



Article

The Assertive China Narrative: Why It Is Wrong and How So Many Still Bought into It

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Abstract

Dissenting assaults on the conventional wisdom that China's foreign policy became more 'assertive' in 2009–2010 have intensified. In this article I develop this revisionist critique in three ways. First, to make the most valid and cumulative assessment of the accuracy of the 'assertive China narrative' to date, I conceptualise its key empirical claim as a case of the general phenomenon of 'foreign policy change'. Second, based on this framework, I present a range of new empirical evidence that, taken as a whole, strongly challenges the notion of a new Chinese assertiveness. Third, since academic China and Asia experts played a pivotal role in creating the narrative, I raise a comprehensive explanation of why a great many scholars so strikingly went along with the flawed idea.

Introduction

The notion that China's foreign policy had suddenly become more 'assertive' appeared in 2009, and soon turned into conventional wisdom. The following year, in which China publicly sparred with the United States, Japan, and South Korea, can be seen as the crescendo of this supposed new assertiveness, and has been described as

China and its People's Liberation Army's 'year of living arrogantly'.¹ Widespread acceptance of this 'assertive China narrative' has spurred a lively and ongoing discussion on the causes of China's alleged foreign policy change (FPC).² At the same time, a dissenting smaller body of research has cast doubt on the accuracy of some of the narrative's central claims, albeit without visibly shaking the mainstream's acceptance of it.³ More recently, a timely article by Alastair Iain Johnston put the key empirical assertion of the narrative to a systematic test.⁴ Johnston's study is an important step in the right direction, but it stops short of providing a complete assessment of the accuracy of the assertiveness argument, as will be shown below.

The article follows up on this revisionist theme in three ways. First, to evaluate the accuracy of the narrative more precisely, and to make the assessment cumulative, I conceptualise its key empirical claim as a case of the general phenomenon of 'foreign policy change'. Second, based on this framework, I present a broad array of new empirical evidence that in sum strongly challenges the narrative. Third, I investigate why the narrative remains so popular. Not only journalists, media pundits, and bloggers, but also academics helped in creating the assertiveness idea. Moreover, since academic China and Asia experts were probably indispensable to turning the assertiveness idea into a 'social fact',⁵ I offer a comprehensive explanation, divided into six micro-level causal mechanisms, of why so many scholars bought into the flawed idea. The narrative continues to inform understandings of recent great power politics in East Asia and evaluation of theories of behavioural change in China and other rising powers. I discuss these implications in the final section.

The assertiveness attributed to China is not of the benign variety—where a state proactively tackles common problems in a positive, cooperative fashion—but indicates a high-handed, often aggressive approach.⁶ Johnston defines the behaviour

¹ Ralph Cossa and Brad Glosserman, 'Return to Asia: It's Not (All) About China', *PacNet*, No. 7 (2012).

² For three alternative classifications of this debate see Michael D. Swaine, 'Perceptions of an Assertive China', *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 35 (2010), pp. 2–3; Alastair Iain Johnston, 'How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?', *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (2013), pp. 35–45; and Andrew Scobell and Scott W. Harold, 'An "Assertive" China? Insights from Interviews', *Asian Security*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2013), pp. 112–113.

³ Yan Xuetong, 'The Instability of China-US Relations', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (2010), pp. 263–92; Michael D. Swaine, 'China's Assertive Behaviour: Part One: On "Core Interests"', *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 34 (2010); Michael D. Swaine and M. Taylor Fravel, 'China's Assertive Behaviour: Part Two, The Maritime Periphery', *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 35 (2011); Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Stability and Instability in Sino-US Relations: A Response to Yan Xuetong's Superficial Friendship Theory', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 4, No.1 (2011), pp. 5–29.

⁴ Johnston, 'How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?'

⁵ John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

⁶ For a typology of assertiveness see Dingding Chen and Xiaoyu Pu, 'Correspondence: Debating China's Assertiveness', forthcoming in *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (2013/14).

ascribed to China as 'a form of assertive diplomacy that explicitly threatens to impose costs on another actor that are clearly higher than before'.⁷ This definition is a good start, but does not fully cover the range of actions attributed to a newly assertive China. For example, China's reluctance to criticise North Korea after the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 was seen as assertive not because China imposed higher costs on South Korea by condoning the violence (it did not), but because it opposed the US line of wanting to put further pressure on North Korea. Similarly, few people described China's 2011 tacit acceptance of the NATO-led intervention in Libya as assertive, even though it is arguable that Beijing's non-veto in the United Nations Security Council was a new policy that clearly imposed higher costs on the Gaddafi government.⁸ Michael Swaine is thus correct in pointing out that identifying a stronger anti-Western or anti-US edge in China's foreign policy is central to the narrative.⁹ Bearing this in mind, I define assertiveness in contemporary Chinese foreign policy as the tendency to achieve goals and resolve common problems involving the United States and its allies and partners by confrontational, as opposed to diplomatic, means.¹⁰ The assertiveness narrative argues that such policies intensified to a degree in 2009–2010 that entailed a departure from the low-profile approach (*taoguangyan-ghui*) of the post-Mao era,¹¹ or at least from the renewed push for reassurance of the late 1990s.¹² The foreign policy shift is said to have occurred at a fundamental policy-making level, thereby generating simultaneous changes in several policy areas. Moreover, China's new assertiveness is described as proactive in that it was not a response to the changed policies of other actors.¹³

⁷ Johnston, 'How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?', p. 10.

⁸ For a different reading of China's non-veto see Yun Sun, 'China's Acquiescence on UNSCR 1973: No Big Deal', *PacNet*, No. 20 (2011).

⁹ Swaine, 'Perceptions of an Assertive China', p. 2.

¹⁰ This definition can be modified to study assertiveness by rising powers in general by replacing the United States with the relevant global or regional hegemon.

¹¹ Dingding Chen and Jianwei Wang, 'Lying Low No More?: China's New Thinking on the *Tao Guang Yang Hui* Strategy', *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2011), p. 196.

¹² On the late 1990s reassurance push see Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), chapter 6.

¹³ Naturally, not everyone talking about a new Chinese assertiveness means the exact same thing. There is a lot of variety in the discourse, and many observers offer very nuanced observations and explanations of China's behaviour. Chen and Pu provide a helpful distinction between 'offensive', 'defensive', and 'constructive' varieties of assertiveness in Chen and Pu, 'Correspondence. Based on this typology, we can conclude that the narrative primarily identifies an 'offensive assertiveness'. 'Constructive assertiveness', on its part, signifies increased support for collectively solving common problems, and is not part of the narrative. 'Defensive assertiveness', while being confrontational, means that China reacts to a changed behaviour of others, and is thus not covered by my definition. However, all arguments explaining a new assertiveness by factors internal to China belong in the narrative (no matter if the ultimate cause is taken to be domestic, such as growing nationalism, or related to China's position in the international

China's New Assertiveness as FPC

We can make a more valid assessment of the accuracy of the narrative by conceptualising its key empirical claim as representing a comprehensive Chinese 'FPC'.¹⁴ 'Policy' is here taken to mean 'an agent's line of action with regard to an object'. 'Line of action', moreover, signifies that 'the agent does alpha whenever situation beta occurs'.¹⁵ The 'agent' is here comprised of the branches of the Chinese government that are directly involved in relations with counterparts in foreign states and international organisations. A foreign policy 'act' may be spoken, such as a remark by a Foreign Ministry spokesperson, non-spoken, such as a non-disclosed attack by a naval vessel, or a combination of the two, such as an official economic sanction. A FPC goes beyond ordinary policy fluctuations and means that a state's foreign policy apparatus routinely starts to handle similar situations differently. A state facing an extraordinary situation often reacts in extraordinary ways, but this is not in itself a FPC. For example, the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was probably not a FPC because, judging by the oft-displayed American eagerness to intervene militarily in foreign countries without even having been attacked, previous administrations would with near certainty have responded to the attacks on the United States of September 11 2001 in a similar way.¹⁶ An isolated act is only a FPC if it can plausibly be argued that the state in question would have acted differently had it earlier found itself in an analogous situation.¹⁷ This definition, in addition to allow us to avoid confusing all unusual acts with policy change, also comes with an system). In short, even if an argument describes China as reacting to a tougher behaviour of others, if an independent variable is located within China, it also points to a *Chinese* foreign policy change.

¹⁴ It is my aim that most, if not all, proponents of the assertiveness idea should be able to accept this definition. On foreign policy change see Kjell Goldmann, *Change and Stability in Foreign Policy: the Problems and Possibilities of Détente* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Jerel A. Rosati, Martin W. Sampson, III, and Joe D. Hagan, 'The Study of Change in Foreign Policy', in Jerel A. Rosati, et al., eds., *Foreign Policy Restructuring: How Governments Respond to Global Change* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994); Jakob Gustavsson, 'How Should We Study Foreign Policy Change?', *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1999), pp. 73–95; David A. Welch, *Painful Choices: A Theory of Foreign Policy Change* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005); Linus Hagström and Jon Williamsson, "'Remilitarization," Really? Assessing Change in Japanese Foreign Security Policy', *Asian Security*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2009), pp. 242–72; and Yi Edward Yang, 'Leaders' Conceptual Complexity and Foreign Policy Change: Comparing the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush Foreign Policies toward China', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (2010), pp. 415–46.

¹⁵ Goldmann, *Change and Stability in Foreign Policy*, p. 9.

¹⁶ However, the terrorist attacks might have caused other changes in US foreign policy.

¹⁷ One implication of this definition of FPC is that although high-level foreign policy changes do happen, they are rare. This makes perfect sense. For a theoretical explanation of the pervasiveness of inertia in international relations see Ted Hopf, 'The Logic of Habit in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (2010), pp. 539–61.

important policy-relevant benefit. A policy change means that a state reacts differently to the same input, which should prompt sensible actors to adjust their policies towards the state in question. At the same time, the need for policy adjustments naturally decreases if the state can be expected to react similarly to the same input.

In the present case, a FPC would mean that China had started acting more assertively when faced with objectively similar, although not necessarily subjectively similar, situations—since changes in China's perceptions, worldview or identity would be one of the possible explanations for the change.¹⁸ Detailed cross-temporal comparisons with earlier relevant cases are thus a necessary tool for assessing FPC. In practical terms, a research strategy would compare China's behaviour in each allegedly assertive case in 2009–2010 with instances in the past when China faced similar circumstances.¹⁹ To find comparable cases is not too difficult, since most of the well-published rows in 2009–2010 are examples of long-running issues of contention between China and the outside world. In instances where comparable cases are absent, counterfactual reasoning is required.²⁰

The belief in a new Chinese assertiveness might lead other actors to harden their China policies, which in turn could produce an assertive response from Beijing, regardless of whether a policy change existed in the first place. The study therefore needs a clear temporal end-point to minimise the risk of mixing up the causal relationships between different variables. Since most proponents of the argument agree that China's new stance softened somewhat in 2011, it seems reasonable to exclude actions that took place after 2010. The cases against which I compare China's 2009–2010 policy come from any time in the post-Mao period. Wherever possible, however, I have restricted my analysis to the decade before 2009, after China's renewed push for reassurance in the late 1990s.

Charles Hermann's renowned four-degree taxonomy allows us to classify FPC. *Adjustment change* describes quantitative changes in the level of effort and/or in the scope of recipients; *programme change* signifies qualitative change, involving new instruments of statecraft, in the methods or means by which a goal or problem is

¹⁸ The expectations of the outside world might change, which could make a state's actions appear more assertive than before. However, then we are talking about the perception of policy change of other actors, and not a policy change by the state in question.

¹⁹ Whether China's foreign policy is assertive compared to other countries is not pertinent to our investigation.

²⁰ Let us say that we find a case where China clearly acts in an unprecedented way. However, through comparison with the most similar earlier cases and counterfactual analysis we are able to conclude that China likely would have done the same thing earlier if faced with an analogous situation. Still, why should we dismiss it as a case of FPC? After all, it is an unprecedented act and thus a 'change'. The reason is that descriptive studies of FPC are useful for IR primarily because they inform theories of behavioural change. To merely show that an act is unprecedented is not valid evidence for such theories. That is why the current definition of FPC is superior.

addressed; a *problem/goal change* is a change in the problem or goal of the foreign policy and *international orientation change* entails a complete redirection of the state's approach to international affairs.²¹ Since China's alleged new assertiveness is described as incompatible with the goals of the reassurance policy, it is clearly more far-reaching than merely an *adjustment* or *programme change*. Some observers go so far as to claim that China was, in a revisionist manner, dismissing the US-led world order, so making it an *international orientation change*.²² The general understanding, however, seems to be that the change fell short of this. The mainstream version thus identifies a *problem/goal change*. China went from stressing amiable relations with the United States, the West and its regional neighbours to single-mindedly pursuing its own narrow interests, with scant regard for the destabilising consequences.

On the whole, Johnston provides an impressively meticulous and nuanced investigation of the factual basis of the narrative. Nonetheless, his study is not free of problems. First, a number of the cases lack a comparative angle, which weakens the main thesis of Chinese foreign policy continuity in 2009–2010. For example, even though Johnston clearly demonstrates that China's reaction to Japan's detention of a trawler captain in 2010 was not as harsh as some people have claimed, this does not disprove the argument that it represents a new assertiveness. Second, Johnston's study does not include a number of the cases most frequently presented as proof of the new assertiveness. This is of course understandable, given space limitations. Nonetheless, it leaves the door open to the suggestion that the missing issues provide stronger support for the narrative. In short, while Johnston's article is the most powerful critique of the narrative thus far, it does not debunk it entirely. By including more cases and following the above outlined standard for assessing FPC, this study adds the final touches to a thorough evaluation of the accuracy of the assertiveness narrative. Furthermore, there is strong reason to believe that China and Asia scholars had a major role in transforming the flawed assertiveness argument into a widely accepted social fact. Unfortunately, however, Johnston's analysis lets scholars off the hook by presenting the narrative as a media meme. In the second part of the analysis I will return to this issue by raising an attempt at a comprehensive explanation of why so many leading academics accept a false argument as true.

²¹ Charles F. Hermann, 'Changing Course: When Governments Choose to Redirect Foreign Policy', *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1990), pp. 3–21. Hermann's FPC framework is not the only available choice. It has the great advantage, however, of allowing accessible and generalizable descriptive, not explanatory, assessments.

²² Elizabeth C. Economy, 'The Game Changer: Coping With China's Foreign Policy Revolution', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 89, No.6 (2010); Gilbert Rozman, 'Chinese National Identity and Its Implications for International Relations in East Asia', *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2011), p. 87.

Table 1. Assessments on the Cases in Alastair Iain Johnston 2013

Cases in Alastair Iain Johnston 2013	The Author's Assessment
Taiwan arms sales, January 2010	Yes, adjustment change
The South China Sea as a 'core interest', March 2010	No
The Dalai Lama's visit to the United States, February 2010	No
Copenhagen UN conference on climate change, December 2009	No
Response to US deployment of carrier to the Yellow Sea, July 2010	Indeterminate
Response to North Korea shelling Yeonpyeong Island, November 2010	Indeterminate
Diaoyu/Senkaku incident, September 2010	Indeterminate

Table 1 applies Johnston's results to the present framework.

Only one of his cases constitutes a clear policy change,²³ while three cases clearly do not.²⁴ A further three cases produced indeterminate results due to the lack of cross-temporal comparisons. In the following section I add the necessary data to assess these three cases as well as that of the Copenhagen climate change talks, for reasons that are explained below. In addition, I include four widespread allegations of new Chinese assertiveness that are absent from Johnston's study: the 2009 essay by the governor of the central bank, Zhou Xiaochuan, on the role of the US dollar; the response to the sinking of the *Cheonan* in 2010; the reaction to Liu Xiaobo's Nobel Peace Prize in 2010 and China's general policy on the South China Sea (SCS).²⁵ This exercise allows a more exact assessment of the validity of the claim of the emergence of a new Chinese assertiveness in 2009–2010. It also strengthens the reliability of the results, which facilitates further discussion of change and continuity in the foreign policies of China and other rising powers.

²³ In fact, all the US companies singled out for sanctions for involvement in the Taiwan arms deal in 2010 expanded their business operations in China in the ensuing two quarters. 'Chinese Reactions to Taiwan Arms Sales', *US-Taiwan Business Council: Project 2049 Institute*, 2012, p. 26.

²⁴ Johnston explains China's milder criticism—'serious interference' (*yanzhong ganshe*)—of the Obama–Dalai Lama meeting in 2010, than of the Bush–Dalai Lama meeting in 2007—'crude interference' (*cubao ganshe*)—as a recognition of Obama's decision to postpone the meeting until after the US–China summit in November 2009. However, the stronger statement in 2007 was primarily directed against the US Congress for awarding the Dalai Lama its prestigious gold medal. Thus, even though China's reaction in 2010 was clearly not more assertive than before, whether this also meant 'reduced assertiveness', as Johnston argues, is debatable.

²⁵ Admittedly, there might be other possible instances of a new assertiveness in these years, for example, the perceived cold treatment given to US President Barack Obama during his state visit to Beijing in November 2009. Space limitations put constraints on the number of examined incidents, however, so I have picked my cases due to their prevalence in the assertiveness discourse, intuitive persuasiveness, and commonly perceived importance in the relations between China and other countries.

Testing Claims of New Chinese Assertiveness

This section complements four of Johnston's indeterminate cases and investigates four further incidents of China's alleged new assertiveness in 2009–2010. Examples of policy change are scarce, which amounts to a strong case against the narrative. The issue under scrutiny is FPC. The argument to be tested is thus not whether or not China in 2009–2010 performed assertive acts, that is, it was 'assertive', but whether or not it acted more assertively than it would have done before 2009–2010, that is, it became 'more assertive'. The cases differ in length due to the level of detail required to make a clear assessment.

The Climate Change Talks in Copenhagen (December 2009)

China's negotiating position at the 15th session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen in December 2009 (COP15) can probably not be described as a policy change. As Johnston points out, China simply reiterated long-held positions on its climate diplomacy.²⁶ Moreover, the conference ended with China and the United States reaching a deal, something that flies in the face of how China's new assertiveness is generally understood. Nonetheless, much of the media reporting from Copenhagen highlighted a new arrogance and swagger in China's attitude, without specifically identifying a change in its negotiating position *per se*. This reporting arguably helped to form the popular image of China's behaviour at the talks, and the idea was picked up in subsequent academic analysis. As one of the earlier instances of alleged new assertiveness, the portrayal of an overconfident and impudent China at one of the most high-profile international conferences in years likely played a sizeable role in cementing the wider narrative. More than any other issue, the absence of Prime Minister Wen Jiabao from the final scheduled negotiations among the 20 key delegations on December 18 was described as an intentional insult to the United States and other countries.²⁷

The reasons for Wen's non-attendance have never been officially disclosed. There are at least two plausible alternatives to understanding it as a deliberate snub.

²⁶ Johnston, 'How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?', p. 14. See also Peter Christoff, 'Cold Climate in Copenhagen: China and the United States at COP15', *Environmental Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (2010), pp. 646–7.

²⁷ Daniel Bodansky, 'The Copenhagen Climate Change Conference: A Postmortem', *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 104, No. 2 (2010), p. 240; Tobias Rapp, Christian Schwägerl and Gerald Traufetter, 'The Copenhagen Protocol: How China and India Sabotaged the UN Climate Summit', *Spiegel Online*, May 5, 2010, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0151869286100.html>; Mark Lynas, 'How Do I Know China Wrecked the Copenhagen Deal? I Was in the Room', *The Guardian*, December 22, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/dec/22/copenhagen-climate-change-mark-lynas>.

First, his absence might have been a protest against perceived cold-shouldering. China's ambassador for climate change Yu Qingtai told the media that Wen stayed away because China had not received an invitation to the meeting.²⁸ Let us suppose that China was not invited—perhaps as a result of confusion in the communications between the organiser and the Chinese delegation—and that Wen therefore decided to send a more junior official in his place. Such a move might be seen as a petty over-reaction, but it would hardly indicate a confrontational attitude. Second, Wen might temporarily have lacked a mandate to negotiate on China's behalf.²⁹ The need to secure backing from the other members of the politburo standing committee might possibly have complicated his negotiating position.³⁰ *Newsweek* cites an unnamed official's claim that Wen lacked the authority to make decisions at the December 18 meeting, and thus stayed away to avoid embarrassment.³¹

To be clear, I do not argue that these two hypotheses are more likely than the insult explanation. My point is merely to suggest that the lack of conclusive evidence for the claim that Wen's no-show was a deliberate snub, together with other plausible explanations, makes it difficult to use it as evidence of a more assertive attitude.

Result: No evidence of policy change.

Response to the US Deployment of an Aircraft Carrier to the Yellow Sea (June 2010)

Johnston problematizes the common understanding in the West of China's opposition to the planned deployment in the summer of 2010 of a US aircraft carrier to the Yellow Sea.³² Yet he does not discuss the specific nature of the deployment, and thus shies away from putting the situation that China faced in an historical context. The specific argument in favour of a policy change is that China's 2010 response stands out because it had not protested against earlier carrier operations in the

²⁸ John Garnaut, 'Don't Push Us, China Warns Rich Countries', January 11, 2010, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, <http://www.smh.com.au/environment/climate-change/dont-push-us-china-warns-rich-countries-20100110-m0th.html>.

²⁹ Christoff, 'Cold Climate in Copenhagen', pp. 648–9.

³⁰ Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), p. 64.

³¹ Rana Foroohar, 'It's China's World We're Just Living in It: The Middle Kingdom Rewrites Rules on Trade, Technology, Currency, Climate – You Name It', *Newsweek*, March, 11 2010, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2010/03/11/it-s-china-s-world-we-re-just-living-in-it.html>; See also Jonathan Watts, 'Speculation Over Change in Role for Chinese Climate Negotiator', *The Guardian*, January 5, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2010/jan/05/he-yafei-china-climate-negotiator>.

³² Johnston, 'How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?', pp. 20–1.

Yellow Sea.³³ It is not at all clear, however, that a cross-temporal comparison testifies to policy change.

The only recent US carrier deployment to the area took place during a joint US–South Korea naval exercise in October 2009.³⁴ This exercise was on a much smaller scale than that planned for 2010.³⁵ In addition, while it is true that China did not protest in 2009, this seems to have been the first time since October 1994 that a US carrier entered the Yellow Sea which, in turn, might have been the first carrier deployment to the area since the Korean War.³⁶ The 1994 deployment resulted in a serious face-off with a Chinese submarine, after which China reportedly informed a US military official that ‘China’s orders will be to shoot to kill’ should such a situation arise in future.³⁷ Before 2009, the presence of US aircraft carriers in

³³ Swaine and Fravel, ‘China’s Assertive Behaviour’, p. 12; James Manicom, ‘Beyond Boundary Disputes: Understanding the Nature of China’s Challenge to Maritime East Asia’, *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 3/4 (2010), p. 50; Ralph A. Cossa, ‘China’s Expanding “Coastal Waters”’, *PacNet*, No. 37 (2010).

³⁴ On the 2009 exercise see Department of the Navy, United States of America, ‘GW CSG Completes Bilateral Exercise with ROK Navy’, October 19, 2009, http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=49074.

³⁵ In 2010, the joint US–South Korea exercise ‘Invisible Spirit’, which eventually took place in the Sea of Japan, included 20 ships, 200 aircraft, and 8,000 military personnel. Chico Harlan, ‘South Korea and US Send Message to North Korea with Drills in Sea of Japan’, *The Washington Post*, July 26, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/25/AR2010072500754.html>. Chinese media described this as the largest US–South Korea naval exercise since 1976. ‘Jujiao yuandong: Mei-Han 34 nian lai zuida guimo junyan kaimo’ (‘Focusing on the Far East: Largest US–ROK Military Exercise in 34 Years Begins’), *Liaowang zhongguo* (*Outlook China*), No. 104, http://www.outlookchina.net/template/news_page.asp?id=3443. For the 2009 exercise, the United States only dispatched four ships. Correspondence with the Commander, US Seventh Fleet. I have not been able to get information on how many ships South Korea dispatched.

³⁶ US Admiral Ronald Zlotoper told media in 1994, ‘in the past, we haven’t had a carrier battle group presence in this region’. Jim Mann and Art Pin, ‘Faceoff Between US Ship, Chinese Sub Is Revealed: Military: October Incident in Yellow Sea Highlights Growing Chance of Naval Conflict Beijing Sounds Warning’, *Los Angeles Times*, December 14, 1994, http://articles.latimes.com/1994-12-14/news/mn-8896_1_kitty-hawk. However, US carriers were active in the Yellow Sea during the Korean War, but have they since been dispatched to the area, except in 1994 and 2009? I have consulted official ship histories of the relevant carriers (Midway, Independence, Kitty Hawk and George Washington) on the website of the Naval History and Heritage Command, <http://www.history.navy.mil/shiphist/index.htm>. However, the histories are missing for most years. I have therefore also directed the above question to the Naval History and Heritage Command, the Commander, US Pacific Fleet, and the Commander, US Seventh Fleet, but, other than the 1994 deployment, they have not been able to confirm any carrier deployment to the area between the Korean War period and 2009. Nor have they been able to confirm that a deployment did not take place, however, so my argument comes with an important caveat.

³⁷ Mann and Pin, ‘Faceoff Between US Ship, Chinese Sub Is Revealed’.

the Yellow Sea had probably not been established practice since at least the mid-1990s, and possibly since the mid-1950s. Seeing China's response to the 2010 deployment as a policy change seems to rely on the assumption that the 2009 deployment had set a new, mutually accepted precedent; that is, it entails an interpretation of China's absence of protest in 2009 as equivalent to accepting the US's deployment of aircraft carriers to the Yellow Sea on a regular basis. This argument is highly dubious.

Result: No evidence of policy change.

The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Incident (September 2010)

Beijing's response to the detention of the captain of a Chinese fishing trawler, who had been accused of ramming two Japanese coastguard vessels in September 2010, has been described as a hard-line policy shift,³⁸ and even as 'the most important indicator of a more assertive foreign policy'.³⁹ Previous research has to some degree modified this view by controlling for exaggerated or unverified reporting of aspects of China's response, including the allegation that sanctions were imposed on the export of rare earth metals,⁴⁰ the detention of four Japanese citizens who entered a restricted military zone in Hebei province,⁴¹ and the demand for compensation after the captain was released.⁴² Another possible misrepresentation concerns the summoning by state councillor Dai Bingguo of Ambassador Niwa Uichirō in the early hours of September 12.⁴³ This apparent breach of diplomatic protocol has been widely cited as part of China's tough response.⁴⁴ Current Prime Minister Abe

³⁸ Yoshihide Soeya, 'Fishing for Lessons: The Latest China-Japan Rift', *Global Asia Forum*, 2010, http://www.globalasia.org/Global_Asia_Forum/Fishing_For_Lessons_The_Latest_China_Japan_Rift.html?w14soeya/; Wang Jisi, 'China's Search for a Grand Strategy: A Rising Great Power Finds Its Way', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (2011), p. 68; Chen and Wang, 'Lying Low No More?', p. 203; Richard Katz, 'Mutual Assured Production: Why Trade Will Limit Conflict Between China and Japan', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (2013), p. 19; Zhao Suisheng, 'Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited: The Strident Turn', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 22, No. 82 (2013), p. 547; Lowell Dittmer, 'Asia in 2010: Continent Ascendant,' *Asian Survey*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (2011), p. 3.

³⁹ Christopher R. Hughes, 'Reclassifying Chinese Nationalism: The Geopolitik Turn', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 20, No. 71 (2011), p. 614.

⁴⁰ Hagström, "'Power Shift" in East Asia?', pp. 282–3; Johnston, 'How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?', pp. 23–6.

⁴¹ Hagström, "'Power Shift" in East Asia?', p. 281.

⁴² Johnston, 'How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?', p. 23.

⁴³ 'China Increases Pressure on Japan Over Ship Collision', *Japan Times*, September 13, 2010.

⁴⁴ Hagström, "'Power Shift" in East Asia?', p. 272; Mochizuki, 'China Over-reached', p. 6; Swaine and Fravel, 'China's Assertive Behaviour', footnote 44; Yves Tiberghien, 'The Diaoyu Crisis of 2010: Domestic Games and Diplomatic Conflict', *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 3/4 (2010), p. 74.

Shinzo's advisor Iijima Isao, however, claims that individuals in Japan's foreign ministry deliberately distorted the story to embarrass Niwa as part of ongoing ministry infighting. According to Iijima, China's foreign ministry contacted the embassy at 6 p.m., summoning Niwa to a meeting two hours later. However, the timing was not convenient for the ambassador, and the parties were not able to reschedule the meeting any time earlier than midnight.⁴⁵ Revisiting these events to some degree moderates our understanding of the intensity of China's response to the detention. The fact remains, however, that the Chinese reaction *was* assertive—but was it more assertive than could be expected in the light of China's behaviour during earlier disputes? A direct comparison with the most similar previous incident, which took place in 2004, suggests not.

To begin with, China, as the 'challenger' in the dispute, would naturally strive to alter the status quo in its favour. At the same time, preventing the Japanese side from doing likewise through exercise of actual sovereignty is another key Chinese priority. Active dispute management by both parties, including Japan's reluctance to solidify its administration through practical measures, previously helped to prevent the conflict escalating.⁴⁶ As many observers have pointed out, China probably understood Japan's initial resolve to prosecute the captain in 2010 as a clear break with the status quo.⁴⁷

The only precedent for 'Japan' detaining Chinese citizens in the area and pursuing the issue according to its domestic law took place in 2004. When, on the morning of March 24, seven Chinese nationalist activists landed on the largest of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, they were arrested on suspicion of illegally entering Japanese territory.⁴⁸ Just as in 2010, the Japanese government initially declared

⁴⁵ 'Gaimushō nimajita no giman "ryōdomondai ha sonzaisuru" to iūnshiki ha itsukieta no ka', ('The Deceit of the Foreign Ministry's Double-dealing When Did the Understanding that "A Territorial Dispute Exits" Disappear?'), *AERA*, October 8, 2012, p. 66.

⁴⁶ Linus Hagström, "'Quiet Power": Japan's China Policy in regard to the Pinnacle Islands', *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2005), pp. 159–88; M. Taylor Fravel, 'Explaining Stability in the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands Dispute', in Gerald Curtis, Kokubun Ryosei, Wang Jisi, eds., *Getting the Triangle Straight: Managing China-Japan-US Relations* (Tokyo: Japan Centre for International Exchange, 2010) pp. 144–5, 155–6.

⁴⁷ Swaine and Fravel, 'China's Assertive Behaviour', p. 9; Mochizuki, 'China Over-reached', p. 5; Hagström, "'Power Shift" in East Asia?', pp. 284–5; Morimoto Satoshi, *Nihon no setogijiwa: Higashi-ajiasaidai no kikinininon ha ikinokoreruka* (*Japan's Critical Moment: Can Japan Survive East Asia's Biggest Crisis?*) (Tokyo: Jitsugyo no Nihon Sha, 2011), p. 154; Johnston, 'How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?', p. 22; Hiroshi Matsubara, 'China-Watcher Yabuki Says Senkakus Are a Diplomatic Mistake by Japan', *The Asahi Shimbun*, December 12, 2012, http://ajw.asahi.com/article/forum/security_and_territorial_issues/AJ201212120001.

⁴⁸ 'Japan Grills Isle Intruders: China Demands Their Release', *The Japan Times*, March 26 2004, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2004/03/26/news/japan-grills-isle-intruders-china-demands-their-release/#.UXZ5xIJCNdA>. In addition to their alleged illegal entry, the activists were reported to have damaged a Shinto shrine on the island, which led the Okinawan prefectural

that the issue would be handled according to domestic law.⁴⁹ However, the situation quickly altered and, on the afternoon of March 26, the activists were handed over to the immigration authorities and later released. The local prosecutor's office apparently took the decision as a result of the direct intervention of Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō, who publicly stated that he had instructed the relevant authorities to handle the issue in such a way as to avoid negatively influencing Japan's relationship with China.⁵⁰ The 2004 incident is thus only really comparable by virtue of the initial two-day period it took the Japanese government to intervene and set the activists free. Yet, nothing in China's reaction during the first two days of the crisis in 2010 seems to have gone beyond that in 2004. To start with, China's demand in 2004 was identical with that in 2010: the immediate and unconditional release of all those arrested. China's open diplomatic measures in the first two days were also more or less interchangeable, consisting in protests lodged with Japan's foreign ministry by China's diplomatic mission, repetition of the demand at foreign ministry press conferences, and daily summoning of the head of Japan's embassy to meetings with deputy minister-level officials at the foreign ministry.⁵¹

China's threats to Japan over issues related to their territorial disputes are a regular occurrence—one study counts 26 public threats between 1978 and 2008.⁵² China publicly threatened or warned Japan in both our cases. In fact, during the first two days the use of this particular pressure tactic was slightly more restrained in 2010 than in 2004. From September 7–9 2010, the only public threat was made on September 7, when China's diplomatic mission in Japan lodged a 'solemn representation' (*yanzheng jiaoshe*) with the Japanese foreign ministry and demanded its citizens' immediate release in order to 'avoid a further escalation of the situation' (*bimian shitai jinyibu shengji*).⁵³ In 2004, China's ambassador lodged a 'solemn representation' on March 24, making clear that from then on Japan would bear full

police to file charges of suspicion of property damage. 'Hōshin kyūten, tomadou genba chūgoku-jin senkaku jōriku jiken de 7 nin kyōsei sōkan' ('Sudden Change of Policy, Confusion at the Scene: Forced Deportation of the Seven Chinese in the Senkaku Landing Affair'), *Asahi Shimbun*, morning ed., March 27, 2004, p. 4.

⁴⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 'Press Conference by the Press Secretary of MOFA, March 26, 2004, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/press/2004/3/0326.html#3>.

⁵⁰ 'Sudden Change of Policy, Confusion at the Scene'.

⁵¹ This comparison is based on information from the homepage of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, and the electronic archives of *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*) and *Asahi Shimbun*.

⁵² Krista E. Wiegand, 'China's Strategy in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Dispute: Issue Linkage and Coercive Diplomacy', *Asian Security*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2009), pp. 170–93.

⁵³ Yu Qing, 'Jiu Rifang zai Diaoyudao haiyu zhuakou wo yumin yuchuan: Zhongfang xiang Rifang tichu yanzheng jiaoshe' ('Regarding Japan Arresting Chinese Fishermen in the Diaoyu Islands Sea Area: China Lodges a Solemn Representation to Japan'), *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*), September 9, 2010, p. 3.

responsibility for any further consequences.⁵⁴ In 2004 China also made threats to Japan's chargé d'affaires in Beijing, using somewhat more explicit language than in 2010. On March 24, vice foreign minister Zhang Yesui urged Japan to release the activists immediately, as failure to do so would lead to a 'magnification and complication of the situation' (*shitai fuzahua he kuodahua*) and 'be bound to arouse the strong indignation (*qianglie yifen*) of the Chinese people'. On March 25, vice foreign minister Dai Bingguo said Japan must fully understand the 'seriousness of the situation' (*shitai de yanzhongxing*) and made clear that if Japan prolonged the detention it would bear full responsibility for the 'serious consequences' (*yanzhong houguo*) that would ensue. These consequences, although not specified, would 'magnify and complicate the problem' and 'further damage' (*gengjia sunhai*) the bilateral relationship.⁵⁵

As for additional measures, China cancelled a number of bilateral exchanges in 2010, but not during the first two days. China's foreign ministry spokesperson hinted on September 9 that talks on joint development in the East China Sea would be postponed unless Japan quickly released the fishermen.⁵⁶ In 2004, although there were no reports of cancelled exchanges during the two days leading up to the release of the activists, on March 30 Japanese officials told the media that bilateral talks on maritime issues scheduled for March 30–31 had been cancelled.⁵⁷

In sum, juxtaposing the two incidents shows that China's initial reaction in 2010 was for the most part identical with its reaction in 2004. If anything, the number of the public threats in 2004 was higher, and their form and phrasing a little stronger than in 2010. A prosecution according to domestic Japanese law would from Beijing's perspective have on either occasion set the same ominous precedent.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ 'Wo wajiaobu xiang Rifang tichu yanzheng jiaoshe dui Rifang feifa zulan Zhongguo gongmin deng Diaoyudao bing qiangxing jiang Zhongfang dengdao renyuan kouliu biaoshi qianglie kangyi' ('China's Foreign Ministry Raises a Solemn Representation to Japan about Japan Illegally Obstructing Chinese Citizens Landing on Diaoyu Islands and Expresses a Strong Protest against the Forceful Arrest of the Chinese Landing on the Islands'), *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*), March 26, 2004.

⁵⁵ 'China's Foreign Ministry Raises a Solemn Representation to Japan about Japan Illegally Obstructing Chinese Citizens Landing on Diaoyu Islands and Expresses a Strong Protest against the Forceful Arrest of the Chinese Landing on the Islands'.

⁵⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, '2010 nian jiu yue jiuri wajiaobu fayaren Jiang Yu juxing lixing jizhehui' ('Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Jiang Yu Holds Regular Press Conference on September 9, 2010'), September 9, 2010, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/wjdt_611265/fyrbt_611275/t738955.shtml.

⁵⁷ 'Japan, China Cancel Sea Treaty Talks After Island Row', *Kyodo News Service*, March 31, 2004, http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-20878315_ITM.

⁵⁸ Paul O'Shea, 'The East China Sea Maritime and Territorial Dispute: The Prospects for Cooperation', paper delivered at the Swedish Political Science Association annual meeting, Linneaus University, Växjö, September 26–28, 2012. Former foreign minister Maehara Seiji and others have argued that the 2010 incident was much more serious than the 2004 incident, since

It would not be far-fetched to suppose that China would have gradually racked up its pressure in 2004—just as it did in 2010—if the Japanese authorities had stood by their initial statements and pursued the prosecution. This comparison with the 2004 incident throws further doubt on the claim that China's reaction to the 2010 detention was a policy change.

Result: No evidence of policy change.

Central Bank Governor Zhou Xiaochuan's Monetary Essay (March 2009)

Some observers argue that China has increasingly challenged the United States on financial issues since the US financial meltdown in 2007–2008.⁵⁹ The seemingly most assertive signal on financial policy to come from Beijing was a March 2009 essay by the governor of the central bank, Zhou Xiaochuan. Zhou argued in the essay that the financial crisis demonstrated the risks of retaining the US dollar as the world's principal global reserve currency. In its place, he suggested introducing a 'super-sovereign reserve currency' through a gradual and long-term process.⁶⁰ It seems unlikely that Zhou published the essay on his own initiative without the support of China's senior leadership. Its appearance can thus be understood as the result of a higher-level decision, although it was not published in the party mouthpiece *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*), which would have hiked up its status to that of a formal government proposal.⁶¹

The essay does not seem to be a case of programme/goal change, since reform of the international reserve currency had been an open concern of the Chinese government for at least five years. Li Guanghui, division chief at the finance ministry, made a similar proposal in 2004 at an international conference in Shanghai.⁶² Zhou's essay, however, marked the first time such concerns had been expressed at such a high level. China nevertheless did not continue to actively promote the idea,

the alleged ramming constituted an obstruction of official duties. Yet, China did not acknowledge that this legal distinction justified a prosecution so it is not relevant for the purposes of the present comparison. Interview with Maehara: 'Kongomo Nippon no genrigensoku o mamoru', *Chūō Kōron*, December 2010, pp. 106–11. Published in English as 'A Principled Stance in Relations with China,' *Japan Echo*, No. 4, December 2010–January 2011, <http://www.japanechoweb.jp/jew0403/>.
⁵⁹ Economy, 'The Game Changer'; Daniel W. Drezner, 'Bad Debts: Assessing China's Financial Influence in Great Power Politics', *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2009), p. 7; Peter Hartcher and John Garnaut, 'PM's Two-step', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 4, 2009, <http://www.smh.com.au/world/pms-twostep-20090403-9qih.html>.

⁶⁰ Zhou Xiaochuan, 'Reform the International Monetary System', People's Bank of China, March 23, 2009.

⁶¹ Compare with Ren Xiao, 'A Reform-minded Status Quo Power? China, the G20, and Changes in the International Monetary System', Indiana University Research Center for Chinese Politics and Business, RCCPB Working Paper, No. 25 (2012), p. 13.

⁶² Ren, 'A Reform-minded Status Quo Power?', pp. 11–14.

and did not try to raise the issue at the London G-20 summit in April that year. Nor did Hu Jintao mention it in talks with Obama at that time.⁶³ In Beijing in early June, US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner told reporters that his Chinese hosts had reaffirmed their support for the US dollar as the world's main reserve currency.⁶⁴ Russia launched a challenge to the dollar at the BRIC summit in June, but China chose not to back it.⁶⁵ Vice foreign minister He Yafei even emphasised that introducing a super-sovereign international reserve currency was not government policy.⁶⁶

On the whole, China was remarkably reluctant to question US economic hegemony during the financial crisis.⁶⁷ This contradicts the assertiveness thesis, especially its strongest version that identifies a change in international orientation. US authority having been tarnished by its financial quagmire, a newly assertive China might be expected to grab the opportunity to actively confront US economic leadership. Nonetheless Zhou's essay indeed constituted a new level at which China communicated an existing concern.

Result: Adjustment policy change.

The Sinking of the *Cheonan* (March 2010)

Many observers have described China's perceived protection of North Korea after the sinking of the South Korean corvette *Cheonan* as a departure from its earlier policy.⁶⁸ There is little evidence to support this view. If anything, when it comes to

⁶³ Injoo Sohn, 'Between Confrontation and Assimilation: China and the Fragmentation of Global Financial Governance', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 22, No. 82 (2013), pp. 11–12.

⁶⁴ Ariana Eunjung Cha, 'China Leaders Have Confidence in US Economy, Geithner Says', *Los Angeles Times*, June 3, 2009, <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jun/03/business/fi-geithner3>.

⁶⁵ Melissa Murphy and Wen Jin Yuan, 'Is China Ready to Challenge the Dollar? Internationalization of the Renminbi and Its Implications for the United States', Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 2009, p. 4.

⁶⁶ Ren, 'A Reform-minded Status Quo Power?', p. 13.

⁶⁷ Robert Sutter, *US-Chinese Relations: Perilous Past, Pragmatic Present* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), pp. 271–2; Yan, 'The Instability of China-US Relations', p. 266.

⁶⁸ Yoo Jee-ho, 'US Scholars Urge China to Be More Responsible in Post-Cheonan Diplomacy', *Yonhap News Agency*, August 13, 2010, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2010/08/13/98/0301000000AEN20100813004600315F.HTML>; Kai He and Huiyun Feng, 'Debating China's Assertiveness: Taking China's Power and Interests Seriously', *International Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 5 (2012) p. 633; Thomas J. Christensen, 'The Advantages of an Assertive China: Responding to Beijing's Abrasive Diplomacy', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (2011), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2011/03/china-christensen>; Rozman, 'Chinese National Identity and Its Implications for International Relations in East Asia', p. 88; Nick Bisley, 'An Assertive China Rattles the Region', *East Asia Forum*, February 24, 2012, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/02/24/an-assertive-china-rattles-the-region/>; Andrew Scobell and Scott W. Harold, 'An "Assertive" China?', p. 121; Yahuda, 2013: 447–8.

inter-Korean border clashes, China may have gone further towards accommodating international pressure to criticize North Korea than it had ever done before.

On March 26, 2010, the *Cheonan* sank in the Yellow Sea with the loss of 46 sailors. The international response was rather muted until May 20, when an international investigation team assembled by the South Korean Ministry of Defence, in which Chinese experts were not invited to participate, declared that the sinking had been caused by a North Korean torpedo.⁶⁹ Pyongyang denied all such accusations.⁷⁰ China, for its part, did not acknowledge the findings of the investigation, emphasising that it lacked direct access to the relevant material. Instead, Chinese leaders issued statements in which they regretted the loss of life, stressed the importance of maintaining peace and stability on the peninsula and condemned all actions that jeopardised this goal.⁷¹

These statements reflect China's long-standing policy of not openly criticising North Korea for its role in border skirmishes, an issue it arguably views as less serious than the nuclear question.⁷² The two most violent previous inter-Korean clashes after the armistice of 1953 illustrate the Chinese policy. On June 15 1999, a gun battle near Yeonpyeong Island in the Yellow Sea between the navies of North and South Korea left seven South Koreans injured and 30 North Koreans believed dead.⁷³ China responded to the incident by expressing concern over the incident and urging both parties to show restraint.⁷⁴ On June 29 2002 navy ships from the two Koreas again exchanged fire in the same area, resulting in the deaths of four

⁶⁹ The Joint Civilian-Military Investigation Group, 'Investigation Result on the Sinking of ROKS "Cheonan"', May 20, 2010.

⁷⁰ United Nations, 'Press Conference on Situation in Korean Peninsula', June 15, 2010, http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2010/100615_Cheonan.doc.htm.

⁷¹ Luo Jie, "'Tianan' haoshijian: ba Chao-Han tuixiang zhanzheng de bianyuan?' ('The Cheonan' Incident: Pushing North Korea and South Korea to the Brink of War?)', *Shijie zhishi* (*World Knowledge*), No. 12 (2010), p. 31.

⁷² International Crisis Group, 'China and Inter-Korean Clashes in the Yellow Sea', Asia Report No. 200, January 27, 2011, p. i.

⁷³ Hannah Fischer, 'North Korean Provocative Actions, 1950-2007', *Congressional Research Service*, April 20, 2007, pp. 19–20. The estimate of dead North Koreans comes from the US Department of Defence, cited in 'Kitachōsenhei, 30 ninshībōka. Beikoku bōsōshō ga suitei. Kanshō kaieki jūshōsen' ('30 North Korean Soldiers Dead? US Department of Defence Estimates Exchange of Fire in the Buffer Sea Area'), *Asahi Shimbun*, June 16, 1999, p. 1.

⁷⁴ Fischer, 'North Korean Provocative Actions, 1950-2007', p. 24. Nakamura Shirō, 'Leiseisa wo tamochi heiwa kaiketsu nozomu. Kankoku to Kitachōsen no jūshōsen de Chūgoku gaimushō' ('Wishing for a Peaceful Solution that Keeps the Cool China's Foreign Ministry on South Korea and North Korea's Gun Battle'), *Asahi Shimbun*, morning ed., June 16, 1999, p. 8.

South Koreans and an estimated 30 North Koreans.⁷⁵ On this occasion also, China refrained from singling out either party for criticism.⁷⁶ Beijing's cautious response to the *Cheonan* sinking therefore closely resembles its stance after the serious clashes in 1999 and 2002, and was thus neither a programme nor an adjustment change. (This observation also applies to China's reaction to the Yeonpyeong shelling in November 2010, one of Johnston's indeterminate cases.)

After publication of the investigation team's results on May 20 2010, the US government hoped for strong international condemnation of North Korea. On May 21 US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared: 'Let me be clear: this will not, and cannot, be business as usual... There must be an international, not just a regional, but an international response.'⁷⁷ The United States and South Korea first tried to get a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning North Korea for the sinking—something which China resisted.⁷⁸ President Obama later accused China of a, 'wilful blindness to consistent problems'.⁷⁹ Chinese support for the resolution would have been unprecedented, however, since it has never previously backed any multilateral criticism of North Korea for its role in border clashes. China instead agreed to a presidential statement, a lower degree of Security Council censure, which condemned the attack on the *Cheonan* without locating responsibility, while noting South Korea's accusations as well as North Korea's denials.⁸⁰ The statement was far more ambiguous than many had hoped for. The *New York Times*, for example, criticised it as 'absurdly, dangerously lame'.⁸¹ Nonetheless, Susan Rice, the US representative at the UN, left no room for doubt as to how she interpreted the

⁷⁵ Fischer, 'North Korean Provocative Actions, 1950-2007', p. 24. The estimate of dead North Koreans comes from the South Korea government, cited in 'Nakatani Says Koreas Situation Stable after Naval Battle', *Kyodo*, July 2, 2002, <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Nakatani+says+Koreas+situation+stable+after+naval+battle-a088685568>.

⁷⁶ 'Jiu Chao-Han zai Huanghai shuiyu fasheng jiaohuo shijian: waijiaobu fayaren da jizhe wen', ('On the North Korea-South Korea Exchange of Fire in the Yellow Sea: Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Answers Reporters' Questions') *Renmin Ribao* (*People's Daily*), June 30, 2002.

⁷⁷ Mark Landler, 'Clinton Condemns Attack on South Korean Ship', *The New York Times*, May 21, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/22/world/asia/22dipl.html>.

⁷⁸ International Crisis Group, 'China and Inter-Korean Clashes in the Yellow Sea', p. 42.

⁷⁹ The White House, 'Remarks by President Obama at G-20 Press Conference in Toronto, Canada', June 27, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-g-20-press-conference-toronto-canada>.

⁸⁰ United Nations Security Council, 'Security Council Condemns Attack on Republic of Korea Naval Ship "Cheonan", Stresses Need to Prevent Further Attacks, Other Hostilities in Region', July 9, 2010 <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2010/sc9975.doc.htm>.

⁸¹ 'Editorial: Security Council Blinks,' *The New York Times*, July 11, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/11/opinion/11sun3.html>.

statement: 'The message to the North Korean leadership is crystal clear: the Security Council condemns and deplores this attack.'⁸² In addition, Jeffrey Bader, then senior director for East Asian affairs on the National Security Council, later described it as signifying 'the council's acceptance of Pyongyang's responsibility'.⁸³ If we accept this interpretation, the statement appears to be the first record of official Chinese criticism, albeit indirect, of a North Korean military attack on South Korea.⁸⁴ Given the magnitude of the *Cheonan* sinking, however, it might be an exaggeration to describe China's backing of the statement as a *non-assertive* policy change. The analytical verdict on China's overall response to the sinking seems to be that of firm adherence to its past *modus operandi*.

Result: No evidence of policy change.

Liu Xiaobo's Nobel Peace Prize (December 2010)

On October 8 2010 China once again unwittingly found itself in the international spotlight when the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded Liu Xiaobo its peace prize. A fierce Chinese reaction followed, which many have identified as reflecting China's more assertive turn.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, a number of circumstances suggest that China's response fell short of a policy change. Beijing had for many years repeatedly made clear that an award to such kind of Chinese individual would have negative consequences for Norway. The response to Liu's prize, both diplomatic measures and political sanctions, was more or less in line with earlier comparable instances.

When Liu's award was announced, China's foreign ministry immediately summoned the Norwegian ambassador to lodge a protest.⁸⁶ The ministry issued a statement the same day, declaring that the award was a 'profanity' (*xiedu*) towards the

⁸² United States Mission to the United Nations, 'Remarks by Ambassador Susan E. Rice, US Permanent Representative to the United Nations, at a Security Council Stakeout, on the Presidential Statement Condemning the Attack on the Cheonan', July 9, 2010, <http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/2010/144386.htm>.

⁸³ Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, p. 87.

⁸⁴ China's response to the Rangoon bombing in 1983, in which North Korean agents killed 21 people, including several senior South Korean politicians, might arguably also be interpreted as an indirect criticism of North Korea, although an even less clear one than in 2010, see Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (Indianapolis: Basic Books, 2001) p. 145.

⁸⁵ Rozman, 'Chinese National Identity and Its Implications for International Relations in East Asia', p. 90, 92; Elizabeth Economy, 'Reality in US-China Relations', Council on Foreign Relations', January 14, 2011, <http://www.cfr.org/china/reality-us-china-relations/p23803>; Bonnie S. Glaser, 'China's Coercive Economic Diplomacy-A New and Worrying Trend', *PacNet*, July 23, 2012, <http://csis.org/files/publication/Pac1246.pdf>; Robert S. Ross, 'The Problem With the Pivot: Obama's New Asia Policy Is Unnecessary and Counterproductive', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 6 (2012); Dittmer 2011, 3.

⁸⁶ 'China Summons Norway's Envoy over Nobel Peace Prize', October 8, 2010, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2010/10/08/us-nobel-peace-ambassador-idUKTRE69732120101008>.

objectives of the prize. The statement made clear that the award would harm relations between China and Norway.⁸⁷ On December 2, a little over a week before the award ceremony in Oslo, China again condemned the Nobel Committee's decision. This time it used stronger language, describing the award as an 'open challenge to China's judicial system' and a 'gross interference' (*cubao ganshe*) in China's internal affairs.⁸⁸ On December 7, China's foreign ministry spokesperson repeated the 'gross interference' phrase and also described the Norwegian government's support for the award as having destroyed the 'political basis and cooperative spirit' of their bilateral relationship.⁸⁹

This criticism might seem exceptionally strong, the diplomatic protest in response to Liu's award might seem exceptionally strong, but it was not out of the ordinary. When the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, China expressed 'great regret and indignation' (*jidayihan he fenkai*) at the Nobel committee's decision, and denounced it as 'open support of...secessionist activities' and a 'gross interference' in its internal affairs.⁹⁰ It also summoned Norway's ambassador on two occasions.⁹¹ Nor has China more recently signalled that it regards the award of similar prizes as any less serious; for example, in 2007, when the US Congress awarded the Dalai Lama its gold medal, China summoned the US ambassador and criticised the event as a 'gross interference' in its internal affairs which 'gravely undermined' (*yanzhong sunhai*) their bilateral relationship.⁹² China also criticised the European Parliament's decision to award its human rights award, the Sakharov

⁸⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Waijiaobu fayanren Ma Chaoxu da jizhe wen' ('Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Ma Chaoxu Responds to Reporter's Question'), October 8, 2010, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/wjdt_611265/fyrbt_611275/t759532.shtml.

⁸⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, '2010nian shieryue erri waijiaobu fayanren Jiang Yu juxing lixing jizhehui' ('Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Jiang Yu Holds Regular Press Conference on December 2, 2010'), December 2, 2010, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/wjdt_611265/fyrbt_611275/t773892.shtml.

⁸⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, '2010nian shieryue qiri waijiaobu fayanren Jiang Yu juxing lixing jizhehui' ('Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Jiang Yu Holds Regular Press Conference on December 7, 2010'), December 7, 2010, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/wjdt_611265/fyrbt_611275/t775065.shtml.

⁹⁰ 'Nuobeier hepingjiang jing shouyu Dalai wo waijiaobu fayanren biaoshi fenkai' ('The Nobel Peace Prize is Awarded to the Dalai Lama China's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Expresses Indignation'), *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*), October 8, 1989, p. 1.

⁹¹ 'Grovkinesiskanklage' ('Serious Chinese Accusation'), *Aftenposten*, October 7, 1989, evening edition, p. 8.; Gunnar Filseth and Morten Fyhr, 'Sterk Kinesisk protest blir avvist av Norge' ('Strong Chinese Protest Is Rejected by Norway'), *Aftenposten*, December 12, 1989, morning edition, p. 16.

⁹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Waijiaobu fayanren Liu Jianchao jiu Mei guohui xiang Dalai "banjiang" shi fabiao tanhua' ('Foreign Ministry Spokesman Liu Jianchao Issues a Statement on the Issue that the US Will "Award" the Dalai Lama'), October 18, 2007, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/fyrbt_602243/dhdw_602249/t373510.shtml.

Prize, to Hu Jia in 2008.⁹³ Thus, regarding the intensity of the diplomatic protest, it is difficult to perceive any policy change in 2010.

After Liu's prize was awarded in 2010, representatives of both the Oslo government and the Norwegian business community in China reported that the dispute had negatively affected Norwegian economic interests.⁹⁴ There is little evidence, however, that the award harmed bilateral trade in any significant way. Norway–China exports increased by 22% and imports increased by 15% in the first 8 months of 2011 compared with the same period of the previous year.⁹⁵ Norway's minister for trade and industry characterised the economic relationship as 'business as usual' in June 2011.⁹⁶ A dip in Norwegian exports to China followed in 2012 but, according to the government statistics bureau, this was unrelated to the political difficulties between the two countries.⁹⁷ China did sever all political contact with Norway, however, including ongoing bilateral negotiations on a free trade agreement.⁹⁸ As of early January 2014, no meeting of substance had taken place in the context of the agreement since announcement of the prize.⁹⁹ Using political means to curb trade ties as a protest against perceived human rights meddling is not uncommon for China. For example, one study raises strong evidence that the countries in which the head of state or government met with the Dalai Lama in 2002–2008 saw their exports to China decrease by an average of 8.1% or 16.9%,

⁹³ 'China Opposes EU's Award to Chinese Criminal', *China Daily*, October 24, 2008, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2008-10/24/content_7135786.htm.

⁹⁴ 'Negativ utvikling for norske interesser' ('Negative Development for Norwegian Interests'), *Dagens Næringsliv*, April 17, 2012, morning edition; 'Støre ber om fred med Kina' ('Støre Asks for Peace with China'), *Dagens Næringsliv*, October 11, 2011, morning edition.

⁹⁵ 'Handelen med Kina øker,' ('Trade with China Grows'), *Dagens Næringsliv*, October 12, 2011, morning edition.

⁹⁶ 'Politiske skjær i sjøen for frihandelsavtale med Kina' ('Political Obstacles to Free Trade Agreement with China'), *Dagsavisen*, June 27, 2011, <http://www.dagsavisen.no/samfunn/politiske-skjer-i-sjoen-for-frihandelsavtale-med-kina/>.

⁹⁷ Gunnar Kagge, 'Liten Nobel-effektpåhandelen med Kina' ('Little Nobel Effect on the Trade with China'), *Aftenposten*, November 19, 2012, <http://www.aftenposten.no/okonomi/Liten-Nobel-effekt-pa-handelen-med-Kina-7048971.html#.UW0H3RICM34>. Chinese authorities might have targeted some Norwegian industries with partial sanctions. Norwegian salmon exports to China plunged after the award and, although Chinese tourism to Norway increased in 2012, the rise was smaller than to Denmark and Sweden. Tom Ingebrigtsen, 'Kineserne droppet Norge' ('The Chinese Dropped Norway'), NRK P2 – Nyhetsmorgen, transcript available at <http://blogg.virke.no/kineserne-droppet-norge>.

⁹⁸ 'Støre Asks for Peace with China'.

⁹⁹ Interview with anonymous source. An official at the Norwegian foreign ministry commented on the issue in correspondence in May 2013: 'The negotiations towards a free trade agreement with China have been at a stand-still since the end of 2010. The Chinese signalled at the time that they need more time for own (sic) technical consultations. The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not been informed of any other cause for the lack of progress and does not want to speculate on any reasons beyond what is stated by the Chinese side.'

depending on the measurement methodology.¹⁰⁰ Prolonged boycotts of high-level talks are also far from unheard of, as can be seen, for example, in China's 2001–2006 freezing of summitry with Japan in protest against Prime Minister Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni shrine. Therefore, there was also no visible policy change in China's retaliation with regard to trade and high-level political dialogue.¹⁰¹

China's diplomatic mission in Oslo requested other embassies not to send representatives to the Nobel ceremony in 2010, a measure that has been described as probably unprecedented in the award's history.¹⁰² In the end, 18 embassies did not accept the Nobel Committee's invitation.¹⁰³ At the Dalai Lama's award ceremony in 1989, China demanded that members of the Norwegian government not attend the ceremony. When they ignored this warning, Beijing declared that their attendance would significantly damage the bilateral relationship.¹⁰⁴ China also demanded that members of Norway's royal family stay away from the 1989 ceremony.¹⁰⁵ In 2010, however, China's foreign policy spokesperson avoided criticising the royal couple's planned attendance in response to a direct question.¹⁰⁶ China's harsh response to the Dalai Lama's award in 1989 raised eyebrows. *Aftenposten*, Norway's biggest morning daily newspaper, editorialised that the closest comparison was

¹⁰⁰ Andreas Fuchs and Nils-Hendrik Klann, 'Paying a Visit: The Dalai Lama Effect on International Trade', *Centre for European, Governance and Economic Development Research (CEGE) Discussion Papers*, 113 (2010), p. 27.

¹⁰¹ A study in preparation by Bjørnar Sverdrup-Thygeson, which came to my attention after completing this analysis, examines the impact of the award on Sino-Norwegian trade. While being of a wider scope and operating with a different research question, the study reaches findings that confirm my conclusion.

¹⁰² Geir Lundestad, 'Den tomme stolen er et slående argument' ('The Empty Chair is a Striking Argument'), *Aftenposten*, December 8, 2010.

¹⁰³ The Norwegian Nobel Committee, 'Embassies Represented at the Nobel Peace Prize Ceremony on 10 December', December 14, 2010, http://nobelpeaceprize.org/en_GB/embassies-2010/. It is doubtful that all these countries would have attended if it were not for Chinese pressure, since at least 11 of these countries also stayed away from the ceremony when Marri Ahtisaari was awarded in 2008. 'Chinese Nobel Boycott Gains Support,' *Aljazeera*, last modified December 7, 2010, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2010/12/201012717240690770.html>. At the Dalai Lama's award ceremony in 1989, the Soviet Union and several Eastern European countries failed to send representatives. Gunnar Filseth and Morten Fyhn, 'Strong Chinese Protest Is Rejected by Norway'. The Norwegian foreign ministry was not informed that Chinese pressure played any part in the decision to stay away from the 1989 ceremony. Interview with a Norwegian foreign ministry official.

¹⁰⁴ 'Kina: Nobelprisutdelningen alvorlig episode' ('China: Nobel Prize Award Ceremony Serious Episode'), *NTBtekst*, December 11, 1989.

¹⁰⁵ 'Kina med skarp note til Norge' ('China with a Sharp Note to Norway'), *Aftenposten*, morning edition, October 10, 1989.

¹⁰⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Jiang Yu Holds Regular Press Conference on December 7, 2010'.

'Hitler's rage' when Carl von Ossietzky received the prize in 1935.¹⁰⁷ The chairman of the Nobel Committee, Egil Aarvik, drew the same parallel, prompting charges of 'absurd logic' in the *People's Daily*.¹⁰⁸

Given China's pre-2010 record, its harsh response to Liu's prize might have been less surprising to people in the know than to casual observers. Geir Lundestad, secretary of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, wrote on December 8 2010, that China had repeatedly made clear that awarding Li Xiaobo would bring a negative reaction. He described the response so far as 'probably about as expected'.¹⁰⁹ The Norwegian foreign ministry confirms that the Chinese authorities communicated similar warnings directly to the Norwegian government in the years between the Dalai Lama's prize in 1989 and Liu's prize in 2010.¹¹⁰ An individual with intimate knowledge of the issue agrees that such warnings were made on several occasions, in both Beijing and Oslo.¹¹¹ The Norwegian government also seems to have foreseen a strong reaction, since foreign minister Jonas Gahr Støre was reported to have approached Lundestad in September 2010 and 'expressed opinions' and 'raised issues' about the possibility that the committee would recognise a Liu Xiaobo.¹¹² In sum, there are few signs that China would have reacted any less assertively in the decade leading up to 2010 to the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to a Liu Xiaobo.

Result: No evidence of policy change.

The SCS

China's much-publicised behaviour in the SCS might on the face of it appear to be the trump card in the hand of proponents of the assertiveness narrative, even if we accept the compelling argument that in 2010 the area was not identified as a 'core interest'.¹¹³ Indeed, evidence of considerable policy change on the SCS in 2009–2010 would weaken the case for comprehensive foreign policy continuity.¹¹⁴ Such a change, however, is not supported by events.

¹⁰⁷ 'Uhørt protest' ('Unheard Protest'), *Aftenposten*, October 21, 1989, morning edition, p. 2.

¹⁰⁸ 'Folkets dagblad med bittert angrep på Egil Aarvik' ('The People's Daily Carries Sharp Attack on Egil Aarvik'), *NTBtekst*, October 23, 1989.

¹⁰⁹ Lundestad, 'The Empty Chair Is a Striking Argument'.

¹¹⁰ Interview with a Norwegian foreign ministry official.

¹¹¹ Interview with an anonymous source.

¹¹² Kristoffer Rønneberg, 'Advarte Jagland før prisutdelingen' ('Warned Jagland before the Award'), October 15, 2010, <http://www.aftenposten.no/nyheter/iriks/article3859267.ece>.

¹¹³ Swaine, 'China's Assertive Behaviour: Part One,' pp. 8–10; *International Crisis Group*, 'Stirring up the South China Sea (I),' Asia Report, No. 223 (2012), p. 4; Johnston, 'How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?,' pp. 17–20.

¹¹⁴ Johnston, for example, writes, 'To be sure, in 2009 and 2010 China's military and paramilitary presence in the South China Sea was more active than in previous years. Indeed, the South China Sea is perhaps the only example where China's diplomatic rhetoric and practice did shift fairly sharply in a more hard-line direction in this period.' Johnston, 'How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?,' p. 19.

To give some background, in 1995 China set in motion a major change in its SCS policy, culminating in the signing in 2002 of the Declaration of the Conduct of Parties in the SCS (DOC). The general policy that resulted from this change served to delay dispute resolution in order to consolidate China's claims, and is still in place.¹¹⁵ China's general goal in the SCS remained intact even after the post-1995 policy change. In other words, China did not modify its territorial claims or start to accept multilateral solutions to its bilateral territorial disputes.¹¹⁶ More recently, China has since 2005–2006 implemented partially assertive adjustment and programme changes to its SCS policy.¹¹⁷ As is shown below, 2009–2010 also saw a couple of adjustment changes, but these can hardly be described as a distinctive threshold in the post-2005 shift.

Observers commonly raise five Chinese SCS policy changes in 2009–2010: the confrontation over the *Impeccable*; submission to the UN of a map with a so-called nine-dash line; the imposition of a fishing ban; the activities of law enforcement vessels; and the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).

First, Chinese ships confronted the US Navy surveillance vessel *Impeccable* in China's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) south of Hainan island in March 2009.¹¹⁸ The *Impeccable* was at the time engaged in surveillance of the seabed, possibly tracking submarine movements close to China's newly augmented Yulin naval base.¹¹⁹ China and the United States differ about the legality of similar operations in the EEZs of other countries, but this well known fact is not relevant here. What is pertinent to an assessment of policy change is whether or not China was facing an unfamiliar, more sensitive situation. It is difficult to say with any certainty whether or not the activities of the *Impeccable* were unparalleled, since data on similar surveillance operations are not publicly available. Even if we suppose that the US ship was not engaged in anything out of the ordinary, it is nevertheless doubtful that

¹¹⁵ Taylor M. Fravel, 'China's Strategy in the South China Sea', *Contemporary South East Asia*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2011), p. 301.

¹¹⁶ Ralf Emmers, 'The De-escalation of the Spratly Dispute in Sino-Southeast Asian Relations', in Sam Bateman and Ralf Emmers, eds., *Security and International Politics in the South China Sea: Towards a Cooperative Management Regime* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 131; Felix K. Chang, 'China's Naval Rise and the South China Sea: An Operational Assessment', *Orbis*, Winter 2012, p. 21.

¹¹⁷ Clive Shofield and Ian Storey, 'The South China Sea Dispute: Increasing Stakes and Rising Tensions', The Jamestown Foundation, pp. 21–1; Fravel, 'China's Strategy in the South China Sea'.

¹¹⁸ Mark Valencia, 'The Impeccable Incident: Truth and Consequences', *China Security*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2009), pp. 26–32; Leszek Buszynski, 'Rising Tensions in the South China Sea: Prospects for a Resolution of the Issue', *Security Challenges*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2010), pp. 92–4.

¹¹⁹ Valencia, 'The Impeccable Incident', pp. 28–9; Ji Guoxing, 'The Legality of the "Impeccable Incident"', *China Security*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2009), p. 18; Oriana Skylar Mastro, 'Signaling and Military Provocation in Chinese National Security Strategy: A Closer Look at the Impeccable Incident', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2011), p. 220.

confronting the vessel represented a clear policy change, since this was only the latest in a series of similarly assertive maritime acts throughout the previous decade. They include the following instances: In 2001 and 2002, Chinese ships drew much attention by confronting the survey vessel *Bowditch*.¹²⁰ In 2004, a Han-class submarine caused a stir by surfacing in undisputed Japanese territorial waters on its way home from circumnavigating Guam.¹²¹ In 2005, a PLAN missile frigate aimed a gun at a Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force Surveillance plane in a disputed area in the East China Sea.¹²² In 2006, an undetected Song-class submarine surfaced within torpedo range of a US aircraft carrier during a military exercise in the East China Sea.¹²³ The same year, Chinese vessels pursued the *Bowditch* for 27 days in the East China Sea.¹²⁴ And in 2008, four Chinese naval vessels made the first known passage between Japan's two largest islands, Honshu and Hokkaido.¹²⁵ Since all these acts were more assertive than China's day-to-day behaviour, it is unclear why the 2009 *Impeccable* incident alone—although arguably more serious than some of the others—should testify to a policy change.

Second, on May 7 2009, China attached a map of the 'nine-dash line' in the SCS to its response to the two separate submissions by Vietnam and Vietnam/Malaysia to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS).¹²⁶ Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines all objected to China's map.¹²⁷ The Vietnam and Vietnam/Malaysia CLCS submissions were the first to contradict China's claims, and thus prompted a response from Beijing.¹²⁸ This, therefore, was a one-off event. To decide whether or not it represents a policy change requires counterfactual

¹²⁰ Steven D. Vincent, 'China and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea: Operational Challenges', Naval War College (2005), pp. 10–1.

¹²¹ Bernard D. Cole, 'Beijing's Strategy of Sea Denial', *China Brief*, Vol. 6, No. 23 (2007).

¹²² 'Chinese Warship Pointed Gun at MSDF Plane', *The Japan Times*, October 2, 2005, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2005/10/02/national/chinese-warship-pointed-gun-at-msdf-plane/#.UfXOYFPfaqk>.

¹²³ Cole, 'Beijing's Strategy of Sea Denial'; Matthew Hickley, 'The Uninvited Guest: Chinese Sub Pops up in Middle of US Navy Exercise, Leaving Military Chiefs Red-faced', *Daily Mail*, November 10, 2007, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-492804/The-uninvited-guest-Chinese-sub-pops-middle-U-S-Navy-exercise-leaving-military-chiefs-red-faced.html>.

¹²⁴ Qiu Yongzheng, "'Wuxia' hao shijian hou: Mei "ZhouSIDUN" fu Nanhai dang baobiao' ('After the 'Impeccable' Incident, the US 'Aegis Combat System' Goes to the South China Sea to Act as a Bodyguard), March 18, 2009, <http://military.people.com.cn/GB/1077/52985/8979784.html>.

¹²⁵ Ministry of Defence of Japan, 'Defence of Japan 2012', p. 38.

¹²⁶ Nguyen Hong Thao and Ramses Amer, 'Coastal States in the South China Sea and Submissions on the Outer Limits of the Continental Shelf', *Ocean Development & International Law*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2012), pp. 245–63.

¹²⁷ Zhiguo Gao and Bing BingJia, 'The Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea: History, Status, and Implications', *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 107, No. 1 (2013), pp. 106–7.

¹²⁸ See Oceans & Law of the Sea: United Nations, 'Submissions to the CLCS', updated on June 24, 2013, http://www.un.org/depts/los/clcs_new/commission_submissions.htm.

reasoning: would China have attached the map had the Vietnam/Malaysia submissions been made in earlier years? What speaks against policy change is that the nine-dash line has a long history, having been used in official PRC maps since the early 1950s.¹²⁹ Some scholars also interpret the use of the term ‘historical rights’ in the most recent law on China’s claims, the EEZ and Continental Shelf Act of 1998, as referring to the nine-dash line.¹³⁰ Nonetheless, the case for policy change seems stronger.¹³¹ The 2009 submission was the first time China had connected the nine-dash line to its territorial claims at the UN.¹³² China did not either attach the line to any of the key laws and regulations from the 1950s to the 1990s that serve as the legal basis of its claims.¹³³ But what kind of policy change was it? The inclusion of the map went unexplained, so China did not explicitly expand its territorial claims by equating them to the nine-dash line. This seems to rule out programme change. The act clearly added to the troubling ambiguity of China’s claims, already demonstrated several times before, for example, by the above-mentioned reference to ‘historical rights’ in the 1998 law.¹³⁴ It would therefore seem to imply an adjustment change.

Third, many observers highlight China’s 2009 imposition of a unilateral fishing ban as reflecting its newly assertive policy.¹³⁵ The ban, however, has been imposed annually since 1999; China only expanded its duration in 2009.¹³⁶ It was thus a minor adjustment change and not a programme change.¹³⁷

Fourth, it has been claimed that Chinese law enforcement vessels displayed more assertive behaviour in 2009–2010.¹³⁸ There seem to be two arguments in favour of policy change here: Chinese ships started patrolling the area more frequently; and began to detain more Vietnamese fishermen. Whether 2009–2010 represented a

¹²⁹ Gao and Jia, ‘The Nine-dash Line in the South China Sea’.

¹³⁰ Florian Dupuy and Pierre-Marie Dupuy, ‘A Legal Analysis of China’s Historic Rights Claim in the South China Sea’, *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 107, No. 1 (2013), p. 129.

¹³¹ For a different view, see Zhiming Chen and Dominique Caouette, ‘China’s South China Sea Policy and Its Implications for Canada: Claims, Strategies and Consequences’, *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2012), pp. 301–18.

¹³² Robert Beckman, ‘South China Sea: How China Could Clarify Its Claims’, *RSIS Commentaries*, No. 116 (2010).

¹³³ Thao and Amer, ‘Coastal States in the South China Sea and Submissions on the Outer Limits of the Continental Shelf’, p. 257.

¹³⁴ Dupuy and Dupuy, ‘A Legal Analysis of China’s Historic Rights Claim in the South China Sea’, p. 131.

¹³⁵ Buszynski, ‘Rising Tensions in the South China Sea’, p. 91; Shofield and Storey, *The South China Sea Dispute*, p. 1; Mikael Weissmann, *The East Asian Peace: Conflict Prevention and Informal Peacebuilding* (Houndsmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), p. 94.

¹³⁶ Fravel, ‘China’s Strategy in the South China Sea’, p. 305.

¹³⁷ An alternative reading would be that a mere extension in time does not even amount to an adjustment change. I nonetheless argue that it meets the criteria for ‘quantitative change in the level of effort’.

¹³⁸ Johnston, ‘How New and Assertive is China’s New Assertiveness?’, p. 20.

peak in arrests is equivocal—arrests seems to have increased in the mid-2000s, reaching a peak in 2009 and then dropping significantly in 2010.¹³⁹ An argument against a policy change is that the 2009 increase in arrests might have been a response to expanded activity by Vietnamese fishing vessels.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, one general counter-argument is that China's maritime law enforcement committed its most violent act by far in recent times on January 9 2005, when vessels opened fire on two Vietnamese fishing boats in the common fishing area, killing nine fishermen.¹⁴¹ No killings of foreign nationals by Chinese law enforcement vessels have been reported in the SCS since this incident. There is accordingly no conclusive evidence of a spike in assertiveness in 2009–2010.

Finally, observers have described an increase in both the scale and frequency of Chinese SCS naval operations since the late 2000s, including a number of eye-catching exercises in 2009–2010.¹⁴² China began boosting the capabilities of its hitherto relatively neglected South China fleet in the 1990s.¹⁴³ As a result of this, well before 2009, PLAN operations in the SCS probably became longer and more frequent, and involved greater numbers of more advanced vessels. In any event, greater capability does not equal a more assertive policy.¹⁴⁴ If this were the case, China's SCS policy would have grown consistently more assertive in recent decades, including during the 'non-assertive' period of 1996–2004. Clarifying whether or not recent changes—including those in 2009–2010—are exponentially greater than before requires a direct comparison with the level of change in earlier periods. Such a study would be greatly complicated, however, by the fragmentary nature of open-source data on PLAN exercises over time.¹⁴⁵ Available studies referring to naval exercises in 2009–2010 rely mostly on anecdotal evidence, and offer no clear proof either for or against policy change. Violent behaviour by the Chinese navy against foreign nationals is a somewhat easier indicator to verify, since the foreign media tend to report incidents, particularly deaths, more systematically. This indicator

¹³⁹ Fravel, 'China's Strategy in the South China Sea', p. 305. It is also important to bear in mind that this assessment is based on Vietnamese figures, which one expert describes as plagued by contradictions and lack of systematic reporting, see Carlyle A. Thayer, 'The Tyranny of Geography: Vietnamese Strategies to Constrain China in the South China Sea', paper delivered at the ISA annual conference, Montreal, March 16–19, 2011.

¹⁴⁰ Fravel, 'China's Strategy in the South China Sea', p. 305.

¹⁴¹ 'Vietnam Urges China to Take Action after Guards Kill Nine Fishermen', *Agence France Presse*, January 14, 2005.

¹⁴² Fravel, 'China's Strategy in the South China Sea', p. 308; 'Stirring up the South China Sea (I)', p. 6.

¹⁴³ Chang, 'China's Naval Rise and the South China Sea', p. 23; Fravel, 'China's Strategy in the South China Sea', pp. 307–8; Ralf Emmers, 'The Changing Power Distribution in the South China Sea: Implications for Conflict Management and Avoidance', *Political Science*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (2010), pp. 121–3; Schofield and Storey, *The South China Sea Dispute*, p. 23.

¹⁴⁴ For a discussion see Hagström and Williamsson, "'Remilitarization,' Really?", pp. 246–7.

¹⁴⁵ Fravel, 'China's Strategy in the South China Sea', p. 308.

Table 2. Summarizing Alastair Iain Johnston and the Author's Cases

Cases of New Chinese Assertiveness	The Author's Assessment
Taiwan arms sales, January 2010 ^a	Yes, adjustment change
The SCS as a 'core interest,' March 2010 ^a	No
The Dalai Lama's visit to the United States, February 2010 ^a	No
COP 15 conference on climate change, December 2009 ^{a,b}	No
Response to US deployment of aircraft carrier to the Yellow Sea, July 2010 ^{a,b}	No
Response to North Korea shelling Yeonpyeong Island, November 2010 ^a	No
Diaoyu/Senkaku trawler incident, September 2010 ^{a,b}	No
Central Bank Governor Zhou Xiaochuan's monetary essay, March 2009 ^b	Yes, adjustment change
Response to the sinking of the Cheonan, March 2010 ^b	No
Liu Xiaobo's Nobel Peace Prize, December 2010 ^b	No
The SCS ^b	Yes, partial adjustment change

^aJohnston.

^bAuthor.

refutes that 2009–2010 saw a spike in assertive behaviour. The PLAN committed its most violent act of recent years on July 9 2007, when its vessels sank a Vietnamese fishing vessel, killing a fisherman.¹⁴⁶ There are no reports of Chinese naval vessels killing anyone in the SCS in 2009–2010.

Result: Partial adjustment change.

China's New Assertiveness Redux

To begin with, the above analysis makes clear that much of China's international behaviour in 2009–2010 quite closely fits our definition of assertiveness. In other words, China time and again took a confrontational approach towards achieving its goals and resolving problems. The issue, however, is whether or not this represents a policy change; the cross-temporal analysis reveals that only a few of China's assertive acts constituted departure from its pre-2009 policies. Table 2 combines and summarises the results of my study and Johnston's.

These eleven cases were chosen due to their prevalence in the assertiveness literature. They are thus widely understood as the most obvious manifestations of a Chinese policy change, and should accordingly be 'easy' cases for the argument. Since China's foreign policy for the most part did not become more assertive here, it is likely that it did not change in other areas either. Nevertheless, we saw a number of assertive adjustment changes: (i) China for the first time openly threatened

¹⁴⁶ Roger Mitton, 'Vietnam, China Clash Again Over Spratlys,' *Strait Times*, July 19, 2007, http://www.viet-studies.info/kinhte/VN_China_clash_July19.htm.

Table 3. Occasional Chinese Assertiveness (2001–2008)

Year	Cases
2001	The EP-3 aircraft collision
2001	Confronting Bowditch
2001	Large-scale Taiwan invasion exercise after US arms sale
2001–2006	Boycotting summitry with Japan
2002	Closing Mongolian border after Dalai Lama visit
2002	Confronting Bowditch
2002	Adoption of the Surveying and Mapping Law, restricting foreign military activities in its EEZ
2004	Han-class submarine surfacing in undisputed Japanese waters
2005	Ratifying the Taiwan Anti-succession Law
2005	Allowing big anti-Japanese demonstrations
2005	Civilian law enforcement vessel kills nine Vietnamese fishermen
2005	First joint military exercise with Russia
2006	Song-class submarine surfaces close to Kitty Hawk
2007	Naval vessel kills one Vietnamese fisherman
2007	Testing of an anti-satellite weapon
2008	First observed passage of navy vessels through Japan's Tsugaru Strait
2008	China Marine Surveillance vessels make their longest stay so far in the territorial waters of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands

sanctions on the US companies involved in Taiwan arms deals; (ii) China's central bank governor penned an essay in which he suggested gradually moving away from sole reliance on the US dollar as the world's main reserve currency; (iii) China extended the period of its annual fishing ban in the SCS and (iv) by presenting the nine-dash line to the UN China added to the unsettling ambiguity regarding its territorial claims in the SCS.

These acts clearly pale in comparison with the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crises; the reaction to the 1999 Belgrade embassy bombing and the aftermath of the EP-3 aircraft collision.¹⁴⁷ Comparisons with these well-known incidents, however, do not rule out the possibility that China's foreign policy after the ensuing reassurance push of the late 1990s became less assertive during the early 2000s, but more assertive again in 2009–2010. However, this does not seem to be the case, as the list of occasional assertive acts in 2001–2008 in Table 3 makes clear.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Johnston, 'How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?', pp. 11–2.

¹⁴⁸ This inventory excludes run-of-the-mill Chinese assertiveness, such as routinely threatening Japan, ignoring US calls to let the Renminbi appreciate, lambasting foreign countries for their human rights criticism (e.g. EU countries in 2008) and opposing firm action in the Security Council on large-scale human rights abuses in other countries (e.g. Darfur).

Many of these acts were undoubtedly equally as or more assertive than the policy changes in 2009–2010. Moreover, the list could certainly be complemented with a similar one of smaller, sporadic assertive acts. All this suggests that occasional assertiveness was the normal state of affairs in China's foreign policy throughout the 2000s. It is thus extremely doubtful that the scattered policy changes in 2009–2010 amount to a general change to a more assertive foreign policy. Therefore, China's overall foreign policy did not become more assertive in 2009–2010.¹⁴⁹

Why Did So Many China Experts Get China Wrong in the Same Way at the Same Time?

The evidence presented and synthesized above strongly indicates that the assertive China narrative was mistaken. China's overall foreign policy did not change in 2009–2010—so why does the idea remain so popular? Johnston explains its rapid spread as the result of the power of Internet-based media—the notion of a new assertiveness became conventional wisdom through an interaction between the foreign policy blogosphere and traditional online media outlets.¹⁵⁰ Yet, the narrative was not limited to journalists, pundits, bloggers, and think-tank analysts. Many scholars also reproduced the idea, as a quick glance at the sources cited this article should make clear. In other words, the narrative is not only a media and a policy discourse but also an academic discourse.¹⁵¹ It seems unlikely that so many China and Asia scholars uncritically bought into a media image. The mainstream acceptance of the narrative was most likely facilitated by a mutual flow of ideational influences between these related but different fields of knowledge production. In fact, there is much to suggest that academics played a special, and probably even indispensable, role in turning the narrative into a social fact.

¹⁴⁹ This article only concerns 2009–2010. Some observers identify more recent examples of a new Chinese assertiveness. Johnston, for example, writes, 'China's diplomatic and military response to Japan's 2012 purchase of some of the Senkaku/ Diaoyu islands from private owners would also meet the criteria for a new assertiveness in its policy toward maritime disputes.' Johnston, 'How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?', p. 19, footnote 36. However, that China's reaction was assertive is not in itself evidence of an assertive policy change, since Japan's nationalisation of the islands was an extraordinary event. China's behaviour might have been new assertiveness, but any such assessment has to be backed up by a comparison with earlier similar cases and/or counterfactual reasoning. One additional important point is that China no longer was viewed as the same kind of international actor in 2009–2010 as it had been in the 1980s and 1990s, when much of its foreign policy was formulated. Growing capabilities could lead people to perceive China's behaviour as more threatening. Chinese leaders might need to implement a non-assertive overall foreign policy change in order to prevent such a situation.

¹⁵⁰ Johnston, 'How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?', pp. 8, 46–48.

¹⁵¹ Johnston recognises this, but the focus of his study is on the non-academic assertiveness literature.

Kelly Greenhill identifies two key variables in the transformation of 'extra-factual information' (i.e. information of unconfirmed accuracy) into a social fact in a ripe social environment: successful 'information entrepreneurs' promoting the belief, and a lack of rebuttals from authoritative sources.¹⁵² In our case, the behaviour of scholars was of great consequence in satisfying both these conditions. First, several high-profile scholars of Chinese and Asian International Relations actively promoted the idea, through op-eds in leading newspapers and articles in the most widely read policy journals.¹⁵³ This body of work both described the features of the perceived policy change and explained its causes. This probably helped observers with more shallow China knowledge, such as the pundits, journalists, and foreign policy bloggers identified by Johnston, to interpret scattered news items according to a convincing framework. Second, until very recently there was a notable absence of authoritative experts publicly rebutting the idea. To my knowledge not a single internationally known scholar spoke out publicly against the narrative in the Western media during the critical time in 2009–2012 during which it became naturalised. Even those individuals who were critical or sceptical of the narrative fell short of dismissing it outright.¹⁵⁴

The fact that the aggregate behaviour of scholars met Greenhill's two conditions does not imply that academics single-handedly turned the narrative into a social fact. The media dynamics, for example, no doubt also played an important role. It does suggest, however, that scholars constituted a necessary condition for this development. This begs the question: why did so many China and Asia scholars so strikingly embrace a flawed idea about their area of expertise? Johnston demonstrates that analytical flaws such as ahistoricism, implausible causal mechanisms, and selecting evidence on the dependent variable permeate much of the assertiveness literature.¹⁵⁵ A lack of familiarity with Chinese affairs, sometimes coupled with a lack of analytical training, could in this way account for some of the popularity of the narrative. We might also add the possibility that some people used the argument instrumentally to further their own interests.

¹⁵² Kelly M Greenhill, *Whispers of War, Mongers of Fear: The Origins of Threat Perception and Proliferation*, forthcoming.

¹⁵³ David Shambaugh, 'The Chinese Tiger Shows Its Claws', *Financial Times*, February 17, 2010, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/d55d5578-1b62-11df-838f-00144feab49a.html>; Joseph S. Nye Jr., 'US-China Relationship: A Shift in Perceptions of Power', *Los Angeles Times*, April 6, 2011, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/apr/06/opinion/la-oe-nye-china-20110406>; Christensen, 'The Advantages of an Assertive China'; Wang, 'China's Search for a Grand Strategy'; Aaron Friedberg, 'The Coming Clash With China', *Wall Street Journal*, January 11, 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB30001424052748704323204576085013620618774.html>.

¹⁵⁴ Minxin Pei, 'Why the West Should Not Demonise China', *Financial Times*, November 25, 2010, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/15a347f8-f8d2-11df-b550-00144feab49a.html>; Li Mingjiang, 'Non-confrontational Assertiveness: China's New Security Posture', RSIS Commentaries, No. 80 (2011).

¹⁵⁵ Johnston, 'How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?', pp. 32–4.

Yet, we would expect academics to be less susceptible to each of these flaws; they are not sufficient to explain why a great many scholars on Chinese and Asian International Relations were convinced by the assertiveness idea. I therefore present an additional six causal mechanisms, each of which explains how academic China experts came to accept the narrative on an individual basis.¹⁵⁶ Together with the mechanisms outlined above they account for a macro-level outcome—the transformation of the assertiveness idea into a belief inter-subjectively held by great parts of the scholarly community. It should be noted that, due to space constraints, the mechanisms are only hypothesised and not tested. I can therefore say nothing about their relative causal weight. While each of them is believed to be enough to sway a particular individual, in many cases two or more mechanisms are likely to have worked in conjunction. I start by presenting those mechanisms that are able to explain cognitive biases in International Relations research in general, and then move on to the more contextually relevant mechanisms.¹⁵⁷

There are a number of interrelated reasons for turning the gaze inwards on the scholarly community. The narrative has already had political effects, and the knowledge production behind it thus naturally becomes a highly relevant object for political analysis. Since academics had an important role in this process, they too become part of the material. This exercise involves objectifying the tools of academics (i.e. theory) by tracing the origin of systematic analytical biases to certain theoretical approaches.¹⁵⁸ A fuller explanation, however, should extend the search for bias to the scholarly field itself. This means looking into more deep-rooted, and often unconsciously applied, scholarly practices, as well as at psychological, social, and political mechanisms. If successfully carried out, this would contribute to a reflection on the role of our discipline in the production of social facts, which is a prerequisite for any rigorous social science practice.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ This only covers those scholars who came to believe the version of the assertiveness argument outlined in the introduction to this article. However, as is stated above, this should apply to most scholars promoting the idea of a new Chinese assertiveness. Moreover, I pay much attention to US-based scholars. This is because of their major role in spreading the narrative, which in turn reflects their general authority in the academic field of East Asian international relations.

¹⁵⁷ A thorough empirical enquiry into the relative importance among the mechanisms would shed much light on the dynamics of the knowledge production of East Asian international relations. To make a tentative observation based on my reading of the assertiveness discourse, however, it seems that 'Prejudices of (Folk) Realism' has a lot of explanatory power. This is not surprising, given the immense influence of political realism among scholars.

¹⁵⁸ For the present geographical context, this is done in for example David C. Kang, 'Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks', *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 2003, pp. 57-85; and Steve Chan, *Looking for Balance: China, The United States, and Power Balancing in East Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

¹⁵⁹ Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 235-41.

Informational Cascade

We rely on the information of others both to maximise our own knowledge and for social reasons.¹⁶⁰ This reliance comes with risks, since repeated exposure to an idea—true or false—has been shown to trigger a number of cognitive biases that can cause it uncritically to be accepted as valid.¹⁶¹ Experts are not immune to this. In fact, even a relatively limited research area, such as China's foreign policy, is so intricate and data-laden that most scholars rely heavily on the often unconfirmed information of others for even quite mundane observations. Moreover, at a certain point in time, maybe around mid-2010, the assertiveness idea was no longer something that had to be justified by pointing to China's behaviour. On the contrary, Chinese actions could readily be explained by its 'new assertiveness'. This represents a sort of tipping-point, after which the spread of the narrative was facilitated by the well-researched social mechanism of 'informational cascade', which is the mechanism by which 'people start attaching credibility to a proposition P...merely because other people seem to accept P'.¹⁶² Or, in constructivist parlance, China was designated a new identity and its foreign policy behaviour was understood on the basis of that identity.¹⁶³ A powerful public narrative can even override personal information.¹⁶⁴ This mechanism is displayed in cases where evidence to the contrary was used to back up the assertiveness argument. For example, Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt of the International Crisis Group takes Beijing's muted reaction to the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong incidents as evidence of continuity in its North Korea policy. Moreover, a change in the attitude of other countries is described as having widened the gap between them and China's position. In spite of this, she argues that 'Beijing's stance on North Korea is only the latest example of its increasingly assertive foreign policy behaviour'.¹⁶⁵

Precedence to Explaining

The popularity of the assertiveness narrative in spite of its deficiencies reminds us that describing a phenomenon is no less valuable a scholarly task than explaining

¹⁶⁰ Timur Kuran and Cass R. Sunstein, 'Availability Cascades and Risk Regulation', *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (1999), pp. 683–768.

¹⁶¹ For a list of such biases see Greenhill, *Whispers of War, Mongers of Fear*.

¹⁶² Kuran and Sunstein, 'Availability Cascades and Risk Regulation', p. 721.

¹⁶³ I thank Karl Gustafsson for pointing this out. See also Hagström, 'Power Shift in East Asia?'

¹⁶⁴ Sushil Bikhchandani, David Hirshleifer, and Ivo Welch, 'A Theory of Fads, Fashion, Custom and Cultural Change as Informational Cascades', *Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 100, No. 5 (1992), pp. 992–1026.

¹⁶⁵ Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, 'Despite Reports, China's North Korea Policy Stays the Same', *The Huffington Post*, January 21, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stephanie-t-kleineahlbrandt/post_1614_b_812407.html.

its causes.¹⁶⁶ The first crucial step in every explanation is that of accurately describing the phenomenon being explained or, as Jon Elster puts it, ‘before we try to explain a fact or an event we have to establish that the fact is a fact or that the event actually did take place’.¹⁶⁷ Nonetheless, it is safe to say that much International Relations scholarship is more interested in explaining than describing social phenomena, something that arguably fuels an unfortunate tendency to be less rigorous about the dependent variable.¹⁶⁸ Moreover, change is often seen as more in need of explanation than continuity.¹⁶⁹ The numerous attempts to explain China’s new assertiveness show that the perceived policy change generated a lot of interest and enthusiasm among scholars. Some might have been carried away by the assertiveness idea and let go of thorough consideration of the explanandum. Such neglect might be even more likely when one has a plausible explanation for the change in question; that is, ‘If you have a compelling causal theory, everything might look like change.’¹⁷⁰ China is currently living through far-reaching societal change and so intuitively compelling explanations for the new assertiveness were not hard to find, as the next mechanism demonstrates.

Discursive Determinism

The ‘practice turn’ in International Relations theory, among other things, urges discourse analysts to be wary of neglecting how discourses affect social action.¹⁷¹ In other words, we should pay attention to not only what people say, but also to what they do. Similarly, a change in how people talk and write should not invariably and straightforwardly be expected to lead to a change in how they act. A number of accounts of China’s new assertiveness arguably commit this ‘discursive fallacy’ and mistake changes in Chinese non-official discourses for a change in

¹⁶⁶ See Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 34.

¹⁶⁷ Jon Elster, *Explaining Social Behaviour: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 15.

¹⁶⁸ Hagström and Williamsson, “‘Remilitarization,’ Really?’, p. 245.

¹⁶⁹ At least for causal theories see Alexander Wendt, ‘On Constitution and Causation in International Relations’, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 5 (1998), p. 105.

¹⁷⁰ Johnston presents a different mechanism for the same outcome: ‘ahistoricism’ defined as ‘the tendency to assume that what observers witness now is new, different, and unconnected to the past’. Alastair Iain Johnston, ‘How New and Assertive Is China’s New Assertiveness?’, p. 33.

¹⁷¹ Iver B. Neumann, ‘Returning Practice to the Linguistic Turn: The Case of Diplomacy’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (2002), pp. 627–51; Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, eds., *International Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). This lesson is of course not lost on rationalist scholars, see Robert Jervis, ‘Review of Pouliot’s International Security in Practice’, *H-Diplo | ISSF Roundtable*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2011), pp. 23–4.

foreign policy.¹⁷² Attention to the (re)formation of China's national identity is of course indispensable to our understanding of its foreign policy, not least when it comes to predicting its likely future development. Nevertheless, the level of influence of public discourse and identity construction on official policy is an empirical question and should not be treated as a fact prior to analysis. Needless to say, discursive changes in the broader society need to be mediated by changes in political priorities and the institutional set-up in order to have any long-lasting impact on policy.¹⁷³ Moreover, the study of China's foreign policy might have been especially receptive to discursive determinism, particularly in recent years. First, due to the non-transparent nature of China's policymaking processes, 'Pekingological' analyses of subtle nuances in news media outputs have long been indispensable to the study of its foreign policy. Discourse-centred approaches have a long and impressive pedigree in the field. The downside of this is that analysis sometimes tilts too heavily towards discourse and away from policy. Second, China's current debate over foreign policy includes more voices and viewpoints than it used to.¹⁷⁴ Not surprisingly, many have expected this noteworthy discursive change to bring with it a corresponding policy change. The assertiveness narrative thus confirmed a development that many had expected.

Prejudices of (Folk) Realism

The assertiveness narrative fulfilled popular predictions of behavioural change by rapidly rising powers in general and China in particular. The narrative was 'cognitively congruent' with the background knowledge of many people, that is, it was a close fit with what they 'believed and "knew" before they heard it'.¹⁷⁵ In particular, two fairly straightforward popular theories about rising powers are relevant here. Power transition theory predicts an increased risk of great power war as the capability of the rising power approaches that of the dominant power,¹⁷⁶ and offensive realism predicts that the rising power will seek regional hegemony by aggressively

¹⁷² Rozman, 'Chinese National Identity and Its Implications for International Relations in East Asia'; Hughes, 'Reclassifying Chinese Nationalism'; David Shambaugh, 'Coping with a Conflicted China', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2011), pp. 7–27.

¹⁷³ Alice Ekman, 'China's Two-Track Foreign Policy from Ambiguous to Clear-Cut Positions', 2012, <http://www.ifri.org/?page=detail-contribution&id=7470>.

¹⁷⁴ Linda Jakobson and Dean Knox, *New foreign policy actors in China*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 2010.

¹⁷⁵ Greenhill, *Whispers of War, Mongers of Fear*.

¹⁷⁶ For discussion on the power transition theory and the rise of China see Ronald L. Tammen and Jacek Kugler, 'Power Transition and China-US Conflicts', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2006), pp. 35–55; Avery Goldstein, 'Power Transitions, Institutions, and China's Rise in East Asia: Theoretical Expectations and Evidence', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 4–5 (2007), pp. 639–82; Jack Levy, 'Power Transition Theory and the Rise of China', in

challenging the dominant power.¹⁷⁷ Both theories foresee that China's capability will grow in tandem with increased aggressiveness, and as a consequence both could readily account for a more confrontational China. Power transition theorists and offensive realists have a track record of confirmation bias when interpreting great power politics in East Asia.¹⁷⁸ This is also likely to have played a role in their acceptance of the assertiveness argument. It is important to note that acceptance of the theoretical assumption under discussion here (i.e. that increased capability makes a great power more confrontational) is far from limited to self-recognized proponents of the above-mentioned theories. It is a bedrock belief in a great deal of ostensibly non-realist writings on China's rise.

There are also China threat notions that have no basis in any universal logic about the behaviour of rising powers. China is instead identified as a security threat for reasons related to its political system or national identity. These ideas, however, can be as deterministic as the realism-based theories described above, since neither China's political system nor its national identity are expected to change anytime soon.¹⁷⁹ Contemporary Japan is one context in which we would expect to find this phenomenon. Japan's political discourse has long contained much insecurity about China's rise, a sentiment that has become more politicised in the past 15 years.¹⁸⁰ Moreover, China's alleged 'aggressive', 'irrational', and 'modern' mode of foreign policy is frequently contrasted with what is seen as Japan's 'peaceful', 'rational', and 'postmodern' international conduct.¹⁸¹ In this way, representing China as a threat has taken on an important role in the construction of Japan's own identity.¹⁸² Japanese representations of China are thus closely tied in with social, political, and psychological mechanisms largely unrelated to China's actual behaviour. This could be expected to increase

Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng, eds., *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics* (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 2008); and Steve Chan, *China, the US, and the Power-Transition Theory: A Critique* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

¹⁷⁷ For offensive realism see John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), chapter 2. For a recent application of the theory to China's rise, see John J. Mearsheimer, 'The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (2010), pp. 390–1.

¹⁷⁸ Kang, 'Getting Asia Wrong'; Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Is China a Status Quo Power?', *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (2003), pp. 5–56; David L. Shambaugh, 'China Engages Asia: Reshaping the Regional Order', *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2004/05), pp. 64–99; Chan, *China, the US, and the Power-Transition Theory*; Chan, *Looking for Balance*.

¹⁷⁹ Feng Huiyun, 'Is China a Revisionist Power?', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2009), p. 314.

¹⁸⁰ Linus Hagström and Björn Jerdén, 'Understanding Fluctuations in Sino-Japanese Relations: To Politicize or to De-politicize the China Issue in the Japanese Diet' *Pacific Affairs*, Vol 83, No. 4 (2010), pp. 719–39. See also Il Hyun Cho and Seo-Hyun Park, 'Anti-Chinese and Anti-Japanese Sentiments in East Asia: The Politics of Opinion, Distrust, and Prejudice', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2011), pp. 275–8.

¹⁸¹ Hagström, "'Power Shift" in East Asia?', pp. 294–5.

¹⁸² Hagström, forthcoming in the *European Journal of International Relations*.

the predisposition among some Japanese scholars to resort to flawed ideas that stress threatening Chinese behaviour, such as the assertiveness argument.

Disillusionment Among China Engagers

In spite of the popularity of the 'China threat' in some circles, the more policy-influential side of the China debate in most countries, including the United States, has long been the 'engagement' camp.¹⁸³ The policy of engaging with China can cause a blowback effect that triggers recurrent hard-line turns in US China policy. Pan Chengxin argues that the engagement strategy is partly based on a dubious supposition that China will eventually converge with Western political and human rights standards. When this US 'fantasy' recurrently hits the hard wall of Chinese reality it gives rise to mass-disillusionment among China engagers, which dilutes their bargaining power with the hard-line camp and thus brings about a tougher US policy.¹⁸⁴ The latest outbreak of disillusionment probably coincided with the rise of the assertiveness narrative. There were a number of cases of suppression of dissent within China in 2008–2009 that were well publicised internationally, including riots in Tibet in 2008 and Xinjiang in 2009, as well as increased censorship of the Internet and mass media.¹⁸⁵ These developments, understandably disturbing in the eyes of many, may have spurred renewed disillusionment among China engagers. For our analytical purposes, disillusionment with China's lack of domestic and international change is hypothesised as having reduced the willingness of engagers to put up with assertive Chinese behaviour, which of course existed before 2009 as well. This in turn led to less care in questioning the factual basis of the assertiveness narrative.

One further development could have encouraged this tendency. Both the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the global financial crisis in different ways thrust China into the international limelight. Various aspects of China's behaviour suddenly received more mainstream attention. Routine and occasional assertiveness thus became more apparent to casual observers, such as pundits and journalists, who actively disseminated it in the mass media. A US non-specialist on China, suddenly aware of Chinese assertiveness after 2008, might possibly criticise the US government's China policy for being too lenient. Proponents of engagement, on the other hand, might

¹⁸³ For the United States see Thomas J. Christensen, 'Fostering Stability or Creating a Monster? The Rise of China and US Policy toward East Asia', *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2006), pp. 108–10. For Japan see Björn Jerdön and Linus Hagström, 'Rethinking Japan's China Policy: Japan as an Accommodator in the Rise of China, 1978–2011,' *Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2012), pp. 215–50.

¹⁸⁴ Pan Chengxin, *Knowledge, Desire and Power in Global Politics: Western Representations of China's Rise* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2012), chapter 7.

¹⁸⁵ I thank Hardina Ohlendorf for alerting me to this point. See also Pan, *Knowledge, Desire and Power in Global Politics*, pp. 140–2.

stress the novelty of China's assertiveness as a defence against this kind of criticism: denouncing engagers for being too soft on China was inaccurate because the assertiveness was a recent development.

Politicised China Research

The perception that China's assertiveness reinforced US foreign policy interests by helping to justify the 'pivot' to East Asia might have boosted the popularity of the narrative among some scholars. US policy on China has in recent decades been one of engagement. The logic of the policy is based on a trade-off—the United States helps China to increase its capability and China in turn agrees to support the status quo of a US-led regional and global order. This agreement requires consistency from both parties in upholding their basic commitments. It is inherent in the assertiveness narrative that the Hu-Wen leadership—either willingly or grudgingly—*de facto* abandoned, or at least substantially amended, Deng Xiaoping's 'laying low' dictum. The belief that China had started to respond more aggressively to the same inputs became a reason to deter it from adventurism through a stronger 'hedge', that is, more focus on internal and external balancing. In 2011, this hedge materialised when the US government launched a plan, known as the pivot or rebalancing, gradually to concentrate its overseas force deployment in the Asia-Pacific region. The US conducted the policy in close cooperation with its regional support network, and it was thus dependent on corresponding policy changes in Japan, Australia, South Korea, and the ASEAN countries. The assertiveness idea helped to 'remind' regional countries of their belief that stability in East Asia depends on the US military, and thus became a reason to implement policies to strengthen its continuing presence there.

Thus while, on the one hand, it is self-evident that the rebalancing amounts to a further militarisation of the region, on the other, policymakers have implied that the policy is a reaction to China's rise and thus an effort to maintain the status quo. China, in suddenly starting to flex its muscles in 2009–2010, was described as having overplayed its hand or, as Lowell Dittmer puts it: 'The consensus of Western observers on this development is that China lifted the boulder only to drop it on its own feet'.¹⁸⁶ The rebalancing is generally portrayed as a reactive move (i.e. one that supports the status-quo) which stabilised the regional tensions instigated by a more confrontational China. The idea of the rebalancing as reactive is in many accounts dependent on a belief in an assertive Chinese policy change. The narrative changed the way China was understood, and thus how the rebalancing was understood; the narrative constituted the main reason for the rebalancing.

In the United States, the academic field of Chinese and Asian current affairs is far from an ivory tower. On the contrary, contemporary US China-watching is prone to politicisation in the same way as Sovietology once was, in the sense that just about

¹⁸⁶ Lowell Dittmer, 'Asia in 2010', p. 3.

everything said about China is read as policy prescriptions.¹⁸⁷ The high degree of policy relevance arguably makes the field especially susceptible to direct and indirect political influence. A number of prominent scholars on China's foreign policy move regularly between universities, government offices, and research-based advocacy groups (i.e. think-tanks). Many others in part frame their research as advice on how to steer China policy in order to best promote US interests. Such close identification with one object of study runs the risk of negatively affecting research quality. It can be hypothesised that scholars, consciously or not, might be less likely to criticise ideas that are understood as beneficial to US interests—such as the assertive China narrative.

Conclusion

The first section of this article gives to the idea of China's new assertiveness a clearer and more generalizable analytical footing through drawing on the literature on FPC. Based on this conceptual refinement, the second section examines a number of the issues presented most persuasively as evidence of a Chinese policy shift in 2009–2010. My search for a new assertiveness, however, was largely futile, leading me to conclude that China's overall foreign policy had not changed in these years. Section 3 hypothesises why the assertiveness narrative became so popular in spite of its obvious flaws. I zeroed in on China and Asia scholars, a group that was crucial to creating the narrative, but which in theory would be least likely to get China wrong. I presented six hypothesised causal mechanisms that, together with instrumental usage of the narrative and three biases identified by Johnston, can explain the academic community's favourable view of the assertiveness idea.

The assertiveness narrative provides a cogent argument for the continued existence of significant US power in East Asia. The narrative was naturalised as a social fact, which was conducive to the rebalancing policy and thus benefited US interests. This process amounts to an effect of US 'structural power'—how actors' social capacities and interests are produced through social processes.¹⁸⁸ This observation

¹⁸⁷ Bertil Nygren, 'American Sovietology and Knowledge Utilization in the Formulation of US Soviet Policy: The Political Influence of Sovietologists in the Eighties, and Consequences for Scholarly Research', University of Stockholm, Department of Political Science, Rapport, No. 2 (1992), p. 76. In fact, several common biases of contemporary China studies display striking similarities to the defects of the Sovietology of yore. For a critical look at Sovietology see, in addition to Nygren, Ted Hopf, and John Lewis Gaddis, 'Correspondence: Getting the End of the Cold War Wrong', *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1993), pp. 202–10; Jan Hallenberg, *The Demise of the Soviet Union: Analysing the Collapse of a State* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002); and Michael Cox, 'Why Did We Get the End of the Cold War Wrong?', *British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2009), pp. 161–76.

¹⁸⁸ Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, 'Power in International Politics', *International Organization*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (2005), p. 55. See also Stefano Guzzini, 'Structural Power: The Limits of Neorealist Power Analysis', *International Organization*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (1993), pp. 443–78.

holds regardless of whether or not the origin of the narrative can be traced back to agents associated with the US state apparatus, or whether or not its spread was intentional. Such considerations become irrelevant if we adhere to a non-intentional and impersonal understanding of power. What is of interest is the ‘production of systemic effects’,¹⁸⁹ of which the naturalisation of the narrative is an example. What is more, the naturalisation of an incorrect representation of reality is, all else being equal, a greater effect of structural power than the naturalisation of a correct representation, because we can expect reality to offer resistance to false beliefs. This has an important implication for structural power analysis. The naturalisation of an incorrect belief is a *least likely case* of structural power.¹⁹⁰ The transformation of the flawed assertiveness argument into a social fact is accordingly strong evidence of US structural power in East Asia.

Power is not ‘fungible’ in the same way as, for example, money is.¹⁹¹ Hence, one kind of power resource, for example, military capability, cannot straightforwardly be translated into another kind, for example, influence over intersubjective beliefs about international security. The development outlined above provides a good illustration of this. If US influence in East Asia were only or mostly based on military might or economic resources we would have expected it to have waned in the years after the outbreak of its economic crisis. Instead, the opposite has happened—the United States was able to successfully launch the rebalancing, with China’s ‘new assertiveness’ as the main reason, and thus boost its regional influence. This suggests that US influence cannot be fully traced back to a material basis. To solely focus on relative changes in material resources between the great powers, and ignore the crucial link between influence over knowledge production and international policy, restricts our understanding of the so-called East Asian ‘power shift’.

To describe the behaviour of rising powers correctly is absolutely central to many IR theories; a general framework for FPC, such as the one employed in this article, aids theory evaluation. A partial or total belief in the assertiveness idea led

¹⁸⁹ Stefano Guzzini, ‘A Reconstruction of Constructivism in International Relations’, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2000), p. 170.

¹⁹⁰ Thus, from this perspective it is a mistake to argue, as here exemplified by Vincent Pouliot that, ‘to know if social reality is really real makes no analytical difference’. Vincent Pouliot, ‘Review Article: The Essence of Constructivism,’ *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2004), p. 330. In fact, the objective reality of social reality makes a big difference to studying one of the things constructivists care most about: the politics of the reification of social facts. However, to take this analytical opportunity requires accepting that we can represent reality correctly (i.e. the truth-correspondence theory), which Pouliot and many other International Relations constructivists do not.

¹⁹¹ David A. Baldwin, ‘Power and International Relations’, in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmon, eds., *Handbook of International Relations* (London: Sage, 2012), p. 278.

analysts to draw unwarranted lessons for strands of balancing theory,¹⁹² identity theory,¹⁹³ and other more or less elaborate theories on China's making of foreign policy, including misperceptions of the senior leadership,¹⁹⁴ the relative influence of the armed forces,¹⁹⁵ and nationalism.¹⁹⁶ It is useful to consider one approach in more detail: power transition theory, which Jack Levy describes as 'probably the most widely used by scholars seeking to understand the likely dynamics and consequences of the rise of China in the contemporary international system'.¹⁹⁷ A sudden upsurge in Chinese assertiveness in the wake of the US economic crisis aligns with expectations of the mainstream application of the theory.¹⁹⁸ However, China's new assertiveness existed only as a social fact within the bounds of the intersubjective knowledge of a particular discourse, and not as an objectively true phenomenon external to this discourse. Thus, China's new assertiveness as a behavioural fact evidently did not cause the rebalancing, which suggests that the rebalancing was a proactive policy.¹⁹⁹ This corresponds better with prospect theory's understanding of power transitions. According to this view, the hegemonic power (i.e. the United States) is more likely than the upstart (i.e. China) to try to alter a status quo that is perceived as more conducive to the interests of the latter.²⁰⁰

¹⁹² Wang, 'China's Search for a Grand Strategy', p. 68; Mearsheimer, 'The Gathering Storm', p. 389; Michael Yahuda, 'China's New Assertiveness in the South China Sea', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 22, No. 81 (2013), pp. 447–9; Friedberg, 'The Coming Clash With China'; He and Feng, 'Debating China's assertiveness', pp. 663–37; 641–42.

¹⁹³ Rozman, 'Chinese National Identity and Its Implications for International Relations in East Asia'.

¹⁹⁴ Nye Jr., 'US-China Relationship'; Scobell and Harold, 'An "Assertive" China?', p. 115; Christensen, 'The Advantages of an Assertive China'.

¹⁹⁵ Dan Blumenthal, 'Riding a Tiger: China's Resurging Foreign Policy Aggression', April 15, 2011, http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/04/15/riding_a_tiger_chinas_resurging_for_eign_policy_aggression.

¹⁹⁶ Hughes, 'Reclassifying Chinese Nationalism'; Shambaugh, 'Coping with a Conflicted China'; Zhao, 'Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited'; Blumenthal, 'Riding a Tiger'; Da Wei, 'Has China Become "Tough"?' *China Security*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2010), pp. 97–104.

¹⁹⁷ Levy, 'Power Transition Theory and the Rise of China', p. 18.

¹⁹⁸ See 'Prejudices of (Folk) Realism' above.

¹⁹⁹ The rebalancing can be seen as a reaction to 'China's new assertiveness' as a social fact. However, this kind of causal relationship is of no interest to power transition theory, which, for all practical purposes, regards beliefs as epiphenomenal of objective material facts. Moreover, the rebalancing can be seen as a reaction to China's long pre-2009 record of assertiveness. However, this does not alter the fact that it was the United States, and not China, that broke with the status quo in recent years.

²⁰⁰ Chan, *China, the US, and the Power-Transition Theory*, chapter 3.

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