

Reading beyond the Lines of Xi Jinping's Speech: China's Leadership and Its Domestic Calculus over the Disputed Spratly Islands

Noor Hasifah **Abdul Rashid***

Ministry of Works, Malaysia

Muhammad Danial **Azman****

Universiti Malaya and Asia Pacific University, Malaysia

Zarina **Othman*****

National University of Malaysia, Malaysia

Khadijah **Md Khalid******

Universiti Malaya, Malaysia

Abstract

The past and recent developments of the disputed Spratly Islands have alarmed the international community due to China's constant increased presence with its sophisticated military infrastructures over reclaimed lands of the Spratly Islands. Considering international arbitrators favoured the Philippines in the 2016's verdict and the July 2021's incident of China's military incursions nearby Malaysia's Sabah maritime border, this article seeks to argue an increased alarming security dilemma among Southeast Asian claimant against China over the Spratly Islands. This article uses Social Constructivism approaches and illuminates social interaction processes between agency and structure or between China premier and state bureaucrat and within the intersection of domestic and international dimensions of China. Unlike conventional International Relations (IR) theories, Social Constructivism

provides merits of Structuration¹ approach to appreciate intricate social relations between China premier and its domestic calculus in determining China's behaviour over the disputed Spratly Islands. In return, Structuration allows nuanced reading beyond the lines in matching President Xi Jinping's verbatim intention through China's behaviour in the disputed Spratly Islands. When reading China in the disputed Spratly Islands, it is appropriate to ask this question: does leadership affect a nation's behaviour and its domestic calculus? In a way to understand this, the Structuration approach is applied. Through the lens of the Structuration approach, this article examines the nexus between the leader as "agency" and the state's institutions as "structure" by emphasising Xi's state leadership and his social interactions over several institutions with the China's state system, illuminating a likely pattern of China's actions over the disputed Spratly Islands. By linking the early days of Xi's speeches to the present plausible behaviour of China in the disputed Spratly Islands, this article illuminates the ascendancy of highly and increasingly unlikely positive images of Xi's construction of China, even among the existing partners of the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRIs) as well as Southeast Asian claimant states over the disputed Spratly Islands.

Keywords: *Agency and structure in China's territorial claimed, Early days of Xi Jinping's speeches, Political rhetoric and leadership styles, Disputed claims of Spratly Islands, Xi's China Dreams, Southeast Asian claimant states, Social Constructivism and China*

1. Introduction

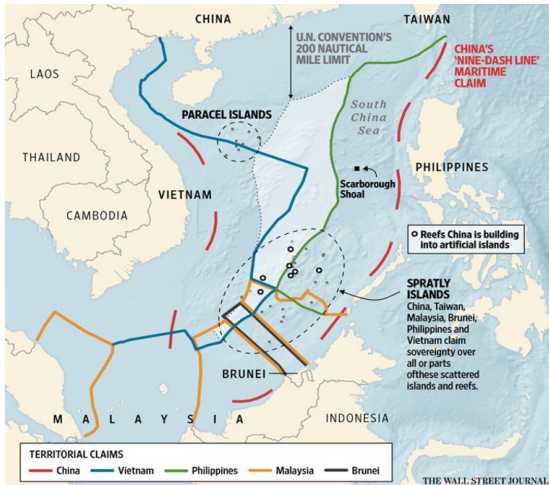
With the ongoing debate over the controversial trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US) or AUKUS against the People's Republic of China (PRC, hereafter known as China), it is exciting to learn that Covid-19 has not prevented discussions of China's assertiveness over the South China Sea (SCS) (Wang 2022; Osawa, 2022; McFaul, 2022; Fewsmith, 2021). Apart from the BRIs and debt-trap diplomatic ramifications, the assertiveness of land reclamations surrounding the Spratly Islands has structured

unsymmetrical disadvantages for most Southeast Asian claimants (Shambaugh 2021; Yeoh, 2021; Turcsányi, 2018; Lam 2018). With no hesitation, China has shown endless endeavours to reinforce its position along the disputed Spratly Islands, which evolves comprehensively from time to time, covering all aspects, including legal framework, and a physical military presence (Smith 2021; Fravel, 2019, 2008; Chung, 2016; Dutton, 2011; Swaine, 2010).

The past and recent developments of the disputed Spratly Islands have alarmed the international community due to China's constant increased presence with its sophisticated infrastructures and technological advancement. The presence of the Chinese military in the various parts of the SCS, and exclusively in the disputed Spratly Islands, displays China's national interests within the envisioned President Xi Jinping's China Dreams² (Zhang, 2022; Denny, 2019; Kelly et al., 2014). Considering international arbitrators favoured the Philippines in the 2016's verdict and July 2021's incident of China's military incursions nearby Malaysia's Sabah maritime border (Pemmaraju, 2016; Palatino, 2021; Jibki et al., 2021; Jaipragas, 2021), this article seeks to argue an increasingly alarming security dilemma among Southeast Asian countries. In contrast to China's territorial acquisition landmarks, none of Southeast Asia's claimant states have shown consistent presence and continuous efforts similar to China's massive complex and soft power. In short, China's reclamation activities can be interpreted as a response to the Scarborough Shoal struggle that has arguably impaired China's assurance of peaceful rise against other claimant parties of the Spratly Islands (see Ji, 2019; Hassan and Jian 2019; Hayton 2019). However, this situation does not stop China from responding assertively to other claimants, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam (BBC News, 2021; Md Khalid and Azman 2021; Hayton 2018; Lewis and Litai 2016; The Guardian, 2010). Although there is a mutual agreement among claimants, the level of understanding and consensus between China, Vietnam, and the Philippines is not on par compared to Malaysia and Brunei's diplomatic resolution (Martison 2021; Lopega 2020; Kim, 2020; Zhang 2021; Putra and Read 2020; Tomacruz 2020). Hence, this drives China to re-evaluate its policy to position its interest in the

disputed area. Undoubtedly, China's physical presence in the disputed area has undermined territorial sovereignty and renewed interesting questions over China's foreign policy decision-making process since the reign of President Xi and his vision of the China Dreams (Shue, 2022; Thornton, 2021; Majumdar 2021; Johnson, 2020; Kefala and Shanshan, 2022).

However, a limited understanding of the peculiar and unique relations between China's leaders and its domestic calculus (state bureaucrats and the state's internal and external dimensions) only increased insecurity (Tsang and Cheung 2022; Economy 2021; Grachikov, 2021). It obscured the foreign policy directions of Southeast Asian claimants when dealing with China's assertiveness over the disputed Spratly Islands (Jacob, 2022; Haget 2019; Hayton 2019; Li 2016). Using the case of China's assertiveness over its territorial claims along the disputed Spratly Islands while maintaining debt-trap diplomacy of the BRIs against individual Southeast Asian claimant parties (to Spratly Islands), this article uses Social Constructivism³ approaches and illuminates the social interaction processes between agency and structure or between China premier and state bureaucrat and within the intersection of domestic and international dimensions of China. Unlike conventional IR theories and their obsessions with the tangible variable determining China's foreign policy decisions, Social Constructivism (via the Structuration approach) provides the merits to appreciate intricate social interactions and relations between China's premier and its domestic calculus in determining China's behaviour over the disputed Spratly Islands (Seo and Lee 2019; Shum 2021; Wang 2019). In return, the Structuration approach allows nuanced reading beyond the lines in matching Xi's verbatim intention through China's behaviour in the disputed Spratly Islands (see Fallahi and Omidi 2022; Jin 2021; Ji 2019; Wang 2018).

Picture 1 Map of South China Sea Disputes

Source: The Wall Street Journal, 2015.

Two reasons should be considered when understating the advantages of appreciating the Structuration approach under Xi's leadership and its domestic calculus when reading China in the disputed Spratly Islands. First, in 2018, the National People's Congress (NPC), as the highest and unicameral state organ, amended the constitution and removed the two-term limits of the president, paving the lifetime reign of Xi to serve as a mantle for further materialisation of China Dreams (Wasserstrom 2022; Ye, 2019; Sainch, 2021). Considered to be the right leader at the right time, Xi's leadership managed to influence every decision made by the government, which has significantly strengthened China's position and presence towards its claim over the disputed Spratly Islands (Luttrull, 2020; Fewsmith, 2021). Many "push" and "pull" factors determined China's engagement with the rest of the claimant parties. As such, even within the case of political readings of Xi's speeches, one cannot assume national interest is necessarily reduced to tangible material variables without embedding within a dialectic

social process, local negation, and structural constraints (Forsby 2021; Glover 2011; Haget 2019; Goldstein 2020). Involvements of Xi's leadership style within China's national interests intensified the country's dispute development alongside its domestic pressure that forced China to re-evaluate its position over any issues that may affect its domestic interests (Chung 2016; Cheek, 2021).

Second, with Xi as its leader, China shows a significant development and massive change in its domestic calculus to push China forward in achieving its ambitions in the international realm: BRI and SCS. This is to prove that China has developed and strengthened its artificial islands by developing organised infrastructures and installing advanced technologies for its military purposes along the disputed areas of the Islands (Chan 2022; Jayadeva, 2017; Arsentyeva, 2021). In contrast to other claimants, China is well equipped with hard and soft power capabilities through its decisive actions by emphasising its presence through land reclamation projects around the Spratly Islands (Beaty 2021; Buzan and Zhang 2014; Dickson 2021). Inadvertently, China's assertiveness under President Xi demonstrates its advanced technological infrastructure over the disputed Spratly Islands, which differed from previous China premierships' approaches (Jacob 2022; Martison 2021; Luttrull 2020). From the military and non-military presence, various concerted efforts by China signified a unique social interaction between PRC's leaders and social structure that provided a logic for the appropriate China's behaviour in the SCS (see Alessio and Renfro 2022; Haget 2019). Inadvertently, reading beyond the lines of Xi's early days speeches allows the Southeast Asian claimant states in the Spratly Islands dispute to understand better the distance between Xi and China's state apparatus when the Dragon is responding to what they perceive as a threat to their national interest.

Nonetheless, China's relatively progressive actions towards the disputed Spratly Islands under Xi created legal ramifications, political tensions, and security dilemmas in SCS and among respective Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) claimants. While Xi asserts his pitiless ambitions on the issue, arguably, China's former leaders (apart from Mao Zedong) were not as aggressive in their efforts

over the Spratly Islands (Li 2016; Cheek 2021; Dickson 2021). While there is no indication that China will come to a standstill in its actions over the disputed Spratly Islands, other countries within the area realise its discomfort with China's behaviour under Xi. A 2022 survey report of the Southeast Asian citizens by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute recorded more nuanced and mixed readings about China on various political economy issues. Three important findings which confirmed consistent views of 2021's version of the same report: a) in terms of international legal compliance and peaceful order, the US is more trusted than China, b) China's strong arms in the SCS, mistreatment of its own religiously prosecuted minorities, and growing economic dominance in the region, and finally, c) relatively not really a benign and benevolent power (Seah et al., 2022).

Given the worthy merits of exploring the Structuration approach, as underpinned by Social Constructivism (Wendt, 1992, 1995, 1999), this unravels the political intentions of Xi's early days⁴ speech (even before he came to power in 2013) and reading them in the context of China in the disputed Spratly Islands, let us ask: does leadership affect a nation's behaviour and domestic calculus? In a way to understand this, the Structuration approach is applied. Through the lens of the Structuration approach, this article examines the nexus between the leader as "agency" and the state's institutions as "structure" by emphasising Xi's state leadership and his social interaction with several institutions within China's state system, illuminating a likely pattern of China's actions over the disputed Spratly Islands. This article first discusses and briefly explores a conceptual clarification of the Structuration approach under Social Constructivism and the social interaction between China's premier as the agency and domestic calculus as the structure. The aim is to show the extent of influence of Xi's capabilities through the state system when translating his political intentions to increase China's assertiveness over the disputed Spratly Islands, and this is done under the pretext of China's sovereignty and national interest. Second, the discussion also investigates Xi's leadership style and three factors of his leadership style – a) constrain, b) the openness of information, and c) motivation – via Hermann (1980, 1999, 2005, 2014)'s three dimensions

of leadership styles. Selected speeches of Xi's early days of power will be used for this purpose. Third, the discussion delves into Xi's leadership and foreign policy style focused on disputed claims over Spratly Island. The final part and conclusion section links the early days of Xi's speeches to present alleged China's behaviour in the disputed Spratly Islands with more contested positive images of Xi's China, even among the existing partners of BRIs as Southeast Asian claimant states over the disputed Spratly Islands.

2. Structuration approach: Social Interaction Between Agency and Structure

The existing literature on the Social Constructivism of China in world politics often emphasises the discourse of power and sovereignty in China's foreign policy and diplomatic relations with other countries in the context of significant powers, relations with the Global South, the political economy of foreign aid and the thirst for natural resources in Africa, as well as PRCs nationalism over the Taiwan Strait (Wang, 2022, 2019; Wang, 2018; Xiaodi, 2018; Zhai 2021; Ye 2019; Rahman, 2021). However, there were only few attempts to examine China's state agency behaviour under Xi and the assertiveness of China's political actions through Xi's speeches within the context of territorial disputes (see also Wang, 2022; Zhai 2021; Seo, 2019). Using Alexander Wendt (1992, 1995, 1999)'s Social Constructivism in analysing the early days of Xi's speeches, this article's reading beyond the lines unravels intangible power elements of Xi's leadership style and China's assertiveness over the Spratly Islands.

With the rise of China, BRI, and SCS, which often focused on tangible elements of China's power capability in world politics, a limited study on intangible elements of power in China's leadership are related to the SCS studies (Ye, 2019). Thus, this study focuses on how China's leadership style influences the state system structure to achieve its national interests and identities within the territorial dispute over the Spratly Islands (Zhai, 2021; Hayton, 2019; Fallahi and Omidi, 2022; Balgden, 2021; Beaty 2021; Burai and Hoffman, 2022). Limited studies

are conducted on Xi's leadership style and role in influencing China's state system structure to achieve China's national interests and identities in the disputed Spratly Islands (see Alessio and Renfro, 2022; Artsenyeva, 2021). On the other hand, existing Constructivist readings over Xi's leadership focused more on China's external relations in political economy and diplomacy (Wang, 2019, 2022; Tsang and Cheung 2022). However, they rarely discussed the illumination of China's power and sovereignty narratives over the Spratly Islands or other similar territorial dispute claims by China (Zhai 2021; Smoth, 2021; Fallahi and Omidi, 2022; Thornton, 2021; Turcsányi, 2018). Thus, we explicated a Structuration approach to examine the early days role of Xi in China's foreign policy and actions over the disputed Spratly Islands. This study will show how Xi uses his ideology and leadership style in commanding and influencing the domestic system to achieve China's identities and interests in the disputed Spratly Islands. The findings of this study will add another layer of understanding to the existing empirical studies on territorial disputes, specifically in the locus of the Spratly Islands. Thus, Social Constructivism allows this study to comprehend China's reclamation activities strategy in the disputed Spratly Islands and to explore how China's leadership style influences the state system structure in producing and reproducing China's national interests and identities in the area. To examine national interests and identities in the context of China, the work of a prominent in this field, Alexander Wendt, is brought forward. According to Wendt (1999, 34), national identity is defined as a "corporate identity where the interests are critical to the state" (Wendt, 1992, 392). In contrast, national interest is defined as "reproduction requirements" or a "security of state-society complexes" (Wendt, 1995, 374). Zhang (2022), Zhai (2021), Qin (2018), and Xiaodi (2018) confirmed on the suitability of Wendtian structural approach to conceptual social interactions between President Xi with the internal and external dimensions of the China state system. Thus, Wendt's Social Constructivism underpinned our readings of social interactions between Xi's leadership and China's domestic calculus in the disputed Spratly Islands. Two elements of characterised social interactions between Xi and the state system will be

summarised as follows:

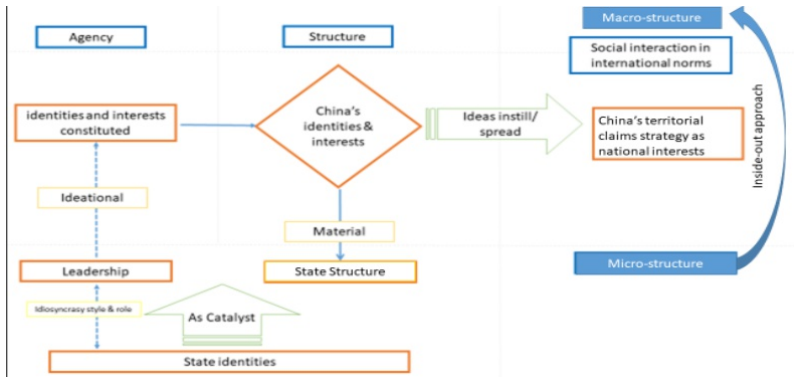
Firstly, Social Constructivism is often associated with the end of the Cold War, which the conventional IR theories failed to account for (Fierke, 2021). As such, the phenomenon in the disputed Spratly Islands allows the study to observe a more nuanced visibility of social interactions between President Xi and the elements with the China state system (see Figure 1). Nonetheless, by adopting Wendtian Constructivism in unravelling the changing ideas and norms of China under a strong man of Xi, we illuminate the structural patterns of construction and reconstruction of China's identity and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s indoctrination of nationalism under the idiosyncratic roles and leadership traits of Xi Jinping (see also Smith 2021; Forsby 2022).

Secondly, Social Constructivism views international politics as driven by a self-help state in the absence of an anarchic world (Karatochwill, 2006; Nor Azizan Idris et al., 2011). At the same time, anarchy is the state's perception of other states as sources of threat or otherwise (Cristol, 2019; Reus-Smith, 2021). Therefore, Wendt's assertion of social interaction between agency and structure is constitutive (1999, 12), thereby reconstructing a temporal and spatial space for China as (a self-interest actor) and its power capabilities in international politics (international social system) conditioned by ideational and material features in constructing China's national identity. This provided an appropriate logic (instead of logic of consequence) in China's assertive foreign policy behaviour over the disputed Spratly Islands. By having China's state as the centre, it allows the study to observe Xi's leadership style and role (as an agency) and China's state system (as the state structure) as they continually produce and reproduce identities and interests to strengthen their position in the disputed area, thereby reduced visibilities and sovereign rights of ASEAN claimant states, and yet, dialectically undermining a positive outlook of China's peaceful rise in world politics (Ogden, 2019; Leslie, 2020).

The agency in this context refers to Xi as the leader or state premier who possesses the ideational part, grounded in his leadership style and role. In contrast, structure refers to China's state system embedded in the

reclamation activities in the disputed Spratly Islands. The agency in this study incites how Xi's ideas of China Dreams and maritime power influence the structure of the state system through the production of China's national identities and interests. In return, these ideas altered and realtered China's national identity and national interests where they are well embedded and constructed within the domestic setting and became the strategy to reassert entitlement in the disputed Spratly Islands. This process happened at multiple levels of social interactions; at the individual level of Xi's interactions with various individual officers and state agents; at the microstructure level within the state system, which then affected the macro-structure setting - the international norms where it is translated within an inside-out approach. The discussions briefly dive into agency-based and structural aspects of China's leader and domestic calculus, which will be discussed next.

Figure 1 Agency and Structure of China's Territorial Claim Over the Spratly Islands



Source: Taken and adapted by the Authors from multiple sources.

2.1 Element of Agency

Generally, agency refers to an individual's capacity to act independently and to be able to reason the action (Fierke, 2021). Nevertheless, to

understand how the agent influences the structure, this study focuses on the intangible elements of power of the agent, that is, the leadership style. Leadership style will allow the exploration of an individual's capacity within the notions of an agent (see above, Figure 1). Figure 1 exhibits the agent and structure of China's territorial claim in the disputed Spratly Islands to derive the factors contributing to the acceleration of China's reclamation activities over the area. This study points out that the agency in the Structuration approach refers to Xi as a China leader. Xi's ideas of maritime power and China Dreams are influenced by his personality and style, which he incorporates into the state's identities and interests (see Xi, 2016b). These ideas later transpired into China's domestic and international actions (Xi, 2021).

In the discussion over the framework of social interactions between Xi's idiosyncratic traits and China's state system, abstraction of ideas, norms, and values must be demonstrated through leadership styles and orientations. Thus, apart from Wendtian Constructivism, this article also explored the work of Margaret Hermann (1980, 1999, 2005, 2014) to analyse Xi's leadership on how he articulates and interacts within the system and towards the other claimant states over the disputed Spratly Islands. According to Hermann (1999, 12), leadership style is defined as how a leader responds and relates to the surroundings or, in a more straightforward form, how the leader structures the interactions and norms. In explaining Xi's ideational merits and influence, his leadership style and cognitive attribute will be the central point in examining how the influence of Xi affects the state structure of China and alter its foreign policy with ASEAN claimant states.

Hermann (2005, 179-2003) argues that leadership style can be determined through interactions with whom they share powers, where the orientation indicators are based on: a) responsiveness to constraints, b) openness to information, and c) motivation for a position. This style will then contribute to the outcome of a leader's traits vis-à-vis speech text and speech-act analysis (Hermann, 2014; Hogan and Judge, 2013). These traits are determined by leadership style through the leader's spontaneous interviews or public speeches for developing high or low trait analysis through content analysis (Emerson, 2019). Hence, in

determining Xi's leadership style (Jin, 2021), the analysis will be based on Xi's speeches text within the context of the disputed Spratly Islands to orientate Hermann (1980)'s interaction indicators.

2.2. Element of Structure

The structure element within the context of this article refers to the state system as the provider of social structure or material part in collaborating and pursuing China's national identities and interests (Turner, 1991; Zehfuss, 2001). It is best to first explain the political concept of a state before further exploring the concept of a state's structure. McLean and McMillan (2009) refer state as a political concept that has absolute authority in exercising power and holds the ability to make and enforce rules through a permanent administrative body like the government. Based on that context, the state system can be referred to as political communities that hold power to govern the state. In the context of China, the state's structure may refer to the structure of hierarchy in the nation's governing body in defining its domestic and foreign policy (Smith, 2021; Buzan and Zhang, 2014).

It is critical to point out how the state's structure works as a platform for the leader to assert their influence in the structure to fit their political identities and national interests accordingly (Wodak, 2012; Stones, 2020). China's state system must work as an internal structure that combines collective ideas among the state members. The Chinese leader highly influences this relationship between internal structure and collective ideas as the primary state sector since the states are "anthropomorphic" (Wendt, 1999; Kim, 2020; Seo, 2019). The following section synthesises China's agency and structure within the early days of the Xi leadership style and traits.

3. Synthesising Xi Leadership Style and Role as the Agency: Hermann's Three Dimensions of Leadership Style

As aforementioned, this article used Hermann's Three Dimensions of Leadership Style (1999, 2005, 2014) as the framework of analysis in determining Xi's leadership style and role. The three factors contribute

to two sets of a leader's criteria, which ultimately work as a determining factor of the leadership style. For the first factor: responsiveness to constraints is divided into two additional types of leaders' responses: i) challenge constraints, or ii) respect constraints. The second factor: openness to information consists of two responses: i) open to information, or ii) closed to information. Finally, the third factor: problem and relationship focuses, are divided into two: i) problem-focus and ii) relationship-focus.

This division of a leader's response consists of its criteria, which will then be a determining factor in pointing out a leader's leadership style. In this study, Xi's responses to the issue related to the disputed Spratly Islands are observed through content analysis or speech-act analysis method on Xi's speeches and are then categorised accordingly (Hogan and Judge, 2013; Vuori, 2012; Wodak, 2012). His leadership style can be proved and observed (intention through the action). Nonetheless, it is necessary to access Xi's leadership style and role via his early days speeches as part of the "agency" within the Structuration approach to understand China's behaviours over the disputed Spratly Islands (see Zhai, 2021). Framing Xi's leadership style vis-à-vis Hermann's framework allows a qualitative content analysis of his selected speeches in the context of the SCS and the disputed Spratly Islands (Wang, 2019, 2022; Goldstein, 2020).

Generally, speech-act and content analysis signify the operation of power, and is politically motivated. These methods provide room for flexibility based on their multidisciplinary and issue-oriented approach (Glover, 2011). This research focuses more on China's leadership style and state structure as the main subject of the disputed Spratly Islands. Qualitative content analysis and speech-act allow us to investigate the power operation on how China constitutes and regulates the structure, domestically and internationally, to achieve the objective. Analysing speech text allows us to use official interviews and speeches, and unofficial texts such as media accounts, comments, etc. The analysis of Xi's speech text is within the context (see also Van Dijk, 1993; Emerson, 2019) of the SCS issues, mainly referring to the disputed Spratly Islands to orientate Hermann's interaction indicators to

determine Xi's traits.

The main objective of using speech act qualitative content analysis is to discover the "ideologies which contribute to the production and reproduction of power" (Fierke, 2021, 175). Power in this research refers to how China's leader influences the state system structure by finding ways to produce (construct) and reproduce (reconstruct) China's national interests and identities by indicating how the leader's language is constitutive rather than representative or reflective (Debrix, 2010; Fewsmith, 2021). This method helps the researcher discover the findings beyond just description and interpretation as it explains why and how discourses work (Jin, 2021) by looking at social phenomena instead of investigating linguistic units (Wodak, 2012). Furthermore, it allows the researcher to explore the primarily prepared text and contextualise (Leslie, 2020; Masaki, 2022) all materials that tailor to Xi's requirements.

This discourse explores anything within the text and context properties to search how agency and structure affect China's reclamation activities strategy (Haget, 2019; Forsbe, 2022). The speech act analysis upon selected political texts of the premier shows the production and reproduction of power of China's leadership, state bureaucrats and its interests in the SCS, especially in the disputed Spratly Islands. To better understand Xi's leadership style, this section discusses Hermann's Three Dimensions of Response and Leadership Style before using it to analyse Xi's leadership exhibited in Table 1, which briefly explains how Hermann's Three Dimensions of Response (2014) and Xi's leadership style works (Xi, 2016b, 2022).

Table1 Hermann's Three Dimensions of Leadership Style

Factors/ Dimensions	Leader's Response	Criteria	Leader's Style
Responsiveness to constraints (leader to exert control & influence of the environment)	Challenges constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Constraints are viewed as obstacles; - Personal characteristics are highly predictive of their responses to events. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Control policymaking; - Quick resolution; - Decisive; - More intent on situation;
	Respects constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Constraints set the parameters for action; - Personal characteristics suggest the degree of support and closure from environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More empathetic; - Compromise; - Flexibility; - Political timing; - Consensus building
Openness to information (leader to make decision making through well-formulated vision/agenda or studying the situation before response)	Open to information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To reinforce a particular point of views; - Data gathered only from experts or advice from highly important electorates. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Determining issues based on popularity and acceptance; - cue-takers;
	Closed to information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Finding information to support situation; - Disregard disconformity evidence; - Focused on persuading others of their position. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Act as advocates;
Leader's motivation (Motives needs & incentives that shape their character & drives to act)	Problem Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mobilization and effectiveness is the key for leader's achievement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pushed to act by believed ideas & images.
	Relationship Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Persuasion and marketing are the central of leader's achievement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pulled by forces outside into action

Source: Taken and adapted by Authors from Hermann (1999, 1-42).

Table 1 indicates how a leadership style will be observed and analysed based on how leaders respond and what drives them to react to the situation – in this case, remarks and statements of Southeast Asian claimant states over reclaimed lands on the Spratly Islands — using a situation on how a leader responds to information. The analysis will be based on how Xi responds to the information on whether to be open or closed. Under this factor, the leader's response will be based on how they study information before responding.

For instance, if the leader chooses to be open, they seem to reinforce a particular point of view and gathers data from all aspects, including the experts, before making any response or decision. This kind of leader is a que-taker or determines issues based on their acceptance or weightage. Contradictory to a leader who is closed to information, this leader will find information only to support his situation or decision. Then, the analysis result will be categorised and concluded into leadership style as exhibited in Table 2: Leadership Style and Three Dimensions of Response.

Table 2 Leadership Style and Three Dimension of Response

Responsiveness to constraints	Openness to information	Motivation	
		Problem Focus	Relationship Focus
Challenges constraints	Closed to information		
<u>Becomes a crusader</u>		Expansionistic	Evangelistic
Challenges constraints	Open to information		
<u>Strategic</u>		Incremental	Charismatic
Respects constraints	Closed to information		
<u>Pragmatism</u>		Directive	Consultative
Respects constraints			
<u>Opportunistic</u>		Reactive	Accommodative

Source: Hermann (1999, pp. 8-9).

Table 2 demonstrates the connection between personalities and leadership style resulting from how the leader responds to these three factors. These leadership styles allow the leader's response and norms to be structured within the context of issues (Van Dijk, 1993). For example, a leader who responds to challenges with constraints and is open when responding to information is categorised under a strategic leadership style. However, the leader will be further defined as incremental or charismatic when the leader's motivation is oriented as problem-focused or relationship-focused. The final analysis of the three factors then results in a leadership style. Understanding the fundamental concept before categorising the leadership style will allow this article to analyse Xi's leadership style in influencing China's state system within the context of the disputed Spratly Islands (see Wodak, 2012).

Throughout the modern history of China, the nation has been led by different leaders with different styles and roles during their respective times of governing (see Shambaugh, 2021). Nevertheless, one main thing remained the same throughout the leadership of these different leaders; the empowerment of economics within PRC's version of communism and scientific socialism perspective. In relation to this, it is

essential to highlight the differences between the leadership of Xi and China's former leader, Mao Zedong (Shum, 2021). Although many may argue that their leadership is similar, this article argues the other way. Mao Zedong can be considered a leader with more dominant features, whereas Xi is the combination of many qualities with features of every Chinese leader before him (Economy, 2021). Xi managed to shift China to a different level, especially in terms of appearing as the newcomer to significant global economic power. However, Xi's success was rooted in Deng Xiaoping, who opened the gateway for China to become a major player in the global political economy. His open-door policy brought a significant impact on the current ascendancy of China (Fravel, 2019).

Xi had shown his interest in the disputed Spratly Islands issues by hinting at it using a general context - the SCS - before he was even installed as the premier in 2013. His interests were captured through Hu Jintao's speech during the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (NCCPC), where Xi led the team for Hu Jintao's speech text preparation. The nearest text to this context is as shown next:

“We should enhance our capacity for exploiting marine resources, develop the marine economy, protect marine ecological environment, resolutely safeguard China's maritime rights and interests, and build China into a maritime power.” (Hu Jintao, November 16, 2012a).

With the long historical claims, the SCS is deemed a suitable and great platform to achieve China's national interests that can only be accomplished through the reinforcement of China's militaristic position over the area, which is well expressed by Hu Jintao's speeches that Xi prepared (Ji, 2019, 4). Nevertheless, in determining Xi's leadership style and role, the three factors of Herman (1980, 1999, 2015)'s framework are used within the context of Xi's effect on foreign policy, especially concerning the disputed Spratly Islands.

3.1 First Factor: Responsiveness to Constraints

Xi has a rather bold move in his response to constraints which makes him fall under the “challenge” category. This is proven by elaborating

and mapping his speeches on issues within the SCS and the disputed Spratly Islands. The speeches made from 2016 to 2018 about the Philippines arbitration were proof that Xi stood to challenge the existing constraints. For instance:

“Territorial sovereignty and marine rights in the seas would not be affected by the ruling, which declared large areas of the sea to be neutral international waters or the exclusive economic zones of other countries.” (excerpt of Xi, cited in Phillips et al., July 12, 2016).

“We intend to drill oil there, if it’s yours, well, that’s your view, but my view is, I can drill the oil, if there is some inside the bowels of the earth because it is ours.... We’re friends, we do not want to quarrel with you, we want to maintain the presence of warm relationship, but if you force the issue, we’ll go to war.” (excerpt of Xi, cited in Mogato, May 19, 2017).

“We cannot lose even one inch of the territory left behind by our ancestors. What are other people’s, we do not want at all.” (Xi, June 27, 2018a).

These statements indicate the strength of Xi’s leadership style in response to the Philippines and The Hague Rule in 2016. Fitting Hermann’s framework, it can be deemed that Xi believes in his ability to control the event related. He dares to say no to states that do not agree with China’s national interests, especially during his terms. In addition, he is bold enough to face the consequences of his actions. This can also be observed through the creation and implementation of China’s foreign policy under his leadership, where he insists on being involved by consolidating power through crucial positions in the state system. Furthermore, he indulged himself as the leader by taking control of the policy from the beginning to ensure its effectiveness. Hence, through his actions and consistency in challenging the interpretations of the rights of the disputed Islands, where he dared to pose his stance over the constraints, it is safe to say that Xi possesses a challenging leadership

style within the first factor.

3.2 Second Factor: Openness to Information

In determining Xi's openness to information, his outstanding claims made from 2017 to 2018 portrayed his high level of self-confidence, and his conceptual complexity is also shown. For example:

"All comrades, commanders and soldiers of the [People's Liberation Army] PLA: You must unswervingly follow the absolute leadership of the Communist Party of China, listen to the directions set by the party and follow its command. Wherever the party points, you shall march." (excerpt of Xi, cited in Phillips, July 30, 2017).

"No one should expect us to swallow the bitter fruit that is harmful to our sovereignty, security or development interests... The Chinese people love peace. We will never seek aggression or expansion, but we have the confidence to defeat all invasions. We will never allow any people, organisation or political party to split any part of Chinese territory from the country at any time, in any form." (excerpt of Xi, cited in Dwyer, August 1, 2017).

"The need to build a strong navy has never been more urgent than today.... It has always been China's aspiration to have a strong navy, which serves as a key guarantee to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." (excerpt of Xi, cited in Jiayao, April 13, 2018).

These statements reflect Xi's high self-confidence and his conceptual complexity. His speeches showed that he tends to be more of a "cognitive miser" and seeks cognitive consistency in ensuring that everything around him suits his vision of China Dreams (Shum, 2021). It shows how Xi preferred a more top-down decision-making process where he firmly expressed himself as the sole leader whereby the nation's people must obey his orders. As he announced China Dreams, Xi decided that all of China's actions must follow these national

interests to materialise China's goals in the SCS. Due to this, Xi managed to structure the whole state system to suit his ideology and interests. Xi structured the state system accordingly to the communist system, which reflects in his rejection of other systems such as the democratic state system. He also set the nation's interests as paramount and would not tolerate any threats from foreign powers. Through his actions, his leadership style within the second factor falls under the "closed" category.

3.3 Third Factor: Motivation

Taking the SCS as the motivation that shaped Xi's character and drove him to act, he made several adjustments to the Central Military Commission (CMC) to strengthen the China army in meeting China's national requirements. These statements from 2014 to 2017 indicates how CMC became the referent subject to be refined to achieve the expected result in the area. For instance:

"There cannot be a modernisation of national defence and the military without modernisation of the military's forms of organisation... There has to be thorough going reform of leadership and the command systems, force structure and policy institutions." (excerpt of Xi, cited in Perlez and Buckley, May 25, 2014b).

"National defence and military development are at a new and historic starting point... Encourage the composition of forces to become a broader, more integrated, multifunctional and flexible... Focus on seizing the high ground of future strategy for military competition." (excerpt of Xi, cited in Buckley, November 26, 2015).

"To build a strong military, [we] must unswervingly adhere to the Party's absolute leadership over the armed forces, and make sure that the people's army follows the party." (excerpt of Xi, cited in People's Republic of China, August 1, 2017).

"A military is built to fight. Our military must regard combat capability as

the criterion to meet in all its work and focus on how to win when it is called on. The capability to win is strategically important in safeguarding national security and strengthening that capability and combat readiness in the new era would provide strategic support to the realisation of the China Dreams of national rejuvenation..." (excerpt of Xi, cited in Beijing Review, November 15, 2017).

Based on China's maritime actions and China Dreams, Xi's motivation is more problem-focused than relationship-focused. Xi's characteristics and drive factors are primarily led by his ideology, from which he materialises ideas and imagination. Xi seems to precisely know what China needs to strengthen its weak points and materialise China's power to achieve its national ambitions. China is a country that has already achieved its economic status but is weak in terms of hard power, particularly military strength. Thus, CMC's major restructuring is much expected in Xi's policy. Due to that, he managed to show his capabilities in ensuring that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was fully empowered.

On September 2, 2015, Xi announced that 300,000 military personnel would be released to maximise personnel capabilities and apply science and technology advancement to the CMC (Wong et al., 2015). This restructuring indicates a significant reorganisation of CMC to achieve world-class military status. The new structure allows the CMC to take charge of the overall administration of China's armed forces with 84 military units under the responsibility of 15 functional sections, including seven departments, three commissions, and five directly affiliated bodies. All these efforts can be seen through Xi's firm statements on this issue. "This has profound and significant meaning in building a world-class military." (excerpt of Xi, cited in Reuters., April 19, 2017).

"...to realising the China Dreams and the dream of building a powerful

military, we have developed a strategy for the military under new circumstances, and have made every effort to modernize national defence and the armed forces... This represents a revolutionary restructuring of the organisation and the services of the people armed forces.” (Xi, October 18, 2017a).

“The launch of the dark matter probe satellite Wukong and the quantum science satellite Mozi, and the test flight of the airliner C919. Construction on Islands and reefs in the South China Sea has seen steady progress. The new institutions of the open economy have been steadily improved.” (Xi, October 18, 2017c).

Furthermore, these statements were made under the subtitle of economic development, where Xi relates the issues of the SCS with China’s economic achievement and the advancement in science and technology. Both were the same criteria mentioned by Hu Jintao in his last speech during the 18th NCCPC:

“The country has undergone new historic changes: It is productive forces and economic, scientific and technological strength have increased considerably.” (Hu, November 18, 2012b).

With the text mentioned above, within the context of Xi’s motivation to respond to a problem, he has shown that he is more of a problem-focused leader rather than a relationship-focused leader. Xi’s responses are primarily self-driven, where his ideology and objective push him. With his high determination and strong character, Xi focuses on expanding his power and influence and is more task-oriented rather than focusing on the structure of group members. Xi also emphasised results and used people as instruments to accomplish tasks.

4. Exhibiting Xi’s Leadership Style in Foreign Policy and National Interests

Xi had used China Dreams as China’s drive to manoeuvre the nation domestically and internationally, including modelling its foreign policy.

China's dream is not merely about rejuvenating China as a great nation but having an enormous ambition. China Dreams is inclusive of all domestic and international agendas that China aims to achieve in a specific time. According to Thornton (2021), Xi is more on the innenpolitik-aussenpolitik (domestic and foreign policy) nexus, which aims to strengthen domestic governance and enhance international influence involving extraterritorial actions. His leadership tends to lean more on sharp power outreach rather than a soft power approach.

This kind of leadership will ensure that China Dreams is made possible. Currently, China Dreams works as a catalyst for China's future. Every action of China is well organised and aligned with this said dream. Thus, by having Xi as the primary causal factor for developing the state's objectives, Xi managed to lay out a comprehensive strategy for China and, now, the future. China's national interests under Xi's leadership are rooted within its Two Centenary Goals which focus more on these two aspects: 1) a moderately prosperous society, and 2) a thoroughly modernised and developed nation. These two goals have encouraged China to have more than in its current position. This can be observed through Xi's speech during the 19th NCCPC:

"We must uphold and improve the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics and continue to modernise China's system and capacity for governance. We must have the determination to get rid of all outdated thinking and ideas and all institutional ailment and to break through the blockades of vested interests. We should draw on the achievements of other civilisations, develop a set of institutions that are well conceived, fully built, procedure based, and efficiently functioning, and do full justice to the strengths of China Socialist system." (Xi Jinping, October 18, 2017c).

"The period between the 19th and the 20th National Congress is the period in which the timeframes of the Two Centenary Goals converge. In this period, not only must we finish building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and achieve the first centenary goal, we must also build on this achievement to embark on a new journey toward the second centenary goal of fully building a modern socialist country." (Xi Jinping, October 18, 2017c).

In stimulating China's national interests, China's domestic and foreign policies are adjusted to align with the state system and structure as it will drive the state towards its goals. Both policies, domestic and foreign, should be consolidated harmoniously to ensure that they work interdependently and produce the expected result as delivered during the 19th NCCPC:

"...the China Dreams can be realised only in a peaceful international environment and under a stable international order. We must keep our internal and international imperatives in mind, stay on the path of peaceful development, and continue pursuing a mutually beneficial strategy of opening up." (Xi, October 18, 2017b).

As the policy direction is clear, it will create a smoother path for Xi's administration to manoeuvre the state to achieve its goals. Although the state direction is clear, it will always invite unpleasant situations among other states since China's national interests might affect their state's national interests and status quo, especially to a significant power such as the US. Although China has clearly emphasised that its development will mutually benefit all through its peaceful rise, China's actions might jeopardise many aspects of the current world, particularly the unipolar system:

"China will continue to hold the banner of peace, development, cooperation and mutual benefit and uphold its fundamental foreign policy goal of preserving world peace and promoting common development. China remains firm in its commitment to strengthening friendship and cooperation with other countries based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and to forging a new norm of international relations featuring mutual respect, fairness, justice and win-win cooperation." (Xi, October 18, 2017b).

As a result of China's new national interests and foreign policy under Xi's leadership, this article stresses that its leader's leadership drives China's domestic and foreign policy. Hence, the involvement of

China in the disputed Spratly Islands is based on its national interests, where Xi again clearly stated during the 19th NCCPC that national interests must be protected first at all costs:

“We must put national interests first, take protecting our people’s security as our mission and safeguarding political security as a fundamental task, and ensure both internal and external security, homeland and public security, traditional and non-traditional security, and China’s own and common security. We will improve our systems and institutions, enhance national security capacity-building, and resolutely safeguard China’s sovereignty, security and development interests.” (Xi, October 18, 2017b).

The statement above made by Xi clearly concluded that China’s foreign policy, particularly in the territorial claim in the disputed Spratly Islands, is within China’s national interests. Based on the three factors of the leadership style through Hermann’s work, it can be indicated that Xi’s leadership style, ideology, and China’s new interests and identities at home determine the engagement of China with the disputed Spratly Islands. Xi managed to use his leadership style and competencies to project an image of a strong leader in the efforts to thrive China’s new focus, modernising China’s economy, and strengthening China’s military as top national interests. This can be seen in another of Xi’s speech in which he emphasised the construction of the SCS under the subtitle of “major achievements in economic development” in his 19th NCCPC 2017 speech:

“Construction on Islands and reefs in the SCS has seen a steady progress. The new institutions of the open economy have been steadily improved.” (Xi, October 18, 2017c).

Therefore, China’s national interests in the SCS is more in protecting its economic security. Nonetheless, it is clear that the leadership style of Xi is reflected in China’s foreign policy, where he subtly advocated in his speeches China’s interests in the SCS, especially towards the claim of the Spratly Islands. His speeches also assert that

China is willing to make a physical presence and challenge other states that are in China's way of claiming these Islands.

5. China's Foreign Policy under Early Days of the Xi Administration

Under the leadership of Xi, China moves fast in the international spectrum without hesitation regarding any future circumstances. During the early days of his leadership, Xi injected a new value within the sets of China's identities; the China Dreams. This new value aims to achieve the Two Centenary Goals for the PRC in 2049 and the CCP, which was celebrated in 2021. Besides China Dreams, Xi managed to instil maritime power ambitions for China to embrace during his leadership under the former leader, Hu Jintao (Miller, 2014). Both ideas had become the new national identities for China in their effort to project their future path. This idea became a driving factor in China's domestic and international actions. Nevertheless, China Dreams became China's fundamental agenda and mission regarding its foreign policy.

In line with its reputation as a rational and knowledgeable agency, China, under the leadership of Xi, believed that the social order could be reformed to fit its current social reality that could benefit future China whether intentionally or unintentionally. China needs to reconsider its position in the disputed Spratly Islands as a massive nation with a vast population. China's national interests over the area is at a peak where China aims to secure the disputed area. At the same time, they have the opportunity and the capability to do so based on the other claimants' reserved behaviour. After that, to proceed with its domestic demand and be in line with the whole ideology, Xi needs to reconsider significant amendments to the state system to pursue China's national interests over the disputed Spratly Islands, especially in terms of state system structure. This state system needs to undergo significant restructuring in which the system can indicate each organisation with its respective functions. In other words, a more top-down system needs to be reconsidered with varied people, scope, rules, jurisdiction and power to administer. Xi influences the Chinese people with the sentiments of history, culture,

identities, and national aspiration to inspire the people to achieve collective success.

The recent developments in the domestic calculus has shown tremendous progress for China to respond following its interests. The new Chinese power structure by Xi demonstrates a new structure setting consisting of a more focused jurisdiction where both organs have their roles and responsibilities of executing tremendous actions and plans for China. Nevertheless, the new reformed power structure is a leader-centred system where Xi controls both executive powers of the organs and possesses the highest military role, which subjected him as the sole power in politics, public services, and the military field. As Xi possesses the power to control the military, the restructuring of the CMC and the PLA aims to strengthen civil-military relationship as well as to align China's military competency with China's national interests regionally and internationally. Two aspects are involved in this restructuring process: i) the restructuring of the organisation itself, and ii) the chain of command. This decision was made during the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the CCP on 12 November 2013, where the discussion and strategic planning involving the reform issue were comprehensively discussed and decided. The decision made was broadcasted through China media:

“We will push forward the reform of the military leadership system, optimise the functional structure and institutional setup of the Central Military Commission (CMC) departments, and improve the lead management system of different services and arms. We will improve the joint combat command organisations of the CMC and the joint combat command mechanism of theatres and push forward the reform of the system of training and logistics for joint combat operations...We will optimise the size and composition of the armed forces, adjust and improve the ratios between the services and arms, between officers and soldiers, and between troops and military offices, and reduce the number of non-combat departments and staff... To promote the integrated development of the military and civilian sectors, we will establish—at the national level—unified leadership and institutions that coordinate between the military and local governments, link military demands to supplies, and

share information....” (Xi, January 16, 2014).

With the anti-corruption campaign being continuously promoted, Xi successfully earned the ability to restructure, take command, and control the whole of CMC. This decision serves as a stepping stone for Xi to act. Likewise, this has been agreed by a retired colonel in the PLA’s General Staff Department, Yue Gang:

“Xi mainly employed the anti-corruption campaign in the military to form his absolute command over the army, so that his military restructuring plan can press ahead after being initially stalled... Now, his authority in the army is solid enough for him to flesh out his vision to transform the military and set it on a path to emulate the US.” (excerpt of Gang, cited in Bloomberg News, September 1, 2015).

To support this, the new structure of the CMC indicates that there are two institutions subjected to CMC; State Council (SC) and the CCP. Under this arrangement, the CMC is responsible for the overall administration of China’s armed forces, including 15 functional sections consisting of 7 departments, three commissions, and five directly affiliated bodies. This new structure is highly aspired by Xi, especially in this modern era where it provides a more efficient and effective organisation under the modernisation and competent joint command structure both at national and regional levels.

This system allows Xi to have a more organised and effective structure, focusing more on tactical and operational formations and deterring strategies to combat corruption and incompetent officers. In addition, the new structure also has a more leader-centred nature. The system is concentrated on the command system, where the CMC focuses on general affairs and the theatres of armed forces, including the five strategic direction-based military regions responsible for operations and field tasks. This new CMC structure benefits the PLA with the current international challenges and threats. In line with these efforts, China passed National Security Law (NSL, People’s Republic of China) on 1 July 2015 to strengthen the power of the domestic security apparatus and

military parts to improve its original version from 1993. It is more of an abstract statement of principles, aiming to encourage the Chinese and agencies to be vigilant about threats and enable a more comprehensive modern security apparatus, which is clearly stated in Article 2:

“National security refers to the state’s political power, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity, people’s well-being, sustainable economic and social development, and other important national interests in a state of no danger and no internal and external threats, as well as the ability to guarantee a sustainable state of security.” (Article 2, NSL, People’s Republic of China, 2015).

Although this will potentially lead to a more powerful build-up, this article argues that the actions taken are to benefit China in terms of governing the national security’s potential violations and threats and to be aligned with China’s national aspiration where everything should be inclusive. This law has 84 articles and is grouped into seven chapters (NSL, People’s Republic of China, 2015):

- a) The guiding principle for protecting national security
- b) Definition of national security
- c) The functions and responsibilities of the NPC and other state organs
- d) Explanation of the key elements of the national security regime
- e) The mechanism for allocating resources to the national security work
- f) The obligations of the Chinese and the corporations in protecting the national security
- g) Supplementary supervisions

Under this law, it is evident that most things that are related to China’s national interest should be protected in every possible way:

“The State strengthens the construction of border defence, coastal defence and air defence, and takes all necessary defence and control measures to safeguard the security of territorial waters, internal waters, territorial seas and airspace, and national territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests.” (Article 17, NSL, People’s Republic of China, 2015).

“The State strengthens the revolutionisation, modernisation, and regularisation of armed forces, and builds armed forces that are compatible with the needs of safeguarding national security and development interests; implements a proactive defence strategy against the military, guards against and resists aggression, and stops armed subversion and division; carry out international military security cooperation, implement UN peacekeeping operations, international rescue, maritime escort and military operations to safeguard national interests abroad, and safeguard national sovereignty, security, territorial integrity, development interests and world peace.” (Article 18, NSL, People’s Republic of China, 2015).

The transformation of both armed forces and the NSL will allow China to achieve its national interests of “an indestructible combat force” through modernising, innovating, and transforming China’s military command and management system as inclusive security and defence strategy for future China. This strategy acts as a trigger point for the defence and security of other foreign countries where the affected parties become uncomfortable and unsettled with China’s achievement, creating an endless spiral effect on both sides. However, China only meant a defensive posture that will always be presumed offensive by its rival. Nevertheless, arguably, possessing a solid economy and army will guarantee nothing if the people do not have a great mind to move forward collectively.

Driven by the nation’s glorious history, Xi wants China to be a great nation again. This glorious historical narrative, especially during the rule of the Ming Dynasty, is used to embed a sense of nationalism into the people’s hearts and minds (Wasserstrom, 2022). In order to achieve this, a few modifications domestically were considered as tools for China’s future success. Thus, some modifications were made to the existing material conditions concerning the state system to provide a solid platform as a causal power factor to others’ ideas and interest conditions. These modifications to China’s domestic calculus have helped China achieve what is presumed impossible. Under the leadership of Xi, this is achievable, especially in the case of the disputed Spratly Islands. This area is significant as it held the history of China’s exploration long before Asia’s colonisation era over their trading and maritime

exploration.

Xi has exhibited strong leadership by projecting his way of managing disputes under his rule. Arguably, his leadership can be considered unique and rare compared to any standing leaders worldwide. This article points out that he is brave and dares to challenge and be challenged for China's interests at any time. Xi's methods of confronting and willingness to be confronted in every issue involving China at the international level had excelled China into a different league of its own. In consequence, he manages to uplift China's image and profile. China's economy is proliferating, imitating its success in protecting the nation's hard power.

6. Xi's China as the Claimant Party over the Disputed Spratly Island

Although others alleged China's efforts to widen a larger maneuverer in the disputed Spratly is too aggressive, arguably, China's physical presence and actions in the disputed Spratly are no other than to protect its national interests, which is essential to its survival. Through the Structuration approach in reproducing the social interaction system over the area, Xi had clearly stated his objective where China will never surrender territorial claim over the SCS: "We cannot lose even one inch of the territory left behind by our ancestors. What are other people's, we do not want at all." (Xi, July 1, 2021). China needs to secure its interests and protect its domestic image on the historical rights of the Spratly Islands to remain intact. Many statements show the consistency of Xi in reproducing social interactions regarding the disputed Spratly Islands. To prove the argument of this article, Xi's remarks on the SCS issues are exhibited:

"The Chinese people do not believe in fallacy nor are we afraid of evil forces. Chinese people do not make trouble, but we are not cowards when involved in trouble. No foreign country should expect us to swallow the bitter fruit of damage to our sovereignty, security and development interests. China will not resort to the threat of force at will, nor will it flaunt its military power on others' doorsteps at the drop of a hat. Flaunting power

everywhere will not reflect strength nor will it scare anyone.” (Xi, July 6, 2016b).

“The Islands and reefs in the South China Sea are Chinese territories since ancient times. They are left to us by our ancestors. The Chinese people will not allow anyone to infringe on China’s sovereignty and related rights and interests in the South China Sea. The South China Sea provides important waterways for China’s international commercial exchanges. China needs peace, security and stability in the South China Sea more than any other country. China would not want any turbulence there, still less would it be the party to stir up chaos.” (Xi, October 18, 2015b).

“Islands in the South China Sea since ancient times are China’s territory. We have the right to uphold our own territorial sovereignty and lawful and legitimate maritime rights and interests. We are committed to maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea, managing differences and disputes through dialogue, and addressing disputes through negotiation, consultation, and peaceful manner, and exploring ways to achieve mutual benefit through cooperation. We’re committed to respecting and upholding the freedom of navigation and overflight that countries enjoy according to international law. Relevant construction activities that China are undertaking on the Island of South -- Nansha Islands do not target or impact any country, and China does not intend to pursue militarisation.” (excerpt of Xi, cited in Garden, September 25, 2015b).

“The Nansha Islands have been China’s territory since ancient times. This is fully backed by historical and legal evidence. China’s development and maintenance of facilities on some of our garrisoned Islands and reefs in the Nansha Islands does not impact on or target any other country, and it should not be over interpreted. These facilities have been built to improve the working and living conditions of the Chinese personnel on the maritime features, provide international public goods and services, and better uphold navigation freedom and safety in the South China Sea.” (Xi, September 25, 2015a).

The above statements illustrate China’s aspiration to claim that the SCS and the Spratly Islands have always been within the nation’s radar. In China’s national interests, its efforts to secure the nation’s interests

are always persistent through multiple approaches from various aspects domestically and internationally as compared to other claimants that are more reserved. This proves that they are not willing to wait for things to happen but instead make a persistent move at the expense of other claimants who are unable to respond. At home, Xi facilitated the process for Chinese citizens to understand the nation's bold move in positioning the situation of the SCS and the disputed Spratly Islands to convince them that the area is within the sovereignty of China. This reproduction of social interactions was also instilled in the CMC to strengthen the China army in meeting future China's requirements or even threats. The statements below were extracted from 2014 until 2017 to indicate how CMC became the referent subject to be refined, to achieve the expected results over claiming the SCS. For example:

"All comrades, commanders and soldiers of the PLA: You must unswervingly follow the absolute leadership of the Communist Party of China, listen to the directions set by the party and follow its command. Wherever the party points, you shall march." (excerpt of Xi, cited in Philips, July 30, 2017).

"No one should expect us to swallow the bitter fruit harmful to our sovereignty, security or development interests.... The Chinese people love peace. We will never seek aggression or expansion, but we have the confidence to defeat all invasions. We will never allow any people, organisation or political party to split any part of Chinese territory from the country at any time, in any form." (excerpt of Xi, cited in Dwyer, August 1, 2017).

"The need to build a strong navy has never been more urgent than today.... It has always been China's aspiration to have a strong navy, which is a key guarantee to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." (Xi, April 11, 2017a).

"There cannot be a modernisation of national defence and the military without modernisation of the military's forms of organisation... There has to be thoroughgoing reform of leadership and command systems, force structure and policy institutions." (excerpt of Xi, cited in Perlez and

Buckley, May 24, 2014a).

“National defence and military development are at a new and historical starting point... Encourage the composition of forces to become broader, more integrated, multifunctional and flexible...Focus on seizing the high ground of future strategy for military competition.” (Xi, October 18, 2015b).

“To build a strong military, [we] must unswervingly adhere to the Party’s absolute leadership over the armed forces, and make sure that the people’s army always follows the Party.” (Xi, October 18, 2017b).

“A military is built to fight. Our military must regard combat capability as the criterion to meet in all its work and focus on how to win when it is called on...The capability to win is strategically important in safeguarding national security and strengthening that capability and combat readiness in the new era would provide strategic support to the realisation of the China dream of national rejuvenation...” (Xi, October 18, 2017c).

These remarks indicated China’s actions over the disputed Islands. Xi, a rational actor and the focal power in China, had projected the nation’s aspirations in manoeuvring the direction of China’s actions in managing the disputed area. Structuration approach unravels how Xi managed to influence the people of China by using his abilities as a strong leader and his position as the President of China (Shambaugh, 2021). Power and talents have proved that he is the right leader at the right time within the nexus of agency and structure through his charming interpersonal skills. Furthermore, the current pressure from international actors, especially from the claimants of the disputed Spratly Islands, does not intimidate China; rather, the rise of China as a significant force should instead alarm these international players that chess will be played differently (Tsang and Cheung, 2022). China’s physical presence in the SCS has comprehensively changed the dispute framework as China sets to work on its claim consistently.

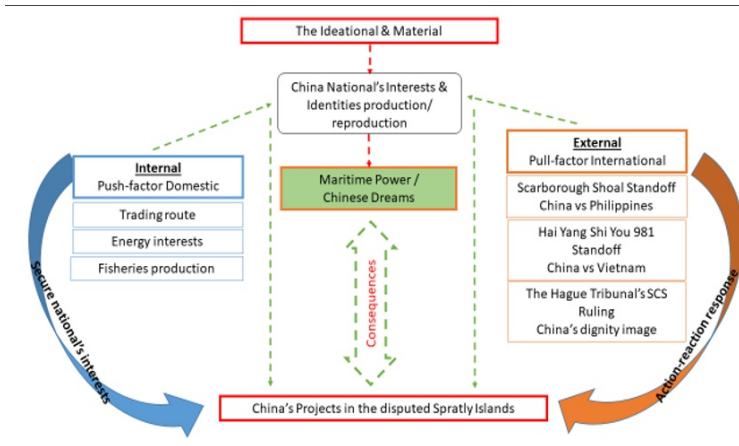
China’s development of artificial islands within the disputed Spratly Islands is presumably part of Xi’s political game to have a tighter grip over its claims on the disputed Islands, which serves as the nation’s top

national geographical interest (Turcsányi, 2018). As per the claim earlier, this article incites that China's action in the SCS is defensive towards its historical value and claims rather than vigorously being too aggressive towards its efforts. China has also emphasised its historical rights over the disputed area through multiple means from its interpretation of legal perspectives towards international and domestic maritime laws to mark their presence on the ground. Based on China's actions, the nation only reacted when other foreign nations blocked its efforts to pursue its national interests, as exhibited by the provocations from Vietnam and the Philippines (Thao, 2021; Batongbacal, 2021). China can force the removal of all claimant's military assets over the disputed Islands with its strength at any time. However, until today, such actions are yet to happen, justifying the arguments in this article.

In addition, China only installed its assets at the Paracel Islands and not in the disputed Spratly Islands until recently under Xi's administration and only as a response to the Philippines actions over Chinese fishermen near the Scarborough Shoal (Batongbacal, 2021, 2023). The response of China, although arguably considered aggressive and offensive by claimants of the Islands, can be interpreted as passively defensive about protesting its domestic image over the historical rights of the Spratly Islands. China wants this image to remain intact (Masaki, 2022, Majumdar, 2021; Martison, 2021; McFaul, 2020; Johnson, 2020; Kim, 2020; Ogden, 2019; Wang, 2018; Ranade 2017).

7. Xi's Personality and China's Claim: Consequences for the ASEAN claimants

Figure 2: Consequences of China's Territorial Claim



Source: Taken and adapted by the Authors from multiple sources.

As discussed in the earlier section, Xi's speeches illuminate his ambitious move in China's power narratives and strengthens the need to take significant actions in the disputed Spratly Islands. Figure 2 demonstrates China's territorial claim in the disputed Spratly Islands from the structural perspective of Xi's leadership and China's state system, in which China's progressive actions are caused by the interactions between internal and external factors. This also indicates social interactions between China's premier and its domestic calculus that pushed the national interests and identities to be produced or reproduced as needed during the early days of Xi's premiership. This cause-and-effect relationship is highly encouraged by the internal push factor of the demand for trading routes,⁵ the energy interest⁶, and the increasing demand for fisheries production⁷ domestically. Inadvertently,

there were a few incidents like the Scarborough Shoal Standoff, the Hai Yang Shi You 1981 Standoff, and the Hague Tribunal's South China Sea Ruling that tarnished China's positive image and non-threat over the disputed area, resulting in the more unpleasant position of others against China. Thus, to secure China's national interests and protect its image, China urged to make extensive actions over the disputed area to protect its traditional interests domestically and internationally. Thus, it is imperative for Southeast Asian policymakers and claimants to understand that the increased assertiveness of China under Xi contributes to deadlocked opportunities for others to constructively engage with China's unwillingness to recognise any international tribunal or mediation over others' rights (Beckman and Dang, 2021; Whomersley, 2021). To avoid criticisms of China's behaviour in the Spratly Islands, Xi's diversions via BRI projects may not last long once the debt-trap diplomacy wakes up many, including Southeast Asian claimants over the Spratly Islands, into the reality of China's nightmare (instead of China Dreams). China's military incursions over the Malaysia Sabah maritime border in July 2021 and the ongoing fiasco of Rajapaksa exile after the Sri Lankan crisis can no longer be isolated from past China's BRI's debt-trap diplomacy over the failure of the Hambantota port (BBC News, 2021, Rowand, 2022; Tharoor, 2022; Blagden, 2021). Ongoing US-China polemic of vaccine passport and travel recognition of Pfizer versus Sinovac, trade wars, and AUKUS limits temporal moment of the good friendly image of China. Soon, the Dragon can no longer be tamed when the reality of dealing with China's assertiveness over the disputed claims of Spratly persists, as money does not always hedge peaceful diplomatic friendships (see Md Khalid and Azman, 2021).

China's state under Xi's leadership style has extensively undergone reformation structure works as the causal power for the ideal and material conditions in materialising China's territorial claims in the disputed Spratly Islands (Cheek, 2021). Before Xi assumed power, China's national interests in the disputed Spratly Islands remained as it is or lesser intense factors in deteriorating friendly relations with other claimant states. There was no permanent physical presence in the area,

although there was a push factor from the internal affairs (Moller Mulvad, 2019). However, during Xi's leadership transition power with severe provocation from other claimants, especially from the Philippines and Vietnam, China's national interests needed to be protected, and the actions must be consistent with what the Chinese government has done before. China, under Xi's leadership, has strengthened its position by developing China's artificial Islands to show and prove that its presence in the area is parallel with the reproduction of China's national interests and identities of China Dreams and maritime powers (Chan, 2022). This has demonstrated the social interactions between the internal and external factors that pushed China to reconsider its stand in the disputed area. Xi and his government should reconsider proper actions from China if its national interests and identities in the disputed area are intact. China's image as a rising power is undermined by Xi's less peaceful rise (Burai and Hoffman, 2022). Since Xi's leadership is based on China's memory of World War Two, and inadvertently, China's public opinions condone this pathway. In the long run, increasing negative views from friendly Southeast Asian claimants toward China's future of peace can no longer be dismissed. Since the CCP's victory in formatting PRC, the official narrative of PRC has always been about facing a century of humiliation with unequal treaties they received during that time, which led to the loss of many territories (Dickson, 2021). Consequently, Xi's ideology and leadership style have strengthened China's position in the disputed Spratly Islands with China's Projects that create an offensive-defensive situation with not only the claimants and friendly neighbours but also the ongoing tussles with the West (Fewsmith, 2021). The idea of China's artificial Islands is not only a physical manifestation but also socially constructed based on internal, external, and China's domestic calculus that directly impacts the peaceful settlement with other claimants in Spratly Islands (Roach, 2021, 413).

8. Concluding Remarks

China today is an awakening dragon that shakes the world's equilibrium, but does China want to pay the price? We believe, not right now and

under the current direction of Xi. At the current critical moment, China should focus on addressing unfinished businesses in domestic affairs, diplomatic manners and restore the confidence of others when dealing with China. China is more inclined towards an inner-out action response, focusing more on (but not solving) domestic issues and grabbing the opportunities they see in the international arena that can help with their domestic needs (Zhu and Li, 2021). China is not replacing the US or even becoming a competitor as China has many issues that they need to counter domestically. It seems that China is taking over, but in reality, it is the power vacuum left by the US in the international realm, especially in East Asia or Southeast Asia (see Shih, 2013). As such, this article has shown that Xi's leadership remarkably works as an ideology that successfully assimilates with the material structure, the state system involving the development of China's BRIs through the promotion of China's national interests in the disputed Spratly Islands domestically and internationally. China managed to elevate its territorial claim strategy from only strengthening its domestic maritime laws to conducting a more stringent act with developing China's artificial Islands in the disputed Spratly Islands.

China's historical claims act only as a basis but not for the current situation; China wants more than just historical claims. Located in the backyard of its mainland, the SCS is the best location for China to exercise its military capabilities. They are enduring a modernisation and transformation to achieve new technological advancements. Looking at China's territorial claims in the disputed Spratly Islands is about securing interests and an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) in China's security and defence apparatus framework since no country is not a political act. Based on this principle, this is to prepare itself to go against any intruders that might jeopardise China in the future as the area serves the purpose of safeguarding the territorial sovereignty and the showcase platform for PLA's modernisation.

In the event of territorial disputes, China is seen as miscalculating the potential risks they will suffer. However, knowing their firm and solid foreign policy and their determination, they would rather fight for what they believe belongs to them, although sometimes, the best

response toward provocation is not to react or to fight. Not all opportunities are to be taken. Some are traps. Like this territorial expansionism, it is just like the Thucydides Trap. Thus, whatever happens in the SCS is embedded in the fact that only a war break out can demolish the whole area. The area will also make international intervention, especially the US, more risky and costly as much as every state's interest will face the loss. Whether or not to accept the risks of more provocation is yet to be seen. However, in the meantime, every risk must be carefully calculated as it will damage the whole area. Yes, transformations and transitions are terrifying, but it is compulsory in this globalised world and necessary to move forward. However, China needs to calculate before accepting any risks. Knowing China's position and ambitions has shown that they are determined to destroy anyone who is against their national interests. Somehow, they become blind and end up destroying themselves. No one can destroy iron, but its own rust. The same goes for China; China's rise will not become dangerous, but China creates its dangerous path where countries typically do not start paying attention to what the world thinks of them unless it hits them where it hurts. They realise it, but it is too late to take necessary actions.

Nevertheless, this study shows that Xi's leadership style remarkably influences China's state system structure in realising China's national interests and identities through the territorial claims in the disputed Spratly Islands with the establishment of BRIs. The analysis showed that Xi's ideologies are assimilated well with the state system structure in producing and reproducing the national interests and identities that appear constitutive rather than representative or reflective. Xi's leadership and ideology (idea structure) affect the state system (material structure). The ideas, interests, and material conditions in the social system possess the power of causal factors to push domestic (micro-structure) to the international level (macro-structure), to change the disputes framework or any geographic phenomenon.

This study also revealed that interactions between leadership traits and state system structure bring about an effect on national interests. In sum, China's territorial expansionism is grounded within national interests that have been highly affected by China's leadership style and

role as the ideology structure, and also China's state system as the material structure. Thus, to answer the central question of whether or not China's assertiveness over the disputed Spratly Islands helps to explain China's territorial claims strategy in East Asia, it depends on the perspectives we use to analyse the situation. By looking into the BRIs, it might be possible to confirm the situation since China proposes infrastructure development and investment to 152 countries throughout Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa that covers the area and interests of the sea routes. Thus, China's Projects over the disputed Spratly Islands may become part of China's BRI eventually. However, the most important note is to protect China's national interests and its image in the area where it is more on a political issue rather than military expansionism per se.

This article proves that Xi's leadership works remarkably as an ideology that successfully assimilates material structure with the state system, involving the development of China's Project reclamation activities through the promotion of China's national interests in the disputed Spratly Islands domestically and internationally. The findings also exhibited that Xi's leadership style and role have wholly affected the continuity and changes of China's national interests and identities through his ideologies of China Dreams, which is the collection of goals China could not afford to achieve. With Xi's leadership style, China will achieve something great, although it might jeopardise China in return if the risk is miscalculated. Thus, Xi's leadership, state system, national interests, and national identities are among the determining factors that accelerated China's territorial claims in the disputed Spratly Islands that led to China's Project developments. China managed to elevate its territorial claim strategy from only strengthening its domestic maritime laws to conducting a more stringent act with the development of China's project reclamation activities in the disputed Spratly Islands. Although this action is grounded within China's leadership, the status of China's rise and strong economy plays a significant part as it also contributes to the weightage for China to manoeuvre and elevate in achieving its 100th centennial goals and Xi's China Dreams, especially on the military aspects.

The past always remains a history. Suppose China has overanalysed its future outcome or miscalculated risks that repeat the great China tragedy in history. In that case, China will get stuck where even now, China is still in the Thucydides Trap with the US. Strategically, China's BRIs impacted others, especially the US AUKUS. In game theory, when both parties compete, if one party makes a move and affects the other's position, then the party who manages to make a strategic move is the one to win the competition game. However, in this case, even though it looks like the Dragon is winning the game, unfortunately, China is still trapped in situations that they miscalculated before. The best solution is to be in a win-win situation which Xi opted not to proceed with.

Nonetheless, in this case, a win-win does not seem to happen; the only thing that China might need to reconsider is understanding the US national interests internationally and, in the region, specifically in the disputed area. With this understanding, China might be on the same page with the US but will be unfortunate with the rest of the other claimants. This is because the US was also part of China's contributory factor during the 1970s when they both had the oil and gas exploration contract and interests in the disputed area. By looking into China's domestic calculus, there is some evidence to show that the Structuration approach made by Xi is aligned and workable as his ideology has assimilated throughout the state's organs and laws in which the state system has been affected by the causal factors of China's leadership style, ideology, and his role as the leader. This assimilation and influence have impacted the geographical phenomenon of the disputed Spratly Islands, in which the whole process happens within China's state system. Xi's leadership manages to influence the state system through structured communication that has worked as the causal factor in producing and reproducing China's national interests and actions to claim the disputed Spratly Islands.

Through the validation of history, China aims to claim the areas within the Spratly Islands. The past always remains a history, but if China overanalyses its future outcome or miscalculates its next move in its effort to make China as excellent as they were in history, China's progress will be halted, leading to a Thucydides Trap with the US.

Hence, as a leader, Xi should strategise a grand plan to benefit itself in its efforts over the Islands without triggering any harsh response from other claimants and from its closest rival, the US. The puzzle between the leadership style influencing the actions of China in the disputed Spratly Islands is dynamic. It is believed that it has directly influenced the whole state system through the systematic, structured process that gives the best platform for the leader to associate his ideas with the state system and affect domestic affairs in accomplishing its national interests through the implementation of flexible strategy and policy abroad to achieve the whole objective over the disputed Islands.

In conclusion, through the Structuration approach, this article proves that Xi's leadership style (as agency) has a massive impact and influence over China's behaviour (as structure) towards its claims over the disputed Spratly Islands. Xi's leadership and the state system function as causal factors influencing the determining factors that accelerate China's territorial claims in the disputed Spratly Islands. However, in the event of the disputed Spratly Islands, China's historical claims may only be a basis for the current situation. In other words, China wants more than just historical claims; to exercise its military capabilities and the freedom to navigate the SCS in the effort of the embargo; the nation to become a more prominent superpower than its closest rival, the US. Nevertheless, this article managed to incite that the leadership highly affects the state's behaviours, emphasising China's position in claiming the disputed Spratly Islands. With his position as a leader, Xi influenced the state's system in its foreign policy, thus asserting more consistent efforts on the Spratly Islands. In other words, if a different figure leads China with a different stance and values, China's position over the Spratly Islands might also be varied.

Notes

- * Noor Hasifah Abdul Rashid is an Administrative and Diplomatic Officer (PTD) and currently serves as a Principal Assistant Secretary, the Policy and International Division, Ministry of Works, Kuala Lumpur branch, Malaysia. She has served for almost 16 years with various ministries and government bodies, including the Ministry of Defence and the National

Institute of Public Administration. She holds a Master of Strategic and Defence Studies from Universiti Malaya (UM), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and a Bachelor of Administrative Science (Hons.) from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia. Her writing and research areas of interest are territorial dispute, leadership roles in the public and foreign policy-decision making process, structural approaches and applied Social Constructivism, Malaysia and China in international relations. <Email: noorhasifaharashid@gmail.com>

** Dr Muhammad Danial Azman is currently a Senior Lecturer at the Department of International and Strategic Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya (UM), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He served as an Adjunct Professor for the International Relations Program, Graduate School of Business and Management, Asia Pacific University (APU) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He holds a PhD in International Relations (Political Science) from the University of St Andrews, UK. A recipient of UM Bright Spark Fellowship (2010-2013) and Government Scholarship for both his Master and Ph.D. in the UK, and a recipient of Dato' Panglima Kinta Eusoff Gold Medal and Ghazali Shafie Book Prize for the First Class Honours (Distinction) graduate in Bachelor of Arts in (major in International Studies and minor in East Asian Studies) during the 2007 UM Convocation Ceremony. His teaching, research and supervision interests are in Africa-Asia Relations, Public and Foreign Policy Analysis, political violence, peace studies and conflict resolution. He is also a recipient Sumitomo Foundation Grant on Look East Policy in Malaysia (2019-2021), Korean Foundation Grant on South Korea Relations with India and ASEAN (2020-2022), and Japan Foundation Special Grant on Covid-19 in Malaysia and Japan (2021) <Email: danial@um.edu.my>.

*** Dr Zarina Othman is currently a Professor and Former Chair at the Research Centre for History, Politics and International Affairs (SPHEA), Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) Bangi, Selangor Malaysia. She holds a Ph.D. and Master of Arts from Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver, US and a Bachelor of Science from University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, US. She is the current Editor-in-Chief for SINERGI: Journal of Strategic Studies & International Affairs. Her teaching, research and supervision interests are International Relations and Comparative Politics of Malaysia, Contemporary and Human Security. She is a recipient of various national and international grants, including the national prestigious 2019 Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) from the Ministry of

Higher Education of Malaysia on national security threats and human trafficking, drug abuse and undocumented immigrants in Malaysia. She had thought, supervised, published, and widely consulted for decades of her academic tenure. She is one of the pioneered curriculum designers for the UKM Special Master Programme in Police and Strategic Studies for senior ranked officers of the Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM), Ministry of Home Affairs, and Malaysian Armed Force Defence (MAFDC), Ministry of Defence in the <Email: zo@ukm.edu.my / zaiiothman02@gmail.com>.

*** Dr Khadijah Md Khalid is currently a Professor at the Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Business and Economics, and a former Director at the International Institute of Public Policy and Management (INPUMA) between 2006 and 2018, Universiti Malaya (UM) Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. She is also a Visiting Fellow at Malaysia's Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS). She holds a Ph.D. in Political Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, UK, a Master of Arts from the University of California, Santa Barbara, California, US and a Bachelor of Arts Hons. (Distinction and Double Major in Politics and Economics) from Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, California, US. A Southeast Asianist at heart, Khadijah's keen interest in contemporary politics and foreign affairs of Malaysia and its immediate neighbours, namely the Republic of Indonesia and Thailand, as well as the international relations of the ASEAN region, with particular reference to China, Japan and the US, has continuously inspired her to research on the region and published quite extensively on Malaysian political and administrative leadership, electoral politics, public policy and diplomacy in local and international journals. Khadijah recently published (co-authored) *The Power of Deeds: The Untold story of Abdul Kadir Shamsuddin*. (Petaling Jaya: MPH Publishing, 2020). <Email: dijut@um.edu.my>

1. The Structural, structuration or structurisation approach is one of the Critical International Relations (IR) strands. It attempts to analyse the international system's political actors, including the state, in terms of functions performed by structures. Every system of politics involves a set of functions through which the agency implements decisions. Regarding broad sociological traditions, Social Constructivism traditions in IR adopted Giddens's structuration approach and emphasised balanced constituent relations between agency and structure. Thus, the Structural approach adopted by Social Constructivism emphasises the crucial roles of socially constructed (contested meanings and subjective ideas) key objects

in international relations wherein the social structure is more important than material structure, be it at the international or national level of the social structure. This article emphasises that the structuration approach is to underscore critical constructivist arguments made by Alexander Wendt on the social interaction process between agency and structure. See (Kratochwil, 2006, Fraley and Johnson, 2006; Stone, 2020).

2. Though grammatically incorrect, President Xi Jinping emphasized the contextual attribute of 'China Dream' instead of the common usage by “outsider” scholars, “Chinese Dream”. In a November 2012 speech after being appointed as the General Secretary of the CCP, President Xi wished to differ from the popular Western depiction of the American Dream, and the usage of China instead of the Chinese Dream is a reference to the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” and his embodiment of the leadership’s ideology because revitalisation of China crucially depended upon the pivotal role of young people who dare to dream and work assiduously to complete them. In this article, the author retained the original phrase of the maxim quoted by Xi Jinping about China’s vision (The Economist, 2013).
3. Given various sub-strands of Social Constructivism approaches in IR, this article adopted Wendtian Constructivism or Applied (American) Constructivism instead of Continental European or Critical Constructivism. In differing from the latter, Wendtian Constructivism aims at pragmatic practicality of accepting partial American positivist assumptions on objectivity instead of arguing for total and absolute subjectivity as underpinned by Critical Constructivism and Postructuralist Deconstructivism (Fierke, 2021; Cristol, 2019; Wendt, 1999).
4. Analysis of this article relied heavily on secondary published and English-translated materials of President Xi’s speeches during his early days (2013-2019) of his premiership instead of more recent speeches made about the SCS.
5. The SCS trade route worth USD3.37 trillion was recorded in 2016 and is rising yearly. From this value, China holds 39.5% worth USD\$1,470 billions of all trade in goods, which constitutes the highest and indicates the leading player in the SCS trading route

(China Power Team-CSIS, 2018).

6. China's energy interests, especially in oil consumption, have increased by 5.0 million barrels per day (BPD) over the past decade. However, the per capita demand is still 3.3 barrels per person (BPP) per year compared to the US, with 22 BPP per year. China needs more energy based on its consumption, whether to support the domestic industry or export. China's consumption increased from 12,301.670 BPD th in December 2016 to 12,798.571 BPD th in December 2017 (ceicdata.com), where it yielded a hiking pattern from 2006 to 2017 (Rapier, 2018; BP, 2018; CEIC, 2021).
7. China's fisheries demand had expanded to 27,590 million tons in 2013 from 18% of global capture. The increment in fish demand among the Chinese is due to income, healthy diet awareness, and status symbols (CEA, 2020; Haskell, 2019).

References

- Alessio, Dominic and Wesly Renfro. (2022). Building empires literally in the South China sea: Artificial islands and contesting definitions of imperialism. *International Politics*, Vol. 59, No. 4, pp. 687-706.
- Arsentyeva, Irina I. (2021). Political discourse on China's stigmatization in the context of covid-19 pandemic. *Vestnik MGIMO-Universiteta*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 22-46.
- Batongbacal, Jay L. (2021). Deciphering Duterte's foreign policy on the South China sea (pp. 199-204). In: Keyuan Zou (ed.), *Routledge handbook of the South China sea*. London: Routledge.
- BBC News. (2021). South China sea dispute: Malaysia accuses China of breaching airspace. BBC News [London], June 2, 2021. <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57328868>>
- Beaty, Dylan Michael. (2021). Roleplay, realpolitik and 'great powerness': The logical distinction between survival and social performance in grand strategy. *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 27, No. 4, pp. 1162-1192.
- Beckman, Robert and Vu Hai Dang. (2021). ASEAN and the South China sea (pp. 336-356). In: Keyuan Zou (ed.), *Routledge handbook of the South China sea*. London: Routledge.
- Beijing Review.(2017). PLA builds strong army in new era. *Beijing Review*

- [Beijing]. November 15, 2017. <https://www.bjreview.com/st_Headlines/201711/20171116_800110137.html>
- Blagden, David. (2021). Political discourse on China's stigmatization in the context of covid-19 pandemic. *Vestnik MGIMO-Universiteta*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 22-46.
- Bloomberg News. (2015). China expected to conduct massive overhaul of military, making it more similar to the U.S. style of command. Bloomberg News [Manhattan, NYC], September 1 2015 < <https://nationalpost.com/news/world/china-expected-to-conduct-massive-overhaul-of-military-making-it-more-similar-to-the-u-s-style-of-command>>
- Buckley, Chris.(2015). Xi Jinping announces overhaul of China's military forces. *The New York Times* [New York]. November 26, 2015. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/27/world/asia/xi-jinping-china-military-peoples-liberation-army.html>>
- BP. (2018). Statistical review of world energy. British Petroleum (BP). July 18, 2018.<<https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/energy-economics/statistical-review-of-world-energy/downloads.html>>
- Burai, Erna and Stephanie C. Hoffman. (2022). Constructivism and peaceful change (pp. 169-189). In: T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, Harold A. Trinkunas, Anders Wivel and Ralf Emmers (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of peaceful change in international relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Buzan, Barry and Yongjin Zhang (eds.) (2014). *Contesting international society in East Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- California Environmental Associates. (2017). Progress toward sustainable seafood-by the numbers. The David & Lucile Packard Foundation, June 12, 2017, <<http://speakingofseafood.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Seafood-Metrics-Report-2017.pdf>>
- Chan, Alfred L. (2022).Xi Jinping era: Political career, governance, and leadership, 1953-2018. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cheek, Timothy. (2021).*The Chinese communist party* (New edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- China Power-CSIS. (2017). How much trade transits the South China sea? China Power, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) [Washington D.C]. August 2, 2017. <<https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>>
- China's, People Republic of. (2015).National security law (translated to English by Rogier Creemers).China Copyright and Media [Beijing]. July 1, 2015. <<https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2015/07/01/national->

- security-law-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>
China's, People Republic of. (2017). President Xi reaffirms CPC's absolute leadership over army. The State Council, The People's Republic of China [Beijing]. August 1, 2017. <http://english.www.gov.cn/news/top_news/2017/08/01/content_281475766111650.>
- Chung, Chris P. C. (2016). Drawing the U-Shaped line: China's claim in the South China Sea. *Modern China*, Vol. 42, No. 1, pp. 38–72.
- Cristol, Jonathan. (2019). *Constructivism*. Oxford Bibliographies [Oxford], October 30, 2019. <<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo>>
- CEA. (2020). Progress toward sustainable seafood: By the numbers, 2020 edition. California Environmental Association (CEA). December 13, 2021. <https://oursharedseas.com/oss_downloads/progress-toward-sustainable-seafood-by-the-numbers-2020-edition-2/>
- CEIC. (2021). China oil consumption, 1985-2020. Financial Data and Economic Indicators, Census and Economic Information Centre (CEIC) Data [Singapore]. July 15, 2021. <<https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/china/oil-consumption>>
- Debrix, Francois. (2010). Language as criticism: Assessing the merits of speech acts and discursive formations in international relations. *New Political Science*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 201-219.
- Denny, Roy. (2019). Assertive China: Irredentism or expansionism? *Survival*, Vol. 61, No. 1, 51-74.
- Dickson, Bruce J. (2021). *The party and the people: Chinese politics in the 21st century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dutton, Peter. (2011). Three disputes and three Objectives: China and the South China Sea. *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 64, No. 4, pp. 42-67.
- Dwyer, Colin. (2017). Xi Jinping: China won't swallow the bitter fruit of attacks on its interests. National Public Radio (NPR) [Washington D.C.], August 1, 2017. <<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/08/01/540841716/xi-jinping-china-wont-swallow-the-bitter-fruit-of-attacks-on-its-interests>>
- Economist, The. (2013). Chasing the Chinese dream. *The Economist*. May 4, 2013. <<https://www.economist.com/briefing/2013/05/04/chasing-chinese-dream>>
- Economy, Elizabeth C. (2021). *The third revolution: Xi Jinping and the new Chinese state*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Emerson, R. Guy. (2019). *Towards a process-oriented account of the*

- securitisation trinity: The speech act, the securitiser and the audience. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 22, pp. 515-531.
- Fallahi, Ehsan and Ali Omidi. (2022). Conceptual developments of Chinese nationalism and its impact on the development-based foreign policy. *Geopolitics Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 65, pp. 115-149.
- Fewsmith, Joseph. (2021). *Rethinking Chinese politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fierke, Karin M. (2021). Constructivism (pp. 163-181). In: Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (eds.), *International relations theories: Discipline and diversity* (Fifth edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Forsby, Andreas Boje. (2022). Inherently particularistic? How China's identity constraints its ability to wield soft power. *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 1-23.
- Fravel, M. Taylor. (2008). *Strong borders, secure nation: Cooperation and conflict in China's territorial disputes*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Fravel, M. Taylor. (2019). *Active defense: China's military strategy since 1949*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Garden, Rose. (2015). Remarks by president Obama and President Xi of the people's republic of China in joint press conference. The White House [Washington D.C.], September 25, 2015. <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/25/remarks-president-obama-and-president-xi-peoples-republic-china-joint>>
- Glover, Nicholas. (2011). Does security exist outside of the speech act? *E-International Relations* [London], October 9, 2021. <<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/10/09/does-security-exist-outside-of-the-speech-act/>>
- Goldstein, Avery. (2020). China's grand strategy under Xi Jinping: Reassurance, reform and resistance. *International Security*, Vol. 45, No. 1, pp. 164-201.
- Grachikov, Evgeny N. (2021). Chinese diplomacy: Context of academic discourse. *World Economy and International Relations*, Vol. 65, No. 3, pp. 33-41.
- Guardian, The. (2010). Beijing rejects tribunal's ruling in South China sea cases. *The Guardian* [London], July 12, 2016. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/12/philippines-wins-south-china-sea-case-against-china>>
- Haget, Mathias. (2019). People's Republic of China naval military buildup: Constructivist and neorealist explanations (pp. 151-171). In: Marcin Grabowski and Tmasz Pugaczewicz (eds.), *Application of International*

- Relations Theories in Asia and Africa. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Haskell, Louis. 2019. China's seafood imports balloon by 44% to \$12bn in 2018. Undercurrent News, January 23, 2019, <<https://www.undercurrentnews.com/2019/01/23/chinas-seafood-imports-balloon-by-over-40-to-12bn-in-2018/>>
- Hassan, Md. Monjur., and He Jian. (2019). Spratly islands dispute in the South China sea: Potential solutions. *Journal of East Asian and International Law*, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 145-168.
- Hayton, Bill. (2018). Two years on, South China sea ruling remains a battleground for the rules-based order. Chatham House [London], July 11, 2018. <<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2018/07/two-years-south-china-sea-ruling-remains-battleground-rules-based-order>>
- Hayton, Bill. (2019). The modern origins of China's South China sea claims: Maps, misunderstandings, and the maritime geobody. *Modern China*, Vol. 45, No. 2, pp. 127-170.
- Hermann, Margaret G. (1980). Explaining foreign policy behavior: Using the personal characteristics of political leaders. *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 7-46.
- Hermann, Margaret G. (1999). Assessing leadership style: A trait analysis. Hilliard, OH: Social Science Automation.
- Hermann, Margaret G. (2005). Assessing leadership style: A trait analysis (pp. 178-214). In: Jerrold M. Post (ed.), *The Psychological assessment of political leaders: With profiles of Saddam Hussein and Bill Clinton*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Hermann, Margaret G. (2014). Political psychology (pp. 117-131). In: R. A. Rhodes and Paul tHart (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hogan, Robert and Timothy Judge. (2013). Personality and leadership (pp. 37-46). In: Michael G. Rumsey(ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Leadership*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hu, Jintao. (2012a). Speech during the 18 National Congress of the Communist Party of China (NCCPC). The 18 National Congress of the Communist Party of China [Beijing], November 16, 2012. <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceus/eng/zt/18th_CPC_National_Congress_Eng/t992917.htm>
- Hu, Jintao. (2012b). Full text of Hu's report at 18th party congress. *China Daily* [Beijing], November 18, 2012. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013npc/2012-11/18/content_16261308_2.htm>
- Jacob, Jabin T. (2022). Towards exceptionalism: The communist party of China

- and its uses of history. *China Report*, Vol. 58, No. 1, pp. 7-27.
- Jaipragas, Bhavan. (2021). Malaysian summons Chinese envoy for second time since June, over vessels in South China sea. *South China Morning Post* [Hong Kong], October 5, 2021. <<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3151183/malaysia-summons-chinese-envoy-second-time-june-over-vessels>>
- Ji, You. (2019). Xi Jinping and PLA centrality in Beijing's South China Sea Dispute Management. *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 1-21.
- Jiayao, Li. (2018). President Xi reviews navy in South China sea. *Xinhua.net* [Beijing]. April 13, 2018. <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-04/13/content_8003649.htm>
- Jibki, Koya., Tsukasa Hadano, and Yu Nakamura. (2021). China's incursions over Malaysia add to South China sea disputes. *The Nikkei* [Tokyo], June 6, 2021. <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/South-China-Sea/China-s-incursions-over-Malaysia-add-to-South-China-Sea-disputes>>
- Jin, Huimin. (2021). Cultural self-confidence and constellated community: An extended discussion of some speeches by Xi Jinping. *Telos*, Vol. 2021, No. 195, pp. 93-113.
- Johnson, Mathew D. (2020). Propaganda and security from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping: Struggling to defend China's socialist system (pp. 241-265). In: James Farley and Mathew D. Johnson (eds.), *Redefining Propaganda in Modern China: The Mao Era and Its legacies*. London: Routledge.
- Kefala, Christina and Lan Shanshan. (2022). End of the China dream? Young western entrepreneurs' trajectories of leaving China during covid-19. *Asian Anthropology*, (New article), <10.1080/1683478X.2022.2090053>
- Kelly, Terrence K., James Dobbins, David A. Shlapak, David C. Gompert, Eric Heginbotham, Peter Chalk, and Lloyd Thrall. (2014). *The U.S. Army in Asia, 2030–2040*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.
- Kim, Youcheer. (2020). Is China spoiling the rules-based liberal international order? Examining China's rising institutional power in a multiplex world through competing theories. *Issues and Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 1, <10.1142/S1013251120500010>
- Kratochwil, Friedrich. (2006). Constructing anew orthodoxy? Wendt's social theory of international politics and the constructivist challenge (pp. 21-47). In: James Farley and Mathew D. Johnson (eds.), *Constructivism and international relations: Alexander Wendt and his critics*. London:

Routledge.

- Lam, Willy Wo-Lap (ed.), (2018). Routledge handbook of the Chinese Communist Party. London: Routledge.
- Leslie, Christopher. (2020). Revisiting Friedrich Engels's dialectics of nature in an age of digital idealism. *TripleC*, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 78-96.
- Lewis, John W and Xue Litai. (2016). China's security agenda transcends the South China sea. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 72, No. 4, pp. 212-221.
- Li, Cheng. (2016). Chinese politics in the Xi Jinping era: Reassessing collective leadership. New York: Brookings Institute.
- Lopega, Diosdado B. (2020). Taming the tiger: A transgovernmental approach for ASEAN to engage China regarding the Spratlys. *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 465-505.
- Luttrull, James E. (2020). Artificial island development in the South China sea: Overcoming data scarcity of new environmental features through shadow analysis. *Case Studies in the Environment*, Vol. 5, No. 3, <<https://doi.org/10.1525/cse.2020.1112838>>
- Majumdar, Munmun. (2021). Beijing raising the Ante in the Natunas: The next flash point in the South China sea. *India Quarterly*, Vol. 77, No. 3, pp. 462-478.
- Martison, Ryan. (2021). Catching sovereignty fish: Chinese fishers in the Southern Spratlys. *Marine Policy*, Vol. 125, No. March, <10.1016/j.marpol.2020.104372>
- Masaki, Yatsuzuka. (2022). China's efforts to seize control of discourse power in cyberspace. *Asia Pacific Review*, Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 13-31.
- McFaul, Michael. (2020). Xi Cold war lessons and fallacies for US-China relations today. *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 4, pp. 7-39.
- McLean, Iain and Alistair McMillan. (2009). *The concise Oxford dictionary of politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Md Khalid, Khadijah and M. D. Azman. (2021). In the Dragon's tight embrace? A Neo-Gramscian perspective on Malaysia's foreign Policy towards China. *Contemporary Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 1081-1189.
- Mogato, Manuel. (2017). Duterte says China's Xi threatened war if Philippines drills for oil. *Reuters* [London], May 19, 2017. <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-philippines-china-idUSKCN18F1DJ>>
- Moller Mulvad, Andreas (2019). Xiism as a hegemonic project in the making:

- Sino-communist ideology and the political economy of China's rise. *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 3, pp. 449-470.
- Nor Azizan Idris, Zarina Othman and Rashila Ramli (2011). *Konstruktivisme sosial dan hubungan antarabangsa Malaysia* (Social constructivism and Malaysia's international relations). *Akademika: Journal of Southeast Asian Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. 81, No. 1, pp. 39-50.
- Ogden, Chris (2019). *A dictionary of politics and international relations in China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Osawa, Jun. (2022). Chinese dream of digital hegemony. *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 32-43.
- Palatino, Mong. (2021). A Philippine plebiscite that rebuked president Duterte and China. *The Diplomat* [Tokyo], March 26, 2021. <<https://thedi diplomat.com/2021/03/a-philippine-plebiscite-that-rebuked-president-duterte-and-china/>>
- Pemmaraju, Sreenivasa Rao. (2016). The South China sea arbitration (The Philippines v. China): Assessment of the award on jurisdiction and admissibility. *Chinese Journal of International Law*, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 265-307.
- Perlez, Jane and Chris Buckley. (2014a). President Xi reviews navy in South China sea. *New York Times* [New York]. May 24, 2014. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/25/world/asia/chinas-leader-seeking-to-build-its-muscle-pushes-overhaul-of-the-military.html>>
- Perlez, Jane and Chris Buckley. (2014b). President Xi reviews navy in South China sea. *Consumer News and Business Channel (CNBC)* [New Jersey]. May 25, 2014. <<https://www.cnn.com/2014/05/25/chinas-leader-seeking-to-build-its-muscle-pushes-overhaul-of-the-military.html>>
- Phillips, Tom. (2017). Xi Jinping orders army to 'unswervingly follow Communist party leadership'. *The Guardian* [London], July 30, 2017. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/30/xi-jinping-orders-army-to-unswervingly-follow-communist-party-leadership>>
- Phillips, Tom., Oliver Holmes, and Owen Bowcott. (2016). Philippines wins South China sea case against China. *The Guardian* [London], July 12, 2016. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/12/philippines-wins-south-china-sea-case-against-china#:~:text=The%20Chinese%20president%2C%20Xi%20Jinping,economic%20zones%20of%20other%20countries>>
- Putra, Bama Adika and Robert Read. (2020). Comprehending Brunei Darussalam's vanishing claims in the South China sea: China's exertion of economic power and the influence of elite perception. *Cogent Social*

- Science, Vol. 7, No. 1, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2020.1858563>>
- Qin, Yaqing. (2018). *A Relational Theory of World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rahman, Zia Ur. (2021). A comprehensive overview of China's belt and road initiative and its implications for the region and beyond. *Journal of Public Affairs*, Vol. 22, (Latest article), <10.1002/pa.2298>
- Ranade, Jayadeva. (2017). *Xi Jinping's China*. New Delhi: KW Publishers.
- Rapier, Robert. 2018. Asia's insatiable oil demand. *Forbes* [New Jersey], July 19, 2018, <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/rrapier/2018/07/19/asias-insatiable-oildemand/#442cb7c56e3a>>
- Reus-Smit, Christian. (2021). Constructivism (pp. 217-239). In: Richard Devetak and Jacqui True (eds.), *Theories of International Relations* (Sixth Edition). London: Bloomsbury.
- Reuters. (2017). China's Xi restructures military, consolidates control. *Reuters* [London], April 19, 2017, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-defence-idUSKBN17L0D8>>
- Roach, J. Ashley. (2021). Dispute settlement mechanisms for South China sea issues (pp. 413-425). In: Keyuan Zou (ed.), *Routledge handbook of the South China sea*. London: Routledge.
- Rowand, Michael. (2022). China made a failed bet on Sri Lanka's Rajapaksa family. *Foreign Policy* [Washington D.C.], July 13, 2020. <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/13/china-sri-lanka-rajapaksa-family-corruption/>>
- Sainch, Tony. (2021). *From rebel to ruler: One hundred years of the Chinese Communist*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Seah, Sharon, Joanne Lim, Sithanont Suvannaphakdy, Melinda Martinus, Pham Thi Phuong Thao, Farah Nadine Seth and Hoang Thi Ha (2022). *The state of Southeast Asia: 2022 survey report*. Singapore: ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.
- Seo, Jungmin and Hwanbi Lee. (2019). Indigenization of international relation theories in Korea and China (pp. 53-62). In: Kosuke Shimizu (ed.), *Critical international relations theories in East Asia: Relationality, subjectivity, and pragmatism*. London: Routledge.
- Shambaugh, David. (2021). *China's leaders: From Mao to now*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Shih, Chih-Yu (2013). *Sinicizing international relations: Self, civilization, and intellectual politics in subaltern East Asia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shue, Vivienne. (2022). Regimes of resonance: Cosmos, empire, and changing technologies of CCP rule. *Modern China*, Vol. 48, No. 4, pp. 679-720.

- Shum, Desmond. (2021). *Red Roulette: An insider story of wealth, power, corruption and vengeance in today's China*. New York: Scribner.
- Smith, Stephen N. (2021). China's "major country diplomacy": Legitimation and foreign policy change. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 17, No. 2, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/oraa028>>
- Stones, Rob. (2020). Anthony Giddens, Structuration Theory and Radical Politics (pp. 395-421). In: Peter Kivisto (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Social Theory* (Vol. 1). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Swaine, Michael D. (2010). China's assertive behavior – Part One: On "Core Interests". Carnegie Endowment for International Peace [Washington D.C.], November 15, 2010. <<https://carnegieendowment.org/2010/11/15/china-s-assertive-behavior-part-one-on-core-interests-pub-41937>>
- Thao, Nguyen Hong. (2021). Vietnam's South China sea policy (pp. 225-239). In: Keyuan Zou (ed.), *Routledge handbook of the South China sea*. London: Routledge.
- Tharoor, Ishaan. (2022). China has a hand in Sri Lanka's economic calamity. *The Washington Post* [Washington D.C.], July 22, 2022. <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/07/20/sri-lanka-china-debt-trap/>>
- Thornton, Patricia M. (2021). Through the mirror of CCP history: Four perspectives. *China Quarterly*, Vol. 248, No. 1, pp. 283-291.
- Tomacruz, Sofia. (2020). Brunei, the quiet claimant, break its silence on the South China sea. *Rappler* [Pasig City, The Philippines], July 22, 2020. <<https://www.rappler.com/world/asia-pacific/brunei-breaks-silence-south-china-sea/>>
- Tsang, Steve and Olivia Cheung. (2022). Has Xi Jinping made China's political system more resilient and enduring? *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 1, pp. 225-243.
- Turcsányi, Richard Q. (2018). *Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea: Power sources, domestic politics, and reactive foreign policy*. London: Springer International Publishing.
- Turner, Stephen. (1991). Social constructivism and social theory. *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 22-33.
- Van Dijk, Teun A. (1993). *Principles of critical discourse analysis*. *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 249-283.
- Vuori, Juha A. (2012). Speech act theory (pp. 133-138). In: Mark B. Salter and Can E. Mutlu (eds.), *Research methods in critical security studies: An introduction*. London: Routledge.

- Wall Street Journal, The. (2015). The South China sea dispute. The Wall Street Journal [NJ], October 29, 2015. <<http://graphics.wsj.com/south-china-sea-dispute/>>
- Wang, Chia-Chou. (2018). Primordialism, instrumentalism, constructivism: Factors influencing Taiwanese people's regime acceptance of mainland China's government. *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 27, No. 109, pp. 137-150.
- Wang, Yunyou. (2019). Proximity theory and the construction of international values: A case study of president Xi Jinping's speech at the 70th session of the UN general assembly. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, Vol. 10, No. 6, pp. 1332-1340.
- Wang, Yunyou. (2022). Legitimization strategies in political rhetoric: Examples from presidential speeches on covid-19. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 5, pp. 894-903.
- Wasserstrom, Jeffrey. (2022). The Xi era. *Dissent*, Vol. 69, No. 2, pp. 16-19.
- Wendt, Alexander. (1992). Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics. *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2, pp. 391-425.
- Wendt, Alexander. (1995). Constructing international politics. *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 371-81.
- Wendt, Alexander. (1999). *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Whomersley, Christopher. (2021). The South China sea arbitration and its implications (pp. 426-452). In: Keyuan Zou (ed.), *Routledge handbook of the South China sea*. London: Routledge.
- Wodak, Ruth. (2012). Political as usual: investigating political discourse in action (pp. 525-539). In: James Paul Gee and Michael Handford (eds.), *The routledge handbook of discourse analysis*. London: Routledge.
- Wong, Edward., Jane Perlez and Chris Buckley. (2015). China announces cuts of 300,000 troops at military parade showing its might. *The New York Times* [NY], September 2, 2015. <<chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpgclefindmkaj/http://www.csc.it/upload/doc/SpeechbyXiJinpingataceremonymarkingthecentenaryoftheCPC.pdf>>
- Xi, Jinping. (2014). Decision of the central committee of the communist party of China on some major issues concerning comprehensively deepening the reform. *China.org.cn* [Beijing], January 16, 2014. <http://www.china.org.cn/china/third_plenary_session/2014-01/16/content_31212602_15.htm>
- Xi, Jinping. (2015a). President Xi interviewed by Wall Street journal. *China*

- Daily [Beijing], September 22, 2015. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015xivisit/2015-09/22/content_21952044_3.htm>
- Xi, Jinping. (2015b). Exclusive q&a with Chinese president Xi Jinping. Reuters [London], October 18, 2015, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-britain-xi-q-a-idUSKCN0SC03920151018>>
- Xi, Jinping. (2016a). Xi Jinping: The governance of China. Beijing: Foreign Language Press.
- Xi, Jinping. (2016b). President Xi's remarks on South China sea issue. China Daily [Beijing], July 6, 2016, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016-07/06/content_25989430.htm>
- Xi, Jinping. (2017a). Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC national congress. Xinhua.net [Beijing], April 11, 2017. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpconationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm>
- Xi, Jinping. (2017b). Secure a decisive victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and strive for the great success of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era. Delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China [Beijing], October 18, 2017. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpconationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm>
- Xi, Jinping. (2017c). Secure a decisive victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and strive for the great success of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era. Delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. China Daily [Beijing], October 18, 2017. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpconationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm>
- Xi, Jinping. (2018). Xi tells Mattis China won't give 'one inch' of territory. China Global Television Network (CGTN) [Beijing], June 27, 2018. <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d514d3545444e78457a6333566d54/share_p.html>
- Xi, Jinping. (2021). Speech at a ceremony marking the centenary of the communist party of China. Centro Studi Sulla China Contemporanea [Milan], July 1, 2021. <<chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnni-bpcajpcglclefindmkaj/http://www.cscs.it/upload/doc/SpeechbyXiJinpingataceremonymarkingthecentenaryoftheCPC.pdf>>
- Xiaodi, Derek Ye. (2018). Rethinking the logic of Beijing's divided rules policy toward Hong Kong and Taiwan: A constructivist explanation. International

- Journal of China Studies, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 201-225.
- Ye, Xiaodi. (2019). Rediscovering the transition in China's national interest: A neoclassical realist approach. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol. 48, No. 1, pp. 76–105.
- Yeoh, Emile Kok-Kheng. (2021). Postscript – from pandemic diplomacy, mainlandisation of Hong Kong to the embattled belt and road initiative: The enigma of communist China's superpower march. *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 1843-1880.
- Zehfuss, Maja. (2001). Constructivism in international relations: Wendt, Onuf, and Kratochwill (pp.54-75). In: James Paul Gee and Michael Handford (eds.), *Constructing international relations: The next generation*. London: Routledge.
- Zhai, Yida. (2021). Discourse power: Sovereignty claims over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 203-221.
- Zhang, Ketian. (2022). Explaining China's large-scale land reclamation in the South China sea: Timing and rationale. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, (Latest article), <10.1080/01402390.2022.2040486>
- Zhang, Rachel. (2021). South China sea: Vietnam builds up defences against Beijing in Spratly Islands, report says. *South China Morning Post* [Hong Kong], February 22, 2021. <<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3122648/south-china-sea-vietnam-builds-defences-against-beijing>>
- Zhu, Feng and Lingqun Li. (2021). China's South China sea policies (pp. 167-182). In: Keyuan Zou (ed.), *Routledge handbook of the South China Sea*. London: Routledge.