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Hardening the Hard, Softening the Soft: Assertiveness and China's Regional Strategy

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing view that the emerging brand of Chinese regional diplomacy in recent years is increasingly assertive. This article attempts to make better sense of this perceived more forceful Chinese diplomacy. It argues that Chinese regional behavior is more profitably understood through the lens of a two-pronged foreign policy strategy that combines two particular aspects. One is a tougher and more uncompromising approach toward issues that China regards as concerning its core interests. The other is a more flexible and cooperative position toward interests that, while significant, are of secondary importance.

KEYWORDS Assertiveness; China's regional strategy; Asia

'There is one basic difference among us,' China's then foreign minister Yang Jiechi bluntly pointed out to his Southeast Asian colleagues at the 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi, 'China is a big country and you are smaller countries.'¹ These words have been evoked to highlight the emerging brand of Chinese regional diplomacy that is being perceived by many observers as 'newly' or increasingly assertive. Other often cited examples of this purported assertiveness, particularly in Asia's maritime spaces, include: Beijing's unilateral declaration of a Chinese Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea (ECS); its continuing occupation of the disputed Scarborough Shoal; the recurrent harrying of Vietnamese and Philippine boats by Chinese paramilitary vessels; and its expansionary activities in contested areas of the South China Sea (SCS) entailing installation of military weapons and infrastructure. These actions have led scholars to wonder whether there has been an assertive 'turn' in Chinese foreign policy.²

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¹Odd A. Westad, 'Memo to China: size isn't everything', *Bloomberg*, 18 Oct. 2012.

²See, for example, Alastair Iain Johnston, 'How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?' *International Security* 37/4 (Spring 2013), 7–48; Dingding Chen and Xiaoyu Pu, 'Correspondence: Debating China's Assertiveness', *International Security* 38/3 (Winter 2013/14), 176–83; Michael Yahuda, 'China's New Assertiveness in the South China Sea', *Journal of Contemporary China* 22/81 (2013), 446–59; Bjorn Jerden, 'The Assertive China Narrative: Why It is Wrong and How So Many Still Bought into It', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7/1 (2014), 47–88.

In addressing these developments, I suggest a more nuanced question to ask instead is: How can we make better sense of China's behavior in recent years, in particular in Asia? The logic is two-fold. First, assertiveness in Chinese foreign policy is neither a recent nor a novel phenomenon. After all, 'countries can fluctuate in their degree of assertiveness over time or be selectively assertive depending on the issue or geographic region.' One can argue that in the post-Mao era (since 1978), Beijing has behaved relatively less assertively as compared to the Maoist period.³ But even during the post-Mao period, during the Jiang and Hu eras, one can find several examples of heightened Chinese rhetoric and actions that were stronger than usual. There were, for instance, (i) China's sabre-rattling in the 1995–96 Taiwan Straits crisis when it conducted a series of threatening military exercises near Taiwan's coastline; (ii) its enraged reaction, including allowing protestors to attack the American embassy, when the Chinese Belgrade embassy was bombed by US air strikes in 1999; and (iii) its unusually robust response to Washington during the April 2001 crisis when a Chinese J-8 fighter jet struck a US EP-3 surveillance plane in midair.⁴ In recalling these episodes, it is not to make a judgment about whether these Chinese actions were legitimate or appropriate, but rather to underline the fact that assertive Chinese behavior is hardly an unprecedented development. Past and recent history has shown that Beijing will act or react in ways that are deemed assertive when it perceives the need to do so. The question then is, *when* does Beijing perceive this need?

Second, it is important to take into account the full complexity of China's regional diplomacy, including those occasions when China has acted in more cooperative and beneficent ways, or reacted with restraint and compromise. For example, Beijing is implementing the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative, with funding support of at least US\$40 billion, to enhance inter- and intra-regional infrastructure connectivity and economic integration. It has taken the lead in establishing the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to help address the region's development and infrastructure gaps. It upgraded its existing Free Trade Agreement with ASEAN, alongside a pursuit of a new treaty on good neighborliness and friendship with the regional institution. These examples demonstrate why it is less useful to probe whether there has been an assertive shift in Chinese diplomacy. China has evidently acted in ways that are more forceful than usual on various occasions, but in several other situations it has responded in ways that are clearly more collaborative or constructive.

³Andrew Scobell and Scott Harold, 'An "Assertive" China? Insights from Interviews', *Asian Security* 9/2 (2013), 111–31.

⁴Johnston, 'How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?', 7–48.

This article argues that the calibrations in China's behavior can be better understood through the lens of a two-pronged Chinese strategic approach in Asia that combines two particular aspects: one, a tougher and more uncompromising policy toward issues that China regards as its core interests or connecting to its core interests; and two, a more flexible and cooperative position toward other more negotiable interests that, while valuable, are of relative secondary importance. This dual approach is described in Chinese by the axiom, '*yingde gengying, ruande gengruan*' (i.e. hardening the hard, softening the soft; abbreviated as HHSS), a phrase and concept that is gaining wider currency in Chinese strategic discourse. The concept situates China's assertiveness within a strategic context.

In many respects, the HHSS strategy bespeaks a form of carrot-and-stick approach. That big powers like China would resort to positive and negative inducements to influence others is not entirely surprising, but what is more novel and different are two elements. For one, the HHSS strategy represents a *heightening* of both costs and benefits for other regional states – i.e. bigger 'carrots' but also bigger 'sticks'. The logic is to greater accentuate the difference between cooperating with China and working against it, *further* incentivizing neighboring states to pursue the former while *further* deterring them from the latter. The idea, as one Chinese scholar puts it, is to amplify the 'strategic dilemma' for, or at least give further pause to, those states thinking of taking actions that may impair vital Chinese interests.⁵

This notion of vital interests, or what the Chinese call 'core interests', constitutes the second distinct element of the HHSS strategy. The assertive face of Chinese diplomacy is essentially conditioned by the Chinese interpretation of these 'exceptional' interests, an important variable understated in the existing literature. In other words, China is more likely to react strongly or more assertively when it perceives threats to issues touching its core interests. This begs the question of what exactly are these Chinese interests. A deeper inquiry of such interests will be discussed later, but at this juncture it is useful to note that the idea of China's core interest is an evolving concept that encompasses a level of ambiguity. This ambiguity is useful (but problematic to others) in lending a degree of flexibility for Beijing to redefine issues as core interests as they grow in strategic and political significance.

A number of caveats are in order. First, my focus here is on China's diplomacy in Asia because to broaden the examination of Chinese foreign policy to other geographical domains would be to extend this study beyond its intended scope. Second, the article focuses on the period from around

⁵Wang Yizhou, '中国外交需“硬的更硬，软的更软”' (China's diplomacy needs to 'harden the hard, soften the soft'), *SINA News*, 7 Mar. 2013. <http://dailynews.sina.com/gb/news/usa/uslocal/china_press/20130307/02004317431.html>; Author discussion with Chinese analysts, Beijing, December 2014.

the time Xi Jinping took over power in China. The basis is that the past few years have witnessed considerable empirical developments (both patent and subtle) to warrant a fresh appraisal of Chinese regional diplomacy. In doing so, it may provide clearer answers to the ramifications of this diplomacy, in terms of both how China might use its power as its capabilities and influence grow and the impact on the regional order. It may also provide critical insights to the overall trajectory of Chinese diplomacy under Xi, someone who has consolidated domestic power at an unprecedented pace, is seen as the most significant Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping, and is expected to remain in office at least until 2022.

The article is divided into six parts.⁶ The next section examines the growing Chinese narrative of the applicability of an HHSS strategy, while the third part looks at related discussions that connect to the HHSS discourse. The fourth section probes the idea of Chinese core interests, which is central to the HHSS approach and, in particular, understanding the conditions in which Chinese assertiveness becomes more evident. In the fifth section, Beijing's behavior is discussed in the context of a regional HHSS strategy. The last section offers a concluding assessment.

An Emerging Strategic Narrative

The dialectical art of combining hard and soft approaches in a concerted stratagem has a long tradition in China, and purportedly dates back to the reign of Han Wu Di (Emperor Wu, 141–87 BC) when the latter successfully used the strategy to repel the Xiongnu invaders and expand the Han empire.⁷ In more contemporary times, this notion of *accentuating* (not just using) both the hard and soft aspects of Chinese power to influence outcomes has most frequently been used to describe Hu Jintao's China policy toward Taiwan. Chinese commentators cite the passing of the 2005 Anti-Secession Law and the strong language in Hu's report to the 17th Party Congress as clear examples of the PRC strengthening the assertive arm of its Taiwan strategy to deter Taiwanese independence. At the same time, they laud the increasing, 'flexible' use of economic sweeteners to enhance cross-strait economic integration and draw Taipei closer to Beijing. It is claimed that this two-pronged approach is an effective strategy because it correctly draws a 'distinction' between Taiwanese compatriots and pro-independence

⁶Fieldwork was conducted in December 2014, May 2015, and June 2015, and included discussions and interviews at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), China Institute for International Strategic Studies (CIISS), China Foreign Affairs University (CFAU), National Defence University (NDU), Tsinghua University and Renmin University.

⁷Xu Pinghua, '汉武帝“大一统”的国家观及其当代价值' (The Modern Value of Han Wudi's 'Great Unification' National Theory), *中共福建省委党校学报* (*Journal of Fujian Party School*) 3 (2014), 107–14.

extremists, allowing China to both suppress the pro-independence movement, as well as appeal directly to the hearts and minds of the Taiwanese populace.⁸

In the Xi Jinping era, similar strategic language has continued to characterize China's Taiwan policy. More significantly, the apparent success of the HHSS approach in managing the Taiwan question has led to an increasing number of calls for it to be applied to other regional policy issues. One ostensibly relevant area is China's management of its maritime disputes. Chinese commentators argue that a more differentiated and calibrated approach is the 'key' to the successful resolution of the SCS territorial disputes, noting that China can do more to accommodate other claimants within the framework of joint development while also emphasizing that China is 'not afraid to resort to force' to uphold Chinese sovereignty. The fundamental message is that opposing China will lead to a 'cul-de-sac' while cooperating with China will bring greater benefits.⁹ Peking University's Wang Yizhou, a leading Chinese scholar, is less hardline, but offers a similar policy advice. Resolving China's maritime crises, Wang muses, requires China to be 'creatively involved.' This calls for China to buttress the assertive aspects of its maritime policy and develop at the 'military and physical levels' several types of 'assassin's mace'; while further softening the benign aspects of this policy by contributing more to maritime commons (e.g. protecting sea lanes of communication; combating piracy, maritime conservation, etc.).¹⁰

Wang would later connect the HHSS approach to China's broader diplomacy. In a *People's Tribune* interview recirculated widely on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) news network, Wang argues that one of the defining features of Xi's steering of China's diplomacy since the 18th Party Congress has been to 'harden its hard aspects while softening its soft aspects.' He cites the declaration of a Chinese ADIZ in the ECS, the establishment of an unprecedented State Security Commission, and Xi's vision of the PRC as a

⁸Li He, '浅析两岸关系和平发展的论断' (An Analytical Thesis on the Peaceful Development of Cross-Strait Relations), *现代台湾研究 (Modern Taiwan Studies)* 4 (2008), 25–6; Shi Xipei, '对台政策新思维论略' (New Thoughts on Taiwan Policy), *中共福建省委党校学报 (Journal of Fujian Party School)* 1 (2007), 27–8; Zhu Songling and Xu Feng, '战略与策略的结合:大陆对台湾的影响力投放' (Combination of Strategy and Tactics: Mainland China's Policy of Influence on Taiwan), *中央社会主义学院学报 (Journal of the Central Institute of Socialism)* 4 (2006), 75–9.; Qu Dingguo, '指导对台工作的纲领性文件' (Guiding Documents of Work on Taiwan), *现代台湾研究 (Modern Taiwan Studies)* 1 (2008), 28–32; Zeng Runmei, '对台政策:连续与发展' (Taiwan Policy: Continuity and Development), *世界知识 (World Affairs)* 22 (2007), 46–7.

⁹See, for example, '南海解局的关键: 软的更软, 硬的更硬' (The key to solving the South China Sea conundrum: softening the soft, hardening the hard), February 2012. <<http://military.china.com/critical3/27/20120202/17012212.html>>

¹⁰Wang, '中国外交需“硬的更硬, 软的更软”'; Wang Yizhou, '处理中菲黄岩岛对峙问题需“软硬兼施”' (Handling the Sino-Philippine issue of the Huangyan island requires a 'soft-hard dual approach'), *Communist Party of China (CPC) News Network*, 10 May 2012. <<http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/148980/17848652.html>>.

maritime power as illustrations of a more assertive China that is not shy of exhibiting the 'style' of a great power. Conversely, he notes a China that has been more willing and flexible in providing public goods in international affairs, the exemplar being the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative.¹¹ In another CCP publication, *Party and Government Forum*, Wang writes that 'new' thinking on Chinese diplomacy should focus on how to 'better exercise' the HHSS strategy.¹²

Another prominent Chinese scholar, Fudan University's Chen Zhimin, concurs with Wang's observations. In a 2014 publication in the influential Chinese IR journal, *World Economics & Politics*, Chen notes:

If we say in the past Chinese diplomacy emphasized a soft strategy...then in the recent few years, Chinese diplomacy has emphasized the combination of hard and soft strategies, elevating an 'attraction' strategy alongside a greater emphasis on the utility of 'countering' and 'pressure' strategies, effecting the 'hard to become harder, and the soft to become softer.'¹³

Highlighting Xi's calls for other nations to 'free ride on the Chinese growth locomotive' – the so-called China's theory on free ridership, a sardonic reply to American accusations of Chinese free-riding in international society – Chen recommends the use of Chinese economic power to boost the PRC's 'attractiveness.' But when certain 'key national interests' are being challenged, China should not hesitate to counter and respond strongly.¹⁴

Such arguments correspond with the growing, wider attention on the pursuit of the HHSS approach in China's external relations. In November 2014, Fudan University released a *China National Security Strategic Report* advocating the idea of 'effective security,' which, among other policy recommendations, calls for 'the application of attraction and compelling [security] strategies....that merges the hard and the soft, interchanges between them, and differentiates the two...'¹⁵ In December 2014, the Central Party School organized the second *50 Young Scholars Forum on International Studies*, where the work of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) scholar Wang Junsheng was singled out for mention in the news network of the *People's Daily*, the CCP's newspaper and mouthpiece. In reviewing Chinese periphery

¹¹Wang Yizhou, '新一届领导人外交战略七个关键词' (Seven key phrases of the new leadership's foreign strategy), *Communist Party of China (CPC) News Network*, 18 Feb. 2014. <<http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2014/0218/c367550-24393662-2.html>>.

¹²Wang Yizhou, '我外交新思路' (New Thinking on Chinese Diplomacy), *党政论坛: 干部文摘 (Party and Government Forum)* 8 (2013), 29.

¹³Chen Zhimin, '中国的外文创新是否索要外文革命' (Will China's Diplomatic Innovation Lead to a Diplomatic Revolution), *世界经济与政治 (World Economics and Politics)* 12 (2014), 42.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Incidentally, Chen Zhimin is the lead author of the report. See Chen Zhimin, '复旦中国国家安全战略报告 2014', *Fudan China National Security Report 2014*, 24. (Shanghai: Fudan University 2014).

diplomacy since the 18th Party Congress, Wang Junsheng argued that China had in effect incorporated an HHSS approach in managing its regional issues, pushing for greater regional integration and connectivity on the one hand, and conversely, exhibiting a tougher posture regarding its maritime territorial disputes.¹⁶

Associated Strategic Discourse

The HHSS strategic narrative is also supported by related discussions of Chinese diplomacy under Xi. One is the question of whether Deng Xiaoping's strategic guideline of *Tao Guang Yang Hui* (TGYH) is still relevant for China's present international context. TGYH, or 'hide brightness, cherish obscurity,' first explicitly articulated by Deng in 1992, is often referred to as China's putative foreign policy strategy of 'keeping a low profile' in the post-Cold war era. The basic assumption is that a low global profile would help China's development priorities. While the concept later morphed into a '24-character' or '28-character' dictum that includes the influential phrase '*you-suo zuowei*' (i.e. get some things done), it is the idea of maintaining a low profile that is most commonly associated with the TGYH principle.¹⁷

Domestic debate on the TGYH concept, of course, has been going on for some time. And in the Xi era, unsurprisingly, this has not abated. Those who argue for the enduring relevance of TGYH cite, among others, the following justifications: (i) the global strategic balance remains fundamentally one of 'west strong, east weak'; (ii) as a latecomer to global society, China remains in the 'sensitive' period of growth and should avoid 'attracting the target onto itself'; and (iii) Chinese development still has several difficult challenges to address.¹⁸ That said, with the PRC's improving power conditions as well as a changing international environment, a number of Chinese thinkers have questioned the applicability of TGYH, arguing that China should assume a more proactive role in international affairs, with strategic emphasis on the latter phrase of '*yousuo zuowei*' (YSZW). While not necessarily jettisoning the TGYH principle, these thinkers argue that Chinese foreign policy, depending on the 'circumstance and emphasis of the time,' should be about establishing an appropriate balance between TGYH and YSZW. And in the current period, this balance has shifted toward YSZW.¹⁹ In October 2013, at the

¹⁶Yang Mu, and Li Jingrui, '王俊生: 中国周边外交目标是为中华民族复兴' (Wang Junsheng: the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the goal of China's peripheral diplomacy), *People's Daily*, 6 Dec. 2014, <<http://world.people.com.cn/n/2014/1206/c1002-26160347.html>>.

¹⁷Dingding Chen and Jianwei Wang, 'Lying Low No More? China's New Thinking on the Tao Guang Yang Hui Strategy', *China: An International Journal* 9/2 (September 2011), 195–216.

¹⁸See, for example, Guan Li, '邓小平与韬光养晦、有所作为的战略方针' (Deng Xiaoping and the Strategic Guideline of Hide Brightness, Cherish Obscurity and Do Some Things), *中共中央党校学报* (*Journal of the Central Party School*) 4 (2014), 18–22.

¹⁹Cheng Zhijie and Wang Wan, '外交定位、外交思维与中国的外交作为观' (Views on the Position, Thinking and Conduct of Foreign Policy), *新视野* (*New Horizon*) 4 (2014), 36–41.

CCP's first Foreign Affairs Work Conference on periphery diplomacy, the YSZW argument received further fuel when Xi added his own conceptual modification, adjusting 'yousuo zuowe' (i.e. get some things done) to 'fenfa youwei' (i.e. striving for achievement).²⁰ According to Xu Qin of the CASS, this reflects a greater emphasis on a more proactive Chinese diplomacy. 'Striving for achievement is now the new normal of Chinese diplomacy,' he contends.²¹

Xu's observations conform to the growing perception among many Chinese analysts that, under Xi, China's foreign policy has become more 'confident' and proactive, and is less passive and inhibitive of risk-taking. Indeed, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi uses the term 'jiji qinqi' (i.e. forging ahead actively) to describe present Chinese diplomacy, a phrase that Chinese analysts have echoed.²² Some of these analysts point to Xi's ideas of 'a new type of international relations,' 'Asian security concept,' and 'major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics' as reflecting this new, more active phase in Chinese diplomacy. It is also not lost on them that there is a notable absence of the TGYH rhetoric in Xi's speeches.²³

Another related discursive development is the increasing evocation of the notion of 'baseline thinking' (*disian siwei*). Baseline thinking in Chinese foreign policy, according to a number of Chinese scholars, encompasses a few aspects. First, it entails consideration of the 'worst-case scenarios' and making preparations on that basis. Second, it brooks no crossing of China's baselines; typically, these allude to China's core national interests. Third, it commits China to respond accordingly if these baselines are violated.²⁴

According to Jin Canrong of Renmin University, Chinese diplomacy has always observed the baseline principle. But under the Xi government, the articulation and practice of this principle have become clearer and more pronounced.²⁵ Many in the Chinese strategic community appear to welcome this emphasis. Shanghai Institutes for International Studies's Chen Dongxiao contend that baseline thinking 'effectively' helped China

²⁰Xu Qin, '中国外交进入“奋发有为”新常态' (China's diplomacy enters the new normal of 'striving for achievement'), *中国日报* (*China Daily*), 16 Dec. 2013.

²¹Ibid.

²²Yu Zhengliang, '积极进取, 引领亚洲, 全球再平衡' (Forge Ahead Actively, Lead Asia, Rebalancing the World), *国际观察* (*International Observation*) 1 (2015), 1; Zhu Feng, '新时代的中国外交: 积极进取, 合作共赢' (New age Chinese diplomacy: forge ahead actively, win-win cooperation), *今日中国* (*China Today*), 12 (2014), pp. 14–15.

²³Author discussions with Chinese analysts, Beijing, June 2015.

²⁴Chen Dongxiao, '新一届政府外交的关键词' (Key Phrases of the New Leadership's Foreign Policy), *党政论坛: 干部文摘* (*Party and Government Forum*) 4 (2014), 24; Yang Jiemin, '新时期中国外交思想、战略和实践的探索创新' (Exploration and Innovation of Theories, Strategies and Practices in China's Diplomacy in the New Period), *国际问题研究* (*International Studies*) 1 (2015), 26–7; Qi Huaigao, '关于周边外交顶层设计的思考' (Reflections on Top-level Design of Peripheral Diplomacy), *国际关系研究* (*Journal of International Relations*) 4 (2014), 20–2.

²⁵Guo Silu, and Liu Zhiyi, '金灿荣: 中国外交明确底线原则' (Jin Canrong: China's diplomacy clearly observes the baseline principle), *南方周末* (*Southern Weekly*), 9 Dec. 2013; Author discussions with Chinese scholars, Beijing, June 2015.

contain its regional maritime disputes from escalating.²⁶ For critics who worry that baseline thinking contradicts and may jeopardize China's declared road of peaceful development, Wang Yizhou has this retort: 'peace does not mean one cannot use tactics, cooperation does not mean one cannot fight for one's interests.'²⁷ Furthermore, as Tsinghua University's Zhao Kejin adds, baseline thinking does not imply that other aspects of Chinese foreign policy cannot exhibit 'flexibility' to complement the baseline principle.²⁸

What are China's Core Interests?

The preceding discussion of Chinese baseline thinking lends itself to an important question: What are these Chinese baselines? More specifically, what are China's core interests? China's HHSS strategy is predicated on a tougher posture toward questions on, or connecting to, Chinese core interests while assuming a more flexible position toward other more negotiable interests. It is therefore useful to discuss Chinese understanding of their nation's core interests.

In general, the Chinese understand core interests as those national interests that China would never 'compromise or trade'. They are seen as interests that take 'first priority' in a hierarchy of China's national interests, with repercussions for the 'entire system.'²⁹ Indeed, some CCP members consider the defense of core interests as the 'benchmark' to distinguish between a patriot and a traitor.³⁰ The imagined sacrosanct nature of the core interests suggests that these are the interests that Beijing would be willing to resort to force to defend. This is not to say that China would necessarily use force, though the consideration of force would be an option (a possible last option).³¹

The rhetoric of core interests first appeared in Chinese diplomatic discourse around the 2003–2004 period as an expression and response to China's concerns over Taiwan's growing independence movement.³² By 2007, the concept became more formalized, becoming part of the official language of Chinese foreign affairs documents and activities. Around this time, in addition to the Taiwan issue, the Tibet and Xinjiang questions also

²⁶Dongxiao, '新一届政府外交的关键词'.

²⁷Wang, '中国外交需"硬的更硬, 软的更软".'

²⁸Zhao Kejin, '党的十八大以来的中国新外交' (China's New Diplomacy since the 18th Party Congress), *国际政治与经济 (International Politics and Economy)* 2 (2014), 96–7.

²⁹Wang Gonglong, '关于国家核心利益的几点思考' (Thoughts on Core National Interests), *国际观察 (International Observer)* 4 (2011), 117–31.

³⁰Huai Chengbo, '怎样理解"国家核心利益"?' (How to understand 'core national interests?'), *红旗文稿 (Red Flag Documents)*, 2011, Vol. 2, p. 38.

³¹Author interviews with Chinese scholars, Beijing, December 2014.

³²Caitlin Campbell, Ethan Meick, Kimberly Hsu and Craig Murray, 'China's "core interests" and the east China sea', *US-China Economic and Security Review Commission Research Backgrounder*, 10 May 2013, pp. 1–7.

became linked to, or were included in, the notion of China's core interests.³³ However, it was only at the China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) in July 2009 that the concept was given more specific description for the first time. Then state councilor Dai Bingguo identified China's core interests as the 'safeguarding of China's political and economic systems; its national security, sovereignty and territorial integrity; and its sustainable economic and social development.'³⁴ To be sure, Dai's articulation remains relatively vague and broad. Moreover, these interests appear to be defined in a way that suggests some degree of overlap. Nevertheless, given the context of the announcement, these interests are commonly interpreted as clarifying three particular areas of paramount importance to Beijing, which Washington should 'respect': (i) the continuity and perpetuation of the CCP's political leadership, i.e. socialism with Chinese characteristics; (ii) ensuring China's economic and social progress; and (iii) ensuring the nonviolation of China's sovereignty and territorial whole. These themes would later gain a broader significance when they were further reiterated in Dai's 2010 article, 'Stick to the Path of Peaceful Development,' and the 2011 White Paper on *China's Peaceful Development*.³⁵

The current Xi government has continued with the engagement of the rhetoric of China's core interests. In fact, the concept has actively featured in several of Xi's speeches, which unsurprisingly results in further echoing within Chinese policy discourse. At a 30 January 2013 group study session of the CCP Politburo, Xi emphasized that:

No country should presume that we will trade our core interests or that we will swallow the bitter fruit of harm to our sovereignty, security or development interests.³⁶

Around six months later, at another Politburo study session on 30 July 2013, Xi appeared to connect the notion of China's maritime interests to the core interest concept for the first time. In a speech underlining the importance of 'enhancing China's capacity to protect its maritime rights and interests, and resolutely safeguarding the nation's maritime rights and interests,' Xi also declared that even as China 'sticks to the road of peaceful development, it will never give up its legitimate rights and interests, and never sacrifice the national core interests.'³⁷ In an 11 March 2014 speech addressing the People's Liberation Army (PLA), Xi would again reiterate a similar message

³³ 北京周报 (*Beijing Review*), '中国强调维护国家核心利益不等于对外"示强"' (China's emphasis on defending its core national interests is not 'flexing of muscles'), 3 Sept. 2013, <http://www.beijingreview.com.cn/2009news/guojiguancha/2013-09/03/content_565208.htm>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Dai Bingguo, '坚持走和平发展道路' (Stick to the path of peaceful development), *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC*, 6 Dec. 2010; *State Council Information Office of the PRC*, 白皮书-中国的和平发展 (White paper on China's peaceful development), 6 Sep. 2011.

³⁶ 中国强调维护国家核心利益不等于对外"示强".

³⁷ Ibid.

and exhorted the PLA to ‘expedite defense and military modernization,’ stressing that ‘under no circumstances’ would China sacrifice its core national interests.³⁸ At the Party’s highest-level annual foreign policy meeting on 29 November 2014, a similar pledge was made by Xi: no sacrifice of the core national interests even as China pursues major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics.³⁹

A number of reasons have been cited for this continuing promulgation of the core interest concept. First, there needs to be a better prioritization of China’s national interests given that its resources and attentions are finite. This is all the more critical given that as China rises, its interests will continue to expand.⁴⁰ Second, in an increasingly uncertain security environment, a clearer enunciation of China’s core interests will help reduce misjudgment and the possibility of conflict, and in so doing, prevent further erosion of those interests. The assumption here is that in delineating China’s most vital interests, others are less likely to impinge on these interests since these are the interests that Beijing is willing to incur the highest costs to defend. The third reason is connected to the growing public attention paid to such interests, in particular, China’s territorial interests. It is suggested that rising public ‘consciousness’ of China’s territorial claims puts greater pressure on the Chinese government to protect those interests.⁴¹

Not surprisingly, it is this aspect of the core national interests – i.e. safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity – that has seen the most expression of China’s purported assertiveness in recent years. By implication, this would suggest that Chinese territorial claims in the ECS and SCS are being considered by Beijing as part of the core interests since these areas unquestionably relate to the matter of national sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The reality is actually more complicated because unlike the Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang issues, Chinese leaders have ‘neither publicly confirmed nor denied’ China’s maritime claims as a core interest.⁴² Indeed, there is an evolving debate within China about whether the ECS and SCS issues constitute a core national interest. Some scholars caution against a broad definition that encompasses the maritime claims because they believe that (i) the contexts and strategic aims of these claims differ from those of the Taiwan, Tibet, or Xinjiang issues; that (ii) it reduces the room for strategic flexibility as well as compels China to consider force as an option to defend these interests; and that (iii) it may have the counterproductive effect of drawing greater American

³⁸BBC Chinese News, ‘习近平强调强军与捍卫核心利益’ (Xi Jinping emphasizes strong army and the protection of core interests). <http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/china/2014/03/140312_xi_jinping_core_interests>.

³⁹Zhang Qiaosu, ‘习近平出席中央外事工作会议并发表重要讲话’ (Major speech of Xi Jinping at the foreign affairs work conference of the central committee), *Xinhua News*, 29 Nov. 2014.

⁴⁰Author interviews with Chinese analysts, Beijing, December 2014.

⁴¹‘中国强调维护国家核心利益不等于对外“示强”’.

⁴²Campbell, Meick, Hsu and Murray, ‘China’s “Core Interests” and the East China Sea’, 1–7.

involvement in the disputes.⁴³ Others meanwhile consider the East and SCS issues as a de facto core interest, short of only an explicit declaration. Proponents cite a number of justifications: (i) a matter of consistency with the principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity; (ii) a more threatening regional maritime environment with growing security pressures, in particular, from the US; and (iii) the criticality of China's maritime peripheries to vital strategic objectives such as the recovery of Taiwan, its energy security, its ambitions as a maritime power, and the protection of the sea lanes of trade.⁴⁴ These reasons may yet find (or may have already found) greater resonance with Beijing since the Chinese definition of core interest encompasses ample room for its contents to 'evolve and adjust according to the circumstances and times.'⁴⁵ A 2013 research report for the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission drew a similar observation, noting that China's definition allows its policy-makers the 'flexibility to highlight specific issues – including but not limited to Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang – as they become salient.'⁴⁶

Developments in the last few years suggest that China's maritime territorial interests in East Asia have grown in gravity for Beijing. For Chinese analysts, while these maritime claims are not yet seen as core interests on par with the Taiwan or Tibet issues, they are considered as, at the minimum, 'vital issues relating to China's core interests.'⁴⁷

Evolving evidence from official and semi-official sources appears to lend some credence to this claim. On 17 January 2012, the *People's Daily* described for the first time Japanese activities near the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands as 'brazenly damaging China's core interests.'⁴⁸ This was followed by the unprecedented September 2012 national White Paper on the Diaoyu Islands, which stated in no uncertain terms:

Diaoyu Island and its affiliated islands are an inseparable part of the Chinese territory. Diaoyu Island is China's inherent territory in all historical, geographical and legal terms, and China enjoys indisputable sovereignty over Diaoyu Island.⁴⁹

The following year, on 26 April 2013, in response to a question on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson reportedly

⁴³Jia Qingguo, '新时期呼唤新理念、新做法:对我国外交的几点思考' (New Ideas and New Practices in New Times: Some Thoughts on our Foreign Policy), *现代国际关系* (*Contemporary International Relations*) 2 (2015), 15–17; Author interviews with Chinese analysts, Beijing, December 2014.

⁴⁴Zhang Diyu, '历史性突破: 中国首次界定核心国家利益' (Historical breakthrough: China delineates the core national interests for the first time), *世界 Affairs* (*World Affairs*), 2011, Vol. 19, p. 21. Author discussions with PLA officers, Beijing, June 2015.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Campbell, Meick, Hsu and Murray, 'China's "Core Interests" and the East China Sea', 1–7.

⁴⁷Author discussions with Chinese analysts, Beijing, May 2015.

⁴⁸Zhongsheng, '中国维护领土主权的意志不容试探' (China's Determination to Protect its Territorial Sovereignty Should not be Tested), *People's Daily*, 17 Jan. 2012.

⁴⁹*State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China*, 'White Paper on Diaoyu Island, an Inherent Territory of China.' 26 Sep. 2012.

affirmed that the Diaoyu Islands issue 'is China's core interest.' The published transcript of the press conference released on 28 April eventually records the spokesperson as saying the dispute 'concerns' the PRC's core interests.⁵⁰ In June 2013, the *Xinhua News* network also circulated an external report of the Xi–Obama California meeting, in which the Chinese president reportedly informed his American hosts that the Diaoyu Islands 'involve China's unyielding core interests.'⁵¹

Regarding the territorial claims in the SCS, the evidence has been more indirect. *Xinhua News*, for example, ran reports on the SCS dispute, which included Xi's familiar quotes on how China will never sacrifice its core interests or incorporated third-party comments that link the SCS dispute to China's core interests.⁵² The China Institute of International Studies, the Foreign Ministry's think tank, has also published articles that alluded to or described the SCS issue as 'involving China's core interests.'⁵³

While the existing evidence stops short of explicitly flagging these maritime territorial claims as China's core interests, it is relevant to note that the language of these maritime claims suggests that these interests are just as nonnegotiable as the core interests. For example, in a typical statement in May 2015, foreign minister Wang Yi asserted that China's will to uphold its maritime sovereignty is 'rock-hard and unquestionable.'⁵⁴ In a similar vein, the Ministry of National Defense has declared that '[China's] determination and will to defend national territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests are unswerving; on this issue there is absolutely no room for bargaining, and any provocative actions will not be tolerated...'⁵⁵ Moreover, in the run-up to as well as the aftermath of the July 2016 SCS tribunal ruling, the Chinese rhetoric on these maritime claims, particularly relating to the SCS, became noticeably heightened. About six months before the ruling, the *People's Daily* contended that, regardless of the decision from Hague, 'China's sovereignty over the SCS islands brooks no

⁵⁰Campbell, Meick, Hsu and Murray, 'China's "Core Interests" and the East China Sea', 1–7; *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 'Foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying's regular press conference on April 26, 2013', 28 Apr. 2013.

⁵¹*Xinhua News*, '日报披露中方称钓鱼岛事关核心利益' (Japanese paper reveals that China Has said the Diaoyu Island concerns the core interests), 13 Jun. 2013.

⁵²See, for examples, Ren Qinjin and Wang Jianhua, '中国核心利益不容挑战' (China's core interests brook no challenge), *Xinhua News*, 25 May 2015; *Xinhua News*, '中国坚定维护国家利益, 妥善处理热点问题' (China will resolutely protect its national interests, will handle hot issues appropriately), 10 Aug. 2012.

⁵³See, for examples, Cao Qun, '南海争端司法化中的美国因素' (The American factor in the legalization of the South China Sea dispute), *China Institute of International Studies*, 12 Aug. 2015; Jia Xiudong, '美搅局南海的三重战略目的' (Three important objectives behind the United States' mess up of the South China Sea), *China Institute of International Studies*, 3 Jun. 2015.

⁵⁴*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 'Wang Yi expounds views on situation of South China Sea'. 16 May 2015.

⁵⁵Pang Qingjie, '在领土主权和海洋权益上绝对没有讨价还价余地' (On territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, there is absolutely no room for bargaining), *Liberation Army Daily*, 30 May 2014.

denial.⁵⁶ The day after the ruling, the *People's Daily* employed for the first time the term 'baseline' to describe the SCS claims, implicitly referencing those interests as China's core interests.⁵⁷ The stronger language corroborates the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission research report's observation about the dynamic character of the core interest concept, and suggests that if Beijing's insecurity over its SCS claims grows – similar to its earlier concerns about Taiwan's independence drift – these claims may come to be explicitly labeled as a core interest.

China's Regional Behavior

There have been indications of a general pattern of behavior in Chinese recent regional diplomacy that alludes to an HHSS strategy. As mentioned, the PRC's maritime territorial interests have been increasingly depicted as a matter that not only relates closely to the core national interest, but is also just as non-compromisable as the latter. Not surprisingly, it is this domain where Beijing has been mostly perceived to be acting assertively or more assertively. Indeed, Johnston's 2013 study of Chinese assertiveness finds that the one area where Beijing's actions have been arguably more assertive is its maritime disputes.⁵⁸

Such robustness in asserting Chinese maritime territorial rights and interests – or in the words of some observers, 'tailored coercion' – has intensified in the Xi era.⁵⁹ For instance, in November 2013, China unilaterally declared an ADIZ in the ECS, a move that raised tensions in the ongoing row with Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. China also stepped up its use of the unified Chinese Coast Guard – frequently accompanied by PLA naval vessels over the horizon – to better patrol and enforce its claims in the ECS.⁶⁰ One such patrol purportedly led to the PLA vessel locking its weapons-guiding radar (implying an impending assault) onto Japanese naval vessels.⁶¹

These patrols have also been stepped up in the SCS. In one incident in December 2013, a Chinese warship, which was part of the *Liaoning* aircraft carrier group that was operating in the SCS for the first time, nearly caused a collision in its insistent shadowing of the cruiser USS *Cowpens* in

⁵⁶Huaxia, 'People's daily: China's sovereignty over South China Sea islands brooks no denial', *Xinhua News*, 15 Dec. 2015.

⁵⁷Commentator, '中国维护南海领土主权和海洋权益的决心坚定不移' (China's determination to defend its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests is unwavering), *People's Daily*, 13 Jul. 2016.

⁵⁸More specifically, Johnston refers to Chinese maritime activities in the SCS. Johnston, 'How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?', 7–48.

⁵⁹Patrick Cronin, Ely Ratner, Elbridge Colby, Zachary Hosford and Alexander Sullivan, *Tailored Coercion: Competition and Risk in Maritime Asia* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security March 2014).

⁶⁰Linda Jakobson, *China's Unpredictable Maritime Security Actors* (Lowy Institute for International Policy 2014), 6.

⁶¹Yuka Hayashi, Jeremy Page and Julian Barnes, 'Tensions flare as Japan says China threatened its forces', *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 Feb. 2013.

international waters of the SCS. That episode, where the PLA vessel had perilously crossed the bow of the USS *Cowpens* at a distance of 100 yards, led the then US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel to accuse the Chinese of behaving 'irresponsibly'.⁶² In another incident in March 2014, a Chinese blockade prevented Filipino vessels from resupplying the small Filipino force at the disputed Second Thomas Shoal. In May 2014, accompanied by a huge patrol fleet, a Chinese oil company relocated the HYSY-981 oil rig to waters near the disputed Paracel Islands in the SCS, leading to skirmishes between Chinese and Vietnamese vessels, which resulted in the sinking of a Vietnamese ship, sparking virulent anti-China protests in Vietnam.⁶³

Meanwhile, China has expanded its physical presence in the SCS, creating artificial outposts out of the Subi, Gaven, Hughes, Cuarteron, Johnson, and Fieri Cross reefs. The expansionary activities include the construction of airstrips and deeper vessel berths, facilities that could have dual military uses (which Beijing does not deny), leading to claims of China 'militarizing' the SCS and unilaterally altering facts on the ground. Infrastructure work in the SCS is not unique to China of course, since Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines have pursued similar work, but the scale and speed of Chinese construction activities in the SCS are unprecedented. According to one report, by June 2015, China accounted for around 95 percent of all reclaimed land in the Spratlys, which is more than 1500 football fields.⁶⁴ These actions are now seen as even more illegitimate in the wake of an international tribunal ruling declaring these activities as essentially illegal. But within China, the response has been increasingly defiant, with Beijing insisting the ruling is 'nothing more than a piece of paper' and that it will consider 'all necessary measures' – an allusion to the potential use of force – to defend its SCS claims.⁶⁵ Such measures have already included the start of 'regular' nuclear-capable H-6K bomber flights over the SCS airspace within a week of the tribunal ruling.⁶⁶

In highlighting some of the more notable cases,⁶⁷ the aim is not to cast aspersion on the aims or legitimacy of Chinese actions in its maritime

⁶²David Alexander, and Pete Sweeney, 'US, China Warships Narrowly Avoid Collision in South China Sea', *Reuters*, 14 Dec. 2013.

⁶³Jakobson, *China's Unpredictable Maritime Security Actors*, 6.

⁶⁴Gordon Lubold, 'Pentagon says China has stepped up land reclamation in South China Sea', *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 Aug. 2015; Jonathan Marcus, 'US-China tensions rise over Beijing's great wall of sand', *BBC News*, 29 May 2015.

⁶⁵*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 'Speech by Dai Bingguo at China-US dialogue on South China Sea between Chinese and US think tanks', 5 Jul. 2016; *China Daily*, 'The farce of shooting oneself in the foot', 15 Jul. 2016.

⁶⁶Huaxia, 'China's air force conducts combat air patrol in South China Sea', *Xinhua News*, 18 Jul. 2016.

⁶⁷In the diplomatic sphere, Beijing is also seen as asserting itself in regional deliberations relating to China's regional maritime interests. For example, it reportedly leveraged its influence over some ASEAN states (particularly Cambodia and Laos) to prevent a unified ASEAN statement and front on the SCS disputes on at least two occasions: the 2012 ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh and the 2016 Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Kunming. See Patrick Barta and Carlos Tejada, 'Sea dispute upends Asian summit', *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 Jul. 2012; David Tweed and David Roman, 'South China sea talks end in disarray as China lobbies Laos', *The Washington Post*, 16 Jun. 2016.

periphery. From China's perspective, such behavior is not necessarily assertive since by increasing Chinese physical presence in these contested maritime spaces, Beijing is only doing what it should do to better protect the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. China's foreign ministry is quick to remind international audiences that the PRC is only merely catching up on activities that had long been practiced by other claimants, or that other claimants had first acted in ways that are equally, if not more, unconstructive (e.g. Philippines's unilateral referral of its SCS claims to a UN tribunal).⁶⁸ But the point here is not whether China has the right to pursue such actions; rather it is that China believes it has that right and that this belief is leading to more tenacious efforts in asserting its maritime claims.

In other areas, however, this assertiveness is replaced by a more beneficent and collaborative approach in China's regional diplomacy (i.e. 'softening the soft'). Under Xi, Beijing has been exercising a sophisticated economic statecraft that is keen to display a China that is more willing to extend the benefits of its growth to its neighbors. As opposed to its territorial interests, Beijing sees more room for flexibility and inclusion in its regional economic interests. To this end, the Xi government has been active in promoting and implementing a number of major politico-economic initiatives. The centerpiece has arguably been the ambitious 'One Belt, One Road' (1B1R) plan that seeks to revive and modernize the historical overland and maritime Silk routes. The objective, with China as the focal point, is to better connect the economies and peoples along these trans-regional spaces, enhancing interregional trade, investment, and infrastructure. To facilitate this goal, in November 2014, China established the US \$40 billion Silk Road Fund to provide financing for related 1B1R regional and country projects.⁶⁹ The seriousness in which Beijing treats its 1B1R plan is evinced by the specific creation of a supra-ministerial committee, *the Leading Group for the Construction of the One Belt, One Road*, to oversee the implementation.⁷⁰ More than 50 countries have agreed to participate and are 'ready to align their respective development schemes' with the 1B1R initiative, Beijing has claimed.⁷¹

Another Chinese initiative that has attracted considerable interest is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which is seen to be part of, or complementing, the 1B1R plan. First proposed by Xi in October 2013 in Jakarta, and later concretized in June 2015 when 50 prospective founding

⁶⁸Author discussions with Chinese analysts, Beijing, June 2015.

⁶⁹Yongnian Zheng and Liang Fook Lye, 'China's Foreign Policy: The Unveiling of President Xi Jinping's Grand Strategy', *East Asian Policy* 7/1 (January/March 2015), 62–82.

⁷⁰*Xinhua News*, '一带一路领导班子, "一正四副"名单首曝光' (The one belt one road leading group, leader and members revealed for the first time), 6 Apr. 2015.

⁷¹Wang Yi, '盘点2014: 中国外交丰收之年' (2014 in Review: A Successful Year for China's Diplomacy), *国际问题研究 (International Studies)* 1 (2015).

members (PFMs) signed the Articles of Agreement, the China-led AIIB (with a capitalization of US\$100 billion) is envisioned to provide the much-needed capital for regional infrastructure and development needs. The establishment of this new institution is notable for its success in attracting 37 regional PFMs, including countries like Philippines and Vietnam, which have seen troubled relations with China in recent years; as well as 20 extra-regional PFMs that include American allies like United Kingdom, Israel, and Germany, despite palpable US pressure to shun the institution.⁷² Chinese scholars credit this success to the apparent lure of the softer aspects of China's regional strategy.⁷³

This softer face is also seen, to some degree, in specific relationships in China's regional diplomacy, including the China–ASEAN relationship. In part counterintuitive because there have been more tensions in China's relations with ASEAN (and some ASEAN states) because of the SCS territorial disputes, it is also logical because the problems in these relationships lend greater incentive for Beijing to use other means to influence the cost-benefit calculus of ASEAN governments. Hence Beijing has stated that Sino–ASEAN relations now represent the 'priority direction' in China's regional policy, with the aim of elevating the previous 'golden' relationship to a 'diamond' partnership for the next decade.⁷⁴ More concretely, the Xi government has (i) agreed to upgrade the existing China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement; (ii) pushed for the signing of an ambitious treaty on good-neighborliness and friendship that seeks 'an institutional framework and legal guarantee for peaceful co-existence between the two sides;' (iii) intensified efforts on concluding the China-centric trade pact, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP); (iv) begun widening the scope for bilateral currency swaps in ASEAN countries; (v) enlarged the China-ASEAN Investment Cooperation Fund by another US\$3 billion dollars; and (vi) stepped up its preferential loans to ASEAN states, including pledging an additional US\$20 billion for regional connectivity projects and US \$480 million for poverty reduction causes.⁷⁵

It should be pointed out that this more beneficent regional economic statecraft is not unconnected to the perceived benefits for China's own development and big power aspiration. These might include helping China to obtain a larger voice in shaping the regional order; better address the issues of the structural reforms and overcapacity of the Chinese

⁷²Swainathan Anklesaria Aiyar, 'Why US allies are happy to join China's AIIB', *The Diplomat*, 30 Jun. 2015.

⁷³Author discussion with Chinese scholars, Beijing, June 2015.

⁷⁴Yan, 'Premier Li Keqiang's keynote speech at 10th China Asean Expo', *Xinhua News*, 3 Sep. 2013; Jian, Chen, Xia Fan, and Chen Jiping, 'China, ASEAN embarking on cooperation of "diamond decade"', *Xinhua News*, 11 Nov. 2014.

⁷⁵Yang Yi, 'China pledges over 20-bln-USD loans to boost Southeast Asian connectivity', *Xinhua News*, 13 Nov. 2014.

economy by opening up foreign markets and production bases; spur the growth of its lesser-developed western and interior provinces; diversify its capital outflow destinations as well as better utilize its burgeoning reserves; and promote greater internationalization of the RMB. Yet while important, these interests clearly encompass more leeway for elasticity and negotiation; foreign minister Wang Yi has indicated as much. Referencing Chinese regional economic interests, he insisted that China should 'never solely seek profits and haggle over the gains.'⁷⁶

Conclusion

The widening gap in the hard and soft faces of Chinese diplomacy has led observers to lament the 'mixed' or 'conflicting' signals that China has been sending to the region.⁷⁷ But as this article has tried to show, there is actually more coherency in these mixed signals than commonly perceived. They are symptoms of a deliberate, two-pronged HHSS strategy in Chinese regional diplomacy. The strategic shift has been both a matter of degree and scope: One, a *more* assertive component toward the core interests combined with a *more* beneficent policy toward relative secondary interests; and two, a wider regional application of a strategy typically associated with China's approach toward Taiwan. As the article finds, there has been a growing narrative of the utility of an HHSS strategy within China, which is supported by related discussions of a more proactive Chinese diplomacy and the 'bottom line' in Chinese foreign policy.

The HHSS strategy should not be seen as explaining (fully) specific cases of Chinese regional actions. For example, a range of other contingent considerations also inform why Beijing has decided to unilaterally declare an ADIZ in the ECS, or move its HYSY-981 oil rig, accompanied by a large paramilitary fleet, to waters near the disputed Paracel Islands in the SCS. Yet, seen in the broader context of a more conditioned form of foreign policy assertiveness, these actions become less surprising because Beijing is likely to act more robustly or respond in an uncompromising way, whenever it perceives threats concerning its core interests.

What might be some reasons for exercising such a regional strategy? Beyond the basic logic of enhancing incentives for neighboring states to cooperate with China while heightening the costs for working against vital

⁷⁶Pei Guangjiang and Wang Di, 'Steadfastly take the path of peace and development, create a good international environment for Chinese nation's great rejuvenation – series of report meetings on propaganda and education on socialism with Chinese characteristics and Chinese dream', *People's Daily*, 22 Nov. 2013; Li Mingjiang, 'China's "One Belt, One Road" Initiative: New Round of Opening Up?', *RSIS Commentary*, No. 50, 11 Mar. 2015.

⁷⁷Nguyen Hung Son, 'China sending mixed signals to ASEAN', *The Straits Times*, 13 May 2014; see as well, Barry Desker, 'China's conflicting signals on the South China Sea', *Brookings Institution Opinion Editorial*, 29 Jul. 2015.

Chinese interests, a number of rationales have been cited by Chinese analysts. First, the HHSS approach is seen to be effective in managing the territorial question of Taiwan. *Ergo*, the same 'solution' could be extended to the PRC's broader regional diplomacy, which is similarly confronting challenges to its maritime sovereignty. Second, in the wake of the US rebalance to Asia, which is perceived to create a more threatening environment for China's security, it behoves Beijing to adopt a more nimble regional approach that both advances China's 'dream' of national rejuvenation as well as protects its legitimate interests and rights. Third, the global balance of power is perceived to be shifting increasingly in China's favor. And while China will not pursue regional hegemony, there is little reason why China should not be vigorous or 'bold' in defending its rightful interests and rights (especially since its capacity to do so is growing). At the same time, China's economic muscle is its most influential advantage and should be leveraged more purposefully. Fourth, there is a need to find a balance between, on the one hand, meeting rising domestic expectations to better safeguard China's territorial interests, and on the other, addressing growing international expectations for China to play a bigger contributory role in the region.⁷⁸

The jury is still out on whether the HHSS strategy will enable China to achieve its main strategic goal of rising peacefully. While Beijing believes its muscular posture toward its territorial claims will enable it to better protect these interests, the kinetics of a security dilemma – where what one perceives to be a defensive, self-help action is seen by others as a concomitant reduction in their security – may well result in an overall more destabilizing regional environment that will be less conducive for China's continued growth. Indeed, several regional states are disquieted by this stronger face of Chinese diplomacy, and have been receptive to the overtures of the American rebalance or stepped up their strategic engagement of the US. At the same time, China's more generous economic statecraft has yet to fully alleviate regional uncertainty (distrust, in some cases) of its longer term intentions. All these could be interpreted as part of China's larger and sometimes difficult 'bargaining' process with international society as it rises.⁷⁹

Prominent Chinese scholar Yan Xuetong is confident, however, that China will have increasing sway over this bargaining. As he notes:

In the future, China will decisively favor those who side with it with economic benefits and even security protections. On the contrary, those who are hostile to China will face much more sustained policies of sanctions and isolation.⁸⁰

Perhaps that future is already here.

⁷⁸Author discussions with Chinese analysts, May and June 2015.

⁷⁹Kai He and Huiyun Feng, 'China's Bargaining Strategies for a Peaceful Rise: Successes and Challenges', *Asian Security* 10/2 (2014), 168–87.

⁸⁰Yan Xuetong, 'China's new foreign policy: not conflict but convergence of interests', *Huffington Post*, 28 Jan. 2014.

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