

Controlled Coercion: China's 'New Normal' for Southeast Asia?

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Is China a force for stability in Southeast Asia or a root of conflict? The answer seems to be both. A recent development illustrates nicely this duality in Chinese behaviour: China's relations with Vietnam – on the mend following Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to Hanoi in October 2013 which produced agreements to enhance bilateral cooperation in several issue areas – have since been severely undermined by China's deployment of an oil rig in a maritime boundary area not far from Vietnam's shoreline. This elicited anti-Chinese violence in Vietnam and the forced evacuation of thousands of Chinese citizens from Vietnam (Liljas 2014). Much of international media coverage has hitherto asserted the illegality of the Chinese move; others however have suggested that the effective occupation and administration by China of Woody Island (Phú Lâm/Yongxing), barely 80 nautical miles from the oil rig's location, could benefit China more than Vietnam should a legal solution via the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea be sought (Bateman 2014). That said, what has mystified many is why China took this action at the expense of its rapprochement with Vietnam. Beijing's apparent willingness to subvert its reconciliation efforts with other claimant countries has raised questions about its strategic aims and the seemingly contradictory approaches it has adopted to that end.

While China would presumably prefer to be viewed favourably by its neighbours, its complex ties with Vietnam and with other regional states arguably underscore Beijing's readiness on occasion to emphasise its interests over its image. In this regard, it has been argued that China's deployment of the oil rig is no strategic mistake but a considered decision to advance its economic interests (Chen 2014). (What Beijing probably did not anticipate was the extent of Vietnamese anger in reaction.) While such developments highlight the disparity between aspirations China might harbour about acting responsibly and actually doing so, this paper argues that there is equally a normative dimension to this episode and other examples of contradictory Chinese behaviour that should not be missed, namely, *China's exercise of its power and influence to establish, incrementally rather than radically, a 'new normal' in Southeast Asia: a China that is no longer diffident about relying on coercive as well as accommodative diplomacy to assert its claims*. According to the theory of normative power, the transformation of regions largely builds on a change of behavioural patterns that redefine 'what can be "normal" in world politics' (Manners 2002). Crucially, this ability to 'normalise' also relies on whether the normative power's legitimacy and vision are recognised and accepted by others. In short, normality is not a given condition but one that emerges through the putative normative power's interactions with other states (Kavalski 2013).

Is China strategic or normative?

Much has been said about China's use of 'salami-slicing' tactics – a slow, patient approach to dominating Asia that falls short of provoking a war with the United States and other regional countries (Cronin *et al.* 2014). Arguably, the strategy is designed to build 'facts on the ground' in an incremental fashion and through a blend of provocative actions and displays of goodwill. To be sure, the resort to assertive actions could also reflect Chinese impatience at its inability to achieve its aims through responsible behaviour alone, as its 'charm offensives' directed toward Southeast Asian countries, or its aid policies, or its peacekeeping contributions in Africa and other parts of the world might be viewed, not least from China's perspective. Grand strategists and/or smart power theorists would see this as Beijing's instrumental employment of hard and soft power approaches, effectively or otherwise, for achieving its national goals. While instrumental or strategic acts are typically explained using the logic of consequence and normative acts using the logic of appropriateness, some norm socialisation theorists accept that normative acts by states can, under the right conditions, be equally considered as instrumental or strategic (Barkin 2010; Johnston 2008). In this respect, China's commitment to and participation in multilateral diplomacy and multilateral institutions have been both normative and strategic at the same time (Johnston 2008). Thus understood, China's resort to controlled coercion in the South China Sea, where coercive means (short of war) are deployed in tandem with collaborative ones, is arguably driven by both normative as well as strategic considerations.

It should be said that China has in the past made concessions in order to settle territorial disputes it has had with other countries. As M. Taylor Fravel (2005) has highlighted, of its twenty-three territorial disputes active since 1949, China offered substantial compromises in seventeen, usually agreeing to accept less than half of the territory being disputed. In Southeast Asia, despite China's vociferous dispute with Vietnam over the South China Sea islands and waters, the two countries successfully signed a treaty relating to the land border between them in December 1999 as well as an agreement relating to the 'demarcation' of the Gulf of Tonkin (or what the Chinese refer to as Beibu Bay or Gulf) at the end of 2000 (Amer 2002). On the one hand, China's readiness to peacefully settle a fair number of its border disputes with adjacent countries suggests it does not harbour expansionist designs of the sort its critics insist of China. On the other hand, China's border policy has above all been strategically driven: territorial concessions to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan during the 1990s, for instance, were presumably rendered with the intent to secure their political support for (or, at the very least, their non-interference over) China's crackdown against Uighur separatism in Xinjiang. Others however have argued the idea of China making territorial concessions is questionable given its apparent strategy stepping up claims and then settling for less (Ramachandran 2011). China arguably has proved most conciliatory towards its neighbours whenever it has experienced serious internal difficulties be it the revolt in Tibet, instability in the wake of the Great Leap Forward, legitimacy crisis following the Tiananmen upheaval, and as pointed out, separatist violence in Xinjiang (Taylor 2005). If anything, its behaviour in this regard is consistent with China's preference for a stable external environment in order that it can focus on its own development. However, it remains uncertain if an internally insecure China automatically means an internationally cooperative China.

Thus understood, a possible challenge confronting China today has to do with its management of the tension between its desire to be acknowledged by the international community as a responsible great power, on the one hand, and its propensity to assert its power and influence in increasingly provocative ways in East Asia on the other (Huang 2013; Thayer 2011; Xia Liping 2001). Chinese

leaders, it has been argued, have purportedly embraced the notion of China as a responsible great power with its attendant normative meanings and ramifications (Hoo 2013), even as allegations about its free riding and perceived reluctance to contribute to global governance and the cause of world stability more broadly continue to abound (Kleine-Ahlbrandt 2009; Patrick 2010). But it has also been pointed out that Chinese leaders view external attempts to define China as a responsible international actor – former US official Robert Zoellick’s notion of ‘responsible stakeholder’ is an oft-cited example – as a normative constraint which they are still reluctant to accept, in the belief that it holds China to unacceptable behavioural standards (He 2014). The perception that China has not received the international respect it believes it rightly deserves and that its rise to greatness is being unfairly conscribed by others have led to mounting frustration and dissatisfaction among the Chinese (Breslin 2001; Klare 2006).

What does China want?

At the Sunnylands summit between Xi Jinping and Barack Obama in June 2013, President Xi outlined China’s two key wishes: one, respect from the United States, and two, for ‘a new relationship among major powers’ to be forged between the two countries. While President Obama acknowledged the need for a ‘new model of cooperation’, he studiously avoided the Chinese phraseology of a ‘new model of major country relationships’ (Economy 2013), hinting perhaps that, in Washington’s view, China as a power is neither responsible nor major just yet. Echoing his predecessors, Xi has claimed that China would never seek ‘hegemony or expansion’ in the Asia-Pacific, even as it strengthens its diplomatic and military footprint in the region (Blum 2013). At the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) held in Shanghai in May 2014, Xi pledged that China would stick to peaceful methods to resolve its disputes over territory (Ruwitch 2014). The logic undergirding Xi’s pledge, according to analysts, is a ‘new security paradigm’ that China wishes to promote, where elements such as mutual respect and understanding and the search for common ground while shelving differences would provide the basis for Asian security to ‘be handled in the Asian way’ (Beng 2014). In much the same way during the Jiang and Hu presidencies, China consistently advanced its principles of peaceful coexistence and promoted a ‘new security concept’ – first introduced in 1997 and subsequently reintroduced each time with slight modifications – that emphasises equality, mutual trust, respect and cooperation, consensus through consultation and the peaceful settlement of disputes (Capie and Evans 2007). Noteworthy scholarly arguments have also advanced China’s rise as having been relatively peaceful, status quo-oriented, and a key pillar for a stable regional order (Kang 2003, p. 66; Johnston 2003).

Be that as it may, while Xi’s notion of the ‘Chinese dream’ – an ambiguous nationalist vision that outlines a path to revive the country as a global economic and military power – is understandable of emerging powers, it has nonetheless fuelled regional anxieties regarding China’s strategic intentions given the perceived gap between its words and deeds. In this regard, much as a number of South and Southeast Asian states may welcome China’s promotion of a ‘maritime Silk Road’ that ostensibly links China with Southeast Asia (and South Asia) through maritime cooperation, others see in Xi’s maritime Silk Road a potentially uneasy correspondence with the so-called ‘string of pearls’, that is, China’s network of maritime facilities in the Pacific and Indian Oceans (Tiezzi 2014). But while most Chinese commentators have tended to emphasise the maritime Silk Road as a new driving force for the prosperity of the entire East Asian region, others, wary of Chinese intentions, have drawn links to the military connotation associated with the ‘string of pearls’ – a notion that did not originate

with the Chinese but was introduced courtesy of a 2004 report by the US defence contractor, Booz Allen Hamilton (MacDonald 2004) – and the vision, advanced first by Hu Jintao, to build China into a maritime power that would ‘resolutely safeguard China’s maritime rights and interests’ (Hille 2012). Much as the Chinese tend to see the United States’ ‘pivot to Asia’ as principally a military policy despite the Obama administration’s incessant efforts to explain otherwise, the same likely holds true for the maritime Silk Road/string of pearls vision, which China’s wary neighbours may see, fairly or otherwise, as a Chinese ploy to gain strategic control of the Indo-Pacific waterways.

Indeed, there is no denying the extent to which the military-strategic dimension has shaped and continues to shape both Chinese and US perspectives of each other’s intentions, as evidenced by China’s efforts to develop anti-access and area-denial, or ‘A2/AD’, capabilities to prevent US forces’ entry into a theatre of operations (anti-access) and, failing which, to prevent their freedom of action in the more narrow confines of the area under China’s direct control (area-denial) (Cheng 2013; Keck 2014; Krepinevich *et al.* 2003). For the United States, the focus within its strategic circles on AirSea Battle as the putative antidote to Chinese A2/AD has had the same effect of providing those who fear that China’s regional activity is being contained by the US and others ample grist to support their claims about US intentions (Kazianis 2013). Xi’s veiled threat (made at the CICA meeting referred to earlier) against unnamed Southeast Asian countries over their alleged efforts at strengthening military alliances to counter China reflects Beijing’s suspicions. It raises the possibility that China feels that the United States – presumably having encouraged, if only indirectly, its allies Japan and the Philippines and even a non-ally, Vietnam, to harden their stances on their respective islands disputes with China – has not shown it the respect it craves.

Likewise, China has long viewed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade pact, of which it is not a member, in much the same way. Suspicious over a supposed US design to ‘contain’ China through economic means (Das 2013), China has nonetheless begun to change its position on the TPP presumably because it recognises the prospective significance of the TPP in making the rules for the next phase in how the global economy develops – a process from which China can ill afford to be excluded – and its own impatience with the World Trade Organisation (WTO) (Gordon 2014). On the other hand, it does not appear that China is prepared to concede to the United States where influence over trade policy in the Asia-Pacific is concerned. With the APEC summit scheduled to take place in November 2014 in China – the first time since Xi Jinping became president – and evident Chinese desire to demonstrate it can provide global leadership, China has indicated it will propose a plan to invigorate the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP). Its proposed trade deal is meant to layer over the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) which China is currently negotiating with fifteen other East Asian economies – a strategy that could give China different ways to influence trade policy in the Asia-Pacific while arguably blunting the US strategy of having the TPP set the standards for regional trade (Davis 2014).

How has China behaved?

It has been argued that Japan’s aspiration to become a normal military power will likely entail a policy shift away from its traditional ‘leading from behind’ or ‘directional leadership’ approach (Hughes 2007; Pyle 2014; Terada 2001). China, in its own way, has also experienced a shift from Deng Xiaoping’s ‘keep a low profile’ approach to Xi Jinping’s brand of confident and assertive foreign policy. Under Deng, the Chinese focused on their country’s social and economic development with outreach limited to the quest for foreign markets for Chinese exports. Following the Tiananmen

incident in June 1989, China stayed 'under the radar', as it were, in order to avoid unwanted international attention (Szcudlik-Tatar 2013). However, under Jiang Xemin and subsequently Hu Jintao, China began to engage more deeply with the outside world and arguably evolved from being a norm taker to, under Xi, an embryonic norm entrepreneur or socialiser, albeit driven largely by instrumental reasons (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Kojima 2001).

China began its involvement in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) with a fair amount of suspicion about the true intent behind such 'new regionalisms' and concerned over their possible use by the United States and others to conscribe China's rise. But while the existence of balancing dynamics within Asia's multilateral institutions is undeniable, the architects of the APEC and the ARF also envisioned their creations as regional platforms to deeply engage a post-revolutionary China and help socialise its evolution towards becoming a 'normal' and 'responsible' power (Ba 2006; Tan 2009). Following Asia's financial crisis of 1997, China benefitted from the perceived highhandedness of the United States and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which not only imposed stringent structural conditions on ailing East Asian economies but effectively squashed Japan's proposal for an Asian Monetary Fund (Lipsy 2003). In the light of the bitter pill East Asians were forced to swallow at a time when they most needed America's and the IMF's support, China's readiness to advance a form of regionalism that excludes the United States paved the way to the formation of the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) and a currency swap arrangement, the Chiang Mai Initiative (Beeson, M. 2003). At the gathering of APT finance ministers and central bank governors in 2009, the decision was taken to establish the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralisation, a USD 120 billion reserve currency pool of which China and Japan are its largest contributors. In Southeast Asia, China pursued an engagement strategy consonant with its 'new security concept', matching a so-called 'charm offensive' aimed at ASEAN countries with notable regional achievements (Kurlantzick 2008), particularly the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement which was signed in November 2002 and took effect in January 2010, and – less concretely, in the light of subsequent difficulties over the South China Sea and stalled efforts to produce a Code of Conduct – a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) also signed in November 2002.

However, by 2010 if not earlier, China's disposition had altered with a considerably hardened response on its maritime disputes with not only fellow claimants over the South China Sea but also with Japan in the East China Sea. Chinese assertiveness was also reflected its behaviour on the global stage, such as its stance at the Copenhagen climate change conference in December 2009 (Lynas 2009). And while in recent times both ASEAN and China have indicated willingness to move forward with negotiations for a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea, their divergent expectations – ASEAN claimants wanting to negotiate a code of conduct with China against China's preference for a loose code of conduct so long as the other claimants are prepared to forego efforts to internationalise the disputes and negotiate directly with China (Valencia 2014) – implies that little to no progress on the code would be forthcoming. Time is on China's side. Its current practice of establishing 'facts on the ground' in the South China Sea – occupation of contested territories, demonstrating its effective control and administration of those territories while highlighting the inability and incapacity of other claimants to do the same – conceivably strengthens its case as and when it is ready to bring its claims before the international courts and tribunals.¹ Be that as it may, the current ambiguity of China's infamous nine-dashed line map, its silence on clarifying its claims on the basis of international law, its practice of building structures atop atolls and administering effective control of them (which other claimants have also been doing), and its employment of gunboat diplomacy in the disputed areas – while, by contrast at the ASEAN level, establishing an

ASEAN-China Maritime Cooperation Fund (worth RBM 3 billion) in November 2011 to support maritime scientific research, connectivity and navigation safety, and to implement agreed cooperative activities and projects within the DOC framework – have contributed to a ‘Jekyll and Hyde’ image. For Southeast Asians, the Chinese propensity for contradiction, along with its attendant ramifications, is likely to be the norm henceforth.

Conclusion

The temptation for the analyst is to suggest that the China of today, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, is distinct from previous incarnations in terms of its international confidence and diplomatic assertiveness. However, according to the noted China scholar Alastair Iain Johnston, China’s so-called new assertiveness is in fact neither particularly new nor assertive when compared with its past foreign policy behaviour – although Johnston acknowledges that Chinese actions in the South China Sea have become more assertive than before (Johnston 2013). Pride in its accomplishments – China surpassed Japan in 2010 and became the world’s second largest economy – and the perception that America is in decline – while China continues to hold over USD 1 trillion in US debt – could have spurred China towards increased assertiveness globally and regionally. But as this paper has shown, Beijing has not been entirely negligent in demonstrating responsibility towards Southeast Asia, albeit selectively. The ‘new normal’ is likely to be a China that is equally part assertive and part accommodative, part coercive – albeit in a controlled fashion – and part cooperative. In a sense, China’s seemingly schizophrenic behaviour reflects its own struggles over what it means to be a great power. As William Callahan has noted, China’s national security is closely tied to its nationalist insecurities (Callahan 2012). Ultimately, China is unlikely to abandon its commitment to be a responsible stakeholder, but it will prove a difficult stakeholder.

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¹ China could well be paying careful attention to the justifications rendered by the courts on recent territorial dispute settlements in Southeast Asia. See Colson (2003); Merrill (2003); Jayakumar and Koh (2009); Arsana (2008).