



China in 2010: The Perils of Impatience by Denny Roy

Denny Roy [RoyD@EastWestCenter.org] is Senior Fellow and Supervisor of the POSCO Fellowship Program at the East-West Center.

Against a background of recent Chinese behavior widely perceived as unusually assertive, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's policy speech in Hawaii on Oct. 28 reiterated the commitment of the United States, despite two ongoing wars and an economic downturn, to commit the resources and attention necessary to maintain US leadership in Asia for the long term. This points up a problem for the Chinese.

The greatest single foreign-policy challenge for the government of a rising China is to balance two objectives that easily clash. The first is to build a reputation as a responsible, principled great power that will be a "force for peace" rather than a regional bully. The second is to satisfy demands from the Chinese public and some Chinese elites that China begin to act like a strong country and stand up more strongly for what they see as China's interests.

Beijing is very aware of the historical danger of neighboring countries banding together to "encircle" a rising power and has expended great diplomatic energy to preclude this outcome. The Chinese are quick to condemn any talk of a "China threat" as a plot to suppress China's natural and rightful fulfillment of its potential, which includes bringing prosperity to China's huge population. Beijing often interprets US diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific as a plot to recruit allies in the "containment" of China.

At the same time, however, Hu Jintao's government has urged China's people to feel pride in the international community's recognition of China as a great power. This reflects well on Hu's legacy as the country heads into a leadership transition, but it also emboldens nationalistic Chinese citizens as well as the military leadership to ask why China continues to tolerate those aspects of international affairs that China is unhappy about. This has required Chinese leaders to maintain a delicate balance between patience and assertiveness. In 2010, Beijing has clearly lost its balance.

Deng Xiaoping advised his successors to be restrained, to shelve difficult issues, and to avoid taking the lead in international affairs until China has consolidated its internal and external strength by completing the present phase of economic and social development.

This year, however, has seen a troubling pattern of strong Chinese reaction over issues Beijing prefers to keep on the back burner. The exposure of China's agenda to shield the North Korean regime from the effects of international opprobrium and economic sanctions after two nuclear weapons tests and the sinking of the South Korean warship *Cheonan* was disappointing enough. China's strident

statements about planned US-South Korean naval exercises off the South Korean coast, which were aimed at North Korea rather than China, suggested the Chinese viewed the entire Yellow Sea as part of a sphere of influence in which foreign navies should be bound by Chinese wishes. When Clinton, after consultation with Southeast Asian governments, called for a collaborative multilateral approach to disputed territory in the South China Sea, PRC Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi characterized her statement as "in effect an attack on China."

Chinese officials and retired generals have made remarks implying some form of Chinese ownership over most of the South China Sea, while the Chinese government refuses to clarify its claim beyond the infamous, breathtakingly expansive "9-dashed line." Chinese officials played hardball by cutting supplies of economically vital rare earth elements to Japan as a punishment for Japan's detention of a Chinese fishing-boat captain who allegedly rammed Japanese Coast Guard vessels near the disputed Senkakku/Diaoyutai Islands – and this after Tokyo had released the captain.

Outside analysts have some understanding of the pressures on the Chinese leadership. Public opinion has become a force to be reckoned with, and it tends to be exuberantly nationalistic. Anger over perceived affronts to China's national honor or encroachments on vital Chinese interests (hot buttons that territorial disputes invariably push) often quickly turns to criticism of the Chinese government for failing to defend the country's interests.

Nevertheless, the Chinese leadership should not underestimate the costs of energizing "anti-China" forces they so often criticize. Chinese acts that international opinion judges to be excessive undercut Beijing's cultivation of a welcoming environment for China's rise. All indications are that Chinese leaders still worry about greatly about domestic problems such as tackling corruption, raising living standards, re-building the social welfare system, balancing urban-rural and east-west development, and keeping a lid on social discontent. China is not prepared to embark on a campaign to revise the rules of regional interaction. Nor is it strong enough externally to shift from assurance to intimidation. The United States remains the region's strongest military power. Several other important states are closely tied into a broad US-sponsored security agenda through alliances and US bases, and other states would quickly move toward greater security cooperation if they perceived China as threatening.

Many Chinese officials recognize their country has suffered strategic and diplomatic losses at least partly because of how China has reacted to regional events. It isn't clear whether the Chinese government can maintain a balanced foreign policy without succumbing to domestic pressures demanding actions that even top policymakers recognize are strategically short-sighted.