No Longer the Status Quo?
Changes in China’s Approach to Territorial Conflict

By Andrew Taffer

Since the end of World War II, China has been involved in more territorial disputes than any other state. The vast majority of them, seventeen out of twenty three according to M. Taylor Fravel, have been settled by bilateral agreements, “usually by compromising over the sovereignty of contested land.” 1 Over half of these seventeen settlements have come since 1991. 2 Beijing’s conduct in this regard has been consistent with, and is in part the basis for, a prevalent view in much of the western academic literature on the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) contemporary grand strategy. The literature has underscored the centrality of Chinese reassurance and the necessity of maintaining an essentially peaceful regional environment that enables Beijing to continue concentrating resources on domestic economic, technological, and military development. 3 Beijing’s strategy, as one scholar put it, has “emphasized actions, and not just words, to reassure China’s neighbors and to enhance the PRC’s reputation as a more responsible and cooperative player.” 4 According to this prudential calculus, as China continues its development, an aggressive posture toward its territorial conflicts is unlikely as the costs would outweigh any gains. 5

Over the last several years, however, Chinese conduct with respect to several of its outstanding territorial disputes has been widely viewed as significantly more assertive and less compromising. Since 2012, Chinese government ships and aircraft have regularly entered the disputed waters and airspace around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, a collection of islets in the East China Sea claimed by both Beijing and Tokyo but which have been administered by the latter since 1972. 6 In a particularly disturbing episode in early 2013, a Chinese military vessel was said to have aimed a fire-control radar at a Japanese destroyer. 7 In the spring and summer of 2013, People’s Liberation Army (PLA) detachments crossed the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India, establishing camps in eastern Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh and displaying signs calling for the withdrawal of Indian forces. 8 According to the Indian government, since 2010 there have been over 600 Chinese violations of the LAC. 9

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With reference to the prevailing understanding of PRC strategy, China’s conduct in the South China Sea has been arguably even more puzzling. In 2012, during a months-long standoff with the Philippines around the Scarborough Shoal, China reportedly deployed nearly 100 vessels to the area, quarantined valuable Filipino exports, and finally roped off the lagoon’s entrance, effectively taking de facto control of the shoal. That summer, China announced the initiation of “combat-ready patrol[s]” in disputed areas of the sea and the garrisoning of Yongxing (Woody) Island. Beginning in 2013, Hainan Province authorized maritime agencies “to board or seize” foreign ships that “illegally” enter Chinese waters in the South Sea. Chinese naval and coast guard vessels later in the year began circling the Second Thomas Shoal, 120 nautical miles from Palawan, where Filipino marines have been living on a ship grounded over a decade ago.

What makes China’s assertive conduct in the South China Sea particularly disconcerting is that it has gone a long way toward bankrupting a large reserve of good will Beijing built up over years of courting Southeast Asian states earlier in the century, and often with great success. Much of the multilateralism and cooperation highlighted in the scholarship on contemporary Chinese strategy was with Southeast Asian states. Observers remarked on the initial successes of Beijing’s approach, and some argued that far from balancing against China, Southeast Asian states were accommodating its rise. Beijing’s recent conduct, however, has exacerbated the security dilemma unfolding in East Asia between the PRC, on the one hand, and its neighbors and the United States, on the other. Animated largely by what is perceived to be an increasingly antagonistic Chinese posture, the Philippines and Vietnam have been deepening their military ties with the United States. According to the logic of the literature on Chinese strategy, this seems to be precisely the kind of dynamic Beijing has been eager to avoid.

Does Beijing’s recent conduct along its border with India and in maritime East Asia—and its apparent willingness to incur greater costs and risks—constitute or portend a changing territorial dispute strategy? It has been argued that Beijing’s strategy in the South China Sea is to “delay” resolution of the disputes while seeking to “deter other states from strengthening their own claims at China’s expense.” While Beijing is not seeking the immediate resolution of any of its disputes, its behavior does not seem intended to maintain the status quo. It may be that, through periods of conciliation and escalation, China is aiming to change the status quo in ways that strengthen its claims. Whether or not this is correct, developments over the past number of years warrant re-examining not only our understanding of China’s approach to its territorial conflicts but also, more generally, its strategy for managing its rise in Asia.

NOTES


4 Avery Goldstein, Rising to the Challenge, 118.


