



Analysis of China's Aggressive Behavior in the South China Sea during the COVID-19 Pandemic (2020 – 2021)

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ABSTRACT

China was the first country that affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, China showed aggressive behavior during that period toward the South China Sea. Meanwhile, countries in the region concentrated on handling the COVID-19 pandemic. This study explains China's strategies and tactics in exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon to achieve its interests in the South China Sea. This study used a literature study method to explain this phenomenon. The selected literature is secondary data scattered in previous research and credible news related to the political dynamics in the South China Sea. The research finds that China combines soft power, such as medical supply assistance and vaccine diplomacy, with hard power to increase its influence at the regional and global levels, including in the South China Sea region. In addition to disputes, these tactics can increase regional tensions and threaten the peace and stability of the South China Sea. In addition, this phenomenon also shows a decline in the trust of the disputing countries in the recognition of each other's sovereignty and the international regime.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a public health tragedy, but also a political one. The medical advocates worry that politics will hinder the handling of the virus, which requires only scientific guidance, such technical decisions still require political decisions about who to consult, who to advise, what models to use, what policies to implement, how they are enforced, and who to trust in the international arena (Davies & Hobson, 2023). Without sound political decisions, societies and countries could suffer more than necessary or inadvertently sacrifice sectors that appear less urgent than the economy and health. For some countries, particularly in Southeast and East Asia, one crucial sector that is often "sacrificed" is maritime security (Gauttam *et al.*, 2020; Zhang, 2022). In particular, they tend to be careless in maintaining their sovereignty in the South China Sea because they are too busy dealing with the virus at home.

It's hard to imagine a more important sea water than the South China Sea. Because it connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans and lies at the eastern end of the Strait of Malacca the world's two busiest straits (Zaman *et al.*, 2015). The South China Sea is also estimated to contain at least 3,365 marine fish species, accounting for about 12 percent of the global catch involving 55 percent of the global fishing fleet, and providing a source of nutrition and livelihoods for at least 3.7 million people. (van Dijk & Lo, 2023).

Equally important, the region is believed to hold vast, undeveloped underwater oil and gas reserves around the Spratly and Paracel Islands (Ives, 2024). It may explain why the South China Sea is a region prone to conflict. No feature is undisputed there. Therefore, seven countries are competing for territorial jurisdiction and maritime resources in the surrounding area: China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei Darussalam. Even several non-claiming countries are involved in the region for various reasons, including the United

States, Australia, Japan, the United Kingdom, and France (Zhou, 2015). In recent decades, power in the South China Sea has been more dispersed; although conflicts have occurred occasionally, the claimant countries have been relatively able to maintain their sovereignty (Morton, 2016). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are indications that power is re-centralizing in China.

China is a fascinating subject to study, particularly its strategy and behavior in the South China Sea during the pandemic. First, China is one of, if not the only, countries with the greatest potential to overtake the United States as a superpower. This great power hasn't even disappeared during the COVID-19 crisis. While it was the first country to suffer from it, China has also been one of the quickest to recover and has ultimately dominated world politics since mid-2020 (Alqedra, 2022). This dominance is no exception in the South China Sea (Ogunnoiki, 2018; Zhou, 2015). China's rise in economic and military status over the past decade, and the fact that they have continued to achieve economic surpluses while other countries have deficits, has made them increasingly dominant in strategic spaces in the South China Sea during the pandemic (Amin & Rafique, 2021; Mitrovic, 2022). As a result, the balance of power in this region is tilted in their favor. Secondly, China is the only country that insists on historical rights to the islands and waters of the South China Sea. It is a mantra often used to justify its disregard for international law (Raditio, 2019). They claim that their ancestors, especially the Qing dynasty, peacefully expanded their territory to Tibet, Taiwan, Xinjiang, and other now-disputed sovereign territories, including the South China Sea. In this way, China has the largest claim, about 90 percent within its self-imposed *nine-dash line*. The last, for the same reason, China has been involved in almost all the high-profile incidents in the region, from the 1974 Paracel Islands incident to the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident (Ogunnoiki, 2018).

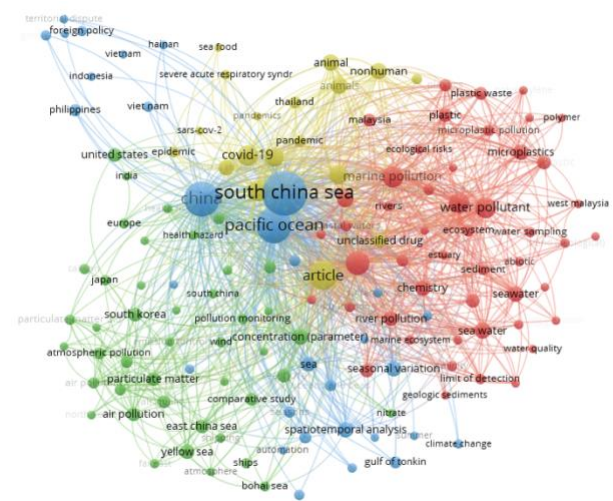
China's intense attention and involvement in the South China Sea makes sense. Although these waters are far from mainland China and have been beyond its reach for quite some time, China has numerous strategic interests there (Zhang, 2022). Dutton (2011) reports that China has at least three strategic interests in the South China Sea, making it nearly impossible for them to allow their claims and sovereignty to erode. First, the South China Sea is key to their regional integration with Southeast Asian countries—part of their “China’s Peaceful Rise” policy. Moreover, in addition to a large market for their products, an alliance with Southeast Asia could also help China compete with the United States (Raditio, 2019). This explains why they tend to maintain a guarded stance in the South China Sea: they want to expand and defend their territorial claims, but at the same time avoid serious conflict with other claimant states. Second, the resources contained in the South China Sea are crucial to China’s progress. Over the past few decades, their economic growth has been rapid. This has increased their energy needs, so they have sought to maximize the oil potential near and even beyond their borders (Zhang, 2022). If energy channels cannot be secured, the key to China’s development and progress will be in the hands of others. Third, the South China Sea is a crucial point for China to maintain its national security. This factor is also related to their economic interests. Without strong naval security, their economic resources derived from the South China Sea will be vulnerable to disruption; conversely, without a strong economy, their military power will be weakened (Swaine & Fravel, 2011; Wenmu, 2009).

Given these three strategic interests, there is no reason for China to weaken its power in the South China Sea during the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, as claimant states and the United States struggle to manage domestic crises, the pandemic creates momentum and an opportunity for China to increase its dominance in the region. Therefore, this study is interested in determining whether China's attitudes and behavior in the South China Sea have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, from being calm and restrained to being the opposite. This is important to examine because, as a major power in the South China Sea, China's behavior can play a significant role in regional order and stability. Moreover, as [Radtito \(2019\)](#) "China's behavior in the South China Sea is a litmus test for its overall foreign policy." A literature review will be used to achieve this goal by compiling and correlating scholarly studies and news reports on incidents in the South China Sea during the pandemic. This study argues that China has exploited the COVID-19 pandemic, through both hard and soft power, as an opportunity to enhance its regional and global standing. These offensive actions, ultimately, threaten the sovereignty of claimant states in the South China Sea—although whether they succeed or not is another question.

This study aims to analyze China's strategy in exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to strengthen its political influence in the South China Sea. This study used a realist approach to explain a country's interests in the region. The COVID-19 pandemic is a global health crisis, causing many countries to experience difficulties, both health-wise and economically, due to restrictions on community activities. However, the health crisis has become a momentum to strengthen China's political strategy and tactics in increasing its influence in the disputed South China Sea region. Global negligence in dealing with the pandemic has become a geopolitical advantage for China, which has recovered earlier than countries in the South China Sea region.

Therefore, this research is significant because it explains the aggressiveness of a country in a disputed area during a global health crisis, namely the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous literature shows that studies on the South China Sea have focused on several topics, such as the long-standing conflict between the disputing countries, international law, and the competition for influence between the United States and China in the region (Chan & Li, 2015; Kwon, 2019; Li & Dylan, 2015; K. S. Lim, 2017; Y. Lim & Kim, 2020; Moberg, 2017; Morton, 2016; Pham, 2011; Sinaga, 2016; Stewart, 2018; Turcsányi, 2018). However, studies explaining China's aggressiveness in the South China Sea during the global health crisis are still limited. Furthermore, what distinguishes this study from others is its temporal analysis focused on the COVID-19 pandemic period (2020-2021). Furthermore, the analysis combines the context of soft power and hard power instruments, inextricably linked to the temporal context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer on Scopus-indexed scientific articles, the combination of the keywords "South China Sea" and "COVID-19" yielded 159 Scopus-indexed scientific articles. The VOSviewer processing results show that studies on the South China Sea, colored blue, are a different cluster from COVID-19, colored yellow. However, this indicates that this study can fill a research gap where the blue conflict cluster can be directly connected to COVID-19. Furthermore, if the search is focused on the context of "South China Sea Disputes" and COVID-19, only 14 scientific articles are found. This confirms that this study has a research gap that can be answered by the findings of this study. The following is an overview of the bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer:



METHOD

This article is a qualitative study using a literature review. This method was chosen because it allows for a comprehensive review of China's attitudes and behavior in the South China Sea during the COVID-19 crisis, including the complex interplay of factors influencing China's actions at the domestic, regional, and international levels. Furthermore, this method allows researchers to explore information related to complex political and security dynamics that are difficult to measure quantitatively. This method is also relevant because the issues studied relate to strategic geopolitics, which does not require direct survey data.

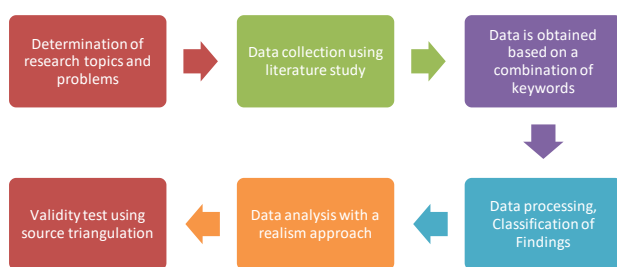
The data for this research consists of secondary data obtained from various credible sources, such as scientific journals and international news. In addition to academic literature, grey

literature such as think tank reports and online news were also included to ensure that significant events were not overlooked. The academic literature search was conducted through the Google Scholar and Scopus databases, while grey literature was manually obtained from the Google Advanced search engine (e.g., "south china sea during the pandemic, site:iseas.edu.sg" to search for the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute report on the South China Sea during the pandemic).

The data collection process was conducted based on a systematic search using a combination of the following keywords: "China," "South China Sea," "COVID-19," "sovereignty," "military presence," "hard power," "vaccine diplomacy," "soft power," and "geopolitics." Boolean operators such as "AND" and "OR" were also utilized to generate specific searches. The literature search was conducted from August 30, 2024, to September 8, 2024. Publications published after that time were not included in the review. The literature selection focused on how China's behavior in the South China Sea has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, considering factors such as economic activity, military activity, and narrative framing. This study aims to understand the motives behind China's actions and their implications for the sovereignty of claimant states in particular and regional security in general.

The next step is processing secondary data sourced from relevant literature. The obtained data is processed by extracting several aspects, including the authors' main arguments, the methodology used, and their findings and conclusions. This data is analyzed and evaluated using thematic analysis, then integrated into the overall analysis. There are two major themes in this context: hard power, which relates to military expansion and maritime activities, and soft power, which relates to medical aid and vaccine diplomacy.

The analysis process is part of the data interpretation process, based on an offensive realism approach. This emphasizes the research's focus on analyzing opportunistic behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, each data item and finding is validated using source triangulation techniques. The following are the stages of this research.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There has been some disagreement over whether China has become increasingly aggressive in its activities in the South China Sea. One view holds that China is defensive and merely seeking to protect its long-term national interests. In other words, while China has the capability to resolve conflicts through military means, it prefers not to impose its territorial claims on other countries and intends to manage disputes peacefully (Raditio, 2015). As noted by Zhang (2022) As a country that prioritizes economic development, it is not very profitable for China to expand its power by adopting the logic of offensive realism in the

current era of globalization. When dealing with Vietnam and the Philippines, for example, China has consistently offered a strategy of gathering and deliberation (Raditio, 2019). This defensive attitude also applies during the pandemic. Thayer (in Tangen Jr., 2020) argues that China is not using the crisis as an opportunity to become more aggressive; they are simply handling "business as usual." If China appears aggressive, it is solely to avoid being perceived as weak by its own citizens and foreign public opinion. Furthermore, their aggressive reactions, such as increasing their military presence, are more to counter the United States' superiority in controlling the South China Sea (Rusli, 2021). Beijing fears that US intervention will make claimant countries more aggressive in territorial disputes with China.

A second perspective challenges such an analysis, arguing that China's attitudes and behavior in the South China Sea are not as simple as black and white. In this case, their attitudes and behavior tend to be ambiguous. Qin (2014), for example, argues that China has indeed become clearer and more assertive in its words and actions, but only to the extent that the United States intervenes. On other issues, even those concerning its core interests, China continues to prioritize "continuity through change," in keeping with its cultural heritage of *zhongyong* (taking the middle path). A similar view is expressed by Morton (2016), who believes that China's offensive behavior in the South China Sea is detrimental to its well-being. Not only is it a major source of contention, but it also creates a legitimacy deficit that undermines its long-term plans to build a positive maritime order. Moreover, we cannot view China as a single entity; like most states, it tends to be fragmented and decentralized, so its international attitudes and responses are not always unified. In the South China Sea, national and subnational government institutions often operate without any coordination at all (Ataka, 2016).

The third view, which notes how China's attitudes and behavior in the South China Sea have become increasingly offensive, particularly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, is the most convincing. In this case, China's actions are interpreted as an opportunistic projection of its growing raw power; the discourse of *China's Peaceful Rise* is merely a stalling tactic to advance its true objectives (Ataka, 2016). In other words, although China attempts to reassure the world, especially Southeast Asia, which challenges and frequently challenges its claims in the South China Sea, it quickly reverts to coercion and intimidation when its core interests are at stake. Its peaceful and noble efforts are intended to increase its bargaining power when engaging in disputes with other countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has seemingly paved the way for such strategies. On land, China is trying to convince the world that it has successfully managed COVID-19. Therefore, they can assist other countries, both through aid and loans, and it is undoubtedly attempting to influence international institutions (Alqedra, 2022; Mitrovic, 2022). In the waters, it remains, or even intensifies, its offensive (Cronin, 2024; Tangen Jr, 2020). Its goal is one: to advance its position in the post-crisis world, including in the South China Sea.

China's offensive posture has been evident since the early months of 2020. They took advantage of the distraction offered by the pandemic by increasing their activities in the South China Sea. These activities have taken various forms, from fisheries and maritime surveys, diplomatic notes, the establishment of new districts, attacks on ships in disputed areas, the naming of shoals, and intimidation (Thao, 2020). China's victims are not limited to

one or two countries, but include at least Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Several countries, such as Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines, are aware of China's expansionist strategy and have aggressively protested, even building up their military despite being preoccupied with domestic crises (Cronin, 2024; Gauttam et al., 2020). It is not surprising that during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially since March 2020, tensions in the South China Sea have soared, which in turn has provoked the United States to become involved (Storey, 2020).

Therefore, this research shows that China is exploiting the global health crisis, namely the COVID-19 pandemic, to strengthen its influence and dominance in the South China Sea. In this context, the strengthening of hard and soft power during the pandemic strengthens China's influence in the region. Furthermore, countries in disputes in the region tend to focus on handling the pandemic rather than responding to China's dominance in the South China Sea.

Offensive Realism

From an offensive realist perspective, China's stance can be explained by three main reasons. First, China's image and reputation, particularly in the West, were severely tarnished by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is believed to have originated in Wuhan City, China. Then-US President Donald Trump even referred to COVID-19 as the 'Chinese virus' (Rogers et al., 2020). This narrative led many countries to blame China and demand responsibility for the pandemic crisis. In response, China launched 'wolf warrior' diplomacy, a harsher and more aggressive form of diplomacy. Thus, in addition to defending itself against external criticism and accusations, China also became increasingly offensive to maintain its reputation and position during the pandemic (Amin & Rafique, 2021). Offensiveness does not always mean physical violence, but can also involve constructing a new discourse that attacks countries or certain parties discrediting China. One of them is that they use a "victim mentality" (that they are being slandered and so on, even some officials consider COVID-19 as a virus made in a United States laboratory) to attract support and solidarity at home, as well as to justify their arbitrariness in the international world (Gupta, 2022).

Second, China has successfully normalized domestic affairs while most countries have "surrendered" to the pandemic. As Gupta (2022) notes, "China is perhaps one of the few countries in world history that has created an international problem in the form of a pandemic and then been praised for its success." This gap in the effectiveness of its pandemic management has created a golden opportunity for China to act more offensively, including advancing its claims in the South China Sea. In early and mid-2020, as Pacific nations focused on combating COVID-19, several sources reported that China was increasing naval patrols and exercises in the South China Sea (Storey, 2020; Tangen Jr, 2020). Washington recognized this and accused Beijing of exploiting its neighbors' preoccupation with the pandemic, an accusation the Chinese Foreign Minister promptly and firmly denied (Tangen Jr, 2020). Third, China believes that crises like the COVID-19 pandemic can be a "turning point" for reshaping the global order and balance of power, just as the United States leveraged the collapse of the Soviet Union to create a unipolar world (Jing, 2021). Challenges remain, especially as the United States under the Joe Biden administration has included China as one of its focal

points of power, but China nonetheless has a greater chance of winning the pandemic (Alqedra, 2022; Jing, 2021).

China has utilized at least three avenues to advance its claims and interests in the South China Sea during the COVID-19 pandemic: economic influence, military expansion, and narrative framing. Over the past three decades, China has experienced an economic boom, achieving growth exceeding 10 percent on several occasions, which has seen it rise to the second-largest global economy, surpassing Japan and placing it just behind the United States (Alqedra, 2022). By the end of 2020, China was one of the few countries still able to achieve an economic surplus, with GDP growth of 2.3 percent (He, 2021). However, due to pandemic mitigation measures such as quarantines, the economies of most countries contracted, some by more than 10 percent. Overall, in 2020, the global economy shrank by almost four percent, and the World Bank recorded an additional 100 million people falling into poverty (Gold et al., 2023).

Under these circumstances, as the only major country to show positive growth in 2020, China portrayed itself as a crisis hero, which in turn could improve its international image. At that time, President Xi Jinping allocated US\$2 billion over two years to help respond to COVID-19, particularly in developing countries (Rolland, 2020). He promised that China would become a depot and hub for the global humanitarian response and would seek solutions for debtor countries. At the same time, China also offered new loans to fund COVID-19 recovery (Mulakala & Ji, 2020). One such initiative, through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), China has created a US\$5 billion crisis recovery fund to support member countries and businesses, attracting interest from many developing countries such as India and Indonesia (Hossain, 2021). In this way, China can take control of key assets in the affected countries or forgive debts to enhance its soft power (Gupta, 2022).

Thus, the pandemic presents a unique opportunity for a major power like China to strengthen its political influence in the region. This also aligns with China's hegemonic agenda; obstacles faced by conflicting countries serve as advantages for countries with greater resources to achieve their strategic goals in the region. Furthermore, this phenomenon demonstrates China's desire to demonstrate its resilience to the global crisis and strengthen its position as a major power in the international regime.

Mask and Vaccine Diplomacy

Another method China has used to increase its soft power, which has alarmed many claimant states in the South China Sea, is "mask and vaccine diplomacy." After its initial mishandling of the COVID-19 crisis, China was able to effectively control the domestic epidemic. This enabled it to launch a global diplomatic project providing financial assistance, equipment, and exclusive expertise to other countries (Mitrovic, 2022). In March and April 2020, China's exports of medical supplies reached approximately US\$10 billion (Bermingham, 2020). China also provided two million surgical masks, 200,000 advanced masks, and 50,000 testing kits to Western European countries, essentially serving as US territories (Hossain, 2021). Furthermore, Chinese state-owned and private companies, such as Alibaba, have donated medical supplies to over 100 countries and international organizations (Hatton, 2020). When the COVID-19 vaccine was discovered and mass-produced, China donated or sold the Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines to many countries, making it the leading global vaccine exporter and supplier in 2021 (van Dijk &

Lo, 2023). At the time, the West was mass-producing COVID-19 vaccines solely for its own domestic needs and was unable to distribute them in large quantities to other countries (Gupta, 2022). This vaccine diplomacy became even more compelling when President Xi Jinping promised that the vaccine would be a "global public good" (Liu et al., 2022).

Among the priority targets of China's vaccine diplomacy is Southeast Asia, which is of great cultural, economic, and strategic importance to China (van Dijk & Lo, 2023). The reality is, China was the first country to deliver vaccines to Southeast Asia, delivering over seven million doses to nine ASEAN countries in July 2021, and has pledged to supply 150 million doses (Liu et al., 2022). Beyond the emergency situation, Chinese vaccines are acceptable to ASEAN members because they are relatively easy to store and transport at standard refrigeration temperatures, as well as being more affordable and cost-effective (Rusli, 2021). Indonesia was the first ASEAN country to receive three million doses of the Sinovac vaccine at the end of 2020, followed two months later by Cambodia (600,000 doses), Laos (300,000 doses), Thailand (200,000 doses), the Philippines (600,000 doses), and Brunei Darussalam (unspecified) (Heydarian, 2021). In late February 2021, Malaysia received a shipment of 200,000 doses, and shortly thereafter, Singapore also brought in 200,000 doses. Myanmar, following suit, received 500,000 doses in early May after being delayed from the scheduled date (February) due to a military coup (Rusli, 2021). Meanwhile, after long rejecting Chinese vaccines, Vietnam finally began receiving Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines in June 2021. Overall, Vietnam has received approximately 41.5 million COVID-19 vaccines from China, of which approximately 5.3 million doses were donated (Tung, 2022).

Besides economic influence, another soft power China relies on is narrative framing. As mentioned earlier, as the first country to be impacted by COVID-19, China is often blamed for the pandemic. On the one hand, the virus's impact on the health of its citizens is clearly worrying, but on the other hand, the Chinese Communist Party regime is also deeply concerned about its deeply damaged reputation, both domestically and internationally. In other words, the damage caused by this crisis could threaten the "perfect armor" they have painstakingly built over nearly a century. Based on this, the Chinese Communist Party is trying to construct a new discourse that can restore its reputation, albeit through manipulative means (Rolland, 2020). Since early 2020, China has been relentlessly constructing a narrative using its most effective tools: diplomatic and propaganda tools (civil, military, media, and cultural outlets) (Mitrovic, 2022). They have been diligently countering anti-China rhetoric and sentiment, particularly in the West, by utilizing print media, social media, and think tanks to improve their image during the pandemic crisis. Some of them are even known to be fake news (Hossain, 2021; Kim et al., 2023).

Domestically, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) presents itself as the only viable option for the country, the embodiment of the past and future of the Chinese people, and the only regime capable of recovering China from its crisis. At the same time, it also seeks to control information. When the first cases of COVID-19 were detected in Wuhan in 2019, the Chinese government tightened its filter on information about the virus and punished doctors who raised the issue in the media (Le, 2022). It was only in December 2019 that Beijing informed the WHO about the disease, but even then, it emphasized that the virus was "preventable and controllable." When the WHO declared a

pandemic, the CCP fought for its regime's legitimacy by stoking nationalism and playing the victim to its people (Pant & Bommakanti, 2020). In this way, it could divert attention from its failures in responding to COVID-19.

Internationally, the Chinese Communist Party wants to be seen as morally responsible for the pandemic. In addition to silencing criticism of China's failure to handle the initial crisis and accusations of totalitarianism, they have also actively promoted their benevolence, such as the millions of vaccines they have provided free of charge (Mitrovic, 2022; Rolland, 2020). Conversely, there are reports that Chinese officials have demanded public statements praising China for its medical supply assistance, or even a thank you from President Xi Jinping (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2020). Such demands may also apply to international organizations, such as the WHO, which is seen as overly praising China (Amin & Rafique, 2021). Without this narrative construction, their mask and vaccine diplomacy is rendered useless. In this way, they have transformed their status from victims or survivors to warriors and even heroes who have effectively handled the pandemic, ultimately becoming role models for the international community (Chang, 2021). Despite numerous reports alleging government manipulation of virus statistics (Green & Medeiros, 2020), Beijing has managed to curb (at least partially) anti-China sentiment and process pandemic aid to the world, ultimately often considered to emerge victorious from the pandemic (Hossain, 2021).

What are the implications of this soft power for China's position in the South China Sea? First, through assistance with medical supplies, economic resources, and information warfare. China can deepen its involvement in Southeast Asia, a region where most countries are involved in territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea. This has disrupted the balance of power in these waters. As observed by Alqedra (2022), the COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the shift in the global balance of power from West to East, including in the South China Sea, from the United States (and its allies) to China. A similar view is expressed by Tangen Jr. (2020), who believes the balance of power has tilted toward China in strategic areas such as the South China Sea. Although the United States is trying to restore regional stability, China's soft power influence has already deepened, forcing claimant states, or rather, coerced, into China's orbit at least until the crisis is over (Chang, 2021).

This is because Southeast Asian countries, including those in conflict with China in the South China Sea, have become economically dependent on China. When ASEAN members were hit hard by the pandemic, and China successfully managed the domestic crisis, China immediately implemented a subtle, almost intimidating, economic expansionism through diplomacy of medical supplies, vaccines, and loans (Hunt, 2021). In this case, in addition to improving its reputation in Southeast Asia, China could exert indirect pressure on claimant states in the South China Sea to accept China's political goals and international vision (Le, 2022). In other words, this mixture of winning hearts and minds is not only an opportunity to convince Southeast Asians that China is their close ally, given that many citizens in Southeast Asia are of Chinese descent, but also to advance their claims in the South China Sea (Mitrovic, 2022). Thus, this has the potential to erode the sovereignty of claimant states, even without the need for deploying armed forces.

Take the case of the Philippines. China promised them access to COVID-19 vaccines in exchange for a moderate stance in the South China Sea dispute (Chang, 2021; Deng, 2020). As several

Philippine diplomats anonymously claimed, vaccine diplomacy is China's attempt to take over the South China Sea, or the West Philippine Sea, as the Philippines calls it, and pressure the Philippine government to remain silent about China's activities in the South China Sea (van Dijk & Lo, 2023). President Rodrigo Duterte himself acknowledged this in his July 2020 State of the Nation Address, stating that "there is no such thing as a free lunch" (Siregar & Napitupulu, 2021, p. 200). This statement indicates that he will not seek conflict with China and therefore has no say in the South China Sea dispute, at least for the time being (Tan & Maulia, 2020). In this sense, China is not only providing early access to COVID-19 vaccines to the Philippines, but also to demonstrate a sense of indebtedness and gratitude, partly by avoiding China's red lines in the South China Sea. Of course, China is not forcing Southeast Asian countries to recognize its claims in the South China Sea in exchange for vaccines, but it is understood as a *quid pro quo* (Gupta, 2022; Mitrovic, 2022).

However, by exploiting the momentum created by the pandemic, China's efforts to advance its interests in the South China Sea also encompass hard power, not just soft power, such as vaccine diplomacy and narrative construction. As reported by Storey (2020) of the Yusof-Ishak Institute, China's military and paramilitary activities in the South China Sea have intensified during the pandemic. Although the Chinese government denies exploiting COVID-19 to advance its claims, there is strong evidence that China has used its military to slowly reap profits while the rest of the world is preoccupied with managing the lives (and deaths) of its citizens (Mitrovic, 2022; Pant & Bommakanti, 2020; Tangen Jr, 2020). From an offensive realism perspective, these actions make sense because, in addition to being militarily conservative, China also wants to protect its economic interests to displace (or at least rival) the United States in the ranks of superpowers (Zhang, 2022). Conversely, China is also leveraging its rapid economic growth to support and modernize its military capacity, allowing it to press its territorial and jurisdictional claims, while weakening the claimant states in Southeast Asia (Alqedra, 2022).

In this context, China aims to transform its global image, from being the cause of the pandemic to becoming a global savior, particularly in the areas of medical assistance and vaccines, which are key to its soft power diplomacy strategy. Therefore, the pandemic presents a strategic opportunity for China to strengthen its influence through soft power channels.

China's Aggression in the South China Sea During the Pandemic

Several incidents have demonstrated China's aggressiveness in the South China Sea during the pandemic. In March 2020, for example, China conducted a 36-hour military exercise in the South China Sea near Taipei (Pant & Bommakanti, 2020). This did not escape the attention of the United States, which a few months later reasserted its naval power in the South China Sea by deploying three aircraft carrier battle groups (Amin & Rafique, 2021). China did not remain silent. In late August, in a major show of force, it launched four medium-range anti-ship ballistic missiles, sometimes dubbed carrier killers, from the Chinese mainland into the South China Sea (Storey, 2020). In November, the Chinese navy conducted two separate additional exercises in the region, which were widely perceived as disrupting oil exploration by other claimant states (Thayer, 2021).

The United States is not the only country involved in conflict with China. In mid-September 2021, several Indonesian fishermen at sea in the North Natuna Sea, Indonesia's term for the South China Sea, reported encountering Chinese warships (Andryanto, 2021). Previously, serious tensions had also arisen between Indonesia and China when more than sixty Chinese fishing vessels, escorted by Chinese coast guard vessels, fished illegally near the Natuna Islands—part of Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Mierzejewski & Chatys, 2020). The Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs quickly lodged a formal protest with the Chinese ambassador (Dalpino, 2020). Shortly afterward, the Indonesian armed forces planned joint exercises with the US Indo-Pacific Command, a strong signal to China that Indonesia (and indeed ASEAN) was in close contact with the United States.

The most high-profile incident in the South China Sea during the COVID-19 pandemic was the ramming and sinking of a Vietnamese fishing vessel by a Chinese vessel near the disputed Paracel Islands (New Straits Times, 2020). The following day, Vietnam protested China's actions, claiming a violation of its sovereignty and a threat to the safety and livelihoods of Vietnamese fishermen (Nguyen, 2020). The Philippines has expressed its support and solidarity with Vietnam, while the United States has condemned China's actions and urged a focus on international cooperation and peace in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic (Thao, 2020). Even more alarmingly, in mid-April 2020, China established the Xisha and Nansha districts in the South China Sea (Mitrovic, 2022). Although their land area is only about 20 square kilometers, when calculated with their waters, these districts cover an area of two million square kilometers, strategically used to control the Paracel and Spratly Islands, two highly contested areas (Dalpino, 2020). In the face of this aggressiveness, the South China Sea claimants appear powerless. One reason is the significant defense budget cuts to plug the economic and health gaps caused by the pandemic (New Straits Times, 2020; Rastika, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This research shows that China has engaged in exploitative behavior during the global health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic. This behavior demonstrates China's interest in expanding its claims and dominance in the South China Sea. While there is debate as to whether China has become more aggressive in the South China Sea during the COVID-19 pandemic, the evidence tends to confirm this: China has turned the crisis into an opportunity to advance its interests and claims in the South China Sea. They have done so by combining soft power with hard power. In the context of soft power, they have shared information and knowledge, supplied medical supplies, deployed medical teams, and provided vaccines, particularly to Southeast Asian countries involved in South China Sea disputes. This soft power has steadily increased, ultimately leading to their geopolitical standing in Southeast Asia, although whether or not this has succeeded in advancing their claims in the long term is another question. Essentially, by instilling a sense of indebtedness and gratitude for China's swift response and assistance, claimant states are being pressured to "shut up" on their claims within the nine-dash line of the South China Sea. The United States, essentially a counterweight to China in the region, has been unable to do much due to its preoccupation with dealing with the COVID-19 crisis at home, at least for a while. Nevertheless, even

hours matter. This delay allows China to assert its influence and power in Southeast Asia, and thus in the South China Sea.

In addition to soft power, China has also been simultaneously deploying its armed forces. All major incidents in the South China Sea during the pandemic have involved China, in part because it initiated the problems. This combination of soft and hard power risks eroding the sovereignty of claimant states and, importantly, fueling unnecessary disputes. Therefore, this article concludes that China, despite its denials that has exploited the COVID-19 crisis to advance its interests and claims in the South China Sea. This move threatens security and stability in the South China Sea and deepens the lack of trust among claimants. In response, we can consider that the way to ease tensions is to stop the militarization of the South China Sea and prevent harassment of Southeast Asian military and civilian vessels, as well as uphold international law on maritime security. However, there is no indication that China will back down (or at least relax) the claims in the South China Sea. These waters, for China, are too valuable to sacrifice.

The findings of this study have critical implications, highlighting the dependence of Southeast Asian countries on economic and medical assistance, including vaccine assistance from China. This dependence weakens the political influence of countries in dispute with China in the South China Sea. Therefore, critical issues concerning national sovereignty tend to be suppressed due to the dependence on international assistance, including China's, in handling the pandemic. Thus, this research shows that for certain countries, the global crisis can be exploited for geopolitical expansion.

Furthermore, this study has limitations because the data consists of secondary sources. Therefore, data obtained from interviews, particularly with parties involved during the conflict and dispute, as well as during the pandemic, can provide a detailed picture in explaining the dynamics of the South China Sea dispute during the pandemic. In terms of method, further research can be supplemented with primary data obtained from related parties. Furthermore, based on the findings of this study, this issue can be developed by examining the context of public perception in Southeast Asia regarding the South China Sea conflict. This can fill a gap in other research in mapping Southeast Asian public perceptions of the South China Sea dispute, particularly during the pandemic.

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