**PRC Strategy for the South China Sea: Ends, Ways, and Means**

**Introduction**

The South China Sea (SCS) is a region of immense strategic importance to China, serving as a critical nexus for its economic, geopolitical, and military interests. Economically, the SCS is a vital trade artery, with over $3 trillion worth of global commerce passing through its waters annually. Additionally, the region is rich in natural resources, including vast reserves of oil, natural gas, and marine biodiversity, making it essential for sustaining China's energy security and food supply.

Geopolitically, the SCS is central to China's ambitions of regional dominance and its broader goal of challenging the U.S.-led international order. Control over the SCS enables China to assert its territorial claims, reinforce its sovereignty narrative, and influence neighboring countries within the framework of its "Nine-Dash Line." This dominance also supports China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by securing key maritime routes and fostering economic dependence among participating nations.

Militarily, the SCS is a strategic buffer zone that enhances China's ability to project power and defend its mainland. It provides a platform for deploying advanced naval and air assets, supporting anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategies, and securing forward-operating bases. By fortifying artificial islands and expanding the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), China strengthens its ability to deter adversaries, counter U.S. influence, and maintain control over critical chokepoints.

The objective of this essay is to develop a comprehensive strategy for the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to achieve its objectives in the South China Sea, outlining the end states and approaches. The essay will reference the principles of Sun Tzu, a renowned military theorist, and apply the Constructivist school of international relations (IR) theory. By integrating these perspectives, the essay aims to provide a nuanced and actionable plan that aligns with China’s economic, geopolitical, and military ambitions in the region.

Outline the structure of the essay.

**Strategic End States**

* Secure control over the SCS, including territories like the Spratly and Paracel Islands.
* Strengthen deterrence against U.S. and allied interventions.
* Maintain the legitimacy of the "Nine-Dash Line" claim under international law.

**Approaches**

**Diplomatic Approaches:**

* Constructivism emphasizes the role of identity, norms, and social constructs in shaping state behavior.
* China seeks to normalize its claims and actions by framing them as consistent with historical rights and regional stability.
* Diplomacy through forums like ASEAN, leveraging economic partnerships to divide opposition (e.g., Belt and Road Initiative projects).
* Build bilateral and multilateral partnerships to isolate opposition (e.g., fostering closer ties with the Philippines or Malaysia).
* Use international organizations to promote China’s narrative and weaken opposition coalitions.

**Economic Approaches:**

* Leverage economic influence to coerce or persuade neighboring countries to acquiesce to China’s claims.
* Develop maritime infrastructure (e.g., artificial islands) to bolster sovereignty claims and enable dual-use capabilities.
* Utilize China’s dominant position in global trade and manufacturing to apply economic pressure on rivals.
* Invest in regional infrastructure projects to strengthen dependencies and alliances.

**Military Approaches:**

* Apply principles from *The Art of War*, such as "winning without fighting" and exploiting the enemy’s weaknesses.
* Incremental actions: Use the “salami-slicing” strategy to avoid provoking large-scale conflict while gradually asserting control.
* Deploy a layered A2/AD (anti-access/area denial) strategy to deter U.S. and allied forces, making intervention costly and risky.
* Expansion of the PLA Navy (PLAN), focusing on amphibious assault ships, submarines, and missile frigates.
* Integration of advanced technologies, such as AI-driven drones and hypersonic weapons.
* Develop and deploy advanced cyber capabilities to disrupt adversary communications and logistics.
* Shape global and domestic narratives to justify China’s actions and undermine U.S. and allied credibility through information warfare.

**Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation**

* **Challenges:**
  + Resistance from the U.S. and its allies, particularly through Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs).
  + Legal challenges from international tribunals.
  + Potential backlash from ASEAN nations wary of China’s dominance.
* **Mitigation Strategies:**
  + Enhance A2/AD capabilities to counter U.S. naval power.
  + Exploit divisions within ASEAN to prevent unified opposition.
  + Invest in soft power initiatives to improve China’s image globally.

**Evaluation of Strategy**

* Assess how the strategy aligns with the principles of Sun Tzu and the theoretical underpinnings of Constructivism.
* Highlight how this strategy leverages a holistic approach, integrating military, economic, diplomatic, and informational tools.
* Discuss potential trade-offs and risks, such as economic overextension or escalatory pressures.

**Conclusion**

* Summarize the importance of the SCS to China’s strategic objectives.
* Restate how the Ends, Ways, and Means framework, guided by Sun Tzu and Constructivism, provides a coherent strategy.
* Emphasize the long-term implications for regional and global power dynamics.