IGCC | UC INSTITUTE ON GLOBAL CONFLICT AND COOPERATION

WORKING PAPER NO. 9
DECEMBER 2025

Capabilities, Costs, and Constraints: A Realist Reassessment of China's Rise in East Asia

Yuji Idomoto

Abstract

China's rise is widely viewed as a destabilizing force in East Asia, prompting concerns of heightened military competition or even an arms race. This paper challenges such assumptions by reexamining traditional security threats through the lens of realist theory. Drawing on offensive and defensive realism, it argues that China's capabilities and revisionist intentions—while significant—do not warrant the level of alarm often portrayed. Regional capability balances, geographic buffers, and the high costs of territorial aggression constrain China's ability to project traditional military power. Moreover, China's increasing reliance on gray-zone tactics and geoeconomic tools suggests a strategic shift away from direct military confrontation. Empirical analysis reveals that East Asian states' military responses remain moderate, especially when compared globally. Taken together, this study offers a more calibrated understanding of East Asia's evolving security landscape.

Keywords: East Asia, East Asia security, defensive realism, offensive realism, Chinese gray-zone tactics

Author

Yuji Idomoto
Postdoctoral Scholar, School of Global Policy and Strategy, UCSD
Email: yidomoto@ucsd.edu

Suggested Citation

Idomoto, Yuji. 2025. *Capabilities, Costs, and Constraints: A Realist Reassessment of China's Rise in East Asia*. IGCC Working Paper No 9.
escholarship.org/uc/item/5g2051pg

Introduction

China's rapid economic and military rise, its territorial disputes with nearly all of its neighbors, and its increasingly assertive posture have led many scholars to argue that Beijing poses a substantial security threat to East Asia.[1] Based on this assessment, it is often claimed that East Asian states have been intensifying their military efforts to counterbalance China's growing power.[2] Some analysts even warn that such military buildups could escalate into a full-fledged arms race, further destabilizing the regional security environment.[3]

These concerns are rooted in the realist tradition, which views rising powers as inherent challenges to the status quo. According to realist theory, external threats—particularly traditional military threats—are shaped by states' capabilities and intentions. Because rising powers, such as China, by definition expand their capabilities and are likely to begin to challenge the status quo, realists generally regard China's ascent as threatening. As one realist scholar notes, "with regard to the consequences of China's rise, the realist default setting must be pessimistic."[4] Given China's expanding power and its assertive actions over territorial disputes, realist logic appears to suggest that East Asian states should feel threatened and be rapidly expanding their military capabilities in response.

Recent trends in defense spending seem to support this view. On average, military expenditures in East Asia rose by nearly 8 percent between 2023 and 2024, with states such as Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam actively enhancing their maritime

---

1 Michael Beckley, "Enemies of My Enemy: How Fear of China Is Forging a New World Order," Foreign Affairs, April 2022, 74; Stephen M. Walt, "Rising Powers and the Risks of War: A Realist View of Sino-American Relations," in *Will China's Rise Be Peaceful?: The Rise of a Great Power in Theory, History, Politics , and the Future*, ed. Asle Toje (Oxford University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190675387.003.0002; Chua Mui Hoong, "We're Living in the Most Dangerous Region in the World," *The Straits Times* (Singapore), September 28, 2014, https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/were-living-in-the-most-dangerous-region-in-the-world.

2 John. J. Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 4 (2010): 381–96, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poq016; Adam P. Liff and G. John Ikenberry, "Racing toward Tragedy?: China's Rise, Military Competition in the Asia Pacific, and the Security Dilemma," *International Security* 39, no. 2 (2014): 52–91, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00176; Jeff M Smith, ed., Asia's Quest for Balance: China's Rise and Balancing in the Indo-Pacific (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); Stephen M. Walt, "Hedging on Hegemony: The Realist Debate over How to Respond to China," *International Security* 49, no. 4 (2025): 370, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00508.

3 Andrew T. H. Tan, "Arms Racing in East Asia," in *Security and Conflict in East Asia*, ed. Andrew T. H. Tan (Routledge, 2015), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315850344-3; Desmond Ball et al., *Asia's New Geopolitics: Military Power and Regional Order* (Routledge, 2021), 55, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003255994; Andrew Sharp, "Asia's Arms Race: China Spurs Military Spending Spree," Nikkei Asia, February 23, 2022, https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Big-Story/Asia-s-arms-race-China-spurs-military-spending-spree.

4 Jonathan Kirshner, "The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Classical Realism and the Rise of China," *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 1 (2010): 59, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066110373949.

capabilities in response to China's assertive behavior in the East and South China Seas.[5] At first glance, these developments appear to confirm the above expectation that China's rise is driving a destabilizing regional arms buildup.

This paper challenges that conclusion, arguing that prevailing accounts of East Asia's security dynamics misrepresent the scope of the Chinese threat and the magnitude of East Asian states' military response. A strict application of realist logic suggests that the level of traditional security threat—defined here as a military threat to national survival—has not escalated to the extent often assumed. Accordingly, the military responses of East Asian states are neither, nor need they be, as extraordinary as commonly portrayed. To substantiate this claim, I examine two principal strands of realism: offensive realism and defensive realism. Offensive realists emphasize that capabilities alone generate threat perceptions, whereas defensive realists contend that revisionist intentions constitute a critical additional factor.[6] Taken together, both perspectives consistently indicate that the level of traditional security threat in East Asia remains moderate.

First, I construct a dataset that incorporates key insights from offensive realism regarding capabilities—especially relative capabilities and geographic features—and demonstrate that, through regional comparison, the balance of power between China and its neighbors is less dire than often portrayed. East Asian states possess substantial economic and military resources, and their geographic separation from China reduces the potency of Beijing's power projection. Second, from a defensive realist perspective, China's revisionist intentions are constrained by the rising costs of territorial aggression, shaped by factors such as the prevalence of free trade and the norm of territorial integrity. These constraints make outright military expansion an unlikely means for Beijing to enhance its influence. I draw on multiple sources on China's territorial claims and actions—including the Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs) dataset and the "South China Sea Incident Tracker" compiled by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)—to demonstrate that its territorial claims have not expanded during its rise and that its behavior has centered on consolidating maritime claims and exerting influence through nontraditional means rather than seizing the territory of other states.

Realism assumes that as states' capabilities grow, they will seek to expand their influence. Yet the high costs and geographic constraints of territorial aggression, especially for China, limit its utility as a means of influence. Consequently, according to realist perspectives, China should pursue alternative instruments of power projection

---

5 Xiao Liang et al., *Trends in World Military Expenditure*, 2024, SIPRI Fact Sheet (SIPRI, 2025), https://www.sipri.org/publications/2025/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-world-military-expenditure-2024.

6 Steven E. Lobell, "Structural Realism/Offensive and Defensive Realism," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (2010), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.304.

than military confrontation. In fact, China exemplifies this logic: rather than direct military confrontation, it increasingly relies on gray-zone activities and nontraditional security tools, such as economic coercion and diplomatic maneuvering, to expand its international influence.[7] As Oriana Skylar Mastro observes, in Asia "the most likely threat from China is not one of invasion and occupation," but rather the use of its economy as a tool of statecraft.[8] Because traditional military threats have not risen significantly, and gray-zone activities and nontraditional security tools do not directly trigger heightened military responses, realist theories should anticipate that East Asian states' military efforts remain moderate. Indeed, this paper demonstrates that although regional defense budgets may appear high, closer analysis reveals that East Asia's military efforts are restrained relative to global patterns.

To be sure, the argument of this paper is that China's traditional military threat is constrained, but not absent. China's vast economy, large military, and unresolved territorial disputes still make it the most serious traditional security concern in East Asia. The issue is not whether China represents the region's greatest threat, but rather the magnitude of that threat. In this respect, regional capabilities, geographic buffers, and the high costs of aggression render China's rise less acute in traditional military terms than often assumed. The more pressing challenge lies in China's increasing reliance on non-traditional and gray-zone strategies, which complicate regional security without necessarily driving an arms race.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section surveys realist theories of traditional security threats and outlines how such threats can be assessed in East Asia and other regions in terms of capabilities and intentions. Second, I evaluate the level of traditional security threat in East Asia by examining the balance of capabilities and geographic factors in comparative perspective. Third, I analyze China's revisionist intentions by considering the costs of territorial aggression alongside its claims and behavior in disputed areas. Fourth, I assess military efforts in East Asia, showing that they remain relatively restrained compared to other regions. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the implications for the future of East Asian security.

---

[7] James Reilly, "Geoeconomics in Chinese Foreign Policy," in *War by Other Means*, ed. Robert D. Blackwill and Jennifer M. Harris (Harvard University Press, 2016).

[8] Oriana Skylar Mastro, *Upstart : How China Became a Great Power* (Oxford University Press, 2024), 198.

1. Realism and Traditional Security Threat

Realists generally agree that the degree of traditional security threat depends on adversaries' capabilities and revisionist intentions.[9] Other things being equal, the more powerful and revisionist potential adversaries become, the more threatening they are to their neighbors.

Although realism generally emphasizes capabilities as a source of threat, offensive realism, an influential school of realism, focuses almost exclusively on the capabilities of potential adversaries as an indicator of threat. According to offensive realists, since potential adversaries' intentions are inherently difficult to discern, states must focus on potential adversaries' capabilities when assessing threats.[10] For example, John Mearsheimer, a prominent offensive realist, points out that "[c]apabilities … determine whether or not a rival state is a threat."[11] Although intentions are unknowable, offensive realists warn of the danger of rising powers' increasingly revisionist actions. Robert Gilpin famously argued that rising powers may be more inclined to change the status quo because their increasing capabilities enable them to implement the revisionist agenda they could not have done before.[12] Scholars who emphasize the threats posed by rising powers widely agree that states become more revisionist as their capabilities grow.[13] This is why, according to them, rising powers, such as China, tend to pose a significant security threat to their neighbors due to their rapidly increasing capabilities.[14]

Unlike offensive realists, defensive realists—another major strand of realist theory—argue that states can meaningfully assess the revisionist intentions of others and plan their military policy accordingly.[15] Rather than assuming that states inevitably become more revisionist as their capabilities grow, defensive realists emphasize the importance of evaluating whether potential adversaries are status quo or revisionist powers and to

---

9 J. David Singer, "Threat-Perception and the Armament-Tension Dilemma," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 2, no. 1 (1958): 90–105, https://doi.org/10.1177/002200275800200110; Stephen M. Walt, The Origins of Alliance (Cornell University Press, 1987); Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

10 Sebastian Rosato, "The Inscrutable Intentions of Great Powers," *International Security* 39, no. 3 (2015): 87, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00190.

11 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politic*s, Updated Edition. (WW Norton, 2014), 45, 384.

12 Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

13 On this point, see Jennifer Lind, "Back to Bipolarity: How China's Rise Transformed the Balance of Power," *International Security* 49, no. 2 (2024): 39, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00494.

14 Sebastian Rosato, *Intentions in Great Power Politics: Uncertainty and the Roots of Conflic*t (Yale University Press, 2021), 36–40, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1k03gb9.

15 Charles L. Glaser et al., "Can Great Powers Discern Intentions?," *International Security* 40, no. 3 (2015): 197–202; Walt, "Hedging on Hegemony: The Realist Debate over How to Respond to China," 46.

what extent.[16] Revisionist intentions may concern a range of issues, including economic and political agendas; however, this analysis concentrates on territorial revisionism, because disputes over territory are historically the most frequent cause of war and thus a central component of traditional security threats.[17] As Douglas Gilber demonstrates, territorial threats exert a particularly strong influence on states' military efforts, unlike other forms of threat such as economic competition.[18] When a state becomes increasingly "greedy" for additional territory, other states are likely to perceive a heightened threat and respond with greater military investment to deter aggression, because the military remains the primary means of defending territory.[19] Territorial revisionism, therefore, is directly relevant to the military dynamics of East Asia.

China's impressive rise, combined with its territorial disputes with nearly all of its neighbors, seems to suggest—under both strands of realist theory—that its ascent poses a significant traditional security threat to East Asian states. Yet, a closer examination of the regional dynamics provides reasons to question whether such a conclusion is fully warranted.

Realist Perspective on Capabilities in East Asia

In terms of traditional threat based on capabilities, the situation in East Asia may not be as dire as it initially appears when examined through three key realist perspectives on capabilities. First, a central tenet of both offensive and defensive realist theories is that the traditional security threat depends not on adversaries' absolute capabilities but on their relative capabilities compared to other states.[20] In other words, the threat posed by rising powers such as China is a function of both their own capabilities and those of surrounding states. To illustrate, consider a simple example: if State *A*'s capability rises to 100 while its neighbor State *B*'s is only 5, then *A* poses a relative threat of 100/5 = 20 to *B*. However, if State *B*'s capability is 50 instead of 5, then *A* poses only a relative threat of 2. Thus, the first element of traditional threat based on capabilities is the extent to which rising powers outpace their neighbors in relative strength.

---

16 David M. Edelstein, "Managing Uncertainty: Beliefs about Intentions and the Rise of Great Powers," *Security Studies* 12, no. 1 (2002): 1–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410212120002; Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics*.

17 John A. Vasquez, *The War Puzzle Revisited* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), Cambridge Core, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511627224; Monica Duffy Toft, "Territory and War," *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 185–98, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343313515695.

18 Douglas M. Gibler, *The Territorial Peace: Borders, State Development, and International Conflict* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), chap. 3, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139060233.

19 Glaser, Rational Theory of International Politics, 46; James D. Fearon, "Cooperation, Conflict, and the Costs of Anarchy," *International Organization* 72, no. 3 (2018): 537, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818318000115.

20 Lobell, "Structural Realism/Offensive and Defensive Realism."

Second, the effect of capabilities is also shaped by geography. Realist scholars have long recognized that geographical distance diminishes the impact of relative power.[21] When capability ratios are identical, the influence of relative capabilities between contiguous states is more pronounced than between states separated by greater distances. The farther rising powers are from their neighbors, the less threatening they appear. Accordingly, the traditional threat that rising powers pose is contingent not only on the capabilities of neighboring states but also on their geographic proximity and environment.

Besides, both offensive and defensive realists emphasize the importance of water when assessing the potency of capability balances. For example, Mearsheimer underscores that water constitutes a forbidding barrier to states' power-projection capabilities.[22] Similarly, Charles Glaser observes that two states separated by an ocean "are better able to defend against each other because distance and water make attack more difficult" than two states sharing a land border.[23] Therefore, other things being equal, the fewer land borders a state has with neighboring countries, the less it needs to invest in its military for defense.

Third, states must consider not only the capabilities of one particular power but also those of other potential adversaries. When planning their defense strategies, they cannot afford the luxury of focusing on a single state.[24] Therefore, in order to gauge the impact of rising powers' capabilities on the level of traditional threats faced by their neighbors, it is necessary to assess capability ratios across all potential adversaries, rather than concentrating solely on one rising power.

Given this understanding, there are reasons to doubt whether the increase in China's economic or military capabilities significantly alters the traditional threat environment in East Asia. First, China's immediate neighbors are themselves highly capable.[25] Japan is the fourth-largest economy in the world, while South Korea and Taiwan also possess substantial economic strength.

---

[21] Kenneth E. Boulding, *Conflict and Defense; a General Theory*. (Harper, 1962); Walt, The Origins of Alliance, 23–24; Bruce M. Russett, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (Norton, 2001), 87; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

[22] Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 114–28.

[23] Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics*, 43.

[24] Keir A. Lieber, "Mission Impossible: Measuring the Offense-Defense Balance with Military Net Assessment," *Security Studies* 20, no. 3 (2011): 458, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2011.599193.

[25] Walt, "Hedging on Hegemony: The Realist Debate over How to Respond to China," 62.

In military terms, Japan and South Korea rank among the top global powers in defense expenditure, and Taiwan placed within the top 20 in 2021.[26] Second, most East Asian states are separated from China by sea. These geographic features not only diminish the effect of China's capabilities due to distance but also impose severe constraints on its power-projection capacity. Moreover, China's smaller neighbors—such as many Southeast Asian states—are located even farther away, which further mitigates the relative capability gap between them and China.

Realist Perspective on Territorial Revisionism in East Asia

Regarding territorial revisionism, the logic of both offensive and defensive realism suggests that the extent of China's revisionism may not be as severe as often assumed. Offensive realists contend that states' intentions are ultimately unknowable; thus, they interpret revisionism primarily as a function of capabilities. Yet, as discussed earlier, in East Asia the influence of China's capabilities is constrained by both the strength of its neighbors and by geographic factors. Consequently, the scope of China's territorial revisionism appears more limited than conventional expectations suggest.

Meanwhile, defensive realists argue that rising capabilities do not automatically translate into greater revisionism. Instead, the likelihood of revisionist behavior hinges on a cost-benefit calculation.[27] If expanding capabilities make the benefits of acquiring additional territory outweigh the expected costs, states may pursue more revisionist policies. Conversely, if the costs remain prohibitive, increased capabilities alone do not necessarily lead to heightened territorial ambitions. This cost-benefit analysis is what Robert Jervis calls "basic intentions" of states.[28]

On this point, several recent studies demonstrate that the costs of territorial expansion have risen significantly, while the benefits have declined—largely due to the rise of nationalism, the territorial integrity norm, and the prevalence of free trade.[29]

---

[26] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database," 2025, https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex.

[27] Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1976), 50–54; Robert Powell, In the *Shadow of Power: States and Strategies in International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 69–73, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691213989.

[28] Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 50.

[29] Mark W. Zacher, "The Territorial Integrity Norm: International Boundaries and the Use of Force," International Organization 55, no. 2 (2001): 215–50, https://doi.org/10.1162/00208180151140568; Tanisha M. Fazal, *State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexatio*n. (University Press, 2007); Gary Goertz et al., *The Puzzle of Peace: The Evolution of Peace in the International System* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Kenneth A. Schultz and Henk E. Goemans, "Aims, Claims, and the Bargaining Model of War," *International Theory* 11, no. 3 (2019): 344–74, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971919000071.

In other words, territorial expansion is no longer beneficial for most states.[30] When states attempt to seize territory by force, they are likely to incur costs from fierce local resistance, economic sanctions, lost trade opportunities, and hostile diplomatic and military responses from other states—on top of the inherent costs of fighting and governing a resistant population. Andrew Coe and Jonathan Markowitz argue that under the territorial integrity norm, expansion does not pay even for less productive states, much less for productive, trade-oriented countries such as the United States.[31] Moreover, as economies have become increasingly trade-oriented and less dependent on land-based resources, the benefits of territorial conquest have diminished further compared to those of sustaining and deepening trading relationships with other states.[32]

With the rising costs and diminishing benefits of territorial aggression, the logic of defensive realism suggests that contemporary rising powers, including China, are unlikely to pursue territorial conquest even as their capabilities expand. Indeed, territorial conquests have declined sharply since 1945 and have been virtually nonexistent since 1975, despite fluctuations in states' relative power.[33] Moreover, since 1945, states have generally refrained from expanding their territorial claims even when enjoying favorable power shifts against their neighbors—a pattern likely explained by the prohibitive costs of annexing and governing foreign territory.[34]

Moreover, when states have engaged in territorial aggression since 1945, they have typically targeted "low-value" areas—small, uninhabited, and ungarrisoned territories—precisely to avoid the high costs of war.[35] If disputed territories do not involve vital security interests, states are unlikely to escalate militarily over such limited stakes. Although war over non-vital territory cannot be entirely ruled out,[36] Kenneth Schultz and Hein Goemans demonstrate that states are significantly more likely to resolve

---

30 Although President Trump's recent expressions on taking territories of other states may undermine the strength of the territorial integrity norm, the norm would not necessarily wither soon. See Tanisha M. Fazal, "Conquest Is Back," *Foreign Affairs*, March 21, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/conquest-back.

31 Andrew J. Coe and Jonathan N. Markowitz, "Crude Calculations: Productivity and the Profitability of Conquest," *International Organization*, June 9, 2021, 1–29, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818321000291.

32 Richard N. Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Trading State: Commerce and Conquest in the Modern World* (Basic Books, 1986); Jonathan N. Markowitz et al., "Productive Pacifists: The Rise of Production-Oriented States and Decline of Profit-Motivated Conquest," *International Studies Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2020): 558–72, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaa045.

33 Zacher, "The Territorial Integrity Norm"; Fazal, *State Death*, chap. 7; Goertz et al., *The Puzzle of Peace*.

34 Schultz and Goemans, "Aims, Claims, and the Bargaining Model of War," 363–67.

35 Dan Altman, "The Evolution of Territorial Conquest After 1945 and the Limits of the Territorial Integrity Norm," *International Organization* 74, no. 3 (2020): 490–522, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000119.

36 Michael E. O'Hanlon, *The Senkaku Paradox : Risking Great Power War over Small Stakes* (Brookings Institution Press, 2019).

disputes peacefully when only small, less strategic areas are at stake, as opposed to larger or more strategically important territories.[37]

Recent scholarship in international relations highlights that the costs of territorial aggression have risen substantially while its benefits have declined. From a defensive realist perspective, this implies that rising powers—such as China—are unlikely to pursue territorial expansion as a primary means of enhancing international influence. Moreover, when states do engage in territorial disputes, they are more likely to confine them to peripheral areas that do not involve vital security interests, thereby avoiding the high risks and costs of major war.

One implication of the high costs of territorial aggression is that rising powers such as China have shifted their focus from outright conquest to gray-zone activities and geoeconomic tools—forms of non-territorial, nonmilitary coercion used to advance national interests. Gray-zone activities are typically defined as coercive measures that go beyond routine economic and diplomatic practices but remain below the threshold of kinetic military force. Scholars argue that China's growing reliance on both geoeconomic instruments and gray-zone tactics reflects a deliberate strategy to expand its influence while avoiding the risks and costs of open conflict.[38] Because they are nonmilitary and non-territorial in character, gray-zone activities and geoeconomic statecraft are unlikely to trigger significant military buildups or intense arming responses from other states.[39]

The next two sections will empirically examine these theoretical arguments. Specifically, they will assess whether the balance of capabilities in East Asia is indeed less alarming than often portrayed, and whether China's actions, namely territorial claims and actions over disputes, align with these theoretical expectations.

---

[37] Schultz and Goemans, "Aims, Claims, and the Bargaining Model of War," 367–68.

[38] Bonny Lin et al., *A New Framework for Understanding and Countering China's Gray Zone Tactics* (RAND Corporation, 2022), 4, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA594-1.html; Reilly, "Geoeconomics in Chinese Foreign Policy"; Ketian Zhang, *China's Gambit: The Calculus of Coercion* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009423816.

[39] Michael Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (US Army War College Press, 2015), https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/428; Robert D. Blackwill and Jennifer M. Harris, "What Is Geoeconomics?," in *War by Other Means, Geoeconomics and Statecraft* (Harvard University Press, 2016), JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1c84cr7.5.

2. Threat Based on Capabilities

This section examines traditional security threats through the lens of capabilities to assess whether the level of threat in East Asia has increased relative to other regions. To do so, I quantitatively analyze regional threat levels from the 1970s to the present. Beginning in the 1970s allows us to trace how East Asia's threat environment has evolved from the Cold War era to the period of China's rise. A cross-regional comparison is essential: while focusing solely on East Asia can reveal whether its threat level is rising or falling, it does not indicate whether that level is relatively high or low or whether China's rise has produced a distinctive shift. For instance, East Asia's threat level may have declined since the 1970s, but if other regions' threat levels declined more sharply and now remain much lower, East Asia's relative threat level should still be considered high and potentially exceptional. Thus, regional comparison provides a necessary benchmark for evaluating the impact of China's rise on East Asia's security environment.

Each state's threat level is calculated on the basis of the configuration provided in the *potential threat* dataset.[40] The measure is defined as the sum of capability ratios, weighted by the loss-of-strength gradient, between each state *i* and all opponent states *j* with incompatible interests in year *t*. Following the original dataset, interest compatibility is defined such that if both states in a dyad have a Polity2 score of 6 or higher (a.k.a., democratic dyad), they are considered to share compatible preferences and thus pose no threat to one another. I retain this factor to avoid implausible cases—for example, South Korea perceiving Taiwan as a threat. For Polity2 scores, I rely on the Polity5 dataset, which extends through 2018.[41] The loss-of-strength gradient is operationalized using the distance between dyad capital cities, derived from Kristian Gleditsch's dataset.[42] This formulation incorporates key realist perspectives on capabilities, including relative power balances, geographic distance, and exposure to multiple potential opponents. To determine the average potential threat in each region, I first calculate the threat level faced by each state and then take the mean of these values across all states within the region.

To calculate the capability ratio, I incorporate both economic and military capabilities to ensure robustness. Following the dataset's original operationalization, I use surplus domestic product (SDP) as the measure of relative economic capability. SDP is derived by subtracting subsistence costs—the resources a population must consume to

---

40 Therese Anders et al., "Bread Before Guns or Butter: Introducing Surplus Domestic Product (SDP)," *International Studies Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2020): 392–405, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaa013.

41 Monty G Marshall and Ted Robert Gurr, *POLITY5. Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800-2018: Dataset Users' Manual* (Center for Systemic Peace, 2020), 85.

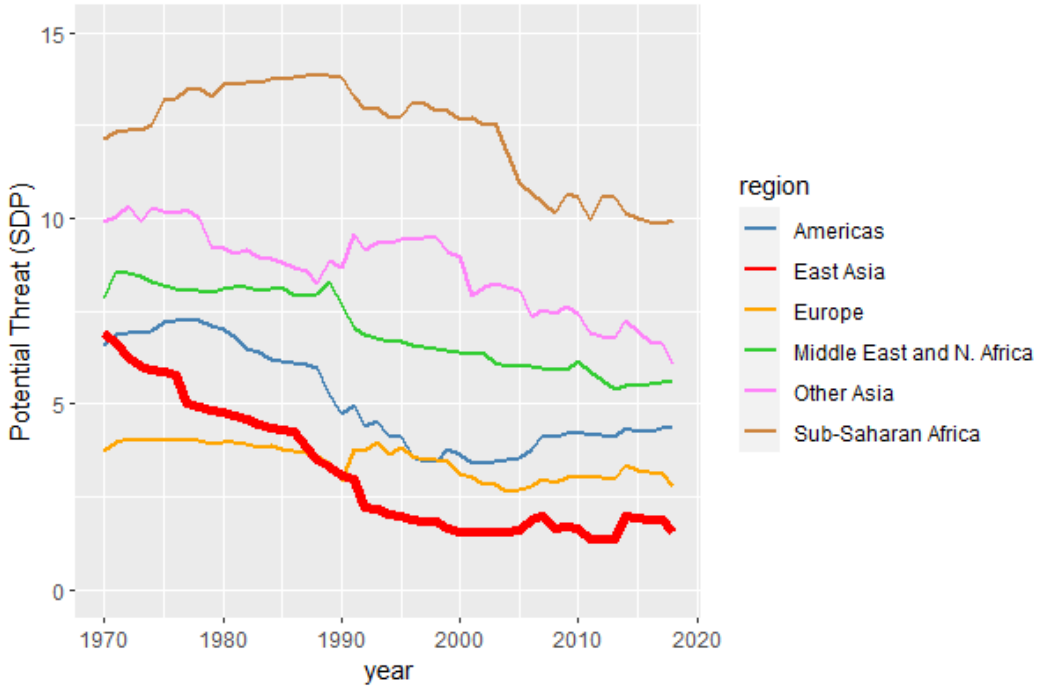
42 Available at http://ksgleditsch.com/index.html, accessed June 3, 2023. For how distance penalizes the capability ratio, see Therese Anders et al., "Bread Before Guns or Butter: Introducing Surplus Domestic Product (SDP)," *International Studies Quarterly*: 398, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaa013.

survive—from gross domestic product (GDP).[43] For military capabilities, I rely on the Material Military Power (MMP) indicator, which captures comprehensive military strength across nuclear, missile, aerial, naval, and land domains.[44] As a robustness check, Appendix 1 also reports results using GDP in place of SDP and military expenditure in place of MMP.

For the purposes of regional comparison, I made a slight modification to the five regional categories used by the Correlates of War (COW) project—Asia, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, the Americas, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Specifically, I divided COW's "Asia" group into "East Asia" and "Other Asia." The East Asia category includes ten actors frequently identified as either most threatened by China or as potential members of a "counter-coalition" against it: Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Australia.[45]

Results

Figure 1. Level of the Potential Threat in each Region Measured in the SDP (1970–2018)



[43] For details, see Anders et al., "Bread Before Guns or Butter," 2020.

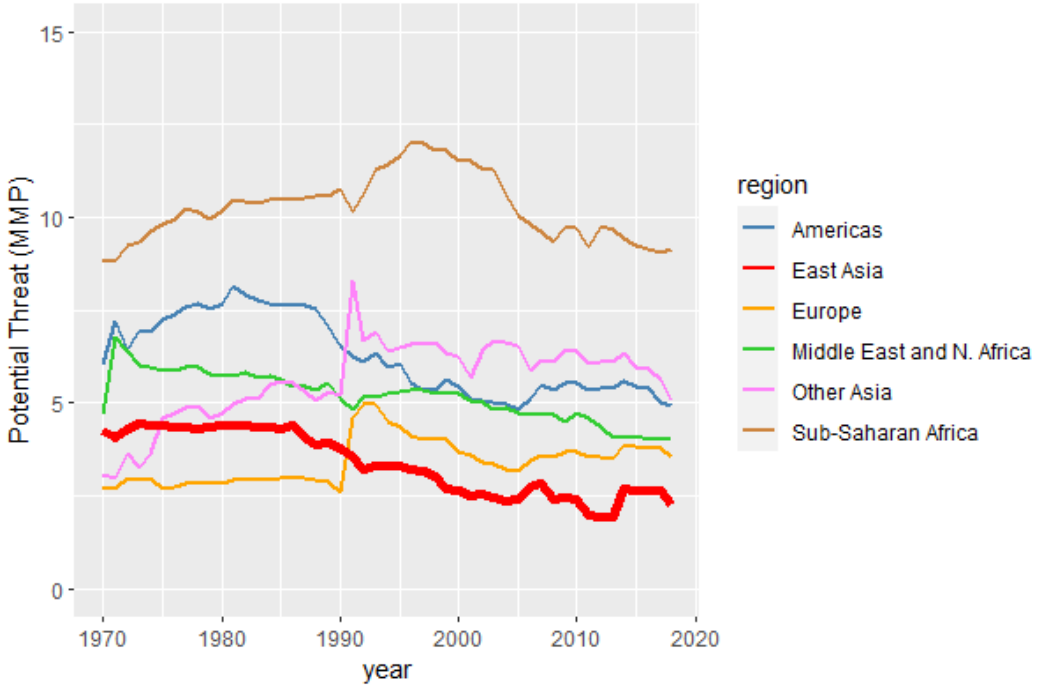
[44] Mark Souva, "Material Military Power: A Country-Year Measure of Military Power, 1865–2019," *Journal of Peace Research 60, no. 6 (2023): 1002–9, https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433221112970.*

[45] See, for example, Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 361–62; Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 318; Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (Yale University Press, 2021), 111–12.

Using the aforementioned operationalization, I begin by examining potential threat levels in the balance of economic capabilities. Figure 1 reports the average potential threat, measured by SDP, across regions. In East Asia, the threat level derived from relative economic capabilities has steadily declined since the Cold War and now remains lower than in other regions. This pattern suggests that despite China's remarkable economic growth, its rise has not significantly increased the overall threat level in East Asia.

Turning to military capabilities, Figure 2 reveals a similar pattern. East Asia's potential threat level in military terms has also declined since 1970 and is again the lowest among regions. Robustness checks using GDP and military expenditure, reported in Appendix 1, confirm that these findings are not dependent on the choice of specific economic or military indicators.

Figure 2. Level of the Potential Threat in each Region Measured in the MMP (1970–2019)



Although the precise values in the figures may vary slightly depending on the indicators employed or the method used to calculate distance, the overall trends are clear. When measured in terms of capabilities, the threat levels faced by East Asian states are (1) declining since the end of the Cold War and (2) consistently lower than those observed in most other regions. These findings reinforce the theoretical discussion above: East Asian states are uniquely separated from one another by sea, which reduces capability-based threats compared to regions with contiguous land borders. Moreover, a rising China—surrounded by relatively capable and geographically distant neighbors—does not substantially elevate East Asia's overall threat environment. By contrast, threat levels remain high in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, where states are closely clustered.

Two additional factors merit discussion before concluding the analysis of traditional threats based on China's capabilities. The first is interest compatibility, which is distinct from states' material capabilities. Strictly speaking, this means the results above do not represent threat levels derived solely from capabilities. I make two points here. First, states often differentiate between the capabilities of friendly and potentially hostile actors, even when assessing threats primarily in material terms.[46] The United States, for example, may regard Russia's capabilities as potentially threatening but not Britain's. Similarly, as discussed earlier, it is difficult to conceive that South Korea views Taiwan's capabilities as a potential threat. Incorporating interest compatibility, therefore, should not significantly distort how states perceive their threat environment. Second, I present results without interest compatibility in Appendix 1, relying only on capabilities and geographic distance. These results reveal a similar pattern: East Asia's threat level remains lower than that of most other regions, with no evidence of a rapid increase. Taken together, the findings suggest that if we assume, as offensive realists do, that states' intentions are unknowable and that capabilities alone define external threats, East Asia should be considered one of the most benign regions in the world.

Additionally, Appendix 1 reports results using an alternative measure of interest compatibility—strategic rivalry.[47] In this formulation, I calculate traditional threat levels based on the capabilities of states identified as rivals in territorial disputes and other conflicts. The findings again show that East Asia's threat level is lower than that of most other regions and therefore cannot be considered notably high.

---

[46] Robert Jervis, "Perceiving and Coping with Threat," in *Psychology and Deterrence*, ed. Robert Jervis et al. (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 14.

[47] The definition and data of strategic rivalry are from William R. Thompson et al., *Analyzing Strategic Rivalries in World Politics: Types of Rivalry, Regional Variation, and Escalation/De-Escalation* (Springer Singapore, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-6671-1.

The second point concerns the offense-defense balance (ODB), which is closely related to the effects of capability distributions. Scholars have long argued that when offense holds the advantage over defense, the impact of states' capabilities becomes more pronounced.[48] Thus, omitting ODB may introduce bias into the results in figures 1 and 2. It is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate each state's ODB or to compare it across regions, as scholars continue to debate both how to measure ODB and whether it can be meaningfully measured at all.[49] Nevertheless, I contend that the concept of ODB is unlikely to invalidate or significantly alter the findings presented here. On the contrary, it can reinforce them.

Technology and geography are generally regarded as two of the most important factors shaping ODB.[50] Scholars broadly agree that since the end of World War II, technological developments have tended to favor defense over offense, largely due to the proliferation of affordable firepower that constrains military mobility.[51] Because such technology is, in principle, accessible to all states—particularly inexpensive weapons like firearms—it is considered a "systemic variable" of ODB, implying that regions share broadly similar technological conditions.[52] Indeed, firepower systems such as anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles are widely available, even in developing countries.[53] Consequently, the technological dimension of the ODB is unlikely to alter the results presented earlier.

---

48 Powell, *In the Shadow of Power; Glaser, Rational Theory of International Politics*; Fearon, "Cooperation, Conflict, and the Costs of Anarchy."

49 For an overview of such discussions, see Michael E. Brown et al., *Offense, Defense, and War: An International Security Reader* (MIT Press, 2004); Tang Shiping, "Offence-Defence Theory: Towards a Definitive Understanding," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 2 (2010): 213–60, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poq004.

50 Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 194–99, JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/2009958; James D. Fearon, "The Offense-Defense Blance and War since 1648," Working Paper, April 8, 1997, 40; Charles L. Glaser and Chaim Kaufmann, "What Is the Offense-Defense Balance and Can We Measure It?," *International Security* 22, no. 4 (1998): 44–82, https://doi.org/10.2307/2539240; Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics*, 43.

51 Stephen van Evera, "Offense, Defense, and the Causes of War," *International Security* 22, no. 4 (1998): 5–43, https://doi.org/10.2307/2539239; Keir A. Lieber, "Grasping the Technological Peace: The Offense-Defense Balance and International Security," *International Security* 25, no. 1 (2000): 71–104; Yoav Gortzak et al., "Offense-Defense Theory: An Empirical Assessment," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 1 (2005): 67–89, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002704271280.

52 Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Offense-Defense Theory and Its Critics," *Security Studies* 4, no. 4 (1995): 668, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636419509347600.

53 van Evera, "Offense, Defense, and the Causes of War," 20.

While technology may not differentiate among regions, geography does. As previously noted, most East Asian states are separated from China—and from one another—by sea. In this sense, East Asia is a particularly defense-dominant region, making it difficult for China to project power over its neighbors.[54] Jennifer Lind, for example, argues that China would face significant challenges in seizing islands controlled by other states in the East and South China Seas, given the maritime barriers between those theaters and the Chinese mainland.[55] To occupy and maintain such islands, China would need to sustain large naval and air forces, which would be costly and reduce the likelihood of successful conquest.[56] Moreover, the deployment of sizable naval and air assets would increase their detectability, while defenders on land possess greater surveillance and strike capabilities to counter them.[57] Thus, the geographical dimension of the ODB reinforces—rather than undermines—the conclusion that East Asia's traditional security threat level is comparatively low.

Of course, ODB includes factors beyond technology and geography, such as nationalism.[58] However, because the two primary variables of ODB are either uninfluential or supportive of the observations above, omitting ODB is unlikely to weaken this paper's argument.

---

[54] Jennifer Lind and Thomas J. Christensen, "Spirals, Security, and Stability in East Asia," *International Security* (CAMBRIDGE) 24, no. 4 (2000): 190–200, https://doi.org/10.1162/016228800560354; Jennifer Lind, "Geography and the Security Dilemma in Asia," in *The Oxford Handbook of the International Relations of Asia*, ed. Saadia Pekkanen et al. (Oxford University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199916245.013.0037; Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion," International Security 42, no. 2 (2017): 78–119, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00294; Eugene Gholz et al., "Defensive Defense: A Better Way to Protect US Allies in Asia," The Washington Quarterly 42, no. 4 (2019): 171–89, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1693103.

[55] Lind, "Geography and the Security Dilemma in Asia."

[56] Lind, "Geography and the Security Dilemma in Asia"; Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia," 99, 109.

[57] Gholz et al., "Defensive Defense," 178.

[58] Glaser and Kaufmann, "What Is the Offense-Defense Balance and Can We Measure It?," 46.

3. Threat Based on Revisionist Intentions

Theoretical reasoning of defensive realism suggests that rising powers do not increase their territorial revisionism and instead focus on non-territorial issues and gray-zone activities. Is China conforming to the theoretical expectations?

On this point, many scholars of East Asian security and regional policymakers concur with the earlier theoretical discussions regarding China's "basic intention" in the cost-benefit analysis of territorial revisionism: the costs of territorial aggression in East Asia have become prohibitively high. Given China's deep dependence on trade, Beijing has strong incentives to avoid disrupting relations with its neighbors through territorial aggression.[59] Taylor Fravel, with detailed analyses of the possible costs and benefits of territorial expansion by China, concludes as follows:

> the benefits of expansion are limited, and China's ability to capture them is weak. When weighed against the high and certain costs of conflict…, the likelihood of expansion is low.[60]

Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth also argue that China's territorial revisionism is constrained by the diminishing returns of acquiring territory and by the high costs that would be imposed by the United States and the broader international community.[61]

Policymakers in East Asia also recognize this logic. For example, Singapore's Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen remarked in 2019, with reference to territorial disputes in the region, as follows:

> all the parties involved—the claimant states and the international community—recognize that the price is too high and the issues in the South China Sea do not warrant an actual physical confrontation.[62]

---

[59] Thomas J. Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 49; Zhen Han and T. V. Paul, "China's Rise and Balance of Power Politics," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 13, no. 1 (2020): 21–24, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poz018.

[60] M. Taylor Fravel, "International Relations Theory and China's Rise: Assessing China's Potential for Territorial Expansion," *International Studies Review* 12, no. 4 (2010): 526.

[61] Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Myth of Multipolarity," *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 3 (2023): 76–91.

[62] Shamil Shams, "Cost of Conflict in South China Sea 'Too High,'" Deutsche Welle, February 18, 2019, https://www.dw.com/en/singapore-defense-minister-cost-of-conflict-in-south-china-sea-too-high/a-47568024.

Further, Tsai Ing-wen, then president of Taiwan, remarked in late 2023 that "this is not a time for [China] to consider a major invasion of Taiwan" because Chinese leaders are overwhelmed by internal challenges and because "the international community has made it loud and clear that war is not an option."[63] These studies and remarks align with defensive realists' expectation that the probability of territorial aggression is low, given the diminishing returns and enormous costs involved, including the likelihood of international sanctions. Thus, the previous theoretical discussions appear directly applicable to China and East Asia.

In addition to the basic cost-benefit analysis of China's territorial revisionism, it is necessary to examine China's behavior—specifically its territorial claims and actions in disputed areas—to further assess its revisionist intentions. Defensive realists emphasize that states can revise their judgments about others' intentions based on observed actions.[64] I therefore begin with China's territorial claims: How extensive are its claims in East Asia, and are they expanding?

For this purpose, Schultz's dataset of territorial claims, which employs geospatial methods to measure the size of disputed territories, provides a useful starting point.[65] It records China's claims to the Senkaku Islands against Japan and the Spratly Islands against Vietnam. However, from the perspective of East Asian states, this dataset may not fully capture the scope of disputes, as it omits other contested areas in the South China Sea.[66] The difficulty lies less with the dataset itself than with the ambiguous nature of China's claims. Although Beijing asserts sovereignty over the vast majority of the South China Sea through its "nine-dash line," the Chinese government has not clarified whether this encompasses all of the land features within that area. This ambiguity makes it difficult to determine precisely what China claims.[67] To address this limitation, I will proceed on the assumption that China claims all land features encompassed by the nine-dash line, and then analyze the data on territorial size accordingly—while acknowledging that this assumption risks overestimating the extent of China's claims.

Table 1 shows the overview of China's territorial claims in East Asia.

---

63 Ing-wen Tsai, "Taiwan's President on the Threat of a Chinese Invasion," *The New York Times Events*, November 29, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/events/dealbook-summit-2023/sessions/tsai-ing-wen.

64 Glaser et al., "Can Great Powers Discern Intentions?," 200–202.

65 Kenneth A. Schultz, "Mapping Interstate Territorial Conflict: A New Data Set and Applications," *Journal of Conflict Resolution 61, no. 7 (2017): 1565–90, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715620470.*

66 For example, according to Schultz's dataset, China does not claim any islands the Philippines or Malaysia currently occupy.

67 Susan L. Shirk, *Overreach: How China Derailed Its Peaceful Rise* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 129.

Table 1. China's Territorial Claims in East Asia

Target	Start Year	Name of the Disputed Territories	Size of the Disputed Territory (km^2)[68]	Proportion of the Disputed Territory to the Target's Territory (%)
Taiwan	1949	All Territories	32,260	100
Japan	1971(1952)	Senkaku Islands	5.53	0.0015
Vietnam	1958(1954)	Spratly Islands	5	0.0016
	1958(1954)	Paracel Islands	7.75	0.0025
Philippines	1958(1971)	Scarborough Shoal	150	0.05
	1958(1971)	Spratly Islands	5	0.0017
Malaysia	1958	Spratly Islands	5	0.0015

Note: The start year of China's claims derives from China's public declarations,[69] and numbers in brackets indicate the dispute start year according to Schultz's dataset.[70]

[68] The size of the disputed and total territories is based on Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook 2021," 2021, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/about/archives/2021/; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Senkaku Islands," accessed April 18, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/senkaku/index.html; Keyuan Zou, Scarborough Reef: A New Flashpoint in Sino-Philippine Relations? (IRBU Center for Border Research, 1999), https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/ibru-borders-research/maps-and-publications/publications/publications-catalogue/.

[69] Zhiguo Gao and Bing Bing Jia, "The Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea: History, Status, and Implications," *The American Journal of International Law* 107, no. 1 (2013): 98–124, https://doi.org/10.5305/amerjintelaw.107.1.0098; Monika Chansoria, *China, Japan, and Senkaku Islands: Conflict in the East China Sea Amid an American Shadow* (Routledge, 2018), 18–22, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351011457.

[70] Schultz, "Mapping Interstate Territorial Conflict."

Even if one assumes that China claims all of the land features in the South China Sea, its territorial claims still represent only a small fraction of the territory of East Asian states. Moreover, China's claims in the East and South China Seas have remained unchanged throughout its rise, consistent with theoretical expectations and suggesting that Beijing's territorial ambitions may be limited rather than expansive.[71] With the exception of Taiwan, China's disputes concern relatively small areas that are geographically separated from its homeland. This pattern is consistent with global trends: most territorial disputes involve only a small fraction of the disputants' territory, and China is no exception.[72]

It is true that the islands at issue in East Asia generate maritime rights extending beyond their landmasses. However, such economic entitlements do not necessarily translate into vital security interests for the states involved. As Fravel argues, these islands are "desolate and unpopulated" and therefore "not linked to vital security interests" for East Asian states.[73] Ryan Griffiths makes a similar point, noting that China's disputes with its neighbors do not involve "key" or "vital" portions of their territory.[74] Even the economic value of the South China Sea is limited; the majority of oil and gas reserves in the South China Sea are located in undisputed zones situated near the coastlines of surrounding states.[75] Likewise, conflicts over fishing resources are unlikely to escalate, since, as one study concludes, "[t]he stakes are, quite simply, too low."[76]

In short, the evidence shows that China has not expanded its territorial claims during its rise. Consistent with global patterns, its claims are confined to small portions of other states' territory that do not involve vital security interests. While these disputes have generated tensions and at times militarized incidents, the overall pattern suggests that China has not become increasingly "expansionist" in its claims. These findings align with defense realist perspectives, which expect revisionist intentions to be limited when the costs of aggression outweigh its benefits.

---

71 Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics*, 105.

72 According to Schultz and Goemans, "one-third [of the total territorial disputes in the world] cover less than 0.01% of the target's territory, and 57% involve less than 1%." Schultz and Goemans, "Aims, Claims, and the Bargaining Model of War," 361.

73 M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 268.

74 Ryan D. Griffiths, "States, Nations, and Territorial Stability: Why Chinese Hegemony Would Be Better for International Order," *Security Studies* 25, no. 3 (2016): 537, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2016.1195628.

75 Brooks and Wohlforth, "The Myth of Multipolarity," 86.

76 John Quiggin, "Myths That Stir Trouble in the South China Sea," The Interpreter, Lowy Institute, December 23, 2021, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myths-stir-trouble-south-china-sea. The low stake in territorial disputes also suggests the low possibility of war. According to the bargaining theory of war, a state's resolve to stick to its claim increases the possibility of war. The low stake of the disputes indicates that states are more willing to bargain rather than fight. See Schultz and Goemans, "Aims, Claims, and the Bargaining Model of War."

Regarding China's actions, defensive realism would expect Beijing to avoid outright territorial aggression in order to avoid the rising costs of war and instead to concentrate on non-territorial issues and gray-zone activities. To examine this expectation, I draw on three sources. The first is the MIDs dataset from the COW project, which provides a broad overview of disputes involving the threat or use of military force and identifies whether their primary cause is territorial or non-territorial.[77] A limitation, however, is that the dataset currently extends only to 2014. To supplement this, I use the "South China Sea Incident Tracker" compiled by CSIS, which records incidents in the South China Sea from 2010 to mid-2020.[78] Finally, I rely on news reports and government documents to capture more recent developments over the disputes.

If the theoretical discussion above is correct, China's militarized efforts to alter the territorial status quo in East Asia should be relatively infrequent and, even when they involve territorial issues, should focus on non-territorial matters or disputes over "low-value" territories. To assess the value of disputed areas, I apply Dan Altman's criteria—whether a territory is populated or garrisoned—alongside the size of the territory emphasized by Schultz and Goemans.[79] Altman demonstrates that population and garrisons increase the likelihood that territorial conquest escalates to war. Accordingly, I examine whether China avoids escalation in disputes involving such populated or garrisoned territories.

Figure 3 presents the number of China's MIDs with East Asian states. Although the overall frequency of MIDs involving China has risen, the proportion of territorial MIDs—those in which territorial revision was the primary aim—has declined since the mid-1990s.[80] More recent disputes have centered on non-territorial issues, such as fishing rights and oil exploration, rather than attempts at territorial revision. This pattern suggests that China's "assertive actions" have not become more oriented toward territorial change as its capabilities have expanded.

---

77 Glenn Palmer et al., "The MID5 Dataset, 2011–2014: Procedures, Coding Rules, and Description," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 39, no. 4 (2022): 470–82, https://doi.org/10.1177/0738894221995743.

78 Center for Strategic and International Studies, "South China Sea Incident Tracker," accessed April 19, 2024, https://csis-ilab.github.io/cpower-viz/csis-china-sea/.

79 Altman, "The Evolution of Territorial Conquest," 498; Schultz and Goemans, "Aims, Claims, and the Bargaining Model of War."

80 I define "territorial MIDs" as MIDs whose primary revision type is coded as "territorial" by the COW.

Figure 3. Total Number of MIDs with China in East Asia

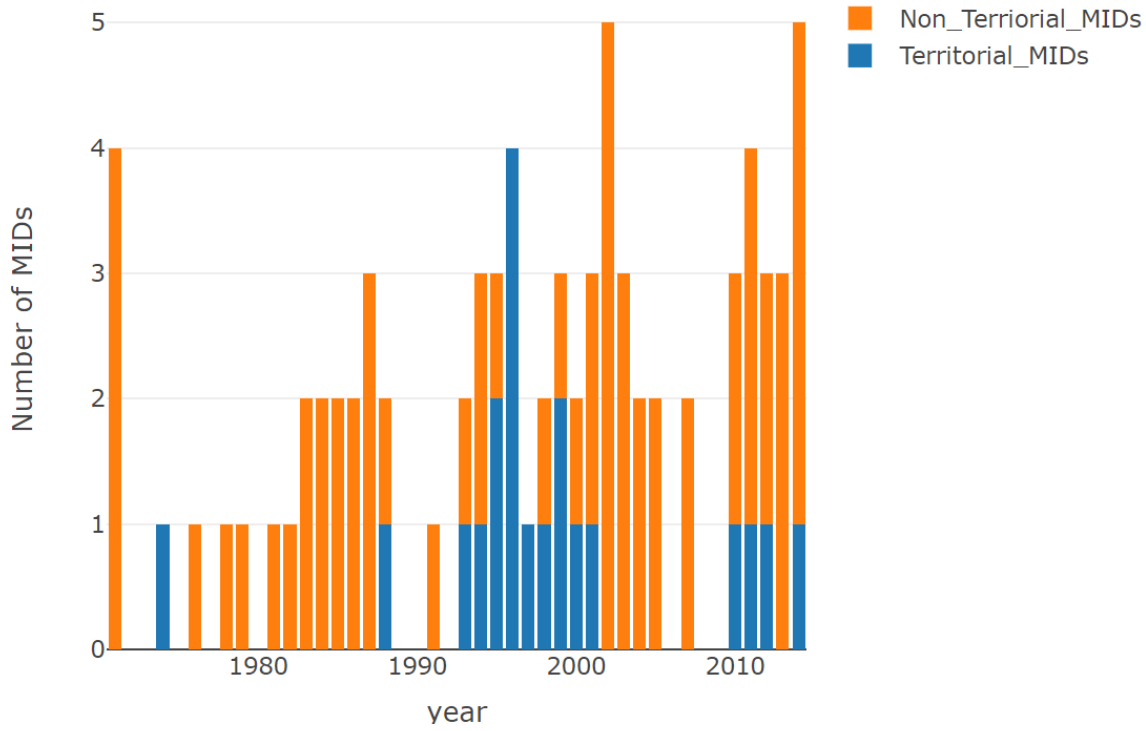


Table 2 summarizes territorial MIDs between China and East Asian states from 1993 to 2014. Most incidents center on unpopulated or undefended islands and land features, consistent with theoretical expectations. Notably, the only militarized incident near garrisoned islands in the South China Sea since 1990 occurred in 1997, involving the Philippines. It bears repeating that all of these disputes concern islands and maritime resources of relatively low security significance and limited economic value.

Table 2. China's Territorial MIDs with East Asian States (1993–2014)

	Dispute Years	Incident	Population	Garrisoned
Philippines	1995	Disputes over China's occupation of Mischief Reef	No	No
	1996–1997	Disputes over the Philippines-occupied Spratly Islands	No	Yes
	1998–2000	China increased its naval presence near the Spratly Islands	No	No
	2001	China increased its naval presence near Scarborough Shoal	No	No
Vietnam	1993	China's oil rigging near the Spratly Islands	No	No
	1994	China's blockade of Vietnamese oil rigging near the Spratly Islands	No	No
Japan	1995	Chinese fighters flew near the Senkaku Islands	No	No
	1996	China's submarine deployed near the Senkaku Islands	No	No
	1999	China's naval forces conducted military exercises near the Senkaku Islands	No	No
	2011–12, 2014	China's naval vessels harassed the Japanese maritime force near the Senkaku Islands	No	No
Indonesia	1996	China sent naval vessels to the natural gas field to protest Indonesia's naval exercise	No	No
Taiwan	1996	China's show of force to intimidate Taiwan away from independence	Yes	Yes

Source: Palmer et al., "The MID5 Dataset, 2011–2014: Procedures, Coding Rules, and Description."

The South China Sea Incident Tracker reveals a consistent pattern: most disputes are non-territorial in nature. As Table 3 shows, the majority of incidents between China and East Asian states involve fishing rights or access to subsea energy resources. The only case that altered the territorial status quo was the 2012 standoff between China and the Philippines over Scarborough Shoal, an uninhabited and ungarrisoned feature, where China ultimately assumed control of the area. While not included in the dataset, recent tensions over the Second Thomas Shoal—where the Philippines maintains a grounded, rusting vessel and China seeks to obstruct its resupply—can be interpreted as a dispute over territorial claims, as the vessel itself symbolizes the extent of the Philippines' sovereignty.[81] Taken together, however, the evidence provides little indication that China has become more assertive in seizing territory from other states.

Table 3. Incidents between China and East Asian States in the South China Sea (2010–2020)

Year	No. of Conflict (Total)	Nature of Conflict			
		Fishing	Energy	Territory	Others
2010	2	2	0	0	0
2011	6	3	3	0	0
2012	3	2	0	1	0
2013	4	3	0	0	1
2014	7	5	1	0	1
2015	15	14	0	0	1
2016	13	12	0	0	1
2017	3	3	0	0	0
2018	3	2	0	0	1
2019	5	3	2	0	0
2020	1	1	0	0	0

Source: CSIS

Note: I classified the nature of conflict as "fishing" if the primary cause of the conflict was the operation of fishing vessels, "energy" if it was about the rigging of oil under the sea, "territory" if the conflict was about occupying a territory, and "others" if none of the categories apply, such as a conflict over research vessels. Since the data covers up to mid-2020, the number for 2020 is partial.

[81] Rebecca Ratcliffe, "Why the Rusting Wreck of a Second World War Ship Is so Important to China," *The Guardian*, October 29, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/30/sierra-madre-phillippines-ship-china-blockade.

China currently continues to press its claims in areas such as the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and the Second Thomas Shoal, but the manner in which it does so underscores the limited nature of the threat. Rather than deploying military forces to seize inhabited or strategically vital territory, Beijing has relied on gray-zone tactics and nonmilitary instruments. In the case of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, for example, China has dispatched Coast Guard and other maritime vessels rather than naval combatants.[82] Similarly, in the Second Thomas Shoal dispute, Chinese Coast Guard ships obstructed Philippine resupply missions without resorting to military force. As Ketian Zhang's research demonstrates, since 2007 China's coercive strategies in the South China Sea have overwhelmingly involved diplomatic, economic, and law-enforcement tools rather than overt military escalation.[83] These patterns suggest that while Beijing seeks to advance its claims, it does so in ways that deliberately avoid the risks of traditional interstate war.

This does not mean that China's actions are benign. They generate tension, impose costs on other claimants, and create friction in regional politics. Yet the focus of these disputes remains narrow: small, uninhabited, and often economically marginal features, rather than populated or strategically central territories.[84] Crucially, China has not engaged in forcible conquests of another state's homeland or core territory. The contrast with Russia's invasion of Ukraine is instructive: Moscow has sought to annex and occupy large swaths of sovereign territory, whereas Beijing's behavior has been confined to incremental, low-level coercion over peripheral features. This pattern is not accidental. As Mastro argues, China has deliberately shaped its military and broader strategies to avoid provoking backlash or heightening threat perceptions among other states.[85] Taken together, the evidence indicates that China's traditional military threat to East Asian states is far less acute than conventional wisdom suggests. Its challenge lies more in the realm of gray-zone competition and nonmilitary issues than in outright military aggression.

---

[82] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Trends in China Coast Guard and Other Vessels in the Waters Surrounding the Senkaku Islands, and Japan's Response," April 1, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/page23e_000021.html.

[83] Ketian Zhang, "Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing's Use of Coercion in the South China Sea," *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 132–34; Zhang, *China's Gambit: The Calculus of Coercion*, 52–54.

[84] M. Taylor Fravel and Kacie Miura, "Stormy Seas: The South China Sea in US-China Relations," in *After Engagement: Dilemmas in U.S.-China Security Relations, ed. Jacques deLisle and Avery Goldstein* (Brookings Institution Press, 2021).

[85] Mastro, *Upstart: How China Became a Great Power*.

Taiwan is an exception for two main reasons. First, unlike other disputes over small, uninhabited features in the South or East China Seas, Taiwan is a "high-value" territory with a large population and self-governance, where China has openly signaled a willingness to use force. Second, Beijing treats Taiwan not as a typical territorial dispute but as an internal issue rooted in the unfinished civil war. As Fravel notes, Taiwan is "unique because of its origins in the Chinese civil war," unlike any of China's other claims,[86] an enduring concern that spans from the Qing to the Chinese Communist Party. Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell similarly stress that Taiwan is "the only part of the self-defined Chinese state that the PRC [People's Republic of China] does not control."[87] As such, Taiwan is best understood as a matter of nation-building, not expansionism—a view shared by most East Asian states. [88] This distinction matters: China's Taiwan policy is not just another example of Chinese expansionism[89] and does not necessarily predict its behavior elsewhere. China's threats of force toward Taiwan are qualitatively different from its approach to other territorial disputes, where it has generally relied on gray-zone tactics and avoided explicit military ultimatums. [90] In short, Taiwan is a unique case, and its dynamics may not serve as a reliable indicator of China's broader regional behavior.

Furthermore, from realist perspectives, structural factors such as geographic features, relative capabilities, and the high costs of territorial aggression make China's threats toward Taiwan far less feasible in practice. Amphibious operations are among the most complex military undertakings, and China's current lift capacity falls far short of what would be required to move and sustain the million-plus troops needed against Taiwan's 450,000 defenders.[91] The Taiwan Strait itself poses major challenges: any buildup would be highly visible, vulnerable to preemptive strikes, and constrained by difficult coastal geography that limits landing sites.[92]

---

86 Fravel, "International Relations Theory and China's Rise," 509.

87 Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security (*Columbia University Press, 2012), 212.

88 David C. Kang et al., "What Does China Want?," *International Security* 50, no. 1 (2025): 78–79, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC.a.5.

89 For example, see Aaron L. Friedberg, *Getting China Wrong* (Polity, 2022), 186; Michael Beckley and Hal Brands, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), 129–37; Colby, *The Strategy of Denial*, 115–19.

90 For example, China avoids explicit messaging about using force regarding the South China Sea. See Oriana Skylar Mastro, "What Are China's Leaders Saying about the South China Sea?," The Interpreter, February 24, 2021, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/what-are-china-s-leaders-saying-about-south-china-sea.

91 Harlan Ullman, "Reality Check #10: China Will Not Invade Taiwan," Atlantic Council, February 18, 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/reality-check/reality-check-10-china-will-not-invade-taiwan/; Robert A. Manning, "Is a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan the Most Likely Scenario?," *Stimson Center*, October 27, 2023, https://www.stimson.org/2023/is-a-chinese-invasion-of-taiwan-the-most-likely-scenario/.

92 Gholz et al., "Defensive Defense," 178.

U.S. officials and military analysts consistently judge that an invasion would be enormously costly and uncertain in outcome, reinforcing the argument that structural constraints make large-scale aggression far less credible than often assumed.[93]

Given these difficulties, surveys indicate that most experts on Taiwan concur that the likelihood of conflict over the Taiwan Strait remains low.[94] Furthermore, the potential significant costs of international reactions may further deter China's aggression, as assessed by the then-president of Taiwan, Tsai Ing-wen, as quoted earlier. Although such high costs and difficulties may not prevent China from taking aggressive actions over Taiwan, the danger may not be as dire as commonly assumed. It is worth noting that this assessment is in line with Taiwan's low military expenditure as a percentage of GDP (2.1% in 2024), well below the world average (2.5%).[95] To place this observation in a broader perspective, the following section examines trends in East Asian states' military efforts and compares them with those of other regions.

---

[93] Jeff Seldin, "Doubts Cast China Will Be Ready to Invade Taiwan by 2027," Voice of America, April 17, 2024, https://www.voanews.com/a/doubts-cast-china-will-be-ready-to-invade-taiwan-by-2027/7574367.html; Brad Lendon and Oren Liebermann, "War Game Suggests Chinese Invasion of Taiwan Would Fail at a Huge Cost to US, Chinese and Taiwanese Militaries," CNN, January 9, 2023, https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/09/politics/taiwan-invasion-war-game-intl-hnk-ml/index.html; Dan Grazier et al., *Rethinking the Threat: Why China Is Unlikely to Invade* Taiwan (Stimson Center, 2025), https://www.stimson.org/2025/rethinking-the-threat-why-china-is-unlikely-to-invade-taiwan/.

[94] Alexis von Sydow, "Most Experts Agree: China Isn't About to Invade Taiwan," *The Diplomat*, February 23, 2024, https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/most-experts-agree-china-isnt-about-to-invade-taiwan/; Bonny Lin et al., "Surveying the Experts: U.S. and Taiwan Views on China's Approach to Taiwan in 2024 and Beyond," *ChinaPower Project*, January 22, 2024, https://chinapower.csis.org/surveying-experts-us-and-taiwan-views-china-approach-taiwan-2024/.

[95] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database."

4. Military Efforts Across Regions

The preceding discussions suggest that China's traditional security threat, based on both offensive and defensive realism, is less severe than often assumed. Challenges in relative capabilities, geographic constraints, and the high costs of territorial aggression have limited China's reliance on conventional military force to increase its international influence. Instead, its actions increasingly emphasize gray-zone tactics and nonmilitary measures, which do not directly provoke military responses from neighboring states. If this assessment holds, we should expect military efforts in East Asia to remain moderate, rather than escalate into the intense arms races that some scholars and experts fear. This section therefore examines the extent of military efforts among East Asian states.

There are multiple ways to evaluate states' military efforts. One study, for instance, identifies nearly thirty measures by which states can enhance their capabilities, including weapons acquisitions, adjustments to force posture, updates to military doctrine, and the strengthening of security relationships with other states.[96] While such measures are useful for understanding the details of military policy, they are less suitable for assessing the overall level of military effort. Many of these actions overlap with routine "defense" or "defense diplomacy," meaning that states regularly adopt them in response to various security concerns.[97] As a result, nearly every state could be characterized as increasing its military efforts simply by undertaking some of these measures—an obviously problematic conclusion.

In the case of East Asia, it is easy to argue that states are expanding their military efforts by pointing to weapons modernization, the strengthening of diplomatic ties, and the updating of defense doctrines. Yet these developments do not necessarily reveal whether overall military efforts are rising or falling over time, nor whether they are higher or lower than those observed in other regions. The key question is not whether East Asian states are taking military measures in response to China—which they clearly are—but whether the degree of their military efforts has increased during China's rise, and whether it is distinctly high.

---

[96] Adam P. Liff, "Whither the Balancers? The Case for a Methodological Reset," *Security Studies* 25, no. 3 (2016): 436, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2016.1195624.

[97] Jim Rolfe, "Review of Asia's Quest for Balance: China's Rise and Balancing in the Indo-Pacific by Jeff M. Smith," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 1 (2019): 147–48.

The difficulty of measuring military efforts across diverse factors may help explain why, in assessing the military efforts of NATO countries, politicians and scholars often focus on military expenditure—particularly as a percentage of GDP—rather than on posture, doctrines, or defense relations.[98] Military expenditure as a share of GDP, commonly referred to as the "military burden," is widely employed in the scholarly literature to gauge states' perceptions of external threats and the degree of militarization.[99] Barry Buzan and Eric Herring contend that military burden is a useful indicator of military effort, since an increase suggests that "the state is increasing the level of its military activity at the expense of its other activities."[100] Moreover, compared to other measures such as weapons acquisitions, military expenditure is "far more generalizable as a measure across time and space."[101] Following these arguments, I adopt military expenditure as a percentage of GDP as the primary indicator of military effort.

I also employ military expenditure as a percentage of government spending as a robustness check. Because GDP and military expenditure vary independently, they may be influenced by factors unrelated to military policy, such as economic downturns. Measuring military expenditure as a share of government spending helps address this issue by capturing the relative priority assigned to military investment compared to other policy areas, including social welfare and education.[102]

---

98 Camille Grand, "Defence Spending: Sustaining the Effort in the Long-Term," NATO Review, July 3, 2023.

99 David C. Kang, *American Grand Strategy and East Asian Security in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 20–23.

100 Barry Buzan and Eric Herring, *The Arms Dynamic in World Politics* (Lynne Rienner, 1998), 89.

101 Susan G. Sample, "Arms Races," in *What Do We Know About War?*, Third Edition, ed. Sara McLaughlin Mitchell and John A. Vasquez (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 66.

102 The data on military expenditure as a percentage of GDP and government spending are taken from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database."

Figure 4. Share of Military Expenditure in GDP (1970–2023)

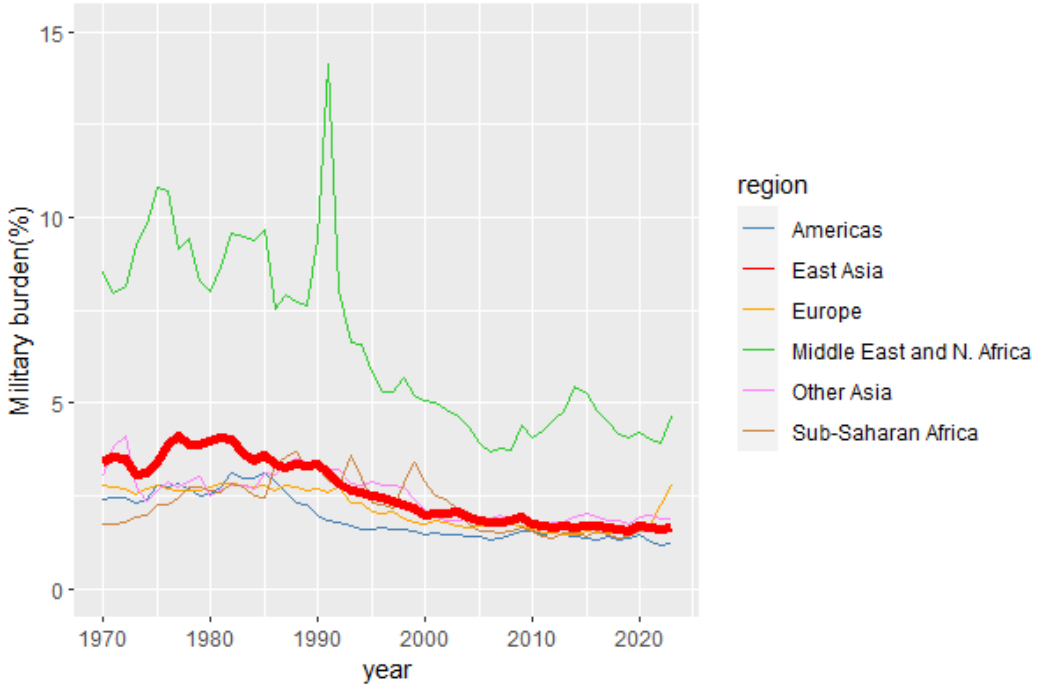


Figure 4 presents each region's average level of military burden, calculated as military expenditure relative to GDP. The data indicate that despite China's rising power, East Asia's military burden (shown by the bold red line) has steadily declined and exhibits no rapid increase. East Asia's burden is considerably lower than that of the Middle East and broadly comparable to other regions. On average, East Asian states devoted about 3.3 percent of GDP to the military in 1990, which fell to roughly 1.7 percent in 2015 and further declined to about 1.6 percent in 2023—well below the world average of approximately 2.3 percent. Although Japan, under its new National Security Strategy (NSS) published in 2022, has been rapidly increasing defense spending, its military burden will remain around 1.5% of GDP—again well below the world average.[103]

[103] In the NSS, Japan announced that its "security spending" would rise to 2% of GDP. This figure includes items not traditionally counted as defense expenditures, such as infrastructure development. Japan's actual military burden, based on conventional defense spending, is expected to be around 1.5% of GDP. See Adam P. Liff, No, *Japan Is Not Planning* to "*Double Its Defense Budget*" (Brookings Institution, 2023), https://www.brookings.edu/articles/no-japan-is-not-planning-to-double-its-defense-budget/.

Figure 5. Share of Military Expenditure in Government Expenditure (1990–2023)

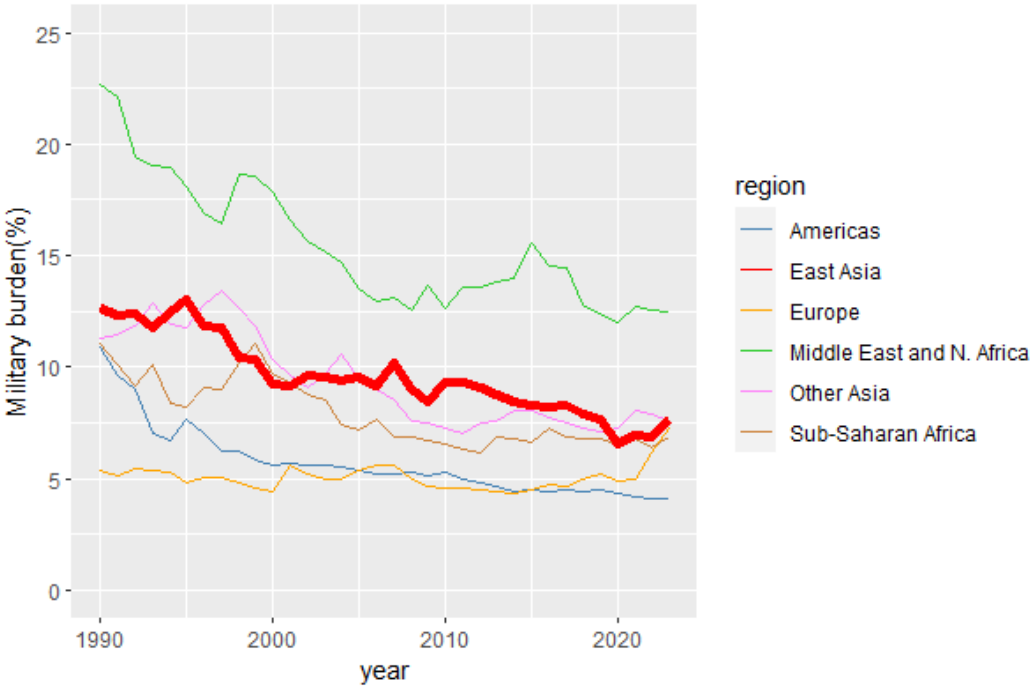


Figure 5 shows military spending as a percentage of government expenditure, which reveals a similar trend. The share of military budgets in government spending in East Asia has steadily declined since 1990 and is by no means high compared to other regions. Despite China's rise, the relative priority assigned to military investment in East Asia has decreased in comparison with other policy areas. This suggests that even as East Asian states respond to China's rise militarily, the overall importance of military investment remains moderate.

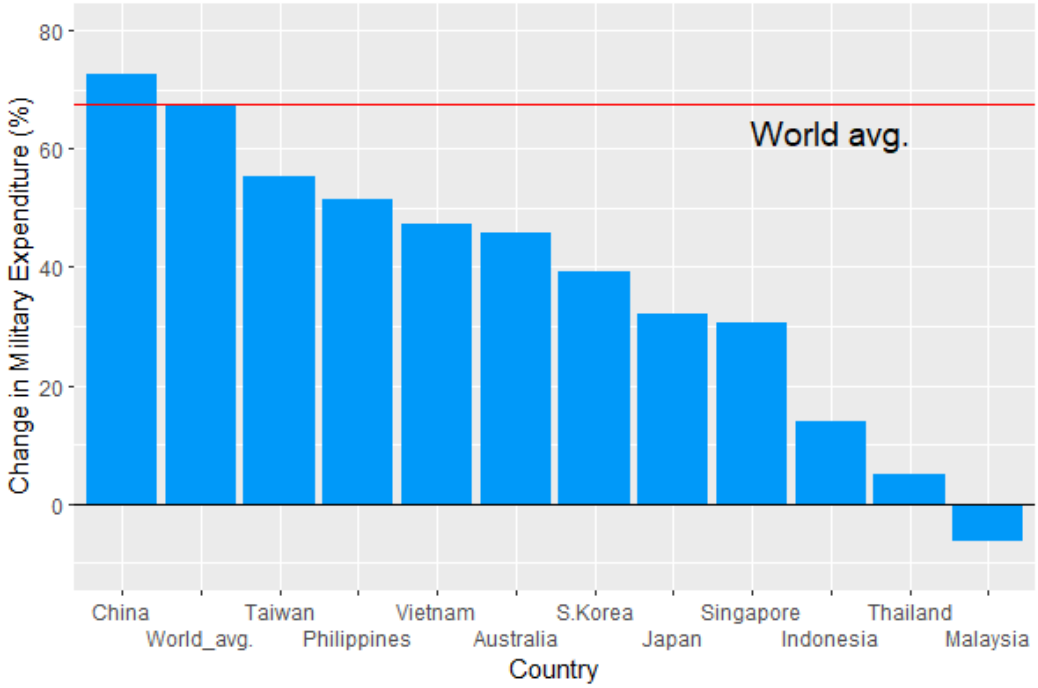
Another important robustness check for evaluating military efforts is the absolute level of military expenditure, since many scholars and experts cite increases in spending as evidence of East Asian states' intense arming against China.[104] Given the rapid economic growth of East Asian states, military expenditure as a percentage of GDP or government spending may not fully capture the scale of investment in military development.[105] To address this concern, Figure 6 illustrates the growth rate of absolute military expenditure in each East Asian state over the past decade, compared to the world average.

[104] Liff, "Whither the Balancers?"; Sharp, "Asia's Arms Race"; Walt, "Hedging on Hegemony: The Realist Debate over How to Respond to China," 63.

[105] On this point, see Liff, "Whither the Balancers?," 432.

The data show that from 2013 to 2023, the growth rate of military expenditure in most East Asian states remained below the global average. While East Asian states are indeed increasing military spending alongside economic development—a predictable outcome—their pace of increase is by no means exceptional and, if anything, relatively modest compared to that of states in other regions.

Figure 6. Change in Military Expenditure from 2013 to 2023 (Constant 2022 US$)



Source: SIPRI

Note: For Vietnam, the difference is between 2013 and 2018, because the data on Vietnam's military expenditure from 2019 to 2023 is not available in SIPRI.

These results indicate that contrary to widespread assumptions, the degree of military investment in East Asia is relatively moderate. It is important to emphasize that this does not mean East Asian states are inactive militarily vis-à-vis China, or that they lack concern about China's actions. They are indeed taking measures. The point, rather, is that because the primary features of China's current threat are nonmilitary rather than traditional military ones, the military responses of East Asian states have not been especially intense.

One possible response to the results above is that East Asian states are free-riding on the United States.[106] While it is true that East Asian states rely to some extent on the United States for their security policies,[107] the free-riding argument rests on the assumption that China's threat is substantial and that East Asian states should therefore be spending more on their militaries. However, as discussed, the level of traditional security threat from China, even within a realist framework, is not especially severe. Moreover, given that not all East Asian states are U.S. allies, it is doubtful that free-riding alone can account for the broader pattern of military efforts in the region. A systematic study of the degree of free-riding in East Asia would certainly be worthwhile, but such an inquiry lies beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on the nature of China's threat.[108]

Neoclassical realists, who emphasize the role of domestic politics in shaping the extent of states' military balancing, may argue that East Asian states are unable to counter China's threats effectively due to domestic constraints such as elite disagreements, fragile regimes, or aging populations that strain national budgets.[109] While domestic politics may indeed influence military policy, they do not account for the region-wide tendency toward moderate military efforts, given the diversity of regime types, levels of political stability, and demographic conditions across East Asia. As shown in Appendix 2, military efforts have remained moderate during China's rise in nearly all East Asian states, regardless of domestic political circumstances. This region-wide pattern suggests that domestic political factors alone do not provide a sufficient explanation.

---

[106] Ted Galen Carpenter, "Washington's Free-Riding East Asian Allies," Cato Institute, May 22, 2015, https://www.cato.org/commentary/washingtons-free-riding-east-asian-allies; Zack Cooper, "Aiming without Arming: Explaining Free Riding among East Asian Allies," American Enterprise Institute, November 30, 2018, https://www.aei.org/articles/book-review-aiming-without-arming-explaining-free-riding-among-east-asian-allies/.

[107] Andrew Yeo, "Cultivating America's Alliances and Partners in the Indo-Pacific," Brookings, September 16, 2024, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/cultivating-americas-alliances-and-partners-in-the-indo-pacific/.

[108] One recent systematic study of free-riding in East Asia finds that the region's low level of military effort stems more from limited threat perception than from free-riding. See Xinru Ma and David C. Kang, "Toward Measuring Free-Riding: Counterfactuals, Alliances, and US–Philippine Relations," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 8, no. 1 (2023): ogac033, https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogac033.

[109] Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton University Press, 2006); Seongho Sheen, "Northeast Asia's Aging Population and Regional Security," *Asian Survey* 53, no. 2 (2013): 292–318, https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2013.53.2.292.

Conclusion

Conventional wisdom often assumes that rising powers inevitably threaten their neighbors due to their expanding capabilities and presumed revisionist intentions. Yet a closer analysis of traditional security threats—evaluated through both offensive and defensive realist perspectives—suggests that China's conventional threat to its neighbors is more moderate than commonly believed.

This finding carries implications for East Asian security. First, the "hawkish" view of China as an imminent military danger may be overstated, at least in terms of traditional threats. Instead, regional concern has increasingly shifted toward gray-zone activities and nonmilitary challenges, such as economic coercion. These issues remain serious, but they indicate that the primary anxiety surrounding China is not existential survival. Second, given the moderate level of military threat, the likelihood that current arms buildups will escalate into a full-scale arms race appears limited. Absent drastic developments—such as a Chinese invasion of Taiwan or a complete U.S. withdrawal from the region—East Asian states are unlikely to dramatically expand their military efforts. While U.S. pressure may encourage allies to raise defense spending, or conversely drive them closer to Beijing,[110] the relatively moderate threat environment affords these states greater bargaining power with Washington than is often assumed.[111]

China's rise is undeniably one of the defining geopolitical transformations of our era, with profound implications for its neighbors and beyond. Yet just as underestimating a threat can imperil security, overestimating it risks fueling a classic security dilemma. Careful and accurate assessment of the nature and degree of threat is therefore essential for effective management of regional security. This study aims to contribute to that effort by clarifying the limits of China's traditional military threat and highlighting the broader spectrum of challenges that demand attention.

---

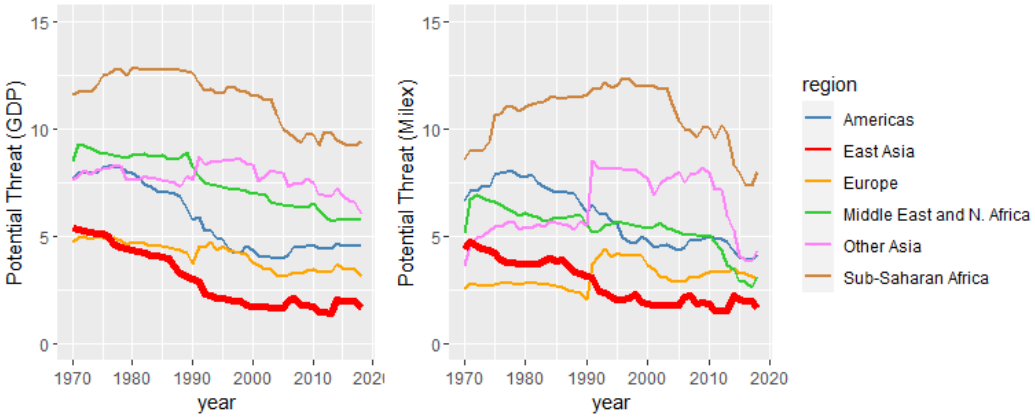
[110] Lynn Kuok, "How Trump's Coercion Could Backfire in Asia," *Foreign Affairs*, April 14, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/how-trumps-coercion-could-backfire-asia; Yuen Foong Khong and Joseph Chinyong Liow, "Southeast Asia Is Starting to Choose," *Foreign Affairs*, June 24, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/southeast-asia-starting-choose-khong-liow.

[111] Japan's repeated refusals to the U.S. demand for increasing the defense spending to 3%–3.5% are one such indication. Kyodo News, "Japan Brushes aside U.S. Demand to Boost Defense Budget to 3% of GDP," Kyodo News+, March 5, 2025, https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2025/03/4ee5079796b9-japan-brushes-aside-us-demand-to-boost-defense-budget-to-3-of-gdp.html; Alastair Gale et al., "Japan Says No US Demand for Defense Spending Worth 3.5% of GDP - Bloomberg," Bloomberg, June 22, 2025, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-06-23/japan-says-no-us-demand-for-defense-spending-worth-3-5-of-gdp?embedded-checkout=true.

Appendix 1. Potential Threat with Alternative Indicators

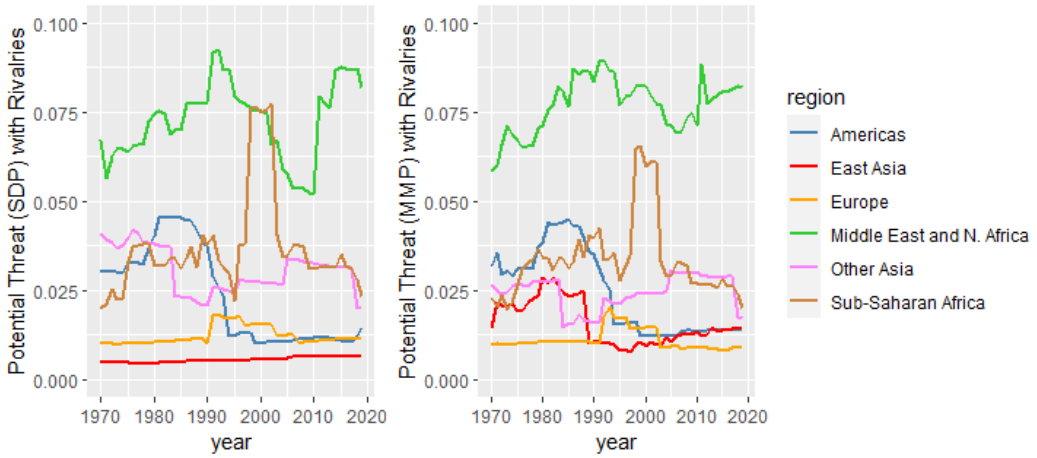
In the main text, I compare the potential threat levels across regions using the surplus domestic product (SDP) for economic capabilities and Material Military Power (MMP) for military capabilities. Figure 1 shows the results using GDP and military expenditure for alternative economic and military capabilities measures, respectively. The figure indicates that the trends are similar to those with the SDP and MMP, meaning that East Asia's threat level is not outstanding compared to other regions and has not notably increased since the 1970s. Thus, the results in the paper do not depend on specific measures of economic or military capabilities.

Figure 1. Level of the Potential Threat in each Region Measured in GDP (left) and Military Expenditure (right) (1970–2018)



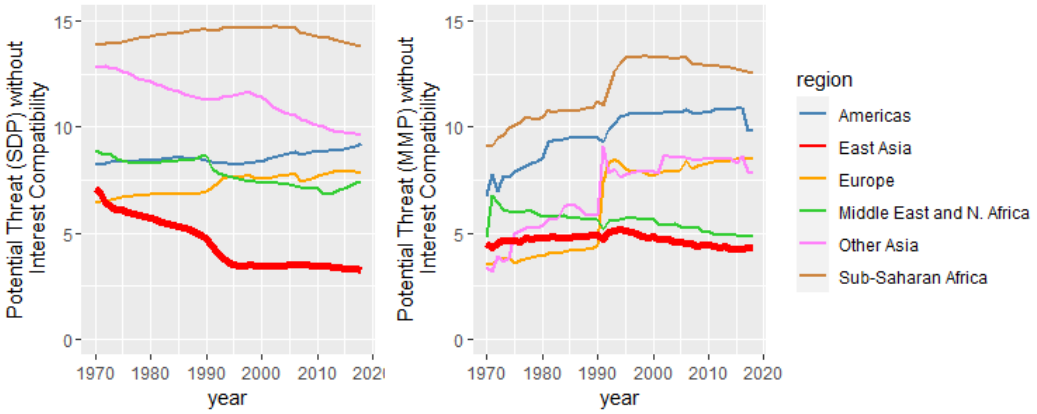
Next, I use strategic rivalry as an alternative measurement of interest compatibility. Namely, I calculate the level of potential threat only from rivals or other states that have ongoing territorial and other disputes. I take the rivalry data from Thompson, Sakuwa, and Suhas (2022). Figure 2 shows the results of the threat level based on using strategic rivalry as interest compatibility, indicating a similar result as Figures 1 and 2 in the main text with East Asia being low in threat level.

Figure 2. Level of the Potential Threat in each Region from Strategic Rivals Measured in SDP (left) and MMP (right) (1970–2018)



Finally, Figure 3 shows the potential threat levels without interest compatibility, using SDP and MMP, respectively. These threat levels are based on capabilities balance and geography, conforming to the assumption that states' intentions are ultimately unknowable. The figures show that even without interest compatibility, the results in the main paper hold that the threat level in East Asia is lower than in other regions and has not increased during China's rise.

Figure 3. Level of the Potential Threat in each Region without Interest Compatibility Measured in SDP (left) and MMP (right) (1970–2018)



Appendix 2. Military Burden in Each East Asian State

Table 1 shows the trend of each East Asian state's military burden (military expenditure as a percentage of GDP) from 1990 to 2023. As the table shows, all East Asian states, except for Japan, have significantly decreased their military burden since 1990. Recently, some states, including South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines, increased their military burden, and it may be an attempt to counter China. As I indicated in the main text, the argument is not that East Asian states are taking no military measures to counter China's threat. But even if they are countering China militarily, they are doing it with a low level of military effort. Even though some states increased their military burden recently, the degree of increase is much smaller than the level of decrease since China started rising.

Table 1. Military Expenditure as a Percent of GDP in East Asia (1990–2023)

	1990	2015	2023	Difference, 1990–2023	Difference, 2015–2023
China	2.45	1.78	1.67	-0.78	-0.11
Japan	0.94	0.95	1.20	0.26	0.25
South Korea	4.00	2.50	2.81	-1.19	0.31
Taiwan	5.22	1.87	2.17	-3.05	0.3
Vietnam	7.91	2.36	(2.28)	(-5.63)	(-0.08)
Thailand	2.59	1.43	1.17	-1.42	-0.26
Philippines	2.15	1.09	1.25	-0.9	0.16
Singapore	4.63	3.05	2.66	-1.97	-0.39
Indonesia	1.41	0.88	0.68	-0.73	-0.2
Malaysia	2.56	1.50	0.93	-1.63	-0.54
Australia	2.08	1.95	1.92	-0.16	-0.03

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2025)
Note: Shaded cells indicate the increase in military burden. Since the data on Vietnam's military expenditure in 2022 is unavailable, it instead shows the data in 2018, the most recent available data.

Table 2 shows the trend using military expenditure as a percentage of government spending, indicating a further downward trend of military burden in East Asia. Not only have most East Asian states, except for Japan, significantly decreased their military burden since the 1990s, but they have also been decreasing recently. For example, although military expenditure as a percentage of GDP has increased since 2015 in South Korea and the Philippines, it has decreased when measured as a percentage of government spending. This means that although the overall government spending has been increasing, the relative priority of the military continued to decrease in South Korea and the Philippines compared to other spending.

Table 2. Military Expenditure as a Percent of Government Spending in East Asia (1995–2023)

Military Expenditure as % of Government Spending					
	1995	**2015**	**2023**	**Difference 1995–2023**	**Difference 2015–2023**
China	15.16	5.60	4.97	-10.19	-0.63
Japan	2.7	2.54	2.82	0.12	0.28
South Korea	20.31	12.64	11.10	-9.21	-1.54
Taiwan	14.76	10.55	13.64	-1.12	3.09
Vietnam	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Thailand	13.67	6.17	4.92	-8.75	-1.25
Philippines	10.52	6.12	5.02	-5.5	-1.1
Singapore	29.38	20.95	18.03	-11.35	-2.92
Indonesia	8.52	5.05	3.92	-3.47	-1.13
Malaysia	11.18	6.09	4.11	-5.09	-1.98
Australia	6.00	5.24	5.06	-0.94	-0.18

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2025)
Note: Shaded cells indicate the increase in military burden.

Appendix References

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. 2025. “SIPRI Military Expenditure Database.” https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex.

Thompson, William R., Kentaro Sakuwa, and Prashant Hosur Suhas. 2022. *Analyzing Strategic Rivalries in World Politics: Types of Rivalry, Regional Variation, and Escalation/De-Escalation*. Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-6671-1.