



Ensuring that China Rises Peacefully

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23 December 2010

China's recent feisty rhetoric and behaviour have unnerved its neighbours as well as nations far from its borders. Beijing's protests that China is simply responding to provocations by other countries are not convincing. For over a decade, China has made efforts to reassure an anxious world that its rise would be peaceful, and with considerable success. Many of its border disputes were settled and China's booming economy provided abundant benefits for the region, including an export market, a source of tourists, investment opportunities and demand for services. The spate of China's recent assertive actions, however, has undermined Chinese interests and violated Confucius's counsel: do not do to others that which we do not want them to do to us. The United States, however, is now pushing back against China's assertiveness. This is necessary to persuade Beijing to adopt a more prudent and accommodating posture.

In 2009, Chinese ships surrounded and harassed unarmed US Navy surveillance vessels operating in international waters off China and engaged in dangerous manoeuvres in an effort to prevent them from operating in China's 200-mile exclusive economic zone. In the South China Sea, where six countries have competing territorial and sea claims, China has pressured foreign energy companies to halt exploratory operations with other claimants, unilaterally imposed annual fishing bans, harassed and arbitrarily detained fishermen, stepped up naval exercises, and avoided multilateral discussions with other claimants. In August 2010, a deep-sea submarine sponsored by China's Ministry of Science and Technology planted a Chinese flag on the floor of a disputed area in the South China Sea. When North Korea sank a South Korean warship in March 2010, killing 46 sailors, China failed to issue any condemnation; yet when Japan arrested some Chinese fishermen for ramming Japanese coastguard vessels around some disputed islands, Beijing objected vehemently, and retaliated by imprisoning some Japanese businessmen and halting exports of rare earth elements. Following North Korea's shelling of South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010, the United States' deployment of the George Washington aircraft carrier to international waters in the Yellow Sea—in order to deter further North Korean aggression—prompted China's Foreign Ministry spokesman to condemn the action as 'brandishing swords and spears'. China also lobbied nations to refrain from attending the ceremony in Oslo that awarded Liu Xiaobo the Nobel Peace Prize, and suspended discussions on a free-trade agreement with Norway.

Why is China behaving in ways that are patently inimical to its interests? What is driving this greater Chinese assertiveness? There are several possible explanations and more than one—if not all of them—may be at play. First, from China's perspective, the global financial crisis has weakened the Western powers and accelerated the emergence of a more inclusive multi-polar system. Beijing sees the changes that are under way as favourable and has sought to gain advantage. Second, Chinese foreign policy decision-making has become increasingly pluralized. As Linda Jakobson and Dean Knox outlined in their recent paper entitled 'New Foreign Policy Actors in China', new interest groups exerting influence on Chinese policies include local governments, resource companies, financial institutions, research organizations, the media and so-called 'netizens' or cybercitizens. Authority over foreign policy has become fractured and Chinese leaders are more constrained in managing challenges to China's sovereignty and 'core interests'. Third, nationalist sentiments have intensified and become

difficult to control. Sixty years of unrelenting propaganda about victimization at the hands of foreigners and the need to protect China's dignity have produced an angry population that is prone to blaming others and lacking in empathy. Fourth, China's leadership is extremely insecure and fearful of domestic criticism. There is paranoia that failure to stand up to perceived challenges from the United States, Japan, Vietnam and other countries could lead to the downfall of the Chinese Communist Party.

Many in China attribute the episodes cited above to the Obama administration's 'return to Asia'. Recent tours of Asia by US President Barack Obama and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to countries around China's periphery are viewed by some Chinese as designed to drive a wedge between China and its neighbours and to encircle China strategically. There is also widespread suspicion that the United States seeks to tarnish China's image and to slow China's rise. State Councillor Dai Bingguo, China's most powerful foreign policy figure, bluntly told US Secretary of State Clinton that his government regarded the Nobel award as an American conspiracy to embarrass Beijing.

Observers should not be misled, however. The United States' purpose in reasserting leadership in the region is to sustain a stable strategic equilibrium to ensure that China's rise is peaceful and that Chinese behaviour is in accordance with international norms. Greater US engagement is welcomed by virtually every country; by tamping down tensions and providing reassurance that any future Chinese coercion will be resisted, the United States' more proactive stance serves the interests of everyone, including China.

Pushing back against Chinese assertiveness will not provoke an even tougher posture or incite Chinese aggression. On the contrary, it may well persuade Beijing to recalibrate and adopt a more prudent and accommodating posture. There is already some evidence that this is taking place. After Secretary Clinton voiced concerns in July 2010 at the ASEAN Regional Forum about tensions in the South China Sea and offered the good offices of the United States to facilitate talks on implementing the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, China committed to talks on a legally binding code of conduct in the South China Sea. Another sign that Beijing is rethinking its foreign policy approach is evidenced in a lengthy article by Chinese State Councillor Dai Bingguo, which was posted on the Chinese Foreign Ministry's website in early December 2010, emphasizing the need to stick to the path of peaceful development and to work with other countries to build a harmonious world. Hopefully, China has concluded that its assertiveness was counterproductive and will chart a more benign foreign policy course in 2011.

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