

CHINA'S PEACEFUL DEVELOPMENT: A RESPONSIBLE GREAT POWER OR A GOOD NEIGHBOUR?

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ABSTRACT

The rise of China has become a catchword to define China's current position in the international system. China's increasing power comes with responsibility. Continuing Hu Jintao's peaceful development, Xi Jinping is committed to realizing China's responsibility as a great power. Concurrently, Xi sets out neighbourhood diplomacy that underlines the importance of bringing development and prosperity to neighbouring states. This paper investigates how China realizes the twin goals of peaceful development. The South China Sea (SCS) disputes involving China and four neighbouring Southeast Asian states serve as a case study. It is found that China's assertiveness, manifested in continued escalations and dragged-on negotiations on the Code of Conduct (COC), does not bode well for China's peaceful development. In other words, China is hardly a responsible great power or a good neighbour in handling the SCS issue.

Keywords: China's assertiveness, peaceful development, responsible great power, neighbourhood diplomacy, the South China Sea disputes

INTRODUCTION

In January 2013, China's newly appointed President Xi Jinping addressed the domestic audience regarding his new administration's trajectory in the coming years. In his words:

“We will continue to follow the path of peaceful development. However, we will never give up our legitimate rights and never sacrifice our core national interests. No foreign country should expect China to trade off with our core national interests, to swallow the bitter fruit as a result of our core national interests being undermined, which include sovereignty, security, or development interests. China is following the path of peaceful development, and other countries should also follow such a path. Only when all countries take the path of peaceful development can they develop together, and live in peace with one another” (quoted in Qin, 2014, p. 310).

This lengthy statement emphasized the continuity of foreign policy that conforms to the previous administration's approach under Hu Jintao. Developed by Zheng Bijian, Hu embraced the concept of peaceful rise and made it the official line of his administration's foreign policy goal to delineate the rise of China that would not threaten the current status quo and which other states should not be wary. It then was changed and replaced by terms with softer tones because of “the confusion caused by the word ‘rise’ among foreign audiences”—peaceful development (Chen, 2009, p. 16). The 2008 financial crisis and China's subsequent successful management of it boosted

China's confidence in furthering its peaceful foreign policy. As the old saying goes, with great capabilities comes great responsibilities; China has been expected to play a greater role in international affairs (Zoellick, 2005). Peaceful development serves as a means to achieve China's great power status. During his meeting with the United States (US) President George W. Bush Jr. in 2003, Zheng pointed out that uncertainty in Sino-US bilateral relations undermined China's future as a major power to be reckoned with (Glaser & Medeiros, 2007, p. 294). From this meeting, he formulated the 'development path of China's peaceful rise' concept that Hu's administration later adopted. It can be inferred that pursuing a great power status was intended to go hand in hand with realizing China's peaceful development. Since China values the unswerving economic development that has lifted millions out of poverty in the past decades, maintaining a conducive and peaceful environment is important (Xia, 2001). In other words, China's peaceful development cannot be uncoupled from the continuation of domestic economic development. And it starts with China's neighbourhood (Zhang, 2016).

Following the new administration's inauguration under Xi, Foreign Minister (FM) Wang Yi, in his attendance at the 2013 World Peace Forum, introduced China's new foreign policy agenda, which did not depart significantly from the existing principles, including Hu's peaceful development. He, nonetheless, underscored, among others, two main features of China's foreign policy: to embrace a great power status by "becoming more proactive in international affairs" and to preserve "a stable and prosperous environment in its regional neighborhood" (Heberer, 2014, p. 120). In October 2013, the Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference was held in Beijing. Chief to that event was the emphasis on the prominence of China's relations with neighbouring countries, although without abandoning the priority of enhancing its relations with the US. Drawing from the abovementioned explanations, China's foreign policy is designed to fulfil two intertwined goals of being a great power while at the same time being more attentive to neighbourhood diplomacy. Peaceful development is assumed to serve as the framework through which these two goals are simultaneously achieved. It is not an easy task to do for Chinese leaders. A great power status reflects the need to act responsibly on a global level. On the contrary, good neighbourhood diplomacy requires China to focus instead on an area of proximity. This contradiction, seemingly, appears to be a challenge to China's peaceful development. This paper aims to analyse how and under what condition China's foreign policy has been carried out in recent years in the light of two conflicting priorities: to be a great power with global reach or a good neighbour without (or with limited) global ambition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Great power responsibility is a concept coined and developed by scholars associated with the English School of International Relations (hereafter the English School). Hedley Bull is among the prominent scholars whose ‘society of states’ has become the central understanding of the English School in its view of the international system and order, and great powers play a major role in such a system. According to Bull (1997), there are three characteristics of great powers: (1) there are more than, or at least, two states with comparable (overall) capabilities, (2) they have strong military power, and (3) they are recognized by others or those with lesser power. Because not every state can manage the international order, this task or responsibility is therefore bestowed upon great powers. There is no consensus as to which states belong to this elite group. The noticeable one would be the five members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) or the so-called P5 consisting of the US, the United Kingdom (UK), France, Russia, and China. The importance of great powers does not only spring from their capabilities to create order but also to enforce it (Foot, 2001, p. 3). Even though great powers seem to hold sway in guaranteeing international order, they at the same time are constrained by legitimacy issues. Bull cautions that “Great powers can fulfil their managerial functions in global society only if these functions are accepted enough by a large enough proportion of the society of states to command legitimacy,” (1977, p. 221). Furthermore, great powers’ status, rights, and responsibilities are not determined objectively merely by looking at their material capabilities but intersubjectively by incorporating recognition of other states (Loke, 2015, p. 5). In Andrew Hurrells words, “great power status is a social category that depends on the recognition by smaller and weaker states willing to accept the legitimacy and authority of those at the top of the international hierarchy,” (quoted in Zhang, 2011, p. 781). It can be summed up that great powers are those states with more material capabilities relative to others upon which the responsibility to manage and maintain international order is conferred. Accordingly, such status requires recognition by the rest of the states in the international system.

The conception of China as a great power could be traced back to the period before the Chinese Civil War. Under Chiang Kai Sek’s Nationalist administration, China actively sought a place it deemed proper in the international system after the conclusion of World War II. Chiang declared that “The nation [China] is responsible for its interests and those of the world,” (quoted in Loke, 2015, p. 13). Upon the creation of the UN, China toiled to have its say heard by emphasizing the significant role of China in ensuring the post-war order in Asia, especially in checking the possible Japanese remilitarization. China then was able to secure a seat in the UNSC and a legitimate great power status. Chen Zhimin argues that China’s awareness of its great power responsibility emerged during the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 (2009, p. 12). China’s decision not to devalue the Renminbi helped avoid the region from plunging even deeper into crisis. Moreover, China exerted the responsibility of conforming to

international law as an excuse for its opposition to intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999 (Chan, 2013, p. 61). China's active role in the UN has also increased in the past two decades. Not only has China become more involved in peacekeeping operations, but it has also raised financial contributions to the institution. Unfortunately, in terms of leadership in both the UNSC and UN General Assembly (UNGA), China has yet made any significant progress as expected (Eastin, 2013). Interestingly, amid the debate over the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in the UNGA in 2005, China endorsed such an idea, albeit with some reservations (Liu & Zhang, 2014).

Rosemary Foot (2001) contends that China incrementally embraces a great power status. Between the 1950s and 1960s, China was not intent on being a great power. Instead, China was at the peak of perceiving that "it had the responsibility to export revolution to the rest of the world," (Loke, 2011, p. 17). In the 1970s and 1980s, China started to turn the tide and changed its course from being "a system challenger" to "a system maintainer" (Foot, 2001, p. 8). Beginning in the late 1980s, China began to elevate its relations with other states, especially the neighbours and major powers. This step-by-step approach to great power is also illustrated by Xiang Gao's (2013) content and discourse analyses of China as a responsible power as appeared in an official magazine *Beijing Review*. She finds that such discourse has gradually been used after 1978 and that China's understanding of the term 'responsible power' has converged with Western conception, except on human rights and democracy issues. This finding is similar to Shogo Suzuki's study (2014). He maintains that China's status as a great power is closely linked to Western recognition of whether to acknowledge it as one. It implies China's attempts to meet Western expectations to be recognized as a great power. The result is that China is more likely to preserve the status quo and work with the existing great powers in their international order management. China's foreign policy, in and of itself, reflects the aspiration of the Chinese leaders to "cultivate positive recognition as a great power in international society," (Deng, 2008, p.17).

Despite the emphasis on China's gradual yearning for great power status, some scholars notice that China is still constrained by its limited power projection, let alone a grand strategy to pursue its great-power dream. China is preoccupied with its pursuit of national interests, and along the process, it might deviate from the responsible great power line (Bulkeley, 2009, p. 90). On the same page, Gerald Chan points out that China's sense of responsibility is toward its nation rather than the international society (2013, p. 62). Regarding the geographical area in which China is more likely to exercise leadership, it is the Asia-Pacific region instead of a global one, making it an incomplete great global power (Kim, 2004, p. 53).

Luke Eastin (2013) contends that China still lacks leadership at the UNSC and UNGA, rendering its legitimacy crippled to some extent. Xiang Gao (2013) reveals that China is still reluctant to discuss sensitive issues such as human rights and

democracy. Precisely these two areas are where China is hardly a part of the Western-dominated international society. According to Zhang Xiaoming, “China is still far from being accepted as a ‘responsible’ member of the international society [because] a rising China is not yet conforming to the ‘new standard of civilization,’ such as human rights and democracy,” (2011, p. 241). The issues of human rights and democracy become an obstacle for China to present itself as a responsible great power, for its legitimacy is born upon fulfilling those norms. China, instead, is a “frustrated great power” (Suzuki, 2008).

The existing literature contradicts China’s foreign policy in the 21st century. On the one hand, China is cognizant of its emerging status as a great power which entails specific responsibilities attached to that status. As then Chinese FM Yang Jiechi clearly articulated, “China is a responsible great power in the international society and would take more international responsibility as Chinese power increases,” (quoted in Zhang, 2011, p. 244). On the other hand, China seems to be absorbed in its domestic and regional concerns.

RESEARCH QUESTION

When Hu’s administration introduced the peaceful development concept as China’s foreign policy core agenda, the key was to sustain national development so it could go in tandem with China’s growing power. China’s rise should not raise any eyebrow in fear of a suspected challenge to the status quo; that China could and would rise peacefully without shaking the existing international order. China aspires to be an active member of great powers. Xi’s ascent to power does not extinguish such aspiration. He reiterates the continuation of the previous leadership’s peaceful development. Additionally, his proposal of neighbourhood diplomacy is not aimed to put that aspiration in check. Peaceful development continues to shape China’s foreign policy, as does the newly endorsed neighbourhood diplomacy. As aforementioned, there seems to be a contradiction within China’s peaceful development agenda, whether China is ripe for a great power status or a good, non-threatening neighbour. The research question is: Is ‘peaceful development’ possible given the existing domestic and international challenges China faces in the 21st century?

This paper uses the South China Sea (SCS) disputes as a case study to help analyse China’s peaceful development dilemma. With the growing apprehension regarding China’s alleged assertiveness in coping with the disputes, China’s adherence to peaceful development—and neighbourhood diplomacy—is questioned. Does China act in accordance with what great powers should do? Or does China abandon its neighbourhood diplomacy by taking assertive actions?

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

China's Claim over the SCS Disputes

China's claim is known as the nine-dash line, originating on the 1947 Nationalist government's map. After winning the civil war, the government adopted it under the Communist Party China (CPC) rule. In 1992 China enacted the Law on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone into which the claim over the islands and waters within the nine-dash line in the SCS falls: the Pratas Islands (Dongsha), the Paracel Islands (Xisha), Macclesfield Bank (Zhongsha), and the Spratly Islands (Nansha) (Dutton, 2011, p. 45). China's claim is primarily made on a historical basis. And this historic claim only came after the 1990s. The first mention of China's historic rights over the contested islands and waters in the SCS was in 1996. The use of historic claims is of importance for China to put itself in a favourable position vis-à-vis other claimant states, especially after China ratified the 1982 UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1996 (Li L., 2014, p. 151). Henceforth, the new historic claim has influenced China's position in the SCS disputes. However, these claims are ambiguous regarding "what constitutes 'historic rights' [and] what is included or claimed within those nine-dashes," (Ba, 2011, p. 271). In response to the Malaysia-Vietnam joint submission to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) in 2009 regarding their claims over the SCS, China, for the first time, including the 1947 map of the nine-dash line in its submission. China clarified its claims covering the islands and the adjacent waters in the SCS. This clarification remains problematic notwithstanding. China's historic rights, along with its 1998 Law on the Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf, seem to collide with UNCLOS provisions about the delimitation of rights to only the waters, not the islands (deLisle, 2012, p. 616). These historic claims and obscure interpretations become the source of contention between China and other claimant states.

In spite of the overlapping claims, China has maintained good relations with the Southeast Asian claimant states. At the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) inauguration in 1994, China was invited, although it was anxious about the likelihood of internationalizing the SCS disputes. Following the Mischief Reef incident in 1995 between China and the Philippines, in which China built structures on that reef also claimed by the Philippines, China was confronted during the second ARF and agreed to talk about the disputes on multilateral fora—something that China had been firmly against. China further assured ASEAN members that the SCS disputes should be resolved according to UNCLOS (Li L., 2014, p. 165). In 2002 China and ASEAN signed a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the SCS (the DOC). Although the DOC is a non-legally binding document, the agreement made by all interested parties was quite an achievement. The principles laid out in the DOC are in conformity with UNCLOS, meaning that all parties abide by their commitment to international law. To date, lacking a Code of Conduct (COC), DOC is the only document upon which China

and ASEAN have agreed to maintain regional peace and stability. On July 21, 2011, China and ASEAN signed and adopted the Guidelines for the Implementation of the DOC amidst heightened tensions. Negotiation on the COC once again was placed on the back burner. In 2013, to everyone's surprise, Beijing announced its readiness to negotiate the possible establishment of the COC. However, it did not touch on the more critical questions of when and under what condition such negotiation would likely undergo. Until then, there has been no significant development regarding COC negotiation.

China's Foreign Policy in the SCS

China's foreign policy toward the SCS disputes has been relatively constant. In the 1990s, China proposed a joint development with other Southeast Asian claimant states to explore and exploit the contested areas in the SCS. China signed such development with the Philippines and Vietnam, respectively. China has maintained a bilateral negotiation with each claimant state as the most appropriate way of resolving disputes. When the SCS dispute was brought before the second ARF in 1995, while taken by surprise, China conceded to ASEAN member states' demand to discuss the matter on the forum. It should be noted that China remains persistent in its preference for bilateral negotiation regarding sovereignty questions. Multilateral talk with ASEAN does not bother China as long as it does not impinge on such a delicate matter. In other words, China is not averse to multilateral negotiation—the signing of the DOC is a case in point.

Since the signing of the DOC, tensions have been fluctuating between claimant states. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) data (n.d.), incidents involving claimant and non-claimant states have increased since 2010. Of 65 incidents between 2010 and 2020, only 8 cases did not involve China. The data further reveals that China and the Philippines have engaged in 21 incidents between 2010 and 2016, China and Vietnam in 30 incidents, and China and Malaysia in 1 incident (CSIS, n.d.). The incidents mostly take harassment by Chinese vessels, including the Chinese Coast Guard and maritime law enforcement agencies, toward fishers fishing in the contested areas in the SCS. These shreds of evidence coincide with the growing allegation of China being more assertive, which has alarmed the neighbouring states in Southeast Asia, not to mention the non-claimant states. China's assertiveness surely does not bode well for its peaceful development agenda.

China has been tiptoeing between assertiveness and cooperation in dealing with the SCS disputes. Starting in 2010, tensions have increased quite significantly. But China has not only resorted to tough approaches, such as more frequently deploying naval forces to the SCS and criticizing other claimant states. Concurrently it has strengthened its cooperation with Southeast Asian states. In 2013 Xi delivered a speech

before the members of the Indonesian parliament about his proposal to build the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road' that would connect China with Southeast Asian states and others beyond the region. This proposal receives overall positive responses. China also pioneers the establishment of two regional institutions supportive of the '21st Century Maritime Silk Road initiative, namely, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Silk Road Fund (NSRF). A question remains: if China has so far succeeded in deepening cooperation with its neighbours, why does it still cling to assertive actions that would only heighten tensions and neighbours' consternation?

According to Zhou Fangyin, China's alternate foreign policy from hawkish to dovish reflects an effort to transition from "keeping a low profile" to "striving for achievement" (2016, p. 873). To some extent, he adds that the maritime silk road has reignited China's proactive approach to the SCS disputes (2016, p. 876). This argument supports the view that being assertive is a deliberate strategy (Advincula, 2015; Chan & Li, 2015; Liao, 2016). Oriana Skyler Mastro (2015) argues that China's assertiveness manifests its long-term strategy to prevail over the contest of balance of resolve. This strategy is directed toward potential interference by third parties, particularly the US, which China believes would only confound the already complicated disputes with Southeast Asian claimant states. Hence, to prevent such a scenario from materializing, China needs to be assertive to show its resolve. Although intentionally carved, China is not interested in letting its assertiveness loose. China restrains its action in the SCS to "put pressure on other claimant states to more seriously consider various cooperative mechanisms, i.e., functional cooperation or 'joint development'," (Li M., 2010, p. 63).

Some scholars take the opposite side by arguing that China's assertiveness does not follow such a trajectory that the leaders carefully craft. Instead, China is being reactive toward external instances, that is, US policies deemed threatening (Feng & He, 2016; Scobell & Harold, 2013). China's reactive assertiveness is also rooted in the classic security dilemma, in which China is merely "responding to what it saw as an imbalance in the status quo [deriving from] other claimants [being] engaged in threatening activities," (Pham, 2011, pp. 157-158). That China is yet sure about what its rising power entails is another reason why it is being more assertive (Gill, 2013, p. 4). Driven by this uncertainty, China's assertiveness is a way to "renegotiate[s] its position with other states in the international system," (He & Feng, 2014, p. 183).

To sum up, China's foreign policy in the SCS disputes in recent years is associated with assertiveness. Two prevailing yet contradictory views explain that assertiveness is a deliberate strategy serving as a means to an end and primarily a reaction toward other claimant and non-claimant states' provocative actions. Be that as it may, sticking to the road of assertiveness does not seem relevant in light of China's peaceful development, let alone its neighbourhood diplomacy. How does

assertiveness feed into China's effort to present itself as a responsible great power or, to a lesser degree, a responsible neighbour?

China: A Responsible Great Power or A Good Neighbour?

China's growing power excites multifarious responses. The 'China threat theory' is one of them. This 'theory' means that China's rise would pose a danger to the existing international order, spanning from ideological to security threats (Broomfield, 2003). China is conscious of it. Therefore, Chinese leaders develop an idea to "project an image of a 'responsible great power' that is a force for global peace, stability, and growth," (Breslin, 2010, p. 53). The peaceful development is part of this image construction of China as a responsible great power (Breslin, 2009, p. 822). Regarding the SCS disputes, the ratification of UNCLOS in 1996 and subsequent iteration of adherence to international law in solving the disputes are evidence of China's attempt to demonstrate its responsibility to play by the rules. Moreover, China's continued support for negotiating the COC with ASEAN does not subside. Nor its engagement with the member states in various cooperation. China's assertiveness strikes a suspicion nonetheless: is China responsible enough to be a great power considering its actions in coping with the SCS disputes?

Another concern relates to China's neighbourhood diplomacy. Scholars argue that China places a strategic value on Southeast Asia for fear of potential containment by the US (Foot, 2005; Goh, 2007; Sun, 2009). The US rebalancing toward Asia has prompted China to re-evaluate its relations with neighbouring countries (Wu, 2016, p. 864). Xi's speech at the 4th Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in 2014 mentioned that "It is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia," (quoted in Wu, 2016, p. 863). This statement is captivating for two reasons. First, China is serious about pouring its attention and resources to follow through with its neighbourhood diplomacy. Second, if taken at face value, at least for now, China's focus is Asia. As mentioned above, China has strived to assuage the uneasiness of its neighbours that results from its growing power. The SCS disputes, and China's assertiveness, accrue as a challenge. Regardless of China's many endeavours to disprove the 'China threat theory,' assertiveness is not likely to aid such an effort (Roy, 2016, p. 195).

Zhang Yunling maintains that China's rise to a great power status would ultimately bring about change and adjustment of regional order (2016, p. 843). China's peaceful development depicts well how China is keen to be a responsible great power. And it should begin in a region close to home. As eloquently stated by Sheng Ding, "To act as a 'responsible great power,' Beijing is also trying to bear greater responsibility for regional peace and development in East Asia," (2008, p. 204).

Therefore, China's commitment starts with maintaining regional peace and stability before moving to a global level. What kind of image has China painted of itself before regional audiences then?

The four Southeast Asian claimant states favour different approaches to the SCS. The Philippines under Benigno Aquino III's leadership perhaps was the only example of a balancing strategy against China's assertiveness. His successor, Rodrigo Duterte, swiftly overturned Aquino's China policy and chose appeasement instead. Interestingly, amidst continued escalations, Duterte later changed his policy to soft-balancing by fostering military cooperation with the US and Japan (De Castro, 2022). Vietnamese leaders resorted to, what Phuong Hoang calls, "a cooperation and struggle hedging strategy" (2019, p. 17). Besides modernizing its defence capability, Vietnam reaches out to outside partners, including the US. Malaysia has been a quieter claimant compared to the Philippines and Vietnam. Even when incidents occurred, like China's incursions into James Shoal in 2013 and harassment of two Malaysian supply vessels around natural gas drilling near Luconia Shoals in 2019, the government tended to deny it. This 'light-hedging' strategy rests on peaceful means of dispute settlement while maintaining defence partnerships with both China and the US (Lai & Kuik, 2021). Brunei is a case of 'foreign policy anomaly', for it has not taken any stance regarding China's assertiveness in the SCS (Putra, 2021).

All four countries have robust economic cooperation with China. At the same time, they are tied to defence cooperation with the US. Different strategies aside, they seem to agree not to put all their eggs in one basket—Aquino's Philippines was an exception. But this rowing-between-two-giants does not sit well with China which has remained suspicious about the US ulterior motives in the SCS. These governments must tread carefully so as not to upset China hardly indicates approval of China's great power responsibility. The heightened tensions in the SCS and dragged-on negotiations on the COC run contrary to the notion of a responsible great power and a good neighbour.

CONCLUSION

China, as of now, is hardly a responsible great power or a good neighbour. It does not necessarily mean that China will not be both in the future. Amitai Etzioni makes a good point that judging China as a responsible member of the international society should also consider three things, namely, high aspirational standards, contextual factors that mitigate China's conduct, and the fact that China is moving somewhat closer to living up to these standards, (2011, p. 550). Undeniably, China has done enough to prove itself as a rising great power not to be afraid of. Yet, in the neighbourhood, China faces the problem of being perceived as a regional bully for its assertiveness in the SCS disputes. These territorial disputes certainly mar China's

image in the region. Some scholars argue that China's assertiveness is a reaction to other claimants' actions. If that is the case, then asking whether China is a good neighbour should also add one supplementary question: does China live in a good neighbourhood that allows itself to be a good neighbour?

This paper starts with the question of whether peaceful development is possible in the 21st century—whether it is still relevant for China to hold onto this foreign policy agenda. By presenting the dichotomy rested in peaceful development between pursuing a great power status or being a good neighbour, it can be concluded that peaceful development is the most relevant strategy China has ever had (Buzan, 2014). Barry Buzan asserts that China's peaceful development is attainable but would not be smooth riding (2010, pp. 35-36). To be recognized as a great power, China has to fulfil some responsibilities, including one that it has pledged: to maintain regional peace and stability. History records that European great powers global domination commenced with their respective regions, and they had to fight against each other for decades in their backyard. It would be meaningless for China to be a great power without gaining respect from its neighbours. Thus, China should be focusing not only on making itself a responsible great power but also a responsible neighbour.

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