



The rise of China as a constructed narrative: Southeast Asia's response to Asia's power shift

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the rise of China from the perspective of three selected countries – the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia – in Southeast Asia. I argue that their perceptions of China's rise are political constructs: while the objective reality may be an increasingly powerful China, their responses have been far from uniform. They vary in ways that are shaped by their domestic politics. These constructed narratives serve their respective political agenda, from leadership legitimacy to the supremacy of a party faction. Since theories of international relations tend to fixate on power politics between great powers, this article explains how and why small regional powers add to the process of understanding China's rise. In short, regional states' domestic politics affect their narratives of China, and therefore affect how China's rise is being understood in the region and beyond.

KEYWORDS International relations theory; China's rise; power transition; Southeast Asia; South China Sea

Introduction

What does a rising China mean to its small neighbors in Southeast Asia? A dominant view of the existing literature contends that Southeast Asian countries' engagement with China can be best understood as hedging or adopting mixed strategies of balancing and bandwagoning, which these states have attempted to maintain a balance between the USA and China (Chong, 2003; Goh, 2008; Percival, 2007; Roy, 2005). Current studies on the regional responses to China's rise focus on the structural level explanations.¹ These works examine the grand strategy that the regional states have adopted to cope with Asia's power transition today. They do not, however, explain the changes occurred at the perceptual, as well as policy levels of these states. For example, what explains the sudden shift in the Philippines' stance on the Spratly Islands, that Manila had become hostile and assertive toward China after Benigno Aquino III assumed office in 2010? And why did the Vietnamese Government opt for the 'ally of convenience' strategy to cope with the USA against China in light of the South China Sea hostility that deviated substantively from their previous approaches?

The above puzzles reveal the nature of smaller powers' role in power transition – regional states' responses to China's rise are in the practice more diverse and inconsistent. Inconsistency is reflected in their narratives about China's rise, and specific foreign policy towards China. Inconsistent narratives and foreign policy may not necessarily alter a country's grand strategy – balancing, bandwagoning, or hedging – to cope with a rising power. These narratives, however, would shape the understanding of China's rise both in the region, and beyond.

In this article, I demonstrate that countries in Southeast Asia actively participate in the construction of the discourse about China's rise, their engagement hence matters in the current power transition. Relying on in-depth case studies focusing on the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia, and using discourse analysis to analyze selected domestic elites' statements, policies, and public views of China over the last 10 years, this article adopts a context-specific approach to analyze regional responses to China's rise.

My central argument is that smaller states' perceptions of the rise of China are political constructs: while the objective reality may be an increasingly powerful China, their responses have been far from uniform. They vary with their political changes at home. Just as '[There] are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people's eyes,' each state has come up with its own narratives of 'China's Rise' that speak to its own national interests. Seeing the rise of China through the eyes of each individual state is different, not homogenous; 'China's rise' constitutes a specific set of meanings to each state. Their 'Rise of China' narratives are therefore contextually-specific, and subject to domestic political changes in individual regional countries.

The role of narratives in power transition

A foreign policy narrative is a form of national strategic narrative. It frames a country's policy decisions regarding security, economic development, investment and engagement with other countries. Narratives are exemplified through leadership speeches, statements, and other official claims. Southeast Asian countries' narratives about China play a significant role in shaping people's understanding of a rising China's intention and action in the region. Scholars and analysts use regional responses to define the nature of China's rise – whether it is peaceful or threatening, and to predict the future order of the Asia-Pacific region (Goh, 2008; Ross & Zhu, 2008).

The USA and other major international actors use regional responses as credible indicators, and that they react to and comment on the rise of China based on these signals. Since 2010, the 'China threat' argument has gained prominence in both the academic and public spheres, largely due to the escalation of tension over the South China Sea disputes (Thayer, 2011). Vietnam and the Philippines began to openly identify China as a threat in their foreign policy rhetoric. Not only has the popular media circulated news articles about the South China Sea disputes that later triggered intensive debates about the future challenges associated with China's rise, scholars also cited Vietnam and the Philippines' responses repeatedly as examples to substantiate their claims. Clearly, these widely circulated narratives about China's rise generated from this part of the world have deeply affected how people understand and make sense of China's rise.

The 'China threat' vs. 'Peaceful rise' debate has been immense, but few have paid attention to a key question behind this phenomenon, and that is: how are these narratives created and why? Recent studies on power transition in Asia showcase the complexity of regional dynamics, and demonstrate that the complexity of regional

responses requires a more nuanced approach than offered by the monolithic and simplistic understanding propounded by the Power Transition Theory (Harris, 2014).

Another bulk of studies examines individual Southeast Asian countries' responses to a major power like China. For instance, some argue that while the ongoing power shift might be a novel experience for the West, it is not entirely a new phenomenon for Southeast Asian countries as they have been struggling to deal with power shifts for centuries (Walton, 2017). Due to power asymmetry, Vietnam has been attempting to search a middle-ground approach that includes tough rhetoric to criticize China, but also avoid open conflict with it (Bui, 2017; Womack, 2006). However, these works overly focus on the structural level explanations. Little has been said about the effect of domestic politics on a country's perception of China's rise.

To obtain a better understanding of the implications of China's rise in Asia, I systematically analyzed individual Southeast Asian countries' responses to China's rise by examining their China policy and rhetoric. In the subsequent sections, I will demonstrate that changes within the domestic sphere in a Southeast Asian country are likely to alter its narratives of China's rise. Moreover, the narratives about China's rise are not given, they are instead constructed by different interests groups or individuals to support and justify their respective agenda. For example, the 'rise of China is peaceful,' or 'China's rise may undermine regional stability' – these are narratives that have been constructed and utilized by domestic actors to achieve specific political objectives.

Domestic politics and foreign policy narratives

This article identifies domestic power struggles as a key explanatory variable for the changes of Southeast Asian countries' narratives about China's rise. Although power struggles exist across countries in Southeast Asia, power struggles of different forms lead to different foreign policy outcomes. I will explain how and why power struggles in Vietnam and the Philippines have caused systematic shifts in their narratives about China's rise, and in Malaysia, despite the presence of power struggles, their narratives about China have remained largely consistent.

I select Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia for empirical testing because there is a strong basis of comparison. First, internal power struggles present in many Southeast Asian countries, but have led to different foreign policy outcomes in different countries. Power struggles in Vietnam in the recent years are presented in the form of party factionalism (Phan, 2015). In the Philippines, leadership rivalry is a prominent form of power struggles, and it is often accompanied by leadership legitimacy crises. The latest power struggle at the national-level was between the electoral rivals Gloria Arroyo, and her successor Benigno Aquino III. Unlike Vietnam and the Philippines, power struggles in Malaysia have only limited impact on its foreign policy making. In spite of the high-stakes power struggle within the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the ruling elites of Barisan Nasional, however, do not disagree with each other on the foreign policy front. It is their common desire to capitalize on China's rise, for the ultimate objective of consolidating its political authority at home (Kuik, 2013).

Second, policy reports suggest that Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea has adversely affected the Southeast Asia's perception of China's rise. While the South China Sea disputes might be an important factor to explain why anti-China rhetoric was higher in some claimant countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam, it is not the only factor that matters in the story. I aim to bring your attention to the domestic politics, which is

Table 1. Case comparison.

Countries	Claimant state in the South China Sea	Increased Chinese assertiveness	Type of power struggle	Inconsistent narratives
Vietnam	Yes	Yes	Party factionalism	Yes, moderate changes
The Philippines	Yes	Yes	Leadership legitimacy crises	Yes, radical changes
Malaysia	Yes	Yes	UMNO elites rivalries	No

a more important factor affecting how individual Southeast Asian countries respond, and manage the disputes with China. To control for the exogenous effects brought by the perceived Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, I use Malaysia as a contrasting case. To facilitate my illustration, I present the similarities and differences observed across the three countries in Table 1, I show that with other things being equal, domestic power struggles is a variable that has caused the inconsistent narratives and foreign policy shifts in Vietnam and the Philippines.

Vietnam is an authoritarian regime ruled by one single party. Power struggles between party factions have been a dominant feature of Vietnamese politics (Khoo, 2010). A prominent explanation depicts Vietnam's high politics as a power struggle between a faction of pro-China conservatives and a faction of pro-Western/US reformists (Phan, 2015). This division has had an important impact on Vietnamese foreign policy towards China (Hiep, 2012; Phan, 2015). Changes of Vietnam's narratives about China's rise can be explained by the competition for domestic influence and superiority in the party between the two groups.

I use the 2014 Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil rig crisis as a case to examine Hanoi's responses to this incident with China. I show that when confronted with an external provocation, the pro-China camp and the pro-US camp tend to opt for different approaches to deal with China. As a result, two competing narratives of China's role in the region are being constructed respectively. Nguyen Tan Dung, Vietnam's Prime Minister and a pro-US group leader, had spoken out strongly in the public that Vietnam would consider taking legal action against China (Pham, 2014). Dung also actively enlisted US support to balance China's growing assertiveness in the region. On the other hand, the pro-China group led by the party's Secretary-General Nguyen Phu Trong believed that Vietnam should avoid the escalation of tension with China, and opted for a softer approach to manage the South China Sea disputes.

The intensification of power struggle between party factions led to the emergence of competing narratives about China's rise during the periods of party congress, that 'every VCP congress is a time of intense power struggles, the 12th Congress was especially partisan (Vuving, 2017).' Evidently, the contestation between the two factions was intensified right before the 12th party congress in 2016, the election for the new secretary-general of the communist party (Phan, 2015). The result of the latest competition for power within the party has remarkably altered its China policy. The fact that Trong defeated Dung, and was re-elected chief of the party, marked the resurgence of China-Vietnam ties. During the visit to Beijing in January 2017, Trong expressed the determination to rehabilitate Sino-Vietnam relations after a few years of remarkable disruption. Analysts have noted that for Vietnam, the trip to China re-consolidated the pro-China faction's ruling position, which had been undermined during the rise of pro-US group led by the Dung government in past years (Quang, 2017).

The Philippines is a practicing democracy that frequently experiences leadership changes. Leadership legitimacy is an important political concern for Philippine politicians before each general election which often leads to power struggles between leaders (Croissant & Martín, 2006, p. 32–33). Leadership legitimacy crises caused by power struggles in this country were often accompanied by elections (Sidel, 1995). This is because once the leadership or the ruling party begins to suffer a volatile legitimacy crisis, the opposition parties would seize the opportunity to replace the ruling party.

The tactic that Benigno Aquino III adopted to justify his rise to power was by capitalizing on the political legitimacy crisis that Gloria Arroyo and her cabinet had suffered. Gloria Arroyo and her supporters lost the legitimacy to rule due to rampant corruption. Aquino criticized Arroyo for gaining private interests at the expense of national interest. In particular, Aquino blamed Arroyo for signing the infrastructural projects with China because he identified China's investment a key source of Arroyo's corruption. One immediate outcome of this leadership change was the termination of several major infrastructural projects founded by the Chinese Government including the \$329.48 million National Broadband Network project with China's Zhong Xing Telecommunications Equipment (ZTE) Corp and the North Luzon Railway System (North Rail) project.² China's economic investment in the Philippines was perceived by Aquino's administration as a curse rather than a blessing which had created more rampant corruption and social dissonances in the country. Consequentially, Philippines' China policy had been re-oriented into a different direction under Aquino. Aquino identifies a rising China less as an economic powerhouse, but as a trouble-maker that is threatening to regional stability. As a result, the China threat narrative has gained prominence in the Philippines since 2010.

Power struggles in Malaysia, on the other hand, did not significantly affect its perception of and approach to China. Their narratives about China's rise have been rather consistent. Malaysia's foreign narratives frame the South China Sea issues with China in a collaborative tone. The approaches Najib's administration adopted to deal with the South China Sea issues reflect the constructive nature of the rhetoric associated with territorial disputes. On the one hand, Malaysia is a party in the South China Sea disputes and has always been a long-term ally of the USA. Hence, the country has a visible incentive in uniting other ASEAN claimant states on a common anti-China ground. However, Najib's government 'made every possible effort not to involve ASEAN in the South China Sea disputes [with China] at all (Caldirola, 2015).'

Malaysia's 'exceptionalism' could be explained by the country's foreign policy orientation which is predominantly driven by pragmatic economic concerns. As China's largest trading partner among ASEAN countries, Kuala Lumpur identifies a rising China as a key foreign investor which is critical to Malaysia's economic growth. In spite of being confronted by Chinese assertiveness, Prime Minister Najib refuses to identify China and its rise a threat to regional security (Caldirola, 2015). He further argued that 'China was a force for stability because it required a peaceful regional environment in which to pursue economic development.'³ Although in the recent years Malaysia has become increasingly vocal over perceived Chinese assertiveness that a counter-discourse which advocates for a stronger stance has emerged, its overall China policy has not yet changed. As noted by several analysts, that 'even the more vocal protests by Malaysia have been carefully calibrated to avoid souring relations with China (Han, 2016).'

By presenting the case of Malaysia, I am hoping to show that China's changing approach to deal with the disputed waters in the South China Sea is not a sufficient condition for the change of perception towards China.

Methodology

I employ Discourse Analysis to study narratives about China's rise constructed by individual Southeast Asian countries. Discourse analysis is especially suitable for the study of foreign policy narratives (Johnstone, 2001). I adopt an interpretive approach to study discourses since an interpretive method of discourse analysis allows us to identify the core elements of the foreign policy decision-makers (Hopf, 2002).

I select a variety of sources that are representative of the official discourses of a country including leadership speeches, interviews, and secondary literatures. I examine articles and reports on the widely circulated publications in English including *The Diplomat*, *East Asia Forum*, and *The Straits Times*. Cross-referencing helps improve reliability. To control for selection bias, I randomize the selection process and avoid cherry-picking the sources. For example, I rely on neutral words for keyword search (i.e. 'China,' 'China's rise,' and 'Vietnam'; 'Philippine and China'). I exclude adjectives such as 'assertiveness,' 'threat,' or 'peaceful rise' in my search that the search result might be skewed toward a particular direction. Thus, the selection has been consistent. The timeframe I select here is less systematic because it is largely dependent on the availability of sources, which is mostly event-based. The tactic I adopt to control for this potential bias is to supplement the primary sources with secondary scholarly sources, for which would provide me with a holistic view of the event.

I code each narrative from text descriptions of China's rise and its implications. Specifically, I ask: what does the rise of China mean to the country from the perspective of political elites? While coding, I take note of their expressions – the tone, framing, and the choice of words. Table 2 presents the most prominent narratives about China's rise constructed by the three countries. It also compares their narrative about China's rise, its implications, and foreign policies, for all three cases before and after the occurrence of power struggles. I show that domestic power struggles of these countries affect not only their foreign rhetoric but also foreign policy. Table 3 presents the frequency of key words (from the most to the least frequently appeared), with one paragraph denoted as the unit of analysis – this is an indication of the salience of a particular discourse in a country's narrative about China's rise.

'China's Rise' as constructed narratives

Vietnam's China policy is informed by the collective leadership of the politburo (Morris, 2006). However, the struggles for power between party factions have moderately altered their foreign policy orientation. In particular, the disagreements between party leaders on the positioning of China in its foreign policy (Hiebert, 2015). The competition between the pro-China and the pro-US factions has led to the construction of competing narratives of China as a means to strengthen their own political interests. The disagreement over how to deal with China when confronted with an external provocation becomes more evident, and this led to the emergence of competing narratives about China and the implications of its rise.

In May 2014, China installed the oil-rig in the disputed waters which both China and Vietnam claim sovereignty near the Paracel Islands. The rig incident stirred a storm in the South China Sea as both Beijing and Hanoi regularly deployed vessels to the disputed areas and the tension had rapidly escalated. In response to this perceived threat, the pro-US group leader Dung has spoken out strongly in public and asserting that

Table 2. Narratives of the rise of China.

Countries	Narratives of the rise of China	Actions taken in response to China's rise	Foreign policy towards China
Vietnam (before 2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – economic powerhouse – helps to reduce poverty – friendly neighbor – total cooperation – provide stable and long-term benefits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – more trade cooperation – attracted Chinese economic investment – imported and praised Chinese agricultural technologies – adopted new and business systems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Hanoi normalized its relationship with Beijing since 1991 – significantly strengthened bilateral ties – regarded China's economic reform as a role-model – China became an important trading partner for Vietnam
Vietnam (after 2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – [China] presents both opportunities and threats – China is both an old friend and old enemy – a powerful China means potential threat – China is Vietnam's competitor in Southeast Asia – China is a threat to Vietnam's national integrity – expansionist intention – [China has the] desire to become a global leading superpower – [China] regards the US as a threat and [it] has the intention to counter the US – militarily ambitious – revisionist power 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Hanoi decided not to further damage relations with Beijing. – Party Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong and president Truong Tan Sang's embrace the idea that Beijing is a 'good comrade.' – avoid taking moves that could further provoke Beijing – started to enhance its external defense capacity by purchasing arms from the US and Russia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – despite clashes over territorial issues, the trading relationship between China and Vietnam remains strong – economic relations between 2009 and 2010 have been enhanced. – cooperation at the party-to-party level has remained substantive
The Philippines under Gloria Arroyo (2001–2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – [China] provides fresh competition and cooperation – [China] generates opportunities and stability in the region – global economic powerhouse – fastest growing country in the region and in the world – significant opportunity for the Philippines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – signed 65 bilateral agreements with China (the largest number in Philippine's history) – initiated major economic projects such as the ZTE and North Rail projects – Arroyo herself was the founding member of APCU 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – China emerged to become one of the Philippines' biggest trading partners and an important foreign investor – strict adherence of the Philippines to the One-China Policy – more receptive to Beijing's commercial incentives, willing to compromise Philippine claims
The Philippines under Benigno Aquino (2010-2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – [China is] violating international rules and law – [China is] stirring tension in the region – China is behaving like the Nazi Germany – [China has the] potential to cause war – forceful – assertive – generate undesirable economic outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – played down the value of China's economic investment – took a position of patriotism which is largely anti-China – renamed the disputed waters the 'West Philippine Sea' – agreements with China entered into by the previous government have been suspended or cancelled 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Aquino took a multilateral track approach (i.e. ASEAN, East Asia Summit) with the hope of binding and socializing China into the framework. – [The Philippines] advocates for a rules-based approach in solving disputes – strengthened its military capabilities to project a more credible defense

(continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Countries	Narratives of the rise of China	Actions taken in response to China's rise	Foreign policy towards China
Malaysia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - [China is] a force for peace and stability - [China] enhances the security of the Straits of Malacca - China is a responsible stakeholder in the security of Southeast Asia - harmless - non-threatening - no expansionist intent - China will never seek hegemony 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - fully committed to the Declaration of the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea - low-key in its response to the SCS issue - tried to avoid rocking boats in disputed waters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - expanded bilateral cooperation with China in many important sectors including security and defense. - Malaysia prioritizes its productive ties with China and emphasizes the use of diplomatic means in managing the disputes.

Table 3. Frequency of keywords.

Pro-China faction in VCP (Nguyen Phu Trong)		Pro-US faction in VCP (Nguyen Tan Dung)	
Key words	Frequency	Key words	Frequency
Cooperation	8	Violating rules	6
Traditional friend and neighbor	6	Exerting pressure	4
Common interests	5	Assertive/aggressive	3
[China generates] favorable conditions for [Vietnam]	5	Maintain peace	2
Exchanges	4	[China] not to militarize	1
Communist traditions	2	Brazenly installed [the rig]	1
[China as a] good comrade	1	Causing damage	1
		Unresponsive	1
		Dangerous	1

Common themes of Vietnam's China policy

China provides economic opportunities	7
Violating [Vietnam's] sovereignty	6
China should act accordance with International law	5
China is [both] an enemy and a friend	2
Party-level exchanges are necessary	2

Gloria Arroyo		Aquino III	
Keywords	Frequency	Keywords	Frequency
[strategic/economic] Cooperation	8	Aggressive/assertive	10
Collaboration	6	Stirring tension	6
Generate opportunities	5	Violating rules	5
Agreement	3	Taking advantages (of)	3
Supportive	2	Expansionistic	2
Consensus	2	Outflank (the South China Sea)	1
Mutual trust	1	[China] knocking out [the Philippines]	1
Understanding	1	[China is] Bullying [the Philippines]	1
		US as a counterforce	1
		[compares China with] Nazi Germany	1

'[Vietnam] would consider taking legal action against China (Pham, 2014).' In addition, Dung actively enlisted US support to balance China's growing assertiveness in the region. The pro-US groups also encouraged nationalist groups in Vietnam to seize the opportunity and to urge for domestic political reforms to gain leverage and to stand up more forcefully to China.

However, despite the increasing demand for the government to take up a more forceful stance against China, the anti-China rhetoric was largely absent in Vietnam's public discourse. This is largely because the political figure who was in charge of state propaganda and education was a member of the pro-China group. According to a 2014 commentary report, '[Right] after the oil rig withdrawal, sources revealed that Dinh The Huynh, a pro-China camp member who heads the Communist Party's Department of Propaganda and Education, instructed the media not to go further discredit China and make it lose face because of the move (Pham, 2014).' The pro-China group would avoid future conflict with China, and self-censor itself. 'They would veto any policy likely to arouse Chinese ire. They would in effect bandwagon with China, that is, avoid criticism of China in the expectation of Vietnam would be rewarded economically for its good behavior (Pham, 2014).' Inferring from Dinh The Huynh's new approach to deal with China over territorial claims, one can plausibly argue that there is a correlation between party factions and perception, and therefore, the narration of China's rise.

In addition, power struggles also affected Vietnam's foreign policy. The decision-making body of the Vietnamese Communist Party has been divided by two camps. The pro-US group led by Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung wants to pursue a proactive foreign policy towards China, and seeks support from Japan and the US to balance China. The pro-China group is seeking to forge a closer ties with China, led by party chief Nguyen Phu Trong. They are concerned that getting too close to the US would result in negative pressures or even sanctions by China. This division partly explains why certain narratives emerged to become more prominent than others. The victory of Nguyen Phu Trong who was re-elected to the second five-year term as General Secretary marked the triumph of the pro-China group over the pro-US group led by Trong's major political rival Nguyen Tan Dung. The pro-Beijing leaders would come to rule the country. Analysts therefore pointed out that a closer strategic relations between the USA and Vietnam is less likely to be materialized anytime soon (Sant, 2016). A Washington-based Asia analyst Zachary Abuza points out: 'The Vietnamese have buckled to Chinese pressure. A majority of the Politburo is unwilling to stand up to China at this time (Pham, 2014).'

Vietnam's perceptions of China have affected how the world perceives China's rise. Perceptual inconsistency is reflected in the country's view of China's rise as a regional superpower. A survey conducted in 2008 seeking Vietnamese about their attitudes towards China shows that about 71 percent of Vietnamese believe China will be Asia's future leader, and 56 percent are comfortable with this outcome (Whitney & Shambaugh, 2008). The Pew Research Center survey on global attitudes in 2007 shows that Vietnam was not among the Asian countries which held the most negative views of China. However, according to the same survey conducted in 2014 and 2015, Vietnamese perceptions of China have changed radically, that less than 20 percent (2014: 16 percent, 2015: 19 percent) of Vietnamese reported to have a favorable view of China, the second lowest level in Asia following Japan.

In sum, contestations between the pro-China and pro-US groups led to inconsistent narratives and policies towards China. Interestingly, whether or not China is acting assertively in the disputed waters has become less of a concern for the Vietnamese

government whereby domestic division seems to matter more in terms of foreign policy re-orientation. China's retreat has come at a 'convenient juncture for the pro-Chinese faction of the party to preempt any planned legal action against China and thwart the highly anticipated with the US (Pham, 2014).' The persistence of party factionalism means that narratives about China's rise are political constructs, they are constantly changing and not static. As such, Vietnamese narrative of a rising China looks like a multifaceted image.

The year 2010 witnessed the delegitimization of Gloria Arroyo and her administration in the name of 'People's Power.' Philippine's perception towards China's economic expansion in the region has changed. According to Thompson, [The] 2010 elections in the Philippines suggest that the prevalent political discourse of 'rich- versus-poor' has been challenged by 'reformist' appeals for good governance (Thompson, 2016). Aquino III revived the calls for clean governance which he identified the 'straight path' using the unpopular Arroyo administration – widely believed to have been the most corrupt in the post-Marcos Philippines – as a convenient foil. Specifically, the Filipinos identify Aquino as a political descendent of people's power, who inherited the legacy of his saintly mother. With strong upper class backing, 'his popularity and partly the legitimacy of Aquino's new government, is largely based on a reputation for personal honesty and for his ability to keep family and friends away from corruption scandals (Thompson, 2016).'

The rise of China had once been portrayed by the Arroyo administration as a great source and opportunity for regional stability and development. The bilateral relations between the Philippines and China was characterized as enjoying a 'golden age of partnership' which was attributable to mutual efforts made by the two countries (Dai & Jin, 2009). Arroyo strengthened the economic relations with China, a more notable fact is that she moved on to forge a closer strategic partnership with Beijing, an attempt that was unprecedented. Under Arroyo, Philippines signed numerous contracts of mega infrastructure projects with China. The Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking (JMSU) with China was an agreement reached by both parties to collect marine seismic data in disputed waters in the South China Sea. Evidently, the Philippines under Arroyo's leadership had chosen to embark on a remarkably collaborative approach towards the contested territorial issues with China. This dynamic was completely lost when Aquino III became the president in 2010. The leadership change in 2010 was crucial for the understanding of the country's revised foreign policy towards China – nationalist-oriented with the emphasis on the governance of territorial integrity.

One immediate outcome of leadership change was the termination of several major infrastructural projects founded by the Chinese Government including the \$329.48-million National Broadband Network project with China's Zhong Xing Telecommunications Equipment (ZTE) Corp and the North Luzon Railway System (North Rail) project.⁴ China's economic investment in the Philippines was perceived by the new government under the leadership of Aquino as a curse rather than a blessing which had created more rampant corruption and social dissonances in the country. Drawing reference on policy shift led by leadership change, I further argue that the redefinition of the two countries' foreign relations was a tactic employed by Aquino to consolidate its legitimacy basis.

Leadership transitions in the Philippines were often accompanied by power struggles. There had been an enduring political instability since the fall of Marcos in 1986, for instance, and as a result the political leaders were more inclined to 'focus on short-term political maneuvering' rather than foreign and security policy strategies (Medeiros et al.,

2008). The cumulative effect is the tendency of the ruling political elite to act in reactive response to foreign initiatives and external developments or crises (Baviera, 2012). Domestic political struggles play a critical role in shaping the Sino–Philippine relations (Medeiros et al., 2008). Specifically, internal political turmoil is a key determinant of the Philippines’ response to the rise of China.

As a consequence of domestic political turmoil, Manila’s ability to play a more active role in the South China Sea vis-a-vis China was constrained. These weaknesses, combined with the prospect of China’s economic growth, have produced a policy of general accommodation toward China which is an orientation likely to continue. However, when Aquino III became the president in 2010, Philippine’s relations with China had significantly declined ever since. Leadership transition from Gloria Arroyo to Aquino III was accompanied by a serious legitimacy crisis which questioned the credibility of Arroyo administration, and this domestic political shift altered Philippine’ perception of China’s rise and foreign relations with Beijing in substantive ways.

First, China’s economic investment in the Philippines was no longer viewed by Aquino III as a great economic benefit, but a source of corruption. The political struggle between Arroyo and Aquino affected the Philippine–Sino relations because the delegitimation of Arroyo changed Filipino’s views on the China-founded economic projects signed between Arroyo and Beijing – from employment opportunities to sources of corruption (Zha, 2015). It is hence not just convenient but also legitimate for Aquino to cancel those corrupted projects and to frame China’s economic investment in a negative way. Multiple sources have revealed that Arroyo and her major patron De Venecia who initiated the economic projects with China was heavily penalized for selling Philippines’ integrity in exchange for Chinese money (“IBON: Corruption Scandals,” 2008). The Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking (JMSU) controversy was an example, that senators alleged that the agreement weakens the government’s position in its claim over the disputed islands (Calica, 2011). They further alleged that ‘it is a “pre-condition” set by China in exchange of some loan agreements. China has committed Philippines \$2 billion USD a year in loans after signing the agreement. President Gloria Arroyo is suspected by some legislators to be hiding the facts that the agreement (Medeiros et al., 2008).’ As a consequence of the controversy, some Philippine legislators became even more suspicious by increasing Chinese influence in the Philippines.

Leadership transition from Arroyo to Aquino in 2010 presented a critical turning point of Philippine foreign policy towards China. First of all, major loans and investments agreements entered into the Philippines by the Arroyo administration remain unimplemented, having been either suspended or cancelled due to corruption and collusion between Arroyo allies and their would-be Chinese partners (Bugaoisan & Callar, 2011). The Philippines’ perception of China has also been reoriented. For example, a poll of 33 nations done in January 2006 by GlobeScan and the Program on International Policy Attitudes shows that more than 54 percent of Filipino respondents had a favorable view of China (Medeiros et al., 2008).

Second, Aquino used nationalism as a tactic to dealing with the South China Sea issues to add weight to his government’s legitimacy and the cohesion of his party profile. It is not surprising that Aquino III, after became the president, began to crush down the sources including external ones that had once supported his predecessor Arroyo’s government by launching the large-scale anticorruption campaign. This is largely because Aquino won the election by successfully discrediting Arroyo’s government for

causing one corruption scandal after another and promising his people a clean government and rule of law (Bower, 2010).

Aquino's South China Sea narratives clearly reflect this dramatic shift. One crucial rhetoric which Aquino applied to gain support was by taking up a strong stance with China over disputed waters. Aquino's 'hardline' position on the territorial dispute made him popular as well as a surge of anti-Chinese sentiment stoked by a nationalist literatus (Abinales, 2015). Today, issues related to the South China Sea turned out to become a regular topic of animated discussion in the Philippines, 'if not outright sensationalization, in the Philippine media and among ordinary citizens (Heydarian, 2016).' Clearly, the nationalist discourses only became more prominent in both the government and public sphere after Aquino became the president, as '[Back] in the Arroyo administration days, barely anyone knew much about the South China Sea disputes (Heydarian, 2016).' In sum, the narratives of China's rise in the Philippines in the recent years were largely a domestic story. Aquino's concerns over his political legitimacy motivated the construction of a set of nationalistic-driven, anti-Chinese narratives.

Malaysia's narratives of the rise of China, by contrast, remain relatively consistent. Kuala Lumpur's approach towards China differed greatly from that of Vietnam and the Philippines. As noted by Malaysian specialists, Kuala Lumpur continues to adopt a quiet and 'playing it safe' approach in dealing with the South China Sea issue even when there saw an increased Chinese incursions since 2011 (Parameswaran, 2015; Storey, 2011). A key variable that would explain this difference is Malaysia's foreign policy domain has been micro-managed since the Mahathir era (Khalid, 2009), and therefore remains largely unaffected by domestic power struggles.

Like Vietnam and the Philippines, power struggles prevail in Malaysian politics. However, Malaysians' struggle for power did not dramatically alter Malaysia's foreign policy, especially their China policy. Hence, different forms of power struggles would lead to different foreign policy outcomes. Unlike the political structure of the Philippines, inter-party struggles are absent in Malaysia. Attributable to the relative success with which the UMNO-led government has established its authority, Malaysia's foreign policy is [relatively] a stable one (Kuik, 2013). There is no severe domestic political challenge for Najib as UMNO appears to be solidly behind Najib, and the opposition is splintered.⁵ As such, Malaysia's perceptions of China's rise were able to maintain a high level of consistency as there are no internal distracting forces to serve the source of alternative narratives.

Malaysia's China policy reflects the ruling elites' collective desire to 'capitalize on the big power's rise for the ultimate goal of enhancing and justifying its political authority at home (Kuik, 2013 p. 467).' Although the struggle for power within UMNO has been intense, foreign policy decision-making was micro-managed and effectively helmed by the prime minister under Mahathir's rule, and since Najib's style of leadership has been associated with 'Mahathirism,' this trend continues to dominate Malaysia's foreign policy making (Khalid, 2009). In contrast with the inner party struggles in Vietnam, the contestations within UMNO have not significantly affected Malaysia's foreign policy orientation. This nuanced difference, nevertheless, contributes to two distinctive discourses of narratives about China's rise across Southeast Asia.

In addition, it is worth noting that just like Gloria Arroyo, Najib also suffered from leadership legitimacy crisis, the crisis that Najib associated with, however, did not significantly undermine Najib's ability in influencing Malaysia's policy-making. This is well reflected in Malaysia's stance on the South China Sea territorial issues. According to

David Han, there are two contrasting narratives in Malaysia's position on the South China Sea disputes. The predominant discourse focuses on Malaysia's traditional preference to take a moderate posture towards the disputes. In response to the latest incursions, for instance, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak told the Dewan Rakyat (House of Representatives) that challenges due to conflicting claims cannot '[be] addressed through military might but instead through negotiations and solidarity among ASEAN countries and parties who support us [Malaysia] (Han, 2016).' Although there emerges an alternative discourse that challenges the predominant view, the remark from Malaysia's top leadership 'reflects the dominant narrative which seeks to eschew overtly confrontational, military-centric rhetoric and actions in its disputes are an ASEAN problem and is not simply a matter of Malaysia's sovereignty (Han, 2016).'

Like the other two cases, Malaysia's China policy is consistent with its narratives. As China's largest trading partner among ASEAN countries, Malaysia identifies a rising China as a key foreign investor which is critical to Malaysia's economic growth. Kuala Lumpur has always been using narratives to signaling Beijing of Malaysia's friendly and cooperative attitude. For instance, the former Prime Minister Mahathir had spoken to the public about China, that '[China] will never seek hegemony and will never do things to harm us (Mahathir, 1985).' Prime Minister Najib also identifies a rising China a stabilizing force rather than threat to regional security.⁶

Southeast Asia's perceptions of China since 2010 varied across countries. China's assertive gestures might have caused an overall escalation of tension in the region. However, individual states chose to either flame it up or scale it down peacefully. Unlike the other two claimant countries, to upset China was not Malaysia's option. Kuala Lumpur has always been cautious in deploying its capabilities vis-a-vis China by calling for a full implementation of the Declaration of Conduct (DOC) on the South China Sea, which is China's preferred method of dealing with the disputes (Lockman, 2013). Malaysia's framing of a rising China as a 'non-threatening' and 'non-expansionist' hegemony demonstrates the constructive nature of perceptions of China's rise in Southeast Asia.

Cross-case comparison

By comparing and contrasting Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia's perceptions of and responses to China's rise, I highlight three major differences across the three countries (Refer to [Table 2](#)). One, both Vietnam and the Philippines played the nationalism card and adopted a stronger stance on the territorial issues, the two countries differed on some fundamental levels. The Philippines under Aquino III took a nationalistic turn and re-oriented its foreign policy towards China based on its nationalist agenda; Vietnam's new approach, on the other hand, should be understood as a battle of rhetoric as opposed to a total strategic shift.

Two, countries which have a multi-party system are more likely to cause more dramatic foreign policy shifts. Although there are splits within the Vietnamese communist party, the country's foreign policy decision-making has been largely based on collective leadership. Unlike the Philippines, Vietnam has not been experiencing regime shifts or political chaos. Thus, Vietnam's policy towards China on its strategic front was less inconsistent.

Three, 'The rise of China' contains more nuanced meanings. Studies on China's rise should not focus solely on the dichotomy of 'threatening-non-threatening.' Instead, regional perceptions of the rise of China should be treated as a complex of discourses constructed by individual state actors driven by domestic interests.

Vietnam's approach to the perceived Chinese assertiveness differed from the Philippines', that Vietnam began to stand up to China vocally, but maintained a positive party-to-party ties with China. For Hanoi, maintaining a cooperative gesture with Beijing is critical for its own economic development, while an open confrontation with China would threaten not only the economy, but also domestic stability due to the presence of the pro-China group. Evidently, notwithstanding disputes with China in the South China Sea, Vietnam's economic relations with China have been strengthened, and in 2013, China surpassed Japan to become Vietnam's largest trading partner (Lam, Qin, & Yang, 2013, p. 227). In this regard, Hanoi is reluctant to take the first move without first calculating Beijing's likely reaction. As noted by a few regional experts '[To] date, even as it has protested the oil rig and China's cordon around it, Hanoi appears to be trying to avoid taking moves that could provoke Beijing, such as increasing its naval presence in the area or inviting the US Navy for port visits (Manyin, 2014).'

Hanoi's preference to maintain a cooperative relationship with Beijing is reflected in their attitudes towards the anti-China nationalist movements at home. Despite the fact that the government had allowed the gathering of protestors in urban areas such as Hanoi, the state quickly dissolved the crowds and instructed the media to silence public debate on the South China Sea. This crackdown was, however, unsurprising. Hanoi was motivated by its desire not to further damage relations with Beijing. Between 2010 and 2014, Hanoi and Beijing continued to expand their diplomatic and party-to-party ties and appear to be seeking ways to prevent their maritime disputes from spilling over into other areas of the relationship (London, 2014). It is also unlikely that Hanoi would further take strong actions that will cause tension, such as sending Coast Guard ships to the area to challenge the oil rig ("Vietnam Objects to Chinese," 2016). In spite of the conflict of interests between the two countries over territorial disputes in the past few years whereby the tension has been escalated, Vietnam-China relations remain largely unchanged strategically.

On the other hand, Aquino's policy towards China has shifted towards a less cooperative, if not anti-China direction both rhetorically and strategically since 2010. By comparing China twice with the pre-WWII Nazi Germany, Aquino III was signaling to China and other countries that the Philippines has always been suspicious towards China, and regards China's rise as a threat to the region. Aquino's contestation did not stop at the rhetoric level, Philippine-China relation has been reoriented into a completely different direction which is largely driven by their nationalist agenda.⁷ Though China is the Philippines' third largest trading partner, Aquino played down the importance of Chinese investments, he pointed out that 'Filipinos have invested \$3 billion in China, while the Chinese have only invested \$1.5 billion in return.'⁸ The Philippines under Aquino's government, unlike Hanoi, did not regard a closer economic ties with China essential to the country's economic survival and development.

The second difference is closely related to the first one, that power struggle between different parties would generate drastic foreign policy shifts. In the Philippines, Aquino III and his cabinet demarcated themselves from Arroyo's political supporters and discredited her political resources which including Chinese investments which were deemed as the 'source of corruption' that had aided Arroyo and her greedy patrons. As noted by some observers, '[Aquino's] anti-corruption crusade against the former regime and its links to corruption-tainted Chinese investment deals and loans may have influenced his distrustful attitude toward China (Chan & Li, 2014, p. 190).'

Instead of seeking foreign direct investment from China, Aquino turned to the USA and Japan for

economic and security support. Unlike the Philippines, which has a security treaty with Washington, Vietnam has sought to develop stronger relations with several powers (Lanteigne, 2016).

Party splits between the pro-China group and the pro-US groups forbade the country's foreign policy from completely sliding into one direction and getting too close with any of the great powers. Hanoi's approach, therefore, occupies the middle-ground in managing its relations with great powers. For instance, Hanoi today continued to seek benefits from both China and the USA. In 2015, bilateral relations with China have entered into a difficult phase as the Chinese oil rig was returned to the disputed waters. Vietnam, however, retained a strong trading relationship with China. At the same time, Vietnam began to seek strategic partnership with the USA in order to counter-balance a potential China threat in 2015 (Thayer, 2015).

However, due to party factionalism, the Vietnamese Government has frequently debated amongst themselves, that '[To] what degree it should align itself with US strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific given the country's economic situation today (Lanteigne, 2016).' Thus, the split between the two groups within the communist party did not trigger a total strategic shift as an agreement has yet to be reached between different factions.

The most important difference that deserves closer attention is the divergence of narratives that have been constructed by different countries. Previous works examine the rise of China focus on two possible outcomes or features by asking whether a rising China is threatening or non-threatening. My findings, however, demonstrate that the 'rise of China' consists of a spectrum of meanings. These narratives are created and advocated by the smaller regional states, but they shape our perceptions of China's rise in important ways.

In Southeast Asia, the rise of China presents nuanced and fluid meanings and implications. Each narrative reflects the perception of a rising China from a distinctive perspective, which is not entirely generalizable. For instance, one interesting narrative emerged from the Vietnamese discourse identifies a rising China as a key competitor in Southeast Asia. According to the illustrations in the source that 'Vietnam and China [are] increasingly competing for influence in mainland Southeast Asia, where Vietnam had dominated between the 1970s and late 2000s China has become the largest aid donor, investor...[and] military partner to Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos... [There is a] race for regional influence [between China and Vietnam] (Kurlantizick, 2015).' This shows that a non-hegemonic power such as Vietnam perceives a rising China as a potential threat, but not for the exact same reasons which previous studies have forecasted. It is not the erosion of the neoliberal hegemony engendered by China's rise that Vietnam is worrying for, as some institutionalist scholars have argued, but the loss of regional dominance and influence to China.

The notion of China's rise therefore should be examined within a specific context. All three countries identify a rising China as economic powerhouse; only Malaysia accepted that China's economic development would bring desirable outcomes without posing much doubt, Vietnam and the Philippines under Arroyo believed that China's rise brought both opportunities and challenges to the region. Thus, instead of focusing exclusively on the two extreme ends of the spectrum (i.e. threatening vs. non-threatening), it would be more useful to also look at more specifically the spectrum by itself and the reasons behind each position that was taken. It will help us better analyze each hegemonic transition.

Conclusion

This article argues that regional powers' perceptions and narratives of the rise of China are substantively different. These narratives matter in the way that they affect how countries both within and outside Asia perceive and respond to China's rise. Relying on in-depth case studies on Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia, I argue that domestic politics in these countries affect the narratives of China's rise, and each narrative is being constructed to serve their respective political agenda. I challenge the conventional explanation in IR for power transitions that it is largely driven by structural incentives or constraints. What also matters is competing discourses that occur below the structural level.

The contribution of this study is twofold. One, my findings challenge the mainstream International Relations (IR) approaches to China's rise. A large bulk of the existing literature focuses exclusively on great power competition, conflict, or cooperation; and analyzes the rise of China through the lens of great power politics, in particular the act of the United States of America (US) rebalancing in the Asia-Pacific. No rigorous research has been done on the smaller regional powers' narratives of the changing political dynamics in the region engendered by China's economic ascendance. However, it is important to examine how regional powers affect perceptions of China's rise. This article shows that small or medium-sized powers also play a crucial role in affecting the dynamic of hegemonic power transition.

Two, this study offers a more empirically tuned explanation for regional response to China's rise. Instead of applying the abstract IR theories or the structural level explanations to explain interstate relations and diplomacy, I am focusing on a country's domestic domain and drawing the connection between its domestic politics and foreign policy. Since I examine Southeast Asian countries' foreign policy, this work is also policy-relevant. My findings will shed light on government's decision-making; government officials in both China and Southeast Asia countries will be able to better assess the pros and cons of their foreign policy.

China has experienced impressive economic growth over the past 20–30 years, and began to be recognized as a rising power only for a decade. The timeframe is too short for a superpower to be fully established and recognized. I point out that the establishment of regional hegemony takes a long time to materialize and will be constantly confronted by non-hegemonic powers. More importantly, we should recognize that even established hegemonies are constantly being challenged by its smaller neighbors. For example, the USA has failed to establish itself as an American Hegemon as Cuba, Venezuela, and other states have consistently challenged its hegemony in the western hemisphere. Counter-hegemonic regionalism has been attempted in America, and it is happening in Asia today. This explains why the 'rise of China' narratives change rather frequently, that some Southeast Asian states' perception of China swings forward or backward like a pendulum, while some remain strategically ambivalent to avoid side-lining.

Notes

1. Existing literature on China's rise generally draws on the power transition theory (i.e. Robert Gilpin), theory of balancing (i.e. John Mearsheimer (2001)) and bandwagoning (i.e. Amitav Acharya (1999) and Randall Schweller (1994)) and a group of mid-range theories such as binding, bonding and beleaguering (i.e. Ja Ian Chong). These works examine regional states' responses to China's rise

largely through the theoretical lens of great power politics, or more accurately, the competition between the US and China in Asia. Please see the reference list for the full bibliographic information.

2. 'Philippines' Aquino halts foreign funded infrastructure projects.' Retrieved from <https://asiancorrespondent.com/2011/06/philippines-aquino-halts-foreign-funded-infrastructure-projects/>
3. 'China is a friend, not a threat, says PM,' *Bernama*, 27 January 2007.
4. "Philippines' Aquino halts foreign founded infrastructure projects". Retrieved from <https://asiancorrespondent.com/2011/06/philippines-aquino-halts-foreign-funded-infrastructure-projects/>
5. See Oh Ei Sun's comments in Alyaa Azhar, "Is Najib taking advantage of US-China power struggle amid 1MDB scandal?". *Malaysiakini*, October 29 2016. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/360939>
6. 'China is a friend, not a threat, says PM,' *Bernama*, 27 January 2007.
7. Aquino III has been more outspoken than Arroyo on defending the Philippine's territorial claims, and has publicly appealed for US assistance with China's challenge in the disputes. See Irene Chan and Li Mingjiang, "Political will and joint development in the South China Sea" in Beckman, R. C., LL. M, Wu, S., & Hong, N. (2014). *Recent developments in the South China Sea Dispute: The prospect of a joint development regime*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge. p.190.
8. Stirring Up the SCS (II): Regional Responses, Asia Report No. 229, 24 July 2012 International Crisis Group <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/north-east-asia/229-stirring-up-the-south-china-sea-ii-regional-responses>

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