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# ***China in Southeast Asia: The Search for a Chinese Model of International Relations***

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*Despite China's claims of a foreign policy of 'peaceful rise'/'peaceful development' and of seeking a 'harmonious world', and despite its economic openness and active participation in economic multilateralism, China's neighbours continue to be concerned about the overall direction and intent of Beijing's security policies. These concerns are particularly heightened by China's rapid military modernization of the past couple of decades. The announcement in 2010 that China considered its territorial claims in the South China Sea a 'core interest', can be seen as a setback to its regional diplomacy, so diligently crafted over the years and drove its Southeast Asian neighbours to seek closer engagement with the US. This article argues that the contradictions evident in China's neighbourhood foreign policy reflect its continuing search for a model of international relations that can balance its domestic interests such as the need for political stability, including regime stability, on the one hand and its external ambitions for a decisive role in regional affairs, on the other.*

**Keywords:** South China Sea disputes, Southeast Asia, domestic politics, foreign policy, Chinese nationalism, international relations

***China's neighbours are*** naturally the most immediately affected by China's foreign and security policies and their inability to read them. Such Chinese foreign policy standards as 'peaceful rise'/'peaceful development' and 'harmonious world', appeared to have been set aside when Beijing declared that its territorial claims in the South China Sea formed a 'core interest'—meaning an issue over which China could go to war.<sup>1</sup> But increasing Chinese stress on its maritime claims was evident at least from 2007, when Beijing began protesting the activities of foreign oil companies—including India's ONGC Videsh—that operated in the South China Sea under agreements with Vietnam. On

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<sup>1</sup> This declaration was first reported by senior American defence interlocutors following a dialogue with Chinese counterparts in Beijing (Wong 2010).

either side of the 'core interest' declaration, Chinese ships, both military and non-military, have engaged in standoffs with US, Japanese and Philippine naval vessels.<sup>2</sup> Such actions have naturally worried China's neighbours and driven many of them and the Americans closer together. What then, explains this Chinese assertiveness in its neighbourhood? I argue that the seeming contradictions in China's regional foreign policy are the result of an ongoing search for a model of international relations that can balance both China's need for domestic political stability, including regime stability, and its ambition of a decisive role in the international affairs of its neighbourhood.

### DOMESTIC POLITICAL DYNAMICS

China's neighbourhood foreign policy is affected by multiple domestic interests and considerations and these form an important part of the explanation for Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. Minxin Pei (2012) has argued that in China, regime interest overrides national interest. Disturbances that have erupted in Tibet and Xinjiang since 2008, and the 'return' of international attention to the human rights situation in China—as seen in the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo in 2010—have created a sense of crisis insofar as regime legitimacy is concerned. Thus, in a domestic environment of political dissent and social instability, the Communist Party of China (CPC) prioritises its own survival above all else. Against such a backdrop, the inability to respond to perceived threats to the national territorial integrity, the CPC fears might be seen as a weakness and therefore, as a challenge to the legitimacy of its rule. This in turn creates conditions for assertive Chinese foreign policy posturing.

Since the Tiananmen incident of 1989, the discourse of nationalism has been particularly useful to shore up the legitimacy of the CPC. However, the CPC is today, as much directed by, as directing, Chinese nationalism and rising nationalism can well form a factor independent of any CPC concerns over its legitimacy or its staying power. Where territorial issues are concerned, nationalist feelings are particularly in evidence. For instance, in a *People's Daily* survey that asked readers whether it was necessary to label the South China Sea a 'core interest'—97 per cent of nearly 4,300 respondents in January 2011, had responded in the affirmative (Wong 2011).

While Chinese nationalism has usually been observed with respect to the West or Japan, China's territorial disputes with its other neighbours such as India and those in Southeast Asia have also historically provided avenues for nationalist expression (Lei 2005: 489). Here, it is not only anti-Western and anti-imperialist sentiment that drives Chinese nationalism but also international norms, particularly Westphalian norms, such as sovereignty, territoriality and international legitimacy (Callahan 2004: 61–62,

<sup>2</sup> For a record of the events and nature of Chinese assertiveness in Southeast Asia and the Asia–Pacific dating to 2010, see Thayer (2010) and Swaine (2010).

70; Lei 2005: 496–98). In other words, China does not shy away from using Western concepts where it finds it useful to do so.

Foreign policy making also puts the civilian leadership under pressure from the politically influential Chinese military represented by the PLA. Apart from retired military personnel, active-duty military officers too have tended to make their views known on foreign policy matters.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the Sino-Japanese fracas as well as the vocal assertion of claims in the South China Sea brings to the fore the important role played by the PLA in Chinese foreign policy where key national security interests are thought to be at stake. Underlining the greater influence of the PLA vis-à-vis the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Chinese political hierarchy, some Japanese analysts have suggested that the PLA overruled the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in escalating the war of words and countermeasures in the September 2010 incident (cited in Pomfret 2010; see also Blumenthal 2011 and Christensen, 2011). Such open or covert actions by military officials also suggest a certain degree of weakness of the civilian leadership in the Chinese system.

The impending 2012 Party Congress is probably another important explanation for China's actions in the region. As older leaders begin to hand over charge, both they and the designated successors try not to commit any mistakes that would cost them their legacies or positions domestically and so it could be argued that there is likely to be greater sensitivity to Chinese nationalist concerns especially over territorial disputes and claims. On the other hand, a leadership transition is also the time when disagreements about policy direction are more likely to come out in the open—Geremie Barmé (2012) suggests that the 'heavy-handed behaviour on display in regard to territorial disputes with China's neighbours in the South China Sea... [is] part of a vast, shadowy power play involving incoming as well as outgoing leaders'. Given that in the Chinese system—as in many other political systems—it is always domestic issues that take priority over foreign policy ones, this might explain why Chinese actions in the foreign policy realm have appeared to be less carefully thought out or to send contradictory signals. However, this also suggests that once the leadership transition is completed and the new civilian leadership finds itself on more stable ground domestically, Chinese foreign policy too will take a more balanced turn.

Finally, there are also various issues of inter-agency competition and competing interests within the Chinese bureaucratic system (Christensen 2011; see also Pomfret 2010). Besides the military, a number of other bureaucracies have increased their influence in the Chinese foreign policymaking process, including those of the energy companies, major exporters of manufactured goods and regional party elite. For obvious reasons, these groups will have particular interests in the parts of the world that they conduct business with and the way China chooses to conduct its foreign policy towards these regions can affect their activities and profit margins. According

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Scobell has argued that increasing levels of professionalism in the PLA have not necessarily led to decreasing politicisation (2006: 26).

to one Chinese analyst, various Chinese maritime law enforcement agencies have apparently taken advantage of domestic political conditions to increase assertiveness in the maritime domain in recent years, in their own interests (Li 2011).<sup>4</sup> While still an emergent phenomenon, it bears close watching and will convey much about the Chinese state's capacity to address the concerns of domestic interest groups while simultaneously pushing for the best possible outcome from a national interest point of view (Christensen 2011).

### THE (ABSENT) CHINESE MODEL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Another explanation for increased Chinese government assertiveness emerges from the lack of an alternative foreign policy in a world in flux. China had adopted what amounted to a policy of reassurance since the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War and with good reason. As the world's largest remaining communist power and especially following the Tiananmen Square Incident of 1989, it was naturally a target of an ascendant United States. China's leaders however, hewed closely to Deng's 24-character strategy among which were the injunctions to 'hide our capacities and bide our time'.<sup>5</sup> China did this so successfully, that the US had to ask China in 2005 to claim greater global responsibility in the form of a 'responsible stakeholder', as Washington strained to handle two big wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that did not seem to have an end in sight.

As China's growing economic profile led to growing expectations, political and otherwise, of a greater Chinese role in world affairs, China's leaders appeared to step away from Dengist maxims. The 2008 Olympic Games and the financial crisis that heavily affected the West, moreover seemed to suggest that the Chinese model (the Beijing Consensus)—of a strong authoritarian state capable of controlling capitalism and creating wealth—could be successful and sustainable (Zhao 2011). At the same time, Western criticism of China's human rights situation continued and the resulting resentment also perhaps contributed to the sidelining of Deng's policy prescription.

It would seem therefore, that Beijing has yet to strike a balance between doing what the world expects China to do and finding its own way to do the things that it thinks ought to be done. Thus, even as phrases such as 'peaceful rise' or 'peaceful development' were meant to reassure the international community that China's growth did not threaten global peace and stability, Beijing also talked about a 'harmonious

<sup>4</sup> Besides the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), another agency involved is the Chinese Fishery Administration that has seized Vietnamese fishing vessels or rushed to the assistance of Chinese vessels being confronted by Vietnamese ships in the Paracel and Spratly islands areas. China is also seeking to improve its capacity to enforce maritime claims in the South China Sea by building more vessels for the Fishery Administration (Thayer 2010).

<sup>5</sup> The complete saying goes thus: 'Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership'.

world’—a concept with a distinct Confucian heritage, that seemed to highlight a Chinese conception of the world order and non-Western norms that China was more comfortable with. As Harry Harding has pointed out,

China has made many changes in its domestic economic structure and international behavior to conform to ‘international standards’ so as to integrate itself into the international order. This represented China’s accommodation of that order, and was appropriate at the time. But as China becomes more powerful, and as its development path proves its worth, that pattern of behavior will be at least partially reversed. The time has come in which, as one Chinese scholar recently put it, ‘the rest of the world is going to have to adapt to China’ (Harding 2011).

There is increasing debate within China (see Yan 2011) of what path it should take in its pursuit of a rightful place in the global order and of how it must integrate with the world system. Should it take on more global responsibilities or should it persist with Deng’s dictum of keeping a low profile on the international stage? And as it seeks its place within the international order, are the international norms China is asked to follow going to be used as pressure points against China or must Beijing strive for a form of global governance that also acknowledges China’s historical development and makes space for its own cultural norms?

Reflecting perhaps China’s increased presence round the world and the political and economic interests that are both cause and effect of this presence,<sup>6</sup> there is evidence that China is beginning to reconsider the efficacy of long-held principles of its foreign policy, most notably of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states (Yan 2011; see also Downs 2011). Examples include support for the international effort against piracy off the coast of Somalia, including the UN resolution that allowed for the pursuit of pirates into Somalia’s territorial waters and voting for a UN Security Council resolution referring Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi to the International Criminal Court despite not recognizing the court’s jurisdiction (Pilling 2011). The links between such ‘interventionism’ and Chinese assertiveness on its territorial disputes is a natural one and if the world welcomes the former, it must also then expect the latter.

China’s apparent willingness to intervene to protect civilians, as highlighted by the Libyan case, has yet another implication. As one scholar has pointed out, it is still unclear whether China’s use of the term ‘overseas Chinese’ applies only to Chinese citizens who have recently emigrated, or whether it includes citizens of other nations with Chinese ancestry. While Chinese intervention currently seems extremely unlikely, violence against ethnic Chinese outside China could stoke nationalism in China and could in the future, conceivably make it difficult for policymakers in Beijing to restrain themselves from using the PLA in an interventionist role (Anderson 2011). This issue has particular relevance for Southeast Asia where instances of violence against Chinese

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as one report puts it, ‘... as China is sucked more deeply into the affairs of distant—and sometimes unstable—lands, its ability to stay out of trouble is diminishing by the day’ (Pilling 2011).

minorities have occurred several times in history and have also resulted in criticism of governments in the region by the Chinese communists.

Chinese citizens meanwhile, continue to move across porous southern borders to set up businesses and homes in countries such as Myanmar and Laos, both nations with weak central governments. Chinese influence is especially pronounced in northern Myanmar and cities like Mandalay have a huge and growing Chinese population. When in August 2009, the Burmese military cracked down in the Kokang region along the Sino-Myanmar border, sending a stream of Chinese refugees fleeing into Yunnan, the Chinese government was quick to criticize the Myanmar junta. Similarly, a number of ethnic armies with close links to China, have refused to convert themselves into border forces as demanded by the Burmese military and the Chinese are believed to be acting as intermediaries between the Burmese army and these groups (International Crisis Group 2010).

China thus appears to be modifying its long-held positions on non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries that, by itself, does not constitute a model of its international relations. For one, there are occasions when China can reverse or moderate policy. For instance in October 2011 and in February 2012, China vetoed a UN Security Council resolution calling for intervention in Syria against the Bashar al-Assad regime's violent crackdown on dissidents. For another, on matters of its own perceived national sovereignty, Beijing continues to draw a very firm line. The disputes in the South China Sea fall in this latter category. Indeed, it would appear that China, while being seen to adjust to current international concepts on the need for intervention for purposes of the global common good, is simultaneously also insistent that the definition of the 'common good' not be enlarged to contradict Chinese national interests.

In the context of the South China Sea disputes, not only does Beijing therefore, not perceive that it is interfering in the sovereign rights of other countries to form partnerships or alliances as they may see fit but it also sees Southeast Asian nations acting against Chinese interests when they turn to the US in response to Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. This despite violating the terms of its own accession in 2002 to the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC)<sup>7</sup> and when its 'historical' claims over the South China Sea waters contradict the principles of international law, notably UNCLOS. Thus, Gen. Chen Bingde, the chief of staff of the PLA publicly criticised military training exercises that the US conducted with Vietnam and the Philippines in mid-2011 stating that the timing of the exercises was 'inappropriate ... [a]t this particular time, when China and the related claimants [to the South China Sea] have some difficulties, have some problems with each other' (quoted in Haddick 2011).

<sup>7</sup> This has been remarked on even by a prominent Chinese analyst. Shen Dingli has pointed out that Article 4 of the DOC accepts peaceful means of resolution of the issue including the principles of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The declaration abjures use of force and clearly refutes any suggestion parties might make that their claims were indisputable, or claiming the entire territory among other things (Roy 2011).

At the same time, China does not seem to have been very successful in reassuring its neighbours that falling into line on Chinese concerns is of mutual benefit. Indeed, Evelyn Goh (2011) has argued that there have been very few instances in which China has managed to get Southeast Asian countries to do its bidding. China, she says, has only managed to add weight where the interests of both parties coincided or on occasion succeeded in persuading others to follow the Chinese position where there has been a debate or choices to be made. Thus, China has been an important agent for economic growth and regionalism where Southeast Asian nations had compatible interests and there is also some evidence that China has succeeded in reassuring Southeast Asian states of its benign intentions in the region by a mixture of regional diplomacy and economic inducements (see Chung 2004: 48–50). But even in the matter of persuasion, there is little evidence to show that the large Southeast Asian countries are ‘rolling over into a Sinocentric sphere of influence’. If anything, the smaller ASEAN nations have engaged with China with their own motives of trying to persuade and socialize China into integrating with the international system (Goh 2011).

Goh also notes that where conflicting territorial claims are concerned, China has not been particularly successful, whether by persuasion, inducement or coercion, in convincing those contending with it to change their positions. Even though both the Philippines and Vietnam were part of the tripartite agreement with China for Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking (JMSU), Manila did not renew the JMSU agreement when it lapsed in 2008 because of public opposition, while Hanoi had joined the mechanism apparently because it covered areas of the South China Sea, to which Vietnam had no claims. Further, in 2009, both the smaller ASEAN nations also submitted their maritime claims to UNCLOS causing further deterioration in their ties with China. In addition, all the claimants to the Spratlys and Paracels have continued with their naval modernization plans. This failure by Beijing at bringing around its smaller neighbours to accommodate its interests, Goh speculates, has possibly led to the subsequent hardening of Chinese positions on the South China Sea disputes (Goh 2011).

In this context, it is important also to note Taylor Fravel’s (2008) thesis that China’s use of force in territorial disputes has usually occurred to reverse or stop what it perceived as deterioration in its bargaining power in a dispute with a militarily more powerful neighbour. Thus, Chinese assertiveness might turn to aggression if Beijing perceives its Southeast Asian neighbours and their deepening alliances with the US are beginning to affect its claims or interests in the South China Sea.

These issues then lead to some questions about China’s international relations approaches and model-building vis-à-vis its Southeast Asian neighbours. Is the ‘ASEAN at the centre’ model of regionalism constraining as far as China’s perceived future interests go? Or does Beijing feel that no matter what it does, ASEAN will not lose its inherent suspicion of China’s rise and foreign policy objectives?

Even if economic regionalism is considered fairly successful in Southeast Asia under the guidance of ASEAN, the fact remains, that the full potential of economic regionalism is far from exhausted. In this aspect lies a potential future approach in a Chinese

model of international relations. China's domestic economic policies of allowing its provinces and state-owned enterprises greater freedom in economic policymaking, including in areas with potential foreign policy impact, constitute a particularly innovative aspect of Chinese policymaking. Not only have some provinces like Yunnan, been traditionally (and even more so, since the beginning of the economic reforms in China) closely tied to economies across its borders in Myanmar and Indochina, but China's state-owned enterprises are increasingly part of regional networks and production chains in Southeast Asia. In both instances, massive central and provincial government subsidies and policy support play a role. Yet, such activism by sub-national units has not only created additional pressures for Beijing to get more involved in domestic affairs of its neighbours—as evident in the criticism of Myanmar following the Kokang crackdown for example—it has also invited suspicion and counter-reactions from the smaller ASEAN nations (see also Alistair Cook's article in this issue).

Next, the situation in China's Southeast Asian neighbourhood still remains one of considerable American presence and influence that possibly guides ASEAN actions or provides its member countries the leeway to differ with Beijing on political and security matters of mutual concern. In such a context, the Chinese perhaps realise that in an ASEAN-led multilateral and consensus-driven approach to key security questions, Beijing will end up being hedged against or having to share space with other Asian powers such as a rising India or an emerging Indonesia and Vietnam. Thus, where it has preferred to use bilateral approaches such as on the South China Sea disputes, China has had to sign on to the DoC which promotes the use of international law, particularly UNCLOS as a means of dispute resolution and is also under pressure to conclude a Code of Conduct (Li 2009).<sup>8</sup> How long, this ASEAN-driven approach will continue to accord with China's long-term interests remains to be seen.

## CONCLUSION

The above sections highlight the evolving and reactive nature of China's foreign policy as also its lack of capabilities and the importance of domestic priorities over external ones. China faces the same difficulty that India has had in South Asia, namely, of convincing

<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that although China has not completely clarified its nine-dashed line, it has not officially claimed sovereignty over all of the South China Sea. What it claims at the UN is sovereignty over the Spratly Islands and their adjacent waters, and the expression 'adjacent waters' is understood to refer only to the 12 nautical mile (nm) territorial sea which can be claimed from any land territory, including islands. And while China cannot claim sovereignty over the EEZ or the continental shelf of the Spratly islands, it has claimed 'sovereign rights' and jurisdiction for the purposes of exploring and exploiting the natural resources of the sea-bed and subsoil in this area. These latter claims overlap however, with claims by the Philippines' EEZ and hence its 'sovereign rights' (see Beckman 2012).

its neighbours that its rise—political, economic and military—is ultimately non-threatening to the smaller nations that surround it. Beijing's turn towards assertiveness on the South China Sea disputes has however, damaged the diplomatic work of several years and only confirmed lingering suspicions of China among its neighbours.

If economic interdependence is insufficient motivation for China to compromise with its smaller neighbours, then the latter are unlikely to behave any differently. China's government and elite interest groups might therefore, need to rethink their foreign policy aims and strategies. If China's foreign policymakers desire to evolve a Chinese model of international relations then they must realise that they cannot simply create an entirely new one that does not acknowledge the Western contribution to the current world order. In the formulation of its vision of an international order with Chinese characteristics, China will have to acknowledge that many Western norms and concepts are here to stay, accepted as they are by a large number of the world's countries, including China's neighbours.

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