

Pavlovian conditioning and 'correct thinking' on the South China Sea

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On a global scale, China is not a clearly revisionist power. But Beijing wants to reclaim something of its historical centrality in East Asia. The United States has emphasised that it intends to remain an East Asian power.

The strategic challenge for China is therefore how to shift the US from the very centre of the East Asian strategic equation and occupy that space, but without provoking responses from the US and Japan that could jeopardise Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule. For the US the strategic challenge is how to accommodate China, while reassuring friends and allies that it intends to hold its position without stumbling into conflict.

The South China Sea (SCS) is not the only issue in US-China relations; it is perhaps not even the most important issue in their relationship. But the SCS is today the issue where the parameters of US-China competition and their interests are most clearly defined. Like it or not, the region will draw conclusions about American resolve and Chinese intentions from the SCS issue, which will also shape perceptions of Asean.

It would be tedious to recount every instance of China's use of force or unilateral assertions of sovereignty backed by the threat of force in the SCS. In 2012, China established Sansha City under Hainan Province, with jurisdiction over the disputed Paracels and Spratly Islands as well as Macclesfield Bank. The following year, it promulgated the Hainan Fishing Regulations, which were an assertion of domestic law over contested areas. China has since become more aggressive in enforcing what it considers its domestic rights in the SCS.

Since 2013, China has begun an ambitious programme of land reclamation in the SCS, has constructed various kinds of structures on the new artificial islands and deployed military assets on some of them. China has argued that it was not the first to reclaim land or deploy military assets in the SCS. This may be true but is irrelevant.

The speed and scope of China's reclamation dwarf anything any other claimant has done and the actions of a major power will always convey a different signature than those of small countries. China's argument that the infrastructure it has built is a common good for the benefit of all users of the SCS hardly seems intended to be believed.

China continues to engage Asean on a code of conduct (COC) for the SCS but in a barely convincing way. Progress has been glacial and Chinese diplomats often hold discussions on the COC hostage to Asean refraining from taking positions on the SCS that displease China. On occasion, Chinese diplomats even seem to have perversely gone out of their way to accentuate rather than assuage anxieties.

Once, after our Prime Minister spoke on the SCS at an Asean Summit, a senior Chinese diplomat told one of my younger colleagues that "silence is golden". If he meant to suggest that

we were not entitled to a view on an important issue that affects our interests, he only undermined the credibility of China's claim to "peaceful development".

This was not an isolated incident nor has Singapore been particularly singled out. China routinely attempts to pressure Asean members, with varying degrees of success, not to raise the SCS in Asean-led forums or not to support other countries which do so.

DIPLOMACY, CHINESE STYLE

The general attitude that such attempts illustrate is not confined to the SCS issue but sometimes is on display even in seemingly trivial matters. Some years before I retired, one of my counterparts from an Asean country that was then holding the Asean chair told me that the Chinese ambassador to his country had forced him to shift an Asean leader attending a summit out of a hotel that had already been allocated to that Asean delegation so that then Premier Wen Jiabao could stay there. The ambassador insisted on this although the hotel allocated to Premier Wen was of equal quality. Did Premier Wen know where he was staying?

Would he have cared if he had known? But the episode certainly left a deep impression on my counterpart and no doubt on the Asean delegation that was forced to move as well.

Chinese diplomats often profess bewilderment that China's generosity towards Asean has not evoked gratitude or assuaged mistrust, and they pretend to ascribe this to malignant external influences. I do not think that Chinese diplomats are more inept or disingenuous than the diplomats of other countries. Their behaviour is, I think, better understood as illustrating the passive-aggressive style and the positing of false dilemmas to force acceptance of China's inherent superiority as the natural normative order of East Asian international relations - or at least South-east Asian international relations because I doubt that Japan will ever accept the Chinese notion of regional order characteristic of Chinese diplomacy.

Chinese diplomacy constantly hammers home the idea that if bilateral ties or Asean-China relations suffer because Asean stubbornly insists on speaking up on the SCS even when our mouths are stuffed with delicious Chinese cake, or because the Chinese Premier has to stay in one hotel rather than another, or if some date they propose for a meeting cannot be agreed on because it is inconvenient for Asean, it is our fault and ours alone.

China does not merely want consideration of its interests. China expects deference to its interests to be internalised by Asean members as a mode of thought; as not just a correct calculation of Asean interests vis-a-vis China but "correct thinking: which leads to "correct behaviour". Foreign policy calculations are subject to continual revision; correct thinking is a permanent part of the sub-conscious. This differentiates Chinese diplomacy from the diplomacy of other major powers and represents a melding of Westphalian diplomatic practice with ancient Chinese statecraft.

The very triviality of the behaviour China sometimes tries to impose underscores the cast of mind it seeks to embed in Asean through an almost Pavlovian process of conditioning. It does not always work. It can be counterproductive. But it works often enough and well enough with at least some Asean members for China to persist.

ASEAN PUSHES BACK

Asean has begun to push back against China's assertiveness. Some Asean claimants, including Vietnam, have moved closer to the US and Japan to balance China. At its last summit with Asean, two out of three of China's proposals - the cookies that China regularly doles out at such events - failed to gain acceptance and one was accepted only after a delay. Indonesia, a non-claimant state, has expressed concern over the impact of China's claims on its exclusive economic zone in the Natunas and signalled its intention to deploy some of its most advanced military assets there. But whatever their concerns, there is a limit to which an Asean member can tilt towards the US.

No one can ignore or shun China. Vietnam is the prime example. Quite apart from the SCS disputes, Vietnam has a long and troubled history with China, but a senior Vietnamese official once told me: "Every Vietnamese leader must be able to stand up to China and get along with China. If anyone thinks this cannot be done at the same time, he doesn't deserve to be a leader." That China and Vietnam are two out of only five remaining communist systems is an additional link.

The current muddle in Malaysia over whether or not Chinese vessels had intruded into its waters - one minister said yes, but another contradicted him - perhaps illustrates the multiple and contradictory forces at play in Asean. In any case, whatever costs in relations with Asean that China may have to pay for its assertiveness in the SCS may not be considered unbearably high by Beijing as compared to the interests at stake.

CORE INTEREST: SHORING UP CCP'S LEGITIMACY

What are those interests? I doubt that control over resources of any kind figures very prominently in China's calculations on the SCS. Resources could be shared without prejudice to claims of sovereignty as China has itself suggested, although its own actions do not make any such agreement likely in the immediate future.

We can dismiss too the possibility that China is trying to strengthen its legal case. China does not even acknowledge that many areas contested by Asean claimants are in dispute. In his Singapore lecture, President Xi Jinping categorically asserted that "the South China Sea islands have been China's territory since ancient times". Uncertainty over what China's "nine-dash line" signifies has added to regional and international concerns. But China has said that it will not recognise the decisions of the arbitral tribunal on the case the Philippines brought against it under Unclos (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea), even though that would at least clarify the legal status of the "nine-dash line". Chinese diplomats have on occasion even argued that it is not in Asean's interest that China should clarify its claims.

I do not think that China considers the SCS disputes a legal matter, although it has on occasion employed the vocabulary of international law in support of its position. But that is not the same thing as recognising a legal dispute and it has not been consistent in doing so. As I pointed out in the last lecture, China has recently relied more on history to justify its claims.

Military planners must prepare for all contingencies but I doubt that China's actions in the SCS are primarily intended to gain military advantage vis-a-vis the US. In the event of a war with the US, the artificial islands and the military assets on them will be vaporised within minutes and will not affect the outcome in any significant way. In any case, as I argued in my last lecture, war between the US and China is highly improbable. Beijing has carefully kept each of its actions in the SCS below a threshold that would compel even the most reluctant of US administrations to respond kinetically. The US has made clear that while its alliance with Japan covers disputed islands in the East China Sea, the same does not apply to its alliance with the Philippines and disputed territories in the SCS. War in support of America's principal East Asian ally, Japan, is credible even if unlikely; war over tiny islands, reefs and atolls would be absurd.

Even in scenarios short of war, I doubt that China really considers the deployment of military assets on these artificial islands a serious deterrent to freedom of navigation operations of the kind the US conducted last year and earlier this year. The US may become a little more cautious - it has never been reckless - but it will not stop operating in the SCS. Military assets that are unlikely to be used are at best a weak deterrent. If, for example, the People's Liberation Army sinks a US naval vessel or shoots down a US military aircraft, the US will certainly retaliate. This will confront the Chinese leadership with a very invidious choice: a token or ineffectual response will expose the hollowness of the CCP's legitimating narrative of having led the "Great Rejuvenation" of China, which will at least complicate, if not jeopardise, the CCP's hold on power; but escalation risks being forced to follow the highly jingoistic Chinese public opinion the CCP has cultivated down a path that Beijing does not really want to travel because it leads to the same outcome as the first choice. The Chinese leadership will strenuously avoid being placed in such a situation.

China's use of history to legitimise CCP rule and justify sovereignty claims gets us, I think, to the crux of the matter. For the past century, the legitimacy of any Chinese government has depended on its ability to defend China's sovereignty and preserve its borders. But what are those borders? Can the CCP meekly accept the borders imposed on a weak China that has now, to use Mao Zedong's phrase, "stood up" under communist leadership? China is not reckless but the CCP must at least give the appearance of recovering lost territory. Revanchism is an intrinsic part of the story of China's "Great Rejuvenation".

The lands lost to a weak China include what are now parts of Siberia and the Russian Far East, Mongolia, Hong Kong and Macau, and Taiwan, as well as the Paracels and Spratlys in the SCS. Siberia and the Russian Far East and Mongolia are now beyond recovery. Hong Kong and Macau reverted to Beijing's rule almost 30 years ago. The US has made clear it will not support independence for Taiwan. Without US support, independence is impossible. With that core concern assuaged, Beijing can multiply the economic threads binding Taiwan to the mainland and bide its time, confident that irrespective of internal changes and how the people of Taiwan regard themselves, Taiwan's long-term trajectory cannot run counter to China's interest. Changing the status quo is not an immediate possibility but is no longer an urgent issue, although China still eyes Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party distrustfully and will never entirely forgo the option of forceful reunification.

That leaves the SCS territories to put some credible shreds of meat on the bare bones of the CCP's version of history as it navigates a second and more difficult phase of reforms and tries to manage social and labour unrest at a time of moderating growth and a future when slower growth will be China's "new normal". The very insignificance of the territories in dispute in the SCS may well be part of their attraction to Beijing for this essentially domestic political purpose.

The costs and consequences of chest-thumping and acting tough in the SCS are minimal. Deterrence or its lack works both ways. If the Chinese cannot deter the US from operating in the SCS because the risks of doing so are too high to be credible, by the same token, neither can the US deter or reverse Chinese activities in the SCS. China is not going to dig up the artificial islands it has constructed and throw the sand back into the sea or give up what it says was Chinese territory since "ancient times". Critical statements by the US, Europe or other countries from around the world calling on China to respect international law - even Botswana has issued a statement on the SCS - can be brushed aside. On the SCS, the only opinion that really matters to the CCP is that of its own people. In the SCS, the CCP can declare victory without taking unacceptable risks.

It was also no accident that the deployment of surface-to-air missiles on Woody Island in the Paracels was revealed shortly after the conclusion of the US-Asean Sunnylands Summit. While the artificial islands are inconsequential in military terms, they are a potent reminder to Asean that China is a geographic fact, whereas the US presence in the SCS is the consequence of a geopolitical calculation. This is an idea that China never tires of seeding in ways subtle or direct.

The implications of this idea should not be exaggerated; nor can they be shrugged off as entirely invalid either. Until relatively recently, the US took a somewhat hands-off approach to disputes in the SCS. When China first clashed with Asean over Mischief Reef in 1995, it took some persuading to get the US to declare a position of principle. Moreover, it is, I think, a geopolitical calculation that, despite all the media hullabaloo and tough talk including by the President himself, engages no US interest that is fundamentally irreconcilable with Chinese interests.

American and Chinese interests are not symmetrical. The SCS is more important to China than to the US. If I am correct that the SCS issue is ultimately connected to the legitimacy of CCP rule, it is an existential issue for China; a "core interest", although China now denies it has applied that term to the SCS, no doubt in order to avoid unduly exciting us natives.

The US takes no position on the merits of the various claims of sovereignty but defines its interests in terms of upholding international law and freedom of navigation (FON). These are important interests but not on the same level as the basic underlying Chinese interest. FON and the integrity of international law are certainly not existential interests threatening the survival of the American system. I doubt that they are even interests that the US must defend at all costs.

LIVING WITH CHINA

Modern South-east Asian history can be understood as a quest for autonomy in which process the formation of Asean was a crucial step. But so can modern Chinese history also be understood as a search to restore the autonomy lost in the 19th century and early 20th century. Asean and China have no choice but to live with each other. We are not enemies, but relations between big and small neighbours cannot but be uneasy. Where the balance of autonomies will be eventually struck between Asean and China is the central issue in the relationship that will in turn determine the extent to which the regional architecture remains open and inclusive.

This is one aspect of the uncertainty and ambiguity that my first lecture argued are the most salient characteristics of the post-Cold War world. To reach and maintain an acceptable balance requires Asean to meet what I described in that lecture as the basic strategic challenge of our times: avoiding being forced into invidious choices and keeping open the maximum range of options.

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