

The Limits of “Assertive” Behavior: U.S.-China Relations and the South China Sea

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Throughout 2010 and into 2011, disputes in the South China Sea were at the forefront of regional tensions involving China, the United States, and neighboring countries. The focal point of such tensions was the 2010 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum where the United States along with ASEAN countries confronted China over its “assertive” behavior in the South China Sea. This episode demonstrated clearly the troubled situation in the South China Sea and the potential for conflict in East Asia. Robert D. Kaplan, writing on how the issue will be a major challenge for the future, states that “Just as German soil constituted the military front line of the Cold War, the waters of the South China Sea may constitute the military front line of the coming decades.” (Kaplan 2011)

Tensions though soon eased toward the end of 2010 and the mood at the 2011 ASEAN Regional Forum meeting was markedly different. It was more conciliatory as an agreement was struck between China and ASEAN countries to resolve their disputes. Even with tensions mounting again between China and Vietnam over the South China Sea during May and June of 2011, the two sides eventually came to an agreement to resolve differences.

What can be understood from these two divergent approaches by Beijing to the South China Sea issue? It is expected that from 2012, China will approach the South China Sea issue through a mixture of assertive and conciliatory approaches. With the emergence of a new leadership in the Communist Party, new policies will be framed and developed. In recognizing the limits of assertive policies, while also not wishing to ease too much on their territorial claims, the new leadership will pursue a policy that fuses the divergent approaches of 2010 and 2011. Crucial to interpreting the new policy for the future, this U.S.-China Relations Series Brief attempts to understand why China’s position shifted over the South China Sea issue. That is why Beijing went from an “assertive” stance to a more restrained or “constructive” one, seeking dialogue rather than further tensions. Power-transition theory can help to understand the direction in which China is going in terms of the limits rising powers face. This Brief shows that because of the way Beijing characterizes the dispute and its naval strategy, a more ambiguous approach can be expected when compared to other areas of dispute, such as Taiwan or even the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

Conflicting Interests in the South China Sea

China shares its land border with 14 countries yet has relatively few ongoing territorial disputes with them. By contrast, China has multiple maritime disputes with its neighbors in the region, particularly in the South



China Sea. The Spratly Islands are at the heart of this dispute. While China claims all the islands, it is disputed by Malaysia, Philippines, and Vietnam. Furthermore, to the north of the Spratlys are the Paracel Islands that China seized from Vietnam in 1974 and are hotly contested. Along with the island disputes, Beijing claims much of the South China Sea as its Economic Exclusive Zone (EEZ). Based on historical and cultural arguments, China believes its claims to the South China Sea are solid. Although this dispute involves multiple countries, Beijing has refused to deal with the matter multilaterally. Rather the Chinese government prefers to resolve the dispute bilaterally and without the involvement of outside parties.

The United States has a number of concerns about the South China Sea dispute, not just for peace and stability in the region, but for the freedom of navigation in one of the world's busiest and strategically-important waterways. It would seem that from 2010 the United States increased pressure on China over the South China Sea issue when it appeared to U.S. officials that Beijing was taking on a more assertive approach. (Pomfert 2010) In the past, China and the United States have had a number of conflicts over the South China Sea issue which has mainly related to the definition of the EEZ. For example, Washington challenges Beijing's view that military vessels passing through its EEZ must give notice and that surveillance activities are illegal. (Swaine and Fravel 2011, p11) This has led to some notable clashes over the years, such as the EP-3 spy plane incident in 2001 and USNS *Impeccable* incident in 2009 where Chinese fishing trawlers harassed a navy surveillance ship.¹ The *Impeccable* incident shows how China has been using coercive diplomacy in this regard to get its message across. That message was for the United States to halt its surveillance activities in waters around China that were viewed as highly provocative. (Mastro 2011)

The more active policies by the United States toward the South China Sea issue can also be understood as part of its "return" to Asia approach under the Obama administration. As wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down, Washington is now shifting its focus back to East Asia, the region that it has identified as the most important for the twenty-first century.² Some countries in the region have welcomed this reengagement, in particular Vietnam which has tried to internationalize the South China Sea dispute much to China's opposition. The culmination of this was the ASEAN Regional Forum in July 2010. At that meeting Secretary of State Clinton took the lead in pressuring China over its assertive policy toward the South China Sea. (Landler 2010) At the meeting, Clinton stated that "the United States, like every nation, has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea."³ Beijing interpreted this as U.S. intervention and characterized it as an "attack" on China.⁴ One year later, at the following ASEAN Regional Forum the mood was friendlier. China and ASEAN countries agreed on guidelines to implement the Declaration of Conduct, an agreement originally reached in 2002 that outlined measures to resolve the South China Sea dispute. Although a non-binding agreement, the move signaled a less "assertive" approach by China.

In some respects the issue of the South China Sea addresses the nature of China's rise and power-transition theory in this regard provides us with an analytical framework. Power-transition theory tells us that a rising power will seek to challenge the established power as it become dissatisfied with the international system that it sees as favoring the hegemon. As a rising power in this regard, China would be expected to forcefully assert its claims in the South China Sea issue and seek to challenge the United States. However, its actions have been more restrained as it has sought dialogue and accommodation.



Is the South China Sea a “core interest”?

In order to understand China’s position, a close analysis is required of how the Chinese leadership characterizes the issue from the perspective of a “core interest.” Much has already been said about the importance of “core interests” in U.S.-China relations. Among the major issues in the bilateral relationship, Tibet, Taiwan, and human rights can be considered to be main areas of potential conflict. This is due to the way in which China has officially defined them as “core issues.” Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Dai Bingguo at the 2009 U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue stated three areas which constitute China’s core interests; its “basic system” and national security, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and economic and social sustained development.⁵ These points were further clarified in a recent white paper on China’s peaceful development. “Core interests” were defined as including “state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity, and national unification, China’s political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability, and the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development.”⁶ This broadly covers the basic elements of China’s economic development and rise as well as the country’s own unity. Currently, only Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, and human rights have been officially stated as a “core interest.” Beijing’s general approach to these issues has been a nonnegotiable stance, to the extent that it would even be willing to consider the use of force if seriously challenged. (Swaine 2011a) The question is then whether the South China Sea dispute is also regarded by Beijing as a “core interest.” So far, Beijing has not publically declared the South China Sea as a “core interest.” However, it was reported in early 2010 that China had indeed labeled it as a “core interest.” Secretary of State Clinton herself confirmed this in an interview when she recalled her meeting with Dai Bingguo, “when China first told us at a meeting of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue that they viewed the South China Sea as a core interest, I immediately responded and said we don’t agree with that.”⁷ From this statement we can see that the 2nd Strategic and Economic Dialogue was the moment in 2010 where both sides tough stance clashed over the issue. Clinton’s comments would seem clear that China regards this dispute as a “core interest.” However, China expert Michael Swaine persuasively argues that the South China Sea dispute is not a “core interest” and believes Beijing is in fact being intentionally ambiguous on defining the issue as a “core interest.” (Swaine and Fravel 2011, p10) The Dean of Peking University’s School of International Studies Wang Jisi, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, also believes that “apart from the issue of Taiwan...the Chinese government has never officially identified any single foreign policy issue as one of the country’s core interests.” (Wang 2011, p71) This can be supported when assessing Dai Bingguo’s remarks during the previously mentioned 2010 Strategic and Economic Dialogue where he referred specifically to Taiwan and Tibet as “core interests.”⁸ Certainly if a “core interest” is an issue that China is not willing to negotiate over then its behavior with regard to the South China Sea dispute is certainly not in line with its approach to other issues such as Taiwan or Tibet. In its statements, Beijing has consistently offered to negotiate, albeit bilaterally, with countries that it has a dispute with. And as mentioned before, China reached an agreement on facilitating guidelines to implement the Declaration on Conduct. While not legally-binding agreement, this demonstrates that China has been willing to reach some arrangement with its neighbors.



Is China's Naval Modernization Displacing the United States in the Region?

China's naval strategy is important for understanding its power capabilities, intentions, and whether Beijing is maneuvering to displace the United States from the Western Pacific. Ever since U.S. intervention in the Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1995-96, China has been actively seeking an anti-access/area-denial strategy (A2/AD) to prevent third-party involvement in a Taiwan contingency. To this end, Chinese military planners have conceived of "first and second island chains." The first covers the area from the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, and the South China Sea, while the second spreads out to Guam covering much of the Western Pacific. As Beijing's naval strategy and capabilities moves from coastal defense to area denial, Washington will face more difficult choices about how to respond to contingencies in the region, specifically Taiwan. Some scholars such as Aaron Friedberg believe that this will challenge Washington's strategic position in the region and endanger security commitments to its allies. (Friedberg 2011b)

Deployment of U.S. aircraft carriers during the Taiwan Crisis seems to have certainly precipitated strong interest in developing the DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) that is a one component of Beijing's A2/AD strategy. (Erickson and Yang 2009, p56) Dubbed a "carrier killer," the U.S. Navy now regards that China has initial operational capability of this missile system.⁹ Despite all the media coverage, ASBM is just one area of concern for the United States, as former Chief of Naval Operations Gary Roughead remarked, "the DF 21 is no more an anti-access weapon than a submarine is." (O'Rourke 2011, p81) China's submarine fleet in that respect has modernized greatly, between 1995 and 2005; thirty-one new submarines were commissioned, many of which will be armed with cruise missiles to attack ships and land targets like airfields. (Erickson and Goldstein 2007) Furthermore, China is developing its surveillance capabilities while denying such platforms to others. In 2007, China shot down one of its old weather satellites in a visible display of its anti-satellite capability. At the same time that Beijing has been shooting down satellites, it has also been putting new ones into orbit that could potentially be able to track warship movements in the Pacific and help guide its missiles at U.S. bases. While development of an A2/AD capability may initially be to prevent U.S. involvement in Taiwan, the question is could it be used to displace the United States from the Western Pacific?

Currently, China's strategy does not appear to be an offensive posture aimed at pushing the U.S. Navy out of the region. Firstly, it has not been seeking naval bases overseas that could balance against the United States. Debates among naval strategists in recent years over this issue have shown some interest in some form of overseas basing. Much of this thinking though is driven by a need to support China's growing involvement in peacekeeping, humanitarian, and anti-piracy operations that has been welcomed by the international community. The Chinese leadership's official position though is very much against overseas basing and is unlikely to change. For example, in 2011 Pakistan seemed to offer China the opportunity to open up a naval base at Gwadar to which China politely refused despite the fact that such a base could support its ships on anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden. (Venugopalan 2011) This also highlights another point that China's navy rarely operates outside of its own waters on long-term deployments. (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2010) The few overseas missions are more focused on what Chinese strategists term "operations other than war" which have included peacekeeping, humanitarian contingencies, and evacuation of Chinese citizens as witnessed recently in Libya.¹⁰



Secondly, its extended naval strategy is strongly focused on nontraditional security roles alongside the main focus of maintaining an asymmetrical dominance over Taiwan which includes deterring U.S. intervention but not displacing it. In fact, Beijing's pursuit of an aircraft carrier might have to do with humanitarian missions that can enhance its image in the region as well as traditional combat roles. Glosny and Saunders highlighted that the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami was a turning point in which the Chinese leadership backed the pursuit of an aircraft carrier. (Glosny and Saunders 2009, p167) This would correspond with the first official statements by Chinese leaders in 2006 that China will pursue with the construction of aircraft carriers. (O'Rourke 2011, p26)

China's naval modernization though has raised the costs of U.S. intervention in any conflict over Taiwan. (Holsag 2010, p43) It will be a key priority for the United States going forward to maintain the confidence of its allies in the region that China's military modernization has not weakened its security commitments to the region.

Adjustment in China's Stance

Having identified China's official characterization of the South China Sea dispute and concluded that its naval modernization, is not seeking to push the United States out, the adjustment in its behavior can be better understood. A comparison of Beijing's position in 2010 and 2011 highlights this adjustment well.

In early 2010, China became more "assertive" over its claims on the South China Sea. At the ASEAN Regional Forum, Beijing reacted strongly to what it perceived as the United States ganging up against them with other ASEAN members. Echoing such displeasure of the dispute being internationalized, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi was reported to have said at the meeting that "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact." (Pomfert 2010) Rather than the situation becoming worse, China appeared to ease back from its tough position in the fall of 2010.

When China and Vietnam clashed again in 2011 over the South China Sea, the Chinese government made efforts to ease tensions and resolve the dispute by facilitating a meeting with Vietnamese officials.¹¹ The culmination of these diplomatic activities was that on October 15, 2011, the two sides agreed on a number of measures to enhance cooperation and avoid further conflict including the establishment of a hotline between Beijing and Hanoi. (Xinhua News Agency 2011) Finally, the United States came to recognize that Beijing's approach to the South China Sea was changing. At the East Asia Summit meeting in Bali in November 2011, there was, according to U.S. officials, a more "constructive" response from China on the South China Sea issue as they were pressed by the United States and other countries. (Calmes 2011)

A reflection of the policy debates that took place in China around this time is an editorial from the *Global Times* which appeared on November 3, 2010. Reflecting upon U.S. intervention in maritime disputes in East Asia, the editorial stated "China has to rethink its priorities. Should it keep its focus on increasing trade and the economy, or should it be drawn into a quagmire that hurts both China and its neighbors?" (*Global Times* 2010) Prioritizing positive relations with its neighbors and economic development, the editorial advocates a more flexible approach. In 2011 though, the editorials in the *Global Times* seemed to take a stronger tone, lashing out against the United States and those countries seeking U.S. involvement, such as



Vietnam and the Philippines. One editorial even advocated “tiny-scale battles” against such countries to “teach them a lesson.” (Tao 2011) While these editorials criticize the United States, they are mainly directed at those countries in the region that seek outside intervention in the South China Sea dispute. This reflects Beijing’s diplomacy of negotiating bilaterally without the involvement of outside parties.

These different approaches can be understood as a reflection of the different schools of thought in China toward its international relations. These views range from the realists who favor taking a tougher stand on the South China Sea issue to the so-called “major powers” school who advocate a more accommodating position that would not damage its relations with the United States. Since 2008, the realist school has had a larger voice in the policy making community. (Shambaugh 2011) We can see that toward the end of 2010, the policy debate in China shifted slightly from the realists to the major powers school on the South China Sea issue. Yet the realists still have a powerful voice, backed by public opinion, which is useful for strengthening Beijing’s sovereignty claims and deterring actions by other countries. The sensational editorial in the *Global Times* reflects this. In lieu of declaring the South China Sea as a “core interest,” a move that would seriously damage the notion of peaceful rise, editorials make bold and sharp claims to reinforce the gravity of China’s sovereignty claims. Therefore the Chinese government has taken up a position on this issue that is located between the realists and major powers school and this will be the guide for the next decade under a new leadership.

The “assertive” approach by China in 2010 seemed to follow the pattern of a rising power challenging the international order. Power-transition theory expects a rising power to be dissatisfied with the international system and therefore seek confrontation with the established power to change the system. But this does not explain why China evidently eased its position over the South China Sea. Rather than boldly staking it claims and declaring the issue as a “core interest,” Beijing remained ambiguous about its intentions. Therefore it did not weaken its sovereignty claims while it also avoided further conflict with the United States. An answer to this can be found in the rationalist theory which sees that the rising power more often than not seeks to avoid confrontation and in fact seeks to assure the established hegemon of its benign intentions. (Chan 2008, pp47-48) With time on their side and still benefiting from the current international system, a rising power would be less likely to act as a revisionist state. Therefore, despite its growing power, China continues to benefit from the U.S.-led international order which includes international norms such as freedom of navigation.

Freedom of navigation is as important for China as it is for the United States. As a rising power dependent on resources, it is not in Beijing’s interests to provoke conflict in such a strategic area. With 80% of China’s oil imports coming through the South China Sea, assertive policies that incite tough responses from its neighbors and increased intervention from the United States work against China’s interests. Fermenting conditions that would turn the South China Sea into an armed camp would have a major impact on its own economic development. Already Vietnam has purchased Kilo-class submarines and other advanced military equipment from Russia as well as renewed military dialogue with the United States. This response by Hanoi shows how sensitive and delicate the South China Sea issue is for regional stability and how Beijing must approach this issue carefully. While not wishing to give up on its claims, China has not been willing to push too hard and has been seeking to reassure the United States of its benign intentions.

Recent statements by the Chinese government lend weight to this argument that China is not seeking



to challenge the United States or the international order as they espouse common norms of “stability” and “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea.

The Risk of Nationalistic Drivers

Despite playing tough and rhetoric aside, China has been relatively restrained in the way it has handled disputes in the South China Sea. The “assertive” approaches in 2010 were brought back and eventually Beijing sought to resume dialogue on the issue. As China is not yet seeking to displace the United States from the Pacific and it has not designated the dispute as a “core interest,” a restrained approach can be expected. This indicates that China’s policy over the next decade will be a limited assertive policy in which it engages partners in the region on the South China Sea issue but does not abandon its principles.

Beijing may come to designate the issue as a “core interest.” Were that to happen, the situation could be then expected to turn into a major flashpoint between China, the United States, and ASEAN countries. Proponents of the power-transition theory would argue that China has not yet reached the key 80% mark of U.S. power and as such is binding its time until it will be a challenger. However, the rationalist theory tends to expect that the rising power will have limited intentions. In particular, the rising power will be sensitive about provoking a preventive war in which the established power seeks to maintain its hegemonic status.

The Chinese government though may face a greater challenge over the next decade from domestic pressures. While Beijing is pursuing a path of “peaceful development,” it faces an influential body of domestic opinion that wishes to designate the dispute as a “core interest.” (Swaine 2011) Such opinions will become stronger whenever ASEAN countries involved in the dispute clash with China over claims in the South China Sea. This has been the case with Vietnam where nationalistic tensions are high and have resulted in tough positions from both Beijing and Hanoi. Enhanced dialogue should mitigate any conflict and the two sides have so far been able to manage domestic pressures. However, as seen with the maritime dispute between China and Japan in 2010 where a Chinese ship captain collided with a Japanese Coast Guard vessel creating a diplomatic spat, individuals can sway a country’s foreign policy. As that case showed, it can be very difficult for one country to back down when domestic feelings are strong and the price for making concessions is high. It is prudent then to have in place measures, such as hotlines and regular meetings between maritime officials, which can manage potential conflicts before they are driven by nationalistic sentiments at home. ■



Notes

- ¹ In fact several similar incidents occurred in 2009, see CNN “Pentagon says Chinese vessels harassed U.S. ship,” http://articles.cnn.com/2009-03-09/politics/us.navy.china_1_chinese-ships-chinese-vessels-chinese-media?s=PM:POLITICS and Mastro 2011, p221
- ² For more on the Obama’s policy toward Asia, see Clinton, Hilary. 2011. “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, November, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century?page=full
- ³ Secretary Hilary Clinton, Remarks at Press Availability, July 23, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/07/145095.htm>.
- ⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. 2010 “Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi Refutes Fallacies On the South China Sea Issue,” July 26, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t719460.htm>.
- ⁵ State Councilor Dai Bingguo, Closing Remarks for U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, July 28, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/july/126599.htm>.
- ⁶ The English version of the Chinese government’s white paper on “China’s Peaceful Development” is available at Xinhua News, for the part on “core interests” see http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-09/06/c_131102329_4.htm.
- ⁷ Secretary Hilary Clinton Interview with Greg Sheridan of *The Australian* <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/11/150671.htm>.
- ⁸ Remarks by State Councilor Dai Bingguo at Joint Press Conference of the Second Round of The China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogues, 25 May, 2010, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/zyjh/t705280.htm>
- ⁹ Admiral Willard, commander of U.S. Pacific Command, confirmed this in an interview with *Asahi Shimbun*, see <http://www.asahi.com/english/TKY201012270241.html>
- ¹⁰ For details of China’s evacuation of its citizens from Libya see Collins and Erickson 2011.
- ¹¹ Details of these diplomatic efforts are detailed in Xinhua News Agency. 2011. “China, Vietnam agree to resolve maritime dispute through negotiations,” Xinhuanet, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-06/26/c_13950640.htm and Wong, Edward. 2011. “China and Vietnam Agree to Talks on South China Sea Dispute,” *New York Times*, June 26 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/27/world/asia/27vietnam.html>.



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