

# Correspondence

Debating China's Assertiveness

Dingding Chen and  
Xiaoyu Pu

Alastair Iain Johnston

*To the Editors (Dingding Chen and Xiaoyu Pu write):*

In "How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?" Iain Johnston argues that China's recent foreign policy is not as assertive as many scholars and pundits contend. Johnston's study is a welcome addition to the literature on Chinese foreign policy in three respects.<sup>1</sup> First, it is the most comprehensive study by a leading China scholar on China's new assertiveness. Second, it challenges the conventional understanding that this assertiveness is both unprecedented and aggressive by design. Third, it addresses potential problems of overestimating the threat from China.

In this letter, we argue that Johnston's definition of assertiveness is too narrow. In addition, he underestimates the significance of China's new assertiveness in foreign policy more broadly.<sup>2</sup>

## A NEW TYPOLOGY OF CHINA'S ASSERTIVENESS

Johnston states that assertiveness in international politics refers to "a form of assertive diplomacy that explicitly threatens to impose costs on another actor that are clearly higher than before" (p. 9). This definition omits the possibility that assertiveness also has a positive connotation. In social life, for example, "assertiveness" is sometimes associated with positive personal traits such as self-respect and self-confidence.<sup>3</sup> Johnston also suggests that China exercises its assertiveness only in territorial disputes and is otherwise a status quo power. Finally, he evaluates China's assertiveness based on whether China is more or less assertive than it was in the past.

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1. Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Spring 2013), pp. 7–48. Further references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

2. For an early evaluation of China's status quo orientation, see Alastair Iain Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power?" *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Spring 2003), pp. 5–56. For a critique of status quo bias in international relations theory, see Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 72–107; and Randall L. Schweller, "Neorealism's Status Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?" *Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Spring 1996), pp. 90–121.

3. See, for example, Arthur J. Lange, Patricia Jakubowski, and Thomas V. McGovern, *Responsible Assertive Behavior: Cognitive/Behavioral Procedures for Trainers* (Champaign, Ill.: Research Press, 1976), p. 7.

We argue that China's assertiveness should be viewed in a broader sense. In social psychology, one definition states that "assertion involves standing up for personal rights and expressing thoughts, feelings and beliefs in direct, honest and appropriate ways which do not violate another person's rights."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, assertiveness is not the same as aggression.<sup>5</sup> Based on this understanding, we define "assertiveness" in international relations as a confident and direct way to defend one country's rights or claims.

We divide China's assertiveness into three ideal types: (1) offensive assertiveness, or a great power's use of coercion to expand its interest and influence without provocation from other countries; (2) defensive assertiveness, in which a great power's capability and willingness to defend its current interests are growing, yet it seeks only to defend—not expand—those interests; and (3) constructive assertiveness, according to which a great power assumes a leadership role to solve regional and global problems.<sup>6</sup> These three types of assertiveness are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Using this typology, we see little evidence that China is engaged in offensive assertiveness. This approach, which assumes that a rising power will naturally expand its interests and influence in the international system, follows the logic of offensive realism and power transition theory.<sup>7</sup> To be sure, some recent Chinese actions and statements might suggest to outsiders that China is taking an offensive assertive approach. And as China's economic power has grown, so has its self-confidence. In the eyes of some Chinese political elites, the 2008 global financial crisis accelerated the shifting balance of power from the West to China.<sup>8</sup> Citing the subsequent meltdown, some Chinese analysts began to argue that the United States was in decline. China's top leaders, however, have a more realistic view of their country's power, continuing to emphasize that China should maintain its nonconfrontational approach toward the United States.

We suggest that China has adopted a defensive assertiveness approach whereby it continues to defend many of its existing claims, without fundamentally changing its policy on those issues despite its growing capabilities. This approach applies to China's territorial disputes. Additionally, when China has demonstrated an assertive posture, it has been in reaction to unwelcome and unforeseen events often initiated by other countries in the region. For instance, in territorial disputes involving the South

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4. Ibid.

5. Assertiveness and aggression overlap in only some contexts. For the most part, the two types of behaviors are different. See James G. Hollandsworth Jr., "Differentiating Assertion and Aggression: Some Behavioral Guidelines," *Behavior Therapy*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (June 1977), pp. 347–352.

6. Here "constructive assertiveness" refers primarily to the role of leadership in solving collective problems. It does not refer to "constructivism" as used in international relations theory. For constructivism in international relations theory, see Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Spring 1992), p. 391; and Ted Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Summer 1998), p. 171.

7. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001); and Jonathan M. DiCicco, and Jack S. Levy, "Power Shifts and Problem Shifts: The Evolution of the Power Transition Research Program," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (December 1999), pp. 675–704.

8. Wang Jisi and Kenneth G. Lieberthal, *Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2012), pp. 1–49.

China Sea or the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, China has strengthened its maritime capabilities and sent more ships and airplanes into those regions. In other territorial disputes, it has begun to use economic sanctions. For instance, in the case of the China-Philippines standoff over Huangyan Island, China imposed stricter regulations on its import of Philippine bananas.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, we see some evidence of constructive assertiveness in China's foreign policy. In seeking to protect its expanding global interests, China has come to realize that the principle of noninterference has its limitations, as there may be practical reasons to intervene in the domestic affairs of other countries—for example, in humanitarian crises. For this reason, China did not protest the West's 2011 intervention in Libya. Without fundamentally changing the noninterference principle, China is exploring alternative strategies to deal with humanitarian crises and political instability in the developing world. In response, some Chinese elites are seeking to develop a new framework. Peking University's Wang Yizhou, for example, has put forth the notion of "creative involvement," according to which China should play a bigger role in international affairs, developing its skills as required.<sup>10</sup> This changing attitude could create opportunities for China and the West to work together to address future humanitarian crises in the developing world.

#### THE INEVITABILITY OF A MORE ASSERTIVE CHINA

As its power and status in the international system continue to grow, China will become increasingly assertive. One major factor that has shaped China's assertiveness is the shifting balance of power between China and the United States. While the Chinese leadership understands that the gap between China and the United States is still large, it is widely believed that China will become the largest economy in the next decade, if not sooner. One notable development is that China became the world's second-largest economy in 2010, overtaking Japan in terms of nominal gross domestic product. Moreover, China's military spending is already twice as large as Japan's. If this spending continues growing at its current rate, China will surpass the United States sometime in the 2030s.<sup>11</sup>

China is also rethinking its role with regard to maintaining and revising global rules and norms. There is some evidence to suggest that China is quietly adjusting its long-held, low-profile approach to foreign affairs known as *tao guang yang hui*. As evidence of this, in 2009 President Hu Jintao announced that China would adopt a new approach to "continuously keep a low profile and proactively get some things done."<sup>12</sup> The

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9. Philippines News Agency, "New Weapon in Scarborough Standoff: Bananas," *InterAksyon.com*, <http://www.interaksyon.com/business/31100/new-weapon-in-scarborough-standoff-bananas>.

10. For China's creative involvement in global affairs, see Wang Yizhou, *Chuangzhaoxin Jieru: Zhongguo Waiji Xin Wuxiang* [Creative involvement: A new direction in China's diplomacy] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2011).

11. It remains debatable whether China is catching up to the United States. See Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson and Michael Beckley, "Debating China's Rise and U.S. Decline," *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Winter 2012/13), pp. 172–181.

12. See Dingding Chen and Jianwei Wang, "Lying Low No More? China's New Thinking on the Tao Guang Yang Hui Strategy," *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 9 (September 2011), pp. 195–216.

significance of this statement is its emphasis on taking action. More recently, China's new president, Xi Jinping, declared that China should "keep pace with the times and be more active in blueprinting diplomatic strategy and undertaking diplomatic work."<sup>13</sup>

Domestic factors, especially Chinese nationalism, are also driving China in a more assertive direction. One scholar argues that China's assertiveness may be the result of a mix of growing confidence on the international stage and deepening insecurity at home.<sup>14</sup> In recent years, Chinese nationalism has become increasingly strident. Enjoying an inflated sense of empowerment following the 2008 global financial crisis, and terrified of an uncertain future given social tensions at home, the Chinese Communist Party has become more willing to play to popular nationalist interests.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, an increasing number of bureaucracies and interest groups have entered into the Chinese foreign-policy making process, including those linked to the military, the mass media, energy companies, exporters of manufactured goods, and provincial party elites. These developments have complicated China's diplomacy. While top officials in Beijing might still have a much more accurate assessment of China's global position, China's nationalist voices have overestimated the scope and speed of China's rise, and in the process have created a heated political environment. To maintain long-term regime legitimacy and social stability, Chinese leaders sometimes take a tougher stand in foreign policy to boost the party's domestic image.<sup>16</sup>

According to a recent survey, most of the Chinese public thinks that China should focus on building its economy and military power instead of playing a leadership role on the international stage.<sup>17</sup> Before 2008 China had clearly demonstrated its leadership in solving regional and global problems,<sup>18</sup> for example, playing a leadership role in the six-party talks dealing with North Korea's nuclear weapons program. That momentum, however, has vanished. At least in some issue areas, such as global climate change, the problem is not that China is more assertive. Rather, domestic considerations have caused it to shirk responsibility in helping to solve international problems.<sup>19</sup>

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13. "Xi Jinping: China to Further Friendly Relations with Neighboring Countries," Xinhua News Agency, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-10/26/c\\_125601680.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-10/26/c_125601680.htm).

14. Thomas J. Christensen, "The Advantages of an Assertive China," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (March/April 2011), pp. 59–62.

15. Suisheng Zhao, "Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited: The Strident Turn," *Journal of Contemporary China*, July 2013, pp. 535–553; and Robert S. Ross, "Chinese Nationalism and Its Discontents," *National Interest*, November/December 2011, pp. 45–51.

16. For an analysis of domestic factors that are contributing to China's new assertiveness, see Christensen, "The Advantages of an Assertive China," pp. 54–67.

17. According to the survey, "Only 27% of the Chinese public thinks that China should take a leadership role in global issues; 66% thinks that China should promote economic growth and improve the quality of life." See Committee 100, "U.S. China Public Opinion Survey 2012," p. 98, [http://survey.committee100.org/2012/EN/C100\\_2012Survey.pdf](http://survey.committee100.org/2012/EN/C100_2012Survey.pdf).

18. Evan S. Medeiros and M. Taylor Fravel, "China's New Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 6 (November/December 2003), pp. 22–35.

19. Although we argue that China will become more assertive in the long term, in the short term, domestic considerations often constrain China from contributing to global public goods; China's constructive assertiveness is therefore limited. For a similar argument, see Randall L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu, "After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of a more assertive China is inevitable, but this assertiveness need not be a bad thing for the rest of the world. There are legitimate reasons to worry if China begins to adopt an offensive assertive foreign policy approach, but we see little evidence of this. Instead, China's assertive behavior has been defensive and responsive. That said, China's defensive assertiveness still poses new challenges for regional order, particularly with regard to the South China Sea and East China Sea territorial disputes. While East Asia has maintained a peaceful order for several decades, such disputes could become the major potential source of military conflict in the region. The involvement of the United States, through its regional alliance system, could further complicate the situation. For now, however, the world should encourage China to take a constructive assertive approach toward a range of international problems, despite the wishes of some Chinese domestic interests to remain uninvolved.

—*Dingding Chen*  
Macao

—*Xiaoyu Pu*  
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*To the Editors (Alastair Iain Johnston replies):*

I thank Dingding Chen and Xiaoyu Pu for their response to my article.<sup>1</sup> I applaud their efforts to introduce more definitional rigor into the analysis of Chinese foreign policy.

Chen and Pu's letter focuses on how to define "assertiveness."<sup>2</sup> In international relations theory, typical terms used to describe state behavior include balancing, bandwagoning, appeasement, engagement, and hiding. Chen and Pu now add a new term—"assertiveness"—which they subdivide into offensive, defensive, and constructive.

Their innovation raises three questions, however. First, does the field need the term "assertiveness" at all? In principle, more categories of behavior can be useful if these cover behaviors that standard typologies do not. But are there consequential state behaviors typically not covered by the terms above that need this new descriptor? I focused on "assertiveness" in my article because it is a prominent meme in U.S. commentary on China, but I am unconvinced that it is a useful term analytically. Chen and Pu need to suggest why existing typologies employed by the field are inadequate.

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Decline," *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Summer 2011), pp. 41–72; and Christensen, "The Advantages of an Assertive China."

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1. Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Spring 2013), pp. 7–48.

2. I have a quibble with Chen and Pu's statement that I characterized China as a status quo power. As I stressed in earlier work, China is more status quo-oriented than at any time since 1949, but this is a relative not an absolute statement. There is an important difference.

Second, is their typology logically complete? They provide a three-category typology of assertiveness, which they define as a “confident and direct way” of acting: offensive, defensive, and constructive. Missing from this typology is “destructive,” which would seem a logical antonym to “constructive” assertiveness.

Chen and Pu really have a two-dimensional typology—an “offensive-defensive” dimension (expanding versus existing interests) and a “constructive-destructive” dimension (taking a leadership role in institutions versus undermining them). Thus they have, at base, a 2×2 of assertiveness—“offensive constructive” (a “confident and direct way” of taking a leadership role in institutions to defend expanding interests); “offensive destructive” (a “confident and direct way” of opposing rules and institutions to defend expanding interests); “defensive constructive” (a “confident and direct way” of taking a leadership role in institutions to defend existing interests); and “defensive destructive” (a “confident and direct way” of opposing rules and institutions to defend existing interests).

To develop this typology further, Chen and Pu would need indicators that clearly differentiate between offensive and defensive assertiveness and constructive and destructive assertiveness, and their combinations. In addition, the authors need to provide a typology of non-assertive behavior. The concept of “assertiveness” has to be falsifiable, and given their definition of “assertive” (a “confident and direct way” of defending interests), one should expect, in principle, to be able to observe “non-confident and indirect ways” of defending interests as well.

With this 2×2 (or 2×4 if non-assertive behavior is included), one could then look at the totality of China’s behavior regionally and internationally and slot its policies into these cells. Perhaps this would be analytically more useful than using the standard types of state behavior I listed above, but that awaits a major research project, and I am agnostic. My guess is that even with Chen and Pu’s (revised) typology, and even with operationalizations with a high degree of construct validity, one would find plenty of examples of Chinese foreign policy for each of these categories. This means that inferences about the totality of China’s diplomacy based on China’s maritime dispute behavior are still likely to be problematic.

A third question raised by Chen and Pu’s new definition of assertiveness is: How static is China’s current “defensive” and “constructive” assertiveness (or, in my revision of their typology, its “defensive-constructive” assertiveness)? Chen and Pu hint about possible shifts toward a more offensive (and destructive) assertiveness, but appear to doubt the likelihood. I am unclear why they are so optimistic.

If nationalism is as influential as Chen and Pu claim, then why should we expect a defensive-constructive assertiveness to persist? One critical variable is whether the regime in China reduces its perceived legitimacy problems. If it cannot, then what will prevent more xenophobic nationalism from becoming even more salient? The policy preferences of some strains of Chinese nationalism would appear to fall within the defensive-destructive (e.g., threats of coercion to defend existing maritime claims) and even the offensive-destructive cells (e.g., unofficial commentary that China should challenge Japan’s sovereignty over the Ryukyu Islands). While we still need more rigorous studies of variants of Chinese nationalism, it is clear that some varieties are racist (both anti-Japanese and anti-“white”) or militaristic, or both. One need only look at the

xenophobic commentary over the years from members of the so-called New Left such as Song Qiang, Kong Qingdong, Wang Xiaodong, and He Xin or the openly militaristic views of Dai Xu and Liu Mingfu. These voices may not be mainstream, but they are not politically irrelevant either. As far as I can tell, there is very little political space in China for public criticism of reactionary nationalist voices and their foreign policy preferences.<sup>3</sup> If one assumes that the top leadership's foreign policies are influenced by popular nationalism—a big assumption to make about an authoritarian regime with strong controls over information and the tools of coercion—then which nationalism is likely to become more salient for the regime if it faces growing legitimacy problems?

In addition to China's internal legitimacy problems, the interaction of Chinese and American nationalism may also contribute to the emergence of a defensive-destructive or offensive-destructive assertiveness. One could imagine that more virulently anti-foreign Chinese nationalism would get a boost from perceptions of anti-Chinese racism in any U.S. reaction to China's rise. My sense is that there has been an uptick in racial resentment directed at ethnic Chinese in U.S. political discourse of late, as evidenced by various campaign videos over the last few years emanating from the Tea Party wing of the Republican Party,<sup>4</sup> and by polls conducted over the last decade by the Committee of 100, a Chinese-American lobbying group, that show that around 30 percent of Americans surveyed believe that Chinese Americans are more loyal to China than to the United States.<sup>5</sup> Whether this is a significant figure is hard to tell. Regardless, it is potentially a substantial base of support for any restrictions on the political, economic, and national security-related activities of Chinese-Americans justified by national security should a full-blown cold war emerge between the two sides. The perceived treatment of ethnic Chinese in the United States could feed racial resentment of Chinese nationalists in China.

As I have suggested before, security dilemmas should be seen as socializing experiences in which ingroup-outgroup differentiation polarizes as the behavior of each side confirms the other's worst-case assumptions and attribution errors. In a perceived

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3. This is not helped by the common assumptions in China that U.S. policy is aimed to contain China's rise. For example, in 2006 there were 17 hits to Chinese language blogs that referenced "containing China" (about 0.01 percent of the blogs that referenced "China" but not "containment"). In 2013 there were 73,700 hits to such sites (about 0.25 percent of the blogs that referenced "China" but not "containment"). There is a similar trend in Chinese academic analyses of U.S.-China policy. In fact, this meme is empirically false, but it narrows the debate inside China over how to understand U.S. strategy. See Thomas J. Christensen, "Fostering Stability or Creating a Monster? The Rise of China and U.S. Policy toward East Asia," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Summer 2006), pp. 108–110.

4. On racist sentiments in Tea Party politics, see the University of Washington's 2010 Multi-State Survey of Race & Politics, <http://depts.washington.edu/uwiser/racopolitics.html>. See also ads from Tea Party-supported groups and candidates: Citizens against Government Waste, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OTSQozWP-rM>; Ron Paul supporters' ad against Jon Hunstman, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0PjsjvLV0q4>; and Pete Hoekstra's campaign ad <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-E2IhOc58k>.

5. See <http://www.committee100.org/publications/survey/C100survey.pdf>; [http://survey.committee100.org/C100\\_2009Report.pptx](http://survey.committee100.org/C100_2009Report.pptx); and <http://survey.committee100.org/2012/EN/survey-EN.php>.

power transition, the effects, if any, of interactive racial resentments in a dominant state and a rising state is a question that heretofore international relations theory has generally not investigated with much rigor.<sup>6</sup> It may all be irrelevant in the U.S.-China case. The forces of economic interdependence and shared interests may apply the brakes to the political influence of xenophobia. The power of ingroup-outgroup identity differentiation to trump material self-interest, however, suggests that racial resentment—a particularly virulent form of identity differentiation—is something to which leaders on both sides need to be alert.

—*Alastair Iain Johnston*  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

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6. Racism's impact on international relations is only beginning to develop as an area of inquiry in U.S. political science. See Christopher Hemmer and Peter J. Katzenstein, "Why Is There No NATO in Asia? Collective Identity, Regionalism, and the Origins of Multilateralism," *International Organization*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Summer 2002), pp. 575–607; Zoltán I. Búzás, "The Color of Threat: Race, Threat Perception, and the Demise of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance (1902–1923)," *Security Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (2013), pp. 573–606; and Steven Ward, "Race, Status, and Japanese Revisionism in the Early 1930s," *Security Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (2013), pp. 607–639.