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### **CHINA COERCIVE DIPLOMACY THROUGH SOUTH CHINA SEA CONFLICT AND BELT & ROAD INITIATIVES**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper studies China coercive diplomacy by first analyzing the South China Sea (SCS) issue from the perspective of China national interest which has Belt & Road Initiatives (BRI) political agenda (formerly known as OBOR). Through BRI, China will be a counterweight to the world economic power in countering US hegemony. This paper aims to describe the coercive form of China diplomacy which has been implemented through both phenomena and to analyze China coercive diplomacy using theory and relevant concept. To achieve those goals, this paper employs qualitative research method as well as national interest and neorealism theory. The findings of this paper suggest that, in reflection of China-Sri Lanka bilateral experience, BRI is one of debt-track diplomacy of China commodities in maintaining energy and economy security. This paper is expected to be one of the studies about South China Sea which can see BRI more in the opportunities it brings.

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

The South China Sea dispute has proven the magnitude of China's ambitions in meeting its national interest. The nine-dashed line stretching from China's national waters to other national waters, including Japan, Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, Myanmar and also Indonesia, is claimed by China based on historic arguments that they

continue to make. However, the Permanent Arbitration Court (PCA) stated that nine-dashed line is illegal since it does not comply with principles and rules of 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982).

This dispute was then won by Philippines as the country which brought this case to PCA in 2013. China responded to that

decision by stating they will never meet the final decision of the court. Their historical argument claims that all area of South China Sea is a territory under full control of China based on their “historical rights.”

In 2009, China also mentioned in front of United Nations (UN) General Assembly that nine-dashed line is a territory under full control of china, once again by referring to the “historical waters” during the times of Great China Empire long ago, where the nine-dashed line area includes coastal countries such as Prata, Macclesfield Bank, Scarborough Shoal, Paracel and Sparty Islands.

These islands are located in South China Sea which are claimed by several coastal countries in the region, and these countries have carried out economic, tourism, and development activities long before China. The areas within the nine-dashed line can be seen in the Figure 1.

Despite the PCA’s decision, China continued to deploy military or trade ships to carry out activities in South China Sea area in order to strengthen their *de facto* control over the area. Recently in Thitu Island, China Navy deployed 95 ships to intimidate Philippines into stopping their construction activities in that island (Yudha, 2019). The presence of other actors in South China Sea has also escalated the conflict in this area.

In 2017, the presence of United States (US) had an impact on China. The USS Carl Vinson supercarrier made a diplomatic visit to Vietnam as a sign of US support to Vietnam. This was strengthened by various cooperation between Vietnam and China’s rivals, such as India and Japan (Mohamad, 2018). The involvement of United States in Asia Pacific has continued to introduce military powers and influence in this region. After all, ASEAN member countries are receiving US aid through the deployment of military base in Philippines and also the US revocation of Vietnam arms embargo. United

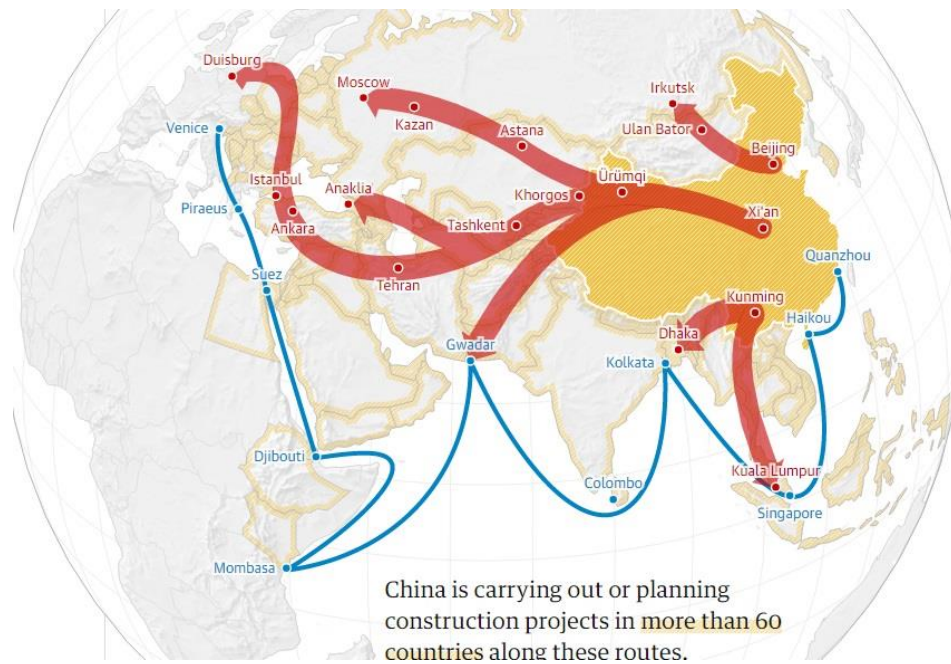
States believe that South China Sea is an international shipping line, hence it cannot be owned by one nation. Therefore, Australia and other countries were also deploying warships in the disputed Islands in South China Sea. These actions were carried out to make sure that shipping line runs accordingly without any confrontations with the China (Debora, 2016).

Through the next China’s initiatives, these conflicts have been made as if nonexistent or slowly disappearing. In 2013, Xi Jinping issued an idea to unite regional connectivity. He named the idea One Belt, One Road. China wants to reopen the international trade route similar to China’s predecessors, namely the Silk Road. This is a route which is expected to connect Beijing to Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Europe and Africa through sets of infrastructures connectivity, including railway, highway, pipes and also port infrastructures to support international shipping and trade line on the sea. One Belt, One Road was then renamed into Belt Road Initiative (BRI) which continues to prioritize Eurasia and Africa connectivity (Ramadhan, 2018).

The BRI has also been nicknamed China Marshall Plan, by providing aids to stimulate the economies of underdeveloped nations and also as a form of foreign aid, i.e. China’s diplomatic strategy to invest in economies throughout the world through trade commodities. BRI is also referred to as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Silk Road which focuses on land trade corridor and also international shipping route (Kommenda, 2019). BRI’s route can be seen in Figure 2, which shows how Quanzhou is connected to Southeast Asia, i.e. Malaysia-Sri Lanka-Pakistan, up to Venice. While the land route is from Beijing-Irkutsk, Xi’an-Moscow, Xi’an Duisburg in Baltic region. China has spent a tremendous amount of money for this project, approximately US\$ 300 billion – 1 trillion (Mangkuto, 2019; Andriani, 2019), to invest in countries



**Figure 1.** China’s Nine-dashed line  
 Source: Australia Plus ABC, detik.com, 2019



**Figure 2.** Belt and Road Initiative Route  
 Source: (Kommenda, 2019)

they deem strategic, such as Indonesia, Pakistan, India and Poland. The fund is transferred in the form of loan, grant, or foreign investment to those countries.

However, countries involved in this program are worried over the possibility of dependence and losing their control. Scholars, economists and foreign policy

practitioners agree that China loan causes problems and difficult to be repaid. One example that needs to be studied is Pakistan (Ramadhan, 2018).

Due to Pakistan-China economic cooperation through China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in 2015, Pakistan faces difficulty in repayment and allows China to take over

80% of their domestic projects, including the construction of power plant, railway and Gwandar port – to the point that China has obtained the rights of management of that port for dozens of years in the future. In addition, Sri Lanka has also failed to return a loan in the amount of US\$ 1.5 million – allowing China to take control of their port for 99 years (“Lima Tahun Program Jalur Sutra 8 Negara Masuk Jebakan Tiongkok,” 2018).

The author argues that BRI is China’s coercive diplomacy to other nations, especially developing countries which need fund to sustain their domestic infrastructure development. If they fail to repay the loan, their assets will be taken by China. This is a threat for countries that enter into this cooperation agreement, i.e. the handover of assets which will ultimately threaten the national security of a state due to the transfer of ownership of their assets to foreign nation.

This type of coercive diplomacy is in line with the South China Sea dispute. Although PCA has decreed China’s claim as illegal in reference to the provisions of UNCLOS 1982, China remains confident in their claim over South China Sea. China’s national security reflects a desire to control the resources in South China Sea. The US Energy Information and Administration (EIA) estimated that South China Sea contains a wealth of 11 million barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic of natural gas reserves (US Energy Information Administration, 2013). In addition, EIA also mentioned that South China Sea is one of the regions with rare natural resources that is not available in many countries in the world, outside of Middle East, Africa and Russia.

This sets a background for China’s national interest in making confrontation in South China Sea, namely the need for resources, energy supply for China’s future. EIA explained that China is the biggest importer of oil and gas in the world after

United States. In 2012, crude oil and natural gas contributes to 20% of China’s total consumption and China imported 6.1 million barrels of oil every day in 2014. China’s oil production is clearly inadequate in meeting their domestic oil demand and needs. Therefore, it can be argued that China is highly dependent on oil imports (Ni Putu Saraswati Puspita Dewi, 2017).

Furthermore, China’s connectivity initiative is also driven by the same interest. BRI signatory countries are those with energy, resource potential for China. This is also supported by several tracks of infrastructure agreement by China, such as The New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor. This corridor connects the land route of member states to meet the Silk Road Economic Belt, in the form of railway, oil and gas pipes.

In addition, Maritime Silk Road is renovation of infrastructure and construction of ports in line with international shipping route through regional cooperation, policy coordination, monetary cooperation and trade facility. Belt and Road Initiative has become China’s foreign policy and diplomatic instrument to spread their influence, economic power to countries within BRI.

At a glance, BRI appears to provide more benefit for countries within it, in the form of facilitation for infrastructure development, renovation of ports which is beneficial in terms of sustainable development. However, the patterns of interaction and diplomacy carried out by China in South China Sea and also their monetary policy through the Initiative should be noted. China’s pattern of interaction and diplomacy seems to be quite concerning for many countries.

China’s non-compliance to PCA decision and their deployment of warships in South China Sea has allowed China to have a *de facto*, not *de jure*, presence. Not to mention their diplomatic tactics through BRI in making developing countries trapped in debt

bondage has allowed them to take control national assets as a compensation for the non-payment of those countries to the Initiative.

A pattern of coercive diplomacy designed to meet China's national interest in meeting their energy needs and security can thus be described. Both South China Sea dispute and BRI are tactics designed to meet China's resource needs which they cannot fulfill domestically. Therefore, this paper will study how China implements its coercive diplomacy through South China Sea dispute and BRI in order to meet their national interest.

This paper aims to (1) describe the coercive form of China's diplomacy which is implemented through the two phenomena, and (2) analyze China's coercive diplomacy using theory and relevant concepts. The discussion in this paper will be divided into several sections, namely theoretical studies employed with regard to coercive diplomacy, national interest and geopolitics. The second section will analyze coercive diplomacy in relation to other concepts that are related to the two phenomena. The final section will explain China's national interest in diffusing its influence through the two phenomena.

## RESEARCH METHODS

State makes various attempts to meet its interest and needs. This is driven by threats that are deemed crucial for a state. Therefore, the concept of national interest emerges to study this problem. Hans J. Morgenthau is a classical realist scholar in International Relations. He explained that a material perception of threat to state can drive patterns of state movement to meet national interest. Morgenthau described national interest in terms of power. A state policy-maker will refer to state conditions, principles to meet what the country needs in a "self-help" manner. The economic capability of a state will thus be equally important as military power (Burchill, 2005).

Kegley and Wittkopf explained that national interest is simple issues related to self-defense against attacks, threats that can disrupt day to day life. All policy makers or state leaders have the same objectives, but limited in terms of options, resources and assistance, both internally and externally. Ultimately, there is a necessity to strike other actors in order to meet one's own needs (Wittkopf., 1993).

Kenneth Waltz and Mearsheimer are neorealist scholars who described national interest from different perspective compared to Morgenthau. Waltz explained that state's objective is simply to pursue security and power in order to defend against threats (Anam & Ristiyani, 2018). Mearsheimer explained that state's objective to meet its national interest is an attempt or method to become the hegemonic power, to conquer international system in a region for the sake of regional stability (Sorensen, 2013).

National interest is inseparable with the concept of politics, especially geopolitics. National interest will move in line with the geographical condition of an entity, i.e. the national interest of a country. The policy or initiative implemented by China cannot be separated with this concept. Geopolitics refers to political influence and interest that impacts the geographic factor of state behavior, including natural condition, climate and their physical territory. The determination of foreign policy, state's method of interaction, is adjusted to such condition. State can be categorized as stronger and richer if it has strategic physical condition in supporting economic and political progress. The ultimate end of geopolitics is state utilizing the geographical condition to obtain a sustainable comparative advantage (Ni Putu Saraswati Puspita Dewi, 2017).

Prominent geopolitics describe an advantageous geographical condition for states that control or have leverage in

utilizing the land and the sea. Halford Mckinder explained that a state can be considered successful in land utilization if they can control the Heartland, i.e. Eurasia. He clearly mentioned that the one who controls Eurasia will be the one to control the world and international system. Meanwhile, A.T. Mahan explained that control over sea will translate to state power. A country that controls international shipping route will be the one to control international relations system (S., 1997).

It can be argued that China's ambition to control the land and the sea is quite relevant with McKinder and Mahan's geopolitical analysis. If the two elements of geography can be controlled, then international order can be controlled and china can become a hegemonic power able to control regional stability.

In meeting national interest and geopolitical perspective, there needs to be an instrument, tool to communicate with other actors. Therefore, the role of diplomacy becomes crucial. Marks and Freeman (2019) explained that diplomacy is a method, means to influence actors, government or people through communication, dialogue, negotiation. Modern diplomacy does not only involve 2 states, but also many state, non-state, international organization and their derivatives (Freeman, 2019).

Diplomatic instruments are strengthened with legal instrument to ensure that diplomacy has binding legal power that can prevent violation if countries agree to enter into agreement. US State Department mentioned several diplomatic instruments (US Department of State, 2019), namely:

1. Treaties
2. Convention
3. Alliance
4. Accords

To meet national interest, current modern diplomatic practice has its own message and impression. Diplomatic practice becomes

state instrument to commit violence, use of force, and can be detrimental to parties involved within. This diplomacy is referred to as Coercive Diplomacy. Coercive diplomacy is defined as a persuasion to pressure actors involved within, through the use of force, military instrument, economic sanction, trade war or asymmetric agreement (Manulak, 2011).

Alexander George stated that coercive diplomacy is a type of diplomacy that, "in hopes of securing a peaceful resolution of a serious dispute by persuading an opponent to stop or undo his effort to alter the status quo situation." George (Manulak, 2011) mentioned several variants of coercive diplomacy as follows:

1. "Try and see" approach, looking at the threat and finding ways to persuade the opponent to change their stance.
2. "Gradually turning the screws approach," giving pressures to avoid unwanted circumstances.
3. "Classic ultimatum" approach, giving clear threat submitting demand at the right time.
4. "Tacit ultimatum" approach, giving clear threat but not at the right time.

South China Sea dispute has greatly impacted Asia Pacific region. US' presence in the region has also significantly influenced China's movement. Nine-dashed line is an illegal diplomatic practice, where China continue to make their claim and deploy warships in South China Sea to show their *de facto* presence, despite contradicting international law. In addition, BRI is expected to be able to give foreign aid to developing countries, but the economic policy offered by China has adversely impacted developing countries. Therefore, the concept and theory employed in this paper refers to National Interest, Geopolitics and Coercive Diplomacy as analytical tools to study the above problems.

In studying the above issues, the author employs library research technique to collect and select information from various sources that are relevant with the above problem, consisting of literatures in the form of books, journals, news, official documents and statements, interview and internet. Data constitutes a foundation of the paper to analyze and study the above problem. As such, the author uses primary and secondary data which have been selected, and processed by sources mentioned above. The utilization of book, journal and reliable internet sources became the supporting data of this paper.

## DISCUSSION

South China Sea dispute has been escalating over the last few years. China's movement in this water is considered to be against existing principles. There is no region that can be controlled by one nation. South China Sea is a region that includes and bordered with all regions within it, especially Central Asia and Southeast Asia. The deployment of China warship in various points has deterred other countries to continue their developmental activities. This is shown in the case of Thitu Island where China Navy deployed 95 ships to intimidate Philippines into stopping their construction activities in that island (Yudha, 2019).

The deployment of military base in Spartly Island becomes a trigger of conflict by China. Spartly Island is one of the islands disputed by various states, such as Vietnam, Philippines, and Brunei. Although the island's status is under dispute, China has deployed advanced military installation with complete weaponry, runway, helipad and so on. The figure 3 below illustrates China's military base in Spartly Island.

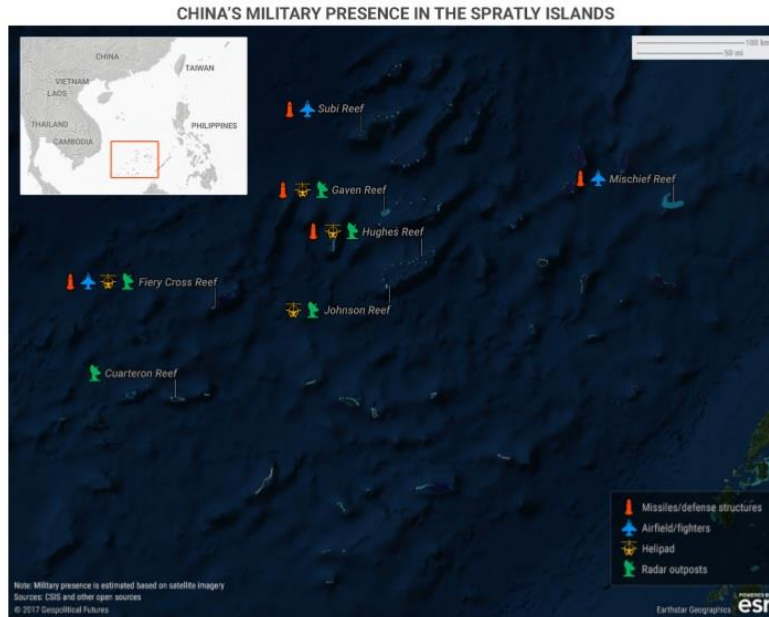
*De facto*-wise, China has built military base despite the fact that the island is still under dispute. A complete military installation can only exacerbate the situation. In terms of balance of power, this installation

proves that China is able to project their power outside of its sovereign territory. By building military base, sovereign territory shall be considered in accordance with the provisions of UNCLOS 1982. But normatively, China's definition is clearly illegal and unjustified by international community. PCA has stated that China's movement in South China Sea is illegal. Moreover, the presence of China navy in Thitu Island is a Maritime Power Projection to ensure that China can maintain its *de facto* presence, by insisting their argument that South China Sea is historically a traditional fishing ground owned by China.

These China ships were not only deployed from the Navy and China Coast Guard, but also China's maritime militia which involves fisherman and their boats. China's maritime militia is a paramilitary organization, in which civilian fisherman is armed and given military doctrines to carry out activities in South China Sea, and told to make confrontation against other countries trading in the international waters. China fishing industry is one of the biggest fishing industries, and China has 200,000 fisherman boats armed by the Government of China to be a proxy of their interest in South China Sea (James, 2015).

The use of fisherman and trade boat is against international law principles, especially humanitarian law. The involvement of civilians in military practice is a threat to civilian themselves if open war or conflict occurs between state militaries. The role of fisherman and trade boat becomes bias, and China must be dealt with because of involving civilians in protecting territory, particularly the military power on the sea. China's military power is obviously not only in military component, but also civilian participation to advocate for China's presence in international waters. Threats that are perceived material by China is construction, exploitation and utilization





**Figure 3.** China Military Base in Sparty Islands  
*Source:* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017)



**Figure 4.** Universal Role of Navy  
*Source:* (Ken., 2015)



of area, land and island in South China Sea by other countries, such as Philippines in Thitu Island, and the deployment of Indonesian military base in Natuna. Energy and resource crisis is a threat to China's energy security if other countries exploit the resources in South China Sea. Resource control is China's desire in meeting their national interest. The presence of military installation in Sparty Island and also routine patrol by the navy is China's coercive diplomacy to meet their interest. With the presence of China navy in South China Sea, the effect of confrontation and "ownership" of the sea becomes clear according to China. Alexander George's coercive diplomacy approach is thus relevant with the above condition and problem.

Therefore, the "gradually turning the screws" approach can be analyzed. This can be seen by the continuous confrontation by China through their navy power, either their military and civilian. This coercive diplomacy approach is in line with the theoretical role of navy in diplomacy. Figure 4 illustrates the universal role of navy.

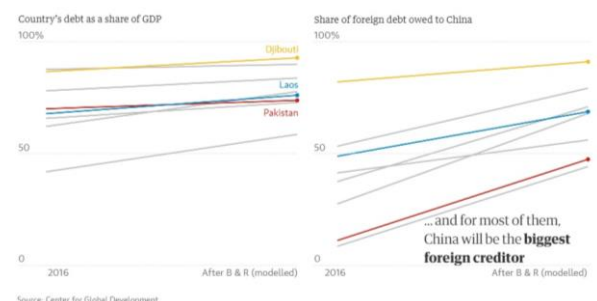
Navy does not only have military role, but also diplomatic and constabulary role. These roles are utilized by China through projection of power, naval diplomacy, and also the role of sovereignty projected to outside of China's water territory to Sparty and Thitu Island. In addition, this is in line with James Cable's concept of gunboat diplomacy. This diplomacy involves naval power or known as Naval Diplomacy.

China's strategy in deploying their naval ships and militia is referred to as Purposeful Force. This persuasive diplomacy through navy is carried out by distributing warships to achieve predetermined objectives. Thus, naval diplomacy is implemented to influence other state's foreign policy (Le Mière, 2014).

It can thus be argued that the deployment of China navy in South China Sea is in line with the concept of coercive diplomacy – as

well as naval diplomacy with the aim of purposeful force. The continuous presence of navy in South China Sea is expected to be able to change the movement of other states, both in terms of ship mobility and also their policy and stance toward South China Sea.

The grand initiative and project of BRI by China can be argued as a form of coercive diplomacy. Countries that have entered into economic cooperation with China, such as Pakistan, Djibouti and Sri Lanka, are impacted by that cooperation. Although this initiative has provided huge impact in terms of development, these countries became trapped in huge debt bondage and faced difficulties to access loan from China. Figure 5 illustrates several states that have huge debt risk due to BRI.



**Figure 5.** Debt Chart of BRI-Debtor Countries  
*Source:* The Guardian, 2019

The above figure illustrates states' debt to BRI, minus their gross domestic product condition, or states' debt compared to the value and service produced by the concerned state. In the above figure, the three states set an example of the impact of China's coercive diplomacy in the form of debt-trap diplomacy. Debt-trap diplomacy is a new terminology in international relations which emerged in 2017, where debtor country becomes trapped in their debt, which can happen intentionally or otherwise through huge lending.

This diplomatic practice is also known as debtbook diplomacy, which is defined as the provision of loan in the form of huge debt to

gain national assets and influence over the debtor country (Chefitz, 2018).

One case that needs to be studied is the case of Hambantota port of Sri Lanka which saw up to 85% of its ownership handed over to China while the state must pay their debt for 99 long years. Due to Sri Lanka's failure to repay their debt in few years, the collateral that they can gave to China was the possibility of repurposing that port for China's naval port hub. This economic power has obviously created negative impact in the eyes of international community. US naval officer, Admiral Scott Swift described China's economic diplomacy as:

"...increase debt in a given country and then turn around and ask for something in return that was not part of the original negotiation." (Moriyasu, 2018)

It is stated that economic negotiation and foreign investment to Sri Lanka is obliged to pay collateral to China due to non-payment. Ultimately, debtor country is obliged to give something to lender country. In this case, Magampura Mahinda Rajapaksa port in Hambantota became Sri Lanka's collateral to China. China's coercive diplomacy is clearly relevant with debt-trap diplomacy by gaining national asset, and making direct political impact to Sri Lanka in terms of administration, bureaucracy, and also domestic infrastructure mobility.

In addition, Pakistan also becomes the 'victim' of China's debt-trap diplomacy through BRI. As per China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China and Pakistan entered into economic cooperation to construct port infrastructure and the fund disbursed by China amounted to US\$ 62 million. Port development were planned for 40 years up to 2059. Due to that economic agreement, China gained 91% and 85% profit over the surrounding free zone in Gwadar port, Pakistan. Furthermore, Pakistan is obliged to pay US\$ 16 million to a China bank for the development of Gwadar port, free trade zone, and communication

infrastructure plus 13% interest and 7% insurance fee. IMF has warned that the loan may disrupt the sustainability of Pakistan's gross domestic product in the amount of 7.5%. Since the large majority of the port is owned by China, Pakistan must spend a lot in port maintenance and operation, causing Pakistan to be trapped in China's debt-trap (Chefitz, 2018). Many are worried that Gwadar port will be used by China as their hub port, including their warships, in the future.

Both South China Sea dispute and BRI can be argued as China's strategy to achieve their national interest, namely the fulfillment of energy needs in the outer area of China, such as Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Middle East. China's claim in South China Sea is a form of coercive diplomacy through the use of navy as diplomacy instrument (Naval Diplomacy and Gunboat Diplomacy) and force, such as the use of maritime militia which involves civilian fishermen. The continuous deployment of navy is expected to change various countries' foreign policy toward South China Sea, including Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia.

BRI is China's geopolitical ambition through economic cooperation, infrastructure development on land and sea, i.e. controlling Heartland (Eurasia) through debt-trap or debt-trap diplomacy through BRI economic cooperation with developing countries. Thus, the subjugation of national asset is carried out to facilitate access China's shipping access and route from Europe-Africa-Middle East-Central Asia-Southeast Asia to Beijing. China's strategy is a form of land and ocean domination to revive the Silk Road which was built by China's predecessors in order to reach the glorious days when China rules and dominates the world.

## CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion that can be made from the above discussion on China Coercive

Diplomacy through South China Sea dispute and Belt and Road Initiative is that their strategies and foreign policies have violated a lot of international law principles, including humanitarian law, law of the sea and international ethics. This can be seen from how China has ignored PCA decision over South China Sea by deploying their naval warships in order to have a *de facto* presence in South China Sea in accordance with their nine-dashed line claims. Fishermen are used as diplomatic mechanism that also present in that area. The use of civilian in operation other than war clearly violates humanitarian law. BRI is considered to have violate international principle because China's loan and grants ultimately end in the handover of national assets, meaning there is an economic domination and imperialism against developing countries by China.

Theory and concepts employed in this paper is relevant with the current condition, facts, and circumstances. Coercive diplomacy is clearly implemented by China in South China Sea, through the deployment of warships, and maritime militia in South China Sea area to initiate confrontation and the use of navy to pronounce their sovereignty over South China Sea despite the decision of PCA. In addition, BRI economic initiative and cooperation ultimately ends in the handover and control over national assets of developing countries which has an impact on their domestic economy and politics.

Debtbook or debt-trap diplomacy has caused countries to fall in debt bondage and insurmountable bank interest due to BRI obliges the use of China's infrastructure investment bank (AIIB) to transfer the loan. China's coercive diplomacy is implemented to meet its national interest, namely the sustainability of natural resources including oil and natural gas. Eurasia and other areas in Heartland have huge oil potential that can meet China's energy needs.

Diplomacy is a practice to present and project state's national interest. Economic cooperation and military confrontation is considered as diplomatic practice carried out by China to meet their national interest. Kegley and Wittkopf explained that national interest shall be carried out and enforced even by destroying other countries because other options have been deemed ineffective. China's foreign practices and strategies are form of self-defense strategy against their perceived threat, namely natural resources crisis for the sustainability and needs of all China people.

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