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Chinese Imperial Narratives in the South East China Sea and its Effects on Chinese Realpolitik

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Abstract

Chinese quasi-perfect realpolitik status and Xi's internal flexibility have hindered the identification of macro-patterns within Chinese imperial practices. For filling this gap in the literature, this article will provide with a comprehensive theoretical framework for analyzing apparently incoherent Chinese politics. This framework will be based on the existence of a South-to-South narrative that ambitions to revise Chinese intentions. Although China maintains similar material structures compared to former imperial actors, its narrative departs from traditional discourses enacted by Western Empires. The election of this narrative purely responds to realpolitik concerns at the national and international level; and not only to the liberal socialization of China, as frequently exposed in the literature. Finally, the material benefits and drawbacks experienced by China because of the implementation of this narrative will be discussed. It will be argued that this narrative provided China with an unexpected constraint on its traditionally flexible realpolitik. This self-imposed constraint generates organic dynamics between the narrative and Chinese realpolitik, providing China with paradoxical outcomes that are frequently misinterpreted by the academic community and international governments. Eventually, this theoretical framework will be tested in a Global Top Ten Peace and Security issue: The South East China Sea Conflict.

Keywords

China, Imperialism, narrative, South East China Sea, realpolitik

In 2010, at the ASEAN Ministers conference in Hanoi, Yang Jiechi, former Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China, stated one of the already most famous quote summarizing China's international view: "China is a big country, and other countries are small countries, and that is just a fact." Many scholars have interpreted this claim as a pure and simple synthesis of the structure and dynamics of power between China and its regional counterparts. However, these only 17 words are encapsulating much more information. They are not only providing with a fact but with a deep intuition regarding the overall behavior of China as a global stakeholder.

China is a big country, a huge one, not only in geographical terms, but also in economic, political, ideological, military and cultural ones (Rudd, 2013). As such, according to Chinese authorities, it deserves the right to lawfully expand for acquiring those natural resources, necessary for the correct and natural development of the State (Zweig and Bi, 2005). This conception of China has been largely debated in the literature as well as the realpolitik approach that the Chinese government is implementing for achieving this goal.

Obviously, the existence of a *global stakeholder* willing to ignore every ethical behavior and liberal values for the realizations of its objectives has concerned the international community and especially its current international leader: The United States (Rudd, 2013)

Following this view, many will argue that Chinese actions should be analyzed as isolated entities—despite the existence of macro-actions as OBOR—without strictly internal coherence (Christensen, 1996). The quasi-perfect realpolitik structure of China's international politics and the large flexibility of Xi Jinping for adopting any kind of policy suggest that spending time in identifying common underlying patterns in Chinese actions is worthless (Economy, 2014). Indeed, many papers have been developed to enlighten Chinese policies without providing a compelling framework which embraces the heterogeneity of its practices or identifies structural patterns. This piece of literature will claim, however, the existence of a common element shaping Chinese agency. Nevertheless, this common point does not rely on the material content of the actions—as usually yearned by mainstream literature (Metcalf; 2006)—but on the narrative that the Chinese government has developed for justifying its realpolitik. A narrative that ambitions to protect Chinese Imperial practices through paradoxically claiming non-imperial practices, non-imperial status and non-imperial motivations.

This narrative is much more in line with the post-World War II values of globalization, self-development and free will of nations (Cheah, 2006). In this way, Chinese Imperialism will be presented as not substantially different from previous expressions of imperialism but dialectically different. Chinese imperial material structures are not substantially different from the ones implemented by former Empires, but the Chinese government would have developed a narrative based on South-to-South relationships for hiding the imperial content of its policies (Mastro, 2019).

The election of this narrative originally provided China with outstanding results especially in terms of international cooperation, however, this narrative also had undesired effects for the Chinese government. Indeed, it will be further claimed that the development of this narrative has tangible realpolitik implications as this discourse has partially coopted the absolute flexibility owned by the Chinese government in the international arena. The organic dynamics between quasi-perfect realpolitik traditionally

performed by China and the self-imposed constraints derived from the use of this narrative will be minutely analyzed.

In order to expand and test these arguments claiming for a distinct Chinese Imperialism based on a cosmopolitan narrative, a comprehensive theoretical framework will be developed and some of its main implications tested in a current Global Peace and Security conflict: The South East China Sea Conflict (SECSC).

According to IPI Global Observatory, the SECSC, is considered to be one of the Global Top-Ten Peace and Security issues. This multilateral conflict confronts the sovereignty claims of China, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei over the South East China Sea (SECS). However, this conflict, far from being a minor regional conflict, stands as a globally crucial concern. In fact, the prominence of this confrontation can be explained given the strategic importance of this Sea in military and economic terms, the abundance of natural resources and the global implications of Chinese primacy in South East Asia (territory historically under American influence). In addition, this conflict turns out to be a paradigmatic case of Chinese international vision, what provides us with an unbeatable testing ground for our three hypotheses: (H1) Chinese Imperialism is not substantially but narratively different from previous forms of imperialism; (H2) the election of a South-to-South narrative was based on a pure realpolitik approach; and (H3) this narrative has effectively constrained the traditional flexible realpolitik of the Chinese Government.

For consistently developing this theoretical framework and testing its prescriptions and implications in the SECS this paper will be structured as follows: Section 1 summarizes the literature review by providing a wholesome analysis of the concept of empire, Chinese imperialism and Chinese imperial practices. Section 2 provides with the theoretical framework supporting H1. In this section it is discussed the absence of material differences between Chinese imperialism and previous imperial actors. It is further claimed the discursive difference existing between China and Old Western Empires. Section 3 presents and analyzes H2, the realpolitik component behind the election of this narrative. Section 4 debates H3, identifying the self-constraining environment created by Chinese South-to-South narrative, as well as the paradoxical implications derived from its implementation. Section 5 introduces the South East China Sea Conflict as a testing ground for the developed theoretical framework. Section 6 studies the robusticity of the hypothesis (H1-H2-H3), by testing them in the SECS. Finally, Section 7 presents the limitations of the study and concludes.

Section 1: Chinese Imperialism

Empires are usually presented in the literature as geopolitical entities based on the asymmetric relationship between a central polity and a peripheric polity or colony. This relation, whether formal or informal, ambitions to effectively control the political sovereignty of the subjugated territory (Colli, 2019). Note that this definition is not exclusive nor sufficient for identifying a potential empire. Nonetheless; it is not the aim of this paper to identify (if identification is possible, fact which neither is clear in literature) the characteristics that must be satisfied by a polity for reaching the consideration of Empire or by certain practices for gaining the consideration of imperial. In whatsoever

concerns this paper, the broad definition used by Colli will be enough for the construction of our argument.

The concept of Empire has also evolved throughout history what makes even harder the identification of shared points between its different realizations as we can observe in this passage from Mastro (2019):

“The United Kingdom collected colonies, the Soviet Union created ideologically linked spheres of influence, the United States established an institutionalized order and a global military presence, and the Qing dynasty built a tributary system.”

Despite the different variations in form and foundations, it is usually accepted that all these different sorts of polity and practices fit respectively into the broad general definitions of Empire or imperial. Current literature, probably including the author of this paper, is always willing to identify the emergence of new Imperial actors or the redefinition of the existing ones. Empires are, by definition, the most powerful expression of geopolitics (Colli, 2019); thus, they have been the focus of attention for an important share of the macro geopolitics publications.

The irruption of China as a major international actor; its outstanding and sustained economic development; its authoritarian internal and external practices; and its expansionist ambitions have naturally collapsed international publications (Rudd, 2013; Hurrell, 2013). The emergence of China as a global superpower is now undoubted by the international community and the academic sphere. Moreover, China's still juvenile phase within the international arena and its continuous claims for physical and figurative space have contributed to the creation of an imaginary conceiving China as a new Empire (Metcalf, 2006).

According to many authors China's practices do not seem to fit into traditional definitions of Empires. Indeed, China is usually presented in literature as a different sort of Empire based on the use of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), international propaganda and micro-educational programs as the main tools leading its expansion (Weiss, 2019). Furthermore, China is usually presented as a non-violent regime in the international arena (China Daily 2015), and consequently it is frequently exhibited in literature as a *good Empire*. Even some of its detractors (De Moraes, 2011), who are able to grasp some of the adverse effects of Chinese practices, usually identify too the spill of socioeconomic welfare brought by Chinese authorities when investing abroad. In this way, Chinese imperialism is usually presented with an aura of mysticism and novelty that pursues to depart from traditional definitions of empires. The fascination of Luft (2016) for Chinese Imperialism contrasts with usual depictions of former empires such as the one presented by Olusoga (2015)

“Today, China is undertaking a third turn to the west-its most ambitious one yet. (...). The goal of the B&R, Chinese officials say, is to bring prosperity to the many developing Asian countries...”

“The descendants of the enslaved carry the same English surnames that appear in the ledgers of the Slave Compensation Commission—Gladstone, Beckford, Hibbert, Blair, etc.—names that were imposed on their ancestors, initials that were sometimes branded on their skin, in order to mark them as items of property.”

As a result, many have tried to argue that Chinese imperial practices, are materially different from previous expressions of Imperialism. This is, indeed, a very convenient argument to defend because its logic is simple and direct. If Chinese international practices provide with welfare to the receiving communities and they are presented with enthusiasm by the International Media, it must be the case that Chinese Imperialism is substantially different from traditional forms of empires. This argument, however, is completely inaccurate. It could be debated though whether differences in size can get to justify differences in categorization, but at least in what concerns this article, it will be argued that Chinese strategies are not substantially different from previous imperial practices, at least in scope or fundamentals. But before debating this claim, it is needed, at first, to check the premise justifying this statement: Are Chinese policies imperialistic in essence?

To answer this question the previous broad definition of Empire will be used, and two pieces of evidence will be provided: A theoretical approach to Chinese Imperialism through a Lebensraum materialistic framework, and a pragmatic approach based on the officially recognized Chinese strategic doctrines guiding Chinese interventions.

The Lebensraum argumentation has been largely debated in literature (Zweig and Bi, 2005; Lai, 2017; Laurent and Koenig, 2016), and it is based on the correct assumption that China is *a big organic country* with big increasing necessities. For instance; as accurately presented by Zweig and Bi: “Twenty years ago, China was East Asia’s largest oil exporter. Now it is the world’s second-largest importer.” Moreover, during the last decades, China has sharply increased its demand for industrial products. By 2010, China already accounted for 47% of iron consumption, followed by the US with a 5.5% (Nakajima et al., 2018). Indeed, as proven by Laurent and Koenig (2016) China’s increasing presence in Africa, the Middle East and South East China Sea can be largely justified by the rising demand of its population. Unsurprisingly the Chinese Government has implemented its biggest efforts in terms of International Politics in strategic areas for guaranteeing the supply of provisions, mostly oil and gas to the Chinese mainland (Zweig and Bi, 2005).

According to classic literature, this imperial expansion could be enacted by individuals (Ratzel, 1969) or politically driven as proposed by Kjellen (1916). Given the idiosyncrasy of China’s political structure, an intermediate version between Ratzelian original Lebensraum and Kjellen revisionist version has gained acceptance among political analysts. Indeed, it will be in first place that the Chinese government directs the macro-expansionist process (The Morais, 2011); but the citizens hold on earth the weight and responsibility of expanding Chinese influence beyond borders, embodying and replicating governmental Chinese expansionism.

Taking Laurent and Koenig as reference when claiming that Chinese expansion is largely explained by increasing economic necessities, it is difficult for the international community to prevent or justify the prevention of the natural expansion of a country, which *apparently peacefully* drives for self-development.

This economic expansionist trend has been strengthened by two further components of Chinese governmental nature: (1) The primacy of economic growth and economic sustainability as a key goal for the Chinese Communist Party (Zweig and Bi, 2005) and

(2) Chinese quasi-perfect realpolitik status, which allows its government to perform any action with the aim of maintaining economic growth (Christensen, 1996). Since the inception of Deng Xiaoping Second Revolution, the CCP has been willing to flexibly redirect all its national and international policies for the acquisition of this aim (Economy, 2018). This obsession with economic growth, especially with the twenty-first century openness, can be understood through a partisan point of view. Economic development and efficiency stand as an appealing trade off with personal liberties and democracy for Chinese government (De Morais, 2011). Note, as exposed by Allison (2017), that this source of legitimacy is diametrically opposed to Western conception of legitimacy. While for Western liberal societies legitimacy relies on the democratic and free consent of the ruled people, for Chinese, legitimacy is gained by the efficiency and welfare provided by the government. According to this concept, it is easy to understand (a) the primacy of economic development for Chinese Authorities and especially for the CCP, which ambitions to remain in power while coopting its citizens' rights and freedoms; (b) the replacement of the traditional Chinese Communist ideology for a "whatever it takes to grow" policy (Zweig and Bi, 2005); and (c) the natural trend towards expansionism hoisted by China (Lind, 2017). As accurately described by Tu (1994), Chinese Huaqiao act as micro weapons of the government for the implementation of China's eastern capitalism and the reproduction of imperial patterns. Chinese living abroad in other South-East Asia (SEA) countries develop structures of profit making within foreign societies, which prepare the field for future governmental imperial structures (as the implementation of bilateral CSPs). As we see, the Lebensraum conception of Empire seems to justify the categorization of Chinese practices as imperial.

Our second argument, supporting the imperialness of China is based on the analysis of Reeves's (2018) four pillars used by the Chinese government when dealing with peripheral diplomacy. In this way, China would have achieved to establish long-lasting structures of subjugation to Chinese interest in peripheral neighbor countries through a complex interaction of four cornerstones. The economic prosperity of Chinese investments canalized through AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) and materialized through BRI (Belt Road Initiative); the diplomatic structure provided by CSP (Comprehensive Strategic Partnership); and Xi's social drive and social imaginary implemented through the Chinese Dream and the Rejuvenation programs. This argument is largely explored in *Imperialism and the Middle Kingdom: The Xi Jinping administration's peripheral diplomacy with developing states* (Reeves, 2018) thus for a further comprehension of the underlying mechanisms, it will be convenient to go through Reeves's ideas. The main thesis drawn by Reeves is that China is substantiating its international relations on unambiguously imperial strategies which create asymmetric long-lasting scenarios between China and the colony.

China frequently claims the non-imperial character of its practices, however, according to the evidence, it is clear that China is indeed developing imperialistic actions (Mastro, 2019). In fact, China officially recognized as central, policies that could unambiguously be classified as imperial in motivation and scope, such as the progressive construction and militarization of artificial islands in SECS contested territory (Chun, 2016). Further evidence of Chinese imperial nature can be identified on China's partnership with Middle East and Central Asian countries as Afghanistan (2012), Kyrgyzstan (2013), Mongolia (2014) and Tajikistan (2013). China consciously partnered with weaker economies for

implementing durable subjugating structures in exchange for short-term funding for local infrastructure and national industry. The asymmetry of these relations matches the general definition of Empire considered in this article.

In this way, and acknowledging the briefness of this argumentation (given that it is not really the main intention of this piece to justify the imperialness of Chinese actions), it seems clear, at the theoretical and praxis level, that Chinese practices can be categorized as imperial, at least in the broad terms previously considered. Moreover, the imperial content of Chinese policies enjoys a broad consensus in the literature, regardless the positive or negative consideration attached to this categorization (Lind, 2018; Campbell and Ratner, 2018; Yoon, 2015); thus Chinese imperial nature will be assumed, from now on, throughout the whole text.

Section 2: Discursive rather material differences. Discussing H1.

Once the imperial status of China or at least the imperial nature of its international policies have been proven, it is time to argue the non-existence of substantial differences between current Chinese actions and previous actions executed by former imperial agents. Some authors have tried to argue a difference in nature by claiming differences in size (Kaplan, 2010). Although this point is arguable, there is no reason to claim such a difference if it is agreed that there are not disparities in motivation, neither implementation nor strategy. A good comparison—and recurrently used in the literature (Sidaway and Woon, 2017)—is to compare the Marshall Plan executed by the United States in postwar Europe and the ambitious OBOR (One Belt One Road Initiative). A simple outlook of the figures reveals a wedge of various orders of magnitude. It is estimated that the United States spent 183—adjusted for inflation—billion dollars, which seem ridiculous compared to the estimations of 4 to 8 trillion dollars that OBOR will demand (De Jong, 2017). Consequently, it has been repeatedly claimed that there must exist a difference in nature, or at least strategy, between the Imperialism developed by the USA in the second half of the 20th century and the ongoing Chinese Imperialism. Chinese government itself avoids comparing these two programs by claiming the political motivation of the Marshall Plan versus the purely developmental and economic realm of OBOR initiative (Sidaway and Woon, 2017).

However, a closer look to the motivational components of both plans evidences no substantial differences (De Jong, 2017). Both plans targeted ruined economies, with weak political power, and used foreign direct investment to gain the favor of these polities. Both plans attempted to (1) reinforce receiving country alignment against the interest of the rival power (the SU in the case of the US, and “the Western liberal order” in the case of China) and (2) to establish path dependence structures which will guarantee the long-lasting permanence of this behavior (in the case of the US, the consolidation of a US-primacy world liberal order through the creation of International Governmental Organizations; and in the case of China by developing economic and political structures that will expand subsequently ensuring the future affinity of these regimes). Indeed, both countries sought to create a new global order with American and Chinese primacy respectively.

Note, that it is not being claimed that differences between the Marshall plan and the OBOR initiative do not exist. Indeed, a simple outlook of both projects will be able to identify substantial differences across them, especially in terms of funding and duration

of the programs. However, the key point here is that no ontological differences exist across these two programs.

Similar parallelisms can be established between Chinese FDI in Africa and Soviet-American intervention after WWII in the Third World. In this case, even bigger differences emerge between Chinese and Cold-War empires, as these policies do not even share similar implementation strategies. While Soviet-American interventions had a strong military and ideological component; China only seems to ask for political alignment—as the recognition of the One China Policy—and the creation of structures which guarantee future Chinese primacy in the region. Nonetheless both dynamics exchange short-term infrastructure, financial and industrial funding for political economy support (Mastro, 2019). Thus, once more, broader patterns and motivations remain untouched: money, global support and mutual recognition in exchange of alignment and fidelity structures.

Another argument, frequently exhibited in the literature, claiming for distinctive material Chinese imperialism relies on the idea that China is not as violent (or not as violent) as its former imperial counterparts (Mastro, 2019). Violence has been a sempiternal component of Empires (Dwyer and Nettelbeck, 2018). The tyranny of former empires, such as the Mongol Empire in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries or the colonial British Empire in Africa and Asia during the 18th, 19th and 20th century, seems to clash with the idea of a benevolent China which performs imperialism through FDI, bilateral pacifist resolutions and the use of a South-to-South narrative. Nonetheless, the peacefulness of the current China of Xi is at best, mistaken. Two pieces of evidence are brought to enlighten the falseness of this conception.

First, the fact that China is not physically executing violence does not imply the non-violence of the Chinese-created structures. Indeed, as minutely described by The Morais (2011) and following the negative-peace framework established by Galtung (Brunk, 2008); it is easy to identify the existence of fairly violent practices and structures developed by Chinese authorities and Chinese workers in recipient economies against locals. These structures may not constitute direct violence against natives, but, undoubtedly, are harmful in the middle and long run for these populations. Chinese structures tend to generate and exacerbate domestic inequalities creating scenarios of indirect violence which condition the free will and potential development of nations. The Morais sharply identifies structures of inequality implemented by incoming Chinese bourgeoisie who has partnered with a local aristocracy and mafias in Angola. This partnership has provided Angola with an erosion of the social fabric and the design of an extractive economy which limits the potential development of Angolans at the macro and micro level. For example, systematic evictions as a result of deliberate Chinese practices in foreign countries could be interpreted as violent as traditional military actions. As a result, certain Chinese practices, even if not directly violent, can be considered inherently harmful for the recipient communities.

Moreover, even if disclaiming the existence of these structures or the validity of Galtung's framework, it is still obvious that there exist undeniable direct violence actions enacted by the Chinese government. These actions are especially cruel when performing imperial initiatives. Indeed, they show a scale of violence equivalent to the one enacted by former

empires. The Mischief Reef incident in 1995, the killing of 64 Vietnamese sailors in the Johnson Reef (1988), Chinese brutality in Hong Kong (2019–2020), Tibetan genocide—where it is estimated that around 1.2 million people out of 6 million died as a result of Chinese invasion in 1959—(Moynihan, 1998) or Xinjiang re-education camps (2017–2020) can largely resemble the violence of former empires. In 2017, Rodrigo Duterte confessed that President Xi threatened Philippines with a war after Philippines's complaints about active presence of Chinese warships on the Benham Rise, region under Philippines's jurisdiction (Reuters, 2017). Similarly, in 2019, Xi reminded all the ASEAN countries and especially Philippines that China's position on the SECS is "unchangeable," threatening them with the use of whichever means for reassuring Chinese interests in the region. As shown, the use, motivation and even the scale of violence do not seem to be substantially different from the one enacted by previous empires. It could be argued that China tends to use other kinds of violence, more subtle and less direct, but unquestionably China's expansion is as violent and harmful as the one enacted by previous imperial expressions.

In this way, it can be concluded that, at least in the two mentioned cases (the economic and violence components of empires), there is no evidence to support a distinct Chinese approach to expansion. There might exist quantitative differences, implementation differences or momentum differences (differences associated to Age, technologies and historical dynamics), but there is no sign of a qualitative gap sustaining the especial categorization of Chinese imperialism.

It is acknowledged though, that it might be tricky to establish such a general claim—as "there is no substantial difference in nature between Chinese actions and the actions enacted by previous expressions of Empires"—by analyzing only the similarity between the American and Chinese imperial economic policy and the proven existence of violence in Chinese expansion. However, this line of thought actually provides with a solid intuition which ambitions to demystify the nature difference across these two sorts of empires. Obviously, an exhaustive list identifying all the characteristics and strategies of previous forms of empires and its Chinese analogs will be impossible to build. Hence, tackling two of the main myths regarding the apparent novelties of Chinese imperialism, is indeed a more solid argument than initially expected.

If we assume as valid this line of evidence, albeit, a clear problem emerges. It is generally accepted, and not only by the scholar community but also by the broad public, that there is something different concerning Chinese international politics. An aroma of novelty blanketing every Chinese action. This difference cannot be explained only by the strong will of the academic personnel of identifying new forms of empires, otherwise, the broad public, journalists and international media will not perceive this innovative component.

The recurrent identification of Chinese imperialism as completely revolutionary might be explained by the generally corrupted perception about China's international politics themselves. Indeed, and this is possibly one of the main arguments presented in this article, the Chinese realpolitik approach—*de facto* recognized by the government—and the frequently misleading interpretation of Chinese imperial practices have hindered the identification of deeper connections among Chinese actions. Moreover, by arguing a perfect realistic approach to Chinese politics and by claiming the idiosyncrasy of Xi's

imperialism, very little effort has been put into trying to identify deeper levels of internal coherence across Chinese praxis.

Nevertheless, and in this way directly tackling H1, here it will be suggested that a macro point present in all Chinese International actions is the presence of a very specific type of narrative. A narrative based on a South-to-South relation. Later, the content of this narrative will be debated but so far, it is important to understand that this narrative is indeed novel and departs from traditional narratives held by other imperial powers. As exposed in Section 1, empires are simply the geopolitical reflection of power. Consequently, it seems logical that they tend to present themselves as superior entities and assimilate themselves to the concepts of *power*, *goodness* or *greatness* (Kennan, 1946; Leeuwen, 2017). The zenith of this narrative can be found on Nazi narratives as described by Haushofer (1942). According to Nazi imaginary, the German Reich, as representation of the fittest nation, had the moral obligation of expanding its identity into less-deserving peoples and nations. The use of this narrative sharply opposes to Chinese equal-to-equal approach, which seeks to reappraise the potential of the receiving country.

In fact, for the first time, an imperial agent is using a distinct narrative based on an equal-to-equal discourse. China presents itself as a traditionally colonized country, which struggled against the domain of Western powers pursuing self-development. It does not try to export a model (Mastro, 2019), neither to prove superiority over the *de facto* colonized territories. Material structures of domination and the presence of violence remain unchanged compared to previous empires but the way that this information is presented to the world is revolutionary. With this narrative, China's ambitions to hide the imperial character of its foreign policy (Mastro, 2019), and to justify the leitmotif and legitimacy of the CCP. Two examples concerning the mismatch between anti-imperialistic narrative and imperialistic actions will be provided in this section.

A first example could be found between the PRC and the United States. China yearly spends millions of dollars on sending Chinese students into some of the most prestigious Universities globally, including Top American Universities. Moreover, during the last two decades, China has initiated a program for bringing foreign students into national Universities with an emphasis on American students (Shambaugh, 2015). However, contemporaneously, China keeps increasing its ambitions and militarization in the SECS (Krepinevich, 2015). Imperialistic actions of harassment and assertive militarization of a region are not new in essence; however, for first time, these imperial policies are accompanied by a distinctive cosmopolitan narrative based on the peaceful cooperation of nations.

An even clearer example of this dual nature is Chinese-Laotian relations (Otto, 2016). In 2014, China already overcame Vietnam as the most prominent investor in Laos with more than 5 billion dollars in value (ASEAN Today, 2018). Now, China's ambitions to include Laos within one of the most ambitious projects within OBOR: The Kunming-Singapore railway connection. Chinese kind investment has been reinforced with a discursive line which seeks to remind pre-colonial relations between China and Laos. Undoubtedly, Chinese investment has provided with welfare to Laotian economy, but in parallel China has developed extensive colonial structures through a system of loans and internal

reorganizations. China uses these asymmetric structures for gaining Laotian political alignment—including support for the *One China policy* and Chinese presence in SECS.

As observed in the different examples, the existence of a distinct narrative compared to previous forms of empires explains an unsolved question in the literature: Why, if no material differences are observed, a persistent image of a new imperialism blossoms around China? The proposed answer is that the difference relies on the *how component*, not that much in the *what component*. This Foucauldian vision explains why a material difference is perceived when the distinction is purely illusory.

Section 3. Chinese narrative, a realpolitik decision. Discussing H2.

Once our first hypothesis has been presented and its theoretical framework developed, new questions arise. Indeed, very little has been said so far about the content of the narrative itself or the underlying reasons explaining its election. Throughout the next section the content of the narrative will be explored tackling our still confusing H2: the election of a South-to-South narrative was based on a pure realpolitik approach.

If just a narrative has been able to shape and condition the global imaginary concerning Chinese real practices, the election of this narrative, that is, the substantial content of the narrative itself, turns out to be incredibly relevant. The claim is that the Chinese government consciously selected a South-to-South narrative, following Cheah terminology (2006), for gaining the favor of the international community and further spreading its imperialism. In other words, they seem to be using anti-imperialistic terminology, which holds global support and consideration in the international arena, for precisely hiding its imperial motivations, avoiding in this way frontal reprobation. This narrative is completely opposed to previous narratives. Old narratives tend to highlight the supremacy and glory of the metropolis even if rejecting the term empire like it happened with post WWII empires¹ (Pomper, 2005). However, China, as correctly pointed out by Mastro (2019), hides rather than exalts its imperial attributions. For first time, an empire is using anti-imperialistic narrative as part of its imperial policy. According to this vision, China does not claim any further superiority over the conquered or *colonized* territories but a pure *vital expansion* for the legitimate satisfaction of its necessities as a State. Note that this fact, already constitutes a big difference compared to previous forms of empires which try to assimilate themselves to a superior expression of goodness and welfare (Pomper, 2005). From Ancient Athens and Sparta, to British Colonialism and Cold War Soviet-American imperialism, all different forms of empires have presented themselves as superior and benevolent entities. Powerful actors which arouse fear and admiration among its rivals. However, for the first time, an imperial actor is adopting a humble approach based on the equality of both countries. China uses its colonial past and its early twentieth century underdevelopment as main arguments supporting this discourse. In material terms, Chinese international relationships are as

¹ With the uprising of the Nazi party and the revindication of the concept of Empire, the term *empire* became vilified by governments, scholars and citizens. After WWII, with the constitution of a Soviet-American bipolar regime, the word “empire” or “imperial” got eradicated from public speech. In fact, it was frequently used as a derogative qualifier for referring to the other power (Pomper, 2005). Nevertheless, the key component of primacy and power expansion remained central for these two modern Empires.

unequal and unidirectional as previous expressions of empires, but the narrative suggests a Chinese specialty.

This claim is obviously obscure and polemical. For the correct development of the argument, a purely abstract intuition of the mechanisms needs to be described. Latterly, an exemplification of this argument is provided using the Chinese-ASEAN relationship exhibited by Han (2017). Note that further exemplification and argumentation is given in Section 6. Nonetheless, and before proceeding to the formal presentation of this idea a necessary insight regarding the Chinese vision of history and politics should be presented to the reader.

As presented by French (2017) and Pomfret (2016), to understand current Chinese actions, it is necessary to include and comprehend Chinese History. In this case, two key considerations are brought regarding Chinese political vision. The first consideration has to do with the fact that China identifies itself as an eternal actor. Unlike other superpowers, Chinese History is easily trackable for more than 2000 years (Allison, 2017). This provides them with an unusual patience concerning the implementation of policies and the attainment of objectives. Many recently created countries, as the United States, lack this perspective, polluting all its actions with the spice of impatience. On the other hand, Chinese governments are willing to trade off short-run losses in exchange for future prosperity. In more practical terms, Chinese government and Chinese population are very flexible. They are willing to assume deviations from original plans if they consider this new way will strengthen their position in the future. This fact provides China with an unusual advantage in domestic and international politics. From an outsider's point of view, this flexibility presents a negative side as it further hinders the forecast of Chinese actions. Clear implications of this vision will be explained in Section 6.

The second consideration is related to the importance of imaginaries for the Chinese population and consequently for the Chinese Government (Garlick, 2018). Influenced by ancient Confucian philosophy and perspectivism, for Chinese people, the way something looks is, at least, as important as the way something is. This Foucauldian view of reality explains two key concerns related to our theoretical framework: (1) The importance of narratives, and how the correct elaboration and spread of these narratives is considered a matter of state for the CCP. Note, for example, the zero stigmatization of the word propaganda by the Chinese population as presented by Shambaugh (2015), which understands as natural, the use of national bodies for the explanation of governmental policies. In this paper, Shambaugh presents the Chinese interpretation of propaganda as the legitimate and necessary mechanisms for the spread of the *Chinese way*. Producing propaganda—executed through the State Council Information Office (SCIO)—is one of the main tasks of the Government which has the obligation to ensure the “correct” explanation of its policies and actions domestically and internationally.

(2) The existing suspiciousness between China and its regional neighbors and Western powers. This claim is extensively presented in the literature (Swaine, 2015; Glasser, 2011; Odgaard, 2016). For instance, one of the main theses defended by Glaser, is that the existing lack of confidence and mistrust between the USA and China can be explained by the lack of consistency between Chinese actions and Chinese discourse and vice versa. The arms race taking place in SECS can be largely justified by the mutual fear and

disconnection between the political speech and the actions that are implemented. Different authors as Metcalf (2006) or Christensen (1996) naively interpreted Chinese inconsistency as political mistakes typical of a new global superpower. However, they fail to understand that this asymmetry is deliberately pursued by the Chinese government. It is true that the mismatch narrative-action provides China with some drawbacks (as mutual mistrust) but it also provides China with outstanding benefits that will be latterly discussed. Consequently, presenting Chinese incongruences as part of a chaotic international strategy is far from accurate.

Following this Confucian conception of eternity and the importance of imaginary for Chinese authorities, it is not surprising to discover that China had devoted a massive amount of resources for the correct development of a national narrative with the intention to explain to the world the benefits of Chinese expansion (Sidaway and Woon, 2017). It is clear then that the election of this narrative was not random neither unconscious, but responded to concrete interests and circumstances. In fact, the election of this narrative responds to a careful analysis of the international scenario and the long run objectives of Chinese realpolitik.

The election of this narrative, as pointed out by Sidaway and Woon, has been incredibly suitable to the current international politics scenario. As pointed by Cheah (2006), central theoretical support of this hypothesis, the world is moving towards a decentralized environment with a multipolar source of legitimacy and sovereignty. People themselves have become major actors within the current globalized *cosmopolitan* scenario. As a result, realities as Human Rights, right to self-development of the countries and decentralization have acquired a major role settling the agenda of International Organizations and national governments.

Under this cosmopolitan umbrella, China has assumed a primacy position by presenting itself as a *poor developing country* which has achieved prosperity through a non-western *Chinese Path* (Cheah, 2000). China stands as an alternative to traditional western powers. Chinese narrative is based on the cosmopolitan principles of free will of nations and reparation of colonialism. In this way, China is usually allowed to perform questionable practices, especially in *gray areas* (Pejsova, 2016). The CCP conspicuously brightens these principles of the liberal order while blurs the liberal pillars of democracy, individual freedom and transparency. Even for justifying the erosion of these pillars, China usually questions their western bias. In December 2019, China's government stood in favor of the decolonization process and dialogue between West Sahara and Morocco. Just a few days later, China rejected every international accusation regarding Uighurs re-education camps, criticizing the colonial origin of those charges. This dual nature concerning liberal principles is intrinsic to Xi's administration.

By using this approach and assuming its *underdeveloped status* role, China has gained a central position among the international community. This narrative turns out to be extremely powerful and very difficult to fight back by western powers. Take western critics to China in terms of environmental degradation as an example. If Chinese behavior would have been performed by any western country, it will gain a global condemn and the consequent sanctions. However, China (despite the usual rebukes) seems to be exonerated from western standards because its *underdeveloped* status is assumed

(Nyabiage, 2019). This trend does not only take place in environmental politics, but it can also be observed in economics, labor, trade, military and human rights standards among others.

After WWII, a liberal world order sustained on the defense of a set of inalienable Human Rights emerged. Among these rights, the right of free will and free development of nation-states, and especially colonies, was widely recognized. This international relations framework enjoys general praise and acceptance among the international community; thus, fighting against the *lawful* expansion of one of these *colonies* using this western narrative, infringe upon the basis of the western liberal order itself.

In line with this argument, China is willing to contest traditionally presented as universal agreements, questioning its western bias. A good example of this behavior can be found on the Chinese view of UNCLOS provisions concerning the sources of legitimacy for claiming sovereignty over a territory. As well presented by the literature (Pejsova and Tønnesson, 2016), China has adopted this strategy a few times, including its rejection to the mediation of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in the Chinese-Philippines conflict about the validity of the nine-dash line. Chinese rejection of this arbitration had nothing to do with the material component of the resolution but with the pledged absence of legitimacy of the Court, whose western bias disqualifies itself from ruling about Chinese sovereignty rights. Fighting back Chinese arguments implies fighting back the western narrative of peaceful development, thus western countries are usually reluctant to individually contest Chinese bravados.

This narrative has been presented extensively and consistently by the Chinese government during the last two decades. This narrative, far from being reduced to a discursive political speech has been supported by three main tools as described by Shambaugh (2017):

1. Financial and economic measures. As presented by Lind (2018), China has efficiently combined the creation of huge financial power structures (financial institutions as AIIB; trade agreements, infrastructures as in OBOR...) with punctual economic coercion when the targeted country *misbehave* (as the Laos loan structure previously described). AIIB stands as the spearhead of Chinese international investment. Despite frontal American opposition, AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) holds more than 75 countries and 26 potential members all around the world, including France, Germany and the United Kingdom. Its funds are mostly used for the creation of physical and financial structures to promote the development of the receiving country, but more importantly, to establish structures which ensure China's primacy and path dependence in these territories. AIIB is particularly ambitious in emerging Asian Economies with weak political susceptible of Chinese Intervention.
2. The role of media. As well identified by Shambaugh (2017) and Hong (2011), media constitutes the visible ram of Chinese global imaginary construction. Xi's ideals of China as a peaceful, non-imperialistic global stakeholder are spread through media using positive and negative actions. Positive actions have to do with the active role of state-controlled media (Xinhua, China Global Television

Network...) and the active presence of Chinese Government in international mass media, social networks, academic journals and even entertainment industry. For instance, Xinhua has experienced a dramatic increase from originally only 23 overseas bureaus to 123 in 2010 (Hong, 2011). Currently, Xinhua is the largest news agency among emerging countries. The negative actions are related to the internal, and more worrisome, external censorship. China has not only successfully managed to increase internal control over information, but has also lobbied to shift the editorial line or the publishing requirements of international publications as the case of Springer Nature. In 2017, Springer Nature bowed to Chinese pressures and withdraw certain publications containing sensitive issues including Taiwan, Tibet, human rights and elite politics.

3. Education programs. Among the three of them, this is the most micro-oriented policy, as the Government uses its own individuals as spearhead for the spread of Chinese ideals. This ratzelian approach to expansionism is executed in a double direction: by promoting the internationalization of Chinese students, who are sent in hordes to the Western educational system and by fostering the spread of Chinese culture among western students, either through in-country policies, as the controversial Confucius Institutes, or by bringing them to study in China. This micro-policy ambitions to settle a Chinese imaginary using a diffuse multilateral approach rather than traditional one-track propaganda.

All these three instruments—complemented with accessory policies as diplomacy hosting or the celebration of international events as the Beijing '08 Olympic Games—aim to create a very specific imaginary of China. The image of China as a developing economy, historically occupied by European colonial powers which ruined the country, but which managed to self-promote through hard work and an eastern perspective of international relations (Nathan and Scobell, 2012). Furthermore, the CCP is currently working to develop an imaginary which depicts current China as a modern reflection of the Qing Empire (Han, 2017). According to Chinese narrative², the Qing Empire is presented as a prosperous regional power with an eastern ideological foundation, which developed a tributary system throughout Asia, providing with opulence and development to all the countries under the influence of the *magnificent* Chinese Empire. The vision of a potential shared opulence is tangibly materialized in the BRI initiative and departs from mainstream imperial narratives. The conception of China as an eternal actor explains how such a remote comparison is even possible. Indeed, the Chinese government ambitions to present a reality which depicts China as a historically prosperous country which has only been ruined temporarily by western colonialism. The message to the international community is clear: “If you let me do it my way, I will provide you with prosperity and development.” In other words, China is doing anything else but asking the international arena not to constrain its expansionist ambitions because “China is different”; “China is not corrupted by western sins”; “China’s expansionism benefits the world.” On November 13, at the closing ceremony of the BRICS Business Forum in Brasilia, Xi delivered a speech in which he claimed against “unilateralism, hegemony and power politics in favor of multilateralism, United Nations authority and the norms of

² Note that this argument will be contested by some authors (French, 2017)

international relations.” Tacitly, Xi is linking the unilateral and hegemonic politics to Western nations and multilateralism to emerging ones, among which China must conserve a central position. This position is further reinforced in the same speech when talking about OBOR. OBOR is presented not as the project of China, but a shared project which will benefit the entire world, especially the developing economies. The intention of this narrative is to link Chinese interests to global interests making them undistinguishable. Nonetheless, it is already known that China will benefit the most in economic and political terms from this project.

This narrative of peaceful development links tangible and intangible realities. For instance, as highlighted by (Sidaway and Woon, 2017), there exist powerful physical metaphors under the One Belt One Road program. By creating material infrastructures which physically connect regions, China enlarges a narrative based on bridge building and prosperity sharing. The increasing materiality of Chinese imaginary has powerful effects on recipient countries. This tangibility makes obvious the presence and character of China in that region, strengthening Chinese aspirations and consolidating neo-colonial structures.

Before analyzing the potential implications of the election of this narrative, it is convenient to ask in first place why the Chinese government chose this narrative among all the possible alternatives (i.e.: highlight the Communist component of the Chinese development, present themselves as a counterbalance to US imperialism, etc.). In fact, the narrative selection, especially when accounting for the fact that this narrative is not only based on a political discourse but on a whole set of material actions, is far from trivial. The election of this narrative is fairly recent, and despite the important changes driven by Chinese authorities since the second revolution of Deng Xiaoping—especially in terms of international openness—(Economy, 2014); the major shift was initiated during the mandate of Hu Jintao and strongly consolidated with the arrival of Xi Jinping to power. Not surprisingly, President Xi strives to carry on the third revolution: A revolution based on the Chinese Narrative and ideologically sustained in the Chinese Dream and the Rejuvenation program (Reeves, 2018).

The election of this narrative answers to strict realpolitik concerns, it will be naïve to claim that China creates this narrative (as we have seen, this narrative is created by the Western economies led by the US after WWII). However, it is not unreasonable to argue that China plays an active role within the international community intensely supporting this diffusive phenomenon. China’s support is especially acute since the Bandung community in 1955. In this Conference, Zhou Enlai, former Foreign Affairs Minister of Mao, advocated for the creation of a non-aligned movement which embraced the self-determination of developing countries (under the potential leadership of China) against the despotic desires of Cold War Empires. This Conference could be considered the origin of the narrative, however, at that time the narrative was limited to a political discourse and unbinding international communiqués. Originally, China’s speech was focused on the independence and free will of nations (nonalignment) but had very little impact on material terms; basically because of China’s domestic socioeconomic problems and its lack of international openness. It will not be until the late ’90s, and more decisively, until the arrival of Hu and Xi that the narrative acquired a multidimensional component.

Moreover, even if acknowledging the relative importance of Bandung Conference, it is still innocent to assume that China plays a decisive role in the creation of this global trend. Indeed, as presented by Cheah, it is coherent to argue that China simply uses this trend which emerged after the WWII and received a determinant push during the decolonization process. The main actors explaining the irruption of these policies and the shift of paradigm in the conception of globalism are precisely individuals—mostly belonging to the upraising middle classes in developed and emerging economies (Cheah, 2006)—. These unexpected authors claimed in favor of democracy, liberty and self-determination of the peoples. These values were eventually institutionalized through International Governmental and Non-Governmental Organizations, international legislation and mass media among others. This bottom to top trend has been progressively reinforced throughout the second half of the twentieth century. It is precisely in this context of general acceptance and deep institutionalization of the liberal wave that China embodied this narrative with outstanding results.

When analyzing the quasi-perfect Chinese *realpolitik* approach, there is no reason to argue that if a more convenient narrative/strategy had been available, Chinese government would not have pursued it. It is only because of the current transitional world order from a unipolar regime, starred by the USA, to a decentralized multipolar regime and the general refusal of empires and authoritarian forms of power, that moved Chinese authorities to adopt this strategy. In other scenarios, China would have been likely to choose other narratives brightening different components of Chinese identity: communism, authoritarianism... Thus, the selection of this specific narrative responds only to realist interests.

Nonetheless, many authors as Han (2017) sustain that China's attitude does not respond to unilateral interests but to the natural reflection of the liberalization trend that China is experiencing along with its political and economic development. As if the liberal order had effectively forced China to assume the liberal creed and progressively introduce itself into liberal institutions. However, this argument presents some limitations. First, if it was true that China is attending to an irresistible liberalization process, we should expect a progressive decay in imperial ambitions; a decay in the use of violence and a progressive approach to liberal institutions. None of these prescriptions is true. China is increasingly implementing imperial practices following the processes described by (Reeves, 2018). China maintains violence as a recurrent tool in domestic and foreign conflicts (Graham-Harrison et al., 2019). And, finally, even if it is true that China has gotten closer to international liberal Organizations as WTO or World Bank, it maintains disdain against central institutions as ICJ (Tønnesson, 2016). This fact proves that China's outreach is unilateral and attends to pure *realpolitik* concerns not to a macro forced liberalization process.

The use of this strategy has provided China with substantial gains as a central position within ASEAN. As described by Han (2017), before 1990s and especially after the Paracel invasion in 1974, China was depicted as an incoherent, imperialistic and violent regional power. This status provided it with the frontal opposition of its South-Eastern neighbors. At that time, China was willing to execute its normative power for reaching bilateral agreements with its neighbors regarding the SECS. Bilateralism would have provided China with more favorable outcomes given the existent power asymmetry.

Although China effectively had the power to impose this sort of agreements, the frontal opposition of ASEAN to Chinese practices highly undermined the possibility of success of this strategy.

Conscious of the image it was transmitting, in the late '90s China voluntarily decides to shift its political conception and to adopt this peaceful superpower narrative. Engaging into this narrative turned out to be very costly in the short run, as China disclaimed the possibility of engaging into bilateral agreements concerning SECS and was forced to halt expansion throughout the next few years. Chinese authorities knew the cost of its new strategy but, given the internal flexibility of the government and the eternal conception of politics, they were willing to commit to this roadmap for achieving long-term prosperity (in this case, total control over SECS). Naturally, Chinese population supported and understood CCP's shift in international affairs. Coherently, following this self-imposed doctrine, China assumed the normative framework of ASEAN and embraced multilateralism.

ASEAN celebrated this shift as a victory of collective action. Similar conclusions were extracted by Han, who described and praised this process, naming it Chinese socialization. However, according to Chinese military, political and economic projections at the time, it does not seem that ASEAN had the effective power to coerce Chinese politics. It is true that ASEAN opposition hindered Chinese bilateralism in SECS, but it would have not been able to prevent Chinese progressive expansion in this Sea (as it was happening before 1995). Consequently, China could have maintained its despotic character. This terror policy, following the Paracels 1974 or the Mischief 1995 conflicts, would have unambiguously provided China with better results and further conquests in the short run. But at the same time, it would have provided China not only with regional but global condemn for its foreign policy. Indeed, and even if this argument requires us to visit the ground of counter factuality, if China had maintained its policy, it is very likely to assume that other global powers as the United States and Japan would have intervened much earlier in the conflict. This intervention would have largely diminished Chinese ambitions of controlling the SECS reaching a situation of blockage, given the military superiority of the US at the time. ASEAN-Chinese crisis was paradigmatic of China's international position at the end of the century. Chinese authorities—under Jiang Zemin government—self-realized this scenario and made a brave decision when deciding to initiate a shift in Chinese narrative that will be concluded by Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping. China could have adopted other possible strategies, based or not on a change of narrative; but unlikely any other roadmap could have provided them with better results.

This new narrative soon yielded China with important returns. For instance, in economic terms, this openness increased FDI into China by more than 300% since 2000. Exports have increased by a factor of 7 and imports by a factor of 8 (Trading Economics, 2019). In socio-political terms, China has gained too an important representation in the international arena. In 1966 it was only present in 1 IGO and 58 INGO; while by 2000 it was already present in more than 50 IGO's and 1275 INGOs (Kent, 2013). This global trend also had an impact on Sino-ASEAN relations. This shift allowed China to regain the confidence of its regional partners by accepting the yoke of multilateralism. This renewed confidence was stated in the Joint Communiqué of 1998 and the Declaration of Conduct 2000 (DOC). At the time, China's sudden change in mentality, made regional

neighbors believe in a material resolution of the conflict. Many governments interpreted this shift as a triumph of the liberal order, and many were expecting China to progressively succumb to the international duties of a responsible stakeholder (Han, 2017). China was following the liberalization path previously walked by many other emerging economies. However, China's plans had very little to do with a liberal shift in values or with a reorientation from a unilateral realpolitik to a liberal interpretation of international relations.

China's intentions were very different. In fact, it has systematically attempted to use this regained peaceful status structured through the embracement of multilateralism and supported by the pillars of financial investments, education and media; for the acquisition of its realpolitik expansionist aims. One of its main goals is to redirect traditionally liberal institutions from the inside to create a new global order based on China's rather than America's primacy (Feigenbaum, 2017). China is willing to create a more favorable institutional and legal framework scenario which provides it with more benevolent contexts. China is not embracing multilateralism as part of an assimilation process to the Western liberal order but as a deep-level strategy to redefine regional and global power.

In this sense, gray areas, as presented by Pejsova (2016), are the favorite playgrounds of China. Gray areas are usually described as swampy ground. Fields, where international legislation is not clear, not specific or western powers do not perform an active role. These gray areas can either be physical such as the Middle East, Hong Kong or the SECS; or figurative as cyber-legislation, out-space legislation or maritime legislation (UNCLOS).

China cleverly takes advantage of its prominent status as *peaceful emerging superpower* for imposing its interests on these areas in the absence of western consensus. While it maintains a peaceful narrative on mainstream general agreement issues (i.e.: economic openness); China usually conducts more defying actions, less South-to-South friendly, on these fields for minimizing the erosion to its narrative (Pejsova et al., 2016). This combination of friendly narratives in mainstream issues with an active challenging attitude on gray areas has provided China with key successes. Good examples of this success might be the de facto recognition of Chinese primacy in the SECS by its counterparts; its unquestionable leadership within international organizations; and we could even consider as a victory the recent American rebalance in SEA (South East Asia) as a proof of Chinese increasing political and military control over the area (Rudd, 2013).

Although the internal effects of the election of this narrative are not presented in this article, it is interesting to understand the domestic effects of this strategy. Indeed, the strategy does not only benefit China as a state but also the CCP as an independent actor. The linkage between CCP and the peaceful imperial narrative is very tight. Given the progressive openness of China and the increasing critics to the Chinese government, the narrative stands not only as a tool for CCP but as the very essence of Chinese domestic policy. This policy seeks to convince the Chinese population about the truly liberal welfare (against corrupted western vision of welfare) delivered by the Government.

Throughout this section we have minutely analyzed the content, origin, development and motivations behind our second hypothesis H2: "the election of a South-to-South narrative was based on a pure realpolitik approach." The content of this hypothesis will be

subsequently contested in Section 6, analyzing the evolution of every component of Chinese narrative on the South East China Sea.

Section 4: The unexpected realpolitik effects of Chinese narrative. Discussing H3.

It is time to present then, our third and final hypothesis H3: This narrative has effectively constrained—restricted the maneuverability of—the traditional flexible realpolitik of the Chinese Government. This hypothesis revolves around the potential substantial effects of the narrative on the traditional quasi-perfect Chinese realpolitik. This section turns out to be extremely interesting because it underlines the fact that the way we present information may have a real impact on the reality we described.

Besides the numerous benefits that this strategy has offered to China, the election of this narrative has also provided it with some backlashes. Chinese authorities might have underestimated the potential short-run cost of engaging into this narrative. Indeed, pretending to be good might have been unexpectedly costly for China as in many occasions it has had to settle for suboptimal achievements for the good and welfare of the narrative. Moreover, unlike traditional isolated and specific policies enacted by the Chinese government, which could be immediately revoked, the implementation of this narrative requires long-term consistency.

A narrative based on the opulence associated to Chinese expansion demands consistency and long-term commitments such as involvement on international liberal organizations. This process is protracted and complicated. It usually last for years until a full enrollment takes place. Beyond that, it also takes time to shift the previous global imaginary and reshape it into the desired one. An old popular saying states that “for being good, you do not only need to be good, but to look like it.” It is precisely this last part, the appearance one, the one which needs more time and patience. To successfully implement this strategy implies to consciously limit traditional flexible realpolitik. In this way, the discursive line originally embraced as a pure strategy for avoiding frontal opposition of regional and global powers regarding China’s lawfulness of expansion, has turned out to be, in some cases, a break for the realization of Chinese interests.

As a result, a self-constraining scenario emerged. Realpolitik and narrative coexist, interact, and constrain each other; creating an organic dynamic with frequent paradoxical outcomes. Long lasting narrative can be easily wiped out by a single realpolitik action outside of the framework. And analogously, South-to-South narrative only results effective if it can stifle every realpolitik outside the parameters established by the liberal narrative. Note that this model successfully interprets the apparent irrationality of Chinese actions in the international arena. Irrational actions are not due anymore to lack of experience or improvisation as suggested by Metcal or Christensen, but they are the result of two antagonistic forces which struggle to coexist. Nevertheless, unlike previous models claiming for a pure realpolitik approach where absence of internal coherence is expected; this interpretation provides with a more wholesome conception of Chinese foreign politics. Chinese politics are not substantiated on the juvenile character of an incipient actor which debates between authoritarianism and liberalism; but on the complex interrelation between a liberal narrative and an imperialistic aim. This analysis offers the reader also the possibility to disentangle the counteracting effects of narrative

and aggressive realpolitik. Moreover, as every organic process, it is linked to current international context, hence the intensity of the two compounding factors vary accordingly. On Section 6 complete dynamics of realpolitik and narrative will be described.

Lastly, it is also interesting to understand that this framework is likely to be long-lasting.

China has unquestionably found a vein of gold and prosperity in this narrative, whose current benefits largely exceed the losses derived from political constraints. As a result, and given the current international situation, it is likely that China will maintain this strategy in the short, medium and even long run. Some of the current events sustaining this claim are: (a) Current Sino-American tensions, reactivated with American rebalance in 2014 and revived Chinese assertiveness in SECS. China has found international protection under *the narrative*; thus, it is willing to keep using it for guaranteeing international condemn to the US in case a direct conflict takes place (Swaine, 2015). (b) The development of OBOR largely demands the maintenance of this narrative. Chinese megalomaniac initiative of connecting Eastern Asia with Europe through Sea and Land has been perceived with increasing suspicion by European and American leaders. A solid narrative, claiming for purely mutual socioeconomic benefits associated with this initiative and lack of imperialistic political ambitions, turns out to be crucial. Given the long run component of this project and the size of Chinese investments, it is very likely to see this narrative as a long-lasting structure. Moreover, as presented before, BRI is simply the material realization of the metaphors invoked by the Chinese government. BRI and South-to-South narrative feed each other, assuring synergy and mutual dependence (Han, 2017). (c) Despite the important advances in the SECS, the Conflict remains immutable and unlikely to get resolved in the medium run as presented by Swaine (2015). The big successes achieved by China since 2013 in this area, through the combination of narrative and sporadic use of force (realpolitik), seem to justify the likelihood of a continuous frame. (d) Finally, and although it will not be further analyzed in the present article, it is important to underline the Chinese government image washing necessities against current levels of internal violence and internal repression. Re-education camps in Xiguan, Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong, escalating tension between Beijing and Taiwan... Despite the efforts of Chinese authorities for keeping these incidents away from public scrutiny, China's image has recently further deteriorated. As a result, China is willing to keep using this soft-power narrative as a tool not only at the international level but also at the national one (Shambaugh, 2017). This justification is tightly related with the considerations concerning the tight relation between CCP and the narrative.

Throughout this publication, we have proven the imperial component of Chinese actions. Later, we have challenged traditional assumptions regarding substantial differences between Chinese Imperialism and traditional Empires. Indeed, the perceived differences could be explained by discursive rather than material differences. China is using a South-to-South narrative as a novel component for the consolidation of its imperial practices (H1). The motivation, origins and implications of this narrative have been minutely analyzed (H2), and eventually several realpolitik concerns regarding the self-constraints derived from Chinese auto-imposed narrative have been discussed (H3). In conclusion,

some of the main benefits brought by this approach compared to traditional narrow analyses of Chinese international personality have been exposed. In this way, the construction of our theoretical framework can be concluded. From now on, this article will focus on testing this framework in the South East China Sea Conflict. First, a brief description of the conflict, main events and positions of the different contenders will be exposed. After that, the same structure and logical procedures invoked during the presentation of the theory (H1-H2-H3) will be followed, testing in this way the main prescriptions of the model.

Section 5: The South East China Sea as Testing Ground

The South East China Sea will be used as the geographical testing arena for the framework explaining Chinese Imperial Narratives. The South East China Sea or Simply South China Sea (SECS) can be characterized in geographical terms as the waters enclosed between the landmasses and archipelagos of Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, Brunei and Taiwan. However, as it will be analyzed below, this geographical conception of the SECS as a pure set of minor archipelagos, islands and water is highly reductionist and hides the sentimental and historical component of this area (Hui-Yi, 2016). This perspective, referred in the literature as Critical Geopolitics, will be central for understanding Chinese narratives on SECS. However, before even proceeding to analyze the scope and evolution of the conflict taking place in SECS (SECSC) it is important to understand why anyone should be interested in it. SECSC constitutes a paradigmatic example of Chinese expansionism and its use of the narrative for shifting the dynamics of the conflict; nonetheless, this approach, still leaves unattended questions like: why shall we bother to analyze the internal dynamics of this conflict, or why it shall be used as a testing ground instead of other major conflicts involving China?

The reasons are intrinsically related to the material and geopolitical importance of the region. In economic terms, it is part of the main trade route connecting Eastern Asia with Middle East oil, but also Chinese manufactures with global markets. According to the Congressional Research Service, it is estimated that around 5.3 trillion dollars pass every year through its waters. It also constitutes one of the biggest fisheries reserves in the whole world—around 10% of global fisheries are located here—(NYT, 2016). In this sense, SECS turns out to be important in environmental and cultural terms—given the tight link between traditional fishermen and these waters—not only in economic ones. Moreover, recently, huge deposits of oil and gas have been discovered in the region. Estimations largely differ across actors, but it is estimated that between 11 and 125 million barrels of oil could be encapsulated in this Sea³.

To this economic value, it should be added the geopolitical importance of this area, as it constitutes the principal connection between the Pacific and the Indic oceans. Moreover, since World War II (although this trend could easily be tracked back until the Spanish arrival to Philippines in the 17th century) this region has been a frequent scenario for confrontations between the western liberal order and regional Asian powers. Indeed, the US, aware of the crucial role of this region, developed a complex net of alliances in the

³ Estimations largely differ because they are provided respectively by the American Ministry of Energy and the PRC Ministry of Geological Resources and Mining, obviously with political intentions.

area—including Philippines and Vietnam—for containing Chinese expansion (Chiang, 2015).

The South East China Sea Conflict is considered to be one of the Top-Ten Peace and Security Issues according to the IPI Global Observatory. Many will argue that every clash involving a Global Superpower as China or the US, should deserve this categorization. However, the true relevance of this issue does not only rely on its actors but on its nature, on its potential effects and on the global and regional imbalances it could potentially generate. For understanding all the different pieces of this puzzle, a brief presentation of the conflict should be given.

Although there existed different claims and conquests of the islands contained in this Sea throughout the centuries; for the scope of this article we will only analyze their evolution since WWII. During WWII, Japan takes control of the Paracel and the Spratly islands, the two biggest archipelagos in the region, pleading its unoccupied status⁴. However, after Japanese Empire defeat in 1945, Japan will be obliged to abandon these islands. This surrender was confirmed in the Treaty of San Francisco 1951. Nonetheless, the resolution did not provide with further information regarding the new status of the islands or its new sovereign holder (Severino, 2010).

Since 1947, and officially since 1949, the Popular Republic of China (PRC) will claim sovereignty of this territory based on the pledged discovery of the islands and a series of expeditions which date back to first century BC. Once more, Confucian interpretation of Chinese politics appears. According to Confucian interpretation about jurisdiction over certain territory; there is no need to prove continuous control over it. Indeed, punctual control of a territory, not challenged back or claimed by any other power, will be enough for guaranteeing the possession of a certain territory (Li, 2010). Moreover, if this fact is interpreted along with the continuist conception of China, which presents itself as the same political entity as the Ancient Chinese Empire, it is conceivable to understand the reasons supporting the revindication.

Note that this Confucian interpretation, is contrary to the Western conception of legitimacy and sovereignty over a territory, which demands consistent and uninterrupted control over a territory. Indeed, this Western vision is supported by International Institutions and more importantly by UNCLOS, the most complete International Treaty on the Law of the Sea. This Treaty has been ratified by around 150 states including China.

China used this Confucian argument together with some further historical reasons of dubious veracity (Li, 2010)—as historical Chinese fishing in the area—for claiming almost the entire area in 1949. China's claims were summarized into a famous map sponsored by Zhou Enlai, Mao Zedong Minister of Foreign Affairs (Severino, 2010). This map is usually referred in the literature as the Cow Tongue or the Nine Dashes Line (although originally it contained eleven dashes). This set of nine lines encloses more than 90 percent of the SECS and obviously interferes with the basic principles concerning regional waters and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) enunciated in UNCLOS.

⁴ although it has been proven that French established control and manage certain functions in the area way before the Japanese conquest

Chinese claims, however, remained largely unattended by the international community, and in the Geneva Accords of 1954, resolution which ended the First Indochina War, it is agreed to deliver the Paracel and the Spratly islands to South Vietnam. Its sovereignty will remain undisputed—despite the latent ambitions of PRC for more than 20 years—. Nevertheless in 1974, taking advantage of the favorable development of the Vietnam War and the difficulties confronted by South Vietnam for effectively controlling its Pacific possessions, China invaded the Paracel Archipelago. Since then, the CCP will consider the Paracel as undisputed Chinese territory (and despite the continuous claims of Vietnam) over this set of islands, *in practice*, all the regional powers seem to accept Chinese control over the Paracels (Scott, 2012). Not because of agreement, not because international resolutions, not even because of convenience or trade-off of interests, but because the unquestionable Chinese military supremacy in the area and the centrality of the Paracels for the Chinese Government. The status of the Paracel seems “not even negotiable” for China. (Chi Kin Lo, 2003)

Since then, and despite the involvement of new regional powers into the conflict as Malaysia or Philippines (which basically claimed some rights over the Spratly Archipelago), the area has presented since 1974 a quasi-peaceful status peppered with continuous minor armed conflicts between China and Vietnam. At this time, as previously claimed, a stalemate situation took place. China’s expansionism clashed with ASEAN frontal opposition to Chinese violence and unpredictability. Indeed, and despite Chinese military superiority, very little advances took place in the region. This apparent stability was challenged by violent punctual episodes such as the Johnson Reef incident between China and Vietnam, which finished with the Chinese invasion of the archipelago (1988), and the Mischief Reef incident confronting China and Philippines (1995) with similar results.

It is then, in the middle of this escalating spiral of violence, mistrust and very little progress, that China will unexpectedly perform a global shift regarding its approach to international relations. It was the origin of the Peaceful Eastern Empire narrative.

Under this new personality, major improvements took place. After minor agreements in 1992 (Manila Declaration) and 1995, eventually in 2002 the first multilateral agreement sponsored by ASEAN and signed by China was released (Scott, 2012); it was the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). As presented in the Declaration, the intention of the resolution was to “REAFFIRM their determination to consolidate and develop the friendship and cooperation existing between their people and governments with the view to promoting a 21st century-oriented partnership of good neighborliness and mutual trust.” Many authors (Amer, 2015) correctly pointed out the existence of big limitations in the agreement. However, at the time, it was presented with enthusiasm; as for the very first time an ambitious multilateral agreement concerning peaceful resolution of conflicts including the presence of China was approved.

This collaborative trend was maintained during the first decade of the century. A good example of this regained confidence was portrayed on the Tripartite Agreement for Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking in the Agreement Area in the South China Sea, signed on March 14, 2005. According to this agreement the governments of China, Philippines and Vietnam—through its national oil companies PETROVIETNAM, PNOC and CNOOC—

agreed on the common extraction of fuel resources. This agreement lasted for three years and proved the decided willingness of China to sustain its regained peaceful status (Ramses, 2015). This apparently peaceful status was achieved and reinforced through a series of white-papers, collective resolutions, protocols and Codes of Conduct. ASEAN (with Chinese compliance) was attaining to maintain a status quo in the area, a progressive demilitarization of the islands and peaceful resolution of emerging conflicts.

In this way, China was day-by-day gaining international confidence and trust; however, this trust diluted in a sudden after just a decade of cooperation. China's despotic power reappeared with regained intensity. Once China considered it held enough power and centrality within ASEAN (and other regional liberal organizations), it seemed to forget its role as a responsible stakeholder and recuperated its ambitions in the region: The Scarborough incident of 2011 (confronting China and Philippines), the construction of artificial islands neighboring the Vietnamese Spratlys, the increasing militarization of the region, limitations to freedom of navigation, the increasing presence of the United States in the region for assuring the rights and liberties of its Pacific allies, Chinese claims for Air Identification Zone, Philippines-China litigation...

As it can be seen, China's attitude in the region experienced a flow evolving from an aggressive (1949-1990s); to a collaborative role (late 1990s-2010); and finally to a regained assertive position in the region (2010-present). So, a key question arises: How can this new theoretical framework explain the evolution of events in the SECS?

But before this question is finally solved—for the convenience of the reader—the current positions of the different actors involved in the conflict will be briefly presented. At first, it is important to differentiate between claimant and non-claimant actors. Among the claimant countries the positions of China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam and Philippines will be presented and among the non-claimants the positions of the United States, Japan and ASEAN will be debated. The revindications of the claimant actors are essentially limited to their territorial claims although broader claims concerning the exploitation of resources and collective security should also be considered. Among all the different revindications, Chinese Cow's Tongue is unambiguously the most ambitious, especially if accounting for the physical distance between Chinese coast and the claimed territories. Vietnam and Philippines are the two other major claiming contestants. Their claims, however, enjoy stronger legal, historical and international support. Eventually, the claims of Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan are mostly limited to their continental shelf and enjoy strong legal support but very little political and military endorsement.

It should be argued though that limiting the extension of its claims to a strictly materialistic scenario is short-sighted (Severino, 2010). For Philippines, this Sea was the entry point used by the Japanese during WWII; for Vietnam, the SECS is the only space for avoiding Chinese suffocation; for Malaysia, the SECS separates East and West Malaysia; and for Brunei or Taiwan, these waters are a potential life-jacket of resources against the rising power of its neighbors. Fear, defense and national identity are feelings which cannot be encapsulated on material claims, but which matter a lot when conducting national policy (Auerbach, 2005). Critical geopolitics in this area are extremely important for China as well. Despite the null international support for Chinese claims, China has maintained historical emotional connection with these waters. This connection is so deep

that the Chinese government ambitions to redefine the SEC as the maritime hub of its Asian policy. Unsurprisingly, Chinese naval strategy was already shifted in the eighties by Liu Huaqing (former Commander in Chief of Chinese navy) using SEC as a central part within this maritime expansion plan (Buszynski, 2012). For China this Sea stands as the link between its glorious Imperial past and a new golden future. China's land has been incorporated into national identity (especially since the Japanese invasion during WWII). In this sense, challenging the sovereignty of China over its land, it is not an attack against the material importance of the territory, but against Chinese identity (Auerbach, 2005). That is why, China and its regional neighbors are so reluctant to reach a material division of the Sea. Land can embody larger importance than the sum of its material components. Precisely in this context of intangible feelings, Chinese narrative once more plays a decisive role, which seeks to shape the nationalistic feelings of the different countries into a shared Asian consciousness of Chinese primacy.

Concerning the position of non-claimants, it is important to present and understand the different economic and geopolitical motivations behind them. In the case of Japan, these are justified by the large Japanese dependence to fuel, gas and goods that are shipped through these waters. Moreover, Japan observes with fear the increasing military power of China, its principal rival. If China succeeds to control this Sea, Japan will be very much constrained by Chinese hegemony. Regarding the United States, and besides the importance of the involved economic components (such as the numerous American companies directly and indirectly dependent on the status of this Sea), interests are mainly geopolitical. South East Asia has been traditionally an American-influence territory throughout the whole twentieth century and especially since WWII. First as a containing wall against the Soviet Union and then against Chinese expansionism. Not surprisingly, the US maintains a very active system of alliances in the region (Vietnam, Philippines, Taiwan...) which seeks to conserve American primacy in the region. However, increasing Chinese political and military power have challenged this hegemony. Many authors even sustain that American primacy in South East Asia is purely illusory (Krepinevich, 2015). Despite its still hiding status, China governs *de facto* the region through a complex system of Collaborative Programs, military actions and political influence. For containing this trend in 2014, Obama led a rebalance of troops and budget from the Middle East to the SECS.

Mutual fear has maintained both actors, China and the US, cautious but defying. A militarization race has taken place in the region without a direct clash between both powers. Nonetheless, Chinese hegemony is so clear and uncontested in the area that many scholars wonder for how long this situation could be maintained. This modern Thucydides trap is explained by the suffocating reality confronted by the United States which must decide whether to confront China as an underdog for maintaining its status, or to assume Chinese superiority as a regional (and possibly global) leader. None of the alternatives seem favorable for the American government; what sustains a fragile equilibrium in the region based on non-direct confrontation (Swaine, 2015).

Finally, ASEAN's interests obviously advocate for a peaceful resolution over this Sea which minimizes economic and political costs. ASEAN interests traditionally have stood against Chinese expansionism, promoting multilateralism and collective bargaining. Note though, that diverse positions exist within ASEAN, as on earth it is simply a

socioeconomic organization of sovereign South East Asian countries. Indeed, we can differentiate between openly Chinese rivals as Vietnam and Philippines, quasi-neutral countries as Thailand and openly Chinese allies as Laos and Cambodia (Han, 2017). This idiosyncrasy provides ASEAN with confronting interests on SECS as it will be described in Section 6.

Once our geographical, historical and contextual framework has been established, we will proceed to test our hypothesis, assumptions and prescriptions in this conflict. In order to successfully challenge our hypothesis, the same internal structure will be disposed. First, we identify the imperial behavior of China in this Sea, secondly we confront Chinese imperialism in the region with other forms of imperialism, thirdly we analyze the implementation of the Chinese narrative on the SECS and eventually we discuss the paradoxical outcomes of the organic dynamics between opposing narrative and realpolitik.

Section 6: South East China Sea as testing ground.

Section 6.1. Chinese imperialism in SECS: Chinese Discursive Differentiation. Testing H1.

For consistently testing the imperial component of Chinese actions the same dual approach will be implemented. A ratzelian materialistic approach suggests that China acts as an organic entity that expands for the satisfaction of the increasing necessities of its population. These dynamics are unambiguously true for the conflict at issue. As presented in section 5, SECS is rich in oil and gas and provides with abundant fisheries for consumption. Zweig and Bi (2005) correctly point out that China is immersed in a global hunt for the securitization of energy supplies. Recent studies suggest that this region could contain massive amounts of unexploited fuel resources of great utility for Chinese interests. Since the discovery was produced, China intensified its efforts and presence in the area. Moreover, the SECS stands as the main line of communication between the Middle East and Chinese coast, principal route for the supply of oil. Controlling this Sea means reassuring Chinese industrial global supply chain against the attacks of the US and against piracy.

Some authors (Gonzalez, 2019) claim for the specialty of Chinese imperialism in this region, because imperial powers rarely invest so much energy in the control of an unpopulated territory. However; this claim ignores the ratzelian interpretation of Imperialism. China, as a living entity, seeks to satisfy its necessities (lack of energy supplies). China has an abundant labor force which does not need to be expanded, consequently incorporating new populations is not a necessity for China. The fact that China pursues an uninhabited territory has nothing to do with a new form imperialism but with the different needs exhibited by the metropolis. Traditionally, empires have been characterized by its western nature and consequently they have always tried to expand its limiting factor: population. Nevertheless, China does not present this specificity and consequently, it does not strive to enlarge its population.

The second framework of imperialism enunciated in the theory was based on Reeves's ideas. Reeves presents four pillars, openly recognized by the Chinese government, as structuring principles of its international-expansionist ambitions. (1) From an economic perspective, China ambitions to present the claiming countries as beneficiaries of Chinese

supremacy in the SECS. A pragmatic example is China-Vietnam relationships. Vietnam is the recipient of astronomical FDI quantities from China and recently it has been included within the One Belt One Road Initiative. Vietnam dependence to Chinese economic structures is so intense that its political actions get constrained by the “economic prosperity” brought by Chinese investments.

“According to the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, the total registered capital from China (excluding Taiwan) in Vietnam amounted to US\$700 million in 2011. By 2018, the registered capital of China had reached over US\$2.4 billion, a threefold increase sustained by an average annual growth rate of about 18%” (ISEAS, 2019).

(2) Regarding the diplomatic structure between China and *colonies* enacted by CSP and based on bilateralism, SECS proved to be a paradigmatic example too. Nevertheless, the dynamics of this process are so important and complex that they will be minutely analyzed subsequently.

Finally, the ideological component of Chinese imperialism (the Chinese Dream (3) and the Chinese Rejuvenation Program (4)) need to be presented. China has constantly exhibited the Chinese Dream speech—ideological support of Xi’s government—which redefines traditional Chinese communism in terms of a novel Chinese narrative. China has frequently used this speech for the creation of an eastern identity which places China in the middle of this imaginary. In the 22nd ASEAN Conference in Thailand in April 2019, Li Keqian, Premier of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, stated the following: “Since the inception of our dialogue relationship in 1991, China and ASEAN have forged ahead side by side with mutual support. We have (...) together contributed significantly to the stability and prosperity in East Asia. (...) President Xi Jinping called for building a closer China-ASEAN community with a shared future.

By enhancing political mutual trust, we have upheld regional peace and stability. We have always respected each other and treated each other as equals. We embrace good neighborliness and emphasize common ground over disagreements.”

Li follows the narrative previously described, seeking to create an imaginary based on concepts as *eastern*, *shared future* or *Chinese centrality*. All these seek to redefine individual national feelings in favor of a common Asian identity of strong Chinese primacy.

All the mentioned pillars and strategies intended to create asymmetric structures of power between China and colonies. These structures generate long-term trends of subjugation and dependency coercing the political freedom of the receiving countries.

As presented in the theoretical section, Chinese imperialism can be confirmed at least in the broad terms previously identified in Section 1. Both, a theoretical ratzelian approach and a praxis level approach verify this intuition. Once the imperial component of our subject has been tested, we will seek to prove the inexistence of material differences between Chinese Imperialism in SECS and traditional forms of imperialism performed by other actors. The strategy will be identical to the one used for the construction of our theoretical framework. We will first challenge the economic novelty of Chinese imperialism and then the non-violence of Chinese actions.

Concerning the economic claim, it sustains that China departs from traditional forms of imperialism precisely through the novel use of FDI as a political tool. In fact, it has already been proven wrong using an OBOR-Marshall plan comparison and presenting Chinese political control of Vietnam or Philippines through FDI. Here, a further example concerning Chinese-Cambodian relationships is discussed. Despite not sharing borders, China and Cambodia have historically maintained political and commercial bonds. More recently, China has supported Cambodia as a counterbalance to Vietnam increasing power and its rapprochement to the US. Since 2006 (O'Neill, 2014), China has invested more than a billion dollars on Cambodia and has strongly invested in Cambodian infrastructure as part of OBOR. Commerce between the two regions has also increased by 700 percent from 2006 to 2016. Unsurprisingly, China has signed too a bilateral Comprehensive Partnership of Cooperation (CCP) program which guarantees Chinese presence in Cambodia. All this support clearly is not a blank check for Cambodian government which has been subjugated to Chinese interests numerous times. In 2012, Cambodia used its hosting status to veto—for first time in 45 years—a resolution of the ASEAN Conference. The reason was the *language concerning South East China Sea* (Otto, 2016). More recently in 2016, Cambodia deadlocked again ASEAN resolution because of its prescriptions concerning SECS despite the pressure it received from its regional partners.

The interpretation of this event is clear. China uses FDI as a coercive tool for the imposition of its interests and the redefinition of international organizations. In this way, it creates more favorable scenarios for the implementation of its expansionist policies in the SECS and others. There is no need to say that these practices (despite the fact that they may provide with some welfare to the recipient country in the short and middle run) highly resemble American and Soviet actions in peripheric countries during the Cold War. The structuration of loans and FDI could be different and spill more or less welfare among the recipient countries, but the ontology remains untouched: Favorable financial conditions to impoverished economies in exchange of political alignment.

Proving Chinese violence either from an indirect or direct perspective in SECS is actually not very complicated. Following the development of the peaceful narrative, it is possible to differentiate three main stages. These stages will be deeply analyzed in next paragraphs, but so far, it suffices to show the evolution of Chinese violence according to this temporal frame. On stage one, since WWII to 1990s, China behaves as an *old empire*. Brute use of force, disproportionate violent responses and chaotic policy which awoke the unease of ASEAN and the international community. During this stage, Chinese policy could be summarized in a succession of minor armed conflicts with disproportionate use of violence and assertive expansionism. The conquest of Paracels 1974 or the Johnson South Reef incident with more than sixty mortal victims are good examples of the indiscriminate use of violence by Chinese authorities. During the second stage 1990s to 2010s, stage of implementation of the new narrative, China abandons direct physical violence in SECS. Over this stage, China reinforces its indirect violence schemes through the pillars and strategies already defined, which tried to limit the potential development of the recipient countries and exacerbate internal discrepancies. As accurately presented by Cheah (2000) in South-Eastern Asia and The Morais (2011) in Angola, China tends to benefit certain elites or identities at the expense of a popular majority. These internal dynamics erode the overall development of the country while enriching local leaders (mostly with a

colonial heritage) and Chinese investors. Unsurprisingly, Chinese minorities in these countries have faced prosecution, stigmatization and marginalization like the ones described by Cheah (2000) as a response to the macro inequalities brought by Chinese investors. These structures resemble traditional colonial practices such as the ones developed by European colonial Empires and more recently by the Soviet-American duo. Enrich a local minority which ensures the administrative control of the area, while extracting and exploiting a popular majority. As widely presented in the literature (Brunk, 2008), these structures are violent in essence and proscribe similar if not deeper damage to the colonized population, even if episodes of direct violence do not take place. Finally, from 2010s to current days, China has regained a direct violent character while maintaining unaffected the asymmetric structures developed in the previous stage. This new violence wave is materialized through further land and water reclamations, increasing militarization of the SECS and new minor conflicts as the Scarborough incident between China and Philippines in 2012.

Again, the scope limitations of this strategy is acknowledged. This reductionist approach might err on simplicity but solidly contests two of the most spread mistakes concerning Chinese imperialism interpretation. From these paragraphs we can extract strong intuitions proving the violent component of Chinese expansionism and the absence of material differences between China and previous forms of imperialism, also in SECS.

Nevertheless, if assuming this first part of the argumentation as correct, similar concerns, to the ones previously, exposed emerge: If no substantial differences between Chinese imperialism and former imperial actors exist, which factor explains our corrupted vision of Chinese practices in SECS? As defended before, the responsible for this perversion is the narrative enacted by the Chinese government.

China has continuously stood in favor of an Asiatic identity of Chinese primacy. If China performs well, then Asia performs well. Note that this discourse is incredibly dangerous as it ambitions (1) to redefine and reduce complex Asian dynamics into a unique identity under Chinese influence and (2) silences alternative actors and processes which provides with development to the continent. This speech is fully consistent and coherent under the Chinese narrative umbrella. First by claiming an Asian identity, rather than a strictly Chinese identity, China assumes an equal-to-equal position rather than a top-down paternalistic approach. Second, by vindicating an Eastern nature, China ambitions to appeal to the feelings of nations which suffered from cruel western colonialism, and whose effects are still present in their impoverished societies. And finally, shared opulence seeks to underline the (un) existent possibility of mutual benefit if the countries assume the Chinese yoke. A good example of this initiative is the *Sea of Cooperation* presented by Lai (2017) and recently incorporated by Chinese administration. The Sea of Cooperation initiative is a conceptual framework which presents the SECS as a meeting point between Chinese and SEA countries. This Sea can be used as a source of mutual material and sentimental gains. China has incorporated this narrative—as observed in Li Keqiang Speech—but with a subtle swift which includes the impetuosity of China governing that process and assuming a central position. Again, OBOR is depicted as the material realization of that meeting point envisioned by Han (2017). Further material policies have been implemented, always under the approval and centrality of China in very diverse fields as Environment Protection, Piracy, Collective Security... These

policies are usually sponsored or approved inside regional rather international organizations (ASEAN PSC, ASEAN SCC, ASEAN EC...) contributing to the development of the Asian narrative. As it can be seen, the only novelty introduced by the Chinese government is the incorporation of an eastern peaceful narrative, which presents China as *the first among equals*. On the other hand, China's material policies seem indistinguishable from traditional imperial actions.

Throughout the previous paragraphs it has been extensively presented, tested and exemplified the original claim H1, which states that no material differences between Chinese and traditional forms of Empires exist. Differences in perceptions can be explained by the novel use of a South-to-South narrative and not by the substantial content of the actions.

Section 6.2 Realpolitik interests in the SECS. Testing H2

In relation to the testing process of H2, this section will be especially devoted to verify the general revindications of the theoretical framework surrounding this hypothesis. Internal dynamics concerning the realpolitik decision of incorporating this narrative have already been largely debated in Section 3. However, it is still necessary to evidence broader assumptions and prescriptions derived from this hypothesis. The key query regarding this hypothesis is whether the general global dynamics of individualization and decentralization described by Cheah did take place in SEA. The answer is a sound yes. As described by Kelly Gerard (2008) in "A People-Oriented ASEAN: Rhetoric and Reality," South East Asia started in 1990s a major shift from traditional public and developmental policies governed by the State to a multilevel approach with a key role of civil society. Throughout the nineties, after turbulent postwar times which lasted for more than thirty years (Vietnam War 1955–1975, Cambodia Civil War 1967–1975, Laotian Civil War 1962–1975), the region provided global markets and global institutions with unusual prosperity and stability. This governmental stability together with the increasing hunt of new markets for Western powers promoted the outbreak of regional emerging powers. Vietnam, Laos, Philippines or Thailand among others started traveling the road previously walked by the Asian Tigers in the '80s. The rising life standards of these populations demanded coherent public policies and the progressive incorporation of the socioeconomic rights previously developed by the West. As carefully described by Gerard, the emergence of powerful civil society and the progressive development and strengthening of supranational organizations as ASEAN, conditioned the adoption of national and international politics. Civil Society claimed for peaceful and material resolutions of conflicts.

Increasing economic power of SEA countries and increasing ideological support for peaceful resolution of conflicts opposed despotic Chinese actions in the SECS until late 90s. China, which had expanded without opposition during the previous two decades given the absence of opposition, for the first time had to confront certain resistance. SEA countries' military power, notwithstanding, remained very small in comparison with Chinese forces. China could have then easily continued its expansionist process, spreading its control over more reefs and water extensions. However, this practice would have produced a global condemn, not only from Governments and IGOs, but from Civil Society.

As a result, in the second half of the 1990s, especially after globally condemned Mischief incident, China intelligently shifted its violent confrontation strategy for an “*as if peaceful*” strategy. The implementation of this strategy was based on the incorporation of a South-to-South narrative, temporal refrain from direct violence in the SECS and the use of FDI, media and education as macro-weapons for the spread of this narrative. Note, that this narrative maintained unaffected the ambitions of China in the SECS and in relation with its SEA counterparts. This narrative was designed to succeed in the late '90s and early 2000s in SEA as it targeted the rising standards of peace and coherence demanded by emerging middle classes. In addition, the anti-western and anti-colonial component of the narrative, ensured approval of governments and Asian supranational organizations which still remember the havoc originated by European and American colonialism in the region. As presented in Section 3, China embraced multilateralism and collaborated in the creation of common agreements and resolutions concerning SECS. Given the limited real power of claimant countries and ASEAN in terms of collective security at the time, it is naïve to assume ASEAN success in *Chinese Socialization* (Han, 2017). At best, it could be argued a triumph of SEA and—indirectly—global SEA countries Civil Society against the imperialistic nature of China. However, this supposition cannot be considered correct neither because currently, China enjoys more control over the SECS than the one it had before the socialization took place. Nowadays, Chinese structures of domination in the SECS are more powerful than ever.

Chinese dynamics in the region can be understood through the evolution of China-Philippines relations. Since 2001, China has maintained an active cooperation in cultural, technological, scientific and judiciary fields. This multilateral rapprochement to Philippine authorities followed the schemes celebrated by ASEAN. Parallely, China has continued its expansion in the Mischief (1995), Scarborough (2012) and very recently Reed Bank (2019) reefs. Moreover, China has systematically rejected the international arbitration process initiated by Philippines against Chinese occupation and has recently threatened Duterte’s government with a war in case of not respecting Chinese claims on the SECS. Some authors and part of the international community celebrated Sino-Philippine Memorandum of Understanding on Education Cooperation (2007), third leg of Chinese narrative, while deliberately ignoring broader imperial dynamics. Consequently, it cannot be claimed that China was forced to play according to the rules enunciated by ASEAN. China willingly used the rules proposed by ASEAN for further increasing its hegemony in the area.

It has been proven then that Western processes of liberalization and democratization, were not exclusive of Western populations but also incorporated within Eastern narratives. As a result, the election of a global Chinese narrative, based on peaceful South-to-South relations, is also coherent with the regional momentum of South East Asia. Moreover, ASEAN frontal reprobation of Chinese despotic character explains regionally Chinese adoption of a peaceful imperial narrative. In this way, H2, that is, the realpolitik component in the election and implementation of the narrative, seems solidly confirmed. There exist no evidence supporting ASEAN’s power for performing Chinese socialization process, and even if assumed, it cannot be claimed that this constitutes a success of collective against China’s expansionism. China adoption of a peaceful narrative and apparent subjugation to multilateral processes responds uniquely to individual interests and has very little to do with global liberal trends.

Section 6.3. Undesired effects of the narrative adoption in SECS. Testing H3.

Finally, in order to conclude this piece of evidence, the third hypothesis concerning the self-constraining environment derived from the complex organic interrelation between China's narrative and traditional Chinese realpolitik will be challenged.

As consistently presented in this article, China's narrative is far from purely discursive; in fact, it is endorsed and reinforced by material components. These components are extremely costly in economic and fiscal terms. Only in OBOR, it is estimated that between 4 and 8 trillion dollars have been invested in the initiative. Moreover, as presented by Feigenbaum (2017) it is very unlikely that this type of investment will provide Chinese manufactures with returns in the middle run. This *waste of money* is complemented with insane amounts of money used by the Chinese government in the maintenance of the official narrative: Censure and propagandistic measures. In August, China spent more than a million dollars on Facebook and Twitter for promoting positive vision of Chinese actions against Hong Kong demonstrators. These, besides costly are very unlikely to provide China with any virtual returns. Indeed, a BBC poll in 2014 proved the decaying image of China as a global actor despite the large soft-power strategy used by the Asian superpower (Shambaugh, 2015).

This wastage, despite the existent of internal censorship, has reached the Chinese population. As stated in Section 1, economic growth and efficiency stand as the main source of legitimacy and power of CCP. Consequently, the misuse of Chinese resources (despite the flexibility and confidence of the Chinese population on its governors) might encounter further resistance in the future. Besides this popular resistance, the direct cost of these investments also limits China's expenditure on different projects or fields. Indeed, according to Standard and Poors (2018) China is facing an increasing deficit which already accounts for 47.6 percent of its GDP. Moreover, S&P fears that China is hiding another 40 percent deficit in off-balance sheet deficit. Increasing resources shortfall combined with the continual necessity of providing its population with economic growth is placing China in a fragile situation with unpredictable outcomes.

Other unexpected source of problems for Chinese government is the increasing education of its younger cohorts. As exposed in Section 3, China has intensively invested in the internationalization of its students. This strategy attempted to increase Chinese human capital but also to contribute to the spread of a Chinese narrative through a micro approach. However, this diaspora has had some unintended consequences on Chinese society. These young cohorts are increasingly claiming for freedom and civil rights against the hermetic Chinese politburo. Reflections of these trends are already observed in the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong or the increasing tension in Taiwan (NYT, 2019).

Although these dynamics can be very important and undoubtedly affect Chinese domestic and international realpolitik, they simply appear to be mechanic collateral effects of the narrative. That is why, it is more interesting to analyze the potential outcomes and paradoxes of the organic interrelation between the narrative and Chinese realpolitik itself.

In this section, two different dynamics will be analyzed: the national and international paradoxical status of Chinese narrative.

At the international level, China holds a mixed status. Since the late '90s to 2010, China initiated a process of assimilation already described in previous sections. This process, although purely initiated for realpolitik concerns and in very specific areas, has effectively seized part of the historical flexibility of Chinese actions. Indeed, the deep interconnection between all these areas, usually place China in compromised situations. As a result, pretending to go through a liberalization process by entering into all these liberal institutions, might be forcing China to perform certain undesired liberal policies. These policies are not the result of a liberal conviction but the result of the partial immersion of China in the liberal order. These abstract concerns can be understood through Sino-American tensions in the SECS (Valencia, 2019). The United States, since the rebalance took place in 2014, has actively patrolled the SECS for ensuring the freedom of navigation in the region. The US claims the legality of its actions invoking the right to innocent passage of its warships without identification described in UNCLOS. This patrolling is not performed by the US because it is legal, but as a political and military challenge to Chinese authority in the region. China is a signatory of UNCLOS; thus, it does not have any legal tool for combating American provocations. China's ratification of UNCLOS responds to the liberalization process initiated in the second half of 1990s. It provided China with large benefits in terms of predictability and trust. However, despite that currently, China's hegemony in the area is uncontested, and it could effectively prevent or hinder American transit in the area; China is tied to this liberal order. China cannot defy American actions without quitting or breaking binding international legislation because it will be extremely costly in the short and medium run. From an outsider perspective, Chinese respect to international legislation could be seen as the aftermath of China's liberalization process. Nevertheless, China's performance is given by the undesired self-imposed constraints when accepting the liberal yoke. These paradoxical outcomes are more common and more intense than originally expected by the Chinese government.

As it can be seen, this framework is able to provide with certain intuition regarding the paradoxical nature of Chinese actions behind the apparent irrationality. In the terms previously described, the fact that China behaves as a responsible liberal stakeholder does not only depend on China's willingness but on an organic and shifting scenario created by its narrative.

At the national level, China presents similar incongruences. Macro liberalizing trends in terms of economic prosperity seems incompatible with Xi's increasing censorship and repression. The scope of this paper is limited to the international effect of China's policies, but it will be interesting to analyze in the future the domestic paradoxical outcomes of these two opposing forces in current phenomena as Hong Kong protests or the Taiwanese conflict. Indeed, this framework could be extended to the CCP as a major actor within China's domestic policy. The particular interests of the CCP could be added to the equation reaching more interrelated and organic frameworks.

Eventually it should be pointed out that despite the substantial constraints imposed by the Chinese narrative, China must still be considered a quasi-perfect realpolitik state. China's

government still enjoy a privileged position which provides them with unusual flexibility inside and outside the liberal order. Moreover, China has wisely selected in which areas and at which level of deepness to implement its narrative. Previously it was shown, how China tended to use the narrative more intensely in general agreement issues while maintaining a more assertive position in gray blurred areas. As a result, the implementation of the Chinese narrative can be said to be successful, as it has provided China with levels of political and economic power never seen before. In this way, we successfully finalize the exposition of the third hypothesis claiming for the existence of material constraining effects of Chinese narrative.

Section 7. Limitations and Conclusion

This study, as every comprehensive theoretical framework, presents important limitations. Concerning methodological issues, we have had important difficulties covering a vast literature and incorporating arguments from very different fields such as Economics, History, Political Science, Sociology, Media Studies... Moreover, the current component of the conflict and the continuous irruption of new information has repeatedly shifted our interpretation of previous facts. Regarding substantial issues, there may exist important concerns especially regarding the accessory arguments invoked in the article. Among them, we should underline the broadness conceptualization of empires, the simplistic comparison of Chinese imperialism with previous forms of imperialism (whose facts are usually presented without deep analysis) and the incorporation of two undisputed facts concerning Chinese sociology (the importance of perspectivism and the eternal conception of the Chinese nation). Further concerns emerge in terms of hypotheses testing. The objective of this paper was the creation of a solid theoretical framework, not that much testing the prescriptions of the model. Indeed, as in every geopolitics paper, it is impossible to identify an exhaustive (or simply large-N) set of cases for proving the validity of the argumentation.

Despite this set of limitations, appealing lines of investigation emerge. At first, further effort in the creation of wholesome models concerning Chinese politics should be invested; avoiding in this way naïve conceptions of China as a juvenile irrational actor. Moreover, this framework provides with a novel holistic approach to Chinese actions. Consequently, further testing and forecast-making can take place under this theoretical umbrella. Finally, this framework might constitute a decent starting point for the analysis of Chinese politics domestically. Obviously, this task will demand an important restructuring process in terms of the content of the narrative, its diffusion channels and the flexibility of local and regional governments. But even in the presence of these obstacles, this model stands as an appealing framework for its analysis.

Throughout the previous pages, a substantial effort has been made to develop a complete theoretical framework which explains apparently irrational Chinese international behavior. This framework seeks to avoid simplistic categorizations of Chinese actions such as *impulsive* or *improvised*. Indeed, Chinese actions respond to a deep-level interaction between an *eastern peaceful narrative* and traditional imperialistic ambitions. The election of this narrative responded to global and regional patterns that hindered Chinese expansion, especially in the South East China Sea. This narrative responds to strict realpolitik concerns, hence, it has very little to do with macro liberal socialization

trends. The adoption of this narrative sustained in the pillars of FDI, mass media propaganda and micro-educational programs has provided China with unambiguous positive effects in the SECS at the political and economic level. However, the implementation of this policy has also provided China with undesired unexpected backlashes. The nature of these inconveniences is related with the decrease in traditional Chinese flexibility. In this way, the model provides us with an appealing framework for the analysis of Chinese national and international politics. China is a big country, a complex living country, and that is just a fact.

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