**PRC Strategy for the South China Sea**

**1.Introduction**

The South China Sea is a region of immense strategic importance to China, serving as a critical nexus for its economic, geopolitical, and military interests. Economically, the South China Sea is a vital trade artery, with over $3 trillion worth of global commerce passing through its waters annually (ChinaPower, [How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea](https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/), 2024). 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 (EIA, [South China Sea](https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/regions-of-interest/South_China_Sea), 2024).

Geopolitically, the South China Sea is central to China's ambitions of regional dominance and its broader goal of challenging the U.S.-led international order. Control over the South China Sea enables China to assert its territorial claims, reinforce its sovereignty narrative, and influence neighboring countries within the framework of its "Nine-Dash Line." (CrisisGroup, [Competing Visions of International Order in the South China Sea](https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/china/315-competing-visions-international-order-south-china-sea), 2021) This dominance also supports China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by securing key maritime routes and fostering economic dependence among participating nations (James McBride, Noah Berman,[China’s Massive Belt and Road Initiative](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative), 2023).

Militarily, the South China Sea is a strategic buffer zone that enhances China's ability to project power and defend its mainland(Fabian-Lucas Romero Meraner, [China’s Anti-Access/Area-Denial Strategy](https://tdhj.org/blog/post/china-a2ad-strategy/), 2023). It provides a platform for deploying advanced naval and air assets, supporting anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategies, and securing forward-operating bases (Fabian-Lucas Romero Meraner, [China’s Anti-Access/Area-Denial Strategy](https://tdhj.org/blog/post/china-a2ad-strategy/), 2023).

The objective of this essay is to develop a strategy for China to achieve its objectives in the South China Sea, outlining its ends, ways, and means using the Lykke Model. The essay will reference the principles of realism and Mao Zedong's military theories. By integrating these perspectives, the essay aims to provide a comprehensive plan that aligns with China’s economic, geopolitical, and military ambitions in the region. The rest of the essay is organized as follows. Section 2 outlines the Lykke Model to China’s Strategy in the South China Sea. Section 3 justifies China’s strategy using the principles of realism, one of the international relationships; Section 4 explains China’s strategy explained using Mao Zedong Theory. Section 5 summarizes China’s strategy for the South China Sea.

**2. Lykke Model to China’s Strategy in the South China Sea**

**2.1. Ends**

The primary strategic end state for PRC in the South China Sea is to achieve uncontested control over the areas demarcated by the Nine-Dash Line (CrisisGroup, [Competing Visions of International Order in the South China Sea](https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/china/315-competing-visions-international-order-south-china-sea), 2021). Despite the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling, the PRC seeks to reinterpret international law to align with its historical assertions (U.S.-China Economic AND Security Review Commission, [South China Sea Arbitration Ruling: What Happened and What’s Next?](https://www.uscc.gov/research/south-china-sea-arbitration-ruling-what-happened-and-whats-next) 2016). Additionally, through sustained military and civilian presence, such as patrols by the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and the maritime militia, China intends to normalize its dominance in the region, making opposition by other states increasingly untenable (Office of Naval Intelligence, [Foreign Governments’ Use of Their Distant Water Fishing Fleets as Extensions of Their Maritime Security Forces and Foreign Policies](https://www.oni.navy.mil/Portals/12/reading_room/20210616_Congressional%20Report_Final%20-%20%2019AUG21.pdf), 2021).

**2.2. Ways**

The PRC employs legal, military, and political strategies to lend legitimacy to its claims and undermine opposition.

First off, while China officially endorses the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), it interprets the convention in ways that align with its historical claims, such as the Nine-Dash Line . Legal instruments, such as domestic laws regulating foreign fishing or navigation, are enacted to reinforce claims (Hannah Beech, [Just Where Exactly Did China Get the South China Sea Nine-Dash Line From](https://time.com/4412191/nine-dash-line-9-south-china-sea/), 2016). By leveraging its permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, China actively blocks initiatives that would challenge its South China Sea strategy (Sam Beltran, [Philippines may face China-sized hurdle as it makes its case for UN security seat](https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3280786/philippines-may-face-china-sized-hurdle-it-makes-its-case-un-security-seat), 2024).

Secondly, China’s military strategy in the South China Sea emphasizes deterrence and control. Advanced systems, such as DF-21D "carrier killer" missiles and long-range radar, prevent U.S. and allied forces from operating freely in the region (Andrew Erickson, [China’s Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile (ASBM) Reaches Equivalent of “Initial Operational Capability” (IOC)—Where It’s Going and What it Means](https://www.andrewerickson.com/2011/07/china%e2%80%99s-anti-ship-ballistic-missile-asbm-reaches-equivalent-of-%e2%80%9cinitial-operational-capability%e2%80%9d-ioc%e2%80%94where-it%e2%80%99s-going-and-what-it-means/), 2011). The construction and fortification of features like Mischief Reef and Fiery Cross Reef include airstrips, missile systems, and logistics hubs to project power across the sea.

Thirdly, economic tools are a cornerstone of China’s regional strategy, designed to co-opt and neutralize opposition. Through BRI, China offers loans and investment in critical infrastructure to regional states like the Philippines and Vietnam. These projects create economic dependence, making states less willing to challenge China’s maritime claims (James McBride, [China’s Massive Belt and Road Initiative](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative), 2023).

Lastly, China invests heavily in shaping perceptions, both domestically and internationally. Beijing employs cyber operations to spread favorable narratives and counteract criticisms on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and other global media outlets (Freedom House, [Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022](https://freedomhouse.org/report/beijing-global-media-influence/2022/authoritarian-expansion-power-democratic-resilience), 2022). By funding research and establishing Confucius Institutes, China cultivates a network of academics and thought leaders who amplify its perspective in international discourse (Stratcomcoe, [Confucius Institutes](https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/confucius_institutes.pdf), 2004).

**2.3. Means**

The PRC’s robust naval and air capabilities, combined with the strategic use of artificial island bases, provide the physical means to assert and maintain control over the South China Sea. The PLAN has undergone rapid modernization, with new assets like aircraft carriers, Type 055 destroyers, and submarines enabling power projection and area control (Congressional Research Service, [China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress](https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/RL33153.pdf), 2024). Islands such as those in the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos have been heavily fortified with airstrips, anti-aircraft systems, and radar installations. These outposts serve as forward-operating bases, logistics hubs, and staging points for military operations (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, [China Island Tracker](https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/), 2024). The People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) deploys fighter jets and bombers to artificial islands, maintaining a constant presence that can challenge rival claimants and deter external military intervention. Additionally, information superiority plays a critical role in supporting China’s maritime strategy, particularly in the realms of cyber and space-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (Adam Leong Kok Wey, [Airborne Assault to Occupy South China Sea Features](https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/airborne-assault-occupy-south-china-sea-features), 2016).

Additionally, information superiority plays a critical role in supporting China’s maritime strategy, particularly in the realms of cyber and space-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) (Felix Chang, [China’s maritime intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance capability in the South China Sea](https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/05/chinas-maritime-intelligence-surveillance-and-reconnaissance-capability-in-the-south-china-sea/), 2021). The PRC employs cyber tools to disrupt adversaries’ communication networks, gather intelligence, and conduct disinformation campaigns. Cyber operations also target sensitive systems, such as those of the U.S. military and regional powers, to gain an asymmetric advantage. Satellites provide critical reconnaissance data for monitoring naval and air activities in the region. China’s BeiDou Navigation Satellite System (BDS) supports precision targeting, navigation, and situational awareness for its forces in the South China Sea (Liu Zhen, [Chinese satellite ground stations installed on disputed South China Sea reefs](https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3235147/chinese-satellite-ground-stations-installed-disputed-south-china-sea-reefs), 2023).

**3.International Relations Theory: Realism**

Realism, as articulated in class, offers a compelling framework for understanding the PRC strategy in the South China Sea. This theory posits that states in an anarchic international system must strive to maximize power to ensure their survival and achieve security (Course Material, [Making Decisions: Strategy And War](https://a7236-97878184.cluster201.canvas-user-content.com/courses/7236~206683/files/7236~97878184/course%20files/lesson_1/SC11G_ISS602_LSN1_20240920/SC11G_ISS602_LSN1_202409202.html), 2024). By prioritizing regional dominance, states can lay the groundwork for broader influence and deter external threats. China perceives the U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific, including alliances with Japan, South Korea, and Australia, as a direct threat to its rise. The South China Sea serves as a buffer zone, where China can challenge the U.S.’s ability to project power. Realism posits that the absence of a central governing authority compels states to rely on self-help mechanisms for security. The lack of an overarching authority to mediate or enforce rules in the South China Sea underscores this principle.

**4. Mao Zedong’s theory**

Mao’s approach to warfare underscores the importance of leveraging asymmetry to offset disadvantages. In the maritime context, China faces superior U.S. naval power and a coalition of regional actors opposed to its claims. China relies on non-traditional forces such as its maritime militia and coast guard to assert dominance in contested waters, blurring the lines between civilian and military operations. Mao advocated for avoiding direct confrontation with stronger adversaries, attacking the weakness of the enemy (S. Kalyanaraman, [Conceptualisation of Guerrilla Warfare](https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/sa/sa_apr03/sa_apr03kas01.html), 2003).

Additionally, Mao’s three-phase model of strategic defense, stalemate, and offense is reflected in China’s maritime strategy (Tony K. Cho , [Mao’s War of Resistance: Framework for China’s Grand Strategy](https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2591&context=parameters), 2011). Initially, China maintained a defensive posture, emphasizing diplomatic claims and historical narratives to establish legitimacy for its Nine-Dash Line. During this phase, it avoided significant provocations, consolidating its position through international forums and bilateral engagements. In the second phase, China began challenging the status quo without provoking full-scale conflict. Tactics such as deploying fishing fleets and maritime militia to disputed waters aimed to normalize its presence while avoiding military escalation. In the current phase, China’s ongoing militarization of artificial islands, including the construction of runways, radar systems, and missile installations, represents the transition to strategic offense. These moves establish de facto control over contested areas, deterring adversaries from attempting to dislodge Beijing’s presence.

**5.Conclusion**

China’s strategy for the South China Sea finds its foundation in the theories of Mao Zedong and the principles of realism. Mao’s emphasis on the importance of protracted struggle and strategic flexibility complements the offensive realist pursuit of maximizing power and achieving regional hegemony. Together, they form a coherent framework that guides Beijing’s actions to secure its sovereignty claims and ensure its strategic dominance in the region.

The Lykke Model to China’s Strategyand the principles of realism provide a structured approach for achieving China’s objectives: asserting uncontested sovereignty, consolidating control over vital trade routes and resources, and deterring adversaries from military confrontation. By integrating political, military, economic, and informational methods, China can effectively align its capabilities with its strategic goals, ensuring its continued rise as a regional hegemon and a global power.

Through a combination of theoretical insight, pragmatic strategy, and proactive adaptation, China can navigate the complexities of the South China Sea and secure its long-term national interests while positioning itself as the preeminent power in the South China Sea.