

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

To answer the research question, “Why do some littoral states’ deterrence initiatives toward China fail while some succeed?”, the author argues that not in all cases the Defender successfully performs a credible threat. Some deterrence enforcement initiated by a weaker littoral state succeeds when the state successfully imposes a credible threat. On the contrary, the rest of the cases are failures because a credible threat is not visible. These are, of course, also taking into account the Defender’s threat credibility, seen from its military power vis-a-vis the Challenger’s. Perfect deterrence theory explains the importance of having both credibility and capability to achieve successful deterrence. The original theory puts both variables on the same hierarchy. However, this research concludes a little differently. The author argues that both variables should not work as checkboxes where each state must tick both for a successful deterrence. Instead, they are meant to complete each other; an excessive presence of one variable compensates an absence of the other.

In terms of the military capability of each party, there is a trend of rising military modernization apparent. Both the Philippines and Vietnam have created their frameworks for military modernization and made purchases to realize such a goal, although Vietnam’s progress looks more visible. It is worth noting that this active military modernization is the by-product of China’s increasing assertiveness

and military advancement, and China does not seem to stop its agenda yet. In the long run, this arms race will likely make the SCS remain asymmetrical.

In terms of signaling, what hinders states from imposing costly signaling is the nature that the effect of signaling depends heavily on whether it can change the Challenger's perception of the Defender. There is no set of fixed parameters that defines a strong signaling behavior. Obviously, *whom* it is a state is trying to deter also matters. Deterring a country as big as China requires a different signaling than deterring a weak state. If the Philippines and Vietnam were to deter a weaker or at least states of similar power using the same signaling strategy as carried out in the four aforementioned cases, the result may be different as they stood a higher chance of winning. However, these cases are complicated because the existing power parity gives China a high degree of confidence. Therefore, to disrupt that confidence and substitute that with insecurity, one must craft a truly costly and believable signaling.

Debates on the SCS dispute have occurred for ages and, the author argues, will not end soon. With the unending dynamics, many scholars try to formulate what will happen next. The author argues that the IR world must expect such dynamics to recur in the future. A peaceful environment and perhaps the most ideal deterrence exist when all parties of the conflict have been 'too tired' to fight. However, so long as there is an assertive Challenger in the dispute, the opposing state will try to defend its will. Therefore, acts of deterrence enforcement will again happen.

Furthermore, the cases in this research are examples of immediate conflict. Yet, will the SCS dispute ever end in an all out conflict when no actor would be willing to back down? The author argues that the answer relies heavily on inter-state relations. It is important to remember that an all out conflict is extremely costly to any state. Perfect deterrence theory also argues that an all out conflict is heavily undesirable and as rational actors, state will prevent the occurrence of one. In the future, one can only hope that the disputants can maintain good relations so the cost of an all out conflict will increase as it would affect the multi-dimensionality of the states' relations.

Another interesting yet unexplored angle of the SCS dispute is whether there is a possibility of de-escalation. Although the intuitive answer is that it is unlikely, the author argues that there is such a possibility if, and only if, Chinese dominations in the region rapidly increase and penetrate the citizens' perspective on China, to the extent that citizens finally welcome Chinese dominations. In that case where the weaker disputants are impared and 'controlled' by China can they de-escalate on the SCS dispute. Of course, it is practically impossible to hope for China to de-escalate considering its power and determination to fulfill its agenda.

The author acknowledges that this research is not without limitations. With the nature of a qualitative research method, it is impossible to examine all cases in the SCS dispute. To enrich the understanding on this issue, future work needs to explore more standoff cases. Furthermore, analyzing the specific contributions the US brings for its formal ally in a territorial dispute is uncovered in this thesis. Yet,

it is very potential and important to be explored by other scholars. Lastly, the author argues that as the Challenger - Defender relation has always occurred will likely remain in the SCS dispute, it is time to accept the reality that a SCS with clear and mutually agreed ownership will remain as an unreachable utopia in the next few decades. With this in mind, states must craft their conflict management strategy in a realistic yet compelling manner. *How* a state could effectively do so is up for future research by other scholars.

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