

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A Critical Political Geography of China and the South China Sea Islands Dispute

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to provide an alternative viewpoint on China and the South China Sea islands dispute through the use of political geography. Specifically, this piece employs a world-systems approach and critical political geography [or critical geopolitics] to understand four phenomena: first, the political-economic rationale behind China's territorial ambitions through the nexus of its political ideology and position in the world economy; second, these ambitions using the "One Belt, One Road initiative;" third, its rise as a potential global hegemon; and lastly, the narratives behind its actions in the South China Sea islands dispute. The paper makes no claims about the superiority of world-systems and critical political geographies in explaining a state's territorial ambition or expansionary behavior. What it attempts to provide is a different, yet complementary, lens to probe issues like this, which typically are confined to the realm of traditional geopolitics or realist international relations. World-systems and critical political geography offer a promise of cogently examining regional and global issues of this nature.

**Keywords:** China, world-systems analysis, critical political geography, South China Sea islands dispute

German political geographer Friedrich Ratzel's (1897) concept of the state as an organism, posited over a century ago, resonates well into a time and place that has challenged widely held ideas of the state itself. For Ratzel, the state, like an organism, contracts and expands its territory. In an epoch where physical space is challenged by narratives of globalization, flows of information and borderless boundaries, Ratzel's pronouncements still resound. Military superpowers and their emergent counterparts are proof the United States, post-Soviet Russia, and China have

administered, annexed, disputed, or occupied territory in the post-Cold War era.

China, in particular, has become increasingly and aggressively expansionary over the past decade. The East and South China Seas have become flash points as China disputes territories with an established power in Japan, as well as small states like the Philippines and Vietnam. A wealth of literature has focused on the military capabilities of the parties involved, as supported by some variant of realist international relations theory (Chang, 2012; De Castro, 2017;

Glaser, 2011; Hsiung, 2018; Roy, 2005; Storey, 1999; Yee, 2017). There is currency in such an approach as the realist theory and its variants provide international relations with the theoretical tools to understand international conflicts and disputes in the context of statism, survival, and self-help (Baylis, Smith, & Owens, 2017).

This paper aims to provide an alternative viewpoint on China and the South China Sea dispute through a political geographic perspective. Specifically, this piece employs a world-systems approach and critical political geography [or critical geopolitics] to understand the politico-economic logic behind China's territorial ambitions through the nexus of its political ideology and position in the world economy. I analyze these ambitions using the "One Belt, One Road initiative," assess its rise as a potential global hegemon, and investigate the narratives behind its actions in the South China Sea islands dispute. While the paper does not discount the relevance of realist interpretations of the dispute, it seeks a more comprehensive understanding of the issues surrounding it. The first part of the paper provides some of the key concepts of world-systems analysis as a social theory of political geography and critical political geography. The second part is divided into four sub-sections that each reflects the discussion points above. The final section offers a short conclusion on the merits of introducing political geography to studies on the South China Sea islands dispute.

### **World-Systems Analysis and Critical Geopolitics: Key Concepts**

An ideal starting point for introducing a critical geographic approach to the South China Sea dispute is world-systems analysis. Several authors consider world-systems theorizing to be an integral part of the broad literature comprising critical political geography (Moisio, 2015; Painter, 2008), and for a good reason. World-systems analysis questions the environmental determinism that classical geopolitics posits. Likewise, its treatment of political geography is not confined solely to the nation-state. Scholars working both within and outside this tradition (Flint, 2010; Flint & Taylor, 2011, 2018; Kolossov, 2005; Howitt, 2003; Taylor, 1991, 2003) have emphasized that the different scales

in geography, or what would be slightly akin to levels of analysis in international relations jargon—local, national and international/global—cannot be isolated from one another.

A world-system, broadly defined, is a historical and social set of overlapping networks that link all units of social analysis, from households, towns, and cities, and national states to regions and global structures (Chase-Dunn & Grimes, 1995). In the context of this paper, the focus is on the nexus between the global and national. One of the main characteristics of the modern world-system and its attendant capitalist world economy is a cyclical and alternating dynamic of growth and decline (Flint & Taylor, 2011, 2018). Kondratieff waves, or K-waves, are long cycles, usually lasting 50 years, of global economic growth and the following period of stagnation and restructuring (Flint, 2010, p. 4). Patterns of growth result from periods of economic innovation, while stagnation and restructuring manifest a politics of redistribution, and interstate and interfirm competition (Flint, 2010). The concept of K-waves is not limited to economic activity. On the contrary, as a defining characteristic of world-systems, Kondratieff waves gave a critical geopolitical approach such as world-systems analysis a politico-economic logic where one could not be divorced from another. A critical geopolitical approach informed by world-systems analysis breaks down disciplinary borders between politics and economics and uses both to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of geopolitics.

Another feature of the modern world-system is its three-level structure consisting of a core, semi-periphery, and periphery. One of the leading proponents of the world-systems approach, Immanuel Wallerstein (1974/2011), conceived of the core as space where towns flourished, industries boomed, and labor specialized in diverse industries through more advanced technology, and at the expense of the periphery, among others. Wallerstein further asserted that contemporary usage of the term denotes wealth, high-technology production processes, a concentration of headquarters of multinational companies, and relatively high wages. The periphery, meanwhile, was continually exploited for its natural resources by core areas while relying on coerced or slave labor, remaining underdeveloped in the process. Many of

its contemporary characteristics are opposites of what core regions or countries have. The semi-periphery exhibited neither of the characteristics preponderant in the core and periphery and represented “a midway point on a continuum running from the core to the periphery” (Wallerstein, 1974/2011, pp. 102–103). At the same time, it was exploited by the core and exploited the periphery.

Two important takeaways emerge from the discussions of K-waves and the world-system’s three-tier structure. First, Kondratieff waves are linked to the rise and fall of hegemonies (Flint & Taylor, 2011, p. 52), of which only three have been identified in the history of the modern world-system: the Dutch Republic in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, Britain in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and the United States from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century up to the present (Wallerstein, 1974/2011). From a world-systems perspective, hegemonies “encompass dominance in economic, political and ideological spheres of activity,” (Flint & Taylor, 2011, p. 50). Their rise and decline are associated with the alternating phases of growth and decline that K-waves capture. Since the British hegemonic cycle around the late 1700s, four pairs of growth and decline have been identified (Flint & Taylor, 2011, p. 56). World-systems scholars periodize the current era as a period of hegemonic decline, where the United States is confronted with post-Cold War global political instability, the so-called War on Terror, growing anti-Americanism, and the decline in the influence of American culture (Flint & Taylor, 2011, pp. 68 & 109). A structural approach to political geography such as world-systems has prompted questions about challenges to American hegemony, even if the identity of the challenger(s) remain(s) unknown.

Second, the three-tier structure of the world economy has implications on the geography of democracies. Citing Taylor’s (1993) earlier iteration of the seminal book *Political Geography: World-Economy, Nation-State and Locality*, Painter (2008) explained that liberal democracies are more likely to be found in core states because they can allow their citizens civil and political rights. In contrast, Painter also suggested that peripheral states, owing to their show of state power through internal repression and military trappings, are the least likely to be liberal

democratic, whereas semi-peripheral states tend to be authoritarian because of their economic dynamism and use of state power to alter the world-system in their favor. These tendencies are confirmed by an empirical study on the geographical diffusion of democracy (O’Loughlin et al., 1998). O’Loughlin and his associates concluded that regional clustering is evident in the spread of democracies, which are found in core regions such as the Americas (with Mexico and Cuba as outliers), western Europe, and Australasia (O’Loughlin et al., 1998, p. 557). Arguably the only exception in this “democratic zone” is the mostly semi-peripheral region of southern Europe. The scholars likewise iterated that at the same time, an autocratic zone is contiguous from southern Africa to the Middle East, and north to Central Asia and China. Save for a handful of oil-rich, Middle Eastern states in this zone, these regions are mostly semi-peripheral or peripheral.

World-systems analysis is unapologetically a structural and materialist form of critical political geography, which also encompasses imperial, Cold War, postmodern, and anti-geopolitics, among others (Agnew, Mitchell, & Toal, 2003). At the same time, it is a branch of theorizing on its own, an analytical toolkit that challenges most of the tenets of classical geopolitics, reconceptualizes geopolitics through an inquiry into “spatial theories and assumptions that guide action in international affairs” (Moisio, 2015, p. 223). Critical political geographers ascribe a greater emphasis on agency than structure. While broad enough to include semantics, Derridean ideas of power and discourse, to name a few, critical geopolitics, for the purpose of this piece, is narrowed down to focus on how constructions of “geography” and “geopolitics” have “supervised the production of visions of the global political scene” (Ó’Tuathail, 1996, p. 52). This includes Blacksell’s (2006) statement about how cartographers can distort maps to backstop claims of legitimacy over particular territories.

Another important issue that political geographers have been grappling with is the concept of boundaries. Traditional geopolitics, as exemplified by early geographers from Ratzel, Mackinder, and Haushofer, to more contemporary “strong versionists,” has always treated boundaries as fixed entities that divide social entities and preserve territoriality (Paasi,

2003, p. 468). Anssi Paasi, one of the preeminent scholars of boundary studies, represents the pushback exerted by critical political geographers on the environmental determinism espoused by classical political geographers. Specifically, Paasi (1998) pointed out that boundaries are constructions of knowledge, narratives, and institutions; create a continuity of social interaction vital to identity construction; and are expressions of power. Borders are iterated processes that require management to manufacture a sense of unfriendliness continually or, worse, threat (Newman, 2006, pp. 152-154).

The concepts discussed above will be applied to the territorial disputes involving China and claimant states, specifically the Philippines and Vietnam, to arrive at a critical political geographic understanding of the situation. Before proceeding to the analysis, the next section details the political geographic reach of China, as shown by its behavior towards claimant states in the South China Sea.

### **Political Geography and the South China Sea Islands Dispute**

This section attempts to weave together ideas posited by world-systems and critical political geography discussed above with historical and recent events in the South China Sea dispute. The section is divided into four sub-sections: the tendency of semi-peripheral states such as China to become authoritarian states; subsequent ambitious and expansionary behavior by a semi-peripheral state in the form of China; Kondratieff waves and the rise of China as a potential global hegemon; and China's production of geopolitical representations to legitimize boundaries.

#### *A Semi-Peripheral Authoritarian State*

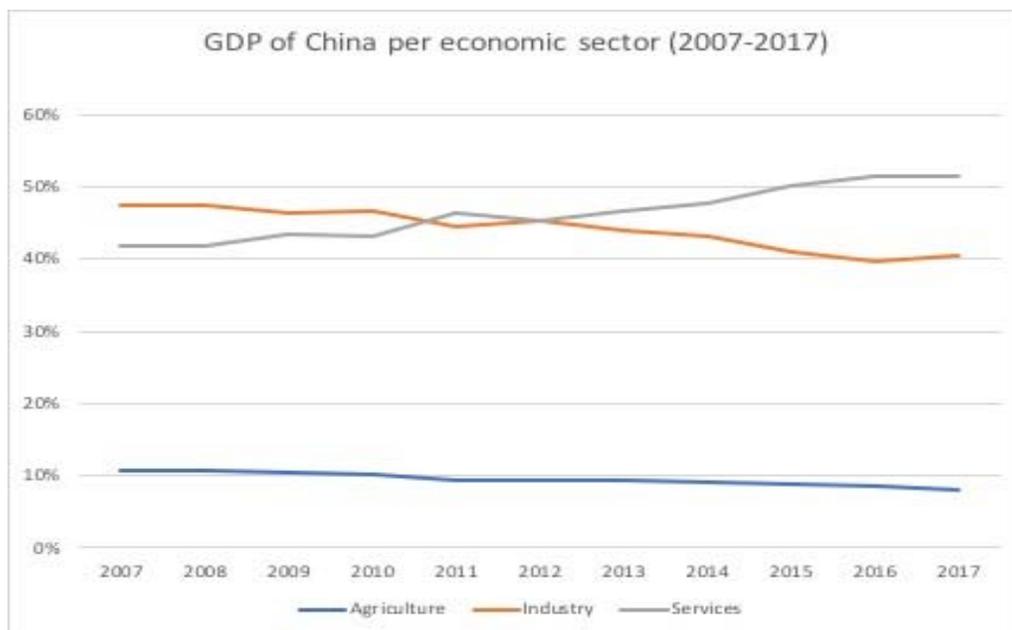
There are at least two ubiquitous conceptions of states and authoritarianism. They are prevalent in underdeveloped or the least developed states, or remnants of absolute monarchies in the international system. Five of the 10 longest-serving non-royal leaders in the world come from least developed countries, while the two longest-serving leaders, Paul Biya of Cameroon and Teodoro Obiang of Equatorial Guinea, are at the helm of underdeveloped states. Of these seven

states, Freedom House, a think tank that undertakes research and advocates democratic principles, classifies only Uganda as "partly free." The rest of the countries are considered "not free" (Freedom House, 2018). At the other end of the economic spectrum, non-elected, absolute monarchs rule some of the richest states in the world such as Brunei Darussalam, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. Also, according to Freedom House, all these countries are "not free."

From a world-systems political geographic perspective, even oil-producing states like Brunei Darussalam, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, which have amassed wealth, are still peripheral because they are primary product producers dependent on a single commodity (Hinnesbusch, 2003, p. 35). Furthermore, Hinnesbusch emphasized that "they fail to process raw materials into high-value products, their human capital remains underdeveloped, and economies are still dependent on 'core' countries for technology and manufactured goods" (2003, p. 35). Aside from dispelling the notion that all wealthy states are core states, world-systems analysis' view on the propensity of semi-peripheral and peripheral states to become authoritarian is validated.

China may not possess the per capita economic wealth of oil-producing authoritarian regimes, but is a burgeoning semi-peripheral state. As mentioned in the previous section, semi-peripheral states do exhibit characteristics of core states. In this instance, the development of high-technology industries is one of them. However, such processes are not preponderant in semi-peripheral states. They simultaneously exist with characteristics of peripheral states such as cheap labor, which are, in turn, exploited by core states.

Figure 1 shows the breakdown of China's GDP by economic sector. In a span of a decade, China's reliance on agriculture has gone down from 10.8% of its GDP in 2007 to 7.9%. This has been accompanied by an increase in services as a contributor to its economy. In 2007, services accounted for 41.9% of the Chinese economy, a number that jumped to 51.6% in 2017. Also, in the same timeframe, the country's industry share of GDP dropped from 47.3% to 40.5%. The drop has been accompanied by a fall in the manufacturing industry, which has experienced an 80% increase in wages since 2010 and stiffer geographical competition



(Source: Statista, 2018a)

**Figure 1.** Gross domestic product of China across economic sectors, 2007–2017.

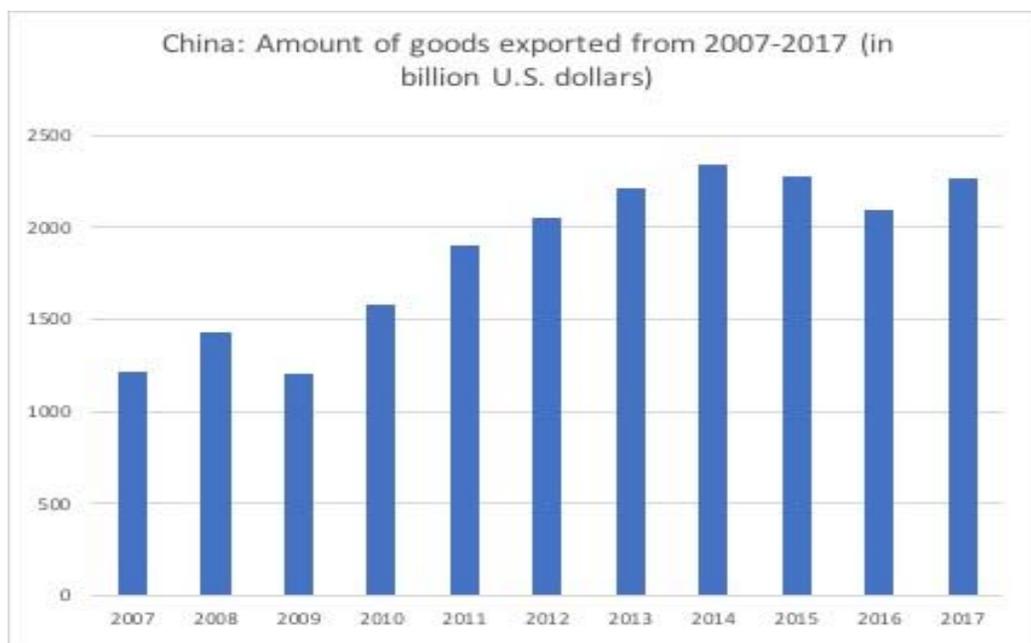
from countries with cheaper labor like Bangladesh and Malaysia (Duguay, 2018). While China remains one of the largest manufacturers in the world, its dependence on manufacturing has waned, as evidenced by the services sector making up a larger share of the country's GDP than industry.

A state's movement from the peripheral to the semi-peripheral zone of the world economy is, among others, predicated on the economic sectors that drive its economy. Peripheral states are characterized by a dependence on agriculture and cheap labor, while semi-peripheral economies are marked by more profitable economic activities and higher wages than the periphery. These phenomena are visible in China's case just in the past 10 years alone.

Furthermore, states in the three zones of the world-system are marked by their types of exports and the values attached to them. Because high-technology and cutting-edge technologies are found in the core, countries in the area profit the most from the world-system and at the expense of peripheral states, whose cheap raw materials and agricultural products fuel the core's economies.

In the "in-between" zone, semi-peripheral states have transitioned from being providers of cheap factors of production, yet still, do not possess the advanced production processes of core states. Some of the components of China's tech industry such as e-commerce and mobile payments are bigger than the United States' while being considered global leaders in cutting-edge areas like facial and speech recognition and artificial intelligence ("China's tech industry is catching up," 2018). At the same time, reports of the demise of its cheap labor workforce seem exaggerated. While its average wage level has overtaken the likes of Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico this century, its rural population remains substantially higher than the United Kingdom and United States', indicating that a large pool of labor still exists and is waiting to migrate to urban areas to drive down labor costs (Bulloch, 2017). While this is admittedly a very minuscule snapshot of the Chinese economy, it does capture some of the key characteristics that define a semi-peripheral state.

One of its manifestations, for world-systems analysis, comes in the form of value of exports.



(Source: Reproduced from Statista, 2018b).

**Figure 2.** Value of Chinese exports, in billion U.S. dollars, between 2007–2017.

Figure 2 shows the rise in the value of Chinese exports from 2007–2017. In 2007, Chinese exports were valued at US\$1.22 trillion. With the exception of three years from 2007–2017, that figure has increased every year, reaching US\$2.26 trillion in 2017, or almost double the amount from a decade before. This corroborates the earlier observations regarding the country’s greater reliance on services than agriculture and industry since the former yields bigger profits from exports than the latter two.

Thus far, the Chinese economic experience has validated its semi-peripheral status in the capitalist world economy. Politically, China is considered a nominally Communist state because of, on the one hand, its more active engagement in the capitalist world economy; on the other hand, its vertical, top-down party-driven hierarchy. According to Kaplan (2010, p. 23), what China possesses that democracies do not is a relentless dynamism in lieu of the constant temporizing that marks a democracy. This means mobilizing its people, from laborers to armies, swiftly and with far less scrutiny and politicization from governmental bureaus or legislative or judicial bodies,

for instance.

Even when taken as a standalone categorization (i.e., China as a semi-peripheral country), the semi-periphery is seen to perform a political function. According to Wallerstein (1974/2011), the political interests of the semi-periphery are outside the political arenas of those in the core. Therefore, they are seen as buffer zones between a potentially discontented periphery and the core that benefits the most from the world economy. Following this logic, semi-peripheral countries would not pose a politico-economic threat to either region, giving it greater flexibility in its geopolitical behavior.

This is where the value of the tendency of semi-peripheral states to be authoritarian could be found. Intuitively, the authoritarian character of semi-peripheral states, and its expediency and resoluteness, enables it to follow through on any plan of action. For China, this includes its expansionary territorial ambition, which can be traced back to 1935, when a government-appointed commission published a map that included the four groups of disputed South China Sea islands (Gao & Jia, 2013, pp. 101–102). Equally

important are the subsequent tangible actions China has taken, which are discussed next.

#### *Ambitious Expansionary Behavior*

Employing a world-systems political geographic approach to Chinese expansionary behavior necessitates an invocation of its broader politico-economic initiative. One such foreign policy strategy is the “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) initiative. Driven by the country’s astronomical economic growth (Zheng, 2014) and its underlying Communist Party of China-driven “China Dream” (Ferdinand, 2016, pp. 942-948), the twin components of the OBOR were unveiled by Chinese President Xi Jinping (Swaine, 2015, p. 2). These involved, first, the creation of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” connecting China with Mongolia, Central Asia, Russia, Iran, Turkey, the Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe, Germany, and the Netherlands (Ferdinand, 2016, pp. 949-950). The second component of the OBOR is the “Maritime Silk Road,” linking the southeast part of the People’s Republic with Southeast Asia, Bangladesh, India, the Persian Gulf, Mediterranean, Germany, and the Netherlands (Ferdinand, 2016, pp. 949-950). This endeavor encompasses upgraded railway routes, highways, ports, and energy pipelines; over 60 countries; and four billion people whose markets account for one-third of the world’s gross domestic product (Ferdinand, 2016, p. 950).

During the inauguration of the OBOR project, Xi, with an ode to his country’s history and influence on human civilization, declared that:

Over 2,000 years ago, our ancestors, trekking across vast steppes and deserts, opened the transcontinental passage connecting Asia, Europe and Africa, known today as the Silk Road. Our ancestors, navigating rough seas, created sea routes linking the East with the West, namely, the maritime Silk Road. These ancient silk routes opened windows of friendly engagement among nations, adding a splendid chapter to the history of human progress. (“Full text of President Xi’s speech,” 2017)

Xi further added that the “Silk Road spirit” champions “peace and cooperation,” “openness and inclusiveness,” “mutual learning,” and “mutual benefit” (“Full text of President Xi’s speech,” 2017). While couched in benevolent language, Xi’s opening statement on the OBOR harks back to a point in time where Chinese civilization influenced much of the world through land-based infrastructure and maritime pathways. Consistent with world-systems analysis’ emphasis on a long view of history, Xi’s assertions are not accidental. For him, 21<sup>st</sup> century China is attempting to reclaim the hegemonic-like status it, at the very least, tried to consolidate.

Politically, the OBOR is viewed as a means by which China could strengthen its political influence and security situation, particularly along its strategically vital periphery, while leaving the distinct possibility of using the initiative to establish “unwanted sphere of influence” or dominate its neighbors (Swaine, 2015, p. 1). Furthermore, it demonstrates China’s willingness to compete with the United States through strategic economic and military policies (Shi, as cited in Ferdinand, 2016, p. 903) while increasing Chinese interest and involvement in Eurasia, the Middle East, and North Africa (Ferdinand, 2016, p. 954). So-called non-authoritative sources (i.e., individuals not connected to the Chinese state apparatus) view OBOR as a strategy geared towards supporting President Xi’s enunciations about strengthening Beijing’s periphery diplomacy and introducing a new kind of international relations anchored on both cooperation and a zero-sum game (Swaine, 2015, p. 7). A more benevolent approach to the initiative sees China contributing to international public goods while meeting the growing global expectation of a leadership role after the global financial crisis (Wang, 2016, p. 7). What both perspectives share in common is China’s desire to fashion an outward-looking foreign policy that reflects China’s ever-strengthening central authority.

This perspective was echoed by no less than U.S. President Donald Trump. In a dinner with CEOs of prominent companies such as Pepsi, Boeing, and Ernst and Young, and senior White House officials, Trump called Xi’s plan “insulting” (Karni, 2018). Notwithstanding Trump’s seemingly benign reception of the OBOR only a year before, as manifested by

sending a U.S. representative to Xi's inauguration of the initiative (Hsu, 2017), the fact remains that the project has caught the attention of the world's preeminent superpower.

While it would be rash to describe the OBOR initiative as a provocative act, it is nonetheless China's attempt at strengthening its political and economic position in international relations. From a world-systems perspective, the initiative is the global geopolitical code that encompasses its actions in the South China Sea. Geopolitical codes are operational codes involving an evaluation of places beyond the state in terms of its strategic importance and potential threat (Flint & Taylor, 2018, p. 51). Furthermore, they operate along three scales: the local, which evaluates a state's proximate neighbors; the regional, where assessments go beyond neighboring states; and global, which requires policies impacting that scale (Flint & Taylor, 2018, p. 52). A global geopolitical code, as manifested by the OBOR initiative, must be in line with both local and regional geopolitical codes. As a local geopolitical code, China's position on the South China Sea islands dispute is in accord with its global geopolitical code. First, part of the New Maritime Silk Road segment of the OBOR initiative cuts through the South China Sea itself, where US\$3.37 trillion worth of trade passed through in 2016 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2018). Second, akin to the OBOR strategy is the People's Republic's assertiveness over territories it deems it owns. The OBOR initiative is not an exercise of annexing independent states. However, it makes known China's geopolitical reach and extent in a way that its local geopolitical code on the South China Sea does.

The OBOR initiative China's posturing has translated into a rapid expansion and infrastructure building spree in disputed South China Sea islands, spearheaded by no less than Xi himself. A top Communist Party publication lavished praise on Xi for personally authorizing building islands and consolidating reefs, which analysts see as his centralization of foreign policy to consolidate power both in and outside China (Mai & Zheng, 2017). The same Communist Party publication credited Xi with establishing the city of Sansha, which China has designated to administer the disputed territories of the Paracel and Spratly Islands,

among others, and is located in the largest of the Paracel Islands. According to the American think tank Council on Foreign Relations (2018), China has built 3,200 acres of new land since 2013. The same think tank classified the "impact on U.S. interests" as "critical" as United States' calls for free and open access to the South China Sea are challenged by China's increasing presence in the area.

The islands dispute is an example of the untenability of separating politics from economics. The inseparability of politics and economics, which leads to the very characterization of the core-semi-periphery-periphery structure, is emphasized by world-systems political geography as an important part of the current geopolitical transition (Flint & Taylor, 2011, p. 67). In other words, peripheral areas or states have the capacity to wage war with, or at the very least, contest the global order maintained by core states. This type of political geographic analysis, therefore, does not confine warfare or the sources of conflict to "great powers," which both neo-realist international relations and classical geopolitics do. World-systems analysis does not discount the possibility of semi-peripheral states challenging core countries even in issues of security and militarization.

#### *Kondratieff Waves and a Potential Chinese Hegemony*

World-systems theorists use Kondratieff waves to characterize hegemonic cycles and geopolitical world orders. K-waves consist of alternating phases of growth and decline in the world-system, based originally on Soviet economist Nikolai Kondratiev's observations on the cyclic regularity of phases of gradual increase and decline (Kondratiev, as cited in Chase-Dunn & Grimes, 2005, p. 405). For Kondratiev, the world economy manifested cyclic dynamics in the form of long-term commodity price fluctuation and foreign trade, among others (Yakovets, 2006, p. 5). Alternating phases are also driven by technological change and economic innovation, which result in trade and financial dominance (Flint, 2010, p. 8). K-waves are one of the foundational elements to contemporary world-systems thought as they account for shifts and changes to the world economy, as well as hegemonic stability and change.

The decline of British hegemony in the late 19th century was succeeded by the genesis of a hegemonic America, which, along with Germany, took the lead role in a “new” industrial revolution where steamships and gas/electric power signaled technological innovation (Flint & Taylor, 2018, pp. 24, 58). The period of American hegemony survived the Great Depression and was consolidated by victory in the Second World War before a series of economic depressions, as well the end of the Cold War, ushered in another cyclical period of decline (Flint, 2010, p. 8).

Naturally, periods of decline in the world-system prompt scholars to speculate on or even predict the succeeding hegemonic cycle and subsequent geopolitical world order. Even during the period of restructuring American hegemony, Flint and Taylor (2018, p. 55) cited Japan’s rise insofar as overtaking the U.S.’ as the leading producer of cars and trucks. The consensus is that there is no clear hegemon to replace the U.S. What is more certain, however, is that the world economy continues to undergo structural changes that undermine American hegemony and open the door to potential challengers of its hegemonic cycle.

China and its institutional-building efforts in the past two decades are reminiscent of one of the ways the United States powered its hegemonic rise, according to Flint and Taylor (2018, pp. 71-72). American hegemony was strengthened by the institutions the U.S. founded after the Second World War. It fashioned out a global economy in its own image through the Bretton Woods institutions, secured the rules of international trade by way of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and later, the World Trade Organization, and the overarching economic principles laid out by the Washington Consensus. In a similar way, China has taken a lead role in forming multilateral institutional initiatives. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, established in Shanghai in 2001, is composed of Russia and all Central Asian states except Turkmenistan. It is widely considered a Sino-Russian-led alliance that promotes cooperation in politics, trade, economic affairs, culture, education, energy, and transportation (Albert, 2015). Central to the efforts of the SCO is the focus on the Silk Road Economic Belt component of China’s OBOR, which would link China to the

Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf through Central Asia (People’s Republic of China State Council, 2015). Complementing the OBOR initiative and illustrating China’s commitment to spearheading international institutions is its creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The AIIB is seen as both an expression of China’s frustration with Western international financial institutions and a capacity to compete with the United States for greater regional influence (Dollar, 2015).

Chinese regional influence in institutions was evident in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations’ impasse in declaring a communiqué on the South China Sea islands dispute in 2016. One of its close allies in the regional organization, Cambodia, “opposed the proposed wording” of the joint statement, which included a mention of the Permanent Court of Arbitration’s favorable ruling towards the Philippines’ claim that China had infringed upon its sovereignty over various reefs in the South China Sea (Mogato, Martina, & Blanchard, 2016). Despite being a party to the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea, China refused to recognize the Hague-based Court’s authority and remained obstinate in its stance that the entire South China Sea basin is within its sovereign jurisdiction.

The concept of Kondratieff waves does not purport to predict the identity of the next hegemonic power. Rather, it is a useful analytical tool in describing structural changes to the world economy, which has served as a precedent to hegemonic decline. China, like Japan and Germany during the phase of American hegemonic decline, may not be the next hegemon. However, its global and regional ambition is indicative of, at the very least, a rising hegemon. Also, its assertion of sovereignty over islands in the South China Sea in a period of structural stagnation is in line with a K-wave-based analysis.

#### *A Critical Political Geography of Borders*

The first three sections approached the South China Sea islands dispute from a world-systems perspective. The succeeding discussion on borders employs a critical political geographic approach, which differs from classical political geography and realist-driven security studies. Traditional political

geography still echoes the views of Ratzel, Halford Mackinder, and Karl Haushofer, all of whom were driven by the imperial agendas of their respective states to complement the contention that boundaries are set in stone and absolute. Meanwhile, realist-inspired accounts of borders are inextricably linked to statism and sovereignty. Critical political geography, or critical geopolitics, does not take state boundaries (or borders) for granted and maintains that states are “perpetually constituted by their performances in relation to an outside against which they define themselves” (Painter, 2008, p. 65).

Contemporary studies on borders challenge the position of fixed boundaries, identities, truths, and power, and instead emphasize their fragmentary and impermanent nature (Paasi, 2003, p. 462). Critical political geography takes its cue from this characterization of borders. Everyday experiences of people, their self-consciousness, and self-identification with various levels cannot be separated from a critical study of boundaries (Kolossov, 2005, p. 614). These are reinforced by social representations in a given population, which together with culture, state security, perceived or real external threats, historical myths, and stereotypes, help condition attitudes of both the larger population and ruling elites toward the boundary in question (Paasi, 2008).

Critical geopolitics can account for China’s primary justification for its sovereignty over the South China Sea islands. Chinese officials have invoked the so-called nine-dash line to buttress its historical claim to the islands (Gao & Jia, 2013, pp. 99–102). Their historical claims stretch back to as far as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, when “barbarians” from the “southern seas,” or the South China Sea, paid tribute to the Imperial Court of various dynasties (Han, Lin, & Wu, as cited in Gao & Jia, 2013, p. 100). In 1947, the Chinese government internally circulated an atlas that showed an eleven-dash line around the South China Sea before publicly releasing a revised map with nine dashes six years later to exert its sovereign claims over the area (Gao & Jia, 2013, pp. 102–103). Today, the nine-dash line serves as China’s official state policy on territorial claims in the South China Sea despite being struck down by the Permanent Court of Arbitration as having no legal basis.

Applying critical political geography to the nine-dash line reveals two insights. First, China is tapping into history to legitimize sovereign claims. The Chinese narrative of sovereignty goes back way before the concept of sovereignty, at least in Westphalian terms, is internalized as a norm in international relations. The nine-dash line becomes a social representation that stakes ownership of the disputed islands and a sense of their inclusion into the Mainland. This is consistent with critical political geography’s approach to boundaries. Part of this approach accentuates boundaries as a “world geopolitical vision” contingent upon national history and culture (Kolossov, 2005, p. 625). This world geopolitical vision is built by political elites and dispersed through national symbols. History and Chinese world geopolitical vision come together in the current iteration of China’s passport, which has an illustration of the nine-dash line. Inclusion in Beijing’s sovereign sphere is further reinforced by the line’s appearance in its passport, a symbol of the link between the state and its people, who can move from one sovereign entity to another by way of that document.

Second, what China says is an absolute and sacrosanct boundary reflects Chinese identity construction. While traditional political geography and realist international relations would equate Chinese state behavior to the protection of its sovereignty, critical geopolitics focuses on how the nine-dash line emerged as a representation of Chinese identity construction. When the first maps depicting the nine-dash (or eleven, at that time) lines were released in 1935, each of the islands in the South China Sea was designated with both Chinese and English names (Gao & Jia, 2013, p. 102). Today, these names are still in use: Mischief Reef is Meiji Jiao, Scarborough Shoal is Huangyan Dao, and Spratly Island is Nanwei Dao, to name a few. Language is implicated and deployed to attach a Chinese identity to the contested islands. It is also a way to contest competing and existing discourses that refer to the islands by English and Filipino names.

## Conclusion

The application of world-systems and critical political geographies to China and the South China

Sea islands dispute produces an alternative take on the issue. The paper attempted to show this by establishing a political-economic logic of China's actions. Neither economically developed nor mired in underdevelopment, the People's Republic is a semi-peripheral state that is not coincidentally authoritarian as states in this tier have a greater repertoire of available actions, including the development of a more expansive territorial geopolitical code. Territorial ambition is framed by a broader political-economic project: the initiation of the One Belt, One Road initiative. The two go hand-in-hand: political or territorial expansion cannot be separated from an enlarging economic presence. From a structural perspective, periods of global economic stagnation, which Kondratieff waves situate the contemporary global economy in, is often met by the rise of potential hegemonic challengers. China is pursuing one of the instruments that hegemonic challengers resort to institution-building and the strengthening of ties with countries in Southeast Asia. While there is no certainty that China will displace the United States as the global hegemon, its behavior is in accord with states that attempt to have greater influence in international relations. Complementing this is the country's historical and cultural invocation of territory in an attempt to legitimize its claims over the South China Sea islands.

The paper makes no claims about the superiority of world-systems and critical political geographies in explaining a state's territorial ambition or expansionary behavior. What it attempts to provide is a different, yet complementary, lens to probe issues like this, which typically are confined to the realm of traditional geopolitics or realist international relations. World-systems and critical political geography offer that promise of cogently taking up regional and global issues of this nature.

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