‘rise of China’, important interpretations of the ‘rise of China’ can be distinguished in order to understand China’s motivations to turn to multilateralism in Southeast Asia during the 1990s. Three of these interpretations will be briefly discussed below.

### *The ‘rise of China’ as part of their ‘Chinese world order’*

First of all, some authors have tried to explain China’s motivations to rise as a result of China’s historical discourse. In China, history has become extremely politicized and it is argued by several authors that the memory of historical humiliation is used by Chinese elites to strengthen their narrative of China’s ‘peaceful rise’.<sup>18</sup> China’s driving national narrative of the ‘century of humiliation’ refers to a series of lost wars, unequal treaties and forced opium trade with Western imperial powers, which had strongly ‘humiliated’ China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>19</sup> It is argued that the Chinese government has refocused on the glory that China had in the past, which was once ‘interrupted’ by the Western imperialist countries and which is now used in the twenty-first century by Chinese political leaders to regain the power that it enjoyed two centuries ago. This historical memory has therefore not only been used as a powerful means to bind the Chinese people together and to strengthen the Chinese

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<sup>17</sup> Nicholas D. Kristof, “The Rise of China,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 5 (Nov.-Dec. 1993): 59.

<sup>18</sup> Suisheng Zhao, “Rethinking the Chinese World Order: the imperial cycle and the rise of China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 96 (2015): 981-982.

<sup>19</sup> Ben Lowson, “Is China Inflicting a ‘Century of Humiliation’ on the World?,” *The Diplomat*, February 4, 2018, accessed May 9, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/is-china-inflicting-a-century-of-humiliation-on-the-world/>.

national identity, but it is also argued that it was used by Chinese leaders to claim China's rightful place in the world.<sup>20</sup> Reuben Mondejar, who teaches at the City University of Hong Kong, has also argued that ancient China's policies seem to be manifesting themselves once more in present-day politics. Mondejar argues, for example, that China, a country that once saw itself as the centre of the world due to its economic superiority, is again showing signs of eagerness to demonstrate its strength.<sup>21</sup> He argues that this particular behaviour of the Chinese government is possible now due to the fact that the country is on the rise again and further mentions that the Chinese government is not only showing these signs of strength to its own people, but also to other countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Furthermore, the Chinese people often believe that their 'rise' is granted to them by nature. In the past 2,000 years, China has enjoyed the status of superpower several times (e.g. under the Han Dynasty and the early Qing Dynasty), which has made the Chinese people very proud of their country.<sup>22</sup> China's weak international status after the imperial wars and during most of the Cold War period has therefore stimulated the Chinese leadership and the Chinese people to correct what they perceive as a 'historical mistake' and to continue their 'rise' in international politics.

#### *The 'rise of China' as part of their security strategy*

The second well-known perception of the 'rise of China' and possible explanation for its foreign policy behaviour in the post-Cold War period is the so-called security perspective. According to Robyn Lim, who published an article on the ARF in 1998, China has been using multilateral approaches as a way to undermine US alliances in Asia, and to play on anti-Western sentiments that have arisen as a result of the economic crisis in East Asia at the time.<sup>23</sup> China's participation in the ARF can thus, among others, be understood as an opportunity for China to form a multilateral Asian block against the United States. Samuel Kim also noted in 1992 that China was more or less caught between the pressures of globalism and unilateralism.<sup>24</sup> With the ending of the Cold War, the structure of the post-war international order had changed significantly and the Chinese leadership had therefore found

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<sup>20</sup> Zhao, "Rethinking the Chinese World Order," 961.

<sup>21</sup> Reuben Mondejar, "China's superiority complex must be carefully managed," *South China Morning Post*, February 26, 2015, accessed May 9, 2018, [http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1723741/chinas-superiority-complex-must-be-carefully-managed?utm\\_source=edm&utm\\_medium=edm&utm\\_content=20150227&utm\\_campaign=scmp\\_today](http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1723741/chinas-superiority-complex-must-be-carefully-managed?utm_source=edm&utm_medium=edm&utm_content=20150227&utm_campaign=scmp_today).

<sup>22</sup> Yan Xuetong, "The Rise of China in Chinese Eyes," *Journal of Contemporary China* 10, no. 26 (2001): 33.

<sup>23</sup> Robyn Lim, "The ASEAN Regional Forum: Building on Sand," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 20, no. 2 (August 1998): 116.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel S. Kim, "China as a Regional Power," *Current History* 91, no. 566 (September 1992): 248.

itself in a completely new situation. As a result of this, the Chinese needed to redefine their security strategy, especially with regard to the new security environment in Asia and the corresponding territorial disputes in the South China Sea.<sup>25</sup> The Chinese leadership didn't need to approach its national security strategy from a Cold War perspective anymore, but it was now dealing with strong economic development, which it had to safeguard in order to realize its capacity in world affairs. Some authors have also argued that the events of the Tiananmen Massacre (1989) and the Asian financial crisis (1997) had forced China to reach out to its neighbours.<sup>26</sup> This often happened with countries in Southeast Asia that had no better human rights records than China. Especially the Tiananmen Massacre, whereby the Chinese government had forcibly suppressed protests, had damaged China's national identity and forced China into an almost complete isolation by the West.

*The 'rise of China' as part of their strategy to challenge US hegemony*

Thirdly, some authors have explained the 'rise of China' as a strategy to achieve regional and eventually also global hegemony. According to Yan Xuetong, there are also a few Chinese people who want to challenge US hegemony in the post-Cold War period, since the 'rise of China' seems to be constrained by the United States.<sup>27</sup> With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States became the sole superpower in the post-Cold War international order. At this time, many Chinese people hoped that their country could grow as rich as the United States. Xuetong thereby stressed that most Chinese people were not looking to share international leadership with the United States, but rather hoped to reduce US intervention in Chinese and Asian political affairs.<sup>28</sup> The same argument was made by Rosemary Foot, who argued that the Chinese search for global power status can be explained by their strong desire for recognition as a great power.<sup>29</sup> Focusing on increasing their power and economic development is especially important for the Chinese leadership, since the legitimacy of the one-party system depends for a large part on this strategy. However, in order to establish this, a peaceful environment is necessary and this includes also a stable diplomatic relationship with the United States. Some authors have argued that this is exactly why China has tried to make it clear to its neighbours and the United States that its

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<sup>25</sup> Weixing Hu, "China's security agenda after the Cold War," *The Pacific Review* 8, no. 1 (April 2007): 117.

<sup>26</sup> Chan, "China Eyes ASEAN," 88.

<sup>27</sup> Xuetong, "The Rise of China in Chinese Eyes," 36.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>29</sup> Rosemary Foot, "Chinese strategies in a US-hegemonic global order: accommodating and hedging," *International Affairs* 82, no. 1 (2006): 80.

development is ‘peaceful’ and that the Chinese leadership is not looking to change the global balance of power. Though, it should be noted that one could never be certain about the real intentions of a state, since the real intentions are only known in the minds of the decision makers.<sup>30</sup> If the Chinese leadership really wants to achieve global hegemony, its main obstacle will become the difficulty of projecting power over huge distances. Achieving regional hegemony in Asia would therefore become a logical move for China, since this could reduce US influence in the region and therefore form an important step in challenging the global hegemony of the United States.

### **1.3 The historical development of China’s post-Cold War foreign policy strategy**

Besides China’s phenomenal economic growth, its increasing diplomatic influence and participation in multilateral organisations have been considered as some of the most important key developments in Asian affairs of the past couple of years.<sup>31</sup> Especially China’s ‘Good Neighbour Policy’ (as it is often called) has become an important part of Chinese foreign policy interests. As part of this particular policy, the Chinese government tried to pursue cooperative and friendly relations with its neighbours, while holding-on to its favoured principles of sovereignty and non-interference. This new diplomatic approach was not only applied to the field of politics, but it was also used by Beijing to promote economic cooperation in the Asian region. The roots of this policy direction can be traced back to the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, when Mao Zedong already cherished China’s independence and tried to pursue a peaceful coexistence with other countries in the region in order to improve China’s political environment.<sup>32</sup> In order to establish this goal, the PRC took the lead in promoting the so-called Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence – principles that needed to make a contribution to the maintenance of peace and stability in both Asia and the world. These Five Principles include mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each

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<sup>30</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, “The Gathering Storm: China’s Challenge to US Power in Asia,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3 (2010): 382-383.

<sup>31</sup> Chien-Peng Chung, “The “Good Neighbour Policy” in the Context of China’s Foreign Relations,” *China: An International Journal* 7, no. 1 (March 2009): 113-114.

<sup>32</sup> Wen Jiabao, “Carrying Forward the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in the Promotion of Peace and Development,” June 28, 2004, accessed May 11, 2018, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/seminaronfiveprinciples\\_665898/t140777.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/seminaronfiveprinciples_665898/t140777.shtml).

other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence.<sup>33</sup> However, it was the death of Mao and the end of the 'Cultural Revolution' in 1976, which eventually paved the way for Deng Xiaoping to introduce his famous policy reforms in 1978. From this moment onwards, the Chinese government really started to open up towards its neighbours in an attempt to protect its increasing economic development and to make the country attractive for foreign trade and investments.<sup>34</sup> Important, therefore, was the attempt of the Chinese government to abandon ideology as its leading policy guide and to develop relations with Asian countries, regardless of whether they supported the United States or the Soviet Union during the Cold War.<sup>35</sup> This policy change eventually led to an improvement of China's relations with some of its periphery countries (e.g. Mongolia) and helped also to create a less threatening image of China in the Asian region.

The main challenge for the Chinese government, however, came with the end of the Cold War. The year 1989 marked not only a new period in history, in which the international order was radically changing, it was also the year in which China had become strongly isolated from the West, due to the events at Tiananmen. It soon became clear that China formed no exception in the post-Cold War global order and Beijing needed to quickly adapt itself to the drastic changes that had been occurring in international politics, just like all the other major countries. It was also from this particular moment in history that China started to really focus on its Southeast Asian neighbourhood. First of all, because Beijing realized all too well that it had to pursue good relations again with other countries in order to 'survive' in this new international order, especially since it had become diplomatically isolated, due to human rights violations at Tiananmen Square in 1989. Establishing friendly relations with countries in the direct neighbourhood could therefore be seen as a logical first step. It was also no real surprise in this context that China decided to re-establish diplomatic ties with Indonesia and Vietnam in 1990 and 1991, and official relations with Singapore, Brunei and South Korea between 1990 and 1992.<sup>36</sup> The human rights records in most of these periphery countries were often no better than in China and it could therefore be seen as a logical move of the Chinese government to normalize bilateral relations with these specific countries after

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<sup>33</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "The Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence," July 30, 2014, accessed May 11, 2018,

[http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/zwjg\\_665342/zwbd\\_665378/t1179045.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbd_665378/t1179045.shtml).

<sup>34</sup> Chung, "The "Good Neighbour Policy" in the Context of China's Foreign Relations," 108.

<sup>35</sup> Suisheng Zhao, "China's Global Search for Energy Security: cooperation and competition in Asia-Pacific," in *China's Search for Energy Security: Domestic Sources and International Implications*, ed. Suisheng Zhao (New York: Routledge, 2013), 150.

<sup>36</sup> Chung, "The "Good Neighbour Policy" in the Context of China's Foreign Relations," 110.

its relations with Western countries soured.<sup>37</sup> However, even though China had reached out to its neighbours at the end of the Cold War period, its disagreement with some of its neighbours about the sovereignty of several islands in the South China Sea remained.

Especially the 1990s formed the stage of increasing tensions between several Southeast- and East-Asian states about strategic islands in the South China Sea. Interesting enough, this was also the period in which the Chinese government started to officially promote its aspirations to lead a “peaceful, stable and prosperous world into the twenty-first century”.<sup>38</sup> The origins of this policy direction can be found in the Chinese Defence White Paper of 1998 in which government officials spoke of China’s devotion to cherish an environment of long-term international peace and to make efforts to promote world peace and development, including an active participation in the international arms control and disarmament process. The White Paper also spoke of upholding the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (as was pronounced earlier by the Chinese leadership in the 1950s and by Deng in the late 1980s) and emphasized the fact that Beijing didn’t seek hegemonism or military expansion.<sup>39</sup> The start of the post-Cold War period can thus be considered as the most important turning point when analysing China’s foreign policy in the context of their economic and political ‘rise’. From this moment onwards, the Chinese leadership only stated that it wanted to pursue friendly ties with its neighbours and build good-neighbourly partnerships. This ‘strategy’ also became largely clear with a famous speech of former Chinese President Jiang Zemin, which he gave in 2002.<sup>40</sup> In this speech, Zemin introduced the official foundations for China’s ‘Good Neighbourhood Policy’, which can be regarded as one of China’s most important foreign policy strategies of the post-Cold War period.

#### **1.4 Different interpretations of China’s ‘peaceful development’ policy**

There is absolutely no doubt that China witnessed an unprecedented growth at the end of the twentieth century, but the way the country has been dealing with this new power status has become a hotly debated topic within the field of international relations. Especially the possibility of a ‘China threat’ has been discussed frequently. According to Denny Roy, the

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<sup>37</sup> Suisheng Zhao, “China’s Global Search for Energy Security,” 150.

<sup>38</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s National Defense: Foreword,” July 1998, accessed May 11, 2018, <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/5/5.fo.htm>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, “II. National Defense Policy.”

<sup>40</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Full text of Jiang Zemin’s Report at 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress on Nov 8, 2002,” November 18, 2002, accessed May 11, 2018, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/3698\\_665962/t18872.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/3698_665962/t18872.shtml).



'China threat' argument can be understood as the situation in which an "increasingly powerful China is likely to destabilize regional security in the near future".<sup>41</sup> He further explains that China's phenomenal economic growth (also known as its 'rise') could turn China's huge population from a weakness into strength, providing China with the basis for great military and technological development. Roy thereby mentions that the alarming element in this conceptualization can be linked to antipathy towards the Chinese Communist Party (CPC). A similar argument was also made by Zhu Feng. According to Feng, China's efforts of pledging good will in its neighbourhood should not only be interpreted as an attempt to protect its economic rise, but also as an attempt to promote the Communist Party's domestic base and stability.<sup>42</sup> He further explains this by arguing that China's efforts of pledging good and enhancing political and economic cooperation can be seen as an attempt of the Chinese government to appease its Asian neighbours. When succeeding in this, it is more likely that US efforts to contain a 'rising' China will be undermined, which in turn could be beneficial to China. Tensions in the region could namely lead to US interference in Asia, which could threaten the domestic stability and image of the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>43</sup> A potential example of this 'act of goodwill', for example, is Beijing's involvement in international multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organisation, where they conform to the international rules and norms. However, even though China is a member of such organisations, it is often argued that the Chinese are not keen on shouldering many international responsibilities.<sup>44</sup> Intervening in another state's affairs, which the Chinese often don't support, can thereby be seen as a good example.

Another important explanation for this Chinese 'charm offensive' was given by David Shambaugh. Shambaugh, who is regarded as an authority on Chinese foreign policy, has argued that Beijing's new type of diplomacy – whereby it tries to gain good will in the Asian region – can be seen as a Chinese attempt to increase its political influence in the region. When more and more countries are, for example, looking at Beijing for leadership, this will provide the Chinese government with more political power to shape a new regional order in Asia and many Asian countries will become enmeshed in a growing web of interdependence. It is thus important to note that there could be multiple motivations for the Chinese

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<sup>41</sup> Denny Roy, "The "China Threat" Issue: Major Arguments," *Asian Survey* 36, no. 8 (Aug. 1996): 758.

<sup>42</sup> Zhu Feng, "China's Rise Will Be Peaceful: How Unipolarity Matters," in *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics*, ed. Robert S. Ross (United States: Cornell University, 2008): 48.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>44</sup> François Godement, "China's Rise as an International Factor: Connecting the Dots," *The International Spectator* 47, no. 2 (2012): 25.

government to become more involved in regional politics and that this can lead to different perceptions of China's 'rise'. That the Chinese have a completely different view of their foreign policy goals has also become clear. Zheng Bijian, who has been an advisor to the leadership of China, has called this new strategic path of the Chinese government "the development path to a peaceful rise" – a term which has been widely cited in the media and within academic circles.<sup>45</sup> In an influential article that was published in *Foreign Affairs*, Zheng argued that China's economic 'rise' goes together with China's goal of "rising in peace", referring to active attempts of the Chinese leadership to improve relations with all the nations of the world.<sup>46</sup> It is thus important to note that the Chinese leadership has attached its own important meaning to this concept, which will be further discussed in detail in Chapter Three of this thesis. Even though the label of 'peaceful rise' is probably the most commonly used label to describe China's recent foreign policy strategy, the label of 'peaceful development' has recently replaced this term in official Chinese discourses.<sup>47</sup> Barry Buzan has defined the concept of a 'peaceful rise' as "a two-way process in which the rising power accommodates itself to rules and structures of international society, while at the same time other powers accommodate some changes in those rules and structures".<sup>48</sup> Buzan's definition can also be applied to China's recent foreign policy direction, since the Chinese have openly opened up towards regional cooperation and thereby joined several multilateral institutions. Though, it remains unclear what the true motivations were of the Chinese leadership to make this particular policy decision in the 1990s.

Buzan's definition of a 'peaceful rise' is also the definition that will be studied in this thesis. The main focus will thereby be on the question of whether China's 'charm offensive' to establish greater ties with countries in the region should be seen as a real attempt on the Chinese side to create stability and peace in the region, or that it should rather be seen as a strategy to portray itself positively to the international community, while trying to establish other priorities behind closed doors. Even though Chinese leaders have already articulated this "peaceful rise" policy from the early 2000s onwards, the debate around the concept is still relevant today. Especially since China's foreign policy has become increasingly assertive under current President Xi Jinping. Some authors, like Jian Zhang, have even argued that this

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<sup>45</sup> Zheng Bijian, "China's "Peaceful Rise" to Great-Power Status," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (Sep.-Oct. 2005): 20.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, 21.

<sup>47</sup> Barry Buzan, "China in International Society: Is 'Peaceful Rise' Possible?," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3 (2010): 5.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*.

Chinese assertiveness has reflected the end of Beijing's "peaceful rise" policy and that it has not only been disruptive to the regional stability in Asia, but also to China's own strategic interests.<sup>49</sup> Other scholars have also pointed to the fact that this 'peaceful rise' strategy has been influencing all of China's foreign policy actions in the direct neighbourhood.<sup>50</sup> This became, for example, clear by China's attempts to increase economic ties with countries in the region and by becoming a member of Western and regional institutions (e.g. APEC, ASEAN and the ARF). Though, the increasing tensions in the South China Sea dispute have shown that the "peaceful rise" policy is not always successfully applied. But to what extent is this dispute about the sovereignty of several islands in the South China Sea causing difficulties to China's diplomatic relations with its neighbours? This is one of the questions that will be central to this thesis. In order to answer this, the next chapter will focus on the theoretical framework of realism and how this theoretical framework can help to explain China's much debated behaviour in the context of the South China Sea dispute.

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<sup>49</sup> Jian Zhang, "China's new foreign policy under Xi Jinping: towards a 'Peaceful Rise 2.0'?", *Global Change, Peace & Security* 27, no. 1 (2015): 5.

<sup>50</sup> Esther Pan, "The Promise and Pitfalls of China's 'Peaceful Rise'," *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 14, 2006, accessed May 14, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/promise-and-pitfalls-chinas-peaceful-rise>.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Analysing China's Behaviour Through A Realist Lens

This chapter develops the theoretical framework in which the analysis of China's political behaviour will take place. It starts with a brief overview of the IR approach of realism and its key authors. Thereafter, realism will be linked to China's "peaceful development". It will be discussed how the theoretical framework of realism can help to explain certain policy choices by the PRC government and how this can be interpreted within the context of the South China Sea dispute. Realism as a theoretical lens can be useful in this regard, since most tensions in this conflict are based upon the attainment of natural resources and the expansion of (maritime) power and national security. Furthermore, the realist framework used in this thesis considers how shifts in international politics could have affected China's approach towards multilateralism in the mid-1990s. By applying such a framework to China, it shows one analytical way to explain how China's economic rise and 'controversial' position in the South China Sea dispute could have affected Beijing's security policy in the mid-1990s.

### 2.1 The theoretical framework of realism

Within the discipline of International Relations (IR), realism forms an important school of thought (rather than one single and coherent theory), which provides a possible explanation for the competitiveness and tensions that occur between states within the international system. The most important thing for realists is thereby to look for where the power is, what the group interests are and the role that power relationships play in the process of reconciling clashing interests.<sup>51</sup> In the case of post-Cold War Asia, it is important to look at the 'rise of China', since power often determines whose political claims prevail and who can therefore play an important role in the distribution of power and the establishment of peace. Furthermore, it could be argued from a realist point of view that power can also explain the prime motivations for the behaviour of certain actors, which is in this case China.<sup>52</sup> Whereas primary assumptions of realism can be traced back to important historical figures like Thomas Hobbes, Niccolò Machiavelli and Thucydides, modern realism, as is studied within the discipline of IR, emerged as a serious theoretical school in the United States after World

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<sup>51</sup> William C. Wohlforth, "Realism," in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Christian Reus-Smit (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 134.

<sup>52</sup> Barry Buzan, *People, States & Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era* (United Kingdom: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 26.

War II. Four main generations should thereby be distinguished: an interwar and wartime generation, a post-war or early Cold War-generation, a détente generation and a post-Cold War generation.<sup>53</sup> Even though there exist different generations within the realist school, all generations reveal a striking resemblance with regard to some important propositions. First of all, there is the assumption in the realist tradition that politics takes place within and between groups: conflict and cooperation therefore become necessary elements in international politics. Wars are thereby seen as natural. They happen because there is nothing to prevent them, since countries would rather defend their conflicting claims than giving up on them.<sup>54</sup> In contemporary politics, the most important groups are considered to be the different nation states and in order for a nation state to survive – according to realists – they need to become solidary with one another in order to avoid conflict.<sup>55</sup> Second, realists hold on to the assumption that individuals and groups are driven principally by the notion of self-interest. They firmly believe that egoism is thereby part of the human nature and will always drive the motivations of nation states. The third and fourth important assumptions within realist thought are the notions of ‘anarchy’ and ‘power politics’. Realists believe that the absence of government shapes the nature of the international system and that the intersection of different groups, which are only looking to fulfil their self-interests, in an environment of anarchy will eventually lead to a politics of power and security.<sup>56</sup>

One of the key authors of the realist school of thought is Hans Morgenthau, who published his famous *Politics among Nations* in 1948. According to Morgenthau, we assume that “statesmen think and act in terms of interests defined as power” and he argued that it is this particular concept of interest defined as power that “makes the theoretical understanding of politics possible”.<sup>57</sup> When analysing foreign policy behaviour of a particular state, for example, it often appears not enough to exclusively focus on the motives of statesmen, who will present their foreign policies in a specific way in order to gain popular support. Analysing China’s recent political behaviour through a realist lens may therefore be useful, since realism can help to map the distinction between the desirable and the possible. Morgenthau further argues that this is analytically possible, since people respond to social

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<sup>53</sup> Wohlforth, “Realism,” 132.

<sup>54</sup> Richard K. Betts, “Wealth, Power, and Instability: East Asia and the United States after the Cold War,” *International Security* 18, no. 3 (Winter 1993-94): 37.

<sup>55</sup> Wohlforth, “Realism,” 133.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>57</sup> Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (Boston: McGraw Hill Higher Education 1948 – seventh edition), 5.

situations with repetitive patterns.<sup>58</sup> Another well-known realist thinker is the American political scientist John Mearsheimer. Mearsheimer is most of all known for his theory of ‘offensive realism’, which describes the interaction between major powers, which are in turn dominated by their desire to achieve hegemony. In his piece ‘The False Promise of International Institutions’ Mearsheimer argues that institutions “have minimal influence on state behaviour” and thus “hold little promise for promoting stability in the post-Cold War world”.<sup>59</sup> He further describes the international system as a “brutal arena where states look for opportunities to take advantage of each other and therefore have little reason to trust each other”.<sup>60</sup> In his line of thought, states thus naturally strive to become the most powerful actor in the system, making international politics not a constant state of war, but a security competition with the possibility of war occurring in the background.<sup>61</sup>

### *Cooperation in a realist world*

When using a realist framework to analyse China’s political behaviour from the early-1990s onwards, it is also important to take into consideration realists’ perception on cooperation. Even though realists rely on the assumption that international politics is competitive in nature, cooperation between states could occur in their view.<sup>62</sup> Based on realist assumptions, states can turn to cooperation, when they think this will provide them with certain profits and gains. According to Mearsheimer, this can either be thought of in terms of absolute gains – a state then focuses on maximizing its own profit and doesn’t really care about the losses of the other state(s) – or in terms of relative gains – a state is then interested in its own gains, but also how it is received by the other side.<sup>63</sup> Realism therewith challenges one of the main assumptions of liberal institutionalism, which came forward as an IR approach in the early 1980s. Whereas proponents of liberal institutionalism argue that international institutions can help to enhance cooperation between states, realists are more pessimistic and worry that other states might gain more from cooperation than they will.<sup>64</sup> In the case of the complex South China Sea dispute, realism could offer a better understanding of the problem with regard to cooperation

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<sup>58</sup> Ibidem, 6-7.

<sup>59</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions,” *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994-95): 7.

<sup>60</sup> Ibidem, 9.

<sup>61</sup> Ibidem, 9.

<sup>62</sup> Ibidem, 12.

<sup>63</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>64</sup> Joseph M. Grieco, “Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism,” *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (Summer 1988): 486-487.

between the involved nations, than liberal institutionalism, since ASEAN and its dialogue platform of the ARF haven't succeeded yet in finding any concrete solution to the conflict. It will therefore also be tested through a realist lens whether the Chinese leadership could be motivated by the establishment of a so-called balance-of-power situation, which is in realist and neorealist circles seen as the main recipe for peace and stability.

### *Realist 'Balance-of-power' politics*

The 'balance-of-power' logic forms not only an important element in the IR approach of realism, it is also necessary in order to understand China's sudden positive approach towards regional multilateralism in the mid-1990s. Traditional realists agree that the 'balance-of-power' system is part of international politics and they understand the notion as a situation in which great powers enhance their capabilities in response to the rising capabilities of another great power.<sup>65</sup> In realist interpretation this thus means that great powers naturally try to balance the military power of other rising powers. A logical response to this situation could be that the state, which is perceived to be aggressive, becomes motivated to reassure other states (or its neighbours) about its intentions. According to Robert Ross, the contemporary balance-of-power politics does not necessarily require the emergence of a global power anymore, but rather that of a strong regional power which challenges the security interest of the status quo power.<sup>66</sup> This is especially important to take into consideration when examining China's global power aspirations, and whether their political behaviour in the region can be interpreted as an attempt to strategically balance the power of the United States. This can be either understood as 'soft balancing', since it is less polarizing and militarized as during the Cold War, or as 'hard balancing', due to the fact that China is using military force in the South China Sea dispute and could be pursuing a strategic cooperation with its Southeast Asian neighbours in order to strengthen its own position in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>67</sup> Though, while traditional realists mostly focus on the element of military power, in the context of contemporary Southeast Asia, focus should also be paid to the role of economic interdependence, since economic power is nowadays specifically characteristic for 'rising China'.

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<sup>65</sup> Robert S. Ross, "Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China: Accommodation and Balancing in East Asia," *Security Studies* 15, no. 3 (2006): 359.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, 361.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*.

## 2.2 Realism and Chinese security policy

Even though realism has been dominating the field of Southeast Asian studies, several authors have opted for different approaches to analyse the political situation in Asia. The end of the Cold War had not only significantly changed the geopolitical map of the region, but it had also triggered a theoretical discussion about the state of security relations in the Asian region.<sup>68</sup> According to Nikolas Busse, for example, most ASEAN states have already moved away from power politics and have successfully embraced a regional code of conduct, which is mostly focused on norms (e.g. non-use of force, non-interference etc).<sup>69</sup> These norms, he argues, have led to a certain collective identity between Southeast Asian states and it is therefore useful in his opinion to look at the topic through a constructivist lens. The IR approach of constructivism is relatively new and entered the field of IR in the early 1990s. It mostly differs from realism in a way that constructivism rather focuses on the sociological aspect of actions of human behaviour, while realists tend to rely on a rational actor to explain certain phenomena. Human behaviour is thus, according to constructivist scholars, mostly driven by rules, norms and identities. In the case of China and its participation in the ARF, several arguments can be made in favour of the constructivist approach. As will be discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis, ASEAN did start a wide range of diplomatic initiatives in order to have China become more involved in the region. It could therefore be argued that this was done by the ASEAN states to ‘socialize’ China, since a lot of emphasis was put on the ASEAN norms that called, among others, for a peaceful settlement of disputes in the region.<sup>70</sup> The same could also be argued for the Chinese leadership. However, in the specific context of the South China Sea dispute, the constructivist approach seems to be lacking the ability to explain why China has been hesitant in finding a joint legal solution to the conflict and why some ASEAN-countries want to contain close ties with external actors like the United States.

That realism seems to be a suitable approach to analyse China’s behaviour towards the region from the mid-1990s onwards also becomes clear when dealing with the previously discussed ‘China threat’ issue and the possibility that things could indeed escalate in the South China Sea to the situation of an armed conflict. Michael Leifer, who is considered to be one of the most influential realists to have studied Southeast Asian security, has also pointed to difficulties of other IR approaches when it comes to studying the security situation in Southeast Asia. He argued, for example, that even though ASEAN has played a positive role

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<sup>68</sup> Nikolas Busse, “Constructivism and Southeast Asian security,” *The Pacific Review* 12, no. 1 (1999): 39.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*, 52.



in providing a framework for avoiding tensions and creating trust among members, it has not been really successful in solving concrete problems in the region.<sup>71</sup> It is thereby also important to keep in mind that ASEAN (and the ARF) function on the basis of cooperative security rather than collective security, which strengthens once again the importance of the realist assumption of self-interest. According to Barry Buzan, realists also tend to see security as a derivative of power, which means that an actor with enough power and the abilities to reach a dominating position could also acquire security as a result.<sup>72</sup> It is therefore that the analysis in this thesis will be based on the theoretical framework of realism, which seems to be the most suitable IR approach to analyse whether the Chinese leadership was most of all led by its motivation to obtain regional hegemony or that perhaps other factors have played a decisive role in their change of policies. In order to have a better understanding of this, the next chapter will discuss the South China Sea dispute. This dispute has been dominating Asian political affairs as early as the 1970s, and the dispute is often mentioned as an example to illustrate China's dubious foreign policy behaviour. Having a good understanding of China's behaviour in this particular conflict will help to map China's behaviour in the ARF and to gain insights into the motivations that could have stimulated the Chinese government in the 1990s to become actively involved in regional multilateral institutions.

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<sup>71</sup> Michael Leifer, "The ASEAN peace process: a category mistake," *The Pacific Review* 12, no. 1 (1999): 25-26.

<sup>72</sup> Buzan, "People, States & Fear," 26.

### **3. China's Strategy in the South China Sea: A Search for Regional Dominance?**

From the end of the Cold War, the dispute about who will control the land and resources within the South China Sea has become one of the biggest security challenges on the Asian continent. The dispute is mostly focused on the belief that there can be large amounts of oil and natural gas found within the sea, next to strategic shipping lanes and rich fishing grounds. While the dispute involves contrasting claims of different (Southeast) Asian states, most attention is given to the behaviour of China, which has claimed most of the territory of the South China Sea as its own. This chapter focuses on the history of the South China Sea dispute and examines China's recent behaviour in this conflict. Special focus will thereby be paid to the strategy that the Chinese government has been using in order to strengthen their maritime claims in the South China Sea dispute. The first paragraph will provide a brief historical overview of the conflict and its most prominent actors and will discuss the main attempts that have been made in order to find a solution to the conflict. This paragraph will be followed by a brief discussion of China's historical claims in the South China Sea, the strategies that could be pursued by China and the Sino-Vietnamese tensions in the context of this maritime dispute. The final paragraph of this chapter will focus on China's claims and political interests in the South China Sea. In this section, the motivations and potential strategy of the Chinese government will be identified. The findings of this paragraph will be used in the analysis (Chapter Four) to examine China's behaviour in the dispute and the implications that this could have for the stability of the Asian region.

#### **3.1 The South China Sea dispute: a brief historical overview**

A good (historical) context that can be used to analyse China's recent political behaviour is the South China Sea dispute. The dispute involves controversial claims over territories and maritime areas in the South China Sea and it can be seen as one of the world's most significant geopolitical issues of today. The sea, which stretches from Singapore and the Strait of Malacca to the Strait of Taiwan, contains strategic shipping lanes and rich fishing grounds, which are of huge importance for several Asian economies. It is therefore also the topic of competing claims by China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei. The sovereignty disputes are mostly about the Paracels and the Spratlys – two groups of islands which are located in the centre of the South China Sea. While China, Taiwan and Vietnam claim most of the islands, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei claim only certain parts of the

Spratly Islands. Though, perhaps more important than these shipping lanes and fishing grounds are the hundreds of uninhabited islands which are believed to contain billions of dollars' worth of oil and natural gas.<sup>73</sup> Even though it was only recently assumed that huge amounts of resources could be found within the South China Sea, the tensions between the Asian states about this maritime area have been on-going for many years (some controversial claims about these islands even date back as far as the 17<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>74</sup> It is thus important to have a good historical understanding of the development of this conflict. Three important phases of the South China Sea dispute – and the attempts that were made to solve this issue – are therefore briefly explained below.

*Phase 1: Early twentieth century (pre-1935)*

Claims to territories in the South China Sea can be traced back to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the Vietnamese state argued that Vietnamese dynasties such as the Nguyen Lords and Kings already exercised state functions over some of the uninhabited islands in this period. Still, the first legalist attempts to settle territorial claims as a dispute over sovereignty occurred later in the 1920s.<sup>75</sup> It was also in this particular period that the “principle of effective occupation” was formulated and recognized under international law, treaties and customs. The main reason for this was the *Island of Palmas Case* which treated a territorial dispute between the United States and the Netherlands over the Island of Palmas, which is located near what is now called Indonesia.<sup>76</sup> The Permanent Court of Arbitration eventually decided that Palmas belonged to the Dutch Indies, present-day Indonesia, and called for the establishment of the “principle of effective occupation”. As a result, states could now exercise continuous and uninterrupted jurisdiction which had been obtained from occupation.<sup>77</sup> According to this principle, a state could thus become a title-holder of a territory through effective occupation and exercise state authority over a reasonable period of time. From this moment onwards, the principle of discovery with the intention to possess the territory also became insufficient.<sup>78</sup> This became, for example, clear with the United States in the *Island of Palmas Case*. The

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<sup>73</sup> Daniels, *South China Sea*, 1-2.

<sup>74</sup> Hong Thao Nguyen, “Vietnam’s Position on the Sovereignty over the Paracels & the Spratlys: Its Maritime Claims,” *Journal of East Asia & International Law* 1 (2012): 168.

<sup>75</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>76</sup> United Nations, “Island of Palma Case (Netherlands, USA),” April 4, 1928, accessed May 15, 2018, [http://legal.un.org/riaa/cases/vol\\_II/829-871.pdf](http://legal.un.org/riaa/cases/vol_II/829-871.pdf).

<sup>77</sup> Leszek Buszynski, “The South China Sea: Oil, Maritime Claims, and U.S.-China Strategic Rivalry,” *The Washington Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2012): 140.

<sup>78</sup> Nguyen, “Vietnam’s Position on the Sovereignty over the Paracels & the Spratlys,” 169.

United States namely claimed its title to Palmas on the basis of the principle of discovery, since it was the successor of the rights that Spain once had over the Philippines (which is located close to Palmas). Though, the United States lost the case, since the Arbitration ruled that there was no real evidence that would establish any act of sovereignty over the island by Spain or a succeeding state like the United States.<sup>79</sup> The early twentieth century thus formed an important period with regard to the development of the South China Sea dispute, since it can be characterized by the implantation of one of the first legal principles to solve controversial claims about territories in the area. However, even though the “principle of effective occupation” was implemented in international law, the dispute between Asian countries about the sovereignty of territories in the South China Sea continued to take place.

### *Phase 2: Towards the end of World War II (1936-1956)*

With the start of the colonial period in Asia, the dispute about some of the important islands in the South China Sea entered a new phase of complexity. Some of the island groups, among which the important Paracel Islands, had become part of what was called ‘French Indochina’ and this made the issue of ownership only more complex.<sup>80</sup> France had namely continued to effectively govern the Paracel Islands on behalf of Vietnam and physically occupied the archipelago in the 1930s. The French government continued to keep sovereignty over the islands until it officially left Indochina in the mid-1950s, due to the consequences of the period of decolonization.<sup>81</sup> As a result of this French withdrawal, South Vietnam (and later also a unified Vietnam) started to claim ownership over the islands, even though China had also started to occupy parts of the archipelago during this transitional period. With the entering into force of the famous San Francisco Treaty of 1951, another important turning point occurred in the South China Sea dispute. This treaty officially ended the Allied Occupation of Japan and according to Article 2, paragraph (f) of the treaty, Japan should renounce all its rights, titles and claims to the Spratly and Paracel Islands.<sup>82</sup> Together with the international conferences that were held around the same time in Cairo and Potsdam, the

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<sup>79</sup> United Nations, “Island of Palma Case (Netherlands, USA),” 868.

<sup>80</sup> French Indochina was a grouping of French colonial territorial in Southeast Asia, which existed from the late 1880s to the mid-1950s. This grouping included among others several regions from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

<sup>81</sup> Raul Pedrozo, “China versus Vietnam: An Analysis of the Competing Claims in the South China Sea,” A CNA Occasional Paper, August 2014, accessed May 15, 2018, [https://www.cna.org/cna\\_files/pdf/iop-2014-u-008433.pdf](https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/iop-2014-u-008433.pdf).

<sup>82</sup> United Nations, “Treaty of Peace with Japan (with two declarations). Signed at San Francisco, on 8 September 1951,” August 21, 1952, accessed May 15, 2018, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%20136/volume-136-i-1832-english.pdf>.

status of the islands remained complex, since it was not officially identified to whom these island groups officially belonged. In 1947, the Chinese government had already circulated an atlas in which an eleven-dash line was drawn in order to legitimize their authority over the South China Sea. This action was then followed in 1956 by the Chinese official argument that the islands in question – which they claimed had fallen during the war of aggression into the hands of imperial Japan – belonged to China again after World War II.<sup>83</sup> The Chinese government thereby tried to strengthen their claim once again by publishing lists with geographical names of the islands in both Chinese and English and managed to take control of parts of the Paracels in 1956. What thus happened after the surrender of Japan was the emergence of a political ‘vacuum’, which largely left the issue of the Spratly and the Paracel Islands unanswered and created an atmosphere in which several ‘new’ competing claims could be made by Southeast Asian and East Asian states.

### *Phase 3: The post-war period (1956-2015)*

However, the tranquillity in the South China Sea really became disturbed by some of the most recent developments in the conflict, which took place during the second half of the Cold War and in the post-Cold War period. In particular, the physical occupation of the Spratly Islands by the Republic of China (ROC), Vietnam and the PRC and the seizing of the Paracel Islands by the PRC in 1974 increased tensions in the region from the 1970s onwards.<sup>84</sup> These developments took place in the context of a second important principle, namely the establishment of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, also known as UNCLOS. This international law was signed by its signatories in 1982 and defined the rights and responsibilities of nations with respect to all issues that can be related to the law of the sea. It defined, for example, what can be defined as a nation’s territorial waters, where states have jurisdiction over a certain area and what counts as an exclusive economic zone (EEZ).<sup>85</sup> The EEZ is an area that is really close to the territorial sea and is therefore subjected to the specific legal regime that is established in this particular area. In this area, the respective state also has sovereign rights to exploit and manage the natural resources and this zone shall not extend beyond 200 nautical miles from the baseline from which the territorial sea is

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<sup>83</sup> Zhiguo Gao and Bing Bing Jia, “The Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea: History, Status and Implications,” *The American Journal of International Law* 107, no. 1 (January 2013): 103.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibidem*, 98.

<sup>85</sup> United Nations, “United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,” accessed May 16, 2018, [http://www.un.org/depts/los/convention\\_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos\\_e.pdf](http://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf).

measured.<sup>86</sup> The establishment of UNCLOS therefore became quite problematic for China, whose maritime claims were mostly based on historical claims. It was therefore also that the PRC responded in 1992 with the *Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone*. This law formulated where China has the right to exercise sovereignty over its territorial sea and that it should safeguard its maritime rights and interests.<sup>87</sup> With this law, the Chinese now officially claimed ownership over several island groups in the South China Sea – among which the Spratly Islands – and openly argued that these islands belonged to their territorial sea, due to the area’s geographical location of twelve nautical miles from the nation’s coastline (Article 2). This law sparked quite some protests from China’s Southeast Asian neighbours, particularly from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. However, the establishment of UNCLOS and the following behaviour of the Chinese government was not the only source of tension that has increased rivalry in the region. From the year 2011 onwards, the potential of oil and natural gas namely came to be appreciated in the region, which changed the complete context of the South China Sea dispute. It was from this particular moment that the tensions between individual Asian states fiercely intensified and the possibility of an armed escalation increased. This became especially relevant when Hanoi started to accuse China of deliberately severing the cables of an oil and gas survey vessel in the South China Sea. Vietnam was, however, not the only country which became extremely annoyed with China’s behaviour in the dispute. In 2013, the Philippines also submitted a case against China to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague about the competing claims in the South China Sea dispute, much to the annoyance of the Chinese leadership.<sup>88</sup> The judgement of the Permanent Court of Arbitration came down in favour of the Philippines and increased pressure on China to scale back its military and naval expansion in the disputed area.

### **3.2 China’s post-war territorial claims in the South China Sea**

In order to understand the Chinese perspective, it is important to have a good understanding of the so-called “nine-dash line”, a controversial demarcation line that is used by the Chinese

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<sup>86</sup> United Nations, “Part V: Exclusive Economic Zone,” accessed June 5, 2018, [http://www.un.org/depts/los/convention\\_agreements/texts/unclos/part5.htm](http://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/part5.htm).

<sup>87</sup> United Nations, “Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone of 25 February 1992,” accessed May 16, 2018, [http://www.un.org/depts/los/LEGISLATIONANDTREATIES/PDFFILES/CHN\\_1992\\_Law.pdf](http://www.un.org/depts/los/LEGISLATIONANDTREATIES/PDFFILES/CHN_1992_Law.pdf).

<sup>88</sup> Tom Phillips, Oliver Holmes and Owen Bowcott, “Beijing rejects tribunal’s ruling in the South China Sea case,” *The Guardian*, July 12, 2016, accessed May 23, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/12/philippines-wins-south-china-sea-case-against-china>.

leadership to claim territories and waters in the South China Sea. These ‘claimed’ territories include, among others, Scarborough Shoal, the Paracels and the Spratlys (see Figure 1). This “nine-dash line” has become an important issue of ambiguity within the dispute, ever since it appeared for the first time on an official map of the ROC in 1947 and has been used by the PRC government in maps from 1949 onwards.<sup>89</sup>



**Figure 2** A map showing China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea (source: The Guardian)

<sup>89</sup> Fravel, “China’s Strategy in the South China Sea,” 294-295.

As for today, the line still remains undefined and the Chinese government remains unwilling to define it, thereby leaving enough space for others to interpret the line differently. One of the existing Chinese perspectives is that the U-shaped line reflects China's maritime security interests in the disputed South China Sea. It could be that the Chinese want to have their security interests legally protected, since they firmly believe that it were the Chinese people who first discovered the islands in the South China Sea during the period of the Han Dynasty.<sup>90</sup> The Sea is of great strategic importance to China – partly since it can protect China's major population and economic centres along the coasts – and it is therefore no surprise that the Chinese government has extended its navy and maritime services in the respective waters. It could thus be argued that the Chinese are trying to find ways to circumvent the international laws mentioned in the previous paragraph in order to strengthen their position in the South China Sea. Not only have the Chinese been openly defending their nine-dash line, but they have also been strongly developing their maritime power, which could indicate that the Chinese government could be seeking some maritime security buffer in the area.<sup>91</sup>

Chinese historical claims of territories in the South China Sea are, however, not the only possible explanation for the fact that the Chinese government firmly holds on to its territorial claims. One of the more contemporary reasons that are often mentioned in academic literature to explain China's claims is the issue of energy resources.<sup>92</sup> It is namely believed that the South China Sea contains huge amounts of oil and gas within the ground – something that can be quite useful for China's rapid economic development. According to Suisheng Zhao, China's rapid economic growth (which started in the late 1970s with Deng's reforms) has brought the country to an unprecedented resource vulnerability, which in the end could threaten China's well-known 'rise'.<sup>93</sup> It is therefore no surprise that the Chinese leadership prioritized energy security as a national security issue in the early 2000s, in order to not be fully dependent on the markets. It would therefore be quite preferable for China to have direct access to the believed natural resources of the South China Sea, since this could largely help to safeguard both their economic development and their great power aspirations. Next to

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<sup>90</sup> Peter Dutton, "Three Disputes and Three Objectives: China and the South China Sea," *Naval War College Review* 64, no. 4 (2011): 49.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>92</sup> Mingjiang Li, "Reconciling Assertiveness and Cooperation? China's Changing Approach to the South China Sea Dispute," *Security Challenges* 6, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 51.

<sup>93</sup> Suisheng Zhao, "China's Global Search for Energy Security: cooperation and competition in Asia-Pacific," *Journal of Contemporary China* 17, no. 55 (2008): 208.



China's historical claims to the territories in the South China Sea, the believed natural resources of this area can thus also be counted as important 'core interests' for the Chinese in order to firmly hold onto their territorial claims. One could therefore argue that China's historical claims could also function as an important discourse to justify Chinese claims during multilateral negotiations, since an official discourse of 'searching for natural resources' can be received as quite hawkish by both the region, as well as the international community.

### **3.3 Strategies for managing claims in the South China Sea**

When it comes to the issue of territorial disputes, there are two elements that often form the core interests of the actors involved, namely a state's national sovereignty and its territorial integrity.<sup>94</sup> These are often the elements over which states could collide and go to war for, thereby threatening the peace and stability in the international system. One of the most important focus points in the study of IR and its theoretical approach of realism is to examine why states go to war or when they make certain decisions to avoid these conflicts. China's behaviour in the South China Sea dispute thereby forms an important case study to show how a 'rising' power deals with territorial disputes in the twenty-first century. Taylor Fravel, who is an Associate Professor of Political Science, has stated that a state can pursue one of three general strategies for managing its claims in any given territorial dispute.<sup>95</sup> First of all, he argues that a state can pursue a strategy of cooperation. This strategy excludes the use of force and involves an offer to either transfer control or to drop claims to the respective territory. Second, he mentions the strategy of escalation, which involves a specific diplomatic behaviour in order to 'force' a favourable outcome at the negotiating table. The third strategy Fravel mentions is the delaying strategy, which he describes as a strategy to maintain a state's claim to a piece of land, whereby the respective state doesn't offer concessions, nor uses force to get what it wants. He further argues that the delaying strategy is the most common strategy of the three that states pursue when it comes to approaching territorial disputes.<sup>96</sup> Though, it should also be taken into consideration that states are more likely to use force in territorial disputes, when this specific piece of land can be linked to important strategic, economic or political significance for the claimant. When applying this to China's behaviour in the South

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<sup>94</sup> Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008), 10.

<sup>95</sup> Fravel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea," 296-297.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibidem*, 297.

China Sea dispute, it could be argued that China has used both a delaying strategy, as well as a strategy of escalation. This can, for example, be illustrated on the basis of the PRC's approach towards Vietnam in the South China Sea dispute, which will be further discussed below.

### **3.4 Sino-Vietnamese tensions in the South China Sea**

The fact that China has been stationing more and more maritime and military personnel in the area of the South China Sea has also contributed to increasing tensions with other claimants. The sovereignty disputes over islands in the South China Sea arose between two claimants in particular, namely China and Vietnam. These two countries, whose bilateral relations have been turbulent in the past, started to fight with each other over the Paracel Islands in January 1974.<sup>97</sup> Both China and Vietnam claim this archipelago and have provided the islands with their own names: the Xisha Islands in Chinese and the Hoang Sa Islands in Vietnamese. According to the Vietnamese government, China has occupied all of the Paracels and some of the rocks in the Spratlys after two naval operations in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>98</sup> In their view, it were the Vietnamese dynasties who were the first to exercise state functions over the islands in the South China Sea in the early seventeenth century, before the French came and occupied it. However, after attempts by the Chinese in the 1970s and 1980s to take control over parts of the archipelago, attacks and incidents have taken place from both sides. In 2015, for example, a Vietnamese official accused China of attacking Vietnamese fishermen, seizing their catch and robbing their fishing equipment.<sup>99</sup> Another well-known incident occurred when Chinese vessels cut the oil exploration cables of a Vietnamese ship in 2011, which was justified by the Chinese government as an act to defend their territory.<sup>100</sup> Violence, however, has also taken place from the Vietnamese side. The most well known example of this was when Vietnamese troops opened fire on Chinese troops in January 1974. Though, this Vietnamese attack resulted eventually in a Chinese counter-attack, which killed three Vietnamese soldiers and paved the way for the Chinese to take control over all the Paracel Islands.<sup>101</sup> Still today,

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<sup>97</sup> Daniels, *South China Sea*, 6.

<sup>98</sup> Nguyen, "Vietnam's Position on the Sovereignty over the Paracels & the Spratlys." 166.

<sup>99</sup> The Guardian, "Vietnamese fishermen accuse China of attacking them in South China Sea," June 17, 2015, accessed May 4, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/17/vietnamese-fisherman-accuse-china-of-attacking-them-in-south-china-sea>.

<sup>100</sup> Alex Watts, "Tensions rise as Vietnam accuses China of sabotage," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 2, 2011, accessed May 4, 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/tensions-rise-as-vietnam-accuses-china-of-sabotage-20110601-1fgno.html>.

<sup>101</sup> Daniels, *South China Sea*, 7.

tensions are present between China and Vietnam on this issue and this situation has shown that peace negotiations concerning the situation in the South China Sea have been rather difficult. Furthermore, there is still the possibility that things could escalate very quickly. This is especially relevant when taking into consideration that Vietnam also has important economic and political interests in the South China Sea, being the major oil producer in the area with their state-owned oil company PetroVietnam.<sup>102</sup> The next paragraph will examine the recent measures that the Chinese government has proposed in order to find a ‘peaceful’ solution to the dispute.

### **3.5 The PRC’s official discourse: towards a ‘peaceful development’**

Even though Chinese foreign policy has been a popular topic within the field of IR, it remains rather difficult to find primary sources or real evidence that reveal the ‘true’ motivations of the Chinese government officials to become more involved in the region. In this paragraph, an analysis is made of how the Chinese government has presented itself in terms of foreign policy rhetoric to its direct neighbourhood. Specific attention will thereby be paid to the official discourse of the “peaceful development” in the context of the South China Sea dispute. One of the most important documents that were published by the Chinese government in the twenty-first century is the White Paper on China’s Peaceful Development, which addressed the most recent foreign policy direction of the People’s Republic of China. The paper, which was published in September 2011, emphasized important goals such as “world peace”, “common development and prosperity” and “progress of human civilization”. This was, for example, visible in one of the first sentences of the White Paper:

*“China has declared to the rest of the world on many occasions that it takes a path of **peaceful development** and is committed to upholding **world peace** and promoting **common development and prosperity** for all countries. At the beginning of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the occasion of the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China (CPC), China declared solemnly again to the world that peaceful development is a strategic choice made by China to realize **modernization**, make itself strong and prosperous, and make more contribution to the **progress of human civilization**.”<sup>103</sup>*

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<sup>102</sup> Zhao Hong, “The South China Sea Dispute and China-ASEAN Relations,” *Asian Affairs* 44, no. 1 (2013): 33.

<sup>103</sup> The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s Peaceful Development.”

However, these types of ‘objectives’ are not only present in the PRC’s White Paper of 2011, but also within the documents and declarations that China was involved in relating to the South China Sea dispute. Already in the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, which was published in 2002, the concepts of “good neighbourliness” and “peaceful, friendly and harmonious environment” were mentioned, together with the goal of enhancing “peace, stability, economic growth and prosperity in the region”.<sup>104</sup> And also in China’s Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin’s speech at the 2014 Xiangshan Forum – an annual regional security conference organized by China – it was argued that “prosperity comes only with peace” and that the Asian countries together should trust each other in order to “promote regional peace and stability”.<sup>105</sup> It has thus become clear that in recent diplomatic statements, the Chinese government has tried to press for peaceful cooperation and development in the region, which they argued would eventually help others to experience economic growth and prosperity.

Besides their statements about the importance of establishing regional peace, Chinese government officials also mentioned specific policies to do this. To come back to the important White Paper of 2011, the Chinese government stated that it wants to “uphold world peace and promote common development” by stating the following:

*“Economically, countries should cooperate with each other, draw on each other’s strengths and make economic globalization a balanced **win-win process** that benefits all countries. [...] In terms of security, countries should trust each other and strengthen cooperation, settle international disputes and conflicts **peacefully** rather than resorting to war and jointly safeguard world peace and stability. Consultation and dialogue should be carried out to enhance **mutual trust**, reduce differences and settle disputes. Use or threat of military force should be avoided.”<sup>106</sup>*

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<sup>104</sup> Association of Southeast Asian Nations, “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea,” version October 17, 2012, accessed May 5, 2018, [http://asean.org/?static\\_post=declaration-on-the-conduct-of-parties-in-the-south-china-sea-2](http://asean.org/?static_post=declaration-on-the-conduct-of-parties-in-the-south-china-sea-2).

<sup>105</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Laying the Foundations of Peace and Stability for an Asian Community of Shared Destiny,” November 21, 2014, accessed May 5, 2018, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/zygy\\_663314/gyhd\\_663338/t1213622.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zygy_663314/gyhd_663338/t1213622.shtml).

<sup>106</sup> The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s Peaceful Development.”

A large part of the PRC's recent foreign policy discourse in the context of the South China Sea dispute is thus that it urges other states in the region to cooperate together and to settle the dispute "peacefully" with "consultation and dialogue". When looking at other Chinese government documents that have been published in the context of the most recent phase of the South China Sea dispute, a similar discourse is visible. In Liu's speech, for example, something similar was said:

*"We are ready to work with regional countries to achieve security for all through **win-win cooperation**. Second, there needs to be stable bilateral relations. [...] All parties should uphold the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, accommodate each other's interests and concerns, and resolve disputes through **peaceful means**."*<sup>107</sup>

He continued by stating:

*"Territorial and maritime disputes bear on countries' fundamental interests and national feelings, and hence are highly difficult to resolve. We should respect international law and historical facts. Disputes that do not have quick solutions may be shelved and parties can go for **joint development**. This would be a good way to narrow differences and create conditions for future resolution."*<sup>108</sup>

Based on these official statements, it could be argued that the Chinese government considers the dispute in the South China Sea as a serious obstacle to regional peace and future prosperity and urges for peaceful negotiations.

When analysing Chinese official rhetoric in direct response to the events happening in the South China Sea, it also becomes clear that the Chinese government officials use a particular type of rhetoric, which can be classified as 'realist'. When Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Liu Weimin was, for example, asked in 2012 about China's position on the Philippine statement that the South China Sea dispute should be resolved by the relevant countries in accordance with the *UN Convention on the Law of the Sea*, he stated the following:

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<sup>107</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Laying the Foundations of Peace and Stability for an Asian Community of Shared Destiny,".

<sup>108</sup> Ibidem.

*“China’s position in the South China Sea issue is clear and consistent. China always maintains that China and the Philippines should resolve the South China Sea dispute through consultation and negotiation based on **full respect for history and international law.**”*<sup>109</sup>

What is also noteworthy, when looking at the previous quotation, is the fact that the Chinese government officials tend to justify their territorial claims on the basis of history. Not only do they hold on to the fact that other states should respect the historical facts, but also that this should form one of the bases for regional consultations. It once again emphasizes that territory and maintaining sovereignty over these territories in the South China Sea form important issues for the Chinese leadership. In a Position Paper that was published by the PRC government in 2014, the same line of realist rhetoric can be found, when they explicitly stated that “China has indisputable sovereignty over the South China Sea Islands and the adjacent waters” and that “the Philippines has illegally occupied or laid claims to some maritime features of China in the South China Sea”.<sup>110</sup> Here, the Chinese emphasized once again their sovereign rights to the territories. It can thus also be argued that, even though the Chinese government is actively promoting a peaceful development discourse, their rhetoric becomes also slightly realist in tone when it comes to direct diplomatic confrontations with other claimants, such as the Philippines.

Another interesting thing that could be noted is the way the Chinese government has presented its message to the region and the international community more in general. In the White Paper of 2011, the Chinese government used terms like ‘the Chinese government’, ‘China’ and ‘the Chinese people’ and argued that it could “learn from other countries” and that it wanted to “create a peaceful and stable international environment”. The Chinese government further emphasized that it wanted to make a “contribution to world peace and development” and therefore addressed – more or less – the whole international community.<sup>111</sup> In contrast to the 2011 White Paper document, Liu Zhenmin’s speech of 2014 contained a slightly different type of rhetoric. What was particularly characteristic for his speech was the

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<sup>109</sup> Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Singapore, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Liu Weimin’s Regular Press Conference on January 12, 2012,” January 13, 2012, accessed June 25, 2018, <http://www.chinaembassy.org.sg/eng/fyrth/t895905.htm>.

<sup>110</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Summary of the Position Paper of the Government of the People’s Republic of China on the Matter of Jurisdiction in the South China Sea Arbitration Initiated by the Republic of the Philippines,” December 7, 2014, accessed June 25, 2018, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/snhwtlcwj\\_1/t1368898.htm](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/snhwtlcwj_1/t1368898.htm).

<sup>111</sup> The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s Peaceful Development.”

fact that he often spoke of “we” and with this he did not refer to the international community, but rather to the Asian community. Whereas the White Paper was published in 2011 – when things started to escalate in the South China Sea dispute with Chinese maritime surveillance boats harassing Philippine and Vietnamese ships – Liu’s speech was given after the Philippines had just submitted a case against China to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague (over China’s competing South China Sea claims). The Chinese government had responded to the legal case in December 2014 with a position paper, which rejected Chinese participation in the arbitration and argued – again – that the respective countries should settle their disputes “in a peaceful and friendly manner through consultations on the basis of equality and mutual respect”.<sup>112</sup> The fact that Liu emphasised the Asian community as a whole could therefore be interpreted as a possible attempt by the Chinese government to create some unity in the midst of regional security tensions. The Chinese leadership has thus used a particular type of rhetoric when it comes to its post-Cold War foreign policy in which peaceful cooperation with the neighbourhood (and also with the international community more in general) is emphasized. But whether this particular type of rhetoric can be seen as part of a security strategy by the Chinese government and whether Beijing follows these ‘policy objectives’ in practice, will be discussed in the next chapter.

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<sup>112</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Position Paper of the Government of the People’s Republic of China on the Matter of Jurisdiction in the South China Sea Arbitration Initiated by the Republic of the Philippines,” December 7, 2014, accessed May 5, 2018, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1217147.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1217147.shtml).

## 4. China's Role in the ASEAN Regional Forum

In order to analyse whether China's turn to multilateralism in the 1990s can be seen as part of a wider security strategy by the Chinese government, this chapter will focus on China's participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The ARF was established in 1994 and functions today as a forum for security dialogue in Asia, where members can discuss regional security issues and potential measures to enhance peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>113</sup> Analysing China's diplomatic behaviour in this Asia-Pacific multilateral forum is interesting, since the Chinese leadership initially reacted with great disquiet when it was asked about the establishment of such a forum in Asia, before it became an active participant in it during the second half of the 1990s. Furthermore, China's involvement in the ARF remains analytically interesting, since its motivations to join the ARF are likely to differ from that of other Southeast Asian states. In the first paragraph, the historical development of the ARF will be briefly discussed from the early 1990s until the year 2015. The focus of this paragraph will be specifically on the major turning points that have taken place in the establishment process of the ARF. The second paragraph will discuss China's behaviour in the South China Sea and how this can be linked to China's political behaviour in the ARF negotiations. Finally, the third paragraph will focus on the different strategies that could explain China's behaviour and their motivations to turn to regional multilateralism in the 1990s.

### 4.1 The ASEAN Regional Forum: its development and structure

Whereas the ARF was officially established in 1994, its roots can be traced back somewhat earlier in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, during the early 1990s. According to Rosemary Foot, who is a Professor of International Relations, the main reason for government officials and commentators in the Asian region wanting to establish a multilateral security organisation in the Asia-Pacific had to do with concerns about the PRC's potential dominating role in combination with the withdrawal of the United States from the

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<sup>113</sup> The 27 members of the ARF are: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Burma, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam [10 ASEAN member states], Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, India, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia and the United States [10 ASEAN dialogue partners], Papua New Guinea [ASEAN observer], the Democratic Republic of Korea, Mongolia, Pakistan, Timor-Leste, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Source: Australian Government, "ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)," accessed May 25, 2018, <http://dfat.gov.au/international-relations/regional-architecture/Pages/asean-regional-forum-arf.aspx>.



continent.<sup>114</sup> The United States had reduced its attention to Asia as a real ‘security problem’ in the second half of the Cold War, due to their withdrawal from Vietnam and their diplomatic reconciliation with China. With the United States becoming less present in the region and China becoming only more powerful, it should be no surprise that countries in Southeast Asia wanted to establish a multilateral security platform. Especially when it comes to China’s historical record of using force, with regard to regional issues such as the island of Taiwan and territorial issues in the East and South China Sea. The direct aftermath of the end of the Cold War thereby formed an important period with regard to the establishment of such a security organisation in the region. Whereas for many Western countries in the world this period marked most of all the end of the end of the Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany and the deepening of the European integration process, for the Asian continent, it rather marked the start of a new era in which the United States withdrew more and more from the region (mostly due its humiliating departure from Vietnam) and whereby China experienced an incredible economic and political transformation, due to Deng Xiaoping’s successful reforms.<sup>115</sup> These particular developments, however, meant for many Asian states an even greater sense of uncertainty. Several ASEAN leaders therefore wanted to make sure that the world’s great powers, and other countries with interests in East- and Southeast-Asia, would have access to a forum where they could address this new security situation in friendly ways.<sup>116</sup> This was especially important for the Asian continent, since flashpoints in several parts of Asia remained a huge threat to the regional stability. North Korea, for example, was suspected of developing nuclear weapons at the time, while the South China Sea continued to be an area of territorial disputes together with the on-going tense situation across the Taiwan Straits.<sup>117</sup> At the same time, China was also perceived as becoming more assertive in some of these flashpoints (among others in the South China Sea dispute) and was therefore perceived as a huge threat to regional stability in Asia.

The first initiative to establish such a multilateral security platform was then launched in 1990, when the Canadian government set up the North Pacific Cooperative Security Dialogue. This North Pacific Security Dialogue can be seen as the potential forerunner of the ARF and consisted of scholars and officials from several countries in the north Pacific.

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<sup>114</sup> Rosemary Foot, “China in the ASEAN Regional Forum: Organizational Processes and Domestic Modes of Thought,” *Asian Survey* 38, no. 5 (May 1998): 425.

<sup>115</sup> Rodolfo C. Severino, *The ASEAN Regional Forum* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), 5.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibidem*, 6.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibidem*.

However, there appeared to be little chance for this initiative to be fully institutionalized at the official level, due to the firm opposition of the Bush administration, which was no fan of multilateral organisations in the region at the time.<sup>118</sup> The Canadian initiative was soon followed, in 1991, by a proposal of then-Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Nakayama, who proposed to create an official regional security dialogue to be held under the auspices of the annual ASEAN post-ministerial conference (CPC). Though, this attempt to establish a security platform in the Asia-Pacific region also did not succeed. This time it was ASEAN, which appeared to be reluctant to put controversial security issues on the agenda.<sup>119</sup> The ideas of ASEAN ISIS, a grouping of ASEAN foreign policy think tanks with close government ties, then became the closest to what would eventually emerge as the ASEAN Regional Forum. The ASEAN ISIS proposal consisted of an appropriated version of Nakayama's proposal and suggested an expansion of an ASEAN-led regional security dialogue.<sup>120</sup> In July 1993, the foreign ministers of several states eventually agreed to create a different meeting, which should take place in July 1994, and which should be used to specifically discuss security issues in the Asia-Pacific region. This particular meeting can be considered the start of what is now called the ASEAN Regional Forum. By helping to create a cooperative security institution in the region, the ASEAN member states hoped to play a more enhanced role in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>121</sup> However, even though a regional security institution was launched with the ARF in 1994, there appeared to be no clear institutional design or agenda present yet.

The first ARF ministerial meeting was held in July 1994 in Bangkok, in the presence of the six ASEAN members, its dialogue partners, some observing countries and the "consultative partners" China and Russia.<sup>122</sup> This particular meeting marked the first time that ministers of East Asian countries and some of the major countries with interests in the region sat together and discussed measures to enhance cooperative security and stability in the region. What quickly became apparent was the fact that the interests of several ARF participants slightly differed, which made it rather difficult to find a consensus. It was therefore left to ASEAN, an association of relatively weak and friendly countries, to host the annual ARF ministerial meetings and to stimulate its progress.<sup>123</sup> The second ARF meeting

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<sup>118</sup> Johnston, "The Myth of the ASEAN Way? Explaining the Evolution of the ASEAN Regional Forum," 290.

<sup>119</sup> Ibidem, 292.

<sup>120</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>121</sup> Amitav Acharya, *Whose Ideas Matter? Agency and Power in Asian Regionalism* (New York: Cornell University, 2009), 118.

<sup>122</sup> Severino, *The ASEAN Regional Forum*, 14.

<sup>123</sup> Ibidem, 15.

then took place in August 1995 and was largely devoted to shape and define the ARF's nature and processes. It was soon followed by the publication of the Concept Paper, which argued that "the region has experienced some of the most disastrous wars of the twentieth century" and that it is "also a remarkably diverse region where big and small countries co-exist".<sup>124</sup> It is precisely because of these reasons that ASEAN called for a gradual evolutionary approach to tackle the challenges in the region simultaneously. The three different stages that it thereby mentioned were: Stage I (the Promotion of Confidence-Building Measures), Stage II (the Development of Preventive Diplomacy Mechanisms) and Stage III (the development of Conflict-Resolution Measures).<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, the paper called for the stages to be carried out by two tracks: the Track One activities, which should be carried out by the governments, and the Track Two activities, which should be carried out by strategic institutes and non-governmental organisations in the region (e.g. ASEAN ISIS and CSCAP). Even though a consensus was thus found that the ARF should build on both Track One and Track Two, some participants still appeared to be reluctant with regard to the role of Track Two.

Whereas one of the main objectives of the ARF was to foster trust among its members through dialogue and promoting security, it also provided an opportunity for small and medium-sized countries to talk to bigger countries as equals when it comes to issues of security.<sup>126</sup> Great emphasis was thereby placed on the principles of mutual trust, non-interference in the international affairs of other member states and the making of gradual progress – principles that could also be found in China's post-Cold War foreign policy direction (among others in China's famous Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence). China thus did not only support the ARF's goals, but also ASEAN's leading role in the process. The fact that the 'official' Chinese foreign policy goals matched with the ASEAN norms and policy goals could partly explain why China decided to join this multilateral institution in the first place and wanted to become involved in settling disputes in the region through peaceful negotiations. Furthermore, it can also be argued that China attached great importance to the ARF and even played an active role in the organisation.<sup>127</sup> China-ASEAN relations intensified

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<sup>124</sup> Association of Southeast Asian Nations, "The ASEAN Regional Forum: A Concept Paper," accessed May 28, 2018, <http://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/files/library/Terms%20of%20References%20and%20Concept%20Papers/Concept%20Paper%20of%20ARF.pdf>.

<sup>125</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>126</sup> Liu Xuecheng, "Strengthening ASEAN-China Cooperation in the ASEAN Regional Forum," in *ASEAN-China Relations: Realities and Prospects*, ed. by Saw Swee-Hock (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), 42.

<sup>127</sup> Ibidem, 43-44.

even further, when they signed a Joint Statement in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) in December 1997, emphasizing their common interests in peace, stability and prosperity for the Asia-Pacific region, as well as the promotion of good-neighbourliness and friendly relations.<sup>128</sup> According to Rosemary Foot, China's increasing level of comfort with the ARF can be explained first of all as a consequence of its experience with the organisation's structure and approach to security questions.<sup>129</sup> The ARF namely tries to make decisions by finding consensus and there is thus no danger of being singled out. Second, Foot also argued that within the ARF's structure, there is less need to form coalitions or to spend resources in order to line up allies for voting processes, something that is greatly favoured by the Chinese. A third possible explanation that could be given for China's positive approach towards the ARF is the fact that the ARF could also function as a venue for others to "get to know" China in a way that suits Beijing best, which could in turn also explain the active use of the 'peaceful development' thesis by the Chinese government.<sup>130</sup>

#### **4.2 China and the ARF: its political behaviour in practice**

In Chapter Three of this thesis it was already argued that Chinese government officials have openly shown their commitment in the post-Cold War period to settle disputes and conflicts in the region in a peaceful way, even though there were no real wars over the islands going on at that particular moment. It could therefore be seen as a logical step by Beijing to become more involved in the region and in ASEAN during the early 1990s. When China joined the ARF in 1994, former Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen also suggested that consultations between the Asian states should take place "on an equal footing" and "peaceful settlements should serve as norms in handling disputes between countries in the Asia-Pacific".<sup>131</sup> What can thus be concluded from the PRC's foreign policy discourse in the first part of the 1990s, when it was still 'flirting' with its Asian neighbours and the ARF, is the fact that it was most of all based on building confidence and trust.<sup>132</sup> The first ASEAN Regional Forum meeting, which was held in Bangkok in 1994, was mostly focused on "intensifying ASEAN's external

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<sup>128</sup> Association of Southeast Asian Nations, "Joint Statement of the Meeting of Heads of State/Government of the Member States of ASEAN and the President of the People's Republic of China, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 16 December 1997," accessed May 28, 2018, [http://asean.org/?static\\_post=joint-statement-of-the-meeting-of-heads-of-stategovernment-of-the-member-states-of-asean-and-the-president-of-the-people-s-republic-of-china-kuala-lumpur-malaysia-16-december-1997](http://asean.org/?static_post=joint-statement-of-the-meeting-of-heads-of-stategovernment-of-the-member-states-of-asean-and-the-president-of-the-people-s-republic-of-china-kuala-lumpur-malaysia-16-december-1997).

<sup>129</sup> Foot, "China in the ASEAN Regional Forum," 428.

<sup>130</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>131</sup> Kai He, *Institutional Balancing in the Asia Pacific: Economic Interdependence and China's rise* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 37.

<sup>132</sup> Ibidem.

dialogues in political and security matters” and “building cooperative ties with states in the Asia-Pacific region”.<sup>133</sup> It was thereby emphasized that developments in one part of the region could have an impact on the security of the region as a whole and that annual meetings should be held in order to increase regional-confidence building and political and security cooperation. However, what was not specifically mentioned in the Chairman’s Statement of the first ARF meeting were the issues of Taiwan and the South China Sea dispute. This could perhaps explain why China was initially quite positive about further integration into the security forum. Though, the first reservations started to appear in 1995, when the ARF’s Concept Paper suggested to develop a “conflict resolution mechanism”.<sup>134</sup> At time, tensions were also increasing in the region, due to the fact that China had deployed two warships in the South China Sea to blockade a Vietnamese oilrig, which was built at a site that was claimed by both China and Vietnam.<sup>135</sup>

From 1995 onwards, China started to modify its foreign policy behaviour towards the ARF. During the second ARF meeting, which was held this time in August 1995 in Bandar Seri Begawan, the capital of the Sultanate of Brunei, some ministers had expressed their concerns about overlapping security claims in the region, referring thereby specifically to the South China Sea (Article 11.1).<sup>136</sup> It was the first time that this sensitive issue was discussed in Asia in a multilateral security platform and the occasion even provided an intergovernmental Inter-Sessional Support Group (ISG) on Confidence Building to focus on dialogue and security perceptions. However, the participants in the second ARF meeting did not come any further than only encouraging further dialogue and consultations on security cooperation in the region. It was no surprise that several Southeast Asian countries had expressed their concerns during this ARF meeting, since earlier that year a Chinese flag was seen fluttering over a platform near the Mischief Reef, an area that has been claimed for a long time by the Philippines.<sup>137</sup> The reef is located in the east of the Spratly Islands and is believed to contain large oil reserves. The Chinese sudden presence near the reef was

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<sup>133</sup> ASEAN Regional Forum, “The First ASEAN Regional Forum, Bangkok, Thailand, 25 July 1994,” accessed May 29, 2018, [http://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/files/ARF-Publication/ARF-Document-Series-1994-2006/01\\_Bangkok2006.pdf](http://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/files/ARF-Publication/ARF-Document-Series-1994-2006/01_Bangkok2006.pdf).

<sup>134</sup> He, *Institutional Balancing in the Asia-Pacific*, 37.

<sup>135</sup> Philip Shenon, “China Sends Warships to Vietnam Oil Site,” *The New York Times*, July 21, 1994, accessed May 30, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/07/21/world/china-sends-warships-to-vietnam-oil-site.html>.

<sup>136</sup> ASEAN Regional Forum, “The Second ASEAN Regional Forum, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam, 1 August 1995,” accessed May 29, 2018, [http://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/files/ARF-Publication/ARF-Document-Series-1994-2006/02\\_Brunei2006.pdf](http://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/files/ARF-Publication/ARF-Document-Series-1994-2006/02_Brunei2006.pdf).

<sup>137</sup> Philip Shenon, “Manila Sees China Threat On Coral Reef,” *The New York Times*, February 19, 1995, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/02/19/world/manila-sees-china-threat-on-coral-reef.html>.

therefore also perceived with great suspicion in the region and raised fears among several Southeast Asian states that Beijing could be prepared to use force in the dispute. In the following ARF meetings of July 1996 (Jakarta, Indonesia) and July 1997 (Subang Jaya, Malaysia), the South China Sea dispute was also widely discussed.<sup>138</sup> It was argued by some authors that, from this particular moment, China's perception of the ARF had become more positive and enthusiastic, something that is quite interesting considering their increasingly assertive behaviour in the South China Sea at the same time.<sup>139</sup> The fact that the Chinese became more open towards participation in the ARF also became clear when the Chinese delegation proposed to help organise the Inter-Sessional Support Group on Confidence Building Measures (CBM) during the third ARF meeting in 1996. The Chinese diplomatic behaviour in the ARF in the first half of the 1990s thus emphasized once again that the principles of mutual respect, non-interference and, perhaps the most important one, peaceful co-existence, were very important to the PRC, which obviously considered itself an important player on the multilateral stage in order to strengthen the processes of peace and cooperation in the region. Though, it should be noted that even though the Chinese government tried to hold on to their 'peaceful development' thesis, they also became more assertive in the South China Sea dispute, something that is quite contrasting with their official rhetoric and could indicate towards a specific security strategy.

In the second half of the 1990s, China had become an active participant in ARF meetings and was also actively involved in diplomatic gatherings in order to find a solution to the disputes in the region. This foreign policy pattern continued into the 2000s. In 2002, ASEAN and China eventually agreed on the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. In this document, the development of friendship and cooperation was emphasized together with the need to "promote a peaceful, friendly and harmonious environment in the South China Sea between ASEAN and China for the enhancement of peace, stability, economic growth and prosperity in the region".<sup>140</sup> In July 2002, the PRC government also published its Position Paper on the New Security Concept, which was also submitted to the ARF. In this Position Paper, the PRC government spoke of a new security concept, which featured dialogue and cooperation as a means to seek common security

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<sup>138</sup> ASEAN Regional Forum, "The Third ASEAN Regional Forum, Jakarta, Indonesia 23 July, 1996," accessed May 29, 2018, [http://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/files/ARF-Publication/ARF-Document-Series-1994-2006/03\\_Jakarta2006.pdf](http://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/files/ARF-Publication/ARF-Document-Series-1994-2006/03_Jakarta2006.pdf). ASEAN Regional Forum, "The Fourth ASEAN Regional Forum, Subang Jaya, Malaysia, 27 July 1997," accessed May 29, 2018, [http://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/files/ARF-Publication/ARF-Document-Series-1994-2006/04\\_SubangJaya2006.pdf](http://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/files/ARF-Publication/ARF-Document-Series-1994-2006/04_SubangJaya2006.pdf).

<sup>139</sup> He, *Institutional Balancing in the Asia Pacific*, 38.

<sup>140</sup> Association of Southeast Asian Nations, "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea,".

through mutually beneficial cooperation.<sup>141</sup> Emphasis was thereby put on the principles of the UN Charter, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and the goal to peacefully resolve territorial and border disputes through negotiations. It could thus be argued that in the early 2000s, the PRC was still justifying its foreign policy behaviour in terms of enhancing regional stability and encouraging peaceful cooperation in the region. In one of his ARF-speeches, former Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan also spoke of the constant exchanges of high level visits, the increasing mutual trust and the continuously strengthened economic cooperation between China and the ASEAN member states in this particular period, which he described as “a new momentum of development” between China and ASEAN.<sup>142</sup> Jiaxuan further spoke during the ASEAN-China Dialogue of negotiations on the free trade area, the development of the Mekong River basin and the possibility of cooperating in non-traditional security areas to deepen China-ASEAN relations, such as fighting illegal drugs and the control of AIDS.

Also, in a paper that was published by the Chinese government in 2002 within the context of the ARF, the focus started to shift more and more towards economic cooperation rather than finding a peaceful solution to regional security conflicts, such as the various sovereignty claims in the South China Sea.<sup>143</sup> In this paper, which was published as a follow-up on the fifth 10+3 and 10+1 summits, the Chinese government mentioned that they were working energetically on matters such as financial cooperation (e.g. the Chiang Mai Initiative), economic cooperation (e.g. preferential tariff treatments) and agricultural cooperation (e.g. training courses).<sup>144</sup> The main focus of this paper can therefore mostly be seen as economical in nature and only a small paragraph at the end was dedicated to cooperation in the field of non-traditional security issues. It could therefore be argued that this ‘sudden’ policy turn became an indirect offer from the Chinese government to its Southeast Asian neighbours to provide them with economic cooperation in exchange for their non-interference with regard to China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea.

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<sup>141</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s Position Paper on the New Security Concept,” July 31, 2002, accessed May 29, 2018, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/zzjg\\_663340/gjs\\_665170/gjzzyhy\\_665174/2612\\_665212/2614\\_665216/t15319.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/gjs_665170/gjzzyhy_665174/2612_665212/2614_665216/t15319.shtml).

<sup>142</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>143</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Non-paper China’s Follow-up Actions since the Fifth 10+3 and 10+1 Summits,” August 20, 2002, accessed May 30, 2018, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/zzjg\\_663340/gjs\\_665170/gjzzyhy\\_665174/2612\\_665212/2614\\_665216/t15323.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/gjs_665170/gjzzyhy_665174/2612_665212/2614_665216/t15323.shtml).

<sup>144</sup> Ibidem.

The Chinese daily newspaper *China Daily*, which is owned by the Communist Party of China, had also published a newspaper article in the early 2000s in which it presented the urge to establish closer links with ASEAN members as an essential way to deal with challenges that are brought by globalization.<sup>145</sup> In another article, the newspaper also repeated the PRC's official foreign policy discourse, that the Chinese side supports the ARF and that it is in favour of progressive development of dialogue and cooperation within the framework of the forum.<sup>146</sup> What is striking again is the fact that they mention that China was ready to take an active part in the non-traditional security field, focusing thereby more on fighting illegal drugs than on finding a diplomatic and peaceful answer to the territorial conflicts that were taking place in the South China Sea. However, things started to escalate more in the region when, in 2009, several US newspapers reported that Chinese ships had shadowed a US navy vessel and attempted to harass its crew.<sup>147</sup> In 2011 and 2012, an increasing number of accusations on the address of China followed. Vietnam accused China, for example, of cutting the cables of a Vietnamese oil and gas survey ship in Vietnamese waters, and the Philippines said that one of their largest warships was engaged in a standoff with Chinese surveillance vessels after their crew tried to arrest Chinese fishermen in the South China Sea.<sup>148</sup> Official statements and speeches concerning China's ARF-meetings around this period are also not accessible anymore on the website of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, a newspaper article that was published by *China Daily* in July 2010 quoted then-Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, stating that "countries should not 'internationalize' the territorial dispute over the South China Sea that Beijing faces with its neighbours", since this would only "make matters worse and the resolution more difficult".<sup>149</sup> He further emphasized that "the best way to resolve such disputes is for countries concerned to have direct bilateral negotiations". These official statements were made after Hillary Clinton had spoken at the ASEAN Regional Forum in Vietnam and suggested to introduce an international mechanism

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<sup>145</sup> Sun Shangwu, "Closer links with ASEAN members essential," *China Daily*, 25 July 2001, accessed May 30, 2018, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/cd/2001-07/25/content\\_72091.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/cd/2001-07/25/content_72091.htm).

<sup>146</sup> China Daily, "China ready to strengthen co-operation for peace," July 26, 2001, accessed May 30, 2018, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/cd/2001-07/26/content\\_72426.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/cd/2001-07/26/content_72426.htm).

<sup>147</sup> The New York Times, "U.S. accuses the Chinese of harassing naval vessel," March 9, 2009, accessed May 31, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/09/world/asia/09iht-ship.3.20710715.html>.

<sup>148</sup> BBC News, "Vietnam accuses China in sea dispute," May 30, 2011, accessed May 30, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-13592508>. The Guardian, "Philippine warship in standoff with China vessels," April 11, 2012, accessed May 30, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/11/philippines-china-stand-off-south-china-sea>.

<sup>149</sup> Li Xiaokun and Zhang Ting, "Direct bilateral dialogue 'best way to solve disputes'," *China Daily*, July 26, 2010, accessed May 30, 2018, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-07/26/content\\_11046559.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-07/26/content_11046559.htm).



to solve the South China Sea dispute. The annual regional gathering of 2012 also ended without a basic diplomatic communiqué, which appeared to be blocked by China.<sup>150</sup>

As the territorial disputes in the South China Sea increased, China's perception of the ARF also seemed to be heading in a different direction. When in November 2015 a Vietnamese newspaper stated that the crew of an unidentified foreign ship had killed a Vietnamese fisherman who was fishing near the Spratly archipelago, tensions between China and its Southeast Asian neighbours only further increased.<sup>151</sup> Even though the newspaper and the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry didn't specifically refer to a potential Chinese involvement in the incident, international news agency *Reuters* did report that the Chinese were getting everything, from military training to subsidies for fuel and ice, in order to create an increasing fishing militia to sail into the disputed South China Sea.<sup>152</sup> Also, in the remarks that were published by the Chinese government in December 2015 on maritime risk management and cooperation, the diplomatic language of the Chinese government officials seemed to have changed. Whereas the Chinese government still argued that they were ready to work closely with all countries in the region to promote the development of a peaceful and open ocean, they also started to use a slightly different type of rhetoric.<sup>153</sup> They stated, for example, in their official ARF-remarks that "some countries have deliberately exaggerated tension in the South China Sea" and they hoped that these countries would "refrain from taking any actions that may escalate tension in the region".<sup>154</sup> These statements were also made around the same time that the Philippines were submitting their arbitration case against China to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin also spoke to *Reuters* about the 48<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting, which was about to kick off at that moment in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), and stated that the meetings should avoid all talk on the

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<sup>150</sup> Jane Perlez, "Asian Leaders at Regional Meeting Fail to Resolve Disputes over South China Sea," *The New York Times*, July 12, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/13/world/asia/asian-leaders-fail-to-resolve-disputes-on-south-china-sea-during-asean-summit.html?mtrref=www.google.nl>.

<sup>151</sup> Hien Cu, "Vietnamese fishermen shot dead by men from foreign ship," *Thanhniên News*, November 30, 2015, accessed May 31, 2018, <http://www.thanhniennews.com/society/vietnamese-fisherman-shot-dead-by-men-from-foreign-ship-54344.html>.

<sup>152</sup> Megha Rajagopalan, "China trains 'fishing militia' to sail into disputed waters," *Reuters*, May 1, 2016, accessed May 31, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-china-fishingboats-idUSKCN0XSORS>.

<sup>153</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Remarks at the ARF Seminar on Maritime Risks Management and Cooperation," December 18, 2015, accessed May 31, 2018, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/zzjg\\_663340/gjs\\_665170/gjzyhy\\_665174/2612\\_665212/2614\\_665216/t1325820.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/gjs_665170/gjzyhy_665174/2612_665212/2614_665216/t1325820.shtml).

<sup>154</sup> *Ibidem*.

sensitive issue and that countries outside ASEAN should not interfere.<sup>155</sup> He further added that the ARF was not the right forum to discuss the issue and that the ARF should be used only to promote cooperation. It could thus be argued that when the South China Sea dispute really started to escalate (from 2009 onwards), China also took a more reserved stance towards the ARF and rather perceived the multilateral institution as a platform to deal with other non-traditional security issues. How this political behaviour can be linked to a certain ‘security strategy’ will be further discussed below.

### **4.3 Understanding China’s ‘strategies’ in the ARF**

The mid-1990s are an important period to understand China’s recent political behaviour in regional multilateral institutions and their potential political strategy to gain more influence in the region. Not only did the South China Sea dispute become more intense during this particular period, China’s diplomatic behaviour also slightly changed in the context of its participation in ARF negotiations. It could therefore be argued that the Chinese government followed a certain political strategy from the mid-1990s onwards to protect its own maritime claims and to increase above all its influence in the Southeast Asian region. This strategy can thereby be characterized as an attempt by Chinese officials to delay the ARF negotiations on finding a joint solution for the on-going territorial disputes in the South China Sea. By delaying this process, China could prevent other claimants from strengthening their position in the dispute, while at the same time it gives them an opportunity to negotiate from a position of strength.<sup>156</sup> How this strategy could be linked to China’s post-Cold War foreign policy in the ARF will be discussed below.

#### *The diplomatic aspect*

The fact that China has been using its involvement in the ARF to strengthen its position in the Southeast Asian region can first of all be explained from a diplomatic point of view. Already from the 1950s onwards, the Chinese government expressed its desire to pursue a peaceful coexistence with other countries in the region and this policy approach - together with the Chinese emphasis on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence - has continued to play an important role in Chinese foreign policy throughout the Cold War and afterwards. By using

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<sup>155</sup> Amy Sawitta Lefevre and Trinna Leong, “China wants no talk of South China Sea at ASEAN meeting,” *Reuters*, August 3, 2015, accessed May 31, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-asean-malaysia-china/china-wants-no-talk-of-south-china-sea-at-asean-meeting-idUSKCN0Q80VV20150803>.

<sup>156</sup> Favel, “China’s Strategy in the South China Sea,” 299.

such a peaceful rhetoric towards its Southeast Asian neighbourhood, China showed that it was willing to participate in regional politics and it could therefore also be considered a strategic 'move' of the Chinese government to become involved in regional multilateral platforms, such as ASEAN and the ARF. When China became an active participant in the ARF from the second half of the 1990s onwards, it continued to hold onto its 'peaceful development' thesis, even after tensions increased again in 1995 between China and some of the Southeast Asian claimants in the South China Sea. From this moment onwards, China remained rather passive when discussing the topic of the South China Sea dispute and even tried to steer the focus of the negotiations in the early 2000s into the direction of economic cooperation and cooperation in the field of non-traditional security areas. In 2015, when things started to become really tense again in the dispute, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin even argued that the ARF should not be used as a forum to discuss the South China Sea dispute and should rather function as a platform to stimulate regional cooperation. What thus happened with regard to China's role in the ARF in the context of the South China Sea dispute is the fact that the Chinese government openly showed its willingness to become more involved in Southeast Asia and to find peaceful solutions for the territorial disputes in the region, while at the same time it tried to delay the process of finding a joint diplomatic solution to it. It could therefore, from a diplomatic point of view, be argued that China's participation in the ARF is part of a Chinese strategy to become more involved in the region. When China becomes more involved in the region, it has the economic leverage to make smaller states more interdependent and the political means to strengthen its own position of power, which in the end will delay the introduction of security mechanisms that could harm Chinese maritime interests.

### *The maritime aspect*

The second important explanation for China having used a strategy in the ARF with regard to its behaviour in the South China Sea dispute can be explained on the basis of a maritime security aspect. China's increasing naval capabilities have namely played an important (indirect) role in China's abilities to defend its maritime claims in the South China Sea.<sup>157</sup> As a result of China's phenomenal economic development in the 1980s and 1990s, China's military budget and opportunities to expand its naval fleets have also strongly increased. It has been argued that China's post-Cold War naval expansion can be best explained by three

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<sup>157</sup> Ibidem, 307.

important motivations, which are to prevent Taiwan from declaring independence, to deploy a sea-based nuclear capabilities in the Western Pacific and to protect China's extended trade routes and energy supplies.<sup>158</sup> Especially the latter forms an important motivation for the Chinese government to expand its fleets in the South China Sea, which is believed not only to contain important shipping routes and fishing grounds, but also billions of dollars' worth of oil and natural gas. While still being a country on the rise, getting access to oil supplies will provide Beijing with more power, since its economy is largely dependent on oil imports. It is thus quite obvious that the South China Sea forms an important area for 'rising' China and in order for the Chinese to protect their claims here, good diplomatic relations with its surrounding neighbourhood are necessary.

It has been reported that China has been expanding its naval bases, together with providing patrols and training exercises in the South China Sea. Noteworthy is the fact that these exercises were also displayed in open waters.<sup>159</sup> One of the main reasons for this could be that China wanted to demonstrate its growing naval capacities to both its neighbourhood and the international community, in order safeguard its maritime claims. Taking also into consideration that no real armed conflict has broken out yet in the South China Sea (besides a few violent incidents), it could indeed be argued that the Chinese government is pursuing a strategy to strengthen its position in the region, since war and armed conflicts could threaten their position of strength (e.g. due to external interventions). While, on the one hand, the Chinese government is trying to convince its neighbours of its peaceful intentions in the ARF, on the other hand, they are also displaying their increasing naval capabilities and power, which could indicate that the Chinese government wants to send a signal to its neighbours.<sup>160</sup> This signal can be interpreted in different ways. It could, for example, be seen once again as a Chinese claim to the territories in the South China Sea, but it could also be interpreted as attempt by the Chinese government to create the right political atmosphere in order to strengthen further economic development. This becomes possible, since China's behaviour is likely to make most of its (smaller) neighbours nervous. Though, as long as China manages to prevent escalation, it has a stable environment to work on its development, while it also enjoys at the same time the status of regional hegemony.

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<sup>158</sup> Buszynski, "The South China Sea," 145.

<sup>159</sup> Reuters, "China wraps up exercise with three warships in South China Sea," *Reuters*, February 17, 2017, accessed June 11, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-china-idUSKBN15W0WA>.

<sup>160</sup> Favel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea," 307.

### *The geopolitical aspect*

A third and important argument to assume that China's involvement in the ARF in the mid-1990s could be interpreted as a strategy to increase its influence in the region is the argument that China turned to regional multilateralism in order to keep the United States out of Asia. With the end of the Cold War and the start of a new global order in 1989, the United States acquired the status of global hegemony in the post-Cold War international order. If the Chinese leadership believes in what some IR scholars have speculated, namely that China could replace the Western-oriented world order by one that is increasingly dominated by the East, this could also be explained by China's recent behaviour in the ARF.<sup>161</sup> Even though the United States did not perceive Asia as a 'real security threat' anymore in the second half of the Cold War, due to its withdrawal from Vietnam and its reconciliation process with China, the United States did express their concerns about China's territorial claims and behaviour in the South China Sea dispute. These concerns even intensified, when China became involved in clashes with Vietnamese and Philippine ships and fishermen from the year 2010 onwards.

The fact that Chinese government officials continued to use their 'peaceful development' rhetoric in ARF negotiations, while being confronted with international criticism can also refer to a certain strategy. When China is, for example, being accused of aggressive behaviour and it tries to convince other countries that it wants to establish peaceful ties, the best thing that they can do is to keep a low profile and to prevent the dispute from escalating.<sup>162</sup> This may also explain why China kept a relatively low profile in the period from 1995 (when it was accused of sending war ships into the South China Sea) to the early 2000s. When there are no signs of escalation in the South China Sea, it is also less likely that external powerful states like the United States will intervene in Asia. Keeping the United States out of Asian regional affairs would not only provide more space for China to strengthen its own position in Southeast Asia, but it could also provide them with the opportunity to create a multilateral Asian block against the United States.<sup>163</sup> If China succeeds in establishing such a multilateral block, this could seriously challenge US global hegemony and become beneficial to the image of China in its own region (due to Asia's new global status). A possible motivation of the Chinese leadership to become more involved in regional security matters in the mid-1990s could thus be explained as a strategic move to increase ties with its neighbours in order to protect its maritime claims, while at the same time keeping external states out of its

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<sup>161</sup> Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West,".

<sup>162</sup> Fravel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea," 310.

<sup>163</sup> Lim, "The ASEAN Regional Forum," 116.

own regional affairs. By looking at China's motivations to participate in the ARF in this way, Sino-ASEAN ties become for a large part symbolic and could therefore indicate that China has not only done this primarily with the goal to prevent any further escalations in the South China Sea, but also to increase its own geopolitical status.

## Conclusion

One of the most significant political developments that have taken place in the aftermath of the Cold War is the so-called ‘rise of China’. In just a few years, China managed to transform itself from a strictly centrally planned market economy to one of the largest market economies in the world with a phenomenal economic growth of nearly 10 per cent a year.<sup>164</sup> As a result of this strong economic development, China could rapidly expand its army and navy, making the country at the same time also one of the strongest military powers in the post-Cold War world. While China’s ‘rise’ was leading the country towards a stronger international position, the Chinese government also decided to change its foreign policy direction. Whereas China’s interactions with other countries were mostly based on bilateral relationships during the Cold War, this started to change in the 1990s, when Beijing initiated to open up towards multilateral institutions and expanded its presence on the regional level.<sup>165</sup> Especially the Chinese decision in 1994 to participate in the ARF can be considered interesting, since it was quite clear that this multilateral security platform would discuss the well-known South China Sea dispute. The main question of this thesis was therefore to what extent the decision of China in the mid-1990s to become involved in the ARF should be understood as part of a strategy to gain more influence in the region or at the global level. This question becomes especially interesting, since the Chinese government has actively presented China’s rise to the international community as a ‘peaceful development’, while in practice its recent behaviour in the South China Sea has been widely criticized and is often labelled as ‘assertive’.

When looking at the rhetoric of Chinese government officials in the context of the analysed ARF meetings, one can already suggest that China’s involvement in the multilateral security platform has been part of an attempt to increase the country’s political influence in the region. The analysis of Chinese rhetoric in the ARF has namely shown that Chinese government officials have continued to use the same official discourse during the different ministerial meetings, which was mostly focused on handling disputes between countries in the Asia-Pacific in a peaceful way and to create confidence and mutual trust among them.<sup>166</sup> Especially China’s rhetoric during the first two ARF meetings can be linked to strategic political behaviour, since it was mostly focused on “intensifying ASEAN’s external dialogues in political and security matters” and “building cooperative ties with states in the Asia-Pacific

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<sup>164</sup> The World Bank, “The World Bank in China.”

<sup>165</sup> Johnston, “The Myth of the ASEAN Way?,” 290.

<sup>166</sup> He, *Institutional Balancing in the Asia Pacific*, 37.

region”, which could indicate that China wanted to create confidence and trust among the ASEAN members.<sup>167</sup> Even though the Chinese government continued to use its ‘peaceful development’ thesis throughout the ARF meetings, their type of rhetoric slightly changed in the second half of the 1990s and the early 2000s. From this particular moment, when more and more Southeast Asian ministers expressed their concerns about China’s behaviour in the South China Sea dispute, Chinese government officials started to emphasize the need to strengthen economic cooperation between China and the ASEAN states and rather spoke of non-traditional security issues that needed to be tackled instead of the escalating territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The fact that China tried to avoid the topic of the South China Sea dispute became even clearer in 2015, when Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin stated that the ARF should not discuss sensitive issues at the ARF, which he argued should rather be used as a platform for cooperation.<sup>168</sup> The Chinese official rhetoric in the ARF can thus be interpreted as ‘strategic’, since it has shifted from elements of confidence building in the early 1990s to an emphasis on regional cooperation in the field of economics and non-traditional security issues in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Important, therefore, was the fact that Chinese government officials were delaying the ARF discussions about finding a concrete solution for the South China Sea dispute.

When also analysing China’s behaviour in the South China Sea dispute, it could be indicated that when China’s position of power increased, it not only became more assertive in the dispute, but also more passive during the ARF negotiations. This particular behaviour became especially relevant in 1995, when China deployed two warships in the South China Sea in order to block a Vietnamese oilrig, and during the second half of the 2000s.<sup>169</sup> Whereas the Chinese did help to organise an Inter-Sessional Support Group on Confidence Building Measures, it also suggested enhancing further economic cooperation between China and the ASEAN states, providing them with support for financial projects. By using such a diplomatic strategy, the smaller ASEAN states became entangled in a Chinese web of interdependence, which eventually strengthened the political position of China in Southeast Asia. That China became more assertive as a result of its new political status in the region can especially be applied to the year 2009, when China increased its efforts to control US naval activities in the South China Sea. However, also in 2011 and 2012, China was accused of increasingly assertive behaviour, when the cables of a Vietnamese oil and gas survey ship were cut and the

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<sup>167</sup> ASEAN Regional Forum, “The First ASEAN Regional Forum,”.

<sup>168</sup> Lefevre and Leong, “China wants no talk of South China Sea at ASEAN meeting,”.

<sup>169</sup> Shenon, “China Sends Warships to Vietnam Oil Site,”.



crew of a Philippine ship was harassed.<sup>170</sup> Even though the Chinese government thus continued to use its ‘peaceful development’ discourse during ARF meetings, in practice its behaviour in the South China Sea seemed rather assertive with its maritime claims having grown in tandem with the size of its navy and maritime services.<sup>171</sup> It is especially this contrast in messaging and behaviour which could indicate that the Chinese leadership pursued a double agenda when it decided to become involved in the ARF.

Based on the fact that Chinese government officials said one thing during multilateral negotiations and subsequently did the other in practice, could indeed support the argument that the decision of the Chinese government to become involved in the ARF in 1994, can be seen as part of a broader security strategy to gain influence in the region, since both rhetoric and action are contradictory. However, in order to examine the broader motivations of the Chinese leadership to have made this foreign policy decision, it is also important to look at these political developments through a realist lens. This is especially relevant since a realist framework can help to explain the prime motivations of powerful actors in the international system. First of all, realists argue that individual actors in the international system are always driven by the principle of self-interest, which is often the desire to achieve hegemony. When looking at China’s international position in the early 1990s, it was obvious that the Chinese leadership found itself in a difficult geopolitical position. Not only had the United States become the sole superpower in the post-Cold War international order, the Chinese were also experiencing diplomatic isolation by the West, due to the human rights violations that had taken place at Tiananmen Square in 1989. In order to be able to continue their successful economic development and increase their political power, it made sense that the Chinese leadership approached its Southeast Asian neighbours. However, several Southeast Asian states feared China, due to its rapid economic growth and historical record of using force against neighbouring states.<sup>172</sup> The ‘peaceful’ rhetoric of Chinese government officials can therefore be interpreted as a strategic attempt to convince its Southeast Asian neighbours of its intentions, because when China becomes more involved in the region, it becomes easier for such a powerful state to steer multilateral negotiations, which are led by smaller, less powerful states (in this case the ASEAN states), into a direction that serves their own interests best.

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<sup>170</sup> The New York Times, “U.S. accuses the Chinese of harassing naval vessel,”. BBC News, “Vietnam accuses China in sea dispute,”. The Guardian, “Philippine warship in standoff with China vessels,”.

<sup>171</sup> Dutton, “Three Disputes and Three Objectives,” 49.

<sup>172</sup> Foot, “China in the ASEAN Regional Forum,” 425-426.

Second, in the realist line of argumentation, cooperation between states can exist, but it often appears when this could provide a state with certain profits and gains.<sup>173</sup> The analysis in this thesis has shown that, when China's political position in the region became stronger in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Chinese were also less afraid to use their power in order to protect their territorial and maritime interests in the region. This can be interpreted as part of a security strategy, since China has succeeded in deepening the economic interdependence between China and the ASEAN states, which eventually resulted in a situation in which China could formulate the 'rules of the game'.<sup>174</sup> Not only were the Chinese able to block multilateral decisions that could harm their territorial interests, they could also steer the negotiations in a direction that was most preferable to Chinese interests in general. Still today, no concrete conflict resolution mechanism has been introduced to deal with the tensions in the South China Sea and also the issue of Taiwan – which is of great strategic importance to the Chinese leadership – seems to have moved to the background of ARF priorities. China's participation in the ARF has thus been rather beneficial for them when it comes to protecting Chinese territorial and maritime interests (which it claims on the basis of history) and this could indeed be part – as realists would argue – of a strategy, since China has gained significantly from its multilateral involvement in terms of regional power.

The third, and perhaps most important indicator that the Chinese leadership has pursued a strategy to increase its regional power, is the fact that China has strengthened above all its security position in Southeast Asia. In the early 1990s, there were already signs that many Asian states wanted to create a multilateral security platform in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>175</sup> If the Chinese were indeed following a security strategy to balance their land and maritime strength, it would make sense that China became actively involved in such a multilateral platform. Not only because this would increase their possibilities to block decisions that could harm their vital national interests, but also because this could strengthen their security position in the Asia-Pacific by being able to use multilateralism as a means for control. It is often argued in academic circles that the preferences of the Chinese leadership for the post-Cold War international order are multipolar.<sup>176</sup> It could therefore be a possibility that the Chinese leadership saw a nice opportunity in the ARF as a political means to mobilise their Asian backyard against the dominating US global power. Furthermore, if the Chinese

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<sup>173</sup> Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," 12.

<sup>174</sup> He, *Institutional Balancing in the Asia-Pacific*, 40.

<sup>175</sup> Johnston, "The Myth of the ASEAN Way?," 291.

<sup>176</sup> He, *Institutional Balancing in the Asia-Pacific*, 39.

succeeded in keeping peace and stability in the Southeast Asian region, this would not only provide them with a nice environment to strengthen their economic ‘rise’, but it could also form a possibility to keep the United States out of Asian affairs, since it is more likely that the United States will intervene on the continent in times of potential regional escalation.

China has thus by far been the most assertive actor in the South China Sea dispute in the post-Cold War era and it is most likely to continue this type of behaviour, since its recent ‘rise’ has provided the country with the economic capabilities to make the smaller ASEAN states dependent on China for further development. It can thereby be argued that China has used the ARF as a means to protect their ‘core interests’, namely their territorial claims in the South China Sea and the believed natural resources that come along with these areas. There is still no concrete solution found for the maritime dispute yet and China seems to be actively trying to delay the ARF negotiations, while at the same time the country is increasing its assertive behaviour in the South China Sea. It can therefore be argued that China has followed a political strategy in the mid-1990s in order to strengthen its regional position. However, to what extent the Chinese will continue their strategic behaviour in order to gain the status of global hegemony still remains an open question for now, even though the centre of economic gravity is shifting already more and more today towards the East.<sup>177</sup> Despite the fact that China seems to have used its involvement in the ARF to protect their territorial interests, the Chinese leadership has also shown that they are willing to take on the role of global leader. In 2014, for example, China reached an agreement with the United States on climate change (in which it specified a timetable for emission reduction) and it also announced during the same year that it would establish a Silk Road fund, consisting of \$40 billion to support infrastructure investments in developing countries.<sup>178</sup> However, only time will tell whether China will actually succeed in obtaining global leadership and whether this political behaviour can also be understood as a certain ‘strategy’ by the Chinese leadership. Though, one thing has become clear for now when thinking about Chinese post-Cold War foreign policy, and that is – as Deng Xiaoping famously stated in the late 1970s – that you need to “cross the river by feeling the stones”, meaning in this particular context that China

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<sup>177</sup> Ikenberry, “The Rise of China and the Future of the West,”.

<sup>178</sup> Dingding Chen, “After APEC, East Asia Summit, and G20, China Emerges a Global Leader,” November 17, 2014, accessed June 16, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/11/after-apec-east-asia-summit-and-g20-china-emerges-a-global-leader/>. Dingding Chen, “China’s ‘Marshall Plan’ is Much More,” November 10, 2014, accessed June 16, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/11/chinas-marshall-plan-is-much-more/>.

strategically changed its passive attitude towards regional multilateralism in the 1990s, in order to realize its balance of power strategy in the region.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> He, *Institutional Balancing in the Asia-Pacific*, 35.

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