

# PRC Assertiveness in the South China Sea

Andrew Chubb

Measuring Continuity and Change,  
1970–2015

**W**hy has the People's Republic of China (PRC) courted international opprobrium, alarmed its neighbors, and risked military conflict in pursuit of its claims covering vast areas of the South China Sea? Despite its central importance to understanding the security of the world's most economically vibrant region in the twenty-first century, the question has remained unresolved. Many realist observers find China's regional expansion unsurprising in light of its growing relative material power, but others identify the maritime policy change instead with unfavorable developments for Beijing.<sup>1</sup> Area specialists focusing on domestic political factors are similarly divided, with some pointing to bottom-up challenges to the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from rising popular nationalism, and others arguing that elite vested interests or overzealous frontline agencies lie behind the maritime expansion.<sup>2</sup> Proponents of

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1. Aaron L. Friedberg, "The Sources of Chinese Conduct: Explaining Beijing's Assertiveness," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (2014), pp. 133–150, doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2014.1002160; John J. Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to U.S. Power in Asia," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Winter 2010), pp. 381–396, doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poq016; Hugh White, "Power Shift: Australia's Future between Washington and Beijing," *Quarterly Essay*, August 2010, <https://www.quarterlyessay.com.au/essay/2010/08/power-shift>; Ely Ratner, "Course Correction: How to Stop China's Maritime Advance," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 4 (July/August 2017), pp. 64–72, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2017-06-13/course-correction>; Michael D. Swaine and M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Assertive Behavior—Part Two: The Maritime Periphery," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 35 (Summer 2011), <https://www.hoover.org/research/chinas-assertive-behavior-part-two-maritime-periphery>; and Dingding Chen and Xiaoyu Pu, "Correspondence: Debating China's Assertiveness," *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (Winter 2013/2014), pp. 176–183, doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\_a\_00151.

2. Robert S. Ross, "China's Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, and the U.S. Response," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Fall 2009), pp. 46–81, doi.org/10.1162/isec.2009.34.2.46; Suisheng Zhao, "Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited: The Strident Turn," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 22, No. 82 (2013), pp. 535–553, doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2013.766379; Thomas J. Christensen, "The Advantages of an Assertive China: Responding to Beijing's Abrasive

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individual-level explanations diverge on which Chinese leader is supposed to be responsible for the push through the maritime periphery—a weak Hu Jintao unable to restrain confrontational conduct or a strong, hawkish Xi Jinping driving it.<sup>3</sup>

This article argues that understanding the dynamics of the South China Sea conflict depends on recognizing longer-term patterns of continuity and change in the PRC's behavior. In territorial and maritime disputes, lines of action introduced at one point in time have cumulative effects, creating the conditions for further changes in behavior in the future, and crucial decisions can take years and even decades to manifest. I show that the most recent turning point in China's policy—the commencement of a rapid administrative buildup and the introduction of regular coercive actions—occurred in 2007, several years earlier than most analyses have recognized. In turn, I trace this behavioral shift to decisions taken in the late 1990s toward strategic objectives that emerged in the 1970s. The article reveals these patterns by constructing a new typology of state behaviors in maritime and territorial disputes, applying it to a unique time series dataset of PRC behavior in the South China Sea from 1970 to 2015, and analyzing the key turning points.

Assessing competing explanations for the PRC's South China Sea behavior has proved challenging given a lack of clarity on exactly what has changed, and when. Few analyses have provided precise definitions or measurements of the changes they seek to explain. Many have focused on coercion, but this excludes key aspects of China's maritime expansion, such as its large-scale island-building program in the Spratly Islands or the increasing on-water pres-

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Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (March/April 2011), pp. 54–68, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-asia/2011-02-21/advantages-assertive-china>; Linda Jakobson, *China's Unpredictable Maritime Security Actors* (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2014), [https://www.lowyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/chinas-unpredictable-maritime-security-actors\\_3.pdf](https://www.lowyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/chinas-unpredictable-maritime-security-actors_3.pdf); International Crisis Group (hereafter ICG), *Stirring Up the South China Sea (I)*, Asia Report No. 223 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2012), pp. 18–26, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/223-stirring-up-the-south-china-sea-i.pdf>; and Audrye Wong, "More than Peripheral: How Provinces Influence China's Foreign Policy," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 235 (September 2018), pp. 735–757, doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018000930.

3. You Ji, "The PLA and Diplomacy: Unraveling Myths about the Military Role in Foreign Policy Making," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 23, No. 86 (2014), pp. 236–254, doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2013.766379; Robert D. Blackwill and Kurt M. Campbell, *Xi Jinping on the Global Stage: Chinese Foreign Policy under a Powerful but Exposed Leader* (Washington, D.C.: Council on Foreign Relations, 2016), p. 17; Irene Chan and Mingjiang Li, "New Chinese Leadership, New Policy in the South China Sea Dispute?" *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, No. 20 (2015), pp. 35–50, doi.org/10.1007/s11366-014-9326-y; and Nien-Chung Chang Liao, "The Sources of China's Assertiveness: The System, Domestic Politics or Leadership Preferences?" *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (July 2016), pp. 817–833, doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12655.

ence of ostensibly unarmed surveillance ships.<sup>4</sup> Such behaviors are captured by the concept of gray-zone conflict, defined as “attempts to achieve one’s security objectives without resort to direct and sizable use of force.”<sup>5</sup> China’s maritime dispute policy has rarely left the gray zone, however—a 1988 naval battle with Vietnam being its most recent military clash—which limits the concept’s utility in identifying variation over time.

The most common label attached to China’s current maritime behavior is “assertive,” but the meaning of this term remains imprecise.<sup>6</sup> Attempts to deploy it analytically have produced a mushrooming list of modifiers: from “passive assertiveness,” “non-confrontational assertiveness,” and “reactive assertiveness,” to “creeping assertiveness,” “militant assertiveness,” and “aggressive assertiveness.” Given this array of descriptive characterizations of the changes in China’s behavior, it is unsurprising that there is little agreement on when the key policy change occurred, with estimates ranging from the early 2000s to Xi Jinping’s ascension in late 2012 and beyond. Answering these what and when questions is a crucial step toward understanding the why.

The article begins by defining and disaggregating the concept of assertiveness into a typology suitable for measuring quantitative and qualitative change in state behavior over time. Works investigating territorial disputes as a cause of militarized escalation and war have focused on three generic state behaviors, summarized by Taylor Fravel as compromise, delay, and use of force.<sup>7</sup> But within this rubric, the PRC has pursued a near-continuous delaying

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4. Ketian Zhang, “Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing’s Use of Coercion in the South China Sea,” *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Summer 2019), pp. 117–159, doi.org/10.1162/isec\_a\_00354. On the role of unarmed Coast Guard vessels and their recent (re)arming, see Ryan D. Martinson, *Echelon Defense: The Role of Sea Power in Chinese Maritime Dispute Strategy* (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, 2018); and Ryan D. Martinson, “China Maritime Report No. 2: The Arming of China’s Maritime Frontier,” China Maritime Studies Institute (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, 2017), pp. 1–2.

5. Michael Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017), p. 21; and Andrew S. Erickson and Ryan D. Martinson, eds., *China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2019).

6. Alastair Iain Johnston, “How New and Assertive Is China’s New Assertiveness?” *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Spring 2013), pp. 7–48, doi.org/10.1162/isec\_a\_00354.

7. M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China’s Territorial Disputes* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 5. The leading quantitative resource on maritime disputes is the Issue Correlates of War (ICOW) dataset, which includes claim initiation, militarized escalation, and peaceful settlement attempts for maritime disputes in Europe and the Western Hemisphere from 1900 to 2001. Like the Militarized Interstate Disputes data it builds upon, the ICOW does not distinguish state actions below the threshold of threat or use of force. Paul R. Hensel et al., “Bones of Contention: Comparing Territorial, Maritime, and River Issues,”

strategy in the South China Sea. The framework developed here captures the ways states advance their positions in such disputes without resorting to either force or compromise. It also takes account of particular features of maritime spaces as objects of dispute—a domain in which the dangers of conflict over maritime disputes are widely believed to have increased in recent decades, especially in East Asia.<sup>8</sup>

The empirics presented here address key shortcomings in the information sources upon which most existing analyses of the South China Sea rely. Few studies have attempted to measure China's maritime behavior using events data or to control for a major skew in the supply of information on such events.<sup>9</sup> In 1988, when the PRC attacked Vietnam in the Spratly Islands and seized six reefs, the confrontation barely made it onto the international media agenda. Today, vast volumes of information circulate on daily developments in the South China Sea. China's increased economic and military power has drawn attention to its actions from foreign governments and media, while the internet has dramatically expanded the volume of information about current events more generally. Beijing's own growing openness about its activities, meanwhile, has further biased the information supply toward recent events.

To address this challenge, I employ an original time series of changes in PRC behavior in the South China Sea dispute from 1970 to 2015 that draws on sources not subject to the present-centric bias in the open-source English-language information supply. These include internal-circulation PRC chronologies of events in the South China Sea, advisory reports from Chinese government specialists, scientific reports, and yearbooks of PRC maritime agencies. Analysis of the data shows both a long-term trend of increasing PRC assertiveness since the 1970s, as well as four breakpoints—in 1973, 1987,

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*Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (February 2008), pp. 117–143, doi.org/10.1177%2F0022002707310425.

8. Lee Hsien Loong, "Scenarios For Asia in the Next 20 Years," speech at Nikkei Conference, Tokyo, May 22, 2014, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/scenarios-asia-next-20-years>; Michael D. Swaine et al., *Conflict and Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region: A Strategic Net Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015); David C. Gompert, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, and Cristina L. Garafola, *War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2016), p. 8; ICG, *Stirring Up the South China Sea (I)*; and ICG, *Dangerous Waters* (Beijing: International Crisis Group, 2013).

9. The most systematic longitudinal study on PRC behavior in the South China Sea to date is Zhang's time series of PRC coercive acts since 1990. Because it is assembled to test a theory of the conditions under which the PRC engages in compellence, the time series does not measure the PRC's behavior per se, but rather Beijing's responses to two specific kinds of unilateral administrative behavior by Southeast Asian claimants. Zhang, "Cautious Bully."

1992, and 2007—marked by significant increases in activity and the introduction of new methods, constituting important changes in China’s policy toward the issue.<sup>10</sup> The data pinpoint two key differences between China’s post-2007 policy and its earlier surges in the South China Sea: the protracted duration of its administrative buildup and the introduction of regular coercive actions.

These empirical findings enable a new evaluation of a range of hypothesized explanations for Beijing’s policy in the South China Sea, helping advance theoretical debate about a key case of foreign policy change in the twenty-first century.<sup>11</sup> Policy decisions may take years to manifest in observable behavior, so advancing positive claims about the causes of state behavior requires documentary evidence and other qualitative sources. The latter part of the article therefore turns to focused analyses of the four turning points in the PRC’s conduct, drawing on Chinese party-state sources. The surges in PRC assertiveness in 1973, 1987, and 1992 were, to a significant degree, opportunistic responses to favorable geopolitical circumstances. In contrast, the processes that produced the 2007 turning point were set in motion nearly ten years earlier, when Beijing decided to develop new domestic legal-administrative structures, organizational systems, and maritime law enforcement capabilities designed to extend wide-ranging state administrative authority over the maritime spaces around China’s periphery. In turn, tracing these four turning points shows how this goal, and the assertive state behaviors that seek to realize it, materialized from several decades of interplay between the PRC party-state and the emerging international Law of the Sea regime.

The remainder of the article proceeds in four steps. The first section builds a conceptual framework to render assertiveness a tractable variable with which to measure state behavior in maritime and territorial disputes. The second disaggregates a four-way typology of assertive actions. The third section operationalizes this framework, applying it to an original set of events data on China’s actions in the South China Sea from 1970 to 2015. Guided by the quantitative data, the fourth section provides focused, qualitative examinations of the four identifiable breakpoints, engaging existing works on the PRC’s past

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10. Charles F. Hermann, “Changing Course: When Governments Choose to Redirect Foreign Policy,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (March 1990), pp. 3–21, doi.org/10.2307/2600403.

11. *Ibid.*; Jakob Gustavsson, “How Should We Study Foreign Policy Change?” *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (March 1999), pp. 73–95, doi.org/10.1177%2F00108369921961780; and David A. Welch, *Painful Choices: A Theory of Foreign Policy Change* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

and present policies and drawing new insights from Chinese party-state sources. The conclusion considers some broader implications of these findings for analysts and policymakers.

### *Assertiveness as a Variable*

The word “assertiveness” has arguably defined the English-language discourse on the PRC’s recent policies on its maritime periphery, and perhaps its foreign policy in general.<sup>12</sup> Yet the term has so far not formed part of any established theory of state behavior in international relations. Iain Johnston inferred from common usage that it refers to “diplomacy that explicitly threatens to impose costs on another actor that are clearly higher than before”—that is, more coercive.<sup>13</sup> But in relation to China’s maritime disputes at least, the term has been associated with various classes of behavior, such as legal-administrative acts and infrastructural projects (e.g., artificial island-building) that do not necessarily involve coercion.<sup>14</sup>

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines assertiveness as “bold or confident statements and behavior.” This definition usefully covers the array of methods, both verbal and physical, and not necessarily directly confrontational, by which states pursue their interests in disputes such as the South China Sea. Adapting this standard definition to the context of maritime and territorial disputes, I define assertiveness as statements and behaviors that strengthen the state’s position in the dispute.

This definition serves three purposes. First, it breaks assertiveness down into observable events—statements and actions—that can be identified without the need for strong, subjective judgments about the state of mind of the actor. In the context of disputes constructed around specific geographies, the “bold or confident” quality of a state’s statements and behavior can instead be inferred from their impact on the positions of the parties in relation to the object of dispute, as discussed in further detail below. This renders assertiveness a tractable variable for measuring change in state behavior.

Second, the definition captures the broad sweep of state actions over a con-

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12. Johnston, “How New and Assertive Is China’s New Assertiveness?”; and Björn Jerdén, “The Assertive China Narrative: Why It Is Wrong and How So Many Still Bought into It,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Spring 2014), pp. 47–88, doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pot019.

13. Johnston, “How New and Assertive Is China’s New Assertiveness?” pp. 9–10.

14. Some of the modifiers often attached to assertiveness suggest coercive qualities (militant, aggressive), but others disassociate assertiveness from coercion (passive, creeping).



tested possession. Unless a dispute is dormant or subject to a cooperative agreement that simultaneously strengthens both parties' positions, such as joint resource development, merely maintaining a disputed claim involves some level of assertiveness. A state's assertiveness can thus be understood as a continuous scale variable whose relative value is determined by the number of assertive acts introduced, maintained, or discontinued over a given time period.

The third purpose is to link the concept of assertiveness with earlier conceptual work on territorial dispute behavior by placing the state's position in the dispute at the center of the definition. A state's position comprises three elements: (1) overall administrative presence in the disputed area; (2) ability to secure interests there using military force; and (3) ability to sustain the claim in international law. This three-point formulation builds on Fravel's definition of a state's bargaining position as "the amount of disputed territory that a state controls and its ability to project military power over the entire area under dispute,"<sup>15</sup> but with two necessary modifications. One is to use overall administrative presence, rather than the amount of disputed land occupied, as the first component. The other is the inclusion of legal claim viability.

Overall administrative presence refers to all state assets within the disputed area—from mobile units such as vehicles, ships, and aircraft, to fixed facilities such as roads, buildings, airstrips, ports, and sovereignty markers, as well as less visible manifestations of state presence such as cellular networks and scientific equipment. Unlike in land disputes, where lines of actual control keep each state's official presence relatively distinct, disputed maritime spaces and uninhabited features are often subject to simultaneous or overlapping control. In such cases, administrative presence, rather than occupation, is the main mode by which state authority is exercised over the disputed possession. Regular patrolling by government boats, for example, has consolidated China's presence in the space around the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea and around features in the South China Sea. Thus, overall administrative presence includes, but is not limited to, the amount of disputed land under occupation.

Legal claim viability is a key component of a state's bargaining position in territorial and maritime disputes, primarily because international law forms an important element of state officials' own understanding of their bargaining

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15. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, pp. 28, 38.

positions. This is particularly so for maritime claims, which are governed by a codified international treaty with 159 state parties—the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)—but it is also evident in the increasing use of international legal processes in terrestrial disputes.<sup>16</sup> The stronger a state considers its claim to be under international law, the greater its potential to resolve the dispute in its favor without facing the costs and unpredictability of using force. Conversely, when a state’s legal position is challenged, its potential for cheaply accessing favorable outcomes diminishes, compromising its overall position. This helps explain the sensitivity of states to potentially legally significant, but otherwise relatively innocuous, actions by adversaries.<sup>17</sup>

Defining assertiveness in maritime and territorial disputes as statements and behaviors that strengthen the state’s position enables its operationalization as a study variable, but assertive conduct thus defined can vary widely in its implications for international stability. By design, the concept covers acts ranging from verbal statements to the deployment of military force. The next section constructs a typology that accounts for the qualitative differences among the various types of assertive conduct.

#### *Four Types of Assertive Actions*

Existing typologies of state behavior in territorial and maritime disputes have not yet recognized important variations below the use of force. The standard Militarized Interstate Disputes coding scheme, for example, distinguishes various “hostility levels” for incidents in which a state threatens or uses military force against another state, but it excludes actions below this threshold of militarization.<sup>18</sup> Paul Huth codes diplomatic and political conflict over dis-

16. Beth A. Simmons, “See You in ‘Court’? The Appeal to Quasi-Judicial Legal Processes in the Settlement of Territorial Disputes,” in Paul F. Diehl, ed., *A Road Map to War: Territorial Dimensions of International Conflict* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999), p. 225.

17. When Sino-Japanese tensions erupted after an incident in the East China Sea in 2010, the PRC made clear that its escalatory countermeasures were a response to Japan’s decision to initiate domestic legal proceedings against the Chinese fishing boat captain who precipitated the incident, rather than the captain’s physical detention. M. Taylor Fravel, “Explaining China’s Escalation over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands,” *Global Summitry*, Vol. 2, No.1 (Summer 2016), p. 31, doi.org/10.1093/global/guw010. For a detailed case study, see Andrew Chubb, *Chinese Nationalism and the “Gray Zone”: Case Analyses of Public Opinion and PRC Maritime Policy* (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, forthcoming).

18. Daniel M. Jones, Stuart A. Bremer, and J. David Singer, “Militarized Interstate Disputes, 1816–1992: Rationale, Coding Rules, and Empirical Patterns,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Fall 1996), pp. 163–213, doi.org/10.1177/073889429601500203.



puted territory separately from military escalation, but leaves nonconfrontational assertive actions indistinguishable from “minimal or no diplomatic/political conflict.”<sup>19</sup> Fravel’s three-way typology of territorial dispute behavior similarly treats actions short of military escalation or seizure of territory as “delay.”<sup>20</sup> The concept of gray-zone conflict, meanwhile, bundles noncooperative state conduct all the way up to the threshold of military force.<sup>21</sup>

Four types of assertive actions in maritime and territorial disputes are identifiable, based on their increasingly serious implications for the positions of rival claimants: (1) declarative, (2) demonstrative, (3) coercive, and (4) use of force. As summarized in table 1, these four categories constitute an ordinal typology. This means that individual cases of behavioral change belong in the highest-level category for which they meet the criteria.<sup>22</sup> Thus, as explained below, patrolling a disputed area is classified as a demonstrative behavior, though it may also involve declarative proclamations of the state’s claim to the area. Likewise, direct interference with another state’s construction project or resource survey will belong unambiguously in the coercive category, even if it also involves declarative and demonstrative elements. Direct seizure of a particular disputed land or sea area will constitute a use of force, even though it usually also entails activities in all three of the lower categories.

Declarative actions are official claims over the disputed area that make no discernable threat to impose punishment on rival states. Such statements fit the broad definition of assertiveness outlined above because they affect the position of competing claimants, both by demonstrating nonrecognition of those claims and because they are often considered as evidence in international legal proceedings.<sup>23</sup> Declarative actions include remarks by state officials, domestic

19. Huth, *Standing Your Ground*, pp. 103–106, at p. 105.

20. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 5.

21. Green et al., *Countering Coercion*, p. 21; and Michael Peterson, “The Chinese Maritime Gray Zone,” in Erickson and Martinson et al., *China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, p. 16.

22. For a general discussion of ordinal classification schemes, see Peter A. Hall, “Policy, Paradigms, Social Learning, and the State: The Case of Economic Policymaking in Britain,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (April 1993), pp. 275–296, at pp. 278–279 and n. 21, doi.org/10.2307/422246; and Scott H. Beck, “The Decomposition of Inequality by Class and by Occupation: A Research Note,” *Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring 1991), pp. 139–150, especially pp. 141, 147–149, doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1991.tb00349.x. Other examples include Hermann’s typology of foreign policy change, and the three-point scale of diplomatic and military conflict in territorial disputes deployed in Paul K. Huth, *Standing Your Ground: Territorial Disputes and International Conflict* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), p. 105.

23. See *The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of Philippines v. The People’s Republic of China)*, Permanent Court of Arbitration, Case No. 2013–19, July 12, 2016, <https://www.pcacases.com/web/view/7>.

Table 1. Four-Way Typology of Assertiveness in Maritime and Territorial Disputes, Mapped onto Existing Concepts

Types of Assertiveness	Existing Concepts
Declarative verbal assertions via non-coercive statements, diplomatic notes, domestic legislation and administrative measures, international legal cases	gray-zone conflict (Green et al.; Peterson); delay (Fravel); minimal conflict (Huth)
Demonstrative unilateral administration of disputed possession: patrols, surveys, resource development, construction of infrastructure, state-sanctioned tourism or activism, domestic judicial proceedings, and cooperative agreements with third parties	
Coercive threat or imposition of punishment: may be verbal, diplomatic or administrative, economic punishment, warning shots, physical interference with foreign activities in disputed area	coercion (Schelling; Zhang); political-diplomatic escalation (Huth)
Use of force application of military force or direct seizure and occupation of disputed possession	use of force / escalation (Fravel); brute force (Schelling); compulsion (Sechser)

SOURCES: M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008); Michael Green et al., *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017); Paul K. Huth, *Standing Your Ground: Territorial Disputes and International Conflict* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Michael Peterson, "The Chinese Maritime Gray Zone," in Andrew S. Erickson and Ryan D. Martinson, eds., *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2019); Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966 [2004]); Todd S. Sechser, "Militarized Compellent Threats, 1918–2001," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (September 2011), pp. 377–401, doi.org/10.1177/0738894211413066; and "Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing's Use of Coercion in the South China Sea," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Summer 2019), pp. 117–159, doi.org/10.1162/isec\_a\_00354.

laws and regulations, diplomatic declarations, submissions to international authorities, and changes in domestic administrative arrangements governing the disputed area. Their significance is evident in the fact that they frequently prompt official protests from other states—and they typically stay in effect in perpetuity unless actively renounced. But because they involve neither physi-

cal actions in the disputed area nor threats of punishment, declarative actions are a qualitative step further removed from conflict than the higher categories of assertive behavior discussed below.

Demonstrative moves are unilateral administrative behaviors—actions that manifest a state’s presence or jurisdiction in the disputed area, but without directly confronting adversaries.<sup>24</sup> In many disputed areas, particularly at sea, states may advance their position without engaging adversaries at all.<sup>25</sup> Typical demonstrative moves include physical acts such as air and sea patrols, scientific surveys, unilateral resource exploitation, and construction work, as well as state-sponsored civilian actions such as tourism, activism, and resource exploitation. Certain kinds of nonphysical moves can also be demonstrative, such as signing agreements with third parties over resource development, or domestic administrative or judicial proceedings over the disputed area. For example, Japan launched legal proceedings against a PRC fishing boat captain who ordered the ramming of a Japanese Coast Guard ship in the disputed territorial seas around the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in 2010, and Tokyo nationalized three of the disputed islands in 2012. Because they demonstrate effective administration of the claimed area, or external recognition of the claim, this class of actions compromises the position of other states in the dispute more than declarative actions do. Indeed, they can constitute stepping-stones to acquisition by *fait accompli*.<sup>26</sup> However, demonstrative acts do not involve discernible threats or punishment of other parties. These belong to the next category, coercion.

Coercive behaviors are those involving the threat or use of punishment against an adversary.<sup>27</sup> Some actions self-evidently satisfy this definition, such

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24. The Merriam-Webster definition is (1a) “demonstrating as real or true”; (1b) “characterized or established by demonstration.” Actions that convey a clear threat or warning to others, however, will belong in the higher-level category of coercive actions.

25. In disputes that take place in wide geographical expanses, interactions between adversaries may be minimal, enabling states to “take what they want” incrementally, without the need for coercion. Schelling referred to this as “salami tactics.” Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, with a new preface and afterword (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966 [2008]), pp. 66–69.

26. Dan Altman, “By *Fait Accompli*, Not Coercion: How States Wrest Territory from Their Adversaries,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (December 2017), pp. 881–891, doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx049.

27. This follows the usage established by Schelling, which includes both deterrent and compellent varieties of coercion. Recent scholarly usage often has equated coercion with compellence, in line with Alexander L. George’s concept of “coercive diplomacy,” defined as “a response to an encroachment already undertaken,” and thus distinct from deterrence. As Robert J. Art and Kelly M. Greenhill point out, such a concept could be more accurately labeled “compellent diplomacy.” For the present purposes, adopting the broader definition allows us to sidestep questions of

as physical interference with foreign activities in a disputed area or the firing of warning shots. Coercive state behaviors can also take a variety of other forms, however, as Ketian Zhang has highlighted, including formal and informal economic sanctions via the disruption of trade, threatening public statements and diplomacy, and administrative moves.<sup>28</sup> For example, promulgating territorial sea baselines that upgrade disputed waters to sovereign territorial seas under domestic law, or the establishment of air defense identification zones in contested areas, can communicate threats to other state and nonstate actors entering such areas. Coercive actions pose more serious risks to stability than declarative or demonstrative moves because they present a relatively narrow set of choices to other parties: alter their behavior or continue and risk incurring punishment. The only qualitatively more escalatory kind of move is a military attack or unambiguous forceful change in the status quo of a disputed possession, as discussed below.

The most escalatory type of action in a maritime or territorial dispute is the application of military violence or direct seizure of the disputed possession. This category maps directly onto the use-of-force category in Fravel's typology.<sup>29</sup> Such actions are a subset of what Thomas Schelling described as "brute force": actions that rely on the actor's own strength to achieve goals directly, rather than by influencing adversary conduct, as in coercion.<sup>30</sup> There are three key reasons why such actions are qualitatively more escalatory than coercive ones. First, in-kind responses from the adversary, or action to restore the status quo ante, will entail physical confrontation. Second, actions that conspicuously change the status quo threaten the basic viability of the adversary's bargaining position, generating incentives for preventive escalation.<sup>31</sup> Third, actions of an

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whether the target had been engaging in encroachment or aggression. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, p. 69; George, *Forceful Persuasion: Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1991), p. 4; and Art and Greenhill, "Coercion: An Analytical Overview," in Greenhill and Peter Krause, eds., *Coercion: The Power to Hurt in International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 13 n. 18.

28. Zhang, "Cautious Bully," pp. 120–122.

29. M. Taylor Fravel, "Power Shifts and Escalation: Explaining China's Use of Force in Territorial Disputes," *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Winter 2007/2008), pp. 44–83, especially p. 50, doi.org/10.1162/isec.2008.32.3.44.

30. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, pp. 2–5. See also Todd S. Sechser's description of compulsion, the forcible imposition of the state's objectives. Sechser, " Militarized Compellent Threats, 1918–2001," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (September 2011), pp. 377–401, 385, doi.org/10.1177/0738894211413066.

31. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*; and Fravel, "Power Shifts and Escalation." From the perspective of prospect theory, a rapid and conspicuous change in the status quo is likely to place the adversary in the risk-acceptant "domain of losses."

unambiguously forceful character are likely to place the adversary's leadership under political pressure by engaging the leaders' domestic competence and international reputation. Notably, the use of force does not necessarily involve military units, given that civilian actors can be deployed to seize disputed possessions, as in the case of the PRC's occupation of Mischief Reef in 1994.

Having distinguished these four qualitatively different types of assertive state behavior in maritime disputes, it is now possible to identify changes in the quantity and quality of assertiveness in a state's behavior across time. Assertive behavior intensifies where an observed action is (1) a new method of advancing the claim, unseen in previous time periods; (2) more frequent than in previous time periods, for example, an increase in patrol activity or resource exploration and exploitation; or (3) applied over a broader geographic area than in previous time periods.<sup>32</sup> The next section applies this framework to a unique time series of 132 cases of year-on-year intensification of the PRC's assertive behavior in the South China Sea from 1970 to 2015.

### *PRC Assertiveness by the Numbers*

A key challenge in assessing the changes in China's behavior in the South China Sea is the present-centric bias in the information supply. As noted earlier, alterations in PRC behavior are more likely to have been observed in English-language sources in recent years than further back in the past. To mitigate this bias, the data set analyzed below draws on historical PRC sources, mainly reference materials intended to inform Beijing's policymakers of events in the maritime domain and report on the implementation of policies. These include internal-circulation PRC chronologies of major events in the South China Sea covering the period from 1949 to 1996,<sup>33</sup> advisory reports on the situation in the South China Sea from 2002 to 2009,<sup>34</sup> and yearbooks of PRC government agencies covering the state's civilian maritime activities from the

32. For a discussion of inferences regarding the duration and diminishment of assertive behaviors, see the online appendix at [doi.org/10.7910/DVN/3Y7NRU](https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/3Y7NRU).

33. State Oceanic Administration (SOA), "Dashiji (Chronicle of major events)," State Oceanic Administration, 1963–2003, <https://web.archive.org/web/20060117003814/https://www.soa.gov.cn/memo/index.html>; and Zhang Liangfu, *Nansha Qundao Dashiji* [Chronicle of major events in the Spratly Islands] (Beijing: Zhongguo Kexue Yuan [Chinese Academy of Sciences], 1996).

34. National Institute of South China Sea Studies (hereafter NISCSS), *Nanhai Xingshi Pinggu Baogao* [Evaluative report on developments in the South China Sea] (Haikou, China: Zhongguo Nanhai Yanjiuyuan, 2002–2009).

1970s to the present.<sup>35</sup> These materials help identify previously unrecognized past alterations in PRC behavior and confirm details of other historical cases.<sup>36</sup>

The particular biases in such sources also need to be borne in mind. Despite being reference materials, these sources typically adopt an unquestioning pro-PRC perspective on the events they describe. Like the PRC's public comments on the South China Sea, they generally characterize China as purely the victim of unprovoked encroachments at the hands of its adversaries. Indeed, many of these chronologies focus primarily on other claimants' activities in the South China Sea. However, this bias should increase confidence in the veracity of those cases of assertive PRC behavior that do appear. Overall, drawing information from these sources should increase the closeness of the relationship between the time series data and the underlying PRC behavior it seeks to represent.

#### INCREASING ASSERTIVENESS AS A CONSTANT

The first key point that emerges from the data is that increasing PRC assertiveness itself is not a new development in the South China Sea. As figure 1 shows, the PRC has advanced its position in the disputes there in some form almost every year since 1970. There have been only four years since 1970 when the PRC's assertiveness did not intensify in some way—and the most recent was in 1990.

Second, within the overall picture of growing assertiveness in China's policy, four periods of rapid acceleration are apparent: 1973–75, 1987–89, 1992–95, and 2007 onward. Outside these four surge periods, the average number of cases observed is around 1.8 per year, a figure that can be understood as representing the baseline growth rate of the PRC's assertiveness in the South China Sea. During the four surge periods, the average number of assertive behavioral changes observed has risen to between 3.0 and 5.1 per year. The assertive behavior since 2007 thus represents the PRC's fourth major push in the South China Sea since 1970.

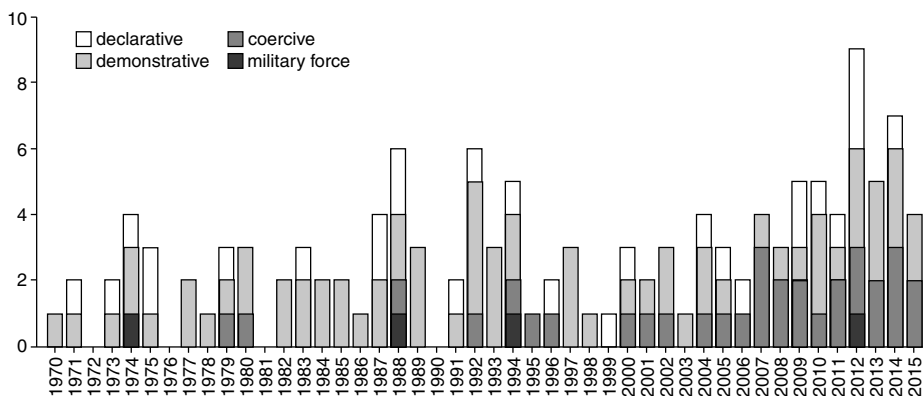
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35. Fisheries Administration, *Zhongguo Yuye Nianjian* [China fisheries yearbook] (Beijing: Nongye Chubanshe); and SOA, *Zhongguo Haiyang Nianjian* [China ocean yearbook] (Beijing: Haiyang Chubanshe). Volumes published between 1987 and 2014.

36. Candidate cases of year-on-year change in PRC assertive behavior entered the dataset through a two-stage assessment process, before being coded according to the typology outlined above. Further discussion of data collection, methodology, and coding checks are provided in the online appendix. A full list of sources, along with case descriptions, is included in the data file.



Figure 1. Intensifications of Assertiveness by the People’s Republic of China in the South China Sea by Type, 1970–2015



BREAKPOINT 2007

The most recent turning point in the PRC’s behavior occurred in 2007. Figure 1 illustrates the major qualitative change in the type of actions by which China has advanced its position since that time. The cluster of dark bars on the right-hand side of the figure indicates the introduction of much more frequent coercive actions—those that involve the threat or use of punishment—since 2007. This indicates that China’s policy underwent what Charles Hermann termed a “program shift,” wherein new methods are deployed in pursuit of the state’s foreign policy goals, along with the intensification of existing practices.<sup>37</sup> The finding is consistent with Zhang’s data on the PRC’s coercive responses to Southeast Asian countries’ energy and construction activities, and with some Vietnamese analysts’ early assessments of Chinese policy.<sup>38</sup> It contrasts, however, with most English-language accounts of the PRC’s South China Sea policy, which typically date the assertive shift to 2009, 2012, or even later.

No subsequent year has established a new pattern of behavior different from the one that began in 2007. The strongest alternative candidate is 2012, when nine cases of intensified assertive behavior were observed, including the sei-

37. Hermann, “Changing Course.”

38. Do Thanh Hai and Nguyen Thuy Linh, “In Retrospect of China’s Policy toward South China Sea Disputes since 2007,” *Vietnam Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 85 (June 2011), pp. 1–18.

zure of Scarborough Shoal, making it the PRC's most assertive year since 1970. This did not constitute a turning point, however; rather than continuing to accelerate after 2012, the average yearly number of intensified assertive actions fell back to 5.3 per year in 2013–15, only marginally higher than the 5.1 observed on average each year since 2007. Thus, 2012 is better seen as an extreme case within a broader pattern established five years earlier.

Dating the PRC's assertive shift to 2012 would also obscure a crucial feature of the change in China's behavior that distinguishes its current policy from earlier periods. If, as the data presented here suggest, the fourth surge in assertive PRC maritime behavior began in 2007, then it is also by far the most protracted. The three previous surges lasted only two or three years. In contrast, the intensification of PRC activity that began in 2007 has continued for a decade and beyond.

#### LAYERS OF ASSERTIVENESS

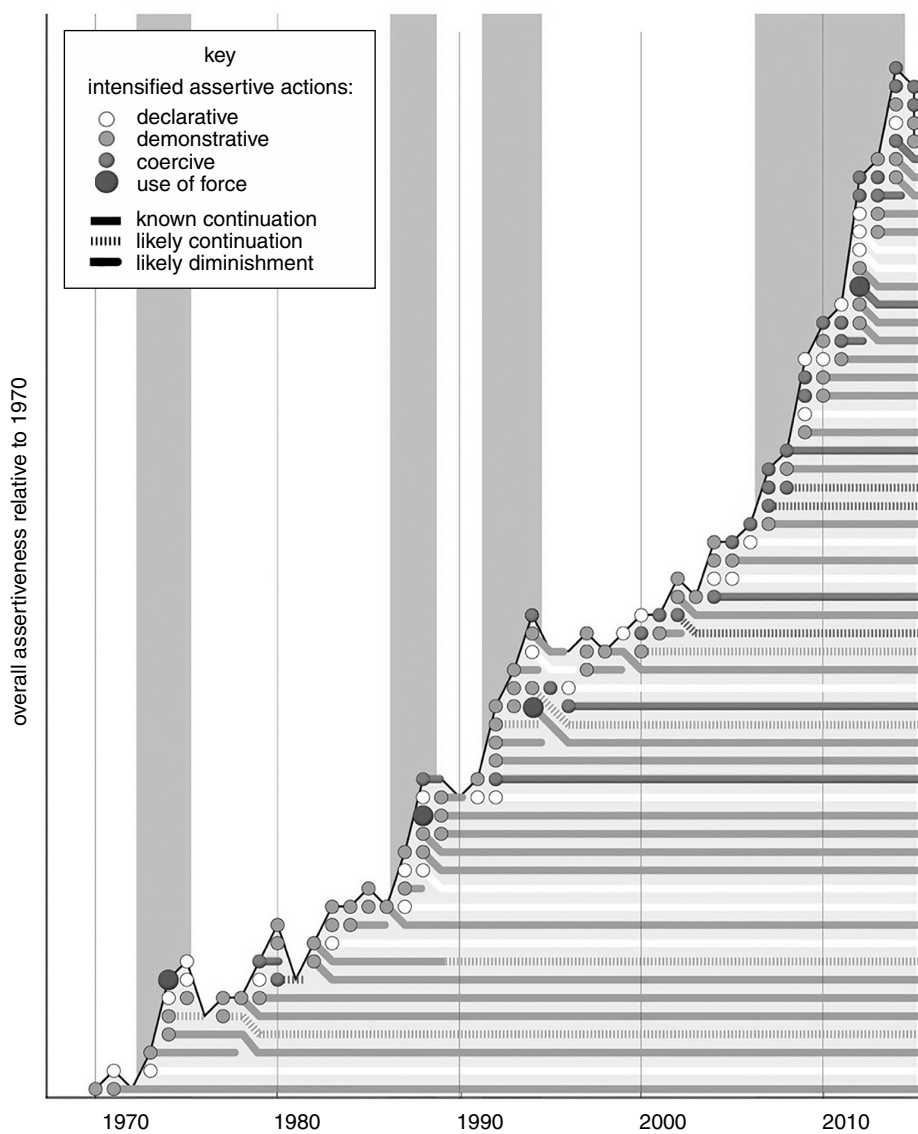
What have these patterns added up to over the long term? Figure 2 addresses this question by adding into the picture what is known, or can reasonably be inferred, about the duration of each identified case of intensified assertive conduct. In more than one-third of the cases, the intensification of China's assertiveness marked a "new normal" that continued at least through to 2015. This stands to reason, given that many assertive actions are by nature ongoing and continuous, such as domestic legal and administrative moves and the construction of facilities in disputed areas, which remain in place until abolished or abandoned. Figure 2 illustrates how each of the surges in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s established a new and much higher overall baseline level of PRC assertiveness in the South China Sea dispute.

The cumulative layering of assertive behaviors also reflects deeper dynamics of state policymaking in maritime and territorial disputes. Assertive actions in a disputed area at one point in time often lay the groundwork for subsequent intensifications of activity. John Garver has noted how China's construction activities in the South China Sea in the 1970s and 1980s created the "physical base" for the expansion of PRC control in the area.<sup>39</sup> Such behaviors not only create *faits accomplis*; they can also have long-term consequences beyond any discernable change in the status quo. Building a new road in a disputed territory, or expanding an occupied island or reef, can

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39. John Garver, "China's Push through the South China Sea," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 132 (December 1992), pp. 999–1026, especially pp. 1006, 1008, doi.org/10.1017/S0305741000045513.

Figure 2. Accumulation of Assertive Behaviors by the People's Republic of China in the South China Sea, 1970–2015



support an increased administrative presence and resource exploitation in surrounding areas. Scientific research—especially cartography, meteorology, and oceanography—is a precondition for future military operations, infrastructure, and patrolling. An increase in patrolling at one point in time can facilitate further increases in following years, as frontline actors gain experience and confidence operating in once unfamiliar areas.

The Philippines-China standoff over Scarborough Shoal in 2012 provides a vivid illustration of this dynamic. The PRC's rapid on-water intervention to block the Philippines navy from arresting Chinese fishermen was only possible because two maritime surveillance vessels were located nearby on a regular patrol. Such patrols commenced in the South China Sea in 2007; five years later, they directly enabled the PRC's seizure of Scarborough Shoal.<sup>40</sup> The pattern of accumulating layers in figure 2 thus illustrate how assertiveness results not only from contemporary policy decisions, but also from groundwork laid down in previous years. This observation has important implications for the explanation of shifts in behavior. Causal links between past and present lines of action make it necessary to consider not just the immediate triggers for an observed change in state behavior, but also temporally distant decisions and slower-moving processes whose effects may only become observable years after being set in motion.

#### SUMMARY

The analysis above represents the first systematic attempt at measuring the long-term changes over time in the behavior of the PRC in the South China Sea dispute. Operationalizing the typology of assertive state behavior in maritime and territorial disputes with a unique time series of events data demonstrates several important descriptive findings. Increasing assertiveness is not a new feature of China's policy in the South China Sea, and within this overall trend of increasing activity, four turning points have each established a new policy status quo on the issue. The surges in PRC assertiveness that followed the turning points in 1973, 1987, and 1992 lasted around three years, but China's fourth push is far more sustained, having begun in 2007, several years earlier than most English-language analysis has assumed. These findings provide a

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40. As explained by the head of the State Oceanic Administration in a 2012 television interview. Liu Cigui, interview by Wu Xiaoli, "Liu Cigui: Bohai yiyou haishang wuran yanzhong [Liu Cigui: pollution serious from Bohai oil spill], Fenghuang Weishi, June 11, 2012, [https://phtv.ifeng.com/program/wdsz/detail\\_2012\\_06/11/15202134\\_0.shtml](https://phtv.ifeng.com/program/wdsz/detail_2012_06/11/15202134_0.shtml)

descriptive foundation upon which to qualitatively investigate the causes of change in Beijing's behavior.

### *Explaining China's Policy Shifts*

Explanations for China's South China Sea policy broadly fall into two groups, respectively emphasizing external and internal factors. The former point primarily to changes in the strategic context in which the PRC operates. In line with realist expectations, many analysts argue that China acts as assertively as its strategic circumstances permit. Thus, favorable changes in the PRC's relative power within its region—both internally from the growth of China's own military, economic, and technological capabilities and externally from the decline of those of others, particularly the United States—have resulted in China intensifying its activities.<sup>41</sup> As Aaron Friedberg argues, behind the PRC's intensified assertiveness lies “increasingly favorable leadership assessments of the nation's relative power and of the threats and opportunities that it confronts.”<sup>42</sup>

A second popular explanation for policy change in the South China Sea has focused on resources, particularly hydrocarbons and fisheries.<sup>43</sup> In general, the higher the value of the disputed resources to the claimants, the greater the incentives for competition.<sup>44</sup> International estimates of the South China Sea's oil and gas reserves have been revised downward over time, but internal Chinese government sources dating back to the 1970s have consistently touted their potential, along with other mineral deposits rarely mentioned in outside analysis.<sup>45</sup> The area's abundant tropical fisheries are also heavily emphasized in PRC sources, and the severe depletion of fish stocks in coastal waters in the

41. Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 94–95; Chi-Kin Lo, *China's Policy towards Territorial Disputes: The Case of the South China Sea Islands* (London: Routledge, 1989); and Chen Jie, “China's Spratly Policy: With Special Reference to the Philippines and Malaysia,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 34, No. 10 (October 1994), pp. 893–903, especially pp. 901–902, doi.org/10.2307/2644968.

42. Friedberg, “The Sources of Chinese Conduct,” p. 143.

43. Swaran Singh, “Continuity and Change in China's Maritime Strategy,” *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 23, No. 9 (1999), pp. 1493–1508, esp. 1506, doi.org/10.1080/09700169908455139.

44. Charles L. Glaser, “How Oil Influences U.S. National Security,” *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Fall 2013), pp. 112–145, especially pp. 122–123, doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\_a\_00137; and Jeff D. Colgan, “Fueling the Fire: Pathways from Oil to War,” *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Fall 2013), pp. 146–180, especially p. 156, doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\_a\_00135.

45. See, for example, Qu Zhenmou, “Nanhai haishang jubu zhanzheng wenti tantao (Discussion of the issue of a limited war in the South China Sea),” in *Nansha Wenti Lunwen Ziliao Huibian* [Compendium of essays and materials on the Spratly issue] (Beijing: Haijun Junshi Xueshu

post-1978 reform era underscores the plausibility of resources as a driver of PRC policy there.

Third, following the logic of preventive war, states may make assertive moves in the present to avoid doing so under worse circumstances in the future. When a state's bargaining position in the dispute is weak and deteriorates further, leaders may perceive the possibility of a favorable diplomatic resolution to be in danger of declining to zero, creating incentives for escalatory action to preserve the claim.<sup>46</sup> Fravel's exhaustive study of the PRC's territorial disputes found that "China has been more willing to use force when its bargaining power has declined, not strengthened." Following this logic, external developments that significantly weaken the PRC's position in the dispute—such as new assertive actions by other claimants—may explain an increase in the state's assertiveness.<sup>47</sup>

Fourth, changes in the international normative context could spur new assertive behaviors. The UNCLOS regime has hardened disputed maritime claims on all sides, spurred the development of new enforcement capabilities, and created incentives for assertive actions to bolster claimants' legal positions.<sup>48</sup> According to Sheila Smith, this has been the case in the East China Sea, where the Law of the Sea regime has hardened the claims of Japan and China to the oil and gas resources in the area.<sup>49</sup>

Internal explanations for China's assertive policies include domestic legitimacy issues; rising nationalism; elite competition; bureaucratic politics; and individual leaders. Domestic legitimacy issues may have prompted international confrontation, per diversionary conflict theory. Many analysts have argued further that rising nationalist sentiment among the public in China has created pressure for tough foreign policies to preserve regime legitimacy.<sup>50</sup> Substate policy interests are argued to have lobbied successfully for assertive policies,

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Yanjiusuo, 1988), pp. 115–127, especially p. 117; and Liu Huaqing, *Liu Huaqing Huiyilu* [Memoirs of Liu Huaqing] (Beijing: Jiefangjun Chubanshe, 2007), pp. 534–535.

46. Huth, *Standing Your Ground*, p. 55; and Fravel, "Power Shifts and Escalation," pp. 48–50.

47. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, pp. 7–9, 31; and Swaine and Fravel, "China's Assertive Behavior."

48. Isaac B. Kardon, *China's Law of the Sea* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, forthcoming); and Andrew Chubb, "Chinese Popular Nationalism and PRC Policy in the South China Sea," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Western Australia, 2017, pp. 133–180.

49. Sheila A. Smith, *Intimate Rivals: Japanese Domestic Politics and a Rising China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. 107–110.

50. Robert S. Ross, "The Problem with the Pivot," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 6 (November/December 2012), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2012-11-01/problem-pivot>; and Zhao, "Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited."



with competing maritime agencies seeking to stretch their mandates, win budgetary allocations, and secure political prestige within the PRC bureaucracy.<sup>51</sup> Intensified intrastate political competition could also make arguments for restraint prohibitively risky for CCP elites.<sup>52</sup> Finally, individual leaders could make a difference: a politically weak leader may lack the authority to prevent assertive maritime conduct, or a more hawkish leader may drive a more assertive policy after taking charge.<sup>53</sup>

As James Rosenau suggested, breakpoints in a state's behavior offer important information upon which to base explanations of foreign policy change.<sup>54</sup> Below, the four breakpoints identified in the events data on Beijing's maritime behavior—1973, 1987, 1992, and 2007—are assessed in light of existing works and a range of PRC party-state sources.

#### 1973: PUSHING PAST THE PARACELS

From late 1973 onward, the PRC used force to evict South Vietnam from the Paracel Islands and stepped up its civilian presence and military infrastructure construction. Saigon was not the only target, however, as the PRC pushed past the Paracels, launching a systematic program of scientific surveys in the waters to the east and south of the archipelago. The PRC also dialed up criticism of the Philippines over its moves in the Spratlys, opened up a new China-Philippines bilateral dispute over Scarborough Shoal, and began asserting its restrictive position on foreign military surveillance in and beyond the territorial seas against the United States and the Soviet Union. Existing accounts of China's actions in this period have pointed to advantageous geopolitical circumstances, negative local developments for China's position in the disputed area, and a growing struggle over offshore energy resources to explain the PRC's use of force against South Vietnam. As shown below, however, the

51. Wong, "More than Peripheral," pp. 744–752; Garver, "China's Push through the South China Sea" pp. 1026–1027; Jakobson, *China's Unpredictable Maritime Security Actors*, p. 6; and ICG, *Stirring Up the South China Sea (I)*, pp. 18–26.

52. James Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State: The Rise of Public Opinion in China's Japan Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); and Joseph Fewsmith and Stanley Rosen, "The Domestic Context of Chinese Foreign Policy: Does 'Public Opinion' Matter?" in David M. Lampton, ed., *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 151–187.

53. Chang Liao, "The Sources of China's Assertiveness," pp. 827–831; and You Ji, "The PLA and Diplomacy," p. 253.

54. James Rosenau, "Towards Single-Country Theories of Foreign Policy: The Case of the USSR," in Charles F. Hermann, Charles W. Kegley, and James N. Rosenau, eds., *New Directions in the Study of Foreign Policy* (Winchester, Mass.: Allen and Unwin, 1987), pp. 53–74, especially p. 61.

Paracels operation was part of a more general policy shift rooted in changing international norms regarding the status of maritime space.

The most visible element of the surge from 1973 was the seizure of the southwestern half of the Paracel Islands, known as the Crescent Group. The operation, which established PRC control over the entire archipelago for the first time, was an early demonstration of the PRC's use of irregular maritime forces as frontline implementers of new policies. It began when armed fishing crews—maritime militia—began staking out unoccupied islands in the Crescent Group in December 1973.<sup>55</sup> Military confrontation followed in January 1974 when Saigon sent reinforcements to push the PRC out of its new positions. Beijing probably had not intended to immediately evict the nearby South Vietnamese forces, but the advance into the Crescent Group was clearly well planned.<sup>56</sup> Drawing on eyewitness testimony, the United States Army Special Research Detachment assessed that preparations were “initiated at least by December 1973, and possibly as early as September 1973.”<sup>57</sup>

The advance was timed to capitalize on the weakness of the South Vietnamese regime and the warming of U.S.-China relations after 1972. A U.S. intelligence memo at the time referred to the prospect of American support for South Vietnam in the Paracels as “virtually ruled out.”<sup>58</sup> China's leaders also may have sensed a closing window of opportunity to prevent the South Vietnam-held islands from falling into the hands of Soviet-backed North Vietnam, which would be more capable of defending them than the moribund Saigon government. Indeed, as Chi-kin Lo has shown, signs of mistrust between Beijing and Hanoi over the issue were already emerging by 1973.<sup>59</sup> Fravel finds that documentary evidence to support a “window of

55. Fravel, “Power Shifts and Escalation,” p. 75 n. 111; Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 280; and Dieter Heinzig, “Disputed Islands in the South China Sea: Paracels—Spratlys—Pratas—Macclesfield Bank” (Hamburg, Germany: Institute of Asian Affairs, 1976), p. 34, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp08c01297r000300180013-8>. On the recent roles of China's maritime militia, see Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy, “China's Maritime Militia,” in Michael McDevitt, ed., *Becoming a Great “Maritime Power”: A Chinese Dream* (Arlington, Va.: CNA, 2016), pp. 62–83, [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/IRM-2016-U-013646.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/IRM-2016-U-013646.pdf).

56. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, pp. 281–282.

57. United States Army Special Research Detachment (USASRD), *Chinese Amphibious Assaults in the Paracel Archipelago January 1974*, December 27, 1974, SRD-SR-44-74, Fort George G. Meade, Maryland, p. 1. The author thanks Bill Hayton for sharing this source.

58. Office of the Director of Central Intelligence, “Potential for Conflict over Certain Disputed Islands in the East and South China Sea,” February 5, 1974, Library of Congress, p. 11, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/loc-hak-558-15-12-3>.

59. Lo, *China's Policy*, pp. 68–73.

opportunity” interpretation is lacking, but acknowledges that the U.S. draw-down in Southeast Asia resulted in “reduced constraints on China’s use of force.”<sup>60</sup> At a minimum, then, these positive changes in the PRC’s relative power position within its region presented advantageous conditions for the move into the Crescent Group.

Energy resources were quickly touted as a likely driver of the PRC’s actions.<sup>61</sup> Preliminary seismic surveys conducted under UN auspices had identified potential hydrocarbons in the Spratly area in 1969, prompting the Philippines and South Vietnam to occupy islands and initiate hydrocarbon explorations there.<sup>62</sup> The assertive push also coincided with the spike in world oil prices after the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries’ October 1973 embargo, increasing the incentives for confrontation over resources. However, while the potential resource bounties may have contributed to the PRC’s calculations, they probably were not a central motivation. The PRC made its first official claim to resource rights around the disputed islands more than four years after the UN survey, and the statement did not refer to oil and gas in particular.<sup>63</sup> China was also insulated from the oil price shock, being self-sufficient in oil production at that time thanks to the large onshore field at Daqing.<sup>64</sup> As shown below, if energy resources mattered, it was as one element of a more general emerging PRC interest in the area.

A little-noted scientific program that immediately followed the Paracels operation casts significant new light on the motivations behind the PRC’s South China Sea policy at this time.<sup>65</sup> In the first half of 1974, the PRC launched a systematic program of scientific surveys across the Paracel Archipelago Sea Area (*Xisha Qundao hai qu*)—a wide geographic area named after, but extending far beyond, the archipelago.<sup>66</sup> These investigations were much more than oil and gas hunts. A government yearbook describes their breadth of purpose: “The

60. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, pp. 284–286.

61. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), “The Paracel Islands Incident,” January 21, 1974, General CIA Records, p. 3, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp85t00353r000100010005-0>.

62. See Marwyn Samuels, *Contest for the South China Sea* (New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 155.

63. The original statement appears on page 1 of the *People’s Daily*, January 12, 1974.

64. See Lee Hong-Pyo, “China’s Petroleum Trade,” *Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Winter/Spring 1990), pp. 184–221, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23253537>.

65. Garver noted that “the seas south of the Paracels were surveyed between 1973 and 1978,” but he did not discuss the implications of this for the PRC’s interests in the area. Garver, “China’s Push through the South China Sea,” p. 1006.

66. For an illustrative map, see the online supplementary materials at [doi.org/10.7910/DVN/3Y7NRU](https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/3Y7NRU).

unfolding of marine hydrological-meteorological, geographical-geological, biological, chemical, and physical survey research has extreme significance for fisheries production, transportation, oil and gas exploitation, warship activities, overall resource appraisals, and maritime forecasting." Besides geological samples, the surveys collected large volumes of biological specimens, gravitational, magnetic, bathymetric, and meteorological data.<sup>67</sup>

The scope of the PRC's comprehensive survey program soon expanded southward from the Paracel Archipelago Sea Area to the Central South China Sea Area (*Nanhai zhongbu haiqu*). The rapid push past the Paracels, and the spatial arrangement of these operations, with measurement stations evenly spaced across wide expanses of sea, illustrates how the scope of the PRC's interests in the South China Sea had expanded beyond claims to the disputed islands, which it had inherited from its civil war rival, the Republic of China.<sup>68</sup> The PRC's interests in the South China Sea had undergone a crucial redefinition, beyond island territories and toward broad-ranging administrative rights across large maritime spaces—including, but by no means limited to, the resources within. Developments in the international normative context of the emerging Law of the Sea regime explain why this new interest in the administration of maritime space was at the forefront of PRC policy planning at the time.

The match between the start of the UNCLOS III negotiations in 1973 and China's assertive push past the Paracels was not coincidental. The negotiations specifically aimed to codify new norms of state jurisdiction beyond the narrow customary territorial sea limit, and it was their commencement that prompted the PRC's first official statements on the matter in July and August 1973.<sup>69</sup> As Isaac Kardon shows, the PRC's positions on state jurisdiction at sea were at first derived largely from other developing states' statements over the preceding years, but Beijing quickly emerged as an influential player in the negotiations.<sup>70</sup> The PRC's advocacy for a 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ), as against other less expansive proposals, reflected the CCP's radical ideological line of the time. However, it was detrimental to the PRC's material

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67. SOA, *Zhongguo Haiyang Nianjian 1986*, pp. 403–404.

68. See maps in the online supplementary materials.

69. "Working Paper on Sea Area Within National Jurisdiction Submitted by Chinese Delegation," July 16, 1973, United Nations General Assembly (A/AC.138/SC.II/L.34); and Zhiguo Gao, "China and the LOS Convention," *Marine Policy*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (May 1991), pp. 199–209, doi.org/10.1016/0308-597X(91)90063-H.

70. Isaac B. Kardon, "Rising Power, Creeping Jurisdiction: China's Law of the Sea," Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 2017, pp. 93–97; on the PRC's impact in the negotiations, see pp. 104–120.

interests, as PRC delegates later lamented.<sup>71</sup> Specifically, the 200-nautical-mile EEZ norm greatly bolstered, and in some cases even created, the legal resource claims of China's neighbors in the East and South China Seas—as illustrated starkly in the 2013–16 arbitration case launched by the Philippines under the UNCLOS. The PRC has wrestled with this legacy of greatly expanded, yet materially unfavorable, norms of maritime jurisdiction ever since.

The UNCLOS III process thus crystallized not only the party-state's interests in offshore resources, but also wide-ranging security interests across large expanses of ocean—a position that has been a key point of U.S.-China friction in East Asia since that time. The expansive PRC positions on state jurisdiction at sea that emerged through the UNCLOS negotiations were formulated at the highest levels of the party-state. Former diplomat Xu Guangjian, who was part of the PRC's negotiating team, has stated that a central-level leading group was established under State Council leadership to oversee the negotiations, coordinating a cross-departmental delegation that included the Foreign Ministry, State Geological Bureau, State Oceanic Administration (SOA), and People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy.<sup>72</sup>

Evidence for internal drivers, rather than emerging international norms, as a cause of the new assertiveness from 1973 is comparatively weak. The policy shift involved a diverse array of actors within the party-state: while the PLA Navy and local maritime militia implemented the Paracels operation, the Chinese Academy of Sciences conducted the subsequent comprehensive survey programs south of the Paracels, and the assertive South China Sea propaganda campaigns against Hanoi and Manila came from organs largely controlled by the radical leftist faction later known as the "Gang of Four." Finally, as noted above, the PRC's positions in the UNCLOS negotiations were formulated through a cross-departmental group under State Council leadership.<sup>73</sup>

As economic growth fluctuated and the political campaigns of the Cultural Revolution dragged on, the basic conditions for diversionary foreign policy arguably existed. Yet, whatever domestic insecurities CCP leaders may have felt in 1973, they surely paled in comparison to those they faced in 1976. The death

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71. Shan Xu, "Lianheguo Haiyangfa Gongyue tanpan shimo: Zhong-Ri ceng jiu dalujia huajie jiaofeng" [The full story of the UNCLOS negotiations: China and Japan crossed swords over continental shelf delimitation], *Liaowang Dongfang Zhoukan* [Oriental Outlook Weekly], December 10, 2012, [https://news.ifeng.com/shendu/lwdfzk/detail\\_2012\\_12/10/20017168\\_0.shtml](https://news.ifeng.com/shendu/lwdfzk/detail_2012_12/10/20017168_0.shtml).

72. Ibid.

73. Ibid.

of Premier Zhou Enlai turned into a serious political crisis when massive crowds commemorating Zhou turned into angry demonstrations denouncing the radical CCP leadership. As Frederick Teiwes and Warren Sun have noted, this constituted “the first challenge to the regime from below” in the PRC’s history.<sup>74</sup> The crisis was followed in quick succession by the death of Mao, the massive Tangshan earthquake that killed more than 200,000 people, and an economic recession. Each of these events added further grave challenges to the party’s authority. Yet far from prompting a foreign policy confrontation, this series of domestic political issues coincided with a lull in China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea. No new assertive behaviors are known to have been introduced in 1976. However, because most of the new activities were ongoing, China’s baseline policy was now significantly more assertive than it had been before the surge.

#### 1987: SURGING TO THE SPRATLYS

The PRC’s second wave of new assertiveness in the South China Sea, which began in 1987, repeated several features seen in the 1973–75 surge. Once again, the PLA Navy clashed with Vietnamese forces sent to oppose a well-planned PRC operation to seize unoccupied features. Like the 1974 battle, the Sino-Vietnamese confrontation of 1988 was only the most salient result of a more general shift in the PRC’s policy that predated the clash. Beijing’s verbal assertiveness against claimants from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) reemerged after more than a decade, and there is evidence PRC policy planners intended the move against Vietnam in part to serve as a warning to Malaysia and the Philippines to refrain from oil and gas exploration in the area.<sup>75</sup> The confrontation in the Spratlys was accompanied by another major expansion in civilian “comprehensive surveys,” with intense multi-disciplinary scientific surveying now covering the entire “nine-dash line” area.

74. Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun, “The First Tiananmen Incident Revisited: Elite Politics and Crisis Management at the End of the Maoist Era,” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 2 (Summer 2004), pp. 211–235, at p. 212, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40022499>.

75. Haijun Silingbu (Naval Command), “Guanyu ‘Nansha Qundao wenti xueshu yantaohui’ de qingkuang baogao” [Situation report on the “Academic Symposium on the Spratly Archipelago issue”], *Nansha Wenti Lunwen Ziliao Huibian*, pp. 8–16, especially pp. 13–14; Han Yujia, “Nanhai zhanlüe geju yu zhoubian guojia junshi fazhan qianjing ji dui jieju Nansha wenti de yingxiang” [The impact of the South China Sea strategic structure on the military development outlook for neighboring countries and the resolution of the Spratly issue], in *Nansha Wenti Lunwen Ziliao Huibian*, pp. 61–62.



And like in 1976, the wave of assertiveness stalled with the arrival of a serious domestic legitimacy crisis.

The move into the Spratlys was based on highly favorable assessments of the regional geopolitical situation at the time. PRC planners expressed confidence that neither superpower would intervene so long as Vietnam were the ostensible target. In mid-1987, for example, Han Yujia of the PLA General Staff Department's Intelligence Division told a naval research center that, because China was already at war with Vietnam on the land border, fighting Vietnam in the Spratlys "will not have much of an effect internationally . . . we estimate that the US and USSR will not stand with China, nor directly oppose China . . . in military terms the probability of their direct involvement is low."<sup>76</sup> Numerous other internal documents echo this assessment, which proved accurate.<sup>77</sup>

One of Vietnam's key material strengths was its military alliance with the Soviet Union, which maintained a large naval base at Cam Ranh Bay. But as Sino-Soviet relations moved toward normalization after Mikhail Gorbachev's ascension in 1985, analysts in Beijing had observed a succession of signals of reduced Soviet alliance commitment to Vietnam.<sup>78</sup> PRC sources also indicate a recognition of a temporary window of opportunity to move into the Spratlys with minimal risk of encountering strong international opposition. Participants in a January 1988 naval conference on the issue noted that "major countries" such as Japan and the United States were likely to become involved in developing oil and gas resources in the South China Sea, which would complicate future attempts to expand the PRC presence. According to a summary provided by the PLA's naval command to the General Staff Department, the majority view at the cross-departmental conference was that the PRC should make its move before Vietnam's entanglements in Cambodia were resolved.<sup>79</sup>

China's position in the South China Sea dispute was not rapidly worsening before its assertive shift in 1987. Détente between Washington and Moscow reduced the possibility of global superpower conflict, enabling Beijing to concentrate more attention and resources on its periphery, including disputed maritime territorial claims.<sup>80</sup> On the local level, as Fravel points out, Southeast Asian claimants occupied around a dozen Spratly features from 1980 to 1988,

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76. Han Yujia, "Nanhai Zhanlüe," pp. 61–62.

77. *Nansha Wenti Lunwen Ziliao Huibian*, pp. 54, 108, 118–119, 129.

78. Chen, "China's Spratly Policy," pp. 901–902.

79. Naval Command, "Guanyu 'Nansha Qundao wenti'," pp. 13–14.

80. Chen, "China's Spratly Policy," pp. 901–902.

“weakening China’s bargaining position in a dispute in which it held no contested land.”<sup>81</sup> Chinese military sources indicate, however, that the majority of these actions occurred in 1988, after the PRC made its move.<sup>82</sup> In the two years before China’s policy shifted on the water, Vietnam and Malaysia occupied three previously vacant Spratly reefs, but none of these features was a land territory.<sup>83</sup> The archipelago’s fifteen natural islands and rocks had virtually all been occupied by the end of the 1970s, the most recent being Malaysia’s occupation of Swallow Reef in 1983. Given that even today there remain many dozens of unoccupied submerged reefs in the area, it is hard to see the occupation of such marginal features as constituting a rapid decline in the PRC’s bargaining position. The accumulation of assertive actions by other claimants over the preceding decade may well have added to the PRC’s motivations, offering moral and political justifications for a move into the Spratlys. There is little reason to believe, however, that Beijing would have refrained from such a move had other claimants been more restrained.

Preparations for establishing a foothold in the Spratlys are apparent from 1982, which saw the appointment of Liu Huaqing as PLA Navy commander and the conclusion of the UNCLOS negotiations. Once again, a key milestone in the development of the Law of the Sea regime closely preceded the PRC’s push for greater control of its maritime periphery. In the first half of 1983, Beijing ordered the PLA Navy’s first mission to the southernmost extent of China’s claims in the South China Sea, sent the SOA to conduct new oceanographic surveys of the central South China Sea, and issued a new standardized list of 287 official names for the islands, rocks, and reefs of the Spratly archipelago.<sup>84</sup> The following year, the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) launched the first comprehensive surveys of the southern South China Sea, gathering gravitational, hydrological, meteorological, and resource information neces-

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81. Fravel, “Power Shifts and Escalation,” p. 77.

82. See, for example, “Waiguo qinzhū wō Nansha daojiào qingkuàng” [Situation of foreign countries occupation of China’s Spratly Islands and Reefs], in *Nansha Zigu Shu Zhonghua* [The Spratlys have belonged to China since ancient times] (Guangzhou, China: Guangzhou Junqu Silingbu Bangongshi, 1988), pp. 203–207. This source lists eight new occupations from January to March 1988, after the PRC moved in, compared with two in 1987, two in 1986, one in 1983, and one in 1980, for a total of fourteen features occupied from 1980 to 1988.

83. Malaysia occupied Ardasier Reef and Mariveles Reef in 1986, and Vietnam occupied Barque Canada Reef in early 1987. See *ibid.*, pp. 204–205; and Zhang, *Nansha Qundao Dashiji*, pp. 113, 203. Vietnam also occupied West Reef in December 1987, also after China’s push into the Spratlys began (not before).

84. SOA, “Dashiji: 1983”; and Zhang, *Nansha Qundao Dashiji*, p. 97.

sary for establishing a permanent presence there.<sup>85</sup> In 1985, the Central Military Commission adopted revised strategic guidance endorsing Liu's "off-shore defense" concept, which had been in development since the late 1970s. This crucial reorientation, turning the focus of the PLA Navy's operations from coastal areas to the "near seas" within the first island chain, was an important condition for the PRC's expansion into the Spratlys from 1987.<sup>86</sup>

A map of the routes of the CAS comprehensive surveys conducted between 1984 and 1986 illustrates the PRC's increasingly concrete interests in the maritime spaces across the specific area enclosed by the nine-dash line.<sup>87</sup> By early 1987, as the top leadership actively considered an operation to establish a presence in the Spratlys, the State Council ordered the CAS to further "strengthen survey research in Spratly waters." In response, the academy organized the largest comprehensive survey expedition yet, sending two ships on a six-week voyage that had "major significance for correcting charts, exploiting resources and navigation." The mission investigated candidate locations for occupation and placed sovereignty markers on Jackson Atoll and Louisa Reef.<sup>88</sup>

The comprehensive scientific survey program that preceded the move into the Spratlys was also indicative of a heightened interest in the aquatic resources and hydrocarbon deposits of the area. This interest, however, related less to resource security or increasing resource values than to the transformation of the PRC's economic model, which rapidly increased demand for energy, while also unleashing profit-oriented fishing enterprises, placing coastal fisheries under strain. A ban on fishing in the Spratlys, in effect since 1954, was lifted in 1985, after which the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries began organizing fishing boats to commence the "revival of production in the Spratlys."<sup>89</sup>

Domestic drivers again appear comparatively weak in explaining China's 1987 policy shift. In another echo of 1974, the CCP top leadership may not

85. Zhang, *Nansha Qundao Dashiji*, p. 97.

86. Xu Qi, Andrew S. Erickson, and Lyle J. Goldstein, "Maritime Geostrategy and the Development of the Chinese Navy in the Early Twenty-first Century," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Autumn 2006), pp. 66–67, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol59/iss4/5>.

87. See map 2 in the online supplementary materials.

88. Zhang, *Nansha Qundao Dashiji*, pp. 114, 120–121.

89. Guo Jinfu, "Nansha yuye ziyuan de baohu he heli kaifa" [Protection and rational development of Spratly fisheries resources], speech at inaugural Symposium on Spratly Comprehensive Scientific Surveys, Chinese Academy of Sciences, January 1988, in *Nansha Wenti Lunwen Ziliao Huibian*, pp. 298–303; and SOA, *Zhongguo Haiyang Nianjian 1994–1996* (Beijing: Haiyang Chubanshe, 1997), p. 45.

have ordered the attack on Vietnamese forces in March 1988: the PLA Navy captain reportedly opened fire on the Vietnamese troops without authorization.<sup>90</sup> The party leadership in Beijing did, however, approve the major assertive actions at this time that led to conflict, including the seizure of six disputed reefs. As recounted by PLA Navy Cmdr. Liu in his memoirs, the large research missions, live-fire naval exercises, and seizure and occupation of six reefs were all carefully discussed and agreed upon by the top civilian leaders.<sup>91</sup>

Zhao Ziyang, who took over as CCP general secretary in 1987, was intimately involved in the plan to establish a foothold in the Spratlys, according to Admiral Liu. It is unlikely that another CCP leader would have acted significantly differently. Zhao's predecessor, Hu Yaobang, had personally visited the Paracel Islands in December 1985, where he vowed to "not permit anyone to seize even one inch of our great country's land."<sup>92</sup> The ultimate authorization for the Spratly step-up came from Deng Xiaoping, who had firmly established his paramount political authority at the end of the 1970s.<sup>93</sup>

Drawing on official histories of the PLA Navy, Garver has argued that bureaucratic politics were a significant driver of South China Sea policy in the 1980s. Highlighting public statements by senior PLA Navy officers emphasizing the economic importance of the South China Sea's resources, Garver argues the PLA Navy lobbied successfully to end a lull in China's Spratly advance in the mid-1980s by reframing its own strategic interests with reference to the state's new interest in economic development.<sup>94</sup> But as shown earlier, preparatory work for a move to the Spratlys was ongoing throughout the decade, as evident in both the CAS and the SOA expanding their comprehensive survey programs, the high-level decision to restart state-sponsored fishing, and the State Council's approval of a new standardized list of the names of specific PRC-claimed features there. Moreover, as noted earlier, the recognition of broad economic interests in the South China Sea had already begun to form among diverse bureaucratic actors through the UNCLOS negotiation process beginning in 1973. In framing the PRC's South China Sea interests as economic as well as strategic, Admiral Liu and the PLA Navy were probably pushing on an open door.

A diversionary motivation also appears unlikely. Macroeconomic indicators

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90. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 296.

91. See Liu, *Liu Huaqing Huiyilu*, pp. 535–539.

92. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 292.

93. Liu, *Liu Huaqing Huiyilu*, p. 539.

94. Garver, "China's Push through the South China Sea," pp. 999, 1022.

were generally positive throughout 1987. While China's new South China Sea policy followed turbulent student demonstrations over the winter of 1986–87, this paled in comparison with the legitimacy crisis the CCP faced in 1989. Here, once again, rather than leading to foreign policy aggression, the student-led protests in Tiananmen Square and their violent suppression in June 1989 coincided with an abrupt end to the PRC's assertiveness in the South China Sea.

#### 1992: FILLING A VACUUM?

After two quiet years in the wake of the Tiananmen crackdown, China resumed its advances in the South China Sea in early 1992. The year began with a major inspection trip in January by Hainan Province officials and PLA officers, who left behind sovereignty markers on seven features in the northern part of the Spratlys. The next month, Beijing promulgated its Law on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone, inscribing the claim to the disputed islands in domestic law for the first time and implicitly authorizing the use of force to evict intruders. In May 1992, Beijing awarded an oil concession to a little-known U.S. energy firm, Crestone, covering 25,000 square kilometers in the Vanguard Bank. On-water standoffs ensued when exploration operations began two years later, with PLA Navy warships blockading a Vietnamese oil rig in the area.

In 1993, the CAS comprehensive survey voyages in the Spratlys restarted after a two-year hiatus, and Vietnam repeatedly protested unilateral PRC energy surveys in the Gulf of Tonkin. Jiang Zemin made the first visit by a CCP general secretary to a disputed island since 1985—and still the most recent—when he toured the Paracels in April 1993. There were upgrades to the six Spratly outposts, creating a new and much larger generation of concrete “reef forts” (*jiaobao*) to replace the spartan “huts-on-stilts” (*gaojiaowu*) built in 1988, and a new concrete sovereignty marker at Scarborough Shoal. In 1994, the Philippines and Vietnam protested increased Chinese fishing activities in the disputed area in the wake of a major PRC survey of aquatic resources.<sup>95</sup>

The surge culminated in the seizure and occupation of Mischief Reef in late 1994. This was the PRC's first use of force in the eastern part of the Spratly archipelago, loosely controlled by the Philippines, a U.S. treaty ally. Mischief Reef remains China's most recent occupation of any disputed feature in the South China Sea. Although originally implemented by stealth, via the con-

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95. For sources on specific activities, see the online appendix data file.

struction of a fisheries base, the move quickly led to confrontation in May 1995, when Chinese vessels blocked a Philippine ship attempting to bring journalists to observe the situation at Mischief Reef.<sup>96</sup> Following unprecedented public statements of concern from both ASEAN and the United States, China once again reverted to a pattern of steady, low-profile advancement. Once more, however, many new lines of assertive action had been added over the preceding three years, leaving the PRC's overall policy much more assertive than ever before.

The series of moves from 1992 closely followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the U.S. military drawdown in East Asia—developments that created a perception of a “power vacuum” among many regional officials.<sup>97</sup> This concern was so widespread that Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen explicitly stated in a 1992 meeting with ASEAN ministers, “It is not necessary for any country to fill up this so-called vacuum.” It also continued the hardening of the PRC's policy at key moments in the development of the Law of the Sea regime, notably the February 1992 passage of the PRC's Territorial Sea Law in anticipation of the coming into effect of the UNCLOS in 1994.<sup>98</sup>

Energy resources were more plausibly a direct contributor to the PRC's assertive surge from 1992 than in 1973 or 1987, though the evidence is not conclusive. In the 1980s, the PRC's growing energy demands had largely been met through ramped-up domestic onshore production, but by 1991, production growth had flattened while consumption continued to soar. Within two years, the PRC had become a net importer of oil for the first time since the 1950s.<sup>99</sup> The events data provide circumstantial support for this contention: more than one-third of the newly assertive Chinese actions identified in 1992–94 concerned energy resources, compared to around 10 percent in earlier surge periods.<sup>100</sup> Yet the energy thesis is weakened by the fact that the PRC moderated its behavior from 1995 onward, while its dependence on energy imports rapidly worsened. It is possible that the looming threat of energy insecurity contributed to the push for the resources from 1992, but in the years that fol-

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96. Xia Zongwan, “90 niandai Zhongguo shoufu Meiji Jiao quan jilu” [A full record of China's re-possession of Mischief Reef in the 1990s], *iFeng*, March 10, 2008, [https://news.ifeng.com/mil/200803/0310\\_235\\_434187.shtml](https://news.ifeng.com/mil/200803/0310_235_434187.shtml).

97. Victor Mallet, “Spratly Dispute Overshadows ASEAN Meeting,” *Financial Times*, July 22, 1992, p. 4, via Factiva.

98. Naval Command, “Guanyu ‘Nansha Qundao wenti,’” p. 15.

99. Lee, “China's Petroleum Trade,” p. 187.

100. See the online appendix.

lowed the PRC accepted dependence on the global market as less risky than unilateral energy development bids in the South China Sea.

The occupation of Mischief Reef has been widely understood as an example of assertive policy driven by lower-level bureaucratic actors rather than the central party-state, but firsthand PRC documentary sources now largely disconfirm this explanation. After Philippine authorities discovered the PRC's new outpost, China's embassy in Manila stated that the move had been initiated by "low-level functionaries acting without the knowledge and consent of the Chinese government," and allegedly to the surprise of Politburo Standing Committee Members.<sup>101</sup> But according to the recollections of Liu Guojun, a PRC Fisheries Administration official tasked with organizing the operation, the decision was taken at the ministerial level or above.<sup>102</sup> The Fisheries Administration's construction effort at Mischief Reef was assisted by a multi-agency civilian scientific and technical team aboard the SOA's *Xiangyanghong-14* research vessel.<sup>103</sup> This cross-departmental collaboration also suggests that the operation was coordinated at a high level within the civilian system.

The assertive surge from 1992 coincided with important political developments in China, but the influence of individual leaders remains difficult to evaluate. It was in January 1992 that Deng Xiaoping conspicuously reasserted his political authority via his "Southern Tour," though there is no evidence that other leaders differed from Deng on South China Sea policy. The presence of longtime PLA Navy Cmdr. Liu Huaqing on the Politburo Standing Committee from 1992 to 1997 could have tilted decisionmaking in favor of greater South China Sea assertiveness. Jiang Zemin's most clear-cut period of political ascendancy, beginning in the mid-1990s, and particularly following Deng's death in 1997, did coincide with the period of moderation in the South China Sea, raising the possibility that Jiang personally may have favored a moderate approach there. Confirmatory evidence is lacking, however.

As in earlier decades, domestic legitimacy challenges once again showed a strong negative correlation with PRC assertiveness in the South China Sea. Economic growth slumped to around 4 percent in 1990—China's most recent

101. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, pp. 296–298.

102. Yi Shi, Yao Zhongcai, and Chen Zhenguo, "Zhongguo Yuzheng shouming chushi Nansha" [China fisheries receives order for expedition to Spratlys], *Qingnian Cankao* [Youth Reference], August 24, 2010, [https://web.archive.org/web/20100901035240/http://qnck.cyol.com/content/2010-08/24/content\\_3390246.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20100901035240/http://qnck.cyol.com/content/2010-08/24/content_3390246.htm)

103. Xia, "90 niandai."



year with no identifiable intensified assertive actions in the South China Sea. A rebound in economic growth from 1991 preceded another surge in the South China Sea the following year, while the next downward turn, during the Asian financial crisis of 1997–98, also coincided with relatively low levels of new PRC assertiveness. This pattern could reflect domestic security challenges drawing state resources and attention away from territorial disputes, while increasing the incentive to seek external cooperation.<sup>104</sup>

The CCP launched a wide-ranging “patriotic education” program aimed at stabilizing the party’s popular legitimacy in the wake of the Tiananmen protests. These campaigns, together with the emergence of a jingoistic semi-commercial media sector and, more recently, online forums enabling PRC citizens to directly share views on political issues, have fueled speculation that popular nationalist sentiments could push the PRC into foreign policy adventurism. If this was a factor contributing to China’s assertiveness in the 1990s, one should expect to find evidence of increasingly confrontational stances from the mid-1990s onward as the patriotic education campaign permeated through society and the wave of popular nationalist publications swelled.<sup>105</sup> Yet the observed pattern is the opposite. China’s assertiveness slowed from 1995 onward; remained relatively low, even though the economic challenges associated with the Asian financial crisis in the second half of the decade; and did not increase again until seven years into the 2000s.

#### 2007 AND AFTER: REALIZING THE NINE-DASH LINE

China’s most recent policy shift in the South China Sea has had two key elements: (1) a rapid buildup of state presence, and (2) the introduction of regular coercive actions across the nine-dash line area. The first change comprised expanding patrol activity by PRC maritime law enforcement fleets, particularly between 2007 and 2013,<sup>106</sup> followed by large-scale artificial island construction

104. Erica Strecker Downs and Phillip C. Saunders, “Legitimacy and the Limits of Nationalism: China and the Diaoyu Islands,” *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Winter 1998/99), pp. 114–146, doi.org/10.1162/isec.23.3.114.

105. Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 103–107; and Yu Huang and Chin-Chuan Lee, “Peddling Party Ideology for a Profit: Media and the Rise of Chinese Nationalism in the 1990s,” in Gary Rawnsley and Ming-yeh T. Rawnsley, eds., *Political Communications in Greater China: The Construction and Reflection of Identity* (New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis, 2003), pp. 41–62.

106. Martinson, *Echelon Defense*; and Andrew Chubb, “Assessing Public Opinion’s Influence on Foreign Policy: The Case of China’s Assertive Maritime Behavior,” *Asian Security*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2019), pp. 159–179, especially pp. 164–166, doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2018.1437723.

in the Spratlys.<sup>107</sup> The seven new islands have since been equipped with anti-ship missiles, climate-controlled hangars for fighter jets, extensive radar facilities, and long runways capable of landing both bombers and large civilian aircraft. They have also facilitated further, and more sustained, increases in ship deployments, underscoring the tendency for assertiveness at one time to lead to even greater assertiveness in the future.

The second key change, the introduction of regular coercive actions, initially targeted Vietnamese geological survey operations, threatened foreign corporations involved in oil and gas projects within the nine-dash line, and coercively implemented new PRC unilateral resource survey operations near the Paracel Islands. This new willingness to use coercion at sea produced confrontations with the United States in 2009, Indonesia in 2010, and the Philippines in 2011, culminating in China's seizure of Scarborough Shoal in 2012.<sup>108</sup> The PRC's regular use of coercive methods has continued across subsequent years, with two to three new cases observed each year.

The growth of China's relative military and economic power in its region was a necessary condition for the PRC's behavioral shift beginning in 2007, but the timing cannot be explained in hard-power terms alone. China's naval superiority over its Southeast Asian rivals was well established by the turn of the century. Already the largest navy in East Asia, the PLA Navy's modernization had been under way since the early to mid-1990s, while Southeast Asian defense budgets had been crimped following the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis.<sup>109</sup> Meanwhile, the diversion of U.S. resources and attention to the Middle East from 2001, and U.S.-China cooperation in the global war on terror, had reduced the likelihood of U.S. military intervention in the South China Sea. If Beijing's new assertive regional maritime policy was based primarily on material power calculations, its behavior should have shifted several years before 2007.

The clearest positive development for China's material power in the region around this time was the 2008 global financial crisis, which weakened and distracted the United States. However, the change in China's behavior in

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107. See the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative's "Island Tracker" (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, n.d.), <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker>.

108. For in-depth case studies of these incidents, see Green et al., *Countering Coercion*; Zhang, "Cautious Bully," pp. 145–157; and Chubb, *Chinese Nationalism and the "Gray Zone."*

109. Bernard D. Cole, "The PLA Navy and 'Active Defense,'" in Stephen J. Flanagan and Michael E. Marti, eds., *The People's Liberation Army and China in Transition* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2003), pp. 129–138.

the South China Sea was unrelated to the financial crisis, the scale of which only became apparent through the second half of 2008. If Beijing saw the weakening of U.S. power as an opportunity to make gains in the South China Sea, that assessment at most entrenched a change in PRC policy that was already under way.

The roots of China's shift trace back more than ten years earlier, to when the PRC wrote its sweeping claims to state jurisdiction at sea into its domestic law for the first time. After ratifying the UNCLOS in 1996, authorities began drafting a suite of new legislation to enshrine China's claims in domestic law. The most important was the PRC's 1998 Law on the Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf, which formalized China's UNCLOS-derived claims to maritime jurisdiction, while also reserving unspecified "historic rights" (*lishixing quanyi*) beyond those allowed under the convention. The State Council assigned the SOA responsibility for upholding these newly codified "maritime rights and interests in accordance with the law," and in January 1999, the SOA established China Marine Surveillance (CMS) as a new "integrated central-regional administrative law enforcement force" tasked with patrolling the PRC's claimed jurisdictional waters.<sup>110</sup> In March 2000, General Secretary Jiang Zemin declared building China into a "maritime great power" to be an "important historic task."<sup>111</sup>

The most directly consequential decision behind China's 2007 policy shift was the State Council's allocation of 1.6 billion yuan to equip the new CMS fleet with thirteen large oceangoing patrol vessels in October 2000.<sup>112</sup> The project took several years to bear fruit, but once delivered, the high-endurance cutters provided PRC maritime law enforcement the capability to stay at sea for prolonged periods across the vast expanses of China's claimed waters. The first ship was delivered in late 2004, and six more followed in 2005. The new agency proceeded with caution, as it still needed to master the challenging logistics of sustaining ships at sea for up to forty days in remote, disputed sea areas. In 2006, with authorization from the State Council, CMS launched its first regular "maritime rights defense" patrol program in disputed waters, be-

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110. SOA, "Dashiji: 1998"; Xu Zhiliang, "'Zhongguo Haijian'-haiyang de 'tejingdui'" ["China marine surveillance"—a "special police unit" for the oceans], *Zhongguo Haiyang Bao* [China Ocean News], No. 914, May 9, 2000, <http://www.soa.gov.cn/zfjc/914.htm> via Archive.org.

111. Zhang Dengyi, "Guanhao yonghao haiyang, jianshe haiyang qiangguo" [Properly manage and use the oceans, build a maritime great power], *Qiushi* [Seeking Truth], No. 11, 2001, p. 46.

112. Su Tao, "Zhongguo Haijian xinxing chuanbo, feiji jianzao ceji" [Profiling CMS's new vessel and aircraft construction], *Zhongguo Haiyang Bao* [China Ocean News], December 17, 2007. The two-stage project was personally approved by Premier Zhu Rongji and Vice Premier Wen Jiabao.

ginning in the geographically smaller and politically simpler East China Sea.<sup>113</sup> Finally, in early 2007 the program was expanded into the South China Sea, and the new fleet began conducting coercive “special operations” (*zhuanxiang xingdong*) there the same year.

Compared to 1987 and 1992, the post-2007 shift offers more convincing evidence of local challenges to China’s claim strength as a driving factor. Beginning in 2004, Vietnam had undertaken new energy development projects with numerous third-country energy companies in the productive Nam Con Son Basin, part of Vietnam’s continental shelf but within the nine-dash line. This negative development for the PRC had been temporarily mitigated by the signing of a tripartite joint exploration agreement with the Philippines and Vietnam, which held out the prospect of access to the energy resources in the promising Reed Bank area. But by 2007, the trilateral deal was in trouble, with the Department of Foreign Affairs in Manila opposing its implementation amid claims from opposition politicians that it would contravene the Philippines constitution.<sup>114</sup>

PRC party-state sources highlight a series of other unfavorable developments, including a rise in Vietnamese fishing in the Paracel Islands and increased detentions of PRC fishermen in the Spratlys.<sup>115</sup> One internal advisory report described the consolidation of other claimants’ positions as a challenge to “the stability of the South China Sea situation,” recommending the PRC increase patrols and strengthen law enforcement in disputed areas to “maintain the dispute and highlight presence.”<sup>116</sup> Such analysis suggests that Beijing may have perceived its position in the South China Sea dispute to be seriously weakening in 2007, following a decade of relative restrained policy.

There is evidence both for and against the PRC’s desire for access to the South China Sea’s resources as a motivation for its assertive behavior. World Bank and Chinese official statistics show that from 2004 to 2006 the value of China’s energy imports more than trebled. On the other hand, PRC oil imports had undergone a similarly dramatic increase from 1998 to 2000 without producing a surge of assertiveness at sea. Two of the four cases of intensified PRC

113. SOA, *Zhongguo Haiyang Nianjian 2007*, p. 173.

114. Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 135.

115. NISCSS, *2006 Nian Nanhai Xingshi*, pp. 25–26; NISCSS, *2007 Nian Nanhai Xingshi*, p. 37; and Fisheries Administration, *Zhongguo Yuyue Nianjian 2007*, pp. 146–148. Fravel suggests this may have been an unintended result of the implementation of the Sino-Vietnamese maritime border in the Gulf of Tonkin. Fravel, “China’s Strategy in the South China Sea,” p. 305.

116. NISCSS, *2007 Nian Nanhai Xingshi*, p. 41.

assertiveness in 2007 related directly to the area's oil and gas resources, while another was indirectly related. However, both the price of oil and the proportion of energy-related assertive behaviors quickly fell back in subsequent years, while China's assertiveness continued to increase. Energy security issues were the subject of intensive discussion in Chinese expert and policy circles in the mid-2000s, but there was little sign of serious advocacy for the disputed maritime periphery as a potential solution.<sup>117</sup>

Several common internal political explanations for China's post-2007 shift can be largely discounted. In no case did the party-state promptly publicize its assertive actions, so evidently the PRC was not driven by a desire to divert public attention away from domestic problems. One key incident—a CMS “special operation” involving the ramming of Vietnamese ships that attempted to interfere with a PRC oil survey in mid-2007—was only revealed for the first time in a state television documentary more than six years later. Others still have never been publicly discussed.<sup>118</sup>

There is evidence that Chinese citizens' attitudes toward the South China Sea issue have hardened in recent years.<sup>119</sup> However, internet search-activity data indicate that this probably occurred after the policy change, not before. The Baidu Search Index of activity on China's dominant search engine indicates that popular demand for information on the South China Sea only began to increase gradually from 2009 onward, and finally become a prominent issue on the online nationalist agenda in mid-2011. Whatever incentives for tougher policies subsequent waves of jingoism may have generated, they at most entrenched existing patterns of assertive behavior.

The CCP 17th Congress, held in October 2007, potentially created extra incentives for ambitious officials to advocate tough foreign policy stances over the preceding months and years, though there was little outward sign of dis-

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117. Zha Daojiong, “China's Energy Security: Domestic and International Issues,” *Survival*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2006), pp. 179–190, doi.org/10.1080/00396330600594322; Andrew B. Kennedy, “China's New Energy-Security Debate,” *Survival*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (2010), pp. 137–158, doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2010.494881; and Jennifer Lind and Daryl G. Press, “Markets or Mercantilism? How China Secures Its Energy Supplies,” *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Spring 2018), pp. 170–204, doi.org/10.1162/isec\_a\_00310.

118. As the appendix indicates, the 2007 and 2008 incidents in the dataset were uncovered not through contemporaneous media reports or official public statements by the PRC authorities, but rather through internal-circulation materials, maritime agency yearbooks, and U.S. State Department cables.

119. Zheng Wang, “Chinese Discourse on the ‘Nine-Dashed Line’: Rights, Interests, and Nationalism,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (May/June 2015), pp. 502–524, doi.org/10.1525/as.2015.55.3.502; and Chubb, “Chinese Popular Nationalism,” pp. 181–248. For a challenge to the prevailing narrative of a general rise in Chinese nationalism, see Johnston, “Is Chinese Nationalism Rising?”

agreements over the South China Sea issue. Analysts describe the 2007 congress as producing a sclerotic system of rule by consensus.<sup>120</sup> This delicate balance disintegrated in the months leading up to the 18th CCP Congress in 2012, when the spectacular political meltdown of Politburo member Bo Xilai triggered months of indecision over his fate. The timing of Bo's downfall raises the possibility that heightened elite political competition could help explain China's abnormally high assertiveness in 2012, when an unprecedented (and so far unrepeated) nine cases of assertive behavioral change were identified. Yet, as shown above, the PRC's quantitatively more assertive and qualitatively more coercive approach had already been observable for five years by that time, so the elite turmoil of 2012 at most temporarily aggravated an existing trend. There is also little sign that the South China Sea was an issue over which internal political struggles were fought around this time.<sup>121</sup>

The protracted duration of China's post-2007 assertive policy suggests that it has been in basic accordance with the central leadership's intentions, and not the result of overzealous substate units acting beyond their remit. The historical events data, however, say little about the possible role that substate bureaucracies, the military, or other vested interest groups may have played in shaping the central leadership's perceptions of the state's interests. Cmdr. Liu Huaqing's legacy has strongly associated the PLA Navy with South China Sea policy advocacy, and more recently Hainan Province has emerged as an effective proponent of tourism and fishing in disputed areas.<sup>122</sup> However, the particular policies that analysts have attributed to substate lobbying—such as tourist cruises and the establishment of Sansha City as an administrative unit covering the disputed area—only began well after the assertive policy shift.<sup>123</sup> By contrast, the new assertive actions that began in 2007–08 were in line with a central policy guideline developed around that time, mandating “the unity of maritime rights defense and stability maintenance”—that is, taking action to

120. Alice L. Miller, “The Politburo Standing Committee under Hu Jintao,” *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 35 (Summer 2011).

121. Baidu News archive searches show no record of either Bo Xilai or Zhou Yongkang commenting publicly on the issue, at least since 2005.

122. Wong, “More than Peripheral,” pp. 744–752.

123. The most prominent case associated with lobbying by Hainan Province and the National Tourism Administration was the establishment of Sansha City, a municipal-level administrative entity covering the disputed island groups, in late 2007. This plan was paused, however, by the central government, and not implemented until June 2012, when Beijing used it to retaliate against Vietnam's passage of a new maritime law. Rather than illustrating the influence of substate lobbying, the case appears to show substate lobbying producing assertiveness only when it accorded with the central leadership's foreign policy intentions.



advance China's position to the extent that it would not trigger instability.<sup>124</sup> High-level programmatic documents released around this time also suggest that this overall policy direction was a matter of broad consensus.<sup>125</sup>

The leadership transition from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao had been formally complete for more than two years by the time China's behavior shifted. Hu's personal authority also received a boost in 2007, as his signature "Scientific Outlook on Development" was written into the Party's constitution. This, and Hu's elevation of the strategic goal of building China into a maritime great power, circumstantially supports the conjecture that the assertive switch in the South China Sea may have reflected Hu's policy preferences, as distinct from Jiang's—though as noted above, Jiang made a key early statement elevating the goal of building the PRC into a "maritime great power." Together with the timing of China's assertive surge, this evidence calls into question the common conjecture that China's maritime assertiveness resulted from a dovish Hu's lack of authority.

The current CCP general secretary, Xi Jinping, formally took control of the party and military in November 2012. Xi's heir-apparent status was confirmed with his elevation to CMC vice chairman in 2010, but this was still more than three years after the PRC's push in the South China Sea began, with Xi still a provincial-level party secretary at that time. The PRC's behavior since Xi took charge has shown significant continuities with the Hu-Wen era, with the most conspicuous assertive moves—such as the large-scale artificial island-building campaign in the Spratlys—attributable to the greater state capabilities available to Xi compared with those of his predecessors.<sup>126</sup> As indicated above, central policy guidelines mandating greater assertiveness predated Xi's ascent by four to five years; his predecessors initiated and then elevated the strategic directive of building China into a maritime great power; the capacity-building projects that enabled the new patterns of behavior from 2007 were set in motion by the end of the 1990s; and the broad goal of extending state jurisdiction

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124. NISCSS, *2007 Nian Nanhai Xingshi*, pp. 38–39; SOA, *Zhongguo Haiyang Nianjian 2009*, pp. 14, 18–19; and Liu Cigui, "Qianghua dui haiyang shiwu de guanli yu chuangxin" [Strengthen management and innovation in maritime affairs], SOA, March 29, 2011, [https://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2011-03/29/content\\_1833868.htm](https://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2011-03/29/content_1833868.htm).

125. For example, the "Planning Outline for the Development of National Maritime Activities" issued by the State Council in February 2008. SOA, *Zhongguo Haiyang Nianjian 2009*, pp. 8–11.

126. Andrew Chubb, "Xi Jinping and China's Maritime Policy" (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, January 22, 2019), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/xi-jinping-and-chinas-maritime-policy>.



across the South China Sea's wide expanses of maritime space emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. There is, in sum, little reason to believe that a different CCP leader would have pursued a significantly less assertive policy than Xi.

### *Conclusion*

China's behavior in the South China Sea has been a central influence on security in East Asia in recent decades, but the absence of a systematic method to measure change in states' maritime behavior has impeded identification of the nature, timing, and causes of change in PRC policy. This article began by developing an original typology to capture important variations in states' behavior in maritime and territorial disputes. Operationalizing this conceptual framework with original data on China's behavior in the South China Sea since 1970, together with focused qualitative analysis guided by the patterns revealed in the data, has yielded several policy relevant findings.

First, the PRC's assertiveness in the South China Sea has intensified in some form almost every year since 1970, and every year since 1990. True to its own rhetoric, Beijing's intent to prosecute its claims there has been long-standing and relatively continuous over nearly five decades. Most new PRC behaviors have continued into subsequent years, in many cases establishing necessary conditions for future assertive activities. The origins of this strategic intent to exercise comprehensive jurisdiction over the South China Sea's maritime spaces lie not in the rise of the PRC's economic or military power, but in its interactions with—and internalization of—the emerging norm of “territorialization” of maritime space associated with the negotiation and progressive implementation of the UNCLOS from the 1970s onward.<sup>127</sup>

Second, the PRC's shift to a policy of rapid administrative buildup, coupled with regular coercive actions in the South China Sea, occurred in 2007, between two and five years earlier than most English-language analysis has assumed. This observation rules out the 2008 global financial crisis, rising nationalist sentiments toward the South China Sea issue from 2009, elevated CCP intra-elite contention in 2011–12 over the 18th Party Conference, and the subsequent political ascendance of Xi Jinping beginning in 2012 as drivers of

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127. See Bernard H. Oxman, “The Territorial Temptation: A Siren Song at Sea,” *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 100, No. 4 (October 2006), pp. 830–851, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4126319>.

the PRC's maritime policy shift. These commonly cited factors at most exacerbated or further entrenched a policy change that was already under way.<sup>128</sup>

Third, and relatedly, the quantitative and qualitative evidence presented here demonstrates how considerable time lags can exist between major changes in state behavior and the decisions that set them in motion. The PRC's steady extension of state authority across a vast disputed maritime geography has depended on decades of cumulative groundwork constituted by earlier assertive actions. Its push since 2007 to realize the goal of comprehensively administering the nine-dash line area resulted from long years of specialized research and organizational work, including capacity-building programs initiated in the late 1990s. For foreign policy analysts, such a finding indicates the value of looking beyond the proximate triggers of observed changes in state behavior, to consider the potentially temporally distant decisions that set foreign policy changes in motion.

For policymakers, these lagged effects indicate how the actions of their counterparts may have less to do with recent events or their own state's behavior or goals than it might otherwise appear. On one hand, this justifies skepticism regarding PRC claims that its assertiveness is a response to external provocations, such as when Beijing deployed anti-ship cruise missiles to the Spratly Islands in 2018, citing increased freedom of navigation operations by the U.S. Navy. Yet it also suggests that analysts and officials should be careful to avoid misattributing assertive behaviors to other-directed motivations such as undermining their deterrent credibility, weakening alliances, or sowing disension. What might appear—or feel—like a targeted action may in fact be, more simply, another confident move toward realizing a stated long-term goal. This explanation is not only simpler; it may also be more consequential.

Focused case study analysis of breakpoints in the PRC's behavior showed how, within the overall trend of steadily increasing assertiveness over time, China's surges in the South China Sea in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s were significantly opportunistic, implying responsiveness to external incentives. The policy introduced in 2007, by contrast, appears to have had much less to do with outside developments. Methodical and sustained through multiple leadership transitions, the PRC's protracted advance has become an entrenched policy status quo. This suggests, paradoxically, how path depend-

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128. Preliminary data collection for the post-2016 period points to a continuation of the 2007–15 pattern, with five to seven strong candidate cases for new lines of assertive activity for each year, two to three of which fit the coercive category.

ence may produce alterations in behavior, contrary to the assumptions of standard models of foreign policy change, which emphasize path dependence as a stabilizing factor that inhibits change.<sup>129</sup> It also means that policymakers attempting to deter a range of new PRC assertive actions in the future may actually be facing the more difficult task of compellence.

Finally, the quantitative and qualitative data provide strong evidence that the PRC's assertive maritime surges have not, so far, resulted from diversionary ploys designed to alleviate legitimacy problems of the Chinese Communist Party. On the contrary, previous periods of acute internal strife in China have led to temporary moderation of the assertive maritime advances, as CCP leaders have focused attention and resources on consolidating their internal position and seeking international cooperation, including from neighboring countries. Amid the global uncertainties over the increasingly antagonistic China-U.S. relationship, the covid-19 pandemic, and the associated prospects of economic downturn within and beyond the PRC's borders, the data offer some cause for qualified optimism regarding future stability in East Asia.

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129. For example, Kjell Goldmann, *Change and Stability in Foreign Policy: The Problems and Possibilities of Detente* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988); and Welch, *Painful Choices*.