

China's “Militarisation” in the South China Sea: Three Target Audiences

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If “militarisation” is defined as an act of deploying military assets to pursue wider strategic ends, then all players of the South China Sea disputes have engaged in some forms of militarisation. China’s militarisation reflect three layers of target audiences: the United States (the main target), regional countries (the secondary target) and its domestic audience. Beijing’s growing anxieties over US rebalancing and the arbitration ruling have paradoxically pushed it to accelerate its “militarisation” activities.

AMID THE INCREASING tensions in the South China Sea, the term “militarisation” has – alongside “assertiveness” and “aggressiveness” – emerged as among the latest lexicons in the discourse and diplomatic battles over the multi-nation maritime claims. The United States and its regional allies have accused China of militarising the South China Sea by deploying missiles, radar and other

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military assets to the occupied land features in the disputed areas. China, on the other hand, has blamed US “freedom of navigation” operations (FONOPs) and other military activities with its partners as the main source of regional tensions, describing them as “provocative acts” that “undermine regional stability” and “harm the security interests of littoral states”. The landing of Chinese fighter jets on a contested island in February 2016 and the recent news about China edging closer to building its first maritime nuclear platform – at a time when Washington is conducting more FON patrols and contemplating to do so along with regional countries – have further fuelled their accusations of each other as the culprit of militarising the South China Sea.

Exactly who, how and whether anyone is militarising the disputed areas depends on how the term militarisation is defined. This essay defines “militarisation” as

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a state actor’s calculated move to deploy and leverage on certain military assets, actions and arrangements in a contested area as a means to pursue wider strategic and political ends. These moves may take the forms of occupation, installation of military facilities, deployment of armed forces, display of military strength, conduct of military exercises, showcasing defence partnership with other power(s), or demonstration of an upgraded alliance around and over a disputed area. They can be done unilaterally, bilaterally and/or multilaterally, with an eye to pursue control, dominance, defence, deterrence, denial, swaggering and/or bargaining over certain immediate- and/or long-term gains.

By this definition, virtually all key players of the South China Sea disputes are involved in militarisation in one way or another, albeit in different degrees. These include not only the claimant parties (i.e. China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan), but also the big powers and some non-claimant states. China’s militarisation moves, however, have received the most attention and criticism from most quarters. This should not be surprising. Although China’s military actions are relatively recent and less entrenched as compared to US longstanding robust military presence in Asian waters, the rising power’s militarisation activities in the contested areas over the past years have been pursued at the largest scope (compared to other regional countries), at the fastest rate, and with potentially most consequential implications for the extant regional order.

China’s militarisation activities and broader assertive turn in the South China

Sea since 2009 are puzzling for two reasons. First, it is a departure from its charm diplomacy in Southeast Asia as manifested in cordial bilateral engagement, active participation in multilateral forums and constructive involvement in regional integration during the 1996-2007 period. At the height of this charm engagement, Beijing even agreed to sign the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in 2002 and acceded to ASEAN's non-aggression pact, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in 2003. Cooperation and cordiality were the main themes throughout this period. China's current assertive behaviour is a clear contrast to, and a "shift" from, that earlier approach.

Second, China's militarisation contradicts with its "peaceful development" notion and President Xi Jinping's "periphery diplomacy" [*zhoubian waijiao*] strategy. At a high-profile working conference in Beijing in October 2013, Xi emphasised the notion of *qin-cheng-hui-rong* – cordiality, sincerity, mutual beneficial and inclusiveness – as the guiding principles of China's strategy towards its neighbouring countries. Beijing's increasingly forceful actions over its near seas, however, are less than congruent with these four principles, thereby sending mixed signals to the smaller regional states. In fact, the past few years have witnessed an observable trend: the more assertive China's actions have become, the more regional countries have exhibited greater tendencies to forge stronger partnerships with the United States and other powers.

One therefore wonders why China has turned more assertive despite its earlier charm engagement and despite Xi's periphery diplomacy. Why has China pursued creeping militarisation in the South China Sea the way it has, even though such hardline policy is pushing several regional countries to move closer to America militarily? China's ongoing militarisation is particularly intriguing, considering that such policy might undermine Xi's "Belt and Road" initiative, which targets Southeast Asia as one of the prioritised regions.

This paper argues that China's assertive turn has been driven – and limited – by both structural and domestic factors. Specifically, it contends that the pattern, pace and extent of Beijing's militarisation in the disputed areas reflects three layers of target audiences: the United States (the primary target), the weaker regional states (the secondary target), as well as its domestic populace and inter-elite dynamics (the ultimate audience). Over the past months, Beijing has become increasingly concerned about the structural pressures of US rebalancing and the Permanent Court of Arbitration's decision in the Philippines' case over the South China Sea. This growing apprehension has paradoxically pushed China to accelerate its militarised activities in the area.

The Patterns and Pace of China's Militarisation

China's militarisation activities in the South China Sea are characterised by three elements. First, in terms of operation, China's military moves have been conducted in conjunction with non-military or paramilitary activities. Second, in terms of objective, China's militarisation acts are aimed at creating a strategic

fait accompli in the disputed area and trying to pursue this without provoking a region-wide backlash. Third, in terms of timing and pace, China's unilateral military moves in asserting its excessive claims have mostly been implemented reactively – at times preemptively – to external developments that are seen as targeting China, especially those associated with the United States. The pace was gradual at the earlier stage, but it has accelerated since early 2016.

Operationally, China's militarisation acts are a part of its wider assertive turn since 2009; however they are neither the earliest nor the most extensive parts that constitute the rising power's assertiveness in the South China Sea. The initial and integral parts of China's assertive actions have primarily been a mix of non-military and paramilitary measures. These include the administrative act of establishing Sansha city under Hainan province, enforcement of fishing bans on foreign vessels, maritime patrols by coast guard, use of law enforcement vessels to stop other claimants' seismic surveys, and attempts to threaten foreign oil companies that conducted maritime surveys and hydrocarbon exploration on behalf of other claimant governments. These measures precede military actions (e.g. deployments of naval assets and conducts of drills in the contested areas), with mutually reinforcing effects. That is, while the former (non-military and paramilitary arrangements) pave the way and set the stage for the latter (military operations), the latter complement and strengthen the intended functions of the former.

This pattern has continued after Xi came to power in 2013. Under the new leader, China has taken a series of mixed and concerted steps to further consolidate its claims to the areas within the contentious nine-dash line. These include placing oil rigs in waters near the Paracels, launching massive land reclamation projects and building man-made islands, as well as constructing airstrips, lighthouses, barracks, ports and other facilities on the outposts, while continuing to send coast guard ships (at times escorted by naval vessels) to different parts of the contested area. These activities have been accompanied and followed by a string of military arrangements: dispatching navy ships to the southernmost part of the Spratlys and other areas, deploying surface-to-air missiles and large number of fighter aircraft to Woody Island (the largest landmass in the Paracels), installing high-frequency radar systems on several features including Cuarteron Reef (in the Spratlys), making the first public landing of military jet on one of the manmade islands (Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratly chain), and more recently, planning to build and employ floating nuclear energy plants to provide stable electricity to offshore oil platforms and the newly built artificial islands. Most of these moves took place in the first half of 2016, months before the arbitration ruling was expected to announce.

Through the concurrent implementations of these nonmilitary measures, paramilitary actions and selective militarisation activities, China seeks to pursue its overarching strategic goal: reshaping the operational landscape and creating a "new reality" in the South China Sea that is unlikely to be reversed under non-

war conditions. China's moves have invited criticisms, raised tensions, pushed many weaker countries to forge stronger defence partnerships with America and other powers, and prompted the US Navy to launch three successive FONOPs in the disputed waters since October 2015, the most recent of which was on 10 May 2016, when the guided missile destroyer USS William P Lawrence sailed within 12 nautical miles of Chinese-occupied Fiery Cross Reef.

However, China's creeping military activities have – thus far – not resulted in the formation of a region-wide united front to push back the giant's assertive actions. This is perhaps in part because of the incremental and selective manner of Beijing's moves (termed by many as a “salami-slicing” strategy), and in part because of the rising power's use of economic inducement and some level of diplomatic reassurance (by continuing the discussion with the ASEAN states on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea) vis-à-vis regional countries, amid the broader context of China's promotion of the Belt and Road initiative in different parts of the world.

Finally, in terms of timing, a number of China's militarisation moves, especially the recent ones, took place after the United States and regional countries moved to strengthen their cooperation (either bilaterally or beyond) that appeared to target at China. For instance, China's recent deployments of missile launchers and a radar system on Woody Island were widely seen as Beijing's response to the US-ASEAN Special Leaders Summit in Sunnylands in February 2016. From Beijing's perspective, its actions are a reaction to the equally or more assertive moves of other claimant countries and the United States. In the eyes of other claimants and parties, however, Beijing's moves are signs of a rising power's creeping assertiveness and even aggressiveness.

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Targets and Audiences

The pattern, pace and extent of China's militarisation, as discussed earlier, reflects three target audiences of Beijing's South China Sea policy. The main external target is the United States, the secondary target the weaker regional countries (especially the claimant states), and the ultimate audience China's domestic populace and elite dynamics.

Militarisation serves different functions for China across different target audiences. Put differently, China's selective militarisation – in the extent, scope and pace it has been carried out – entail different nature and different degree of importance for the ruling Chinese Community Party (CCP) elites' interests at different levels. Militarisation activities targeted at external actors are more about displaying China's relative geopolitical resolve vis-à-vis America, denying

the United States hitherto of unchallenged military manoeuvrability in China's near seas and demonstrating a more credible deterrence posture vis-à-vis all regional players; in short, it is used as a bargaining leverage for longer-term power positioning. Military processes intended for domestic audiences, on the other hand, are more about projecting the image of CCP as a credible defender of China's sovereign rights [*weiquan*] and a promoter of the "great rejuvenation of China"; in sum, as a pathway of nationalist legitimation aimed at enhancing the elites' domestic authority amid mounting challenges at home. The effects of these external and internal functions are mutually reinforcing for their ultimate goal of preserving the Communist Party's rule.

The United States is clearly the main target of China's militarisation in the South China Sea. This is not to say that China is necessarily aspiring to push America out of Asia militarily. Nor does it suggest that China is determined to stop America from continuing the FONOPs in disputed waters. Beijing realises that it does not have the capability to pursue either goal. In fact, it probably still acknowledges that some form of US presence is in the interest of China and regional stability.

What China appears to pursue, based on the patterns and pace of its militarisation in the contested area over the past years, are three interrelated instrumental goals. First, China wants to exhibit a greater relative resolve to defend what Beijing perceives as its legitimate sovereign and territorial interests in the South China Sea, which are politically crucial to CCP's authority and relevancy at home. To the ruling CCP elites, these existential stakes are more fundamental than US proclaimed "national interests" in the disputes; and hence the deeper determination on the part of China than the United States to act more forcefully over Asian waters. Second, on the basis of the demonstrated greater resolve, China seeks to signal more credibly to Washington that Beijing will not be deterred nor stopped by the United States' expanding military partnerships with countries along China's periphery. Third, through its increased physical existence in the South China Sea, which cannot be halted or scaled back unless the United States adopts military compellence – an unlikely scenario, considering the two powers' asymmetric interests over the disputes as well as the unacceptable structural costs and risks entailed in such armed conflict – China aims to present the United States the reality of a consolidated Chinese geostrategic position in Asia, as a leverage for great power bargaining.

China has attempted to pursue this with cautious restraint, advancing whenever feasible, but avoiding any possibility of direct conflict with the superpower at all times. For example, during the recent US FONOP in Fiery Cross Reef, Beijing responded by scrambling fighter jets and navy ships to shadow the US warship, without confrontational actions that may lead to direct conflict between them.

The secondary targets of China's militarisation are the weaker regional countries, particularly claimant states who openly play the US card against China. Through its increasingly assertive actions and military arrangements, Beijing aims to signal to regional countries that their strengthened partnerships with the United

States and others will not slow, let alone stop, China from defending its interests in the South China Sea. Beijing recently said that criticism of China over the South China Sea “will rebound like a coiled spring”. The Chinese navy launched its annual war drills from 8 to 9 May 2016 in the South China Sea, showcasing its military muscles in the disputed region. Through selective militarisation aimed at highlighting the dual realities of power and proximity, China seeks to deter regional countries from joining anti-Beijing coalition and from taking positions that could harm China’s interests.

The ultimate, principal target audience of China’s militarisation and its assertive turn, however, has remained its domestic populace and elite politics. This is not only about the need to conform to the imperative of nationalist legitimisation, but also about mobilising inter-elite dynamics and balancing multiple interests across different segments of the Chinese polity. The direction and extent of Xi’s power concentration since his rise in Chinese politics may not necessary be a sign of strength, but an indicator of the extent of the internal challenges and problems faced by the country’s leadership, if not division, tension and fragility inherent in the system.

Driving (and Limiting) Factors

Indeed, besides the structural pressure stemming from the uncertain China-US relations, it is domestic political factors – particularly growing political insecurity and rising nationalism – that have motivated (and limited) China’s assertive turn as well as its militarisation in contested waters.¹

The uneven socioeconomic effects of decades-long reform and development since the late 1970s – coupled with problems surrounding the ethnic minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet – have presented a multitude of growing political challenges to the ruling CCP elites. These challenges include social unrest, public protests, central-periphery conflicts, corruption, political grievances, as well as developmental gaps between coastal and inland provinces. The hundreds of thousands of “mass group incidents” [*qunti shijian*] are indicative of an erosion of government credibility and legitimacy. Chinese leaders are becoming hypersensitive about public criticism on the ground of populist nationalism.² To the ruling elites, there is growing imperative to invoke and appeal to nationalist sentiments as a pathway of political legitimisation.

As the South China Sea is widely regarded in China as the country’s “maritime

¹ This section is drawn from Kuik Cheng-Chwee and Wu Dan, “Sources of China’s Assertiveness in the South China Sea”, *EAI Background Brief*, no. 1089, Singapore, East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, 16 December 2015.

² Thomas J Christensen, “The Advantages of an Assertive China”, *Foreign Affairs*, 90, no. 2, 2011, pp. 54-67; David Finkelstein, “Is China Getting Assertive on Territorial Disputes”, paper presented at CSIS Roundtable, 28 October 2011; Andrew Scobell and Scott Harold, “An ‘Assertive’ China? Insights from Interviews”, *Asian Security*, 9, no. 2, 2013, pp. 111-131.

backyard”, this further necessitates the CCP government to take tougher actions to boost its credentials as a protector of China’s interests, or at the minimum, to avoid being seen as too soft in defending the country’s sovereign rights.

Compounding this nationalist imperative is the growing involvement of multiple sub-national and non-state actors whose views and actions constitute, affect, or steer China’s “policies” in the South China Sea. These diverse

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actors not only include bureaucratic bodies and enforcement agencies such as the State Oceanic Administration, Fisheries Law Enforcement Command and Maritime Police Bureau, but also the military, provincial and local authorities, energy companies, state-owned enterprises, specialists and researchers, fishermen, netizens and the media. Among these “new” actors, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in particular has taken an increasingly active and assertive approach towards maritime issues. Besides attempting to influence public opinion through official and unofficial statements in the media, the internet and seminars, the military has also tried to shape China’s maritime policy through assuming a “quasi-independent level of control” over some operational aspects of China’s military presence, providing training to various maritime law enforcement agencies and conducting highly publicised joint drills in the South China Sea.³ The growing involvement of different actors has created an increasing multiplicity of interests, perspectives and activities, leading to the problem of fragmented authority in China’s maritime policy.⁴ Each agency seeks to interpret and defend China’s maritime rights based on its

own institutional interests. As a result, it is becoming more difficult for Beijing to coordinate the actions of different actors.⁵

³ Michael D Swaine and M Taylor Fravel, “China’s Assertive Behavior Part Two: The Maritime Periphery”, *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 35, Summer 2011, p. 2; Jakobson, *China’s Unpredictable Maritime Security Actors*, pp. 20-3.

⁴ Scobell and Harold, “An ‘Assertive’ China?” p. 113; Jakobson, *China’s Unpredictable Maritime Security Actors*.

⁵ Finkelstein, “Is China Getting Assertive on Territorial Disputes”, p. 5.

A deliberate contradiction

Xi's South China Sea policy has been characterised by deliberate contradiction: selectively showcasing its harder stick (and making this as a “new normal”), but at the same time seeking to limit the extent and effects of assertiveness by complementing it with a range of economic and material carrots to regional countries.

This contradiction – as well as the scope and pace of China's militarisation in the South China Sea – is a net result of the CCP elites' efforts to strike a balance between two competing pathways of authority-justification – i.e. performance legitimisation and nationalist legitimisation – amidst the dual challenges of mounting political insecurity at home and growing structural pressure at the systemic level.

Structurally, the mounting pressure of US rebalancing activities along China's periphery – coupled with the perceived Japanese assertiveness in the East China Sea and several smaller states' actions in the South China Sea – have all deepened Beijing's besieged mentality. In the face of such growing forces, China's policy elites have concluded that the principal approach to mitigate the top-down pressure – deemed likely to endure for some time – is via diplomatic and geo-economic approaches rather than military means. Hence China's persistent efforts to promote a “new type of major power relations” [*xinxing daguo guanxi*] to cultivate peaceful and stable relations with all big powers, particularly the United States. This global strategy is pursued hand-in-hand with the “regional” strategy of periphery diplomacy, which, by 2014, appeared to anchor on “the Belt and Road” [*yidai yilu*] initiative. The initiative aims to transform the geo-economic and geopolitical landscape surrounding China through a string of regional connectivity initiatives as a way to reshape the long-term security order in the Asia-Pacific.

Despite this deepened determination to strengthen neighbourly ties, Xi's China has continued to assert its sovereignty claims by stepping up the creation and expansion of artificial islands at seven sites in the disputed areas since 2014 to establish a new reality in the maritime heart of Asian waters in the face of the Philippine's arbitration case, as noted.

The interplay of structural drivers and domestic needs have both driven and limited the scope, speed and extent of China's assertive turn in the South China Sea policy. In the face of mounting internal problems and changing external environment, China has sought to foster a stable relationship with America while reshaping Asia's regional order and seeking to provide regional public goods via promoting deeper regional connectivity. China's move to further integrate itself with the immediate and near regions, in particular, is motivated primarily by the CCP elites' need to create more conducive conditions for ensuring continuing economic growth and sustainable development, a goal central to maintaining the party's performance legitimacy.

In the eyes of the Chinese elites, the various goals of the Belt and Road initiative – such as enhancing trade and investment links by building transcontinental railways, expressways, energy pipelines, ports and industrial zones between

China and countries in its wider “peripheries” in Southeast, South, Central and Western Asia – are expected to serve a range of mutually strengthening purposes. These include compensating its reduced trade with and investment in US and European markets after the global financial crisis by expanding its economic links with geographically closer areas; channelling demands for the production surplus of its steel and cement industries to rebalance its own development by connecting its underdeveloped western regions and central provinces with Europe and the rest of Asia; enhancing its energy security by diversifying energy sources, transport routes and resource acquisitions; and promoting renminbi regionalisation, internationalisation and interdependent relationships with the peripheral countries.

Conclusion

To conclude, domestic political needs have compelled China to continue treading the tightrope between sovereignty-preservation [*weiquan*] and stability-preservation [*weiwen*]. Chinese policy elites are pressured to find an “optimal” balance across the trade-offs of its policy measures. In the South China Sea, it has chosen to rely mainly on coastguard and civilian law enforcement agencies, rather than naval forces, to assert its interests. It has continued to reclaim islands and build military outputs in the contested areas without provoking direct confrontation, as discussed earlier.

Beijing’s bottom line is to be assertive and act in accordance with the pathway of nationalist legitimation, but short of inciting region-wide backlash that will destabilise regional environment and undermine its performance legitimation efforts. Beijing has attempted to offset the adverse impact of its assertive actions by stepping up its reassurance and inducement efforts.

Through these ongoing cooperative and integrative processes, China aims to transform its relations with claimant states and neighbouring countries into that of institutionalised interdependence, mutually beneficial and common security. These dynamics are likely to persist in the years to come, due in part to the looming uncertainty surrounding US-China relations, and in part to the vast array of domestic challenges confronting China’s leaders. ■