

Chapter 10

The Art of Incremental Dominance: China's Coordinated Power Play in the South China Sea

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines China's comprehensive strategy in the SCS through the theoretical lens of realism in international relations. Employing qualitative document analysis, the research identifies four integrated strategic pillars: incremental "salami slicing" tactics that gradually alter the status quo without triggering military confrontation; unprecedented artificial island construction and militarization establishing strategic outposts; systematic deployment of coast guard and maritime militia forces operating in legal gray zones; and legal-diplomatic strategies linked with the Belt and Road Initiative. The findings reveal that China's actions exemplify revisionist power behavior in an anarchic system, utilizing coordinated instruments to maximize national interests while avoiding direct conflict. This analysis provides crucial insights for policymakers regarding the multidimensional nature of great power competition and the necessity for comprehensive, long-term regional response strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea (SCS), spanning over 3.5 million km² and serving as one of the world's busiest maritime routes, has emerged as one of the most complex geopolitical flashpoints in the contemporary international system. This region not

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only hosts over one-third of global maritime trade, valued at approximately \$3.4 trillion annually, but also contains abundant oil, gas, and fishery resources, while occupying a strategic position connecting major economies from Northeast Asia to the Indian Ocean and beyond (Hayton, 2024). In the context of a global power shift from West to East, with China's rise as a major power seeking to reshape the regional order, the SCS has become the primary stage for Beijing to demonstrate its strategic ambitions (Mishra, 2021). The escalating tensions in this region—from large-scale artificial island construction and militarization of geographic features to maritime confrontations between law enforcement vessels and fishermen—have attracted profound attention from both the academic community and policymakers worldwide.

Research on China's strategy in the SCS has garnered significant attention from various analytical perspectives in existing academic literature. Some scholars have focused on analyzing the legal aspects of the disputes, particularly the implications of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling and China's response to international law (Pemmaraju, 2016; Schoenbaum, 2017). Other studies have illuminated the economic motivations behind China's actions, from the need to protect energy routes to marine resource exploitation (Kiet et al., 2025a; Hiep et al., 2024). From a security perspective, numerous works have analyzed the militarization of artificial islands and its impact on the regional balance of power (Hieu et al., 2024; Putra, 2024). Recent studies have also examined the role of coast guard and maritime militia forces as instruments in China's "gray zone" strategy (Sarjito, 2024; Le & Tran, 2025). However, most of these studies tend to focus on individual aspects or analyze isolated events, failing to provide a comprehensive and systematic picture of how China integrates different power instruments—from military, economic, and legal to diplomatic—into a coherent overall strategy.

A critical gap in existing research is the absence of a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of how various instruments and methods are coordinated and mutually reinforcing by China to achieve long-term strategic objectives in the SCS. While many studies have identified individual tactics such as "salami slicing" or the use of coast guard forces, there remains insufficient clarity on how these tools are integrated within a comprehensive strategic framework, as well as the connection between the SCS strategy and China's broader global initiatives such as the BRI. Moreover, existing research often lacks a consistent theoretical lens to explain the deeper nature of Chinese behavior, particularly when situated within the context of realism in international relations—a theory with strong explanatory power regarding power motivations and great power competition in an anarchic system (Kiet & Hiep, 2025).

Therefore, this article aims to fill this critical research gap by providing a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the instruments and implementation methods that China has deployed and continues to deploy in the SCS, while situating them

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