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The map *is* the story: the *U*-shaped line in western news media coverage of the geopolitics of the South China Sea

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Abstract

China's claim to a large part of the South China Sea (SCS) is indicated by a specific cartographic convention, the *U*-shaped (or dashed) line, shown on its official maps. The line has become an important element in Western popular discourse concerning the geopolitics of the SCS. This paper argues that the cartographic *re*-presentation of the *U*-shaped line in the Western press contributes to an 'orientalist' conception that portrays China as 'other'; as aggressive and unwilling to 'play by the rules', and a portrayal of the whole region as potentially unstable. Its re-circulation may, however, work to China's advantage by reinforcing cartographic precedent and creating a specific 'geographic imagination' of the SCS. Maps are regarded as an important element in the 'spectacle of fear' propagated by the West, with the representations of the SCS shown to be part of a wider use of maps by the press to cover issues related to geopolitics and conflict.

KEYWORDS: geopolitics; cartography; news-media;

Introduction - cartographic precedent

> 'Who would have imagined given the US's tragic involvement in Indochina that nowadays it would be conducting joint naval exercises with communist Vietnam designed to contain Chinese claims to a few submerged rocks in the northern Pacific as it asserts its own Monroe Doctrine.' (Burleigh, 2013, p.8)

These disputed reefs and islands are found in the South China Sea (SCS), an area of three and a half million square kilometres. Control of this sea and its resources are disputed by several states, including China (People's Republic of China), Taiwan (Republic of China), Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia (Gau, 2012). It is also the focus of US 'freedom of navigation' operations, a response to a perceived Chinese capacity to undermine US 'command of the commons' (Dian, 2015, Tang, 2012). This paper is concerned with the role of maps in Western popular geopolitical discourse on the SCS. It can be argued that Western journalistic perspectives draw on established tropes within 'orientalist' discourses that 'other' China as an aggressive player on the world stage, and a player that does not conform to international norms.

Maps are an important element in news coverage of international relations and conflict, but rarely is journalistic *re*-presentation of a particular state's own mapping so critical to understanding the popular geopolitical discourse surrounding an issue. It is argued that the

re-presentation of China's *U*-shaped line, its cartographic claim to the SCS, may act in China's favour by reinforcing a perceived geopolitical 'reality' through 'cartographic precedent'¹. This paper explores the meanings that are projected on to the map as part of wider geopolitical discourses concerning China's intentions in the SCS and the response of other states, specifically the US. This examination draws on Debord's concept of the 'society of spectacle' and its corollary, 'spectacle of threat', to understand how maps operate within popular geopolitical discourse.

The concept of 'cartographic precedent' is important; drawing a line on a map has resulted in the annexation of large areas of the globe or creation of new nations. Where states project their territorial ambitions into previously unclaimed/disputed space, maps can be critical to achieving their aims. There is a long history of cartographic justification for territorial ambitions, both through reference to historic maps (establishing priority) and creating a 'reality' in advance of that reality through 'cartographic precedent' (Hall, 1981). This works particularly well where it becomes the accepted version, or where re-circulation creates a defined 'space' in the geographic imagination. Examination of Western news media coverage of the SCS dispute and the use of maps as a component of that geopolitical discourse provides insight into what it *assumes* China means by its *U*-shaped line, but also, inadvertently, reinforces specific 'geographical imaginations' that might serve China's interests.

Maps in the news

This study is part of a longitudinal survey of over three-thousand maps in the UK 'prestige press' (1999, 2009, and 2014). It also draws on additional material specifically related to news coverage of the SCS to 2017. The survey has established that international conflicts and war,

defence issues, and territorial or resource disputes are consistently amongst the most numerous themes mapped in the UK news media (the others are internal conflict, civil war/terrorism - see table 1). Territorial disputes emerged as a major theme, including the SCS and the on-going Sino-Japanese dispute in the East China Sea (ECS).

The decision to focus on the prestige press was taken for several reasons. These (and on-line versions) are read by policy/decision makers (politicians, civil servants, business people), by opinion-formers (other media, educationalists), and the public who are interested in international relations and are used as learning resources in a range of educational settings (Vujakovic, 1998, 2018a).

The focus on the prestige press is also underpinned by notions of trust. The results of a survey concerning 'trust' in sources of information indicated that UK viewers/readers have relatively high levels of trust in specific news providers (Ipsos-MORI, 2008); the survey indicated trust in the prestige press (e.g. *Guardian* 94%, *Daily Telegraph* (including *Sunday Telegraph*) 93%, *Times* (including *Sunday Times*), 89%). The popular press fared less well (e.g. *The Sun* 29%). A recent YouGov poll on behalf of IMPRESS (2016) has, however, shown a decline in trust, with only 44% of social grade ABC1 trusting the prestige press, and much lower levels of trust for 'popular' publications.

The survey was initiated in 1999 as a six-month study of maps published in five daily newspapers (*Times, Independent, Financial Times, Daily Telegraph* and *Guardian*) and two Sunday papers (*Sunday Times* and *Observer*). The project focused on map use in the news (design, thematic coverage), geopolitics (Vujakovic, 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2002a), and environment and development (Vujakovic, 2002b). Further surveys were undertaken in 2009 and 2014. All the general data discussed below relates to a six-month period (Jan.–June) for comparability.

'Cartohypnosis' and popular geopolitical discourse

> 'Like bombers and submarines, maps are indispensable instruments of war.' (Wright, 1942, p. 527)

Studies of cartography in the news media have shown consistency in terms of themes, with war/conflict, and geopolitics strongly represented. Monmonier's (1989) review of *The Times* (UK) and four US newspapers showed war, defence and geopolitics to be the highest scoring categories. Perkins and Parry (1996) identified '*military conflict, defence, geopolitics, threats and riots'* as 27.2% of maps in the UK news media (similar results found for Canada (Gauthier, 1997), Spain (Tremols, 1997), and Poland (Kowalski and Pasawski, 1997)).

These findings tally with the longitudinal study by the author(s), with '*Military conflict/war, defence issues, territorial/resource disputes'* the highest-scoring theme in 1999, 24.5% of all maps; the figure was inflated by the large number of maps devoted to the Kosovo crisis (Vujakovic, 1999, 2002b). The surveys in 2009 and 2014 yielded figures of 29.6% and 26.9% for the sub-themes '*internal political conflicts*' and '*Military conflict/war, etc.*' combined (Table 1) confirming the importance of maps in reportage of geopolitics..

Table 1: News map themes - UK elite 'press'

Geopolitics and conflict tend to involve complex and 'dynamic' cartography. Holmes (1991) and Mijkenaar (1996) provide numerous examples of complex 'pictorial' maps associated with the Falklands War (1982) and the Gulf War (1990–1) respectively. Mijkenaar noted that the

Gulf War also corresponded with developments in software allowing 'infographics' teams to create affordable and timely graphics.

This study takes as a starting point the idea that maps in popular discourse can have high levels of 'suggestibility', perpetuating particular geographic imaginings and geopolitical discourses. This is not new. As Tim Barney notes:

'In June 1947 … the Official Geographer of the Department of State, S.W. Boggs, wrote a curious manifesto about maps for the popular *Scientific Monthly*. Boggs was an academic and a bureaucrat, known for his pioneering work in political geography (particularly borders and sea claims) – but here he traversed popular culture by worrying aloud about the public's engagement with cartography. Boggs warned forcefully against the potential of what he termed 'cartohypnosis', or a condition where the 'map user or the audience exhibits a high degree of suggestibility in respect to stimuli aroused by the map and its explanatory text' (Boggs, 1947: 469, cited in Barney, 2018).

It is worth noting Boggs' point about intertextuality - in geopolitical discourse the map and explanatory text operate together. In most cases, the map supports the text and other graphics; acting as supposedly 'down-to-earth' (objective) information (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996), although occasionally the map is the dominant format.

This study adopts a conceptualisation of 'map as spectacle' (Vujakovic, 2018b). This draws on Debord's 'Society of Spectacle' through which elites create compliant populations:

'In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation' (Debord, 2009, p.24).

Central to this is the idea that compliance and alienation are products of socio-economic organisation under advanced capitalism and technologies. While there is evidence that

advanced technologies may be empowering to a degree, Callens (2000) argues that the mass media, and more recently the 'personal computer', have turned from being a means of facilitating exchange of information to a 'self-enforcing dominant cultural environment' (p.291) that *suppresses active engagement in public affairs* (see also Teurlings (2013) on the 'society of the machine'; society's growing obsession with the machineries of representation).

For Debord liberal democracies are characterised by 'integrated spectacle' where 'spectacle is marked by incessant technological development, [and] a state of general secrecy' (Kosović, 2011, p.20); a society governed by 'experts'/technocrats. Pertinent to news maps and related graphics in geopolitical discourse is Debord's understanding of how spectacle can be mobilised to generate acquiescence through fear.

> [It is the state's] 'wish is to be judged by its enemies rather than its results. The story of terrorism is written by the state... The spectators must certainly never know everything about terrorism, but they must always know enough to convince them, that compared with terrorism, everything else must be acceptable or in any case more rational and democratic' (Debord, 1998, p.24)

The fear justifies the state's enhancement of its monopoly of force and surveillance in a 'volatile' world. Geopolitical graphics, including maps, underpin this.

Spectacle operates by balancing a discourse of fear and the perceived ability of democracies to respond, and increasingly so as threat discourse is represented in terms of the control of space-time (Barrinha and da Mota, 2016) and physical geography (Marshall, 2015). The application of hi-tech systems to deliver 'surgical' airstrikes and for surveillance become the neo-Baroque equivilant of *fuegos de artificio* (fireworks) of political and military elites (Author(s), in press b), with news maps/graphics providing supporting visual metaphors (see

Vujakovic (2002a) for discussion of maps as guarantors of accuracy and precision in supporting 'surgical strikes').

China's *U*-shaped line

Cartographic precedent' is the concept whereby maps convey a particular image of 'reality' in advance of that reality, potentially precluding or prejudicing alternative (geopolitical) outcomes (Hall, 1981) or provoking conflict. Instances of cartographic precedent date back centuries and have lasting effects. The Tordesillas line (Treaty of Tordesillas, 1494), divided the world between the Portuguese and Spanish crowns (Figure 1).

Figure 1 The Tordesillas line as shown on Cantino world map of 1502

The line has continued to be mobilised as a form of cartographic precedent. Pinochet de la Barra's 1948 '*La Antártica Chilena*' includes a map of 1588 that shows the line extending to Antarctica, justifying Chile's claim (Wilson, 1964). Howkins (2009) notes that both Argentina and Chile have actively promoted '*Antártica Chilena*' and '*Antártica Argentina*', while Laver (2001) points out that Argentina has also used the Tordesillas line in its claim to 'Las Malvinas'/Falkland Islands. The line remained arbitrary until the late eighteenth century as it was impossible to measure longitude precisely, so for much of its history it was a 'line of anticipation' (Monmonier, 2010, p.52), but nonetheless powerful in the geographic imagination. Other examples abound, e.g. the 1916 Sykes-Picot line (agreed by Britain and France - see Figure 2) which continues to have an influence in Middle East politics (Barr, 2011).

Figure 2 - Sykes Picot Agreement Map signed 8 May 1916

China's *U*-shaped line can be seen as a special case of cartographic precedent. It is critical to competing geostrategic discourses in the Indo-Pacific realm. As Kaplan (2014) notes, the East Asian seascape is one of the most important hinge points for war or peace facing the world. The *U*-shaped line clearly represents Chinese claim to much of the SCS, but its specific meaning is ambiguous (US Dept. of State, 2014):

> 'China has not clarified through legislation, proclamation or other official statements the legal basis or nature of its claims associated with the dashed-line map' (p.1)

A history of the line is important to understanding how its circulation and *re*-presentation in the news media may operate within popular geopolitical discourse. This paper adopts the term '*U*-shaped line' for the cartographic feature under discussion, however, it is also known as the 'dashed line', including specific versions depending on the number of dashes adopted by China (e.g. 'nine dash line').

First issued by the Kuomintang (Guomindang) government of China in 1947, the *U*-shaped line was adopted by The People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 (and retained by the nationalist government in Taiwan). The 1947 map (see figure ?) shows the line as eleven widely spaced dashes running from the Gulf of Tonkin, extending south to enclose the Paracel Islands, before describing a loop that takes in most of the SCS including the Spratley Islands, turning north (close to mainland Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines), taking in Scarborough Shoal, and terminating in the Philippine Sea. The dashes are the same line-weight as the line used to show international boundaries on land, with the first dash in the Gulf of Tonkin attached to the land boundary.

A Sino-Vietnamese agreement of 2000 regarding the Gulf of Tonkin (Amer, 2014) is China's only resolved maritime boundary and led to the removal of two dashes. These appear to have disappeared during the period of negotiation between the two countries, evinced by a Chinese map published in 1999 (Tonnesson, 2000).

The best known version of the map is one attached by China to a diplomatic response (a *notes verbale*) to the UN (May 2009) in protest against a Malaysia-Vietnam submission to the UN Committee on the Limits of Continental Shelf. In their objection China stated the following, and clarifying their claim to the islands:

'China has indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters, and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof (see attached map). The above position is consistently held by the Chinese government, and is widely known by the international community.' (US Dept. of State,2014, unpaginated).

This version of the map led to the wide adoption of the 'nine-dash line' nomenclature. China has subsequently added a tenth dash, which extends the line north between Taiwan and Japan's Ryukyu Island chain, heightening geo-strategic rivalry in the region (De Castro, 2013). This version caused controversy when used as part of a map printed in Chinese passports in 2012 (Graham, 2013).

While the persistent use of the *U*-shaped line clearly contains a message concerning sovereignty it is not altogether clear what this entails. The US Department of State (2014) suggests several interpretations. It notes that China's claims are basically of two types, claims to land and to the sea. China's position is clear with regard to the islands, over which it claims 'indisputable sovereignty', but its position regarding maritime claims is less clear.

'If the dashed line is intended to depict a unilateral maritime boundary claim, this interpretation also does not address the related question of what kind of rights or jurisdiction China is asserting for itself within the line. The dashed line, to be consistent with international law, cannot represent a limit on China's territorial sea (and, therefore, its sovereignty), as the dashes are located beyond the 12-nm maximum limit of the territorial sea of Chinese-claimed land features. Moreover, dashes 2, 3, and 8 are not only relatively close to the mainland shores of other States, all or part of those dashes are also beyond 200 nm from any Chinese-claimed land feature. The dashed line therefore cannot represent the seaward limit of China's EEZ consistent with Article 57 of the LOS [Law of the Sea] Convention, which states that the breadth of the EEZ "shall not extend beyond 200 nautical miles" from coastal baselines. US Department of State' (2014, unpaginated)

Note: the EEZ's are the 200nm (nautical mile) Exclusive Economic Zones defined by UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on Law of the Seas)

The report suggests three different interpretations of Chinese intentions; first, the line encompasses the islands and the maritime zones, under the Law of the Sea Convention, over which China claims sovereignty; second, it designates a national boundary line; or third, it indicates limits of historic maritime claims of varying types. The matter is made difficult by

inconsistencies in placement and spacing of the dashes, for example, between the 1947 and 2009 maps (see US Dept. of State (2014) map 5).

Other commentators have addressed the implications of the line. Keyuan (2012) suggests that China may be using it as the basis for a future claim over continental shelves (200m isobath), to 'historical rights', and as a counter-measure against rival claims. He notes that a change in number of dashes is indicative that the *U*-shaped line is being used flexibly rather than as an absolute demarcation. Graham (2013) also believes that China is deliberately seeking to preserve a sense of ambiguity, but notes that some Chinese commentators, aware of the inconsistency 'between China's UNCLOS obligations and a maximalist interpretation of the nine-dash line as a territorial enclosure' (p5), are seeking to reassure the wider world; for example, he quotes Gao Zhiguo (China's appointee to the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea) as suggesting that the line has three clear meanings; title to island groups, historic rights to fisheries, navigation and other marine activities, and a basis for potential maritime delimitation lines. Gao and Jia (2013) very clearly state that the line has 'foundation in international law' (p98), and, that although based on 'customary law', does not contradict China's UNCLOS obligations.

In geopolitical terms, what is important is how the line is perceived in the West and how this might affect policy and actions. Several ideas have been suggested for what has been characterised as China's recent 'assertive' behaviours in the SCS. The most obvious is that it is a matter of physical security, staking claim to energy and biological resources (Bräutigam and Xiaoyang, 2012). Xu (2014), for example, notes that 'half a billion people who live within 100 miles of the South China Sea coastline. The need for resources … has intensified economic competition in the region, particularly given the rapid coastal urbanization of China'

(unpaginated). Kuok (2014) recognizes physical security as a major issue, but acknowledges the role of nationalism and China's position in world affairs (see discussion below).

For others, defence issues, including protection of strategic waterways and defence of China's 'Caribbean' are regarded as critical; Duchâtel, and Kazakova (2015) note:

> '[t]his dimension is easily overlooked, as the PLA [People's Liberation Army] has never officially mentioned the strategic importance of the SCS for China's future nuclear posture. However, several signs suggest that the PLA's nuclear deterrence strategy provides an important context to understand land reclamation work in the SCS' (unpaginated).

For Storey (2014) resource security and defence issues are both seen as playing an important role. Others believe that China's perceived 'assertiveness' is much more to do with its wish to portray itself as a major power. Curtis (2015), drawing on Mitzen's (2006) concept of 'ontological security' in world politics, makes a strong case that China's wish to secure a strong sense of national identity, to redress 'the century of humiliation' under external powers, may be more important than securing physical resources. Curtis regards Chinese assertiveness in the SCS as part of a wider construction of itself as the natural leader of Asia.

While drawing on these explanations for China's behaviour the Western press tends to present China as a potential threat, part of a long-term journalistic representation of China and other states (e.g. Japan) through an 'orientalist' lens; for example, see Yang (2016) on China, 'fiscal Orientalism', and the 'spectacle of (US) national debt'. Edward Said (1978) describes 'orientalism' as:

'[T]he corporate institution of dealing with the Orient - by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, the Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient' (p.3)

Orientals are cast as *living by different rules* (Said, 1987). This 'othering' is generated by contrast with Western ideologies and institutions (Said, 1993). Liss (2003) has characterised US press depictions of China as 'refuting those principles and values that compose the American way of life' (p.317). Liss regards this discourse of 'threat' as a growing problem for policy makers who believe engagement with China is crucial. Ban *et al*., (2013) also discuss media responses to China. Adopting Peng's (2004) phases of media conceptualisation of China, from 'Red', through 'Green' and 'dark', to 'grey China', they characterise the latter phase (post-1992) as one of unpredictability in US-China relations (the ambiguity of the *U*-shaped line plays to this agenda). They suggest that orientalist notions of China remain underpinned by stereotypic understandings of 'Confucian values', and reflect Huntington's (2002) 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis. Huntington (2013) rehearses his orientalist 'othering' in a recent article '…the central Western value going back centuries is individualism. That is the value that Asian societies have never really held very central. That is the constant in the conflict between our two civilizations.' (p.47). Ban *et al*. (2013) argue that China has been presented 'as a place with lack of respect for international laws and conventions' (p.290), as 'deviant' in the economic arena. The same is clearly evident in media coverage of China in the SCS. Fisher's (1950a and b) 'oriental geopolitics', focused on pre-WWII Japan, could easily be transposed to current projections of China's 'assertiveness', and increasing 'militarisation of the maritime realm' (e.g. reportage of its first overseas military base in Djibouti, 2017).

'All the world's a stage' - news, maps and the *U*-shaped line

Within a framework that regards spectacle as a form of control, the news media are important. Monmonier (1989) notes '…the news media are society's most significant cartographic gatekeeper and its most influential geographic educator'. While this might be regarded as a benign role, it is a position of power with regard to the formation of geographical imaginations. One has only to open a newspaper, especially the 'international news' section, to be confronted with *spectacle* - dramatic headlines, vivid photographs and graphics. The tendency to 'infotainment' has grown in recent years, supported by technologies that can rapidly produce ever more rhetorical, complex and theatrical 'infographics' (Tufte, 2006) The aim of spectacle is not to inform, but to entertain or, in the case of threat, *overawe*.

To understand how graphics 'work' as rhetorical devises in popular geopolitics one has to understand the grammar of visual design (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996), for example the difference between what is 'denoted' and what 'connoted', and how specific connotations can be constructed using a variety of graphic conceits. This becomes particularly important in relation to the 'spectacle of fear' and threat discourse, where graphic devices, such as the use of specific colours or 'dynamic symbols' can trigger particular warning associations. As well as understanding how individual graphics 'work', the order and layout of titles, text, photographs and infographics on the page are also important.

The role of maps in news media discourse concerning the *U*-shaped line may be examined in two fundamental ways, first, the connotations contained in the graphic itself - its immediate impact, and second, how this forms part of a wider intertextual environment; i.e. how it

supports a wider orientalist conception - China as assertive ('bullying'/'aggressive') and unwilling to 'play by the rules':

> 'Can diplomacy and negotiation still persuade Beijing to *step back and follow the rules*, or will a bit more pressure need to be applied? …Australia is very much in the game. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has avoided making any kinds of threats, preferring instead to remind China that its own interests are overwhelmingly served *by obeying the rules.*' Sydney Morning Herald, *Making Mischief in the South China Sea,* 16 July 2016[1] (emphasis added).

The 2014 survey of news maps indicates that the SCS region is a major geo-strategic concern, with 21.2% of all the maps in theme B4 (Table 1) were devoted to China's maritime disputes in the SCS and the ECS (specifically air defence identification zones, above the contested Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, administered by Japan). If maps of Arctic navigation routes with explicit reference to China's energy security are added the figure rises to 23.1%.

The following examination of *news* maps of the SCS (and ECS) takes as its starting point the 2014 survey, drawing on additional maps published up to and including 2017. All of the maps are drawn from elite news providers. While the 2014 survey was based on hard-copy, other news maps were gathered using searches of on-line versions of newspapers and weekly/monthly news magazines (e.g. *The Economist* (UK)). The examination focuses on a 'Western' perspective, including news providers from France (6), Germany (7) and the US (9), as well as two 'Western aligned' regional powers, Australia (4) and India (6), with a major stake in the Indo-Pacific arena. In addition to the 2014 survey UK publications (7), four other UK news providers (*The Economist*, *New Statesman*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily Mirror*) are included.

In total 90 maps from 43 publications are examined. Examples of different aapproaches to mapping are given in table 2.

: Typography of media maps of the *U*-shaped line.

Several design features appear to be important to how China's 'assertive' claims in the SCS are presented and the extent to which these are emphasised over the claims of other littoral states. This is generally based on visual *emphasis,* created by choice of specific colour and/or line-weight relative to the other claims (if shown at all).

All of the newspapers sampled (2014 survey) produced at least one map related to contested air/sea-space in the SCS or ECS (total 22). *The Financial Times* (*FT*) produced the most, with seven displaying the *U*-shaped line (all in the 'nine-dash' form). All of the *FT* maps consistently showed *only* the Chinese claim despite the fact that some stories discussed UNCLOS and EEZ claims of other states. All the maps showed the line in red, with two incorporating graphics displaying the strength of China's navy (in one case comparing it with the Philippines). While care must be taken in assigning connotations to colour use in maps, red is usually regarded as a sign of 'threat' or 'danger' (see discussion below), and the text generally focused on China as 'assertive' and 'stoking' regional tensions, lending credence to such connotations.

Of the other newspapers that included the *U*-shaped line in maps during early 2014, *The Times* (16 May 2014), focusing on China's assertive stance, showed it as a solid bright red line in contrast to the Vietnamese claim in blue (same line-weight). The line overlies and appears to engulf the Vietnamese claim, although the latter's claim 'encroaches' on those made by

both Malaysia and The Philippines (not shown). In contrast, *The Guardian* (18/07/2014) chose to show the line as the formal nine-dashes in blue, but in contrast to Vietnam's 200nm EEZ based on uncontested territory, rather than showing Vietnam's claim to a *much* larger contested area. The article was relative neutral in tone, although it did report the US as accusing China of "gluttonous, naked aggression" (p,25).

With respect to the ECS and contested air defence zones between Japan and China, it is worth noting that the Chinese Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) was shown as red in all instances, in contrast to Japan (usually in blue). The unilateral declaration of China's air zone was regarded as bringing 'the region closer to the perilous "miscalculation" long feared by defence analysts' and 'a more daring assertion of [China's] national ambition' (Lewis, 2013, p.52). As well as showing the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (on which the contested air zones are partly based), several maps also show the Chunxiao/Shirabaaka oilfield that lies within the contested area.

Of the UK news providers publishing maps of the SCS up to 2017, almost all show the line in red, exceptions being the *Daily Mirror*, which used a heavy, solid blue line, and a very specific instance in *The Sunday Times* (31/05/2015) where the line is white against a red background. The latter is probably the most spectacular news map of the line published in recent years. It accompanied an article entitled 'US builds up arms at sea to halt China' (Sheridan, 2015, p. 28). The map is centre of a full-page graphic[2] in which the red of the Chinese national flag 'bleeds' into the contested sea, only shown blue beyond the first island-chain where it becomes the 'sky' to a graphic of a Chinese ballistic missile. The graphic includes photographs of Chinese military personnel and hardware, as well as 'before' and 'after' aerial photographs

of Fiery Cross Reef, one of the locations where China is building 'islands' - the so-called 'Great Wall of Sand'.

In terms of visual grammar, *The Sunday Times* image operates as a triptych, a specific example of spatial framing discussed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996); the left-hand element (often a photograph) usually represents a 'given' (cause), the right-hand element (again, often a photograph) represents 'new' (effect), while the central element acts as a 'mediator' - often constructed as 'conceptual pictures with abstract or scientific modality' (p.216), a graph, plan, or map that explains the transformation from 'given' to 'new'. In this case the photo of Chinese military personnel (wearing shades - a signifier of opaqueness), backed by the Chinese flag and photograph of a destroyer, represents the 'given' - China as military threat. The 'new' is a graphic of a 'launched' missile (caption: 'The DF-21 is a ballistic missile that threatens America's aircraft carriers'), its launched state indicating heightened regional tensions. The map and the two aerial photographs ('objective record' of island building), act as mediators - evidence of China's militarisation of the SCS.

The image is clearly constructed as threat discourse with the Chinese characterised as 'demonstrating a willingness to tolerate a higher level of regional tension' (p.28). The article mentions fisheries and mineral reserves, but focuses on China as an assertive regional-power. While more visually dramatic than most, the image contains most of the visual referents associated with the SCS and plays to the geopolitical discourse of the 'Thucydides trap', the belief that a rising-power will almost inevitably come into conflict with the current hegemonic power (Er, 2016). Jonathan Fenby's (2016) *New Statesman* article tells a very similar story and

is explicit about the danger of the Thucydides trap. The article contains an example of the *U*-shaped line shown as heavy, multi-dashed red line.

It is interesting to compare these with an article by John Pilger (2016); he reminds readers that '[t]oday, more than 400 American bases encircle China with missiles, bombers, warships and nuclear weapons' (p.13), his words are accompanied by a satellite image of the Indo-Pacific region showing these bases - a reverse of the common threat images in which China is portrayed as the danger.

Variations occur, but the general trend is emphasis of Chinese claims, even where competing claims are shown. Examples of the latter include *Daily Telegraph* (26/0502016) and *Independent* (28/10/2015); both show competing claims using coloured lines of equal weight. The former extends China's line beyond the tenth-dash, while the latter erroneously extends China's line into the Gulf of Tonkin, the one area of maritime agreement between Vietnam and China (basis of the removal of two dashes from the 1947 map). The claims are all shown either as a contiguous line of small dots or a solid line. The BBC is unusual in publishing several different versions of the *U*-shaped line, one using the 'nine-dash' format with the dashes in red, one showing it as a near contiguous line of small red dashes, and one with a solid line in blue. The Chinese claim is often contrasted with the EEZs of other littoral states (based on current undisputed territory and shown in blue) rather than their extensive claims based on disputed islands.

Examination of the maps published in other Western states show similarities with UK maps, but also some significant 'local' variations. It should be noted that not all news providers

(including UK) produce their own maps, but may use graphics produced by news agencies (e.g. Agence France-Presse (AFP)) or graphics agencies (e.g. Graphic News Ltd). *La Croix* and *Humanite* (FRA), *The Daily Mail* (AUS and UK), and *The Hindustan Times* (IND), all use graphics provided by AFP. Others have their own very distinctive house style; e.g. *The Economist* (UK).

The US press almost invariably uses red to represent the *U*-shaped line (*The Diplomat* uses green), and all adopt China's dashes, although in one case (a graphic used by both the *Washington Times* and the *LA Times*) the dashes are joined by a thin red line. CNN and the *Huffington Post* used a solid red line, which also leads them to extend the line into the Gulf of Tonkin. Conversely, every Australian news provider used a solid red line or a dense series of dashes. The *Sydney Morning Herald* was the nearest to US usage and the formal recognistion of the dashes as portrayed by China. It showed China's dashes in red, but still joined them with a grey line of the same line-weight[3] (Figure 4) creating an element of direct closure.

Figure 4: Map of the *U*-shaped line from the Sydney Morning Herald, 12 July 2016 (with kind permission of Fairfax Syndication

The tendency in the German and French press, like the UK, is *to close the line*. The German press uses a solid line or near contiguous dots/dashes, effectively closing the line (e.g. *Frankfurter Allgemeine, Bayernkurier, Die Welt, Der Spiegel*). The French are the most extreme, the use of red is pervasive, and the line is always solid or composed of near contiguous dots/dashes. Only one, *Liberation,* shows the Chinese dashes (all ten), but these are still 'closed' by adding a narrower red line that extends into the Gulf of Tonkin and into the disputed East Sea. *Le Figaro* and *La Monde* go a step further and add a colour fill to the

sea *within* the *U*-shaped line; in several cases this is 'pink', an 'organic' visual metaphor, perhaps playing on the 'cow's-tongue' parody of the *U*-shaped line adopted by protestors against China's claims. India is the most variable, with examples using the nine-dashes (or, in the case of the *Deccan Chronicle* with eight dashes that do not correspond with any Chinese version) through to a solid red line in *The Economic Times*.

How do these various representations 'work' in terms of spectacle and impact on popular geopolitics? What, if any, is their role in 'othering' China within an orientalist discourse? These graphics appear to work at several levels in terms of the geographic imagination. The issues in the SCS (and ECS) are not an immediate threat to Europe, but taken together with other tensions, particularly those related to North Korea, and with China's rising power, they do constitute a part of a developing threat discourse, positioning of the region as a potential arena of conflict between major powers - the Thucydides trap. For the US, Australia and India, as Indo-Pacific powers, the issue is more pressing. India has been welcomed by ASEAN states as an active player in the SCS, sending ships there and supporting 'freedom of navigation' operations. Conversely China is concerned about India's oil exploration initiatives with Vietnam in what it regards as its waters (Hong, 2013).

'Seeing red' - colour and connotation

In terms of graphic design the use of red provides the most overt means by which China's claims are presented as threat. The use of colour to stimulate specific connotations is well documented. Monmonier (1991) discusses the use of colour in propaganda, but notes that 'even if no deliberate manipulation is intended, because of the embedded emotions or

cultural conditioned attitudes some colors [sic] carry subtle added meaning' (p.153). Black (1997) provides numerous cartographic examples of red as connoting danger/threat. Barney (2018) notes: '[t]he ubiquitous 'red' splashed all over the pages of the wartime and post-war *Time*/*Life* maps was also a signature, able to capture the increasing fears of expansions, interventions, and infiltrations of the global world.' (p.177).

There can be little doubt that red is used to connote threat, especially when associated with text that focuses on China's 'assertiveness/aggressiveness', or 'bullying'. Maps where the area within the *U*-shaped line is infused with 'pink' reinforce the spectacle of threat (as well as the French examples discussed above, this device has also been used by *The Economist* (UK) and CNN (US)).

Power of the 'trace'

Another significant feature of many Western news maps is the tendency to 'fill in' the widely-spaced dashes of the Chinese original - to complete the *U*. The Chinese maps retain their ambiguity while at the same time benefitting from 'reification' (gestalt theory) in which an image *appears* to contain more spatial information than actually presented. In the case of the dashed-line, the viewer readily identifies the widely-spaced dashes as belonging to a single *U* shape. The Western representations, however, turn this from a tentative trace to a bold 'shape', with penetrative capability.

Ingold offers some useful thoughts on the power of the 'trace'. He reminds us that while a trace, such as a loop will have been created by a movement of a hand holding a pen (or stylus/mouse), the resultant figure may be interpreted as either a trajectory or static perimeter (Ingold, 2008). The latter 'captures and 'contains' space, the former moves through it. Ingold (2007) argues that if the line appears gestural, the eye will follow the path the hand drew. The tendency of the Western press to complete the line and in numerous cases extend it into the Gulf of Tonkin tends to reinforce the image of a perimeter. Ingold also contrasts the complete trace with the line as a series of dispersed points (or dashes), which he argues is 'the quintessence of the static' (p.73). This makes sense in terms of China's representation - it holds its breath leaving others to determine its meaning, while at the same time the effect of 'reification' infers the *U*, reinforcing the sense of ambiguity. China leaves the work of turning this figure into something more dynamic and aggressive to others. As Edward Tufte (2006) notes, 'links' (lines, traces) should provide specifics - 'identical links should only be used if identical processes operate everywhere' (p.79). Again, China's dashes leave the intent equivocal, adopting the symbology of an international boundary, but deliberately fragmenting it and changing the number/positioning of the dashes through time.

It is interesting to speculate about the motivation behind the West's decisions to 'complete' the *U*. Is this an attempt to undermine China's deliberate ambiguity by firmly representing its claim? '*See - this is what China wants!*' Or is it simply to help their readers to 'picture' the total extent of the claim? In either case it reinforces a *definitive space* in the geographic imagination, and contributes to cartographic precedent. The almost universal reference in news stories (and some maps) to one version of the *U*-shaped line ('nine-dash'), also tends to emphasise stability (which is not the case) thereby falling into the 'reification fallacy' of

treating an abstraction on a map as if it were a real thing. Closure of the line creates a sense of exclusion; a hard 'boundary' not connoted by China's dashes, and at the same time releases it from stasis by signifying a 'gesture' - a dynamic line. China's maps fit well with its current attempt to portray itself as globalist, seeming to advocate open-trade and free-movement of goods; in this interpretation China *does* have contemporary interests in the SCS, but this should be seen in context of increasing globalization. It can be seen as part of a wider strategy portrayed as 'peaceful rise' (Bijan, 2011; He and Feng, 2014; Zhang, 2015). China is inherently dependent on open sea lanes throughout the Indo-Pacific realm for its oil supplies and for its trade with other states. The 'dashed line' works well as a visual metaphor for this.

Closure by the press generates a firm 'organic' image of the *U*-shaped line and a visual sense of 'penetration' - both concepts long associated with the vocabulary and imagery of geopolitics. The constant repetition leads to the naturalisation of the organic metaphor. The organic concept of the state has a long history (e.g. Hobbes' *Leviathan*), but for the purposes of this study, it is the version influenced by Friedrich Ratzel, the 'father of political geography', that provides an appropriate origin. Raztel drew on Darwin to suggest that states, like organisms, thrive or fail as they compete for resources ('land-greed') with other states (Flint and Taylor, 2011). Since the mid-twentieth century global institutions have created relative stability around inviolability of state boundaries, however, in this century 'sea-greed' is, emerging as a key issue. Conflict often hinges on disputed islands.

'Penetration' can imply the acquisition of territory, but is also associated with sinister extension of influence. The term has generally been deployed with strong negative connotations, for example, the Harmsworth *New Atlas of the World* (c.1920) included text

and a double-page map devoted to 'The World - showing Germany's peaceful penetration' (pre-WWI). German influence is shown in acid-yellow, with its negative associations, and financial and diplomatic 'penetration' of German influence is branded as 'insidious' and used to 'spy out opportunities for German aggression' (p490). The British political geographer Charles A. Fisher (1950a) frequently deployed 'penetration' to describe Russian and Japanese expansionism pre-WWII, while ÓTuathail and Agnew (1992) note that during the Cold War 'the image of penetration was frequently evoked' (p.200) to characterise Soviet communism in patriarchal, sexualised and 'savage' terms. They also note that:

'The image of the *Red flood* was a particularly powerful element in fascist mythology during the inter-war period' and '[s]uch an image is easily reinforced by appropriate cartographic visuals featuring bleeding red maps of the USSR spreading outwards, or menacingly *penetrating* arrows' (p.201, emphasis added).

Clearly several elements are combined in Western representation of the *U*-shaped line to reinforce a threat discourse and image of penetration. This is especially evident in the 'phallic' format where the *U*-shape is strongly outlined in red; at once a signifier of vitality and menace. This is particularly powerful in French representations which resemble penises, the island of Hainan a testicle (*Le Figaro* and *Le Monde*).

Carto-Orientalism

The discussion above has focused on the *U*-shaped line as a specific element of news maps. To fully understand maps as threat spectacle requires an understanding of how this interacts

with other elements of the map. Three types of map dominate the news media representation. First, those showing only the *U*-shaped line, second, those that contrast the line with the EEZ of China and other littoral states (based on undisputed territorial base-lines), and third, maps that contrast the *U*-shape line with the *extended claims* of the other states. Each of these support orientalist portrayals of China.

The use of the *U*-shaped line alone emphasises 'assertiveness', with the connotations associated with colour and shape creating a sense of aggressive penetration. This represented about a third of all the maps. *The Financial Times*, for example, uses this very effectively to support several articles in 2014 that focused on China's growing navy and ability to project power regionally. While simple and effective in displaying China's claim, these lack, the nuances of the other types of map.

The second type is more subtle, representing about a tenth of the maps which include the *U*-shaped line. It provides a clear contrast between current 'legal' claims under UNCLOS and China's extended claim. The former are often shown in pale blue, thereby emphasising the red *U*-shaped line. This positions China as clearly 'unwilling to follow the rules'; for example, its unwillingness to accept the judgement of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PAC), which, in 2016;

> 'concluded that, to the extent China had historic rights to resources in the waters of the South China Sea, such rights were extinguished to the extent they were incompatible with the exclusive economic zones provided for in the Convention. The Tribunal also noted that, although Chinese navigators and fishermen, as well as those of other States, had historically made use of the *islands* in the South China Sea, there was no evidence that China had

historically exercised exclusive control over the *waters* or their resources. The Tribunal concluded that there was *no legal basis* for China to claim historic rights to resources within the sea areas falling within the 'nine-dash line'. (Press-release, PCA (2016), pp.1-2).

About half the maps that displayed the *U*-shaped line did so within the context of the other extended claims. This approach lends itself most obviously to a 'spectacle of threat' discourse; Kaplan's (2014) turbulent seascape. An orientalist ('realist') discourse pitches China as the main threat within an unsettled system of competing states; the 'tangle' of lines a powerful metaphor of 'sea-greed'. The maps reinforce the concept of the state as an organism - grappling with each other for sovereignty. A specific example from *The Economist* (12 July 2016[4]), which shows the complex knot of claims, supports the rhetoric of the accompanying article:

'The South China Sea has long been one of the world's most coveted waterways. Seven different countries—counting Taiwan, which is itself claimed by China—assert sovereignty over overlapping portions of its waters. The last time waxing and waning tension spilled over into serious conflict was in 1988, when Vietnam lost over 70 lives in a skirmish with China in the Spratly archipelago.' (unpaginated)

The general use of heavy line weight and/or careful choice of colour hierarchy in these maps means that China's claim is usually visually dominant.

Conclusion

In general, the tendency is for the Western press to represent China's interests in the SCS as 'assertive' and 'acquisitive', underpinned by a 'realist' view of international relations. Focusing on aggressive competition (sea-greed) may, however, be counterproductive. A danger is that the more nuanced perspectives of some commentators are side-lined. 'Idealist' concepts of international relations that focus on cooperation may be precluded by characterising China as 'not playing by the rules'. This orientalist view of China has a long history, with its roots in the nineteenth century. Said (1993) argues, the way 'we formulate or represent the past shapes our understanding of the present.' (p.2); his discussion of the conflicting world-views that brought the West, specifically the US, into conflict with Iraq (Gulf-War 1990-91) might equally apply to the situation in the SCS. He characterised the Iraqi view as one of Arab history unrealised and full independence 'a promise traduced by 'the West'' (p.3). This provided the basis for righting the wrongs of imperialism. The US, meanwhile, then (and now) casts itself as 'a righter of wrongs, against tyranny and defending freedom.' (p.3). It does not take much imagination to see parallels with China's need to ensure its ontological security by reversing the 'century of humiliation' and re-claiming its position as a great civilisation (De Castro, 2012), and the US position on 'Freedom of Navigation' in the SCS and ECS. Care must be taken in accepting the rhetoric of each side.

The role of news maps in these contested world-views is crucial to an understanding of the dynamics of the SCS. The contest for a hold on the geographical imagination is ultimately between a Chinese cartographic metaphor of a permeable maritime zone which it seeks to control, from which it can defend itself and project power at times of need, and a Western 'orientalist' vision of the *U*-shaped line ('dynamic', 'penetrative') as evidence of an assertive state seeking to establish sovereignty at the expense of its neighbours and internationalist arrangements. The *U*-shape line is in many cases over-emphasised to connote danger and

reference older organic metaphors of the state revived in a new narrative of 'sea-greed'. In almost all cases the Chinese claim to maritime resources is emphasised at the expense of other claims.

In terms of lessons for cartographers and graphic artists working for news media outlets, it is important that they consider how emphasis in such matters as line-weight or colour can create unwanted or confusing connotations. If the maps are supposed to provide an objective image allowing mature assessment of the situation by the readership, then many clearly fail. The issue then becomes, is this deliberate? Comparison with 'orientalist' narratives of the accompanying text suggests it may be. In other cases, it may just be lack of care, with the U-shaped line being emphasised as the core element of the story. Where a cartographer is attempting to provide an objective rendering, all claim lines or other boundaries (e.g. the EEZs) should be given the same line weight, and if colour is needed to distinguish between nations, care should be taken not to introduce bias by poor attention to the visual hierarchy of colour.

It is as yet unclear how this narrative will play out. If the Western image of the *U*-shaped line creates a sense of inevitability in terms *de facto* Chinese control of its 'Caribbean', then China's deliberate ambiguity will have worked to its advantage. If, however, the West, specifically the US and regional powers feel threatened by the rise of China (Turner, 2016), then it could prove disastrous. As China takes the initiative in the liberal globalist project through schemes like its 'New Silk Road' (One Belt, One Road), the SCS may prove an Achilles heel. The West has raised suspicions about China's Indo-Pacific interests, for example, seeing Chinese sponsored civil port facilities in the Indian Ocean (the 'String of Pearls') as a 'Trojan horse' for militarisation (Ramadhani, 2015). Under current conditions, an incident between China and any of the other key players could trigger for the 'Thucydides trap'.

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