

## ***China's Assertiveness in the South and East China Sea: A Constructivist Approach***

*La asertividad de China en los Mares del Sur y del Este de China:  
un acercamiento constructivista*

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article aims to discuss the issue of China's assertiveness in the South and East China Seas within the constructivist framework, as economic (liberalism) and military power (realism) are not sufficient to explain the complexity of the problem. It aims to answer the following question: How does the constructivist approach lend itself to the understanding of China's assertiveness in the case of the South and the East China Sea territorial disputes? It will also explore the following hypotheses: the victimized identity perception leads China to be assertive in the South China Sea dispute and the perception of Japan's behavior as aggressive (as in the past) provokes China to be assertive in the East China Sea dispute.

**Keywords:** China; South China Sea; East China Sea; disputes; constructivism.

### **RESUMEN**

El presente artículo tiene como objetivo discutir la cuestión de la asertividad de China en Los Mares del Sur y del Este de China dentro del marco constructivista, ya que el poder económico (liberalismo) y el poder militar (realismo) no son suficientes para explicar la complejidad del problema. Tiene como objetivo responder a la siguiente pregunta: ¿Cómo se presta el enfoque constructivista a la comprensión de la asertividad de China en el caso de las disputas territoriales del Mar del Este y del Sur de China? También explorará las siguientes hipótesis: la percepción de la identidad victimizada lleva a China a ser asertiva en la disputa del Mar del Sur de China y la percepción de agresividad en el comportamiento de Japón (como en el pasado) provoca que China sea asertiva en la disputa del Mar del Este de China.

**Palabras clave:** China; Mar del Sur de China; Mar del Este de China; disputas; constructivismo.

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China's assertiveness and refusal to make any concessions regarding the sovereignty issue with respect to the disputes in the South China Sea (SCS) and East China Sea (ECS) constitutes a vital concern. Little attention has been paid to China's assertiveness from the ideational point of view; much of the study on interpreting China's behavior towards the SCS and the ECS disputes focuses on the two most popular theories in International Relations: realism and liberalism. In other words, many scholars refer to the economic and power realms to analyze China's assertiveness in the SCS and the ECS disputes (Calder, 1996; Yee, 2011; Kaplan, 2010; Mearsheimer, 2014; Buszynski, 2003; Koo, 2009; Magcamit and Tan, 2016). This is hardly surprising, as the escalation of both disputes started with the discovery of potential natural resources and the race to own parts of the vital sea-lanes, mainly by the rising power that is China.

Nevertheless, economic and military power are not enough to explain the complexity of the issue, which is why the article aims to answer the following question: How does the constructivist approach lend itself to the understanding of China's assertiveness in the case of the South and the East China Sea territorial disputes? In line with the constructivist approach, this article will also explore the following hypotheses: the victimized identity perception leads China to be assertive in the South China Sea dispute and the perception of Japan's behavior as aggressive (as in the past) provokes China to be assertive in the East China Sea dispute. The scope of this article is limited to the constructivist approach, which will serve as a framework to analyze the national discourses and historical events—such as the Century of Humiliation—that contributed to the construction of China's identity and ideas through the analysis of case studies and formal statements voiced by high-ranking Chinese officials.

Western scholars and news commentators frequently used the term “assertiveness” following the year 2006 to describe China's behavior in the SCS and the ECS regions. Assertiveness is defined as “aggressive, confrontational or anti-western aspects”, “imperialistic, nationalistic or anti-normative behavior in Chinese foreign policy and statements” or a “form of assertive diplomacy that explicitly threaten[s] to impose cost[s] on other actors that are clearly higher than before” (Swaine, 2010; Johnston, 2013). In early 2006, Western observer Evan Medeiros described China's foreign policy as “growing assertiveness”—especially towards the U.S.—and pointed out the possibility of China becoming a global power (Swaine, 2010). After the 2008 financial crisis, China perceived the U.S. as a declining power and defined its own role as an active protector of its own interests and a challenger of U.S. dominance. For example, State Counselor Wen Jiabao criticized the U.S. for its economic management and weak monetary policy; at the same time, there was a surge in anti-Japanese/anti-American sentiment among the Chinese public (Johnston, 2013).

Despite the Western perspective on Chinese assertiveness, China rejects the notion of describing its foreign policy as “tough” or “confrontational”. Instead, China still upholds Deng Xiaoping's notion of “harmony and peaceful developments”. Aware of the ongoing

controversy regarding the sovereignty disputes in both the scs and the ecs, China claims to act merely for the sake of protecting its “core interest and dignity towards sovereignty, territorial integrity, security, peace, and development both in China and the Asia region” (Johnston, 2013: 18). Regarding the scs and ecs issues, it has become “more active in defending its maritime interest,” and “surprisingly those interests and preferences concerning their claims in the scs and ecs are unchanged” (Johnston, 2013: 19). As Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi stated, the country views the “assertive behavior of the Chinese government as a necessary way to counter-balancing the incorrect assertions and actions of the U.S. and other Western nations on many issues” (Swaine, 2010: 5).

This article is based on the definition of assertiveness penned by Johnston (2013) and Swaine (2010), which describes the assertiveness of China’s foreign policy in the scs and the ecs disputes as the insistence on sovereignty and territorial integrity in domestic discourses. Such discourses are connected with defending the “interest and dignity” of China, which includes rectifying the actions of neighboring countries and the West and their “incorrect assertions” about China’s action with respect to these two disputes (Johnston, 2013; Swaine, 2010).

### ***Constructivism as a Research Framework***

To answer the research question presented above, this article uses constructivism as a research framework. However, it does not intend to test the constructivist approach or reject the notion that realism and liberalism are not accountable to explain China’s assertiveness in both disputes. Rather, it states that constructivism helps explore the ideational point of view instead of power-based or materialistic ones as suggested by realism and liberalism.

Constructivist theory asserts that significant aspects of international relations are shaped by ideational factors (which are historically and socially constructed), not just material factors. Constructivists believe that state’s identity is not fixed by nature. Rather, it is a product of social interactions among states that allows for the discovery of differences in ideas and establishes an inter-subjective understanding of one another (Wendt, 1992, 1999; Finnemore, 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001; Katzenstein, 1996). Moreover, studying the discourses within society can help identify how interests of states are constructed. Hence, emphasizing the construction of national identity in the constructivist approach is important because it helps identify the origin of certain interests and explain the characteristics of China’s policy towards certain issues, such as the scs and ecs disputes (Weiss, 2014). Constructivism accounts for this by arguing that the social world is of our own making (Onuf, 1989). Actors (usually powerful ones, like leaders and influential citizens) continually shape—and sometimes reshape—the very nature of international relations through their actions and in-

teractions. Another central notion of constructivism lies in identities and interests, as well as social norms.

Modern China formed its “collective interests” and defined its position, role and foreign policy approach based on past interactions with other states. One of the prominent events that had shaped China’s ideas about other states is the period known as the Century of Humiliation (1839-1949), when China was invaded and lost its sovereignty and territorial integrity to the West and Japan. The historical trauma that ensued had significant impact on how China perceives itself and other states. From then on, the discourses of being the “victim” of the foreign countries played a significant role in how China reacts to certain issues concerning the West and Japan. Interestingly, the scs and ecs disputes represent the contemporary version of this national trauma. The perception of China was reinforced by the conviction of being a victim in both disputes, believing that foreign countries were humiliating China by taking away its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Particularly, the ECS disputes with Japan are perceived by the Chinese as the recurrence of Japan unjustly taking away their territory (Weiss, 2014).

As a result, the constructivist approach highlights the importance of ideas when studying China’s assertiveness in the disputes. It is true that the materialist approach has contributed to the “external explanation” regarding the struggle for power and economic means. However, both realism and liberalism face important limitations in explaining why China based its claims on history or why it is sensitive and assertive with respect to sovereignty and territorial issues. In other words, realism and liberalism still lack internal explanations of the emotions and ideas that can affect the policy of China. Hence, at least theoretically, constructivism offers a different perspective, along with the identification of the decisive elements of China’s policy by upholding the importance of ideas, discourses and social interactions.

Constructivism is a useful tool to understand the behavior of China by looking into the construction of identity through historical experience and interaction with other states that makes up the inter-subjective meanings. Those types of meanings can be derived from multiple complex sources of evidence in reality. Hence, the article uses the research method of descriptive case studies (Mills, Durepos y Wiebe, 2009) to observe China’s assertiveness within the constructivist framework. Descriptive case studies are chosen because they offer an illustrative in-depth study of a single unit (China) in a complex phenomenon (the scs and the ecs disputes). In spite of their limitations as a model for producing research publications, descriptive case studies are appropriate here because they allow for exploring an “in-depth” structure and construction of ideas, perceptions and preferences of China’s assertive policy as a case study (Encyclopedia of Case Study Research).

Two case studies were selected: the South China Sea and the East China Sea disputes. The reason for selecting these two particular issues is that China’s approach to both of them is similar. Firstly, China is the main claimant in both disputes. Secondly, China’s foreign

policy is assertive based on historical claims and operates through bilateral consultations and negotiations. Thirdly, China perceives the scs and the ECS as its historical territories. By studying both cases, it will be possible to evaluate whether the constructivist approach has broadened our understanding of China's assertiveness or whether an ideational point of view has important implications for the country's decision-making process. Moreover, the research presented in this article explores the discourses and past interactions that construct China's national identity, such as education, historical and nationalist archives, interviews, surveys, and the media (articles and images).

The disputes in the scs are mainly based on the matter of sovereign authority over the large habitable islands (the Spratly and the Paracel Islands, for instance) and other smaller inhabitable islands and reefs scattered across the scs. In the past, there was no particular recognition regarding maritime delimitations in the scs. Decolonization pushed Japan and France out of Asia, which left the United States as the only power that remained in the scs. During that time, the U.S. paid little attention to solving the maritime delimitation issues in the scs and chose to focus on practicing freedom of navigation in order to protect its interests as the only naval power in the region (Tønnesson, 2001), which is one a key strategic premise for the country.

The post-Cold War period left a power and legal vacuum in the region. Gradually, the states of Southeast Asia and China struggled to fill the vacuum. Various Asian countries, including China, began to put forth their individual claims over the islands in the scs. Three leading countries—China, Vietnam, and the Philippines—initiated the spark of the disputes. Both China and Vietnam asserted their sovereignty over the whole chain of the scs by referring to historical rights gained in the pre-modern era. In other words, China has always perceived the scs as its historical “belonging,” dating back to past practices of navigation and trade during the Qing and Han Dynasties. Likewise, Vietnam referred to the colonial inheritance rights bequeathed to it by France after decolonization. Thus, Vietnam believes it has a claim to the sovereign right that belonged to France and established its presence in the scs naming it the “Eastern Sea of Vietnam”. On the contrary, the Philippines do not base their claims on historical rights but rather on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the notion of *terra nullis* to annex the islands as their territory, since there was no sovereign authority over the islands. Generally, the past colonial powers' lack of interest in establishing maritime delimitations has given China a chance to put forth its historical rights to challenge the legitimacy of the international law (Tønnesson, 2001). Until now, the internationalization of the disputes has made the situation more complicated, and China appears to be more assertive and increases its military presence in the scs.

Historically, China stated that it was the first country to name and rule over the scs. First, China has defended its sovereignty over the scs by referring to two treaties signed by the past colonial rulers: France signed a boundary agreement to hand over the control of scs

to China. Following the defeat of Japan in 1945, China claimed the rights over the Spratly and Paracel islands (Buszynski and Sazland, 2007). During the Cold War, China admitted that it had lowered its presence and performance in the scs due to the presence of the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

With respect to the ECS, China, Taiwan, and Japan both claim a group of small islands, named Diaoyu by China/Taiwan and Senkaku by Japan. The complication of the disputes derived from three main factors: 1) different interpretations of treaties after the termination of WWII about which countries have the right to control the Diaoyu/Senkaku archipelago (discussed below), 2) the discovery of oil in the islands and 3) the rise of nationalism in both countries, which affects the outcomes of ECS-related policies (Osti, 2013).

The first source of disputes is derived from the different interpretations of treaties signed after WWII, such as the Cairo Declaration between the U.K. and Taiwan, according to which Japan was to return all territories it had taken from China (Osti, 2013: 6), and the San Francisco Treaty, which stated that the U.S. had the right to exercise all powers of administration, legislation and jurisdiction over the territory and inhabitants of these islands, including their territorial waters and specifically the Senkaku islands (Osti, 2013: 6). However, Japan denied China's sovereignty under these treaties and put forth the Treaty of Shimonoseki to show that it had seized the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands from China *after* the Sino-Japanese War (Ramos-Mrosovsky, 2008). Additionally, regardless of the treaties, Japan pointed out that it also had the right to annex the Senkaku islands because there was no actual sign of Chinese control, whereas the Senkaku islands were extensively used by the Japanese businessmen who had their private businesses there (Ramos-Mrosovsky, 2008).

The second source of disputes lies in the competition over the ECS's natural resources. Once the United Nations Economics Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) announced that these islands were rich in oil reserves located under the continental shelf between Taiwan and Japan, the struggle over the ECS escalated rapidly (Osti, 2013).

The final source of disputes is the clash of the passionate nationalism that has risen in right-wing movements in Japan and China, which indirectly affects the outcome of policies concerning the ECS dispute. These issues are clearly politically inspired to some extent, but they still influence the situation and make its resolution more difficult.

History and education have played a significant role in the construction of China's national identity, along with fostering patriotic and nationalistic feelings among the Chinese people. However, Chinese leaders prefer to use the term *patriotism* instead of *nationalism* in order to avoid inspiring nationalistic feelings among minority groups in China that prefer to keep their own specific identity. Hence, the concept of nationalism is expressed in Chinese as "aiguozhuyi" (patriotism), which means to "show loyalty and desire to serve the state, either as it was or as it would be in its renovated form" (Zhao, 1998: 291).

Zhao (1998: 290) claims that “Chinese nationalism is rooted in the long, humiliating history which China struggled to get itself of foreign imperial powers”. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese political discourse was based on the ideas of strong resistance to foreign invaders, particularly referring to the “Century of Humiliation” that started with the Qing dynasty having to sign hundreds of treaties that gave foreign powers the right to enter its ports, which it was forced to open for foreign trade. They also made China lease or cede certain territories, among other concessions to the “great powers”. China felt humiliated by not being able to fend off foreign encroachment on its territory by Japan and the West (the Allied powers) in the Opium Wars, the Invasion of Manchuria and the Nanjing Massacre; all this shaped China’s sense of being the victim of these countries (Weiss, 2014).

Since then, the historical memories of foreign invaders have played a huge role in the formation of national identity amid China’s relations with the West. Those ideas were passed down from generation to generation with the help of the Chinese government, which institutionalized those ideas and historical narratives through propaganda and a fierce educational campaign (Weiss, 2014). It is therefore not surprising that nowadays Chinese nationalism tends to have anti-Western or anti-Japanese mentality: the source of mobilization lies in the goal of enhancing Chinese people to “save China” and put sovereignty and territorial integrity at the heart of Chinese nationalism (Downs and Saunders, 1998: 118).

Before 1989, Chinese nationalism did not have the political weight to apply pressure on Chinese foreign policy. The Tiananmen Square protest (pro-democratic movements) was a turning point for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in terms of using nationalism and patriotism as a means for the survival of the CCP’s legitimacy. Two years after the Tiananmen Square protest, the CCP was going through a political and intellectual struggle to redeem itself and regain the confidence of the Chinese people. They perceived the Tiananmen “incident” as the lost hope of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong’s thought was to push Chinese people to have faith in the Communist regime. Both Deng Xiaoping and Jing Zemin saw the need to initiate state-led patriotism, a cohesive ideology that could bind Chinese people together once again (Zhao, 1998: 289). Hence, nationalism was rediscovered. The CCP had the idea of diverting the people’s attention to remembering the National Humiliation China suffered at the hands of the West and Japan. It launched nation-wide nationalistic campaigns and propaganda through which it succeeded in fostering the anti-Western or anti-Japanese feelings and regaining the people’s support.

In 1991, the Party launched a nation-wide “Patriotic Education Campaign” to re-educate Chinese youth to embrace communist ideology. The core aim of the campaign was to prevent mobilizations against communist revolution. It sought to remind them how much the country had changed since the communist revolutions and help revive collective historical consciousness, particularly regarding the Century of Humiliation. Moreover, the CCP used history to redefine the national identity of China by spreading victimization narratives

and blaming the West and Japan for China's suffering due to their aggression. Historical textbooks served as an important source to spread the discourse of the new victimization narratives. The CCP changed the structure of most historical textbooks to focus on the foreign invasion and oppression of the Chinese people (Wang, 2008: 783). The narrative of the Japanese invasion was restored and the Nanjing Massacre gained popularity in the nationalist discourse (Downs and Saunders, 1998). Furthermore, the CCP institutionalized these victimization narratives by making the Century of Humiliation a mandatory subject studied by students all the way from primary school to university.

Apart from Chinese youth, the CCP also engaged all Chinese people to participate in the patriotic education campaign, particularly the Chinese army (especially high-ranking officers) and farmers. For instance, weekly patriotic sing-alongs and quizzes were implemented as an activity to show support for the motherland. The CCP even created an ambience filled with patriotic sentiments: various museums, memorials, and historical sites about the CCP in local communities were set up to remind the Chinese people of the legitimacy of the CCP and encourage them not to forget the aggression of the West and Japan.

Until now, the "Patriotic Education Campaign" has had significant influence on the formation of national historical memories, as well as on the formation of the national identity of the Chinese people. As Gries (2004) points out, the Chinese nationalist/ patriotic propaganda is not simple party propaganda or merely a tool: it has constructed national identity by attaching deep-rooted emotions and self-perception regarding the Century of Humiliation narrative as a humiliating loss of sovereignty. Moreover, the propaganda has succeeded in creating solidarity among Chinese people, especially in changing their attitudes towards the CCP and shifting their focus to what the West and Japan did to China in the past. Nonetheless, the output of nationalist and patriotic sentiments can affect the CCP's goals to preserve good relations with the West and Japan today and in the future. So far, the CCP has been pressured by its proponents to adopt assertive foreign policy when the country faced sovereignty disputes such as the ones in the SCs and ECS (Wang, 2008: 802).

### ***Chinese Nationalism Online***

Nowadays, the internet is undoubtedly a prominent source of information on the maritime disputes in China: around 46 % of the Chinese population frequently uses online media (Piskorski, 2015) including news websites and Weibo (one of the biggest microblogging social media platforms in China). Surprisingly, China's online activists perceive their activity as a public right to defend China's national interests and demand international respect to China's territorial claims (Reilly, 2010). For instance, the website sina.com (the largest and most active Chinese language online community in the world) posted news updates about the incident



of a Chinese Bao-diao<sup>1</sup> activist arrested by Japan in the ECS and there were more than 1.23 million responses within one month. Moreover, sina.com also has an online petition campaign that calls for Chinese people to boycott Japanese Asahibeer in order to protest against Japan; in just two hours, more than 1.28 million individuals signed the petition. These examples show that a popular online website such as sina.com has provided a quick opportunity for nationalists and patriots to obtain information and respond to the topics that stir up their emotions (like territorial disputes with their international nemeses). The call for boycott of certain products does not apply only to Japan, but also the Philippines: after the Hague took over the Philippines' dispute against China over the scs between 2013 and 2016, Chinese citizens used Weibo to call for a boycott on the Philippines' mangoes with the following slogan: "If you want to eat mango, buy the Thai and starve the Filipinos to death". Weibo also has a map of China including the nine-dashed-line with the message "China: Not even a bit can be left behind" that was reposted by many Chinese celebrities on Weibo.

In China, there are two major online news websites: the PLA Daily and People's Daily.<sup>2</sup> "China's Military Online" is an official news website authorized by the Central Military Commission of the PRC and sponsored by the PLA Daily. The website presents The People's Liberation Army as an important news platform regarding military capacity, threats, and security dilemmas; it mainly focuses on the scs and the ECS. Meanwhile, the "People's Daily" is considered one of the most authoritative publications of the governing party, spreading important news about China's politics, society, economy, and culture. The website is often referred to as the "voice of China," and can therefore be perceived as a major source to study the Chinese people's opinion on the disputes. Examples from these sources are presented below.

#### *China's Military Online examples*

- "An expert says: China must stay vigilant against Japan" (March 24, 2016)

Japan passed a new security bill, which adopts Japan's Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) and allows military support from the U.S. despite the geographical constraints. Moreover, the Chinese experts interpret that it was the turning point for Japan to pursue a defensive (understood as preventive) security policy. In response, China should keep a close eye on Japan's military action in the ECS issues because pre-emptive strikes and surprise attacks are common in Japan's strategic culture.

- "Defense ministry spokesman responds to tensions in the South and East China Sea" (July 8, 2016)

During the press conference, Senior Colonel Yang Yujun received a question regarding tensions in the ECS and the scs. He replied: "China has never been the provoker of any

<sup>1</sup> Bao-diao is a social movement that propagates China's sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands.

<sup>2</sup> Discussed news reports were chosen at random, mainly to show the Chinese insistence on their claims along with exploring their perceptions of other states, which are reported within China's news websites.

complex situation, Chinese military operations in the relevant waters are appropriate, reasonable, legitimate, professional and responsible”. Regarding the scs issue, China’s action was to “safeguard China’s national sovereignty and territorial integrity”. Moreover, China intends to “maintain peace and stability in the area along with the insistence on the settlement of the disputes through consultations and negotiations by respecting the historical facts according to International Law”.

- “China refutes Japan’s defense white paper 2016” (August 2, 2016)

The Chinese Defense Ministry spokesman, Colonel Wu Qian, organized a press conference about Japan’s new defense White Paper. In the paper, Japan made an “irresponsible” reference to China’s military developments and patrols in the scs and the ECS. Regarding the ECS issue with Japan, the spokesman stated: “the Diaoyu and its affiliated islets are China’s inherent territory and China has historical and jurisprudential evidence on that”. He further claimed that China’s military activities in the ECS are legally based on the “indisputable facts that Diaoyu belongs to China”. In the concluding remarks, Qian warned Japan not to enter a similar path to the one chosen in the past. Japan should also acknowledge the facts and stop accusing China of offensive military acts. Finally, he recommended Japan to focus on building peaceful relations with China.

- “70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Xisha and Nansha Islands recovery” (December 23, 2016)

The PLA Navy held a ceremony to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of China’s recovery of the Xinsha and Nansha Islands. In other words, China successfully resumed sovereignty after the defeat of the aggressive foreign intruders (Japan and the West) in the Century of Humiliation. “The recovery of Xinsha and Nansha islands is effective restoration of China’s inherent territories and represent as an assertive claim of China’s sovereignty over those islands”.

- “Japan outsmarts itself” (January 19, 2017)

Since Shinzo Abe came to power in 2012, Japan has shifted from global diplomacy to strategic diplomacy, particularly with Southeast Asian countries: the Philippines, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. During his visits to these countries, Chinese experts reported that Abe’s goals were to publicize the “China threat theory” to its neighboring countries, particularly to those which are currently having sovereignty disputes with China in the scs. Thus, China perceives such behavior of Japan as “outsmarting”. Moreover, China declared that Japan should stay out of the scs issues and let China and the other Asian countries figure out their concerns.

*People's Daily examples*

- “Backgrounder: China has indisputable sovereignty over South China Sea islands” (April 29, 2016)

China points out that the Nansha Islands have been an “inherent territory” of China that dates back to the 1900s or even earlier. Although China was invaded by foreign powers, the Chinese government managed to gain control over the scs. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that the Philippines are filing a case against China concerning the exclusive economic zones and the continental shelf in the scs, China backed up its claims by stating that China’s control and exercise predated the establishment of International Law on the continental shelf delimitations.

- “China the first to discover and name South China Sea islands” (June 26, 2016)

One of the main aims of the Philippines to forward the arbitration process was to turn down China’s sovereignty claims in the scs. However, China points out the historical facts which show that China was the first to discover and name the scs. According to historical archives, the Han dynasty was the first to rule over the scs, mainly through trade, fishing navigation and other maritime activities. Most foreigners would call the scs the Nansha Islands. Throughout history, Chinese government has never renounced its sovereignty in the scs given the constant exercise of effective control and administration over the islands in the scs.

- “Spotlight: Official reaffirms Chinese stance on South China Sea” (January 26, 2017)

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang reaffirmed China’s stance regarding the scs: “we defend national territories from being taken over by one country” and “the scs is not an international territory, it is Chinese territory”. Moreover, he emphasized China’s sovereignty issues with some Asian countries, stating that China was aware of the controversies and accusations directed at his country. Hence, China is now trying to shove aside the sovereignty disputes and focus on joint development instead.

- “China firmly opposes U.S. endorsement of Japan’s illegal claim on Diaoyu islands” (February 13, 2017)

China opposed the U.S.-Japan security treaty that covered China’s Diaoyu islands in the ECS. U.S. President Donald Trump affirmed that Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan security treaty covered the Diaoyu islands. However, China claimed that “the Diaoyu Islands and its affiliated islets are China’s inherent territory. No matter what anyone says or does, the fact that the Diaoyu islands belong to China cannot change”. Hence, China will continue to safeguard its territorial sovereignty and territorial integrity with determination.

### *Examples of interviews*

- “Ambassador Liu Xiaoming talks to Jeremy Paxman on the BBC News Night” (January 8, 2014)

The ambassador of China in the UK, Liu Xiaoming, gave an interview to Jeremy Paxman on BBC concerning the East China Sea disputes. He claimed that “it has been very peaceful for the past 40 years. First of all, I would say these islands have been part of the Chinese territory since ancient times. It was in 1895 when China lost the war with Japan that they were seized illegally” (MFAPRC, 2014). Moreover, he claimed that natural resources are not China’s concern and the dispute is based purely on sovereignty and territorial integrity.

- Ambassador Liu Xiaoming gives an interview to Reuters on the South China Sea (July 3, 2016)

The ambassador of China in the UK, Liu Xiaoming, gave an interview to Reuters on the scs issues. During the talks, China made clear its position during the arbitration procedures with the Philippines. Ambassador Liu said: “We do not know, we don’t care, in fact, when this arbitration decision will be made, because no matter what kind of decision this tribunal is going to make, we think it is totally wrong” (Torode and Collett-White, 2016). Regarding the controversy on the sovereignty disputes, Ambassador Liu Xiaoming stressed that “China is not claiming the islands now, China was the first to name, develop and govern the islands”. Before in the 1970s, no one challenged China’s rights, but when oil and resources were found, neighboring countries started to claim their rights. “We stand firm concerning China’s sovereignty over these islands”. The Reuters interviewer raised concerns of why China cared so much about the borders and the sea. Ambassador Xiaoming replied that China had suffered at the hands of foreign powers in the past and lost various territories. Thus, China will not be willing to give away the scs and “will defend every inch of the land at any cost” (MFAPRC, 2016).

- “Yang Jiechi gives an interview to state media on the so-called Award by Arbitral Tribunal for the South China Sea” (July 15, 2016)

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, State Counselor Yang Jiechi gave an interview with the state media on China’s stance and opinion towards the Arbitral Tribunal awards in favor of the Philippines on the scs disputes. Yang Jiechi claims the arbitration awards were driven by a “political farce and hidden agenda” of countries outside the region that tried to deny China’s sovereignty and discredit China in front of the whole international community. On that note, China firmly defended maintaining its sovereignty over those islands in the scs: “China cannot afford to give away a single inch of territory that our ancestors have left to us”. China’s territorial sovereignty, maritime rights and interest in the scs have formed for over two thousand years, fully backed by historical and legal evidence. Thus, such arbitration awards are “nonsense” to China. The state counselor also criticized

International Law for ignoring the history and reality of the scs. Moreover, he stressed that China was willing to put forth a joint development with the Philippines and hoped the new government would be ready to consult and negotiate the issues.

- “Beijing pushes back on Trump administration over disputed islands in the South China Sea” (January 24, 2017)

Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang gave an exclusive interview to NBC News, hosted by Richard Engel, on the South China Sea criticizing Trump Administration. The interview was based on the press secretary of the Trump’s administration’s statement that “the U.S. will defend the South China Sea from being taken over by China”. Kang stated very clearly that the territory that the press secretary refers to “is not an international territory, it is Chinese territory”. Moreover, China is aware that there are sovereign disputes among the Asian countries, but it is not America’s issue to solve the disputes or protect anybody’s interests. On the contrary, China recommended the U.S. to leave the disputes to China and its neighbors to negotiate. However, Ambassador Kang made it clear that China is willing to negotiate putting aside the sovereignty disputes and focus on joint development to sustain peace and stability in the region, but not to negotiate regarding sovereignty, because those islands belonged to China.

In addition, he implied two objectives in the scs: firstly, China was entitled to protect or preserve its territorial integrity and thus sovereignty over the islands in the scs; secondly, China was devoted to maintaining peace and stability in the scs and the whole region. Nonetheless, China was concerned about the U.S.’s intentions towards the scs disputes. Before the 1970s, the scs was peaceful and no country posed any challenge. Right after the 1970s, when the U.S. administration initiated its pivot to Asia, the situation in the scs started to change. Nonetheless, China and all Asian countries still hold to the common interest, which is to maintain peace and stability in the region. On the other hand, Lu Kang, a senior official with the Chinese foreign ministry, told NBC News that “There might be a difference of opinion regarding who has sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea, but that’s not for the United States to get involved in” (Engel, Smith and Baculinao, 2017).

#### *Examples of surveys*

- “Exploring China’s “maritime consciousness”: public opinion on the South and East China Sea disputes”

The surveys were taken from the Beijing Horizon Key Research Consultancy in Chinese and presented in English by Andrew Chubb (2014) and the Perth US Asia Centre. The survey was conducted in March 2013 and consisted of 1400 interviews in five major cities of China: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu and Changsha. The survey questions on maritime disputes seek to explore what Chinese citizens think about the disputes. They

also aim to measure the influence of the government through media and other propaganda tools by measuring the influence of media, government policy, feelings and perceptions towards both disputes.

The respondents were asked to indicate their answers (their reaction to statements) on a sliding scale (1 to 10). The statements were: 1) The Diaoyu Islands belong to China; 2) All of the Nansha (Spratly) Islands belong to China; 3) Huangyan Island (Scarborough Shoal) belongs to China; 4) The Paracel (Xinsha) Islands belong to China, and 5) The entire maritime area within the nine-dash line on maps is China's territorial waters. The results show that the majority of respondents believe that all the disputed islands (Diaoyu, Spratly and Paracel Islands and Scarborough Shoal) belong to China. Nevertheless, only 44 % indicated *certainty* that all disputed islands belong to China. Summing up, the data shows the perception among the people of China: the four large islands that belong to the nine-dashed-line are situated in China's territorial waters (Chubb, 2014).

Other research was designed to test the extent to which the historical narratives (Century of Humiliation) shaped national identity and the perception of the Chinese people towards the scs and the ecs disputes. The statements aimed to measure how much the Chinese people perceive both disputes as "a matter of state, national and personal dignity and humiliation". The choices given to respondents were: agree, disagree, somewhat/strongly agree or somewhat/strongly disagree with provided statements (Chubb, 2014). The statements asked in relation to the Diaoyu Islands were the following: "Japan's presence in and around the Diaoyu Islands ..." and for the scs: "The occupation of some islands in the South China Sea by countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam..."

- a. ...affects the dignity of the Chinese government.
- b. ...is a continuation of the Century of Humiliation.
- c. ...affects the dignity of the Chinese nation [people].
- d. ...is a continuation of the Chinese nation's suffering of humiliation.
- e. ...affects my personal dignity.
- f. ...makes me feel humiliation and a loss of face.

The results show that more than 87 % of the respondents agreed that Japan's presence in the Diaoyu Islands constituted a continuation of the Century of Humiliation and affected the dignity of Chinese people. Additionally, 85 % agreed that the ongoing disputes represent the continuation of the humiliation of the Chinese nation. For the scs, 83 % agreed or strongly agreed that Vietnam and the Philippines' presence in the Spratly Islands constitutes a continuation of the Century of Humiliation, which means being the victim of the West and Japan. As for the matter of personal dignity, 60 % agreed and 12 % strongly agreed that China's rivals (Japan and the United States) being involved in the disputes created a feeling of personal humiliation. Regarding demography, young people born after the 1990s

are more inclined to perceive the Diaoyu Islands disputes in line with the national humiliation (Chubb, 2014: 59-63).

The construction of China's identity in foreign relations can be traced back to the late 1980s. When communism fell, China, along with other communist countries, started to lose its legitimacy. China encountered unrest in domestic politics that challenged the communist regime. Nevertheless, the CCP survived due to the success of its strategy of pursuing a revival of history (the Century of Humiliation specifically), which allowed it to function in the post-communist era, not to mention its state-run Patriotic Education Campaign that propagated mainly on one strand of history (being a victim of foreign intruders in particular of the West and Japan). Many scholars paid attention to how specific historical events can shape the way Chinese people perceive the West and Japan and how it affects China's decisions in solving the disputes in the SCS and ECS (Downs and Saunders, 1998; He, 2007; Shirk, 2008; Reilly, 2010; Dafoe and Weiss, 2016).

Downs and Saunders (1998) described Chinese nationalism as a "double-edged sword". On the one hand, nationalism serves as the primary source in unifying the Chinese people and strengthening the national spirit. On the other, "excessive nationalism" can put the CPC in an uneasy position when facing problems with the country's old rivals, which increases the demand for assertive foreign policy that Chinese leaders cannot satisfy (Downs and Saunders, 1998: 121). In particular, Japan played a key role in fostering Chinese nationalism because of its imperialism and aggression in the past, giving rise to the anti-Japanese sentiment. Likewise, the case of the ECS disputes can be linked to nationalism. For example, the 1990s incident of Japanese nationalists trying to claim the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands as Japanese territory led China to send eighty of its armed fishing boats to patrol the waters around the islands. Although China wants to preserve relations with Japan, nationalists are pressuring China to choose between its people and economic ties with Japan. Eventually, the Chinese government responded, but put little emphasis on the nationalistic rhetoric to minimize the damage to Sino-Japanese relations. Consequently, many Chinese people became unsatisfied with the government's reaction, which had an adverse impact on the legitimacy of the government.

Likewise, Yanan He (2007) indicates how the CPC's patriotic and nationalist propaganda complicated China-Japan relations. Since Japan invaded China, the Chinese people have become easily inflamed by grievance whenever their country faces problematic situations with Japan. The current sovereignty disputes in the ECS are just one example of nationalist or patriotic Chinese currents being able to pressure the CPC to engage in aggressive policies against Japan. During the 1990s, the tension of the disputes between Japan and China outpoured. Consequently, many Chinese students demonstrated against Japan's behavior. They claimed that Japan revived its old territorial ambitions against China as it had during the World War II. Moreover, Chinese nationalists formed an organization called the China Federation for Defending the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands (CFDD) situated in Beijing solely to defend the Diaoyu/Senkaku

Islands. In reaction to what was happening in China, Japan also had to take certain steps: it was the first time that the Security Committee of the House of Representatives of Japan had to adopt a unanimous vote to acknowledge that the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands belong to Japan.

## Conclusions

The CPC's patriotic and nationalist propaganda worsened China-Japan relations. Moreover, it shaped the characteristics of these relations based on mistrust and perceptions of the threat. Although in 2005 the Chinese government tried to promote friendly cooperation with Japan, these actions were blocked by anti-Japan demonstrations (He, 2007) based on the slogan that Japan denied the responsibility for the aggression it had displayed during WWII. At the same time, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi chose to visit the Yasukuni shrine and honor the Japanese soldiers who died during the war, which led Chinese nationalists to organize protests to boycott Japanese goods and boost anti-Japanese sentiments. Moreover, these nationalist acts had severe implications for China to adopt a particular foreign policy towards Japan, which became a more sensitive topic in terms of China's domestic policy. Sensitivity towards Japan was fostered by history books and propaganda that retold the stories of China being a victim to Japan's imperialism. For example, the Diaoyu/Senkaku disputes were described as follows: "Japan's ambition of seizing oil and gas resources on the continental shelf of the East China Sea is a new form of its expansionist and invading ideology presented during World War II" (Shirk, 2008: 148).

Apart from the educational strategies consisting of a revival of painful history, it is possible to observe an increasing trend of nationalism online. Nowadays, the internet is one of the most prominent sources that provide information and facilitate collective action among nationalists regarding maritime disputes in China: more than 46 % of online media such as news websites and Weibo frequently discuss both disputes (Dafoe and Weiss, 2016). Most online media discourses portray China as the victim in the SCS and the ECS disputes. Reilly (2010) points out how the internet is likely to foster nationalism that can lead to a more pragmatic foreign policy of China and focuses on the role of internet activists and news websites that contribute to popular nationalism, especially towards Japan. The majority of online activists popularize ideas to protect and defend China's national interest and demand international respect towards its sovereignty and territorial integrity, especially through sina.com, which has become one of the most popular websites to discuss the SCS and the ECS disputes.

Similarly, online news websites that are either run by the state or news agency centers interpret the Century of Humiliation in a way that suits the anti-Western or anti-Japan sentiments. Most Chinese news commentators describe the SCS and ECS as "inherent territory or Chinese territories" or prefer to call the SCS "Nansha and Xinsha," just as the Qing dy-



nasty did. Thus, China stands in full control and has the right to protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the SCS and the ECS. Moreover, after analyzing the statements of Chinese high officials, it can be concluded that the attitude towards the U.S. and Japan is still based on mistrust and threat perceptions. Both the U.S. and Japan were described as foreign intruders and advised to stay out of the SCS disputes: for example, Japan was accused by the government of trying to publicize the “China Threat Theory”. As a result, online media is seen as the principal means of shaping the SCS and ECS disputes as a matter of “national and personal dignity”. Additionally, the CPC’s campaign based on Century of Humiliation and sina.com contributed to constructing the perception of both disputes in terms of being a victim and a reason for China’s humiliation (Chubb, 2014). There is no significant difference between online commentators and Chinese diplomats’ views on the SCS and the ECS disputes (as seen in the example of Ambassador Liu Xiaoming discussed earlier in the paper). Nevertheless, if the rhetoric of Chinese leaders is not followed by tough action, public opinion reflects disappointment, which may even cost the government its legitimacy when the high expectations of society are not met and projected actions are not undertaken.<sup>3</sup>

The starting point of the article comes from the observation that most research related to China’s assertiveness gave little attention to ideational and conceptual factors (Calder, 1996; Yee, 2001; Kaplan, 2010; Mearsheimer, 2014; Buszynski, 2003; Koo, 2009; Magcamit and Tan, 2016). The constructivist approach allows for taking into account past and present discourses and narratives like the Century of Humiliation or the Patriotic National Campaign to analyze and better understand China’s standing in the SCS and ECS disputes. Constructivists pointed out that there was a huge perception gap between China and other countries regarding the SCS and ECS disputes: while other countries described China’s policy as assertive with intentions to terrorize smaller states in the disputes, China considers itself a peace-loving country and a victim in the disputes. The construction of China’s perception of others and the need to protect its ancestral territories can be regarded as a product of the Chinese government’s effort to maintain its legitimacy in the post-Tiananmen period. The aim of the Chinese government was to end Western influence by encouraging Chinese society to remember the specific strand of history that is the “Century of Humiliation” and constructing the idea of being a victim of the West and Japan’s aggression at the same time. Moreover, China embedded these ideas nation-wide by initiating the Patriotic Educational Campaign to ensure that the Chinese society maintained faith in the government and perceived foreign countries as a threat to China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

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<sup>3</sup> This is the case of the incident with the U.S. patrol in the SCS. The Chinese government characterized U.S. freedom of navigation near the SCS as a “provocative attempt to infringe on China’s SCS sovereignty” (Dafoe and Weiss, 2016: 3). As a result, the government’s rhetoric has given the domestic audience high expectations of a tough response. However, the Chinese government did not take any provocative actions towards the U.S. The Chinese public then opinion described this behavior towards “foreign intruders” as humiliating and incompetent.

Hence, there is no doubt as to why China regarded its identity as a victimized one and upheld the norm in protecting its sovereignty and territorial integrity in the SCS and ECS disputes. Most of the patriotic and nationalistic part of Chinese society perceive the SCS and ECS disputes as sensitive and important issues on which the government should take tough stance in order not to let foreign countries humiliate China again. Domestic pressure on the government can be observed through national discourses about both disputes. The findings show that most Chinese people describe the disputes as a reoccurrence of the Century of Humiliation. Moreover, the Chinese government has faced a dilemma between choosing the people (legitimacy) or its relations with neighboring and other foreign countries that are encroaching on Chinese territories. As a result, China's policy to is to some extent determined by domestic pressure to react assertively in order to not look weak in the eyes of foreign countries.

From the constructivist point of view, the idea of being a victim can lead China to adopt an assertive policy because of domestic pressure. However, the findings cannot positively verify the first hypothesis because the idea of being a victim to ASEAN neighbors is not strong enough and is less rooted in the domestic discourses. Considering that China had rather positive relations in the past with its ASEAN neighbors and despite some recent bilateral tensions, the victimized identity is constructed based solely on the Century of Humiliation, which does not refer to the ASEAN neighbors. Nonetheless, the findings support the second hypothesis because Japan represents an old rival. China's inter-subjective attitude towards Japan grew out of wars and invasions such as the invasion of Manchuria and Northern China, as well as the Nanjing Massacre. Nowadays, the ECS disputes have reminded Chinese society of imperialist and aggressive Japan, which invaded and unjustly took its lands. The discourses in Chinese history textbooks, media and interviews most often refer to Japan as to an aggressor who tried to complicate China-ASEAN relations in the SCS by spreading the "China threat theory" of a country that revived imperialist ambitions (Shirk, 2008). Thus, China's assertiveness results from the fact that it cannot afford to be a victim and lose its territory to "imperialist Japan" again (He, 2007; Downs and Saunders, 1998).

Concerning the scope and limitations of this article, constructivists focus solely on the power of ideas that are intertwined with the past like the Century of Humiliation. Thus, the first limitation is that this approach is better at describing the past than anticipating the future. The second limitation is the exclusion of the third party, which in this case is the U.S., whose impact on the world's perception of China as an assertive country in both disputes is an important issue. The findings also show that Western scholars and news commentators are important constructors of China's assertive behaviors in the SCS and ECS disputes. Hence, it seems that only by combining various international relations theories and paradigms will it be possible to fully understand China's assertive behaviors in these disputes.

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