

Hainan Province in China's South China Sea Policy: What Role Does the Local Government Play?

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Studies of Chinese national security or territorial dispute policy have overwhelmingly employed a state-centric approach, treating China as a unitary actor and a black box (Allison, 2017; Haynes, 2016). Most of these studies focus on China's military power (Erickson, 2016; Holmes & Yoshihara, 2012; Tellis & Tanner, 2012; Swaine, 1997, 1998; Yung, 2015; Char & Bitzinger, 2017), security strategy (Chau & Kane, 2014; Harnisch, Bersick, & Gottwald, 2016; Hyer, 2015; Roy, 2013; He, 2012), strategic culture (Feng, 2007; Pillsbury, 2015; Y. Wang, 2010), diplomacy, and decision making at the national government level (Weissmann, 2015b; Hoo, 2018). It is certainly true that policy making on security and territorial disputes is primarily the responsibility of the national political leaders and various central government institutions. But some studies find that the state-centric approach often does not explain the whole story, especially when it comes to the nuances of China's actual policy behavior (Lampton, 2001; Carlson & Ren, 2011; He, 2016; Arduino, 2017). In this context, some scholars have attempted to examine various domestic factors: role of public opinion (Wang & Wang, 2014), nationalism (Z.Wang, 2014), and bureaucratic politics (Lai & Kang, 2014; You, 2014; M.Li, 2015). In general, there is insufficient attention paid to the role of subnational governments in China's foreign relations and national security (Jakobson & Knox, 2010; M.Li, 2014).

The field of China's South China Sea (SCS) policy is no exception. Numerous scholars and pundits have analyzed China's policy in the SCS disputes from traditional perspectives of history, security strategy, rivalry with other major powers, Sino-ASEAN relations, domestic nationalism, and material interests such as energy and fishing resources (Ang, 2000; Ba, 2011; Buszynski, 2012; Fravel, 2011; Goldstein, 2011; Hyer, 1995; Rahman & Tsamenyi, 2010; Yahuda, 2003; Yoshihara & Holmes, 2011; Feng & He, 2018; Weissmann, 2010; Weissmann, 2015a; Hoo, 2017). A few studies have attempted to unpack the role of various sub-state actors in China's SCS policy (Garver, 1992; International Crisis Group, 2012; Jakobson, 2014; Long, 2016; Wong, 2018). Garver (1992), for instance, argues that the Chinese military played the most important role in Beijing's SCS operations in the 1980s and its activism was mainly motivated by a desire for a bigger budget.

This paper attempts to explore the role of the local governments at different levels in Hainan province in Beijing's policy in the South China Sea (SCS) disputes by examining Hainan's views, interests, and initiatives in the disputes. A few existing studies have addressed this issue, but these studies either mention the subject very briefly or only address some aspects of Hainan's involvement. For instance, Jakobson points out that Hainan local government is a non-negligible player in China's maritime security but it has been engaged in "ad hoc rather than systematic" actions in the SCS (Jakobson, 2014). Other studies briefly mention Hainan's interest in exploring the economic resources in the SCS (International

Crisis Group, 2012; International Crisis Group, 2016). Wong (2018) uses Hainan's involvement in the SCS as one of the cases to explore provincial units' influence on Chinese foreign policy from a micro perspective. She argues that Hainan's role is manifested in three manners: trailblazing (proposing new policy ideas to central government), carpetbagging (rhetorically accepting central government's policy directives but implementing them in ways that are divergent from Beijing's original plans); and resisting (refusing to implement central government's policy that is harmful to local interest). Building on these existing studies, this paper attempts to provide a more comprehensive and more detailed analysis of Hainan's influence on China's SCS policy by focusing on macro-level issues, including the local government's role in shaping the national narrative towards the dispute, defining national interests, and actual participation in China's national security activities in the SCS.

The paper is divided into three main sections. Section one discusses Hainan's views and positions in the SCS disputes. Section two focuses on how Hainan attempts to define its interests in the SCS and how these interests help shape China's positions in the disputes. The third section explores the involvement of the Hainan government in defense and law enforcement in the disputes. The paper concludes that Hainan has played three major roles in the SCS disputes: an avid defender of China's historical claim and sovereignty position, an active definer of China's interests in the disputes, and a helpful participant in asserting China's national security in the SCS. The establishment of Sansha City has significantly

increased Hainan's involvement in the SCS contestations. Similar to other studies, this paper also argues that Hainan's involvement in the SCS has been very strongly motivated by various economic interests and the national policy parameter always serves as constraint for the local government's behavior. Putting all these arguments together, this paper contends that Hainan's role in China's SCS policy is more significant than existing studies have shown. Different from Wong's arguments, this paper contends that Hainan's role is reflected not only in its micro policy responses to the central government but also its activism in structurally shaping China's approach to the disputes. This study suggests that Beijing's policy in the SCS is unlikely to become significantly more moderate partly because of Hainan's strong position on the dispute and keen interest in the resources in the area. The paper also recommends incorporating the views and activities of local governments in future studies on Chinese foreign and security policy.

Hainan: A Strong Defender of China's Claims and Positions

Many international analysts believe that China has had an excessively expansive view of its claims in the area. For a long time, China's official claims in the SCS were not entirely clear. Recent official Chinese documents and various statements have indicated three tiers in Beijing's claims: first, sovereignty over various land features and groups of land features; second, maritime areas that these land features or groups of land features can generate in accordance with various international laws such as the United Nations Convention on the

Law of the Sea (UNCLOS); and third, historical rights in the remaining waters of the South China Sea, most likely within the nine-dash line (“Statement of the Government,” 2016).

There are still a few major ambiguities in Beijing’s positions: first, how will China define the legal status of the different land features in the SCS? second, how will China draw its baselines in the Spratlys?; and third, what are the exact historical rights? These ambiguities have come under greater international scrutiny after an arbitral tribunal ruled against some of China’s SCS claims in July 2016, in a case filed by the Philippines.

Beijing’s sweeping yet ambiguous claims in the SCS have been a major source of suspicion and anxiety for other claimant states and even regional non-claimant countries and external powers. Many observers outside China challenge the rationale and justifications of China’s claims and positions in the SCS disputes. Very often, they attribute these claims to Beijing’s strategic ambition to pursue a predominant position in the SCS and in Southeast Asia. What is under-studied is an understanding of the Hainan government’s perspective and role in advancing Beijing’s historical claims.

People in Hainan have a particularly strong position on the SCS disputes. Local elites, including government officials, researchers, and media opinion leaders, have a deep-rooted conviction that the SCS has been and should be part of their possession. For instance, Luo Baoming (2016), former party leader in Hainan, opined that the SCS is the Hainanese “ancestors’ sea” (*zuzong hai*). This “ancestors’ sea” discourse has been nationally accepted.

Even Chinese president Xi Jinping used this term during a meeting with the former US defense secretary Jim Mattis in June 2018 (“Xi tells Mattis,” 2018). Local elites in Hainan also play a significant role in creating and supporting the “ever since ancient times”¹ narrative in China’s views toward the SCS disputes. According to these local elites, historical evidence shows that fishermen from this island were the first group of people that discovered the islands and explored the marine resources in the SCS. The local elites would also point out that Hainan and other adjacent provinces had exercised effective jurisdiction in the SCS for centuries. According to Hainanese, the whole nine-dash line maritime region, which totals about two million square kilometers, belongs to Hainan province as its jurisdictional waters.² These views are challenged by the international research community.

To strengthen China’s historical claims in the SCS, the Hainan government has been actively building archival sources. Various agencies in Hainan have been collecting, protecting, and preserving old booklets that fishermen in Hainan used as guidelines for sailing and fishing activities in the SCS. The local fishing community named these handwritten documents *Geng Lu Bu* (or *Geng Lu Jing* or *Geng Lu Zhuan*), which essentially means navigational guidelines in the SCS. These old booklets contain information about sailing routes, navigational safety warnings, weather conditions, sea currents, and fishing stocks in different areas of the SCS. Over 100 land features in the SCS were identified in these materials. For instance, the booklet owned by Peng Zhengkai, a senior fisherman at

Tanmen, records 17 fishing routes to Paracels, more than 200 fishing routes to the Spratlys, 29 return routes from the Spratlys to Hainan, and 7 transport hubs and fishing grounds in the SCS. According to various Chinese sources, these navigational guidelines, which date back to the Yuan Dynasty and became popular during the Ming Dynasty, were widely used until the late Qing Dynasty when steamships replaced the old sailboats (Y.Liu, 2017; Yan, 2015).

Chinese analysts contend that these booklets suggest that the waters near the Paracels and the Spratlys had become traditional fishing grounds for Chinese fishermen in Hainan since at least the Ming Dynasty. To the Chinese elites, particularly those in Hainan, these documents are treasures because they serve as strong evidence that the Paracels and the Spratlys had been China's territory since ancient times (Chen, 2016a; Yan, 2015; Zhou & Tang, 2015).

Other Chinese scholars believe that these booklets can also serve as strong evidence that China is entitled to historical rights in the nine-dash line area of the SCS from the international law perspective (Chen, Huang, & Li, 2015).

These archival sources have been acknowledged by the central government. In 2008, these booklets were included in the list of national non-material heritages. The central and local governments financed a group of Chinese scholars, mostly based in Hainan, to systematically study these booklets. Books and many articles were published on this subject in China. Local political elites in Hainan have been making efforts to try to further popularize these navigational booklets. Hainan delegates to the National People's Congress annual session in

March 2016, for instance, advocated the educational and publication sectors' promotion of these booklets across China to raise the Chinese people's awareness of China's interests and rights in the SCS (Du, 2016). Local governments in Wenchang and Qionghai in Hainan launched an initiative to protect these historical navigational materials (Y.Zhang, 2014).

Hainan Daily, a government-owned newspaper, decided to contribute one million RMB to set up a South China Sea Navigational Guidelines Protection Fund to save and better protect the booklets in March 2016 (Du, 2016).

With Hainan's support, a special documentary entitled *Our Geng Lu Bu: Historical Evidence of Sansha Belonging to China* was produced and broadcast by the China Central Television and other TV stations in China. The central theme of the documentary is that China was the country that first discovered, named, and utilized the islands and their adjacent waters in the SCS (Chen, 2016b). The broadcast is likely to deepen Chinese people's sense of ownership in the SCS.

The Hainan government has done more than just preserving and promoting these navigational booklets. It decided to build a National South China Sea Museum spanning 70,870 square meters at Tanmen, a famous fishing town in Hainan, for the collection, protection, and research of archives, documents, and objects relevant to the SCS.

Construction started in November 2015 and its official opening took place on April 26, 2018 ("China Nanhai Museum opens," 2018). The museum is expected to provide more and more

convincing evidence for China's claims in the SCS and enhance the protection of China's territorial integrity in the region (Wang & Wei, 2015).

Local officials in Hainan also actively participated in activities that affirm China's sovereignty claim in the SCS. One example was the action of placing sovereignty stones at the James Shoal, the southernmost tip of China's claimed territory in the SCS. For decades, the Chinese geography textbooks, media articles, and many academic works have acknowledged China's sovereignty over James Shoal. The conventional view in the international society is that no country can claim sovereignty over this shoal because it remains constantly submerged; thus James Shoal has become a symbol of China's sovereign claims in the SCS. Various Chinese agencies that are keen to assert China's sovereignty and interests in the SCS have visited James Shoal to throw sovereignty markers. Local leaders in Hainan have also taken part in such activity. In 1992, a vice-governor of Hainan province sailed to James Shoal where he placed seven "sovereignty plates" (Garver, 1992). Ms. Zhao Linru, a former vice mayor of Sanya, a popular tourist destination in Hainan, also sailed to James Shoal with a group of local government leaders in the mid-1990s to place 15 sovereignty stone markers. She wrote about her experience:

Leaving sovereignty markers in the part of the sea demonstrates that we possess sovereignty over the James Shoal. This can be used as an argument in international court. And our future generations can also use this as an evidence. (Zhao, 2011)

Through these narratives and initiatives, Hainan has at least partially contributed to the persistence of China's historical claims in the SCS disputes. Many international scholars believe that some of Beijing's arguments based on history are dubious and have led to China's expansive claims and assertive actions in the SCS. Some policy elites in China also understand that some of their country's historical explanations are not convincing to the international community and may not entirely align with contemporary maritime international laws (Zhao, 2011). Moreover, the propaganda materials based on history produced by actors such as Hainan have fueled domestic assertive nationalism toward the SCS disputes. As long as some Chinese scholars (particularly historians) and government actors (such as Hainan) continue to emphasize the historical context of China's claims and rights, it is unlikely that Beijing will significantly amend its South China Sea position and move towards a more legalistic approach in handling the disputes.

A Pro-Active Definer of China's National Interests in the SCS

Hainan has played an active role in defining China's interests in the SCS. In addition to the pursuit of sovereignty and territorial integrity, the local government also recognizes the significance of the resources in the SCS for China's future development and Hainan's own economic growth. What is also worth noting is the fact that Hainan elites have been advocating that allowing Hainan to take full advantage of the resources in the SCS is the most

effective way to assert and protect China's sovereignty and rights in the area (Hainan Daily, 2012).

For a long time, many Chinese analysts, officials and elites in Hainan in particular, have constantly emphasized the need for Hainan to become “a crucial base” (*zhong yao ji di*) for the exploitation of energy resources in the SCS. The term “a crucial base” has been constantly used in Hainan's narrative on the resources in the SCS since the 1990s. More recently, Hainan has begun to emphasize becoming “a strong maritime province” as an objective for its future development.

Hainan's Interests in SCS Energy Resources

Hainan is primarily interested in the energy resources in the SCS. China and the outside world have different estimates of the energy reserves in the SCS. Even within China, estimates vary. Zeng Hengyi, former member of China's Academy of Engineering, deputy chief engineer of China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC Group), and science and technological advisor to the Hainan government, estimated in 2005 that the total value of the oil and natural gas resources could be over 20 trillion RMB. He further commented that exploiting only 30 percent of these resources in the coming 20 years would contribute 1.2 percent GDP growth to the Chinese economy annually (Fen, 2005). Another expert from the Chinese Academy of Engineering Zhou Shouwei suggested that the total energy resources within the nine-dash line may amount to 35 billion tons of oil equivalent, about one third of

the total energy resources in China's land areas (Liang, 2012). Local media in Hainan have frequently reported higher estimates of 40 billion tons of oil and 15 trillion cubic meters of natural gas, for instance (Shan, 2007). According to a local senior official in charge of economic policy planning, studies by the Chinese Ministry of Land and Resources show that the SCS possesses oil reserves ranging from 23 billion tons to 30 billion tons, with the most optimistic estimate standing at 55 billion tons and natural gas 20 trillion cubic meters (Liang, 2012). Chinese opinion leaders have maintained that other claimant countries have benefited from the energy resources in the SCS, whereas China has done almost nothing in the southern part of the sea. They frequently mention that other claimant countries have produced over 50 million tons of oil in the SCS whereas China has not even started a single oil well in the waters around the Spratlys.

China became a net importer of energy resources in 1993. For the rest of the 1990s, China's imports of oil and gas continued to increase year on year, which sparked many Chinese elites' concerns about their country's energy security. In the late 1990s, China became more interested in exploring the energy resources in the SCS; however, China did not have the technology for oil exploration and exploitation. In the mid-2000s, the desire to utilize the energy resources in the SCS appeared to be more salient in Hainan. Publications in Hainan constantly emphasized that taking advantage of the energy resources in the SCS would be crucial for China's economic development and energy security.

By the mid-2000s, Hainan had seen noticeable benefits in exploiting the energy resources in the northern part of the SCS. The successful operation of the Ya 13-1 gas field, with an annual production of 3.4 billion cubic meters of gas, led to the development of a few major industrial enterprises, such as the Fudao Fertilizers, Nanshan Power, and *Dongfang* Fertilizers in Hainan. These benefits reinforced the local elites' belief that exploiting the energy resources in the SCS could help jumpstart Hainan's industrialization and boost local economic development (C.Li, 2005; Shan, 2007). In 2006, a deputy governor in Hainan stated that the Hainan local government would actively participate in the research, exploration, and exploitation of oil, gas, and methane clathrate in the SCS. He added that Hainan would also encourage companies outside Hainan to set up businesses in the province and engage in the development of energy resources in the SCS ("Hainan jiji zhichi," 2006).

Also, since the mid-2000s, many policy elites in Hainan began to develop a strong interest in the methane clathrate reserves in the SCS. Hainan government has organized many research activities for the study of exploring methane clathrate (Xinhua, 2004; Hainan Daily, 2018; China Ocean News, 2019). According to one Chinese source, some preliminary surveys in the sea troughs at the Paracels led to the discovery of abundant sources of methane clathrate. A surveyed seabed area of 5,242 square kilometers has an estimated reserve of 4.1 trillion cubic meters of methane clathrate. According to these studies, the total available methane clathrate in the SCS may be equal to half of China's regular oil and gas reserves, and

methane clathrate will be the best hope for China's future energy security ("Nanhai kaifa jihua," 2005). Local officials in charge of economic policy stated that Hainan would include the exploration and exploitation of methane clathrate in the local government's work agenda (Hainan Daily, 2018).

Hainan has been working with major state-owned oil companies to advance its interests in the energy resources in the SCS (Jakobson, 2014; International Crisis Group, 2016). With Hainan's support, major Chinese state-owned oil companies became more active in exploring the deepwater oil and gas in the SCS in the late 2000s. In 2008, CNOOC Group announced that it would, in the next 10 to 20 years, invest 200 billion RMB in oil and gas resources development in the SCS, mostly in deep-sea areas. The company aims to produce 500 million tons of oil equivalent annually in the deep-sea areas of the SCS by 2020 (Liang, 2008).

The provincial government in Hainan has considerable interest in cooperating with the major energy companies: CNOOC, China Petroleum & Chemical Corporation (SINOPEC), and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC). It planned to build a new logistics service base at Macun port for CNOOC to cater to an anticipated objective of 30 million tons of oil to be produced, and a research and logistics service base in Sanya for SINOPEC to conduct oil and gas exploitation activities in the SCS. To provide manufacturing capabilities and repair services for both energy companies' activities in the SCS, the Hainan government invested in the building of shipyards and marine engineering facilities in Yangpu and in

Lingao (Liang, 2012). The Hainan government indicated in its 12th Five-Year plan that a major economic goal was to build a development and service base for the SCS resources (Fu, 2010).

The mutually reinforcing interests between the energy companies and Hainan are likely to grow further because these companies are poised to play a larger role in resource exploration in the SCS (Gong, 2018). By 2014, three major oil companies in China had made plans to exploit the energy resources in the SCS: (a) CNPC registered 18 blocks with a total area of 126,848 square kilometers, (b) SINOPEC registered three blocks with a total area of 10,573 square kilometers, and (c) CNOOC registered 82 blocks with a total area of 541,982 square kilometers (W.Li, 2014). In addition to the energy sector, Hainan's pursuit of economic interests in the SCS is supported by the Chinese military (Garver 1992; Long, 2016), the tourism sector (Wong, 2018; Gong, 2018), law enforcement agencies, and the propaganda machinery (Jakobson, 2014).

Given Hainan's ever-growing interest in the energy resources in the SCS, conflict with other claimant states would be inevitable. In the past decades, on a number of occasions, China has forcefully prevented other claimant states from exploring energy resources in areas that they claim to be their exclusive economic zones and China claims to be within the nine-dash line. On May 2, 2014, the Haiyang Shiyou 981 platform was deployed in an area near the Paracels for the exploration of energy resources. This exploration operation was China's

first attempt to carry out energy development in deepwater areas in the SCS. And it may have been a result of many years of lobbying activities by Hainan local officials in Beijing for energy exploration in the waters off the Paracel islands (Jakobson, 2014). In the following months, China and Vietnam were engaged in a diplomatic crisis. The Vietnamese sent dozens of boats to the area to force China to cease operations and withdraw its oil rig. Anti-China protests and riots broke out in Vietnam. It is estimated that the area where the 981 platform conducted exploration operations could produce 56.5 million cubic feet, an equivalent of 9,400 barrels of oil, on a daily basis (Zhu, 2015). Chinese sources indicate that the presence of commercially-viable and technically-feasible energy resources will very likely result in China's decision to start exploitation in that area (H.Wang, 2015).

Hainan Eyes on Fishery Resources in the SCS

The Hainan government and the fishing community in the province regard fishing stocks in the SCS as a lifeline for the local economy. The central government started to provide diesel subsidies for the fishing sector in 2006. During the period of the 11th Five-Year Plan, fishermen in the SCS received up to 9 billion RMB of diesel subsidies (Huang, 2014). Since October 2007, the Hainan government subsidized 20 percent of the local marine fishermen's personal accident insurance.³

Because of the scarcity of fishing resources in the near sea areas of Hainan island, the Hainan government financed fishing activities in deeper waters in the Spratlys area and beyond (Tong, 2012). It made a major decision to subsidize 100,000 RMB for every fishing vessel above 80 tons of displacement. From 2008 to 2011, Hainan government provided a total of 14.3 million RMB to subsidize the manufacturing of 143 such fishing boats. In September 2017, a researcher in Hainan said that municipal and county governments in the coastal regions of Hainan provided financial resources to their local fishermen to help them build bigger boats.

In recent years, Hainan's growing interest in artificial fish farms in the SCS has led to the development of several deepwater netted fish farms in the Paracels and in the Spratlys. In 2012, Hainan's Marine and Fishery Department planned for the expansion of deepwater netted fish farms in the Paracels, Spratlys, and Macclesfield Bank ("Hainan jiang dali," 2012). Political elites in Hainan have been lobbying the central government for the expansion of netted fish farms in the SCS. At the National People's Congress annual meeting in March 2015, Hainanese delegates urged the central government to provide a policy package to support its fish farms in the South China in accordance with the National 13th Five-Year Plan. The local political leaders' aim was to expand their fishing projects to a massive scale through preferential policies from the central government (Du & Luo, 2015). For instance, while the central government desires to build a stronger maritime militia for the purpose of

protecting China's maritime rights, the local Hainan government has intentionally capitalized on this national policy for the purpose of increasing fishing revenue in the province (Wong, 2018). Hainan's interest in the fishing resources in the SCS is so strong that sometimes the local government simply ignores or even resists central authorities' fishery policy in the South China Sea. To reduce regional tensions, Beijing has been interested in restricting the fishing activities of Chinese fishermen in some sensitive areas, in particular by implementing an annual fishing ban for the summer season in some parts of the SCS. However, Hainan local government agencies often do not strictly enforce these central government's policy requirements, favoring high growth rates for the local fishery sector instead (Wong, 2018).

Hainan Aiming to Become a Strong Maritime Province

The Sixth Provincial Party Congress in May 2012 announced that the Hainan province would strive to build a strong maritime province. To do so, Hainan needs (a) advanced marine science and technology for marine resources development, (b) a well-developed marine economy which is about 40 percent of the province's total GDP, (c) better protection for its marine ecology, and (d) stronger maritime defense. According to local elites, Hainan's goal could only be accomplished if China's maritime interests in the SCS are well protected (B.Zhang, 2014).

Hainan officials have often lamented that Hainan's pace of marine economic development is slower than the provinces of Shandong, Zhejiang, and Guangdong. They pointed out that

the latter's total marine economy accounted for nearly 50 percent of China's total marine economy in 2011. In contrast, Hainan's marine economy was only 1.5 percent of the national total in that year even though Hainan owns a large area in the SCS (equivalent to two thirds of China's total maritime area) that is much richer in resources than China's other near seas (Liang, 2012).

According to Hainan's 12th Five-Year Plan for marine economic development, the marine industry would account for 30 percent of the province' total GDP by 2015 and over 35 percent by 2020. Hainan has been working hard to get the central government to accept its local marine economic plans as part of the national maritime development strategy and to include them in the National 13th Five-Year Plan for marine economic development (He, 2015).

Local leaders in Hainan have taken steps toward maritime development. Former governor Jiang Dingzhi noted in his work report in February 2014 that construction had commenced for 103 big fishing boats. He also noted that Hainan intended to set up a deep-sea oil exploitation company (J.Zhang, 2015). In November 2014, the State Council publicized an action plan for energy development strategy (2014–2020). One of the policy instructions was to increase oil and gas production in its near seas while quickly improving deepwater oil drilling technologies and manufacturing capabilities of relevant equipment in the SCS (J.

Zhang, 2015). The central government's policy was embraced by the local elites as a good opportunity for Hainan's economic development.

Hainan also continued to lobby the central government for a more active policy to support its resource exploitation in the SCS. A policy study conducted by the State Council Development Research Center, commissioned by the Hainan government in 2014, suggests that besides tourism, the resources in the SCS (fishing, energy, and minerals) are essential for Hainan's future development. The study estimates 40 billion tons of oil, 15 trillion cubic meters of gas, 70 billion tons of methane clathrate, and an annual catch of about 2 million tons of fish in the SCS. The report emphasizes that "maximally occupying and controlling marine resources through various economic activities should be the most effective and sustainable approach for protecting China's rights in the SCS" (W.Li, 2014). In the 2000s and 2010s, Hainan has actively lobbied the national government for policy support that would allow the province to play a central role in resource exploitation in the SCS (International Crisis Group, 2016).

It is well-known to the research and policy community that resources in the SCS have been one of the major driving factors in Beijing's policy on the disputes. The preceding analysis shows that Hainan has played a critical role in defining and maintaining China's material interests in the SCS. With Hainan as an active actor that constantly emphasizes the importance of energy resources to national interest, Beijing's strong position on the disputes

is not likely to shift. China is likely to continue to insist on its claim of historical rights in most parts of the SCS; otherwise Hainan's plan to exploit the resources in the region would be thwarted.

For a long time, China has advocated "shelving disputes for joint development" in the SCS. But joint development in the SCS between China and other claimant states has been sluggish for various reasons. Because of the disputes, Hainan was unable to undertake large-scale energy exploitation activities in the SCS. Officials in Hainan understand that it is impossible for the province to solely claim and exploit the resources in the SCS. Given the intricate nature of the disputes, local elites in Hainan seemed to be genuinely interested in engaging in economic cooperation with the countries surrounding the SCS. In the past decades, there have been various policy suggestions in Hainan that the province could hinge its economic future on cooperation with Southeast Asian countries.

In the late 1990s, policy analysts proposed the idea of building a South China Sea rim economic circle involving Hainan and other littoral states in Southeast Asia (Lv, 1997; Chen, 1997). In the mid-2000s, local elites also discussed the proposed Pan-South China Sea economic zone (Yu, 2008), which apparently continues to be of interest in Hainan (Wu, 2018). Those with alternative views suggested that Hainan adopt a non-exclusive approach to the resources in the SCS. In other words, instead of asserting control over the resources and engaging in outright competitive activities, Hainan could foster more cooperative relations

with the neighboring countries to explore joint development opportunities while strengthening economic and trade cooperation with these countries. Long-term cooperation with countries surrounding the SCS may produce more economic benefits for Hainan than the current mainstream policy preference on maximization of unilateral interests can.

Unfortunately, partly because of the incessant conflicts in the SCS between China and other claimant countries and also partly because of the weak economy of Hainan, these regional economic integration schemes never took off.

A Helpful Participant in Asserting Sovereignty and Maritime Rights in the SCS

Hainan's Support for National Defense

In 1959, China set up the Xisha Nansha Zhongsha Qundao Office (Office for Paracels, Spratlys, and Macclesfield Bank) under the Hainan Administrative Region, which was part of Guangdong province at that time. In 1988, Hainan was upgraded to become a provincial unit, a decision which may have been associated with China's growing interest in the SCS in the 1980s (Xu and Situ, 2018), and consequently the Office was placed under the direct leadership of Hainan province. In 2008, the Office underwent reforms. A few party and government departments were set up. Examples of party departments include the Party's Disciplinary Committee, General Office, Organization Department, Publicity Department, and Mass Work Department. Examples of government departments include the Social

Development Division, Finance and Taxation Division, Ocean and Fishery Division, Land Environmental Protection and Construction Division, Tourism Division, Public Security Division, and the People's Armed Forces Division (Kang, 2012).

For many years, China managed to expand its presence in the SCS in at least five ways: diplomatic statements on sovereignty and rights in the SCS, occupation and control over the Paracels, occupation of seven rocks and reefs in the Spratlys, fishing activities in many parts of the SCS, and occasional patrols by the Chinese navy and law enforcement vessels. When it comes to sovereignty, defense, and responses to actual conflicts, there is no doubt that the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), especially the Navy, has played the most important role (Garver, 1992; Long, 2016). In this context, in past decades the local government did not play a notable role in China's defense matters in the SCS. But its role, which began to expand in the 1990s, increased dramatically in the late 2000s.

Hainan's role in national security in the SCS is evident in three major areas: (a) effective occupation and administration of the land features and waters in the area on behalf of the central government, (b) law enforcement activities by local agencies in the region, and (c) auxiliary support for the Chinese military. With the establishment of Sansha city, Hainan is very likely to continue to play an even more significant role in strengthening China's presence and in asserting China's interests in the SCS.

One contribution that Hainan made for asserting China's interests in the SCS was the passage of local laws and regulations that would be applied in the SCS. According to local Hainan officials in charge of laws, the province has passed 12 laws in relation to the sea, which constitute a fairly complete legal framework for the province to manage the SCS disputes. A local official noted that the Regulations for the Management of Border Defense and Public Security in the Coastal Regions of Hainan Province that went into effect in January 2013 played an effective role in cracking down criminal activities in the sea and in protecting China's sovereignty and maritime rights. Interestingly, the enactment of these local Regulations was not consulted with the central government agencies in Beijing in advance (Jakobson, 2014). Hainan revised its provincial Implementation Guidelines for the National Fisheries Law in 2013. The revised guidelines stipulated stringent restrictions on near-sea fishing and encouraged local fishermen to sail to deeper waters and the ocean for fishing activities (Du, 2014). With more Chinese fishing vessels arriving in the southern part of the SCS, the incidence of fishing disputes between China and other claimant states is likely to rise (H. Zhang, 2016). These new regulations would require foreign vessels fishing in waters that Hainan is supposed to administer in much of the SCS to apply for permission from the Chinese State Council in advance, which caused significant concerns from other claimant countries. Hainan passed these new rules primarily to demonstrate its authority in exercising jurisdiction in the SCS despite that fact that it does not have the capability to

enforce them in such a vast maritime area (International Crisis Group, “Stirring up the South China Sea (III): A Fleeting Opportunity for Calm,” 7 May 2015).

Another major role of the Hainan government is taking the lead in the organization of the local maritime militia troops. Like all other local governments in China, Hainan is responsible for coordinating the action between militia organizations and the locally-stationed military units. Unlike other local governments in China, many of the militia groups in Hainan are already involved in defense and maritime law enforcement activities. Many sources indicate that the Hainan government has been actively recruiting, organizing, and supporting the local maritime militia troops since the 1990s (O’Rourke, 2019; Erickson, 2014).

It appears that Hainan has become much more active in supporting the local maritime militia troops in recent years. Following Xi Jinping’s commendation of the maritime militia in Tanmen when he visited Hainan in 2013, the local government issued additional policies to support the local maritime militia groups (Zhang and Bateman, 2018). Examples include more subsidies for duty performance, diesel subsidies, medical care allowance, and pensions. The Hainan government decided to allocate 280 million RMB more subsidies for the maritime militia groups. In early 2014, the Hainan government decided to form a leadership task force led by the province’s deputy party secretary Li Xiansheng to strengthen the local maritime militia through recruitment, training, and upgrading of equipment and fishing boats

(“Hainan sheng dali,” 2014). Even county-level governments were required to provide 50 percent subsidies to their locally-based militia organizations (“Hainan sheng chutai,” 2014).

It has been reported that at least some of the maritime militia groups were equipped with sophisticated military skills. In December 2007, the Hainan Provincial Military Region, with support from the PLA Navy’s Base in Yulin, trained a group of militiamen in mine disposal and anti-submarine warfare, together with the local naval forces (“Hainan sheng junqu,” 2008). The role of the local maritime militia in China’s SCS policy has become a concern for other parties, especially the US and Japan (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2018; Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018; [Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019](#)), suggesting that Hainan’s role in assisting China’s national security in the disputes is not a trivial matter.

Sansha Takes Action

In June 2012, the central government decided to upgrade the Xi Nan Zhong Sha Archipelagos Office (*xi nan zhong sha banshichu*) to a prefecture level city called Sansha Municipality. When the Sansha municipal government was established, its main task was to serve national security purposes while developing the local economy. With the establishment of Sansha and the military garrison on Woody Island, it appears that a lot of defense-supporting responsibilities and jurisdictional duties are increasingly shifting from the provincial level to the prefectural level in Sansha.

In the past few years, Sansha has played a major role in safeguarding China's sovereignty and in exercising jurisdiction in the SCS. Civil-military fusion has been one of the central tasks for Sansha city ever since it was established. Immediately after its founding, the local government of Sansha set up a leadership group for "mutual support between the civilian sector and the military" (*shuangyong*) and provided various preferential policies for the local military personnel. Sansha has an annual budget of 60 million RMB to implement 10 major "mutual support" projects.⁴

To facilitate the troops' commute from Woody Island to Hainan island, Sansha procured two additional cruise boats, "Qiongsha No. 3" and "Sansha No. 1". In the past, troops on Woody Island had to wait for half a month for the boat to return to Hainan Island; with the addition of two more cruise boats, the waiting time of cruise sails has been reduced to three days. Researchers in Haikou said that the local government of Sansha also occasionally hired chartered air flights for the military officers (C.Liu, 2016a). Major infrastructure projects in Sansha, such as garbage disposal, desalination, roads, and hospitals, catered to the needs of local troops. A military-police-civilian sector integrated defense mechanism has gradually taken shape after the founding of Sansha. The three sectors reportedly conducted 324 joint patrols, travelling a total of 46,000 nautical miles in the SCS in the four years since the establishment of Sansha. In July 2016, the central government and military authorities recognized Sansha as "a model city in the mutual support program" (C. Liu, 2016b).

Under the civil-military fusion program, the local government of Sansha and the military troops stationed at the Paracels cooperated by “sharing information, rotating duty shifts,” and engaged in “joint law enforcement, co-organizing maritime militia, and jointly managing maritime affairs.” On the nine islands and islets with human habitation, militia “national flag” teams (*minbing daojiao guoqi ban*) have been formed. On Woody Island and Zhaoshu island (Tree Island), the office buildings for neighborhood committees are also built for multiple purposes. Examples include local residential cultural activities, extreme weather shelters, outposts for the militia groups, and wartime command posts (C. Liu, 2016a).

Sansha has established two maritime defense militia outposts and it plans to set up more in the future. Militiamen operated radar round-the-clock to monitor the various activities in the sea. They are also responsible for patrolling the islands and their shores. Militia members include both retired soldiers and fishermen. They undergo military training on navigation, communications, laws and regulations, and catching objects in the sea. The Sansha military garrison alone trains a few hundred militiamen every year. Within 3 years of the establishment of Sansha, the Sansha militia members sailed 30,000 nautical miles to assist in more than 250 operations in maritime law enforcement. They detected and handled more than 350 cases of foreign fishing boats said to be infringing upon China’s rights (Hou & Yang, 2016).

Sansha City has been actively engaged in lobbying the provincial government for various preferential policies and support, despite the fact that the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs had tried to “slow down enthusiastic local officials” (Jakobson, 2014, p.34). At the Hainan National People's Congress (NPC) session in 2013, deputies who represented Sansha submitted 11 policy requests to the provincial government for consideration, covering sovereignty protection, economic and social development, infrastructure development, environmental protection, cultural relics protection, and people’s livelihood. There was a proposal for national and provincial support for a major comprehensive supply base at Jinqing island (Drummond Island) in the Paracels for purposes of national defense, national maritime rights protection, and regional economic development. The supply base, if built, could provide logistics support to China’s fishing fleet in the Spratlys, enterprises involved in deepwater netted fish farming, law-enforcement patrol boats, and the tourism sector in the Sansha area in the future. Another proposal was to renovate the martyrs park and build an exhibition hall at the Chenhang Island (Duncan Island), eventually transforming this island into a patriotic education base for the Chinese people. Another recommendation was to allow Sansha to adopt a more flexible household registration policy so that fishermen can become official residents of Sansha (Fan, 2013).

The establishment of Sansha City also made an impact on China’s maritime law enforcement in the SCS. The local jurisdictional systems in the SCS are still, by and large,

compartmentalized. The Ocean and Fisheries Department of Hainan Province, the Maritime Safety Department of Hainan Province, the South Sea Fisheries Bureau of the Ministry of Agriculture, and the South Sea Bureau of the State Oceanic Administration are all involved in the law enforcement activities and management of the SCS. After the government of Sansha was established, local elites proposed that the former assume responsibility for all issues related to the following: fishery, public security and border defense, resources development, environmental protection, tourism, and weather broadcasting services (L.Zhang, 2015). If this proposal is accepted, or even partially accepted, Sansha is likely to become a super powerful prefecture-level local government and its role in the SCS disputes will become much more prominent.

Conclusion

Given its geographic location and the official responsibilities assigned by the central authorities, Hainan is destined to be an active and important player in the SCS disputes. This paper has analyzed three major roles played by Hainan in the SCS contentions: (a) a strong supporter of China's historical claims, (b) an active participant in defining China's interests, and (c) a useful helper in defense in the SCS.

Nationalism, capabilities, and institutional responsibilities have all been driving forces behind the local elites' views and involvement in the SCS. Local Hainan leaders share some

of the fundamental elements in China's general views of the SCS disputes, but they have a much stronger sense of entitlement and even ownership of the region because of Hainan's geographic proximity and the social environment. For patriotic purposes, local elites will want to get involved in the South China Sea issue. This can be seen in their vigor in creating and consolidating a history-focused narrative to support China's positions and claims in the SCS disputes. The growth of capabilities in the past decades and the expansion of the local fishing fleet for instance, have spurred Hainan to take an active role in the SCS disputes. Institutional changes, such as the establishment of Hainan province and Sansha city, have incentivized the local governments in Hainan to increase their involvement in the SCS.

Hainan's ambition and actions in the SCS have also been significantly driven by its economic interests in the region. Leaders in Hainan have high expectations of economic benefits from exploiting the resources in the SCS. Much of the province's economic policy planning has been closely associated with interests in the SCS resources. This association has grown stronger over time. Through highlighting the economic importance of the SCS for Hainan and China, the local government in Hainan has essentially helped define and substantiate China's interests in the dispute. Driven by the pursuit of economic interests, local officials often take actions on their own and 'report after the fact' rather than obtain prior permission from the national leaders (Jakobson, 2014). Partly because of Hainan's role, Beijing is unlikely to abandon or significantly amend some of the core elements in its claims

in the SCS. Despite severe criticism from many other claimant and non-claimant players, Beijing will insist on its historical rights to the resources within the nine-dash line.

What is more revealing in this article is the fact that the local Hainan government has played a significant role in China's actual security policy and behavior in the SCS. Although the local government plays a minor role in maintaining national security compared to the central government agencies and the Chinese military, it has played a significant role in establishing China's assertive posture and policy in the SCS disputes through its direct logistical support for the military, its law-making initiatives, its involvement in organizing the militia groups, and its law enforcement activities. Many of these local governments' activities are also clearly linked to the so-called "gray zone" tactics that have frustrated other claimant parties and external powers (the US for example) in the past decade (Green, 2017).

This paper sheds light on an aspect that is insufficiently studied: Hainan's role in China's territorial dispute and national security policy in the SCS. It enhances our understanding of the role of domestic context in China's policy formulation and the underpinning rationale for China's actual behavior in the disputes. This case study may also inspire further scholarly inquiry into the role of local governments in Chinese foreign policy and security strategy.

Notes

¹ Numerous official statements, academic publications, and media editorials constantly mention that China has been using the South China Sea and practicing jurisdiction in this area ever since ancient times. This “ever since ancient times” discourse has not been convincing in the international society.

² Interviews with over 20 government officials and scholars in Hainan from 2008 to 2018.

³ Interviews with researchers in Hainan in September 2017.

⁴ Interviews with researchers in Hainan in September 2017.

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