



CHINA'S RECENT POLICY OF ASSERTIVENESS

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China's current assertive posture has got alarm bells ringing in many world capitals, especially in Asia. Even countries usually careful not to offend China have expressed concern. What has aroused apprehension is the strong suggestion of military muscle in China's diplomacy and Beijing's demonstrated willingness in recent years to use force. This trend has become especially noticeable since late 2008. It reflects the Chinese leadership's assessment that national capabilities are now poised to merge with intentions, enabling China to overtly push on issues benefiting its national self-interest.

China's current policy particularly towards its neighbours, however, has a history. In fact the formulation enunciated in 1979, that China needs a peaceful neighbourhood environment till it achieves its Modernisation goals, itself has inherent a time limitation. Deng Xiaoping's advice to successor leaders, to 'lie low, bide your time', supplemented this.

China's communist leadership has retained the ambition underpinned culturally by *Sanjiao*, or the Buddhist-Taoist-Confucian tradition preserved by a centuries-old bureaucratic legacy, that China must regain its self-perceived rightful role and influence in the world. Deng Xiaoping, along with other leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), believed that 'power flows from the barrel of a gun'. This was reflected in his decision to retain defence as an area of focus when he launched the Four Modernisations programme.

Deng Xiaoping brought in Geng Biao as Defence Minister with the objective of giving the PLA's senior echelons exposure to the advances made by foreign armies in military doctrine, tactics and technology. His directive to 'teach Vietnam a lesson', when

senior PLA Commanders remained complacent despite Deng's criticism of the condition and capabilities of the PLA, resulted in the PLA suffering severe unanticipated casualties and consequently being shocked into embracing efforts to modernize it. In a prescient move, which at the same time hinted at China's intention of using the PLA to robustly support its national security and foreign policy objectives, Deng Xiaoping took steps to modernize the fledgling PLA Navy. He envisaged that the

PLA Navy would have to play an important role in future in safeguarding sea-lanes vital to China's commerce and recovering 'lost territories'. As far back as 1982, he appointed Liu Huaqing, then the only senior PLA officer with sea experience and the rank of Admiral, to modernize the PLA Navy and equip it with a doctrine. That a large role was envisaged for the PLA Navy in the future was underscored

even then in Admiral Liu Huaqing's definition of the term 'coastal waters'. With Deng Xiaoping's approval he defined this to include 'the Yellow Sea, Eastern Sea (East China Sea), the Southern Sea (South China Sea), the Nansha Archipelago and Taiwan, the seas on this side and that side of Okinawa, as well as the Northern Region of the Pacific.' The role that the PLA would play in the future was, therefore, clearly not unanticipated.

Deng Xiaoping was equally conscious of the importance of the PLA in domestic politics. Particularly important was the PLA's role as the sword arm of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). He ensured that the PLA remained the 'Party's army' and stayed subordinate to the Party. The PLA's usefulness to the Party in this role was demonstrated during the 'Tiananmen Incident' in 1989. He similarly sought to ensure that successor generations of Party Chiefs would secure the loyalty of the PLA. In 1987, he

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decided that the CCP Central Committee (CC) General Secretary would head the Military Commission, thereby combining in the Party Chief full powers over the Party, Army and Government. To prepare the Party General Secretary for this role it was decided he would initially serve as first Vice Chairman of the Military Commission to familiarize himself with military affairs and build a support base in the PLA. He would later take over as Chairman. This policy was implemented for the first time with the appointment of Jiang Zemin as first Vice Chairman and subsequently as Chairman of the Military Commission. This was successfully repeated with his successor, Hu Jintao. Both leaders further strengthened the Party's already tight grip over the PLA to ensure that the military remained 'absolutely subordinate' to the Party and the Party General Secretary.

Successor generations of Chinese leaders inherited the ambition to 'recover' China's 'lost territories'. Modernization of the PLA was essential for realization of this ambition. The role of the PLA in implementation of national strategic and foreign policy was accordingly shaped. This was evident in the PLA doctrines as revised periodically. Though the US remained the prime source of threat and the PLA was being equipped to tackle it, by 2006 China had developed the doctrine of 'Winning short-duration Local Wars under Hi-tech Informatised Conditions'. The emphasis for the PLA was, therefore, to quickly 'win local wars' on its periphery. This doctrine suggested that China was preparing to, some time in the future, 'recover' its lost territories and areas of influence. Taiwan was for a while the primary focus. That focus expanded to actively include the South China Sea, described as a 'core national interest'. Modernisation of the PLA remained an unwavering central objective through the decades and was aimed at achieving this goal as well as acquiring the capability to deter, or delay, the US from assisting its allies.

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during the First Gulf War in 1991, and later the US actions in Kosovo and Afghanistan (2001) and the Second Gulf War (2003), jolted the Chinese into realizing how backward they were in comparison. These US military actions provided considerable material for study to Chinese strategists as evidenced by the plethora of articles analyzing these wars in authoritative Chinese military publications. Jiang Zemin ensured adequate funds for the PLA and annual double-digit hikes in the

defence budgets became the norm. This policy was continued by Hu Jintao as Chairman of the Military Commission.

Hu Jintao, however, has taken greater interest in the PLA's modernization than his predecessor. He has emphasized the importance of 'integrated joint operations' and, promptly after taking over as Military Commission Chairman, inducted the Commanders of the PLA Air Force, PLA Navy and Second Artillery as Members of the Central Military Commission. He has ensured that the growth in the defence budget, which has registered a double-digit percentage increase each year except one since 1993, has kept pace with the country's growing economy whose foreign currency reserves presently exceed US\$ 2.4 trillion. Conservative estimates peg China's current defence budget at around US\$ 90-100 billion.

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The PLA Navy for the first time ventured into the Indian Ocean on an anti-piracy mission and has, significantly, sustained this effort. It plans to formalise agreements with

Indian Ocean littoral countries for bases for its flotilla operating in the Indian Ocean. A vivid demonstration of Chinese assertiveness was the manner in which PLA Navy vessels confronted the US survey ship 'USNS Impeccable' in March 2009, described by US officials as the 'most serious' incident since that involving the EP-3 aircraft in 2001. Another incident occurred in June

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2009, when a Chinese submarine hit an underwater sonar array being towed by the destroyer 'USS John McCain'. This incident occurred in Subic Bay off the Philippines coast. The confrontations were intended to demonstrate the PLA Navy's capacity to defend China's territorial waters and willingness to confront the USA, if necessary, to safeguard its interests. They were also intended to clearly signal to Taiwan and other countries in the region, who have off-shore disputes with China, that they should not rely on US assistance. Coinciding with these incidents were the unpublicised clashes taking place between Chinese Navy vessels and Vietnamese craft since late 2007. China simultaneously began to prepare the legal basis for enforcing its maritime territorial claims in the South China Sea. These actions have aroused concern in Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines and other countries.

It is during this period that China adopted an assertive posture with India too. While border negotiations and official-level contacts between India and China continued, military pressure along the 4,057 kms long disputed India-China border increased as did the number of intrusions. China re-opened the hitherto settled issue of Sikkim and enhanced the profile of its territorial claim on Arunachal Pradesh. It initiated a policy of declining visas to residents of Arunachal Pradesh and compelled international institutions not to extend loans for development projects in that state. More recently, it raised the ante in Kashmir when it began issuing loose-leaf visas to residents of the state and later declined a visa to the Northern Army Commander on the plea that he commands troops in the 'disputed territory of J&K'.

Suggestion of military muscle in diplomacy was evident in China's reaction to the US-ROK joint military exercises in mid-2010. Chinese official media and military and strategic analysts accused the US of threatening China. China's official media and military publications, quite unusually, publicized a series of military exercises conducted by the PLA, Second Artillery and PLA Navy at this time. These reports pointed out that the PLA was preparing for any eventuality.

A relatively new element has been added to China's diplomatic posturing. This is the tendency of former, or serving, military officials to offer comments which appear to deviate from stated policy. A number of such officers are employed in military-affiliated think-tanks and hold

posts equated with military ranks. Had they not been given licence to speak they would have been punished. This particularly when the Party and the Party General Secretary, Hu Jintao, retain such a tight grip on the PLA. No reports have been noticed to suggest that any punishments have been awarded, but some of them are known to have received promotions.

As military modernization began to show results China's leadership became more confident. An example was the remark in May 2009 by a senior PLA Navy officer to US Admiral Keating. The officer suggested: 'as we develop our aircraft carriers why don't we reach an agreement, you and I. You take Hawaii East, we'll take Hawaii West and the Indian Ocean. We'll share information and we'll save you all the trouble of developing your naval forces west of Hawaii'.

Meanwhile, Hu Jintao allowed Chinese military and civilian strategists the freedom to continue redefining the country's strategic frontiers more boldly. These Chinese strategists began describing it as: 'China's entire continental shelf, the north Pacific contiguous to Russia and Japan, the Bohai Gulf, the Taiwan Strait, the East China Sea and even west-ward through the Malacca Strait into the Indian Ocean'. By the 1990s some strategists had stretched the definition to include the Persian Gulf. Huang Kunlun, a military commentator, later further expanded this by articulating the 'theory of boundless national interests'. He clarified this to mean: 'wherever our national interests have extended, so will the mission of our armed forces'. Maps depicting China's so-called traditional sphere of influence also remain in circulation in China and include areas well beyond the newly defined strategic frontiers.

There are other instances where China has assertively pushed its self-interest disregarding the articulated valid concerns of other nations. One example is that of rare earth exports to Japan. A more serious issue that impacts on the livelihoods of millions of people relates to the construction of dams on the upper Mekong River thereby reducing water flows downstream. Another serious issue having a similar impact and affecting India is the proposed diversion of the Brahmaputra river waters to China's arid, but populated, north.

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factors including China's consistent double-digit economic growth over three decades, military might and ensuing international adulation. In contrast, Chinese analysts assessed that the US military was over-stretched consequent to being embroiled in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and that the world's major economies, especially the US, had been considerably weakened because of the deleterious effects of the international economic crisis.

Chinese leaders, therefore, perceived the current time as opportune for China to make its bid for pre-eminence in the broader Asia-Pacific region. Its success in coercing European countries to resile from long-held positions on contentious issues, like Human Rights and Tibet, encouraged Beijing. China's assessment seemed to have been substantiated when Hillary Clinton, during her first visit to Beijing as US Secretary of State, failed to mention Human Rights, Tibet and Democracy in meetings with Chinese leaders. Obama's declining to meet the Dalai Lama during his visit to Washington was additional confirmation of apparent American weakness. In this backdrop the joint statements issued after the two summit meetings between Hu Jintao and Obama, in September and November 2009 respectively, took on greater significance for the Chinese. They assumed that the US was willing to let China exercise the role of regional hegemon while retaining for itself the mantle of global superpower.

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indicative of US intention to re-enter the Asia-Pacific and maintain its dominance. US President Obama's speech recently in the Indian Parliament would have amply reinforced this assessment. The public offer of support by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Japan in the current dispute with China over the Senkaku, or Diaoyu, islands together with US overtures to Vietnam, Indonesia and South Korea have not gone unnoticed. Commentaries in the official Chinese media have described these as attempts at 'containment' of China and specifically warned India, Japan, Vietnam and Indonesia against falling into USA's trap.

There is debate underway in China, though, as to whether discarding Deng Xiaoping's policy of *taoguang*

yanghui, or 'lie low, bide your time', was premature. Some articles, interestingly, occasionally appear in the Peoples' Daily and Guangming Daily and these also explore the possibility of Beijing reverting to its earlier policy. A few Chinese commentators have candidly acknowledged that China's policy of 'peaceful rise', modified to 'peaceful development', had apparently not found many takers. They recommend that Beijing reverts to its earlier policy and bides its time.

Whether and how China's leadership will try to retrieve its position and refurbish the image it had so assiduously cultivated earlier is unclear, but it will not be easy. In fact, there are no indications yet to suggest a reversal in policy in which Hu Jintao's probable successor, Xi Jinping, would have been involved.



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