

China's Recent Assertiveness:  
Implications for the Future of US-China Relations

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**Introduction**

In the past five years China has used stronger, more strident language and more assertive, and at times, forceful actions to assert its claims to control the waters and air space off its eastern seaboard. Chinese spokesmen (and some Western analysts) have sought to deny that any shift has taken place, or to explain those changes that have occurred as mere reactions to the behavior of others. With the passage of time such claims have become increasingly difficult to sustain.

Examples of China's growing assertiveness continue to multiply. The most recent include Beijing's unilateral declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone that covers Japanese-controlled islands in the East China Sea in November of last year, the deliberate near-collision of a PLAN vessel with the U.S. Navy cruiser *Cowpens* in December and, in the past two months, the deployment of oil rigs and a small armada of naval and maritime patrol vessels into waters claimed by Vietnam.

These developments raise three questions:

- What explains Beijing's increased assertiveness?

- What are the likely implications of this behavior for China's relations with its neighbors and with the United States?
- And how should the U.S. respond?

### **Explaining increased Chinese assertiveness**

With the end of the Cold War, China began to pursue a consistent and generally cautious strategy for dealing with its neighbors and with the United States. This strategy reflected the wisdom of former Party chief Deng Xiaoping who, in the wake of the Tiananmen Square massacre, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the U.S. defeat of Iraq in the first Persian Gulf war advised his colleagues that China should "hide its capabilities and bide its time."

At least until recently Chinese strategy has evidently been governed by three axioms:

- "Avoid confrontation" (especially with the United States, but also with China's wealthy and powerful neighbors).
- "Build 'comprehensive national power'" (a concept Chinese analysts use to refer to all of the various dimensions and instruments of national capability).
- "Advance incrementally."

Regarding this last point: Chinese policymakers assessed that they were in a relatively weak position and needed time to build their strength, but they did not believe that they could or should remain passive. To the contrary, over the last two decades they have sought opportunities to enhance their country's influence and

strengthen its position, while simultaneously attempting to erode and constrict those of the United States.

The ultimate aims of Chinese strategy appear to be two-fold:

- To preserve the Chinese Communist Party's monopoly on domestic political power.
- To displace the United States and restore China to its rightful place as the preponderant power in East Asia.

Beijing's recent behavior suggests an adjustment in tactics and timelines rather than a fundamental shift in strategy. China is pushing harder to achieve its long-standing goals. In addition to advancing its claims to control most of the water and resources off its coasts, it is using calibrated threats in an attempt to intimidate its neighbors, demonstrate the inadequacy of U.S. security guarantees, and, if possible, to drive wedges between the United States and some of its regional friends and allies.

China's increased assertiveness reflects a mix of arrogance and insecurity. Following the onset of the global financial crisis, many Chinese analysts and policy makers concluded that the United States had entered into a period of unexpectedly rapid decline in its relative power and influence. With their country's fortunes seemingly on the rise, some argued that the time had come for China, if not to abandon "hiding and biding," then at least to adopt a more forward-leaning posture in its dealings with the rest of the world. Chinese planners appear to have concluded that, at least for the next several years, the United States will continue to

be strategically preoccupied and fiscally constrained. If it plays its cards right during this period, China can “create facts” and consolidate its position.

Near term confidence is mixed with longer-term concern. Among other factors, slower economic growth and continuing revelations about the extent and depth of official corruption could threaten internal stability and regime survival. A more assertive stance may enable Beijing to achieve victories that contribute to “national rejuvenation” and enhance the CCP’s legitimacy by casting it as the defender of China’s honor and greatness. Regardless of the results, however, the regime appears to believe that an atmosphere of increased tension and friction with foreign rivals can help it to rally support and deflect possible public resentment from its own inadequacies and failings.

### **Implications for regional peace and stability**

China’s recent actions are deliberately dangerous. Its leaders are manipulating risk or playing “chicken;” they are knowingly creating hazardous situations in the hope that others will back down. Even if it is not intended to do so, such behavior could easily lead to confrontation and escalation.

In the long run, China’s assertiveness could also turn out to be counterproductive and even self-defeating. If its Asian nations respond by increasing their own capabilities and working more closely with one another and with the United States they may be able to block Beijing’s initiatives and balance its power. But such an outcome is not automatic or inevitable. In the absence of an effective American response, China may yet be able to successfully pursue a divide

and conquer strategy: intimidating some of its neighbors into acquiescence while isolating and demoralizing others. Indeed, this appears to be precisely what Beijing is now trying to do: reaching out to Washington and proclaiming its desire to form a “new type great power relationship” with the United States, while at the same time ratcheting up pressure on key targets, especially U.S. allies Japan and the Philippines, as well as Vietnam.

### **How should the U.S. respond?**

For most of the last two decades the United States, like China, has been pursuing an essentially constant strategy. Despite occasional shifts in emphasis, successive administrations have sought to engage China, primarily through trade and diplomacy, while at the same time taking steps to preserve a favorable balance of power in East Asia. In addition to maintaining and selectively strengthening its own military capabilities, Washington has sought to bolster relations with its traditional treaty allies and to build quasi-alliance relationships with other countries (including Singapore and India) that share its concerns about the possible implications of China’s growing strength.

The objectives of U.S. strategy have been, first, to “tame” China by giving it a stake in the preservation of the existing international order and second, in the long-run, to transform it, encouraging the evolution of its domestic political system away from authoritarianism and towards something more closely resembling liberal democracy.

It is neither feasible nor, at this point, necessary to abandon this mixed strategy in favor of something different. What is required, instead, is a readjustment of the blending of the two elements and, in particular, an increased emphasis on the balancing portion of America's strategic portfolio. The current administration began to move in this direction in 2011 with its announcement of a "pivot" towards Asia (later renamed the "rebalance"), but its efforts to date have been, and are widely perceived in the region to be, inadequate. There is growing concern on the part of friends and allies that, despite the rhetoric of its leaders, the United States may lack the resources, the focus, and perhaps the resolve necessary to sustain a position of leadership.

Among the measures that will be needed to alleviate these fears, one in particular stands out. The United States must develop, articulate and (together with its allies) implement a military strategy that will enable it to continue to project power into the Western Pacific, under any circumstances, and despite the ongoing deployment by China of so-called anti-access/area denial capabilities. America's position in Asia is built on its alliances and those, in turn, rest on assurances that it will come to the aid of its allies if they are threatened or attacked. Without an effective and timely response, Beijing's ongoing military buildup will begin to call the credibility of those assurances into question, weakening U.S. alliances, increasing the risk of aggression, and potentially endangering the peace and stability of the entire Asia-Pacific region.