

CHINA'S LONG MARCH AT SEA: EXPLAINING BEIJING'S SOUTH CHINA SEA STRATEGY, 2009-16

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THREE INFLUENTIAL VIEWS

- Regional hegemony as China's goal: "China seeks hegemony in East Asia. Simple as that" (Adm Harris, 2016)
- Gray-zone coercion as China's tactic: "an opportunistically timed progression of incremental but intensifying steps to attempt to increase effective control over disputed areas and avoid escalation to military conflict" (DoD 2017)
- Bureaucratic politics as a decision-making constraint: bureaucratic disorder and competition in the Chinese decision-making system help to explain policy inconsistency and confusion. Chinese policy is an ad hoc product of capricious bureaucratic jostling rather than a systematic grand strategy (Jakobson 2014)

MY ARGUMENT

- China has an implicit strategy in the South China Sea since the 1990s: not a strategy of regional hegemony or gray-zone coercion, but one of balancing the goals of defending rights and maintaining stability.
- In July 2013, this strategy went public, when President Xi Jinping articulated the central task of achieving a rights-stability balance.
- In 2014-15, the goal of strategic balance was eluded by bureaucratic parochialism and lack of policy coordination, the most spectacular manifestation of which was island building.
- Since 2016, Chinese decision-makers had developed a sophisticated understanding of the changing situation, refined their interest conceptions, and strengthened domestic policy coordination.
- As a result, in conjunction with unleashing a new COC process in August 2016, Beijing began to achieve some success in strategic balance.

MARITIME ASSERTIVENESS, 2009–2011

- Bureaucratic politics is a useful perspective
- The Chinese acknowledge as much by conjuring up an image of “nine dragons stirring up the sea” (*jiu long nao hai*).
- Two events provided a context of especially robust action between 2009 and 2012. First, the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing was a considerable constraint.
- Second, the 2005 Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking agreement expired in June 2008. Beijing responded to exploration activities of the Philippines and Vietnam by increasing its own patrols
- A critical shift in strategic assessment: China’s self-restraint after signing the DOC was said to be exploited by other states for their unilateral advantage
- An attempt to streamline decisionmaking: the creation in mid-2012 of the CCP Central Committee Leading Small Group for the Protection of Maritime Rights and Interests.

DIPLOMATIC MODERATION, 2011-12

- In December 2010, State Councillor Dai Bingguo published an authoritative article to reaffirm Deng Xiaoping's strategy of keeping a low profile.
- In July 2011, China signed an agreement with ASEAN on Guidelines for the Implementation of the DOC
- In January 2012, China and ASEAN set up four working groups to implement the DOC
- The moderation was a response to the US entry into the South China Sea disputes and regional countries' embrace of it.
- The goal of maintaining stability gained prominence relative to the goal of safeguarding rights.

THE SCARBOROUGH SHOAL INCIDENT, 2012

- The incident is widely taken as one of the best evidence of China's attempt at regional hegemony and gray-zone coercion, but it is not.
- The link between control of the shoal, which became China's objective during the second month of the standoff, and the goal of regional hegemony was tenuous at best. The purpose of controlling the shoal was to safeguard sovereignty and maritime rights, not to maximize power.
- Gray-zone coercion fits several characteristics of Chinese policy, but falters in its central premise that China has a fixed tactic of altering the status quo. Throughout the first month of the incident, Beijing in fact wanted to restore the status quo by appealing to diplomatic dialogue with Manila. It was only after the second month, when Manila's intransigence fed Chinese apprehensions of "losing" the shoal, that Beijing settled on a new policy of control.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SCARBOROUGH SHOAL INCIDENT

- China's decision to control the shoal was based on a pragmatic calculation informed by changing circumstances. It feared a steady assertion of Manila's sovereignty claims over, and administrative control of, the shoal and thus an alarming erosion of Chinese claims and positions.
- Another was the perceived "black hand" of the US.
- The incident was significant in finally prompting China's strategic transition from previous reactivity to a new approach of taking the initiative and shaping events in its favor.
- Equally significant was the invaluable hint that it gave to the Chinese leadership of what an effective strategy should look like: in July 2013 Xi pointed to achieving a dynamic balance between maintaining stability and safeguarding rights as the central task of China's strategy

ISLAND BUILDING, 2013–PRESENT

- A stunning case of policy domination by a significant interest group—the PLA Navy
- The PLA regarded regional trends in 2013 as favorable for achieving a surprise breakthrough: the Sino-Philippines relationship irrevocably damaged; Manila’s recourse to arbitration probably accelerated the Chinese timetable; the Obama administration’s rebalance strategy continued to exacerbate Chinese apprehensions and provided a geopolitical pretext; Obama judged as a weak and indecisive leader
- Like controlling Scarborough Shoal, island building is best seen as another instance of China’s attempt to turn changing circumstances to its advantage, this time without any triggering event
- The difference lies in the policy actors: the MFA and the SOA in the former case, and the PLA Navy in the latter

IS ISLAND BUILDING EVIDENCE OF CHINA'S HEGEMONIC AMBITION?

- First we need to isolate the PLA as a policy actor from other actors in the Chinese system
- The PLA is concerned about the security of Chinese assets in the South China Sea. But this security motive is predicated on the assumption of China's sovereignty rights in the area.
- Protecting rights requires enhanced control of the islands and their surrounding waters, but this is distinct from maximizing relative power over the US for regional hegemony.
- The PLA's desire to expand China's security perimeter reflects a strategy of active defense of Chinese interests by deterring or countering U.S. intervention in territorial disputes
- The challenge to US military dominance is a consequence of this active-defense strategy, not a cause of it.
- The consequence may have been intended by some hawks within the PLA, but not by the PLA as an institution, and certainly not by the Chinese state as a whole

COC CONSULTATION, 2016-PRESENT

- China and ASEAN agreed to expedite COC consultation in August 2016, agreed on a framework text in August 2017, and launched negotiations in November 2017
- COC diplomacy defies the hypotheses of regional hegemony and gray-zone coercion
- It was Beijing's proactive attempt to turn changing circumstances of the first half of 2016 to its advantage, by seizing the negative occasion of the release of the arbitral ruling and turning it into a positive opportunity
- It seeks to preserve stability by banishing the ruling and creating a new diplomatic process – and to consolidate gains made by island building.
- It is an attempt to achieve a balance between stability and rights, with better policy coordination between the MFA, the maritime law-enforcement agencies, and the PLA

CONCLUSION

- China's strategy is not one of regional hegemony or gray-zone coercion, but a dialectic and arduous one of balancing the goals of safeguarding rights and maintaining stability.
- These twin goals, often in conflict, have characterized Chinese strategy since the 1990s. Xi's July 2013 speech was its first public articulation.
- Beijing's challenge has been to achieve a dynamic and sometimes elusive rights-stability balance with changing means.