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Understanding Power (Shift) in East Asia: The Sino-US Narrative Battle about Leadership in the South China Sea

Mikael Weissmann

In this article I study the competing US and Chinese narratives about the South China Sea. Arguing that the practice of calculating power shifts in terms of the changing distribution of material capabilities is inadequate, I complement existing literature by taking ideational and normative dimensions of power into account. I ask what the alternative Chinese narrative of power and leadership in the South China Sea looks like and how it is perceived by others in comparison with the dominant US narrative. While a “hard” power transition is ongoing, China’s preferred narrative has yet to become widely accepted and the US narrative will remain dominant for now. Nevertheless, China has been making progress in shifting the narrative of what the future could look like with China’s vision for a post-US regional and global order now seen as a possible alternative.

Keywords: *China, South China Sea, United States, power (political), power (military), power shift, power transition, soft power, narratives.*

THIS ARTICLE STUDIES THE COMPETING US AND CHINESE NARRATIVES ABOUT the South China Sea. Developments in the South China Sea are crucial for power and leadership in East Asia, as the region at the epicenter of the ongoing East Asian power conflict between the United States and China. This power shift has been seen as imminent for over two decades (Betts 1993–1994; Friedberg 1993; Roy 1994), and it is generally accepted that there has been a redistribution of capabilities between the two countries, even if there are differences in opinions about the outcome of the power shift (Hagström and Jerden 2014). Arguing that the production of intersubjective social reality is fundamental for power analysis, this article analyzes the role and impact of narratives concern-

ing the South China Sea conflicts and by extension the competition for power and leadership in the region and beyond.

Following these insights into power as socially contextual, I address the alternative Chinese narrative of power and leadership in the South China Sea and perceptions of it in comparison with the dominant US narrative. That is, what representation of reality has been or will become accepted over time as the dominant representation of reality? If the Chinese narrative is becoming more attractive and dominating over time, a more profound power shift will have taken place. Such a shift would have a wide-ranging impact also when it comes to the impact and room for maneuver of military and economic capabilities.

Although this analysis defines power to include dimensions other than traditional “hard” or material considerations, the article does not challenge the idea that a “hard” power transition is occurring as a result of China’s military and economic rise. Instead, the article complements the observed “hard power” transition by capturing the ideational and normative dimensions of power shifts through an analysis of “narrative power competition.” I argue that the common practice of calculating power shifts in terms of changing distribution of material capabilities is inadequate as the intersubjective production of social reality creates a demand to include ideational and normative dimensions into power analysis. As will be discussed in further detail below, my analysis rests on insights that the exercise of power has an ideational or normative dimension. Variables such as norms, culture, and identity are crucial here as in the emerging security setting (Katzenstein 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Gustafsson 2014; Hopf and Allan 2016). Narratives steer how reality is interpreted, and when certain interpretations are taken for granted they soon require self-fulfilling explanations and actions (Hagström 2012).

The outcome of the narrative battle in the South China Sea matters beyond the case itself. The representation of reality that becomes accepted as “normal” here is a manifestation of both the overall power dynamics and what happens in the South China Sea. These developments have implications beyond the area—in the East China Sea, for China’s behavior elsewhere, and for China’s (and the United States’) international standing, respect, and impact.

The article is organized as follows. This opening section is followed by a discussion on studying power shifts, including a brief review of research on power in the context of East Asia. The article’s analytical framework is then presented, before I move on to conducting a narrative analysis of the South China Sea situation since 2009. The analysis

concludes that, while a “hard” power transition is ongoing, China’s preferred narrative has yet to become widely accepted and the US narrative will remain dominant for now. Nevertheless, China has been making progress in shifting the narrative of what the future could look like with China’s vision for a post-US regional and global order now seen as a possible alternative.

Studying Power Shift

Power cannot be understood as purely material but needs to be attributed with meaning in a social context. Part of what becomes power lies in the attractiveness of reality as it is represented. By getting one’s own description of how the world works, including one’s description of history, norms, rules, and institutions, accepted as legitimate and true, what is “normal” can be created. With a redefined state of normality, a power shift and the emergence of a new leader follows. Military and economic capability and other hard power may be—and arguably are—important for such a power shift. However, outside of the social context, they are merely resources with potential effects, not power in the sense that they produce effects. In the East Asian case, it is clear that economic power is an essential driving force for China’s rise. Without its economic development, the focus on China would have been different and there would have been less attention given to the Chinese narrative of what the world should look like and China’s role in this world. Thus, there is a link between real and perceived future Chinese economic might and the creation of a description of how the world should work. The latter narrative gains power from its narrator’s material capabilities, which, in turn, are attributed to the social meaning needed for them to produce effects by the same narratives.

Thus, from a power shift perspective, a critical question is if the attractiveness of the Chinese alternative narrative of power and leadership—that is, what the future world order should look like—is gaining acceptance and over time becoming the dominant representation of reality. The level of acceptance of one’s preferred narrative is crucial for the diplomatic maneuvering space within which one may legitimately wield “hard” power, and the severity of consequences if moving beyond what is perceived as legitimate. Once established as “normal,” a certain narrative or discourse more broadly speaking will make certain courses of action seem legitimate, natural, or realistic, while others appear illegitimate, unnatural, or unrealistic (Doty 1993; Weldes and Saco 1996; Hol-

land 2013; Hagström 2015b). For example, the way the United States and the West have acted in Iraq, in the War on Terror, and with respect to the intervention in Libya has been accepted because the narrative description of reality into which they fit has been accepted. Responses to a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, an occupation of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, or an intervention in Central Asia would be very different as the linked narratives have far less international support.

Power in the East Asian Context

The field of research on power in East Asia is extensive. There has been a scholarly debate on power shifts for over two decades (see, e.g., Hagström and Jerden 2014). This debate includes a wide range of scenarios, including ones in line with power transition theory (Roy 1994, 2003; Levy 2008; Debs and Monteiro 2014) and offensive realism (Mearsheimer 2010) where the United States is predicted to stay in East Asia and there is an imminent risk of conflict as China is challenging the existing order. There are also predictions of a stable balance of power emerging in the region (Ross 1999; White 2012). Others predict a full or partial US military withdrawal (Roy 1994; White 2012), which could lead to arms races and security dilemmas (Friedberg 1993; Christensen 2006), or a positive bandwagoning with China (Kang 2007). There is also a strand reflecting a more positive perspective on China's rise and eventual progressive integration into the existing order, including work by Mel Gurtov, which argues for engagement between the United States and China on issues of common concern, rather than confrontation or containment over differences (Gurtov 2013), and that by David Kang, who argues for a grand US strategy focusing on diplomatic and economic relations rather than pursuing a military-first policy (Kang 2017).

The concept of "soft power" has received much attention, and attempts have been made to use the concept as an analytical tool for different aspects of international relations in East Asia. The concept has been used in research comparing the use of soft power by China and Japan with the United States, for example (Rivlin 2004; Kurlantzick 2007; Lampton 2008; Li 2008; Watanabe and McConnell 2008; Callahan and Barabantseva 2011; Lai and Lu 2012). There are also studies focusing on comparing the soft power of Japan and China (Vyas 2011; Sun 2012; Hagström 2015a). These studies have given particular attention to the international attractiveness of Chinese and Japanese cultures. Here, soft power is used as a way to analyze power resources such as manga and

anime in a reasonably successful way (Katsumata 2012; Heng 2014; also see Bukh 2014 for a historical review).

Predicting China's rise has become a field of its own, with myriad studies of the how and if China will become a great power. Studies include assessment of China's military might (Brown, Prueher, and Segal 2003; Ross 2009; Wortzel 2013; Haddick 2014; Cliff 2015; Kamphausen and Lai 2015), its economic power (Abeyasinghe and Lu 2003; Ramo 2004; Kurlantzick 2007; Percival 2007; Bardhan 2013), and China's role as a rising global power (Dittmer and Yu 2010; Shambaugh 2013; Christensen 2015; Weissmann 2015; Breslin 2016; Nordin and Weissmann 2018). There is a broad consensus that the rise of China is a relatively long-term process. When it comes to the question of final outcome, however, the field contains views ranging from those confident about the inevitability of China's rise amid its expanding global influence or that in the likely strategic conflict between China and United States that China will win, marking the beginning of a new era of Chinese global leadership, to those emphasizing the domestic and external constraints that impede China's ascent to global leadership (for a review of the literature on China's rise, see, e.g., Chung 2015, 2–3; also see Christensen 2015). There are also those who, like the author, think that it is uncertain and not yet set in stone, that China has tremendous potential for becoming a great, even hegemonic power, but the path there is underlined by uncertainty (see Chung 2015, 2–3). Regardless of the final outcome, there is a consensus among scholars and pundits alike that China is on the rise.

Whether or not the Chinese narrative will become dominant, and if so in which form, is relevant not only to the East Asian context but also beyond, as this is a time when the hegemony of the liberal order is widely challenged and there is uncertainty what the future global architecture will look like (Duncombe and Dunne 2018). The Chinese narrative includes opposition to the US/Western-led neoliberal international order. It also endorses the views on the role of the state articulated in the five principles of peaceful coexistence, with emphasis on noninterference when it comes to the system of government and treatment of its populations as well as opportunity for trade and other commercial cooperation with no normative strings attached. This Beijing alternative, though still not fully developed as a concept, is an alternative to the existing system that has received little support in the developed world, but more so in developing countries. Its most explicit elaboration can be found in the vision document of the Belt and Road initiative. While being more concrete than is usually the case in the context of China, it is still more

of a vision or direction than being a clear plan in terms of a detailed formulation of a program of action (National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Commerce of the PRC 2015).

Not surprisingly, Beijing's foreign policy focus is on the developing world and emerging powers. China has here been trying to widen its impact as it increases its material presence and influence in Central Asia, South Asia, Latin America, and Africa. It is also trying to develop its economic and political cooperation with other emerging major states, such as India, Mexico, South Africa, and Russia.

Analytical Framework

This article examines whether the preferred narratives of China and the United States are more successful in mustering support for their preferred representation of reality. I emphasize the reception of these alternative narratives in other countries, in particular among those countries' elites and leadership, as I would argue that it is ultimately they who are the judges of which narratives are the most attractive and the ones to be accepted, thereby becoming the dominant representation of reality.

I investigate the extent to which the narratives produced and spread by the United States and China succeed in gaining acceptance, exploring if and how they succeed in shaping how others perceive and define their preferences and interests. The underlying idea is that the narratives ultimately define the dynamics of the East Asian security setting and international relations more broadly, creating a framework for what actions are possible, when, and for whom. In short, it is ultimately the dominant (or victorious) narratives that define what is seen as legitimate and illegitimate, what is normal and abnormal, and ultimately what is possible to say and to do, and what is not.

The analytical framework used here is based on a process developed by Linus Hagström in his research on the Senkaku/Diaoyu issue (Hagström 2012, 2015a). The analytical process starts by identifying existing narratives and asking if any of them are dominant. After that, it is asked how and where said narratives are spread, who is producing them, and who their audiences are. Having identified the narratives, their producers and audiences, it is asked how the narratives connect to existing discourses, such as international law, to achieve acceptance. Thereafter, it is asked what and what subject positions (identities) that are created through the dissemination of respective narrative. These are here di-

vided into three broad “groups of belong,” where membership depends on whose narrative is preferred. Finally, it is asked how acceptance is secured; that is, are there any consequences for those not adhering to or accepting a particular narrative?

“A Great Wall of Sand”: A Narrative Battle for Power and Leadership

When analyzing existing narratives on the South China Sea, it is necessary to understand the overarching master narratives concerning the two key actors competing for leadership in East Asia, China and the United States. The master narratives are the fundamental context for understanding the narratives specifically related to the South China Sea. These narratives guide how one is to interpret developments in the South China Sea, such as the extensive Chinese land reclamation and construction building on different reefs in the South China Sea—or the construction of a “Great Wall of Sand” (Associated Press in Canberra 2015; also see Dolven et al. 2015; Paul 2016).

Two competing master narratives can be identified. The first one is the “China threat” narrative. This narrative is based on the idea of China as a threat to US hegemonic power. It tells a story about a rising China that threatens regional and global order, with the United States being presented as the protector of stability, peace, prosperity, and freedom. According to this narrative, China is a revisionist and aggressive power, and a power that aims to become the regional leader. If accepted, this narrative requires the United States and its allies to “balance” China to safeguard stability, peace, and prosperity as well as to uphold international law and protect the existing global order and economic system. Although of course not unchallenged, this is the dominant narrative today, particularly in the West.

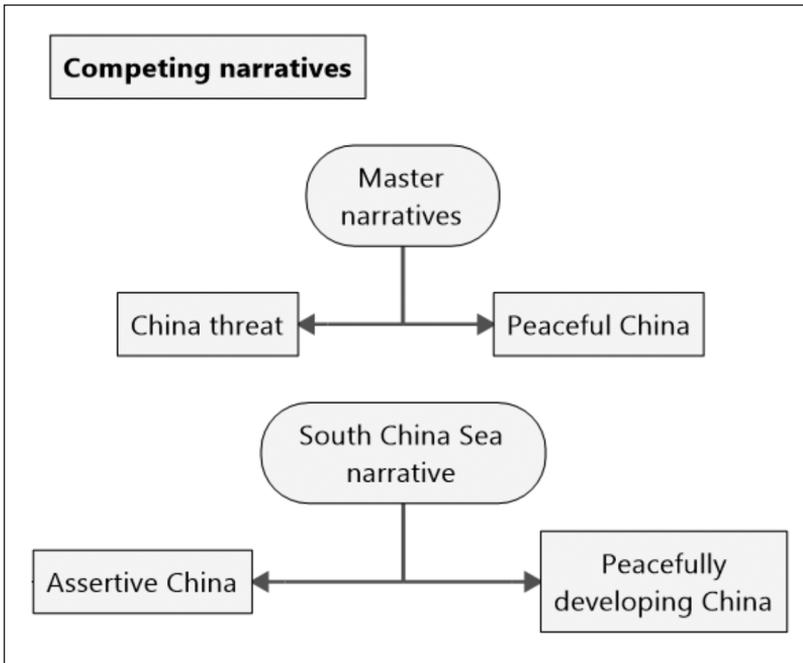
The second master narrative is about a “peaceful China.” China is presented as a nonhegemonic, nonrevisionist, and developing country that seeks to develop peacefully to ensure domestic growth. This China is a responsible power that wants to contribute to the public good of the international community as far as it can. It also wants to assume greater international responsibility with the aim of contributing to greater peace and prosperity for all. This is also the official Chinese story as outlined in its foreign policy documents and official statements (Weissmann 2015, 154, 159–161). If this narrative is accepted, US behavior and actions are the threat, not China.¹ The “peaceful China” narrative

has gained some support in some parts of the world, particularly among developing countries, though it has proponents elsewhere as well. It is also a narrative prominent in the Belt and Road Initiative, President Xi’s and China’s vision for international leadership.

The Threat of a More Assertive China

Moving to the South China Sea, the master narratives are also manifested in the narratives of respectively a more assertive China and a peacefully developing China (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Competing Narratives of Rising China



The first master narrative emphasizes the actions of an assertive China that undermines stability by more aggressively pursuing its claims in the South China Sea. This pursuit is not only rhetorical but evident in China’s land reclamation and its growing military presence and forward

deployment in the South China Sea challenging innocent passage and foreign navies in its exclusive economic zone. To quote the *New York Times*, “China has been behaving in a bellicose fashion . . . as part of a sustained and increasingly dangerous effort to assert sovereignty over a vital waterway in which other nations also have claims” (*New York Times* 2016). Here the most threatening and clear example is, to cite the same editorial, “China’s most aggressive and outrageous tactic . . . to use tons of dirt and gravel and rocks to transform small reefs and rocks into artificial islands with airstrips and other military structures, including runways capable of handling military aircraft” (*New York Times* 2016). Besides undermining regional stability, these actions also appear to threaten freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, which is crucial for the regional and global economy.

In this narrative, it is the United States that ensures peace, stability, and freedom of navigation. This is done through political pressure and military presence, including conducting so-called freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) (Ku, Fravel, and Cook 2016; Slavin 2016; Jaipragas 2018). US responses to China are done for the good of everyone, with the US presence being central for upholding the existing regional security architecture and ensuring China is kept under much-needed control. The Chinese counternarrative is somewhat different, where the FONOPs are described in such terms as “hegemonism in disguise” (*Xinhua* 2015).

For the United States, labels of emergent strategic concepts such as the “pivot” or “rebalance” have framed Washington’s justification for its actions in the South China Sea. It has also been a common practice to use the idea of freedom of navigation and the need to ensure regional stability to legitimize its actions. This reasoning is complemented by the condemnation by the United States of China’s “unlawful” acts in constructing military facilities on maritime features in the South China Sea. China disagrees with this narrative, claiming that FONOPs are merely a sugar coating for the actual intentions and political ambitions of the United States in the region. Rather than a defender of peace and stability, it is the United States that is the one who has disturbed the stability of the South China Sea. To cite *Xinhua*, “The South China Sea used to be a peaceful region before the United States poked its nose into the area. Instead of its ‘Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific’ strategy, what the United States really needs is to ‘rebalance’ its attitude toward the issue” (*Xinhua* 2016a).

The Chinese counternarrative about a peacefully developing China is very different. Drawing on the “peaceful China” master narrative, it

tells a story about a benevolent nonhegemonic country seeking peace and prosperity for all (Fu and Wu 2016). This story has parallels in the narrative associated with BRI, which links up to the “Silk Road Spirit” of “peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit” that has “contributed greatly to the prosperity and development of the countries along the Silk Road” for “thousands of years” (National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Commerce of the PRC 2015). In this narrative, China is peacefully developing and its actions in the South China Sea are first and foremost reactive to others’ actions. Moreover, even if this were not the case, it is not aggressive but seeking to contribute to public goods. While protecting “the security of its sovereignty and maritime rights [while refraining from proactive motions and act with restraints],” China’s policy objective in the South China Sea is “to uphold the policy of “shelving the disputes and seeking joint development” and upholding “the freedom and safety of navigation” (Fu and Wu 2016).

For example, according to the Chinese narrative, leaders of Chinese land reclamation projects ought not to worry about those who themselves have good intentions, as the Chinese ambassador to the United States stated:

Such work [on some of the Nansha islands and reefs] is well within China’s sovereignty. The main purpose is to improve the functions of facilities there so as to provide services to ships of China, neighboring countries and other countries that sail across the South China Sea. Such services will include shelter for ships, navigation aid, search and rescue, marine meteorological observation, fishery service and many others. Emphasis will also be put on marine environment protection. (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America 2015)

Also on the question of “militarization,” Ambassador Cui Tiankai’s narrative tells a different story than that of the US narrative, noting that “of course there will be defense facilities” on the islands that are “only natural and necessary” and “purely for defensive purposes” and arguing that

if these facilities could not even defend themselves, how can they render service to others? If China could not safeguard its own sovereignty, how can it shoulder greater responsibilities for international stability? Therefore, building-up of China’s capabilities in the South China Sea provides public goods to all and serves the interests of maintaining security, stability and freedom of navigation there. (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America 2015)

To make this point clear and convincing, Cui links his story to the master narrative:

China has long been a strong advocate for international cooperation and a staunch force for world peace. Facts show that as China grows stronger, it is better able to take up greater international responsibilities and contribute more to regional and global stability. Anyone who shares our commitment to community building in the region shall have nothing to worry about. (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America 2015)

As we have already seen, this is not how the US narrative understands the same action. This gap in perspectives has grown wider during the Donald Trump administration in the United States. After an initial period with a relative lack of a clear strategy toward the South China Sea as the Trump administration's focus was foremost on trade, the United States has stepped up its military activities in the region, including not only FONOPs but also overflights with nuclear-capable B-52 bombers (Valencia 2018). These moves have been associated with statements that China's militarization of its claims will have consequences, with White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders telling a regular news briefing that they are "well aware of China's militarization of the South China Sea" and that "there will be near-term and long-term consequences" in response to reports that China had installed missile systems on outposts in the South China Sea (Sanders 2018). It has also been made clear by Vice President Mike Pence that the United States will not back down because of what is seen as Chinese intimidation tactics (*Guardian* 2018).

The Importance of Narrative Acceptance

When contrasting how similar Chinese and US actions are interpreted by other countries, the dominant narrative at play is evident. For example, one of the fears among countries in the region and elsewhere with respect to Chinese land reclamation and constructions in the Spratly Islands is that this will allow China to bring in fuel, supplies, and replacement parts and allow for crew rotations allowing Chinese vessels to operate in the area without having to travel back to the mainland, thereby increasing its military presence. The US Navy also uses or plans to use forward bases in, for example, the Persian Gulf, as well as with the placement of littoral combat ships in Singapore (Dolven et al. 2015,

9). It should also be noted that land reclamation has also been a practice of other claiming states, as well as the United States elsewhere. There are also examples of the deployment of weapon systems in the area with other claimants also having established airfields on disputed features. This is not to argue that these are equivalent, nor that there is no reason to be concerned about the Chinese moves. However, it shows that the meaning given to specific actions and behaviors is a question of interpretation where the dominating narrative and the acceptance of the narrative in which they are embedded are of fundamental importance.

It should here be emphasized that what is important is not which narrative is more “true,” but which narrative becomes dominant. The dominant narrative will also influence what instruments and actions can be used and the reaction to how they are used. The reaction to a certain instrument, such as land reclamation or military patrols, is very different depending upon which narrative the audience subscribes to. Depending on which master narrative dominates, the answers to questions about whether it is China or the United States that “militarizes” or is “aggressive” and “destabilizing” are very different. Is China’s practice of placing arms systems on its artificial islands “aggressive,” or is there a justifiable need for such “defensive” measures? As the Chinese story goes, “if these facilities could not even defend themselves, how can they render service to others?” (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America 2015). Was China “forced” to build such facilities and enhance its military capabilities as the United States shifted its strategic priorities to the Asia Pacific and reinforced its military presence there (Fu and Wu 2016)? Is there some truth to the suspicion among some Chinese scholars that “the US may be creating illusionary threats and crises in the region which can turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Fu and Wu 2016)? Are the US FONOPs offensive intrusions or merely a defense of stability, freedom of navigation, and international law? The answers to these questions depend on the narrative.

The Dissemination and Production of Narratives

The narratives outlined above are spread through official material and in Chinese and international media outlets. The South China Sea has been a hot topic in leading international media such as the *Economist*, *New York Times*, *Financial Times*, and *Guardian* as well as web-based outlets like the *Diplomat* and *Foreign Policy*, which all have readerships

comprising international and national elites. There have also been many English-language articles in Chinese outlets such as the *Global Times* and *China Daily*, often in the form of op-eds aimed at non-Chinese readers. The South China Sea has received much attention among experts and pundits, in particular in the United States, spreading the dominant narrative in a range of think-tank publications and op-eds. Their Chinese counterparts have done the same.

The producer of the “peaceful China” narrative is ultimately the Chinese leadership. Besides official channels, including press statements, briefings, spokesperson remarks, and statements by top Chinese leaders, this narrative is also channeled through other Chinese agents, including Chinese think tanks, scholars, and experts. The primary international audiences are the international and regional elites, including policymakers, experts, media, and the business community.

In the case of the “China threat” narrative, its production is less centralized. The narrative is largely produced and reproduced by non-governmental and government-linked actors, particularly in the United States. The main audiences are international and regional elites. As opposed to China, the governments in Western societies are somewhat limited in their ability to create and spread the narrative. The United States for one takes no official position on the claims in the South China Sea, for example; policymakers speak out in support of the dominant narrative, and materials from the Pentagon and the White House support the narrative (see, e.g., Obama 2015; Trump 2017). However, official foreign policy statements tend to be more moderate and diplomatic. For example, in the US Department of State’s briefing on the arbitration it is said to be “a very sweeping and decisive ruling,” adding that though being “quite clear and authoritative, it was also immensely complex” and avoids taking any stands on claims (US Department of State 2016). This is very different from the official Chinese reaction, to say the least (Lu 2016; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2016a; Yi 2016). To cite the Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lu Kang’s remark on “the so-called ruling,”

I want to stress again that the arbitration unilaterally filed by the Aquino III government, which violated international law, is a political farce under the cloak of law. What the arbitral tribunal did and ruled severely deviated from the common practice of international arbitration. The ruling is null and void with no binding force. It will in no way affect China’s territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea. (Lu 2016)

The implications of these very different narratives competing to become accepted as the “true” representation of reality extend beyond an influence on elite views. The path of their relative acceptance has and will continue to have a major impact on what and how different hard power resources can be utilized. The US military presence and actions are legitimized and welcomed due to the acceptance of its “China threat” story. If the “peaceful China” narrative was to become dominant and it became generally accepted that China genuinely aims to provide public goods in the South China Sea including ensuring freedom of navigation, peace, and stability, reactions to China’s military posturing and land reclamation can be expected to be very different. However, what is the path to get one’s narrative accepted?

Linking the Narratives to Existing Discourses?

To be convincing, a narrative needs to be linked to existing discourses. The US narrative is linked to international law and the upholding of existing international norms and rules. It offers to uphold the stable and prosperous liberal world order that China is challenging. The United States presents itself as a guarantor of peace, stability, and prosperity and protector of international law. Former US president Obama’s remarks in Vietnam on May 23, 2016, exemplify how this linkage is expressed:

The United States and Vietnam are united in our support for a regional order, including in the South China Sea—where international norms and rules are upheld, where there is freedom of navigation and overflight, where lawful commerce is not impeded, and where disputes are resolved peacefully, through legal means, in accordance with international law. I want to repeat that the United States will continue to fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows, and we will support the right of all countries to do the same. (White House 2016b)

The US position was also emphasized at the US-ASEAN Summit in February 2016: “The U.S. will be underscoring the importance of resolving any territorial disputes consistent with international norms and international law, and we will continue to underscore the principle that these issues have to be resolved consistent with international norms and not through bigger nations bullying smaller ones” (White House 2016a). It should also be noted that the freedom of navigation operations is legitimized in a similar logic (Ali 2017; Sevastopulo and Mitchell 2017).

China's competing narrative rests on the idea of Chinese benevolence manifested in its approach to the role of the state in foreign policy and international cooperation based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, "Peaceful Rise/Development," and the idea of "Harmonious World." Similar to the US narrative, it is also linked to international law. China has, for example, responded to the accusations of its action in the South China Sea as having been unlawful (including constructing artificial islands, performed military operation, and built missile structure), arguing that they were legitimate according to international law and within its sovereign right, being means of self-defense and being aimed at maintaining regional stability.

A good example of this is the 2016 tribunal award. China has repeatedly stated that it would neither accept nor participate in the arbitration unilaterally initiated by the Philippines including after the tribunal itself, taking the position that it was in effect jurisdiction under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).² Here China's view was that what the arbitrator was doing was ruling on the sovereignty issue, which in effect is not within the authority of UNCLOS. The day after the award China issued a white paper regarding the ruling defending itself, stating that "it respects and acts in accordance with international law" and asserting its righteous position on disputes in the South China Sea issue. The white paper also systematically refuted the Philippines' claims and stated that the Philippines used unlawful means and "distorted facts, misinterpreted laws and concocted a pack of lies" on the South China Sea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2016b).

China is also linking its narrative to rule-based frameworks, emphasizing the importance of the existing Declaration on the Code of Conduct (DOC) and the last phase of the negotiations of the Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea. These are also what China always returns to when external legal interpretations are not favorable to China, as when China's foreign minister Wang Yi stated in Laos that the tribunal award "had interfered with DOC and COC negotiations progress" and "brought Sino-Philippines relationship to the bottom which had compromised intraregional people's interest" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2016c [author's translation]).

Groups of Belonging: You're Either with Us or against Us (or Somewhere in Between)

The different narratives create different groups of belonging among their followers. Countries can here be clustered into three groups depending upon what type of order they identify with and what narrative they accept. They can be divided into (1) those identifying themselves with and being accepted “members” of the US-led liberal world order, (2) those being ambivalent, not wanting to pick a side, and (3) those with a preference for a Chinese-led alternative order.

Members in group 1 are mainly Western liberal democracies. However, even among Western democracies there is a degree of ambivalence, with some countries at least sometimes leaning toward group 2. An excellent example of this ambivalence can be seen in the response to the South China Sea ruling. Hungary and Greece are both economically dependent on China, and Croatia and Slovenia have their own maritime disputes, and thus these countries did not want to endorse an anti-China statement issued by the European Union (Emmott 2016). Not surprisingly, considering the ongoing power shift, the second group is the largest one. This is also where one can find the majority of countries in the East Asian region, who are ambivalent to how to handle the rising China vis-à-vis the United States. The third group consists mainly of nondemocratic countries, particularly in Africa and South America, where there has been a tendency to focus on the positive side of what China has to offer in contrast to the United States and its Western allies.

The first group is larger than the third one, which is also linked to why the first master narrative dominates. The ambivalent group is the largest one; thus it is clear that the future master narrative has yet to be settled. This is mainly so as it is often developing countries that are torn between an existing order created by the old nations, sometimes also their former colonial masters, and the possibilities as China is often perceived as the future great power in the coming center of Asia and possibly the world. Being a member of this group also offers a more flexible alternative for respective leadership, both when it comes to constraints to domestic affairs and on how rule following and principled one needs to be when engaging in the international community.

Narrative Acceptance and Adherence

The audiences' choice of preferred narrative is not free from consequences. Not accepting a certain narrative may have costs, in the forms of both carrots you do not get and sticks wielded at you. In the case of the dominant narrative of the "China threat," political pressure and shaming and the risk of losing one's "membership" to the first group of belonging are here important for narrative obedience. There is a reason why a statement like "you're either with us or against us" has such power for this group—implying that the question of belonging is non-negotiable and requires (absolute) faithfulness. There are also economic and representational impacts if not adhering; if you are not seen as an "insider," or as among the "in-group," you risk losing support in international institutions. You also risk your seat at the table in certain multilateral fora and dialogues for getting different diplomatic priority and treatment, different access to technologies, and so on. Ultimately, you might also risk indirect or even direct economic and political punishment—in the forms of both sanctions and less favorable treatments/deals. The latter is something that has been made very clear during the Trump administration.

When it comes to the Chinese narrative, China has been keen on wielding its economic power to convince, induce, or force others to adhere to its preferred narrative. By accepting the Chinese narrative, you can expect favorable economic and political treatment. If you do not, there will be a risk for direct or indirect consequences. For example, when ASEAN member states have been following the peaceful China narrative, avoiding making harsh statements, not taking up the South China Sea in the ASEAN meeting, and so forth, there have been monetary rewards, for example, in the form of Chinese investments. If doing the opposite, the treatment has been less favorable. The fact that there will be consequences if you go against the narrative of a peaceful China is not limited to weak states or neighbors.

The power of carrots and sticks—regardless of them being imagined or real, direct, or indirect—is clear among China's neighbors. Here again the Philippines president Rodrigo Roa Duterte is a good example: he was aware of the reality of his country's dependence on China for trade and economy development, and after an anti-China themed presidential campaign, the Philippines took an unexpected turn in response to China, arguing to reporters at the presidential palace in August 2016 that it was "better to continually engage China in a diplomatic dialogue rather than anger officials there" and making a promise to start a bilateral

talk “within the year” (Mogato 2016). He even went so far in his flattery as to say in an interview ahead of a visit to China, “All that I would need to do is just to talk and get a firm handshake from the officials and say that we are Filipinos and we are ready to cooperate with you, to help us in building our economy and building our country. . . . My grandfather is Chinese. . . . It’s only China (that) can help us” (Xinhua 2016b).

Consequently, Duterte was rewarded, with the Philippines signing US\$13.5 billion worth of deals with China during this trip. He even said to the audience in Beijing that “I’ve realigned myself in your ideological flow and maybe I will also go to Russia to talk to [Vladimir] Putin and tell him there are three of us against the world: China, Philippines and Russia. It’s the only way” (Walker 2017). Thus the Philippines reiterated its shifting alliance from the United States to China as well as including Russia on the Philippines’ side. Concerning the South China Sea, both parties agreed on setting aside the disputes and respecting and following the DOC.

Conclusion

The “China threat” and “assertive China” narratives are used to legitimize the US use of hard power. If these narratives were not accepted, the United States would not be seen as the protector of peace and stability as is currently the case. Without the domination of these narratives, its “innocent passages” would not necessarily be perceived as so “innocent,” nor would the US rebalancing be perceived positively by so many. A case in point is this: the reaction to the increased Chinese presence and activities in the area cause a very different reaction than the US ones. In short, it is the dominance of the “China threat” narrative that provides the context for interpreting Chinese militarization in the South China Sea, and consequently the strong reactions follow as a logical progression.

If a “peaceful China” narrative would have been accepted and become the dominating one, it would be China’s behavior that was seen as legitimate. This is not to say that there is a lack of narrative behind what China wants to do in the South China Sea or why it would have a right to do so. It is just the case that this narrative is not widely believed and accepted. If this would be the case, the interpretation of China’s land reclamation and related constructions and the reasoning why there is a need to defend the islands and why patrols are needed would be different.

Nevertheless, we can see (for China) positive effects even if its narrative is not fully accepted, as some Southeast Asian countries at least pay lip service to the Chinese narrative. By doing so they may potentially receive benefits and at least not risk too severe consequences. This is also something that mitigates the likelihood of collective opposition to China's actions from ASEAN.

In conclusion, if the Chinese narrative were more widely accepted, it would be China that would have space to use hard power to station and project its armed forces in the area under the umbrella of protecting peace and prosperity, not the United States, as is the case today. If this happens, there will have been a power shift that goes beyond "hard" power in the South China Sea and the region (and possibly the world).

Moving beyond the South China Sea

It is clear that China's preferred narrative has yet to become widely accepted. However, there are signs that the Chinese narrative is beginning to receive increasing acceptance over time. While being far from fully accepted, there has been an avoidance of going against the China narrative. This way Beijing has over time been successful in getting more room to maneuver in the region and beyond. A case in point is that even the European Union had a problem reaching a consensus about the Philippines arbitration ruling. A similar case can be made regarding the Belt and Road Initiative, where President Xi presents and promotes a different worldview from the one promoted by President Trump in Washington, where many countries have been partnering up with different projects (Nordin and Weissmann 2018). To date, BRI has been welcomed by many countries both within and beyond the region. This remains the case, despite there recently having been some backlash as with the Hambantota Port Development Project in Sri Lanka where China ended up obtaining control over the harbor and fifteen thousand acres of land for ninety-nine years (Abi-Habib 2018). In short, it is the case that China and its narrative representation of reality *de facto* gain space.

So has there been a power shift in East Asia? While it is clear that a "hard" power transition is ongoing, China is still struggling to get acceptance of its narrative about power and leadership. Until the Chinese alternative gains somewhat more general acceptance, the United States will ultimately remain the preferred leader. Nevertheless, China has been making progress, as its "offer" of what the future could look like under the umbrella of Chinese leadership has developed to a point

where it has become a serious alternative to the existing US-led regional and global order. China's leadership is becoming more and more accepted. Not only are many countries courting China to gain material benefits, but the Chinese narrative is not without attraction.

The quest for power and leadership is not without friction, as has been seen in recent counterreactions to the impact of BRI. It is thus clear that to become accepted as the regional and international leader, China still lacks the soft power—or attractiveness—to gain the acceptance needed for their narrative. While China's "leadership" is often accepted on the surface, its ideational and normative depth is still limited. Thus the US narrative continues to be the most attractive one, at least for now.

This said, as China now offers a serious alternative description of what the world could look like, it creates a feeling of being at the tipping point where even a small shift in relative narrative acceptance could have significant implications for regional and global power and leadership. In short, the rise and ambitions of China force us to question the relevance of the existing liberal order, whether it can survive as it is today or under currently debated labels such as Liberal Institutionalism 3.0 or World Order 2.0 (Ikenberry 2009, 2017; Weber 2010; Haass 2017). That these debates exist shows that there is a possible space for alternative narratives, not necessarily the Chinese narrative. But China is presenting an alternative that cannot be dismissed.

Notes

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1. For a good example of this narrative, see Fu and Wu (2016). In this piece the chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee of China’s National People’s Congress and the president of the National Institute of the South China Sea Studies tells a very different story than the first master narrative. Another good example is the March 2015 “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” issued by the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, with State Council authorization outlining the vision of the Belt and Road initiative (National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Commerce of the PRC 2015).

2. See, e.g., Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (2016a). The Chinese position is also clear in the award itself; see <https://pca-cpa.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/175/2016/07/PH-CN-20160712-Award.pdf>. Also see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (2014).

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