



## **China's Shift to Toughness on Maritime Claims – One Year Later** by Robert Sutter and Chin-Hao Huang

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China's tough stand on maritime territorial disputes evident in the 2012 confrontations with the Philippines in the South China Sea and with Japan in the East China Sea has endured through China's leadership transition and now marks an important shift in China's foreign policy with serious implications for China's neighbors and concerned powers including the United States. China's success in advancing its claims against the Philippines and in challenging Japan's control of disputed islands head the list of reasons why the new Chinese policy is likely to continue and perhaps intensify over the next year. Few governments are prepared to resist. Over the longer term, a wide range of existing and potential adverse circumstances at home and abroad could prompt Chinese leaders to see the wisdom in shifting policy again, perhaps moderating their approach to these neighbors.

### **China's Foreign Policy Shift**

China says its foreign policy is consistent but experience shows repeated shifts and changes, with serious consequences. Mao Zedong was notorious for changing foreign policy for the sake of revolutionary and other goals; Deng Xiaoping shifted repeatedly as he sought China's advantage in the prevailing US-Soviet-Chinese triangular dynamic. Post-Cold War Chinese leaders advanced conventional relations in neighboring Asia but negative reactions to Chinese military assertiveness over Taiwan and the South China Sea in 1995 prompted an emphasis on reassurance in the form of a New Security Concept. The United States and its allies were still targeted but Beijing eventually felt compelled to shift again at the turn of the century to an approach of peaceful rise, later called peaceful development, which endeavored to reassure America and its allies as well as the Asian neighbors.

The focus on peace, development, and cooperation was welcomed and continues as the main emphasis in Chinese foreign policy; but it has been accompanied in recent years by repeated use of coercion and intimidation well beyond internationally accepted norms in support of Chinese broad maritime claims in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. In short, the principles and praxis of Chinese foreign and security policy have evolved and continue to change, reflecting a mix of domestic priorities, challenges and

considerations, as well as treatment and acceptance by neighbors and others abroad.

2012 saw this toughness established as a pillar of Chinese policy to the region. In the case of the Philippines, Chinese actions involved diplomatic threats, economic sanctions unbound by international norms, and massing coast guard forces intimidating Philippine security forces and fishermen. Top Chinese leaders grossly manipulated ASEAN leadership and undermined its unity to insure China had its way on the South China Sea.

In the case of Japan, China fostered mass demonstrations in over 100 Chinese cities leading to violence and destruction against a foreign country's property and interests not seen since the worst days of the Cultural Revolution. There were economic sanctions unbridled by world rules and deployments of coast guard and other forces directly challenging Japanese counterparts for control of disputed islands. Rather than looking at China's own actions causing frictions with neighbors, authoritative Chinese commentary blamed the neighbors along with alleged US efforts to incite the Philippines, Japan, and other Asian governments to contest Chinese claims.

Chinese commentaries laid out the implications clearly. Those neighbors and other concerned powers that accept Chinese claims are promised a peaceful relationship of "win-win" cooperation. Those that don't, which include US allies, the Philippines and Japan, are subjected to heavy coercion and threats, thus far short of direct use of military force. US interventions against bullying were attacked strongly. To the satisfaction of Chinese commentators, they have become less frequent over the past year.

### **Outlook**

China was successful in using coercion and intimidation in advancing control over some contested territory in the South China Sea. It also established a pattern of employing force short of military means and other pressure to more actively assert claims and dispute Japanese control over East China Sea islands. The Philippines continued to complain loudly and Japan resisted firmly. But most concerned governments came to recognize that China's "win-win" formula emphasizing cooperation over common ground was premised on the foreign government eschewing actions acutely sensitive to China over Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang, and that the scope of Chinese acute sensitivity had now been broadened to include the maritime disputes along China's rim.

The Southeast Asian countries have had limited success in negotiating with China. ASEAN focused on the protracted process of getting China to agree to a code of conduct in the South China Sea, and the prospects for a fully negotiated legally binding agreement will test the resolve and unity of

ASEAN member states, as well as China's commitment to regional stability; until now, China has seemed satisfied with its ability to manage the process along lines acceptable to its own narrow interests.

US policy focused on calming tensions while concurrently deepening security and other cooperation with allies and friends under the rubric of the Obama government's "rebalance" in the Asia-Pacific region. US leaders also endeavored to persuade China to moderate its behavior during enhanced high-level China-US exchanges. None of the above seems likely to prompt China to change its current hard line on the territorial disputes.

Against this background, China's neighbors and concerned powers like the United States will need to calibrate more carefully their actions related to disputed maritime territories. Unfortunately, the parameters of China's acute concerns regarding maritime claims remain unclear. Thus, the various Southeast Asian claimants that continue to carry out activities in South China Sea areas subject to broad Chinese claims will face continued uncertainty over which actions might prove sensitive enough to provoke Chinese coercion and intimidation.

Meanwhile, the drivers of China's new toughness on maritime disputes include rising patriotic and nationalist sentiment in Chinese elite and public opinion and the growing capabilities in Chinese military, coast guard, fishery, and oil exploration forces. The latter are sure to grow in the coming years, foreshadowing greater Chinese willingness to use coercion in seeking advances in nearby seas. Nationalist sentiment remains a volatile and potentially very disruptive force, as seen in the mass Chinese demonstrations against Japan in 2012.

While a forecast of varied regional acquiescence to China's new toughness on maritime claims seems most likely, circumstances in China and abroad could cause the Xi Jinping leadership to shift again and perhaps moderate its approach. Japan is a formidable power; its leadership seems poised to win July 2013 elections and remain at the helm for several years. The US-Japan security alliance is strong and getting stronger. Against this background, Tokyo seems prepared to counter and fend off Chinese probes and intimidation as it readies the country for a longer term struggle with China. A prolonged Chinese standoff with Japan would come on top of protracted crises on the Korean peninsula caused by China's erratic North Korean ally.

In Southeast Asia, a broad coalition of claimant and non-claimant states persist in efforts to establish a code of conduct for the contested waters that would curb Chinese assertiveness. In effect, the eastern rim of China – from Korea to Indonesia, by far the most important area in contemporary Chinese foreign policy – is tense and unstable. Managing the active tensions in three neighboring areas (Korea, East China Sea and South China) is sure to preoccupy still untested Chinese leaders who stress China's need to focus on numerous domestic problems involving corruption, economic slowdown, social instability and environmental degradation.

When confronted with an array of problems, Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping prioritized. They determined and focused

on the "main" problem, and endeavored to play down or ease tensions in other areas so as to manage the effort against the primary target more effectively. Xi Jinping now faces three big foreign policy problems, along with a host of domestic issues. Unfortunately, Xi does not have the power of Mao or Deng to decide to play down some foreign policy disputes in order to focus on a top priority issue. Thus, his policy may drift along established lines, until negative consequences of continued tensions and preoccupations along China's sensitive rim mandate a new shift, possibly toward a more nuanced and moderate approach that is more convergent with regional institutions and expectations.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*