

Unmasking China's Assertive Behaviour in the Maritime Sphere

Written by Fareed Amir

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This essay argues that China's assertive behaviour in the South China Sea (SCS) and East China Sea (ECS) is primarily motivated by nationalism and economic interests. China's ability to pursue its desires is a result of its growing economic and military power, combined with the relative decline of the United States. It is best to focus on China's behaviour in the SCS and ECS, as it is in these areas that their public doctrine is being challenged the most. Of course there are other challenges to the peaceful rise rhetoric, such as the 'string of pearls' theory, but these challenges are on a comparatively lower level and include more speculation than evidence. The essay will begin by providing some context to China's rise and how its growing power has allowed it to increasingly act on its interests. Then, the essay will provide some context to the maritime crisis and show that China is not the only assertive player in the disputes. Most importantly, the essay will argue that nationalism and economic interests are the most important motivations that explain China's assertive behaviour at the expense of its public doctrine and relationship with key trading partners. Due to length constraints, one cannot fully explain all of the motivations for China's assertiveness and one key motivation – the rivalry with the U.S. – is not sufficiently explored.

The Context of China's Rise

The context in which China is rising plays a significant role in its ability to act on its claims. China is worth almost 15% of the global economy and in the past year China exported \$2.21 trillion and imported \$1.95 trillion, to make it the largest trading nation in the world and thus China has bypassed the U.S. for the first time as the world's largest trading nation.[1] The military budget, although lagging significantly behind the U.S., is the second largest in the world and grew by 12% last year.[2] The East Asia region in which China faces its biggest challenges has for the first time surpassed Europe in defense spending.[3] Specifically, the region has been spending on naval modernisation, for example, modern submarine forces accounted for 10% of China's submarine force in 2004, but by 2011 they accounted for 50%.[4]

China's attitude towards the United States – which has close ties with many of China's neighbours – has also changed particularly since 2008. The U.S. is seen to be in decline after the financial and psychological costs of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.[5] The 2008 global financial crisis added to the perception of U.S. decline at a time when China continued to grow and further closed the economic gap between its major rivals. Furthermore, Chinese scholars raise the problems of the American's 'crumbling' political institutions that are characterised as dysfunctional and lacking legitimacy.[6] It is in this context, of an economically strong China, militarising region and a declining United States, that China is able to act assertively and feels it needs the naval power to match its international status.[7]

In response to global concerns of China's growing economic and military power, Zheng Bijian – a Chinese Communist Party theoretician – popularised the slogan 'peaceful rise' (*heping jueqi*) in 2005, which was later replaced by the softer term 'peaceful development' (*heping fazhan*).[8] According to Bijian and the Chinese leadership, China's ascendancy was different; China would humbly accept and participate in the existing globalised international system from which it has benefited.[9] However, the language adopted by China is not new, similar principles were found in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence during the 1950s. Although it is important to note

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that the Five Principles were expressed under a different context and excluded the crucial component of global market integration. Ironically, the Five Principles were declared by both India and China before the 1962 Sino-Indian War in which China took full control over the Aksai Chin. Many regional neighbours today, especially Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines fear of similar outcomes in disputed islands in the East and South China Seas.

Excluding maritime issues in the ECS and SCS, the behaviour of China has been relatively peaceful for such a large power. Despite the People's Liberation Army (PLA) commanding the world's largest army with 2.3 million active personnel, China has not been engaged in a major war since the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War. Compared to the other P5 members, this is quite remarkable. Nor has China plundered the natural resources it requires for industrialisation but has paid for them and established friendly relations with their global partners. China has also integrated itself into global institutions, not only is it a member of key international and regional organisations; such as the WTO, APEC, UNSC, but is also "a member of over 100 intergovernmental international organizations" and "party to over 300 international conventions".[10]

Disputes in the Sea

Even in the maritime world, in which China is generally observed to have become increasingly assertive over the past decade, there are instances of cooperation between parties to the various disputes. For example, despite maritime disputes in the ECS between Japan and China, the two countries have come to an agreement to invest and develop existing oil and gas fields in Chunxiao.[11] Moreover, there are also examples of cooperation in the SCS. China has joined the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which makes members legally bound to not use force against other members. Furthermore, China has signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, which although is not legally binding, does soften China's formal 'non-negotiable' stance on the Paracel and Spratly islands as it allows for joint exploration which weakens claims of exclusive sovereignty.

Despite the instances of cooperation between China and its East Asian neighbours, there are many instances of low-level aggressive behaviour that have greatly contributed to regional insecurity. However, it is important to note that there has been an emphasis to use constabulary and law-enforcement agencies to enforce maritime claims and hence an intention to keep the disputes out of the military realm.[12] Furthermore, it is also important to note that the Chinese are not always to blame for escalating tensions. For example, the recent escalation of Sino-Japanese tensions was primarily down to Japanese governor Shintaro Ishihara announcing his desire to purchase the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in 2012.[13] China responded by sending vessels inside the territorial waters of the islands for the first time. At other times China's response is much more excessive. For example, when the Japanese put a Chinese fishing boat captain on trial after he had rammed two Japanese ships near the disputed islands, China responded intemperately. China "went beyond suspending all government talks to arresting four Japanese on spurious charges, withholding or delaying the export of rare earths crucial to Japanese industry and even demanding an apology and compensation".[14]

Chinese officials often declare they have "indisputable sovereignty" over large parts of the South China Sea and that there is "historical and legal backing" to support China's claims.[15] However, China's legal claims seem to be erroneous and their historical claims are weak. The UN Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to which China is a signatory, states that foreign vessels shall be allowed to pass through Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), hence the harassing of foreign navies is against international law.[16] China could only legally justify the harassment of foreign vessels in the South China Sea if it claimed that the nine-dash line – otherwise known as the ox's tongue – represents territorial waters and not their EEZ. Not only is such a claim absurd, it also defies UNCLOS, which states that territorial waters are (usually) within 12 nautical miles from a nation's shore. [17]

Moreover, advocates of China's sovereignty in the South China Sea claim that they are legally supported by UNCLOS because UNCLOS "has shown respect for historical sovereignty".[18] Claims to some parts of the South China Sea are apparently 2,000 years old, however their historical claims are also widely disputed, especially considering that most of the islands have never been inhabited. The Chinese government uses a map inherited in 1947 from the previous regime, in which its demarcations were not internationally recognised and from which the nine-dash line originates.[19] In the East China Sea, China's first official claim to territorial sovereignty over the

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Senkaku/Diaoyu was in 1970, a year after Taiwan – the first party to officially claim the islands – had claimed them. These islands were however occupied by the United States from 1945 to 1972 and handed to Japan afterwards. There is also evidence of Chinese acceptance of Japanese sovereignty prior to the 1970s. For example, before 1970 Chinese research specialists referred to the islands by their Japanese name and according to a 1971 CIA report, the 1966 Red Guard Atlas suggested that the islands were beyond China's borders.[20] Hence, China's historical justifications contain serious weaknesses – as do their legal justifications – and do not strictly justify their rigid sovereignty claims.

Although China's behaviour in the maritime sphere can be reactionary rather than initiatory, their general aggression and assertiveness is not simply a reactionary result. China's assertive posture seems particularly surprising, not only because of its public doctrine, but also because of the many incentives it has to focus its energy elsewhere. Domestically, China has pressing domestic challenges in Tibet and Xinjiang that threaten national unity, which is essential to Chinese territorial integrity and the Communist Parties rule.[21] Regionally, China needs a peaceful East Asia with which it has extensive economic relations with and security challenges that cannot be addressed unilaterally.[22] Globally, China's behaviour in the ECS and SCS damages its trust-building exercise with the world and drives its regional neighbours even more towards its major rival, the United States. There are two primary motivations that explain China's increasing assertiveness; nationalism and economic interests. China's ability to act on their motivations is mainly due to their growing economic and military power combined with the decline of the U.S.

Nationalism Driving Assertiveness

China's extensive sovereignty claims derive not from legal and historical claims, but from the nationalist desires that have increased greatly over the past few decades. Whilst the ruling party's legitimacy to govern used to be based on its supposed adherence to Communist ideology, since Deng Xiaoping's reforms, it has become increasingly difficult to base the right to govern on ideology. Since the 1978 reforms the Chinese Communist Party's rule has "been based on the government's ability to ensure economic growth and rising living standards".[23] Hence, in China "most citizen protests are framed in terms of economic rights" and whenever the leadership feels even modestly threatened, "it has resorted to nationalistic appeals to reassert its hold on the polity".[24]

Naval nationalism, in particular, has been growing and has become increasingly used to enhance the ruling party's prestige. Through the state-run media, issues revolving around the military receive widespread lengthy coverage.[25] For example, antipiracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden, the building and launch of the first aircraft carrier, the introduction of new and improved naval equipment all receive extensive media coverage and widespread support from the public.[26] The navy has always sought to transform itself into a large blue-water navy for reasons beyond nationalism, but now support for their aspirations is in all sectors of Chinese society, including "universities, government think tanks, industrial circles, the political elite, and the general public".[27]

At the core of nationalist justifications for the expansion and development of the navy has derived from the so-called 'lessons from history' arguments that are presented in Chinese nationalist discourse. Chinese scholars refer to Alfred Mahan's theory of sea power and use it to explain historical Chinese defeats. For example, Japan had won the First Sino-Japanese War because "the key to winning that war was to gain the command of the sea".[28] Similarly, China's defeat in the 1839-42 Opium War is also attributed to the decline of naval power.[29] Furthermore, accompanying historical lessons of military battles is the historical 'underdog mentality' that has been espoused in China in the political arena and through the education system. This underdog mentality, which has been fostered by nationalist rhetoric, characterises China as a country that has in the past century not threatened others but has been constantly threatened by other great powers. According to the nationalist narrative, China has been threatened by; the United States through its support for Taiwan and its alliance with South Korea, the Soviet Union during the Sino-Soviet split and Japan which has always strived to become the regional hegemon.[30]

In addition, the nationalist desire for reunification with Taiwan has been also exploited to further China's maritime agenda. By developing its naval capabilities China will be able to "prevent Taiwan from declaring independence while deterring the United States from supporting it with naval deployments in the event of a conflict".[31] U.S. aircraft carrier deployments in 1995 and 1996 remind the leadership of the importance of a strong naval if they are to

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successfully coerce Taiwan into reuniting with the PRC. Moreover, Chinese nationalists see taking over Taiwan as a defensive move, because at the moment Taiwan is viewed as an American aircraft carrier pointing at China.[32]

Thus, China's assertiveness in the sea can be partly explained by the expression of nationalism through the widespread support in China for the military and the navy in particular, as well as the underdog mentality that sees China as a victim of the 'hegemonic' ambitions by other great powers. These circumstances make it difficult for China to empathise with the security fears of its neighbouring states that feel threatened by China's growing navy and its increasingly assertive behaviour. Relations with the Philippines are so poor that recently the Filipino President Benigno Aquino III compared China to Nazi Germany.[33] But the nationalist mood that defines modern China dismisses the grievances and claims of its coastal neighbours, as China is supposedly the main victim of Asian history. The nationalist suspicion of others has produced a lack of empathy for others, which has made China's regional neighbours move towards the United States and by doing so, China now feels even more threatened by their coastal neighbours. Thus any attempts to solve the security dilemma must consider the internal nationalistic environment of Chinese society.

Securing Trade Routes and Energy-Security

The second major motivation for China's increasingly assertive behaviour in the SCS and ESC is down to their energy-security needs and ambition to have greater authority over their nearby trade routes. However, the economic motivations for China's growing naval capabilities are not new. Admiral Liu Huaqing in the mid-1980s laid the intellectual foundations for a new concept of the navy. One in which the navy's role was not just to protect the sovereignty of China, but to secure the Chinese economy by securing the sea lanes and energy resources.[34] These sentiments remain relevant today and have been repeated by many senior Chinese officials, including very recently Premier Li Keqiang.[35] Moreover, Huaqing argued that due to China's growing needs and rising military power it needed to abandon its old concept of the navy's role in modern China. The navy was also to move away from its traditional sea denial strategy in case of war and move progressively towards sea control over the First and Second Island Chains – which includes almost all of the SCS, ECS and the Philippine Sea.

To understand the economic motivations, one must examine both the economic needs of China and the economic significance of the seas. Firstly, China's economic interests globally are largely defined by the import of natural resources to fuel their industrialisation. Hence, securing energy from abroad and safeguarding China's trade routes is key to maintaining the economic growth that the Communist Party requires to sustain its right to rule. On the other hand, some scholars believe that securing the import of oil is simply a nationalist justification for expanding the Chinese navy and not one that has any real substance.[36] Ross (2009) argues that only 10% of China's total energy usage is from imported oil and that domestically produced coal makes up the majority of China's energy use.[37]

However, if one were to undertake a more comprehensive analysis of China's energy needs, it seems as though China does have legitimate energy-security needs and the argument presented above is quite misleading. Firstly, the consumption of oil has outpaced Chinese production. So hungry is the Chinese economy for oil, that in the space of 20 years it has gone from being a net importer of oil in 1993 for the first time,[38] to now becoming the world's biggest net oil importer.[39] The U.S. Energy Information Administration predicts that the by 2020 66% of China's total oil will be imported and by 2040 72% will be imported.[40] Although it is true that coal makes up the 69% of China's total consumption and oil makes up 18%, China which has historically been a coal exporter has, since 2009, become a net coal importer for the first time and is expected to import higher amounts of coal as well.[41] Furthermore, regardless of the ratio of energy imports versus energy exports, the volume of imports across the energy spectrum has grown and is expected to grow substantially. Plus, events over the past decade that demonstrate the instability of the Middle East and the high prices of energy, has reminded China to ensure their energy diversification strategy must succeed.[42]

The seas themselves are important not only because of strategic reasons in war crises, but they contain economic opportunities for China. East Asia is considered to be "an inherently 'maritime' region, one in which the sea provides the highways that power the region's key economies and offers precious resources".[43] The ECS contains key sea routes, fish stocks and natural resources and has become a platform to project regional power from. China claims to

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have found 17.5 trillion cubic feet of “proven and probable” gas reserves in the Okinawa Trough and is believed to contain the richest concentration of petroleum deposits but are less accessible due to its depth.[44] In addition, Japan claims that there is over 94.5 billion barrels of petroleum deposits in the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.[45] Although, it is important to note that the figures of exactly how much gas and oil is located in the ECS is disputed. Nevertheless the key features of the ECS match up with some of China's key economic interests; important trade routes and energy reserves.

The SCS is of much greater economic importance to China than the ECS, as trade routes in the SCS are seen the main route for regional trade, similar to how “Americans once regarded the Caribbean Sea”. [46] More than half of world trade “passes through the Straits of Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok, with the majority continuing on to the South China Sea”. [47] Regionally, the SCS is also the main trade route for China's trade with ASEAN – which is expected to reach \$US1 trillion by 2020.[48] Furthermore, the SCS has been dubbed the ‘new Persian Gulf’ because of the vast levels of the estimated 130 billion barrels of oil and 900 trillion cubic feet of gas that it holds (Hong, Z, 2013: 32).[49] Thus, the economic incentives for China to behave more assertively in the East and South China Seas are evident, not only because of the importance of securing trade routes but also because of the vast levels of resources available that China needs. However important the economic incentives are, there can also be negative economic consequences for behaving aggressively against their neighbours, not to mention the damage to China's peaceful rise rhetoric.

Conclusion

In conclusion China's rise has seen them on the whole act relatively peacefully, if peace is defined by the absence of war. Despite their assertiveness, China has also cooperated with other claimants in the SCS and ECS. There has been a conscious effort to use constabulary and law-enforcement agencies to enforce maritime claims in order to de-escalate the crisis. Also, at times other claimants can instigate tensions and hence the crisis is not as one dimensional as often portrayed. Nevertheless, China's legal and historical claims are flawed and fragile and do not excuse their assertive behaviour, particularly since it damages its relationship with key trading partners and damages the acceptability of the peaceful rise doctrine.

Nationalism is a key driver of this behaviour; the ‘victim of history’ and ‘underdog mentality’ makes it difficult for China to empathise with other international actors. Additionally, nationalism has strengthened the navy's case for a bigger and more assertive role in securing China's sovereignty claims in the nationalist pursuit of reunification with Taiwan. Furthermore, there are also strong economic incentives for China's assertiveness. As the largest trading nation it needs to be secure and confident over the trade routes in the contested seas. China requires energy to fuel its growth and any perceived threat to its supply lines are dealt with the utmost priority. Finally, the seas themselves hold plenty of energy reserves that incentivise China and the other claimants to claim as much as they can.

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