

The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Explaining Beijing's Assertiveness

Starting in 2009, an increasing number of foreign observers (and many Chinese as well) began to note a shift towards more forceful or “assertive” behavior on the part of Beijing.¹ Among the most frequently cited indications of this trend were:

- An internal debate among Chinese elites in which some participants advocated edging away from Deng Xiaoping’s “hiding and biding” strategy and replacing it with something bolder and more self-confident;²
- A “newly forceful, ‘triumphalist,’ or brash tone in foreign policy pronouncements,”³ including the more open acknowledgement—and even celebration—of China’s increasing power and influence;
- Stronger reactions, including the threatened use of sanctions and financial leverage, to recurrent irritations in U.S.–China relations such as arms sales to Taiwan and presidential visits with the Dalai Lama;
- More open and frequent displays of China’s growing military capabilities including larger, long-range air and naval exercises, and demonstrating or deploying new weapons systems;
- A markedly increased willingness to use threats and displays of force on issues relating to the control of the waters, air space, surface features, and resources off China’s coasts. These include ongoing disputes with the Philippines and Vietnam (among others) in the South China Sea, with Japan in the East China

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Sea, and with the United States regarding its conduct of surveillance and military exercises in areas from the Yellow Sea to the vicinity of Hainan Island.

Despite the seeming weight of the evidence, some analysts have sought to challenge what political scientist Iain Johnston refers to as the “new assertiveness meme.”⁴ According to Johnston, China’s behavior in recent years has been neither especially new nor assertive. If on occasion, China *has* acted in a more forceful or aggressive fashion, it has done so largely in response to the provocative actions of others.

While the events in question are complex and subject to varying interpretation, on closer inspection neither of these arguments is persuasive. To take one notable example: Johnston devotes considerable attention to the imbroglio that followed the 2010 arrest of a Chinese fisherman charged with ramming a Japanese coastal patrol vessel. The ensuing crisis, which resulted in an unprecedented heightening of Sino–Japanese tensions, appears to have been driven almost entirely by Beijing. Johnston acknowledges that “it is true that China escalated its diplomatic rhetoric,” first demanding the captain’s immediate release and then, once that had been obtained, insisting that Tokyo apologize for its actions. He speculates that the initial decision to ratchet up tensions may have had something to do with the impending anniversary of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and dismisses the demand for an apology as possibly “perfunctory and clearly aimed at a domestic Chinese audience.”⁵ The fact that domestic political dynamics may have played a role does not change the fact that Beijing’s stance was unusually confrontational; certainly this is how Tokyo perceived it.

As to allegations that China sought to punish Japan by refusing to sell it rare earth minerals essential in the manufacture of high-end electronics and other products, Johnston concedes that, if it actually happened, the imposition of such an embargo “would constitute a new assertiveness because it threatened to impose much higher costs on a key Japanese economic interest.”⁶ While noting that “there have been conflicting reports...about how many rare earth exports were delayed, for how long, and by whom,” Johnston presents data showing that exports were in fact constricted, at least for a time. Figures for the arrival from China of six categories of rare earth minerals at four major Japanese ports reveal that in almost every instance, the volume of imports fell, in some cases sharply, following the reported imposition of an embargo in September 2010. There were a handful of exceptions, and imports generally rose again in subsequent months. But these figures can more easily be reconciled with the hypothesis that Beijing intended to send a signal by imposing a deliberate and temporary, albeit undeclared, boycott on exports than with any alternative explanation.⁷ By Johnston’s own standards, this qualifies as a significant example of China’s “new assertiveness.”

The South China Sea is one area where even a skeptic like Johnston believes that “China’s diplomatic rhetoric and practice” have shifted “fairly sharply in a more hard-line direction.”⁸ As he and others have argued, however, these shifts may have come in response to actions by others.⁹ It is true that during the period 2009–2011, the Chinese government published a series of maps and documents that one could interpret as expanding and intensifying its claims in the region. But these were arguably part of a larger diplomatic and legal game in which other states may have made the opening moves.¹⁰

The most recent rounds of escalation and heightened tensions in the East and South China Seas can also plausibly be blamed on Tokyo and Manila rather than Beijing. When the Japanese government bought three of the five disputed Senkaku Islands from a private landowner in September 2012, China stepped up air and naval activity and, in November 2013, unilaterally declared an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over most of the East China Sea.¹¹ In April 2012, when the Philippines sent a navy frigate to investigate the activities of a group of Chinese fishing boats, Beijing accused Manila of “militarizing” their long-standing dispute over the cluster of rocks and reefs known as Scarborough Shoal. The Chinese deployed several maritime patrol vessels to the area, resulting in a protracted standoff that ended only when the Philippines backed down and withdrew its ships, as Ely Ratner of the Center for a New American Security explains, “under the auspices of a face-saving typhoon.”¹²

There are at least two major difficulties with the claim that China’s behavior in the East and South China Seas has been merely reactive rather than assertive. First, cutting into the narrative of an ongoing dispute at one point, rather than another, can produce dramatic shifts in perspective as to which side is most at fault. Thus, Beijing presents its own recent actions as a response to Japan’s purchase of the Senkakus. But Tokyo’s decision to take this step was driven in turn by China’s escalation of the dispute over the islands, extending back at least to the 2010 fishing boat incident.¹³

Similarly, the April 2012 dispatch of the Philippines naval frigate that so incensed Beijing was a reaction to the deliberate intrusion of Chinese fishing vessels a few days earlier into waters claimed by Manila, made worse by the discovery that they had been violating Filipino law by harvesting endangered clams, sharks, and corral.¹⁴

What explains the shift in China’s more assertive behavior from 2009–2014?

Second, even if China was provoked in these or other instances, it did not necessarily have to respond as aggressively as it did. In recent years, Beijing has repeatedly chosen to escalate ongoing disputes rather than wind them down. This pattern is so obvious that analysts have come up with a label to describe it:

Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt calls it “reactive assertiveness.”¹⁵ As a report by the International Crisis Group explains, under this approach “Beijing uses an action by another party as justification to push back hard and change the facts on the ground in its favour.”¹⁶

Assuming that China’s behavior in the period from 2009 to 2014 was, in fact, more assertive, what explains the shift?

“Great Power Autism”

In *The Rise of China vs. The Logic of Strategy*, Edward Luttwak offers a novel account of recent events. Beijing’s belligerence, and its seeming inability or unwillingness to abandon what appear to be self-defeating policies, are manifestations of what he terms “great-state autism,” a condition whose primary symptom is a “pronounced insensitivity to foreign sensitivities.”¹⁷ This syndrome is rooted in self-absorption and limits on the capacity of governments to process information simultaneously about both internal and external events. Chinese policymakers are especially prone to this tendency because their country is so big and so troubled. At any given moment, some part of China will be experiencing an economic crisis, natural disaster, “or an actual or imagined internal political threat.”¹⁸ The “structural insecurity of the leaders of the CCP”—their awareness that they lack the legitimacy that comes either from democratic elections or a widely accepted ideology—makes them especially sensitive to this last category of dangers.¹⁹

The root cause of China’s assertiveness can be found in its leaders’ mindset and perceptions.

In addition to its sheer size, China’s unique past makes it especially prone to strategic autism. The nation’s “idiosyncratic history as a solitary great presence” has left it with “tacit assumptions of centrality and hierarchical superiority.”²⁰ Added to this, Chinese decision makers retain a “stubborn faith in the superior strategic wisdom to be found in ancient texts.”²¹ Among other distinctive features, Chinese strategic writings encourage the dangerous expectation that “long-unresolved disputes with foreign countries can be resolved by provoking crises, to force negotiations that will settle the

dispute.”²²

The root cause of China’s recent assertiveness can thus be found in the mindset and perceptions of its leaders. As their country has grown stronger, they have felt empowered to move back toward the position of centrality and influence to which they believe history entitles them. Unfortunately, China’s leaders are largely oblivious to the distress provoked by their actions and

attitudes. Despite mounting evidence that their behavior is proving counterproductive, Luttwak predicts that they will continue to push, solidifying a coalition that will ultimately check China's rise. The only question is whether this process will unfold peacefully or if, as has happened in other historical cases, it will result in a devastating war.

An awareness of the possibility that China may be suffering from "great-state autism" should alert U.S. policymakers and others to the danger that subtle (and not so subtle) words and deeds meant to signal resolve or restraint to Beijing may not have the desired effect. Not only may Beijing misread them, it may not receive them at all—or if it does, the message may come through in a muffled and attenuated fashion. Strategies premised on the assumption of "perfect information," or even reasonably accurate communications, are unlikely to prove effective in dealing with an autistic rival.

If the ideas and predispositions that Luttwak describes are so deeply ingrained, what can account for variations in Chinese behavior over time? These would seem to offer a formula for ceaseless aggression and yet, as we have seen, there is strong reason to believe that China has become markedly more assertive in recent years. One reason for the change might be that the nation's rulers assess that their capabilities have grown, creating new possibilities for them to indulge their predilections and pursue their preferred goals. If this is the case, however, it would suggest that calculations of relative power are the key to explaining shifts in behavior rather than deeply-rooted precepts of strategic culture. When Beijing feels stronger it acts more assertively; when it feels weaker or more vulnerable it acts with greater caution and restraint.

Observed indifference to mounting opposition is the primary symptom of strategic autism. Yet, Chinese analysts and decision makers have displayed sensitivity to allegations of assertiveness. At the end of 2010, as expressions of concern over China's behavior reached a crescendo, Beijing began to make a series of statements and gestures that were clearly intended to reassure others about its intentions.²³ Many of these signals were aimed at Southeast Asia. At a July 2010 meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi had managed to offend and frighten the other delegates by reminding them that "China is a big country and other countries are small countries and that is just a fact."²⁴ By the fall, senior leaders had fanned out across the region to deliver the soothing message that, as then-Vice President Xi Jinping put it in a speech in Singapore, "China sees all countries, big and small, as equals."²⁵ More concretely, Chinese officials offered loans, stressed the importance of good economic relations, and indicated a willingness to discuss next steps in implementing the non-binding Code of Conduct it had signed with ASEAN in 2002.²⁶

Interviews with Chinese analysts suggest that in late 2010 Beijing also shifted "dramatically" toward efforts to reach out to Washington.²⁷ The possibility that

continued tensions with the United States might prove counterproductive was highlighted during 2011 by talk of a U.S. “pivot” toward Asia, coupled with a flurry of visits, speeches, and announcements meant to underline the continuing U.S. commitment to the region.

While they may not have believed that their own behavior was inappropriate or unwise, according to analyst Michael Swaine of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Chinese strategists clearly recognized that an overly tough reaction to the U.S. “pivot” would be counterproductive.²⁸ China’s leaders were therefore at pains to offer at least a rhetorical olive branch to Washington. Among other themes in 2012 and 2013, Xi Jinping and his colleagues emphasized their desire to reduce “strategic distrust” and to build a “new type of great power relationship” between China and the United States.²⁹

Regardless of their seriousness or sincerity, these gestures were obviously part of a campaign intended to dampen foreign concerns about Chinese assertiveness. The existence of such an effort suggests sensitivity to feedback that is inconsistent with a simple diagnosis of strategic autism.

Have China’s actions largely been driven by a convergence of domestic political forces?

“Primat der Innenpolitik”³⁰

Even if China’s leaders are not completely oblivious to the outside world, their actions may still be driven largely by a convergence of domestic political forces. Some observers believe that, whether separately or in combination, three such factors have been responsible for the recent pattern of assertive Chinese behavior:

Nationalism

The Chinese Communist Party’s use of nationalism to rally popular support and bolster its claims to a continuing monopoly on political power has been widely noted. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre, the regime began to implement a system of “patriotic education” designed to counteract the threat of Western subversion and, in effect, to displace Marxism-Leninism-Maoism as the prevailing ideology.³¹ Rather than simply highlighting the glorious history of Chinese civilization or the nation’s more recent achievements, the emerging belief system stressed the harm done to China by other countries during the “century of national humiliation,” and the CCP’s critical role in reversing past wrongs. As portrayed by China’s rulers, this process of restoring the nation’s dignity did not end with the Party’s victory in 1949, but is ongoing with many wrongs yet to be righted and crimes yet to be avenged. Territorial disputes are

important because they involve tangible manifestations of the injustices inflicted on China when it was relatively weak.³²

Having done so much to call them into existence, the regime now arguably finds itself driven and sometimes trapped by strong feelings of national pride and resentment. Faced with a public that expects them to “stand up” and defend China’s “core interests,” the leadership feels compelled to push harder for the resolution of some outstanding issues.³³ When confronted by a challenge, especially from one of the perpetrators of past crimes against the Chinese people, top decision makers supposedly feel impelled to take a hard line, even at the risk of escalation or other negative diplomatic and economic consequences. To do otherwise would, at a minimum, risk accusations of “softness” in the Chinese blogosphere and might have more serious consequences including public demonstrations which could endanger social stability.

Interest Group Politics

A second factor frequently cited as causing or at least contributing to China’s recent assertiveness is the widening array of groups and organizations that now appear to have some influence over the policymaking process. Although it remains a one-party authoritarian regime, the PRC is no longer the rigid, top-down system it once was. Especially since the turn of the century, as China’s society and economy have grown more complex and diverse, so too has the apparatus of the party-state, with new agencies and ministries joining the table of organization in Beijing. Provincial and local governments have also gained a greater measure of autonomy within which to pursue their own agendas. An assortment of other actors has also emerged at the periphery of the official structures including some (such as state-owned enterprises in the manufacturing, energy, and financial sectors) that have considerable resources at their disposal. In the end, all of these entities are subordinate to the center—but, to a greater degree than ever before, they seek to shape policies that affect their interests.³⁴

Among these actors are several that may see assertive and even confrontational policies as serving the best interests of their institutions. As regards the maritime disputes in the South China Sea, for example, an analysis by the International Crisis Group finds that there are as many as eleven different stakeholders involved, including provincial governments and maritime patrol agencies.³⁵ To varying degrees, all stand to benefit if China can advance its claims, and some may believe that they will profit (in budgetary terms) from heightened tensions and continued clashes with neighboring states. Even if some in the system would prefer to take a softer line, others may be able to act on their own initiative or in collaboration with one another, “creating facts” with which the rest of the interested parties will then have to deal.

“Rogue” PLA

Of all the bureaucratic actors involved, none has greater prestige or more resources at its disposal than the PLA. Some analysts speculate that it now plays a larger role in making foreign as well as strictly military policy, with the result that China’s overall posture has shifted toward a tougher and more confrontational stance. Whatever part the PLA as an institution is playing behind the scenes, individual officers have become increasingly willing to express support for a hard-line stance, both in general and on particular issues, especially those related to questions of sovereignty and territorial control. Journalist Willy Lam argues that this trend has been especially marked since 2010. He quotes senior officers questioning the wisdom of continued adherence to Deng Xiaoping’s “hide and bide” strategy and calling for abandoning what they term a “defensive mentality.”³⁶ Others are on record favoring “short, sharp wars” to teach a lesson to countries that oppose China’s territorial claims.³⁷ Especially in crisis situations, Michael Swaine notes that military officers may seek to influence the course of events “indirectly through comments, statements, or articles published in China’s increasingly raucous public media and cyber sphere,” as well as directly through whatever advice they may be offering to the senior civilian leadership.³⁸

Focusing on the internal dynamics of the foreign policymaking process is a useful corrective to the simplifying assumption that the Chinese state is a “unitary actor.” As is true of any modern political system, China’s external policy is the product of many converging forces and at times may not appear especially coherent or well-integrated.

The Chinese system is evolving, although toward what is by no means clear.

Attending to its inner workings also highlights the fact that the Chinese system is evolving, although toward what is by no means clear. In certain respects, the changes that have occurred in recent years—the growth of state-cultivated patriotism, the increasing sensitivity of leaders to mass opinion, the multiplication of interest groups, and the possible emergence of coalitions favoring more assertive external policies—resemble those that took place in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century.³⁹ The world may be witnessing the early manifestations of a process that could lead eventually to liberalization and even democratization. Unfortunately, if history is any guide, the changes now occurring could also be the harbingers of a period of increasing instability and aggression.

Insufficient Explanations

Whatever they may portend in the long run, the three domestic factors discussed here are of limited utility in explaining recent Chinese behavior.

The nation's leaders are certainly aware of the patriotic sentiments that receive such widespread expression in the media; indeed, to a certain extent they no doubt share them. They may also be genuinely concerned about the impact on their own careers, and perhaps on the CCP itself, of appearing weak in the defense of national honor. That said, there is very little to indicate that, at least to date, the leadership has ever felt compelled by public sentiment to take positions or pursue policies different than those it might otherwise have chosen. To the contrary, the evidence suggests that, in addition to its skill in stirring popular passions, the regime has become adept at modulating and directing them to serve its own purposes.

One analysis of the anti-Japanese protests that took place following the 2012 Senkaku Islands purchase concludes that, as in the past, these followed a “cyclical pattern, best characterized as a wave of popular mobilization.”⁴⁰ The authorities at first permitted mass demonstrations in order to vent popular anger and show the world how Japan's actions had “hurt the feelings” of the Chinese people. Once these protests began to spread and to grow more violent, the regime quickly reeled them in: it directed local governments to maintain order, blocked phrases that could be used to organize gatherings on the internet, and in one city, sent text messages to all mobile phone users urging them to “please express their patriotic fervor rationally, and abstain from illegal or criminal behavior.”⁴¹ A recent study by Yale University's Jessica Chen Weiss finds that, as with other authoritarian regimes, the Chinese government uses protests to signal seriousness and strengthen its bargaining position. Public protests enable Beijing to claim that popular opinion is constraining its actions.⁴²

The notion that “rogue” PLA officers have hijacked policy and are driving it in directions that it might not otherwise go also does not stand up well under scrutiny. University of Western Australia's Andrew Chubb finds that the most visible and vocal military personalities are relatively senior officers with long-standing connections to the intelligence and propaganda departments of the PLA. Without official sanction, it seems highly unlikely that they could enjoy sustained access to government-controlled media outlets.⁴³

Chubb suggests that, as is true of mass demonstrations, the real function of the outspoken “hawks” is to mobilize domestic support while at the same time sending international signals of determination and resolve. Hawkish commentators also help to raise what PLA Major General Luo Yuan has referred to as “imperilment consciousness,” stirring patriotic feelings and popular support for the military and the CCP regime as a whole.⁴⁴ In the case of the 2012 Scarborough Shoal confrontation with the Philippines, for example, Chubb observes that Luo's “frequent appearances appear to have been part of a state-led effort to focus public attention on the issue.” Angry public discussion was “driven by inflammatory central media coverage and escalatory official

comments.” These statements and the expressions of popular anger that they helped to stimulate appear to have been part of a deliberate strategy to intimidate the Philippines and force it to accept China’s claims.⁴⁵

While there are no doubt differences on some issues, there is virtually no evidence of significant splits between civilian and military leaders on the most important questions of foreign and defense policy. To the contrary, all signs point to the existence of a broad consensus on national objectives, strategy, and tactics including the need for what scholar You Ji describes as “controllable assertiveness” in dealing with sovereignty disputes.⁴⁶ Even if disagreements exist, by all accounts the Army continues to accept its historical subordination to the Party. If China’s external behavior in recent years has been assertive, even militaristic, it is probably not the result of machinations on the part of the PLA but rather of decisions by the nation’s top civilian leaders.

The persistence of Chinese assertiveness over time, most notably in the period following Xi Jinping’s accession at the end of 2012, has also made it more difficult to sustain the view that this behavior is the by-product of freelancing by

Xi Jinping is a strong leader who seems to have taken firm control over national policy.

lesser agencies and bureaus.⁴⁷ In contrast to his predecessor, Xi is widely acknowledged as a strong leader who seems to have taken firm control over all aspects of national policy. In addition to directing a number of “leading small groups,” informal bodies set up to advise the top leadership on key issues, Xi has created a new National Security Council whose purpose is to synchronize the actions of all relevant agencies.⁴⁸

China’s actions across a range of fronts thus appear increasingly to be systematic and deliberate, if not always perfectly coordinated or skillfully executed.

The “Calculative” Model⁴⁹

A third and final approach views China neither as an autistic giant nor as a mere agglomeration of interest groups, but rather as an essentially rational international actor that has chosen on the basis of strategic calculations to become more assertive. China’s rulers may be preoccupied with internal problems. Their distinctive culture and history no doubt shapes and perhaps distorts their beliefs about others and about themselves. And their efforts to formulate and execute coherent policies are certainly complicated, and may at times be foiled by the presence of conflicting impulses and pressures. But seen in their totality and over time, the nation’s actions suggest the existence of

consistent goals and of policies for achieving them that can change in response to evolving calculations of cost, benefit, and risk.

Regarding objectives, the Beijing regime describes itself as pursuing the ultimate aim of “national rejuvenation.”⁵⁰ Domestically, the achievement of this goal depends above all on preserving the CCP’s monopoly on political power so that it can complete the construction of a “prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious modern socialist state,” as analyst Timothy Heath has pointed out. Internationally, “national rejuvenation appears to require regional preeminence.” Although officials are careful not to openly advocate this goal, they do “hint at a desired end state in which the region is centered on Chinese power.” As Heath notes, the main elements of Beijing’s vision of a “harmonious Asia” include “a political order shaped by Chinese political principles; deference to China on sensitive security issues; PRC-led regional economic integration; and a stronger ‘Asian’ cultural identity.”

The internal and external facets of China’s “national rejuvenation” are thus mutually reinforcing. Attaining the strength required to achieve preeminence depends on preserving CCP rule. On the other hand, gaining preponderance will increase regime security by pushing back the constraining U.S. presence as well as its subversive ideological influence, and by enabling China to control the sea lanes and offshore resources that are essential to its prosperity and political stability.

At least until 2009, China appeared to follow a coherent strategy broadly consistent with Deng’s admonition that it should hide its capabilities and bide its time. For the most part, Beijing sought to avoid confrontation with other major powers, taking advantage of a stable international environment to expand its trade, build its economy, and cultivate all the other elements of its “comprehensive national power” including military strength, technological competence, and diplomatic influence. Beijing’s evident intention was to “win without fighting,” gradually advancing toward a position of unassailable regional preponderance.⁵¹

The recent increase in Chinese assertiveness does not reflect a change in overall objectives, nor a wholesale abandonment of the previously existing strategy. Rather, it is a result of increasingly favorable leadership assessments of the nation’s relative power and of the threats and opportunities that it confronts. In retrospect, it appears that these upward adjustments began over a decade ago. Thus, the proclamation of a twenty-year “window of strategic opportunity” in 2002 seems to have come in part from the belief that, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the United States would shift its focus away from

In retrospect, it appears that Chinese adjustments began over a decade ago, at least in 2002.

China and East Asia and toward the Middle East. Deepening U.S. difficulties in Iraq contributed to the sense that the United States was in retreat, if not decline. By the mid-2000s, some analysts were beginning to question whether, in light of trends in the distribution of power, it was necessary for China to continue to adhere to Deng's cautious dictum.⁵²

Meanwhile at around the same time, senior civilian leaders were laying out "new historic missions" for the PLA.⁵³ Notable among these was the requirement that the military provide "effective strategic backing for safeguarding national interests." This phrase was widely interpreted as a call for developing forces capable of projecting air and naval power beyond China's coasts in order to secure much needed off-shore resources and defend increasingly long and vital sea lines of communication.

This confluence of expanding needs and growing opportunity is reflected in the official guidance document or "Work Report," circulated following the 17th Party Congress in 2007. According to Timothy Heath, "The guidance marked a significant evolution in PRC strategy," requiring the military to "protect the nation's core interests, a growing number of which lay beyond China's borders."⁵⁴ Heath suggests the new guidance helped to set the stage for the shift in Chinese behavior that soon became evident.

The 2008 global economic crisis thus accelerated changes in prevailing assessments of relative power that were already underway. Those shifts, in turn, encouraged (even if they did not cause) the burst of Chinese assertiveness that followed. Rational, calculating Chinese strategists saw an opportunity to advance toward their goal of regional preponderance, and they seized it across a range of fronts. Beijing may have been opportunistic in certain respects, but its actions were consistent in tactics and general direction.

Beijing has sought to compel others to back down by raising the perceived danger of escalation.

Whether or not they made the first move, in one situation after another, moving in a broad arc extending from the Yellow Sea to the South China Sea, Beijing sought to compel others to back down by raising the perceived danger of escalation. China's targets varied: in some cases, such as the 2009 *Impeccable* incident, it aimed directly at the United States; in some, such as the 2010 fishing boat incident with Japan or a series of 2011 encounters with Vietnamese vessels, it appeared to focus primarily on its neighbors; and in others, the 2012 escalation of tensions over Scarborough Shoal and the Senkakus, China directed actions simultaneously at neighbors and at their alliance ties to the United States. As it increased pressure on Tokyo and Manila, Beijing was also probing for seams in their relations with Washington. If the United States

hesitated in backing up its friends, it might have seriously weakened its alliances.

This kind of Chinese gambit is obviously risky; it can provoke an escalatory response or stimulate a backlash that actually drives partners closer together. But it is certainly not irrational. What troubled many observers, and caused them to characterize Chinese behavior as autistic or domestically-driven, was Beijing's apparent persistence given what seemed to be overwhelming evidence that its tactics were proving counterproductive. Yet, we can solve this puzzle without resorting to claims of irrationality. Following 2010, China did *not* simply plow ahead with a policy of omnidirectional assertiveness, but instead tempered its behavior in certain respects in response to the reactions of others. As we have seen, by the end of that year the CCP regime had already begun to make conciliatory gestures toward the United States, followed by efforts to soothe relations with most members of ASEAN.

Even as they eased off on some of their opponents, however, China increased pressure on others, most notably Japan and the Philippines. In the latter case, in 2012 Beijing appears to have lured Manila into an ambush, sending fishing vessels into contested waters and then, when the Philippines navy responded, deploying a small flotilla of maritime patrol vessels that had been lurking nearby. A few months later, following a steady stream of probes by Chinese aircraft and ships, Japan's purchase of islands in the Senkakus group provided the occasion for Beijing to further escalate its ongoing confrontation with Tokyo. In both cases, the behavior of the various agencies involved, the mobilization of public sentiment, and the tough talk from PLA officers all appear to have been well-synchronized and to have *followed* rather than caused a high-level decision for action.⁵⁵

The claim that Chinese behavior is irrational hinges on the widely held belief that it has produced a powerful countervailing response and is thus obviously self-defeating. Yet, on this crucial count the jury remains out. Since 2012 many in the region and elsewhere, including the United States, have begun to suspect that the pivot may not live up to its advanced billing.⁵⁶ Budgetary constraints coupled with an evident desire to avoid antagonizing Beijing are limiting the scope and pace of the U.S. response to China's ongoing military buildup and its increasing assertiveness. As seen from Beijing, the balance of power may therefore seem to be tilting further, faster in its favor even more than was the case five years ago.

The calculative model appears to do well at explaining the past and, in particular, at accounting for variations in China's treatment of different interlocutors as well as fluctuations in the broad pattern of its behavior over the last two decades. Still, a number of caveats are in order. As is always the case, models based on the assumption of rationality risk tautology and can prove

Undue faith in Beijing's rationality could increase the danger of miscalculation and surprise.

difficult if not impossible to falsify. Beijing's apparent decision to intensify pressure on Tokyo while easing off on some other countries could reflect a carefully calibrated plan, but it may also represent a manifestation of rampant popular nationalism or a visceral animosity toward Japan on the part of China's leaders. Undue faith in Beijing's rationality could increase the danger of miscalculation and surprise. Finally, even if China is basically a rational actor, its rulers may calculate

costs and benefits differently than outside observers would expect, in part because they have a longer time horizon than the leaders of some other countries might. Actions that appear counterproductive because they stimulate initial resistance could still pay off in the long run if they demoralize and exhaust the target or divide it from its allies.

An End to Assertiveness?

In the latter half of 2014, Beijing made a number of moves that some interpreted as marking an end to the period of assertiveness and the possible beginning of an era of "detente."⁵⁷ In May, Xi Jinping gave a major address calling for a new approach to regional security issues, one in which "the people of Asia" would "run the affairs of Asia."⁵⁸ In October, Beijing announced the formation of a new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank that would provide capital for development projects across the region.⁵⁹ One month later, at the East Asia Summit, Premier Li Keqiang promised that China would step up its efforts to devise a code of conduct for handling maritime disputes, proposed a new treaty of friendship between China and the members of ASEAN, and for good measure offered them \$20 billion in loans.⁶⁰ At the November 2014 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Beijing, Chinese and Japanese leaders held their first formal high-level meeting in two years. For their part, the United States and China signed agreements pledging, among other things, to reduce carbon emissions and calling for the development of procedures designed to avoid accidents in the air or at sea.⁶¹

Most of these measures are extensions of the efforts to reduce tensions with the United States and many Southeast Asian nations that began as early as late 2010. Beijing's apparent desire to cool the diplomatic climate may reflect a concern that the risks of an unintended conflict were rising or a judgment that, at least for the moment, the costs of further assertiveness would exceed the benefits. Whether the awkward handshake between Xi and Japanese Prime Minister Abe will lead to a sustained easing of Chinese pressure on the

Senkakus, and whether Beijing will back off in its ongoing confrontations with the Philippines and Vietnam remains to be seen. If it does, then the interval of forceful action that began in 2009 may be at an end, and a more placid period in China's relations with its neighbors, and with the United States, may be at hand.

What seems more likely, however, is that China's leaders have chosen to adjust the mix of threats and inducements that they use to pursue their long-term strategic objectives, offering more carrots to some even as they continue to build and brandish bigger sticks against others. Far from being over, the era of Chinese assertiveness appears to be entering a new, more complex, and potentially more challenging phase.

Notes

1. See Andrew Scobell and Scott W. Harold, "An 'Assertive' China? Insights from Interviews," *Asian Security* 9, no. 2 (2013), pp. 111–131.
2. "Hide your capabilities and bide your time" is the essence of the so-called "24 Character Strategy" laid out by Deng in a memorandum circulated to Communist Party officials after the Tiananmen Square incident (and the economic sanctions and diplomatic condemnation that followed) and shortly before the final collapse of the Soviet Union. For an overview of the recent debate 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* 9, no. 2 (September 2011), pp. 195–216.
3. Michael D. Swaine, "Perceptions of an Assertive China," *China Leadership Monitor* 32 (May 2012), p. 2.
4. Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2013), p. 7.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 23
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 24–30
8. *Ibid.*, p. 19
9. See also Derek Pham, "Gone Rogue?: China's Assertiveness in the South China Sea," *Journal of Politics and Society* 22, no. 1 (2011), p. 145.
10. Michael D. Swaine and M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Assertive Behavior, Part Two: The Maritime Periphery," *China Leadership Monitor* 35 (June 2011), p.3. See also M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (December 2011), p. 300.
11. "Japan and ASEAN Nations Seek 'Freedom of Overflight,'" BBC, December 14, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-25345156>.
12. Ely Ratner, "Learning the Lessons of Scarborough Reef," *The National Interest*, November 21, 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/learning-the-lessons-scarborough-reef-9442>. See also Carlyle A. Thayer, "Scarborough Shoal Standoff Reveals Blunt Edge to China's Peaceful Rise," *YaleGlobal*, June 12, 2012, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/standoff-south-china-sea>.

13. The story can be wound back at least two further steps: some analysts speculate that Tokyo's initial processing of the arrested captain in a domestic court was seen in Beijing as a provocative assertion of sovereignty over disputed waters. William Wan, "Boat Collision Sparks Anger, Breakdown in China-Japan Talks," *The Washington Post*, September 20, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/20/AR2010092000130.html>. On the other hand, the collision that triggered the incident may have been pre-planned.
14. Ratner, "Learning the Lessons of Scarborough Reef." *Op. cit.*
15. Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, "China Takes the Gloves Off," CNN.com, July 25, 2012, <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2012/07/25/china-takes-the-gloves-off/>.
16. International Crisis Group, "Dangerous Waters: China-Japan Relations on the Rocks," Report no. 245, April 8, 2013, p. 12, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/north-east-asia/245-dangerous-waters-china-japan-relations-on-the-rocks>.
17. Edward N. Luttwak, *The Rise of China vs. The Logic of Strategy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 12.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 19
19. *Ibid.*, p. 21
20. *Ibid.*, p. 24 and p. 35
21. *Ibid.*, p. 72
22. *Ibid.*, p. 78
23. The theoretical rationale for these initiatives was contained in an essay by State Councillor Dai Bingguo reaffirming the basic axioms of Deng Xiaoping's "24 character strategy." Dai Bingguo, "Adhere to the Path of Peaceful Development," University of Southern California, U.S.–China Institute, December 6, 2010, <http://china.usc.edu/ShowArticle.aspx?articleID=2325&AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1>.
24. John Pomfret, "U.S. Takes a Tougher Tone with China," *The Washington Post*, July 30, 2010.
25. Andy Yee, "Maritime Territorial Disputes in East Asia: A Comparative Analysis of the South China Sea and the East China Sea," *Journal of Chinese Affairs* 40, no. 2 (2011), p. 187.
26. Michael Yahuda, "China's New Assertiveness in the South China Sea," *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 81 (2013), p. 456.
27. Scobell and Harold, "An 'Assertive' China?" p. 123. *Op. cit.*
28. Michael D. Swaine, "Chinese Leadership and Elite Response to the U.S. Pacific Pivot," *China Leadership Monitor* 38 (August 2012), p. 14.
29. See Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, "Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust," Brookings Institution, John L. Thornton China Center Monograph Series, no. 4, March 2012.
30. Literally "the primacy of internal politics." This label has been applied to the arguments of historians who see the causes of the First World War as lying primarily in the domestic politics of the major powers, rather than in their international interactions.
31. For an early assessment of the possible implications of this shift, see Allen S. Whiting, "Chinese Nationalism and Foreign Policy After Deng," *China Quarterly* 142 (June 1995), pp. 295–316.
32. See Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). Also Peter Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

33. See, for example, Yahuda, "China's New Assertiveness in the South China Sea," p. 454. *Op. cit.*
34. See Linda Jakobson and Dean Knox, *New Foreign Policy Actors in China*, Policy Paper 26 (SIPRI September 2010), p. 1.
35. See International Crisis Group, "Stirring Up the South China Sea (I)," Asia Report no. 223, April 23, 2012.
36. Willy Lam, "China's Hawks in Command," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 1, 2012, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304211804577500521756902802>.
37. David Lague, "China's Hawks Take the Offensive," Reuters, January 17, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/17/us-china-hawks-idUSBRE90G00C20130117>.
38. Michael D. Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior, Part Four: The Role of the Military in Foreign Crises," *China Leadership Monitor* 37 (April 2012), p. 8.
39. See Paul Kennedy, *Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860–1914* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982); Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).
40. James Reilly, "A Wave to Worry About? Public Opinion, Foreign Policy and China's Anti-Japan Protests," *Contemporary China* (October 2013), p. 2.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
42. See Jessica Chen Weiss, "Authoritarian Signaling, Mass Audiences, and Nationalist Protest in China," *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (January 2013), pp. 1–35. See also her book, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
43. Andrew Chubb, "Propaganda, Not Policy: Explaining the PLA's 'Hawkish Faction' (Part One)," *China Policy Brief* 13, no. 15, July 25, 2013, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=41175&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=25&cHash=7f8c429316c37306078d14d0b363856a#.UtGfuaVdqdu.
44. Andrew Chubb, "Propaganda, Not Policy: Explaining the PLA's 'Hawkish Faction' (Part Two)," *China Policy Brief* 13, no. 16, August 9, 2013, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=41254&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=25&cHash=57de84de0f8841ac12c795fa4fadffbc#.UtF_UqVdqdu.
45. *Ibid.*
46. You Ji, "The PLA and Diplomacy: Unravelling Myths About the Military Role in Foreign Policy Making," *Journal of Contemporary China* (2013), p. 4.
47. China's announcement of an Air Defense Identification Zone over the East China Sea in late 2013 and its deployment of an oil rig to disputed waters off Vietnam in May 2014 are among its more assertive actions in recent years. On the latter, see Carlyle Thayer, "Vietnam, China and the Oil Rig Crisis: Who Blinkled?" *The Diplomat*, August 4, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/08/vietnam-china-and-the-oil-rig-crisis-who-blinkled/>.
48. Ankit Panda, "What Will China's New National Security Council Do?" *The Diplomat*, November 14, 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/11/what-will-chinas-new-national-security-council-do/>.
49. This term is borrowed from Michael D. Swaine and Ashley Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy: Past, Present, and Future* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2000), p. xi.
50. Timothy R. Heath, "What Does China Want? Discerning the PRC's National Strategy," *Asian Security* 8, no. 1 (2012), pp. 58–60.

51. See Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), pp. 142–181.
52. See Chen and Wang, “Lying Low No More?” *Op. cit.*
53. These were first spelled out in a speech by Hu Jintao at the end of 2004. See James Mulvenon, “Chairman Hu and the PLA’s ‘New Historic Missions,’” *China Leadership Monitor* 27 (January 2009), p. 3.
54. Heath, “What Does China Want?,” pages 63 and 67. *Op. cit.*
55. The sequence of events in the Philippines case is well described in Chubb, “Propaganda, Not Policy.” *Op. cit.* Regarding Sino-Japanese tensions following the 2012 island purchase see International Crisis Group, “Waters: China-Japan Relations on the Rocks.” *Op. cit.* This report notes that immediately following the purchase “China implemented a string of measures. that bore the hallmarks of a well-planned campaign with multi-agency coordination and high-level decision-making.” *Ibid.*, p., 10.
56. See, among many examples, Kirk Spitzer, “USA Upgrading in Asia, But ‘Pivot’ Questioned,” *USA Today*, December 17, 2013.
57. For a useful summary, see “Chinese Vision Drives East Asian Détente,” IISS, Strategic Comments, December 8, 2014, <https://www.iiss.org/en/publications/strategic%20comments/sections/2014-a6f5/chinese-vision-drives-east-asian-d-233-tente-aef>.
58. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “New Asian Security Concept for New Progress in Security Cooperation,” Remarks by Xi Jinping at the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, May 21, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1159951.shtml.
59. “Why China Is Creating a New “World Bank” for Asia,” *Economist*, November 11, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2014/11/economist-explains-6>.
60. Zhao Yanan and Zhao Yanrong, “Country Pushes for Code at South China Sea,” *China Daily*, November 14, 2014, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014liattendealm/2014-11/14/content_18911539.htm.
61. Dingding Chen, “After APEC, East Asia Summit and G20, China Emerges a Global Leader,” *The Diplomat*, November 17, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/after-apec-east-asia-summit-and-g20-china-emerges-a-global-leader/>.