

Analysis

What happened to Deng's maxim 'Tao Guang Yang Hui'?¹

Explaining China's increased assertiveness in East Asia

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Since roughly 2009-2010, a pattern of behavior where China has become increasingly assertive and uncompromising when it comes to pursuing its interests in the region, in rhetoric as well as in policy, can be discerned.² Of course most visible in this regard are the territorial conflicts with Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam China has fueled over the past years. China's latest major provocation was the announcement of an 'East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone', overlapping a similar system by Japan. A move the Dutch Advisory Council on International Affairs regards as China's testing of the US commitment to the US-Japan security alliance.³ How can China's new posture in East Asia be explained? I believe that China's increased assertiveness can in part be explained by domestic factors and will offer two probable explanations: increased influence of the left, and domestic insecurities and the leadership transition of 2012.

Explaining the turn

For the first explanation we have to go back to 2003, when Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao came to power. As Japanese political scientist Masayuki Masuda notes in his discourse analysis of the 'harmonious world' concept put forth by President Hu Jintao at a UN summit in 2005, Hu, Premier Wen Jiabao and Vice Chairman of the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) Jiang Zhenhua in 2003 acknowledged China's rise and argued that the first 20 years of this century presented 'strategic opportunities' that had to be seized. Hu reaffirmed this policy direction in an article in 2007.⁴

How this grand strategy ought to be shaped became the subject of intense debate among scholars and top officials in the period 2003-2006, culminating in lectures on the topic given by scholars to the PSC and the airing of the documentary series 'Rising Powers' on CCTV national television. Until 2007-2008, the emphasis of Hu's harmonious world concept fell on the 'peaceful rise' of China, later rephrased as 'peaceful development', an according to Beijing less threatening description. Henry Kissinger describes this concept as based on the historical philosophy of the 'Middle Kingdom', where the progress and expansion of influence of Imperial China was accomplished by a non-confrontational approach, based on implicit moral-cultural claims.

Although there were attempts to reaffirm this concept to reassure foreign observers that China's intentions were benign, there was after 2008, at least in parts of the central government, a changed perception of the political outlook and the strategic opportunities this development provided.

The combination of the 2008 financial crisis and the persistence of the resource-draining US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, on the one hand, and China's continued economic growth and the successful and symbolically important 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics, on the other

hand, gave rise in some parts of the government to the notion that the balance of power was shifting, a situation which ought be taken advantage of. China should in particular become less accommodating towards a declining US.⁵

Professor Christopher Hughes (London School of Economics) points in this regard to one of the highly nationalistic books that came out in 2009-2010, 'China Dream', by the influential colonel and professor at the National Defense Academy Liu Mingfu. In the book Liu aligns himself with Hu's statement at the 17th Party Congress in 2007 that China will never be a hegemonic or expansionist power but subsequently paradoxically asserts that a 'harmonious world' can be achieved only by China becoming a counterweight to the not-to-be-trusted US, creating a balance of power. Hughes notes that the book is noteworthy not necessarily for the foreign policy strategies it offers but for what it symbolizes. According to Hughes, the book tells us that populist-nationalist thought regarding the direction of China's foreign policy was not only allowed to surface, but that there is a popular and governmental base for it that apparently had to be served.⁶

Increased influence of the left

With regard to this governmental base, it can be said that the position argued by Liu falls within the broader consensus since 2008 among nationalists and conservatives that China should use its recently attained power to be more assertive. American political scientist David Shambaugh distinguishes two distinct but sometimes overlapping schools of thought on the left side of the political spectrum. On the far left is what he calls the 'Nativist' school, consisting of populists, nationalists, and Marxists. This loosely organized school of thought is characterized by its traditional Marxist-Maoist and isolationist way of thinking, and can be found, for example, in some (government-affiliated) research institutes. It is revisionist in that it believes the international system has a Western-imperialist bias and therefore needs to be altered. The financial crisis and 'imperialist war' in Iraq confirmed this school's view that any Sino-American collaboration within the current global system would be naïve.

The second school of thought is what Shambaugh refers to as the 'Realism with Chinese Characteristics' school. Shambaugh sees this school as currently holding the dominant position in the debate on China's global posture. Emphasis is on economic, military and diplomatic strength, which ought to be employed to bend the region to China's will (offensive faction) or to deter 'imperial aggression' (defensive faction). The views of this school are represented in particular in the military and also in several universities and research institutes. A central tenet in this school's thought is the 'Century of Humiliation', where Western powers and Japan through force or the threat of force coerced China to cede to them concessions. China in its renewed position of strength should assert itself against those powers. In the current context it should assume a firm stance, particularly with regard to the US. This school argues that China should straightforwardly pursue its national interests instead of engaging the international community constructively.⁷

Hughes also points out the relatively weak position of Hu vis-à-vis the (realist) military. He asserts that Hu, being 'boxed in' by vice chairmen appointed by (the rival faction of) Jiang Zemin, with no experience of having served in the military and with no ties to high-level officers, is merely 'signing documents prepared by the generals'. Moreover, he contends that in decisions to engage in assertive, provocative military actions such as those involving

the Senkaku islands (referred to by China as the Diaoyu islands), political leaders and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are not even consulted.⁸

Indeed, as Shambaugh argues, China's increased assertiveness could be explained from this perspective. Since 2008, more moderate elements in the government appear to have lost in influence to, in particular, the Realists, represented in the seemingly relatively autonomously operating military, with a 'strong pull' from the Nativists. China's policy towards East Asia could plausibly have changed in that direction as a consequence. Moreover, even though top officials and foreign policy-makers might be more moderate and not be seeking an adversarial relationship with the US, in order to maintain stability they have to respond to pressure from not only the Nativist and Realist schools in the (quasi) government, but also to popular forces voicing nationalist sentiments in line with the Nativist perspective. In particular, keeping the so-called 'netizens' on Internet forums such as Sina Weibo in check is of great concern to the Chinese government.⁹

Domestic insecurities and the leadership transition of 2012

In addition, on a second level of analysis, two plausible explanations for the turn, as argued by Joseph Nye, can be advanced: domestic insecurities due to declining economic growth and the leadership transition of 2012. First, Nye argues that increased Chinese assertiveness could be explained by the fact that China's leadership, with China's economy slowing down, is faced with potential social instability. With ideological communist rhetoric no longer in its toolbox, the Communist Party may see the rallying around the flag of popular nationalist elements in society as an effective strategy for reasserting its legitimacy to rule.

As a second plausible explanation, Nye notes the changing of the guard in November 2012. With the 18th National Congress coming up, taking into account increased pressure from popular nationalist elements in society, China's top officials did not want to look softer than their competitors, especially those from a rival faction or governmental body.¹⁰

Indeed, there are many signs that have come out of Beijing that support, in particular, the second explanation. First, it can be said that the inter-factional competition in the run-up to the 2012 National Congress was extraordinarily fierce and the outcome unexpected: six out of the seven PSC seats were taken by Jiang Zemin and Xi Jinping's 'elitist' camp, and four out of seven PSC members are so-called 'princelings', a category of leaders Li describes as coming from 'families of either veteran revolutionaries or high-ranking officials'.¹¹ Most, though not necessarily all, princelings are also elitists. The only member from the other main faction, the 'populist' camp of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, is Premier Li Keqiang, but he had been selected at the previous Congress five years ago. Once someone has been selected to become the next president/premier, the selection cannot be changed without an all-out factional war.¹² In the Central Military Commission (CMC) the influence of the princelings increased as well, with princelings now occupying four out of eleven seats.

Since the turn of the century, there has been a balance in the central government between the elitists, representing the capitalist-business-orientated middle class on the east coast, and the populist camp of Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao-Li Keqiang, representing the rural, lower social classes. The fact that the balance on the PSC and the CMC shifted so dramatically suggests that an immense power struggle took place.

Second, there appears to have been bitter disagreement over the direction of the Party. The expulsion and imprisonment by Hu and Wen (populists) of Bo Xilai, prominent princeling of the elitist camp, goes beyond the personal aspect of the scandal he/his wife was involved in. During the March Congress, Wen, in the typical implicit Chinese way, stated that the Bo Xilai case was also about the direction China ought to take. With the removal of Bo, lead-promoter of the increasingly popular 'neo-Maoist Chongqing model' (in line with the Nativist perspective), the resurgence of Maoism, according to Hu, was capped. This is important since not only had the left gained in influence in the broader government and in society, but, according to Zheng, a doctrinal divide had emerged within the PSC as well, culminating in Bo's unprecedented public fall from grace.¹³

The power struggle and disagreement within the PSC about the direction of the Party support the view that, with this intense rivalry going on, leaders on both sides of the factional spectrum could not afford to look weak vis-à-vis the forces on the left and pushed for or condoned a firm East Asia policy as a consequence.

Continuation under Xi

China's assertive behavior, however, did not cease after the leadership transition of 2012. In order to be able to assert that there is continuity in China's assertiveness, China's posture under President Xi has to be assessed as well. Xi in his first year appears to have consolidated his power quite successfully. Xi, unlike Hu, who had to wait two years before getting the top military post, got the CMC chairmanship and the Party leadership and presidency at the same time. Furthermore, in the Third Plenum Xi managed to introduce two new administrative bodies dealing with economic and security policy, which report directly to the president. In this way, Xi, with a majority in the PSC but with the Politburo, Secretariat and other important governing bodies still about equally divided between the elitists and populists, can have more direct influence in making and executing policy.¹⁴ These developments would suggest that the new president is more powerful than his predecessor, which would mean that Xi could execute policy with greater independence from rival domestic forces.

However, there are also signs that Xi, like Hu, has trouble keeping the military leadership in check. While he signed off on the creation of the Air Defense Identification Zone, the clear lack of public support for it by Xi and official state media outlets suggests that Xi is not or no longer fully behind it, raising questions about his relationship with the military. Moses asserts that Xi's comprehensive anti-corruption policies, which did not exclude top military ranks, and his attempts to restrain the military's influence over policy, created animosity within the military establishment. Moreover, it appears that also Xi feels compelled to appease the forces on the left, as suggested by his speeches on the 'China dream', which he presents as also entailing a 'strong-army dream'.¹⁵

Thus it appears that under Xi as under Hu the pressure and influence of the left, in government and in society, continues. Although it is difficult to make any predictions, if the latter assertion is in fact correct, China's assertive behavior in East Asia, in particular with regard to the island disputes, will probably persist for the time being.

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1. In China the maxim is mostly translated as 'not to show off one's capability but to keep a low profile'. Outside China, it is also translated as 'hide our capabilities and bide our time'. See Xiong, G. (2010), 'China's Diplomatic Strategy: Implication and Translation of "Tao Guang Yang Hui"', *Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs*.
2. Shambaugh, D. (2011). 'Coping With a Conflicted China', *The Washington Quarterly*, 34(1), p. 7. For the view that there is a great degree of continuity in China's posture, see Johnston, A.I. (2013). 'How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?', *International Security*, 37(4), pp. 7-48.
3. Advisory Council on International Affairs (2013). *Azië in opmars. Strategische betekenis en gevolgen*, pp. 15-16. See for a more elaborate account of Chinese assertiveness United States Office of the Secretary of Defense (2013). *Annual Report to Congress. Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, p. 16.
4. Masuda, M. (2009). 'China's Search for a New Foreign Policy Frontier: Concept and Practice of "Harmonious World"'. In Masafumi, I. (Ed.), *China's Shift: Global Strategy of the Rising Power*, Tokyo: NIDS Joint Research Series, pp. 62-63.
5. Kissinger, H., *Over China*. (Amsterdam 2011), pp. 478-481, 484-485.
6. Hughes, C.R. (2010). 'In Case You Missed It: China Dream', *The China Beat*.
7. Shambaugh, 'Coping With a Conflicted China', pp. 7, 10-13.
8. Hughes, C. (2012). 'The role of the military in China's leadership transition', *European Union Institute for Security Studies*.
9. Shambaugh, pp. 21-24.
10. Nye, J.S. (2010). 'China's Bad Bet Against America', *Project Syndicate*.
11. Li, C. (2013). 'Rule of the Princes', *The Brookings Institution*, pp. 34-37.
12. Zheng, Y. (2012). 'China in 2012. Troubled Elite, Frustrated Society', *Asian Survey*, 53(1), pp. 165, 168.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 166-169.
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15. Moses, R.L. (2013). 'Why Xi Jinping's Done So Little to Sell China's Air Defense Zone', *The Wall Street Journal*.