

Understanding China's South China Sea Policy

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The puzzle:

- In the past years, we witnessed a rapid rise of China's economic power and comprehensive strength. Many outside people have a feeling that China's behavior is becoming more assertive than before.
 - While conflicts happened at many parts of the world, no military conflict occurred in the South China Sea, even though it has been a hot spot for many years.
 - What's the reason for this phenomenon, does it has something to do with China's behavior as to foreign affairs.
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What are China's strategic objectives in the South China Sea?

- ❑ Is China attempting to maximize its power, and to gain as much de facto control over the islands as possible?
 - ❑ Is China's changing South China Sea policy opportunistic behaviour, aimed at establishing regional dominance at a time when it believes there is least likelihood of resistance from the neighbouring countries concerned?
 - ❑ Or is China trying to defend its sovereign rights and national interests without jeopardizing stability in the area?
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Basic logic of the analysis

- We should not talk about South China Sea just from the perspective of SCS.
 - China's strategic goal in dealing with the South China Sea territorial and maritime disputes is determined in part by its overall diplomatic aims and how the South China Sea fits into this larger picture, and in part by how China reads the changing international environment and its room for manoeuvre in determining policy on this issue.
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Some Chinese behavior worth noting

- (1) China gained de facto control over the Scarborough Shoal (Huangyan Dao) by adopting a proactive approach—considered successful by many Chinese analysts—it did not replicate this approach in dealing with the Second Thomas Shoal (Ren'ai Jiao) or other disputed islands.
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Some Chinese behavior worth noting

- (2) in July 2014 China called a halt to the operations of the Haiyang Shiyou 981 drilling platform in the South China Sea, even though in Beijing's view the operations were taking place in waters not under dispute.
 - On the other hand, it has insisted on continuing land reclamation on a large scale on some islands and reefs in the South China Sea, which lasted for about 2 years time.
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Some Chinese behavior worth noting

- (3) While China established an ADIZ in the East China Sea on 23 November 2013, it has been very cautious about establishing an ADIZ in the South China Sea.
 - Claims of increasing Chinese assertiveness cannot explain these seemingly paradoxical behaviors
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Background for China's policy transformation

- After 2010, with the rapid increase in China's economic power and growing concern and vigilance in the United States about China's rise, the policy of keeping a low profile became markedly less effective. China's confrontations over territorial disputes in the South China Sea with other claimants have not only prompted the adjustment of this policy, but also reflect and put to the test a more proactive foreign policy approach.
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The ranking and status of SCS issue in China's foreign policy

- ❑ two top-level diplomatic work conferences were held by the Chinese government in successive years:
 - ❑ the Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference on 24 - 25 October 2013,
 - ❑ the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs on 28 - 29 November 2014.⁸
 - ❑ All members of the Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party's Politburo attended both meetings.
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The ranking and status of SCS issue in China's foreign policy

- It is worth noting that the South China Sea is not mentioned in the public documents that emerged from the two conferences, which suggests that these disputes are not at the top of China's foreign policy agenda.
 - The importance of the SCS disputes need to be evaluated within the framework of China's overall strategic and foreign policy goals rather than inferred from a narrow interpretation based on examination of particular actions taken by China in respect of these disputes.
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The ranking and status of SCS issue in China's foreign policy

- According to the documents published following the two top-level conferences on foreign, the fundamental goal of Chinese foreign policy in the coming decade is to serve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.
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The ranking and status of SCS issue in China's foreign policy

- Although the South China Sea territorial and maritime disputes are important, their status may fluctuate significantly within the bigger picture for Chinese diplomacy.
 - If China and the other countries in question were able to shelve the disputes, the issue would slip to a low rank on China's foreign policy agenda.
 - if the disputes threatened to provoke military conflict, and thereby to affect the stability of the overall regional environment, they would move rapidly up to the top of the Chinese foreign policy agenda.
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The ranking and status of SCS issue in China's foreign policy

- different approaches to protecting China's interests in the South China Sea will have different effects on its interests in other spheres.
 - China's attitude in dealing with the South China Sea disputes can have an impact on the achievement of other diplomatic goals.
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The ranking and status of SCS issue in China's foreign policy

- It is generally accepted in the Chinese debates that if China were to adopt a restrained and moderate policy on this issue for a considerable length of time, this could prompt certain countries to become more demanding in their relations with China.
 - Restraint and moderation could thus lead to direct damage to China's national interests, while at the same time stimulating a rise in nationalism at home, making a moderate approach ultimately unsustainable.
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The ranking and status of SCS issue in China's foreign policy

- If, on the other hand, China were to adopt consistently tough, aggressive policies, this could not only elicit strong policy reactions from countries including the United States, the Philippines and Vietnam, but also engender widespread misgivings among other countries in southeast Asia and elsewhere in China's neighboring area, prompting them to question China's strategic intentions.
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The ranking and status of SCS issue in China's foreign policy

- Between 2011 and 2014, Chinese foreign policy went through an overall transition from 'keeping a low profile' to 'striving for achievement'.
- From 2012 to the first half of 2014, the Chinese government was exploring the approach of 'striving for achievement', in part by testing it out in its handling of the SCS disputes. China's changing approach towards the SCS disputes, therefore, reflects a process of learning and accumulating experience in pursuing its new diplomatic line of 'striving for achievement'.

The ranking and status of SCS issue in China's foreign policy

- By the second half of 2014, the development of the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative and preparations for setting up the AIIB were entering a critical stage. In this context, a proactive approach to dealing with the SCS disputes seemed unlikely to secure many substantive benefits, while also promising no fundamental solution of the issues, and possibly having a negative impact on other, higher-priority, diplomatic goals.
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China's changing tactical thinking about the South China Sea disputes

- Not only has the status of the South China Sea in the bigger picture of Chinese diplomacy shifted; China's tactical thinking on dealing with these issues has also been adjusted since 2010, especially in terms of what is the most appropriate way of realizing the nation's broad strategic goals.
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China's changing tactical thinking about the South China Sea disputes

- Broadly speaking, the change in the strategic thinking behind the Chinese approach to dealing with the South China Sea disputes has gone through a series of stages
- (1) During the first stage, China adopted a principled policy of shelving disputes and seeking common development (gezhi zhengyi, gongtong kaifa).
- This policy was guided by the principle of keeping a low profile, worked well for some time and helped China to maintain friendly relations with the ASEAN countries, although in the latter part of this first stage it became increasingly difficult to sustain

China's changing tactical thinking about the South China Sea disputes

- (2) In the second stage, as regional tensions rose, the Chinese government realized that the policy based on keeping a low profile was becoming less effective and could not calm tensions in the SCS
 - a debate emerged as to whether the priority in dealing with the SCS disputes should be to 'defend [China's] sovereign rights' or 'maintain regional stability'.
 - a general consensus was reached that China should not allow its essential sovereign rights to be compromised for the sake of maintaining regional stability
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China's changing tactical thinking about the South China Sea disputes

- (3) the third stage, after the Scarborough Shoal standoff and before the "One Belt and One Road" initiative gain influence
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China's changing tactical thinking about the South China Sea disputes

- (4) The fourth stage, after the "One Belt and One Road" initiative gain influence, before the South China Sea arbitration
 - (5) after the arbitration
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China's changing tactical thinking about the South China Sea disputes

- Several important points:
 - (1) Having long been guided by the principle of keeping a low profile, Chinese diplomacy needs to go through a period of 'becoming assertive' in order to establish the level of deterrence necessary for China to be in a position to defend its sovereign rights and national interests in the South China Sea.
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China's changing tactical thinking about the South China Sea disputes

- (2) although Chinese foreign policy during this period of transition has become more assertive, assertiveness itself is neither the goal nor an inherent characteristic of Chinese diplomacy. The priority of Chinese foreign policy in the short term is to keep the situation in the South China Sea under control and to contain the escalating provocations of certain neighbouring countries in defence of its own national interests.
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The future of SCS situation

- (1) What's the difference made by President Rodrigo Duterte?
 - (2) Is the current ease of tension stable?
 - (3) Will China's SCS strategy change in the future?
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□ Thank you
