

Understanding China's Assertiveness

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In recent years, China has stepped up its presence in the East and South China Seas, arousing the suspicion of its neighbours. It has maintained a hardline approach to the disputed islands off its coast. Beijing's official position on the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong, and its unyielding stance in response to recent street protests, are part of a cohesive foreign policy to defend what it views as its territorial rights.

China's President Xi Jinping's recent speech to Communist Party officials at the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs in November 2014, stating that "China now [has] the power to steer world crises and turn them to China's advantage", serves as a reminder of China's growing power and its lack of hesitation to use it (Perlez, 2014, November 30).

What is China's motivation behind its tough stance in the East and South China Seas? How will China deal with the growing unrest in Hong Kong and calls for greater democracy? The answers might be found in President Xi's aforementioned speech: that China "will never relinquish [its] legitimate rights and interest, or allow China's core interests to be undermined" (Perlez, 2014). Deng Xiaoping made a similar comment during negotiation talks with the British on the return of Hong Kong to China but he went one step further to say that he would be a traitor to the country if he allowed Hong Kong to remain in British hands (Cottrell, 1992). Experts have suggested that China's assertiveness could be a matter of wanting to "save face" ("留面子", or to preserve honour) and to ensure it does not face any humiliations as it did previously (Kuhn, 2010; Wagner, 2012; Li, 2013).

China's Actions in East and South China Seas

In November 2014, an IHS Jane's report noted China's efforts in reclaiming land in the South China Sea, specifically the Fiery Cross Reef, in the Spratly Islands — a string of reefs that are also claimed by the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia (Hardy, 2014). The land being reclaimed is large enough to accommodate an airstrip complete with tankers and naval warships (Perlez, 2014, November 23).

This is similar to China's construction of a runway for military aircraft completed a month earlier on another cluster of islands – the Paracel Islands, which are also claimed by Vietnam and Taiwan. The runway is on Woody Island, where China's municipal government of Sansha resides, together with the military garrison of China's People's Liberation Army

(Ramzy, 2012). These moves have been viewed by the international community as China's attempt to coerce other claimants into relinquishing their claims, alongside the potential development of a second Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ).

Beijing unilaterally declared its first ADIZ over the East China Sea on 23 November 2013 (Harlan, 2013). All commercial and non-commercial aircraft travelling through the ADIZ are bound by the requirements of the Chinese authorities. This includes the submission of flight plans to Chinese authorities, maintenance of radio communication and activation of radar transponders. China has threatened military consequences if the rules are not complied with.

The area covered by the ADIZ overlaps with those of Japan, Taiwan and South Korea. Significantly, it also covers the disputed islands of Senkaku/Diaoyu, which are claimed by Japan and China. The United States, Japan and South Korea have since sent military aircraft into the zone unannounced (Sanger, 2012). Japan and South Korea went one step further and instructed their commercial airlines not to comply with the requirements. Predictably, this has heightened tension in the region, not least because the ADIZ encroaches on both freedom of navigation and aviation.

China's Century of Developments

Taken together, China's actions may seem belligerent and provocative. Viewed through the lens of history, however, China's foreign policy is aligned with its internal policies. Against the backdrop of its defeat in the Opium Wars (1839–1842; and 1856–1860) and the Nanking Massacre (1937–1938), China has since sought to reassert its political dominance. Successive governments in Beijing have been guided by the principle that China should reassert its sovereignty and reclaim its rightful territories in the region, and also to overturn its label from the late 19th and early 20th centuries as the “sick man of the East” (“東亞病夫”). This label highlighted its weakness and inability to retaliate to political threats.

The Rise of China

The Chinese economic miracle set in motion by the late Deng Xiaoping in 1978 served to turn the image of the “sick man” around. China's robust economy has made Beijing a power to be reckoned with. With a population of 1.3 billion and Gross Domestic Product of US\$9.24 trillion in 2013 (The World Bank, n.d.), it has overtaken Japan to become the second largest economy in the world. China's economy boasts a growth rate of more than 6% each year since 1977. However, in terms of demography, China's life expectancy rate remains at 73 years, behind that of Japan at 83 years and South Korea at 81 years (OECD, 2013).

In the case of Hong Kong, China has been steadfast in its dealings with the British government on the return of Hong Kong to Chinese rule. In 1984, the Joint Declaration between Britain and China asserted China's right to resume the exercise of sovereignty over Hong Kong with effect from 1 July 1997. In accordance with the “one country, two systems” principle agreed between Britain and China, the Hong Kong Basic Law guarantees that Hong Kong's previous capitalist system and way of life would remain unchanged for a period of 50 years until 2047.

Demands for greater democracy from the recent Occupy Central movement and student leaders in Hong Kong have made little headway. Talks with Hong Kong officials proved fruitless, and attempts to travel to Beijing to present their case directly to China's leaders have been unsuccessful. Similarly, a group of British Members of Parliament were told by the Chinese embassy that they would be refused entry to Hong Kong. The Chinese government has condemned any international attempt to intercede as "foreign intervention".

In the same light, the East and South China Seas disputes can be seen as China's assertion of their right to reclaim what they had lost when they were weak. Of course, it should be acknowledged that China might have taken a different tact if the region was not profitable in terms of minerals, oil and trade. However, it is also important to recognise the need to "save face" in the Chinese psyche and not underestimate the Middle Kingdom's 5,000 years of civilisation.

This consideration is especially pertinent to the development of an appropriate strategy by ASEAN to collectively negotiate with China on the South China Sea dispute. Thus far, the strategy has been one of appealing to China's sense of rationality and justice. Yet, the sense of rationality and justice is subjective; what ASEAN views as rational and just is not the same as that of China. From Beijing's perspective, its actions over territorial sovereignty are imbued with a sense of righteousness – justice for the injustice that the country has endured over the years. Future strategies which incorporate measures that appeal to Beijing's need to "save face" might be more successful in managing what is increasingly viewed as an aggressive Chinese foreign policy.

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The views expressed are the author's and do not represent those of the Institute.

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