RATIONALE FOR REVISIONISM? NEOCLASSICAL REALISM AND CHINA’S NEW MARITIME ASSERTIVENESS

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Masters of Arts
in Asian Studies

By

Taylor Michael Wettach, B.S.F.S.

Washington, DC
April 17, 2017
RATIONALE FOR REVISIONISM? NEOCLASSICAL REALISM AND CHINA’S NEW MARITIME ASSERTIVENESS

Taylor Michael Wettach, B.S.F.S.

Thesis Advisor: Victor D. Cha, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The renewed tension between China and other claimant states over disputed territories in the East and South China Seas in the past few years has generated widespread concern about China’s increasing assertiveness in bolstering its claims. While China’s development of greater relative power is undoubtedly significant to its pursuit of a more assertive maritime policy, this systemic factor does not in itself sufficiently serve to explain the aforementioned development. This paper advances a neoclassical realist argument that a confluence of domestic political interests serves as the most significant complementary variable. In summary, the increasing strategic significance of the maritime domain to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s performance-based legitimacy and China’s goal of national rejuvenation (domestic political elements) can be seen to have interacted with the perception of growing relative power (an international political element), leading to a decision among Chinese leadership in regard to China’s new maritime assertiveness post-2008 financial crisis.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................... 1

CHINA’S NEW MARITIME ASSERTIVENESS .............................................................................. 2

RATIONALE FOR REVISIONISM? ............................................................................................. 4

SIGNIFICANCE AND LIMITATION OF STRUCTURAL REALISM ............................................ 5

SIGNIFICANCE OF NEOCLASSICAL REALISM ........................................................................ 10

  Neoclassical Realism as a Theory ......................................................................................... 10

  Emphasis on Performance-Based Legitimacy ....................................................................... 12

  Evolution of National Rejuvenation Strategy .................................................................... 13

  Strategic Significance of the Maritime Domain .................................................................. 14

  Diminished Relative Power of the United States ................................................................. 15

  Relative Leadership Consensus ........................................................................................ 16

  Neoclassical Realism and China’s New Maritime Assertiveness ........................................ 18

ALTERNATIVE ARGUMENTS .................................................................................................... 20

SENKAKU/ DIAOYU TRAWLER INCIDENT, SEPTEMBER 2010 ........................................... 24

CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................................ 27

WORKS CITED .......................................................................................................................... 32
Introduction

The renewed tension between China and other claimant states over disputed territories in the East and South China Seas in the past few years has generated widespread concern about China’s increasing assertiveness in bolstering its claims.\(^1\) Despite the risk that such behavior presents to China’s growing economic and diplomatic ties as well as the potential of such behavior to provoke a security dilemma, Beijing has become increasingly uncompromising in contrast with its relatively conciliatory approach to maritime disputes between the late-1990s to mid-2000s.\(^2\) While China’s development of greater relative power is undoubtedly significant to its pursuit of a more assertive maritime policy, this systemic factor does not in itself sufficiently serve to explain the aforementioned development. As such, this paper will review several potentially complementary explanatory variables, including international competition with rival states (a “reactive” theory), domestic competition among rival actors (an “accidental” theory), and a confluence of domestic political interests (a “consensus” theory). It will advance a neoclassical realist argument that the latter factor serves as the most significant complementary variable, reviewing this argument and alternatives through a limited case study. In summary, the increasing strategic significance of the maritime domain to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s performance-based legitimacy and China’s goal of national rejuvenation (domestic political elements) can be seen to have interacted with the perception of growing relative power (an international political element), leading to a

---


decision among Chinese leadership in regard to China’s new maritime assertiveness post-2008 financial crisis. Explaining China’s maritime behavior is significant for the development of policies that might both better encourage regional peace and security and minimize the potential for hegemonic war between China and the United States. In particular, this paper’s delinking of Chinese maritime assertiveness from wholesale revisionism, and location of this development not only in international politics but also in domestic politics, encourages a more nuanced assessment of Chinese behavior, and, in turn, a more sophisticated U.S. response. Per this understanding, this paper concludes with several policy recommendations for the United States which build on its findings.

China’s New Maritime Assertiveness

It has become increasingly common in U.S. media, pundit, and academic circles, as well as among Chinese observers, to describe the diplomacy of China as newly or increasingly assertive. This assertiveness began in 2008 with the onset of the global financial crisis, and was further confirmed in March 2009 when five Chinese vessels shadowed and aggressively maneuvered in dangerously close proximity to the U.S. Naval Ship Impeccable. Although this understanding of China’s post-2008 financial crisis assertiveness has gone viral, it is not without its critics. In this regard, Alistair Iain Johnston argues that the new assertiveness meme underestimates the degree of

---

3 For examples of this type of commentary, see Michael Swaine, “Perceptions of an Assertive China,” China Leadership Monitor 32 (May 2010), p. 10.
4 Scobell and Harold, 111.
assertiveness of certain Chinese policies in the past, and overestimates the amount of change in China’s diplomacy as seen in the recent policy shift. Despite this thesis, however, Johnston acknowledges that Chinese diplomacy has been newly assertive in the realm of maritime security, noting that the “area where Beijing’s rhetoric and behavior did threaten to impose substantially higher costs on states with disputes with China concerned maritime claims in the South China Sea.” Johnston also acknowledges that “China’s diplomatic and military response to Japan’s 2012 purchase of some of the Senkaku/ Diaoyu islands from private owners would also meet the criteria for a new assertiveness in its policy toward maritime disputes,” recognizing the East China Sea as an additional area of Chinese assertiveness.

Ultimately, then, while it may or may not be true that Chinese diplomacy has become more assertive as a whole, most expert observers at least agree that in the area of maritime disputes, China has demonstrated an increased willingness to threaten and use limited force to promote its sovereignty claims.

While inconclusive in its refutation of China’s new assertiveness, Johnston’s critique is significant for encouraging clarification of the definitions of both “assertive” and “new”. At their most extreme, descriptions of Chinese assertiveness have instead suggested a different word—belligerence—an unsophisticated assessment of recent Chinese behavior. As illustrated by Kishore Mahbubani, “if (China) were truly

---

6 Johnston, 7.
7 Ibid, 45.
8 Ibid, 9.
9 Johnston’s paper, published in 2013, only examines cases through 2010, with the aforementioned 2012 Senkaku/ Diaoyu case referenced after the fact as being in line with South China Sea trends.
belligerent, it could militarily remove the other island occupants. Fortunately, it has made no such effort… the guns in the area have been mostly silent since the March 1988 skirmish between China and Vietnam at Johnson South Reef that left 74 Vietnamese soldiers dead. “11 This comparison with China’s former behavior is also telling for its demonstration that previous Chinese maritime policy has, at times, not only been more aggressive than at present, but also actively belligerent. As such, while not disavowing the potential for future, more aggressive developments, a more defendable understanding of China’s new maritime assertiveness recognizes the limits to its intensity as well as an understanding of Chinese history that extends before the period immediately preceding China’s policy shift.

Rationale for Revisionism?

Recognizing that this shift has taken place, what might explain China’s new maritime assertiveness? What happened to China’s insistence that it was committed to a “peaceful rise”/ “peaceful development,” and Beijing’s much-touted “charm offensive”?12 These questions are particularly valid considering that, in the view of many observers in the United States and Asia, Beijing’s more muscular approach to maritime disputes has proven counterproductive and detrimental to China’s own interests.13 In line with this understanding, a recent Pew poll demonstrated that 70 percent of respondents in the Philippines, Japan, Vietnam, South Korea, and India expressed concern over potential

12 Scobell and Harold, 111.
conflict with China.\textsuperscript{14} Furthermore, according to a 2014 Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) poll of strategic elites in eleven countries, 61 percent of respondents felt China had a negative impact on regional security.\textsuperscript{15} Significantly, China’s muscle-flexing has driven allies such as Japan, the Philippines, and Australia into a closer alliance with the United States,\textsuperscript{16} with the U.S. embracing this opportunity by expanding its regional presence and cooperation.\textsuperscript{17} Given this situation, many observers had expected greater policy moderation to follow China’s post-2008 financial crisis shift toward maritime assertiveness.\textsuperscript{18} In this regard, Andrew Scobell and Scott W. Harold have argued that a first wave of post-2008 assertiveness gradually dissipated by early 2010.\textsuperscript{19} However, despite fluctuations within the post-2008 financial crisis period of greater assertiveness,\textsuperscript{20} China appears to be largely doubling down per recent developments such as the placement of surface to air missiles (SAMs) on Woody Island.\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{Significance and Limitation of Structural Realism}

Arguably the most prominent of the explanations for China’s maritime assertiveness advances a neorealist, or structural realist, argument that frames Chinese

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 154.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Nike Ching, "US, Allies Tighten Cooperation to Counter China in South China Sea," \textit{Voice of America}, 28 Apr. 2016.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Mastro, “Why…”, 152.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Scobell and Harold, 113.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid, 111.
\end{itemize}
behavior as a result of China’s greater relative power.\textsuperscript{22} According to John Mearsheimer, as “China continues to grow economically, it will attempt to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere.”\textsuperscript{23} While not all observers that fall into this structural realist camp take such a pessimistic view of China’s rise, it should be noted here that Chinese economic growth has been accompanied by active military growth, with its military expenditure increasing by double-digit percentages almost every year for over almost two decades.\textsuperscript{24} Materializing in tandem with the emergence of greater Chinese strength is the appearance of relative—if not absolute—weakness among its principal rival, the United States. In this regard, while China seemed to emerge from the financial crisis relatively unscathed, the U.S. financial system appeared to teeter on the brink of collapse.\textsuperscript{25} Furthermore, deepening U.S. difficulties in Iraq, along with a mounting array of global challenges amidst a diffusion of global power,\textsuperscript{26} contributed to the appearance of the United States in retreat, if not decline.\textsuperscript{27} While the degree of relative emphasis placed on Chinese strength and rival weakness differs from analyst to analyst, the overall emphasis per this structural realist theory is on the concept of power, with systemic changes in power deemed to best explain state behavior. The resulting conclusion is, more or less, that a strengthened China has shifted toward a more assertive maritime policy to fill the power vacuum resulting from a weakened United States.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{22} Scobell and Harold, 112.
\textsuperscript{25} Scobell and Harold, 112.
\textsuperscript{28} Scobell and Harold, 112.
This structural realist narrative does, on its face, appear to match up well with the development of recent Chinese maritime assertiveness. However, this narrative is complicated by a more expansive understanding of international relations that calls into question relying solely on a systemic explanation for China’s recent shift toward maritime assertiveness. At the root of this criticism is structural realism’s under-nuanced conception of the balance of power. Arising as a metaphorical concept during the Renaissance, this concept achieved acceptance as a sort of law of nature within realist notions of international politics, an understanding that still infuses most discussions of how this theory and its variants operate. This notion can be seen in the literature, with Kenneth Waltz asserting, “As nature abhors a vacuum, so international politics abhors unbalanced power,” and Mearsheimer claiming that, “status quo powers are rarely found in world politics, because the international system creates powerful incentives for states to look for opportunities to gain power at the expense of rivals, and to take advantage of those situations when the benefits outweigh the costs.”

However, from the policymaker’s perspective, balancing superior power and filling a power vacuum hardly appears as a law of nature. As noted by Nicholas Spykman, “Political equilibrium is neither a gift of the gods nor an inherently stable condition. It results from the active intervention of man, from the operation of political forces.” This understanding is particularly significant given the perceived risk of Chinese assertiveness to Chinese interests. Because of this, the concern has arisen that

31 Ibid, 163.
32 Ibid, 164.
China’s new maritime assertiveness may be reflective of overbalancing (or inappropriate balancing), which could unnecessarily trigger a costly and dangerous security dilemma.\(^{33}\)

This understanding is also significant given that the development of Chinese maritime assertiveness accompanies China’s continued—and, in certain ways, expanding—engagement in the status quo international system, including China’s self-evident cooperation in selective spheres of international relations such as trade and climate change.\(^{34}\) Analysts such as Christopher Findlay, Andrew Watson, and David Lampton have argued that China has become increasingly involved in the process of “complex interdependence” described by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye.\(^{35}\) In this regard, China appears to be bucking both structural realist and liberal institutionalist predictions by segmenting out this complex interdependence, cooperating in some areas and not on others. Indeed, as noted by Bonnie S. Glaser and Deep Pal, rather than choosing between two different approaches to periphery diplomacy, China seems to be attempting to unite them in a single, proactive strategy that advances Chinese interests.\(^{36}\)

Furthermore, while a structural realist assessment would expect Chinese assertiveness to be observed in tandem with its growing accumulation of power, or following a tipping point of relative power, expanding the historical scope complicates this assessment, demonstrating convolutions in Chinese behavior and impediments to its observation. In the early 1990s, many observers predicted that a rapidly developing China

\(^{33}\) Ibid, 167.


was destined to pursue a revisionist course, and China’s leaders seemed to fulfill these fears as they eagerly called for the transition to a multipolar world order. Despite the appearance of an emerging revisionist trend, however, Chinese leadership instead opted for a reassurance policy toward the end of the 1990s. By the mid-2000s, the consensus among experts increasingly held that China was a beneficiary and supporter of the status quo.³⁷ In this manner, China’s economic and military rise had not delivered on the expected revisionism, an understanding that encourages critical appraisal of contemporary revisionist predictions.

Valid criticism of the balance of power concept and fluctuations in Chinese assertiveness, as well as the lack of a clear shift in assertiveness outside of the maritime sphere as noted by Johnston and others, call into question reliance on structural realism’s explanatory power in assessing China’s new maritime assertiveness. Why might Beijing have behaved more assertively during the mid-1990s (including aggressive behavior associated with the Taiwan Straits crisis which outstrips present assertiveness) despite the United States’ post-Cold War preeminence, only to pursue its “charm offensive” amidst growing Chinese power? Why might the emergence of a new assertiveness post-2008 financial crisis be generally focused on the maritime sphere, but not some other areas of foreign policy? And why might it have chosen to pursue this policy shift around 2008? While systemic developments are undoubtedly significant to the choices allowed to Beijing, the revisionism predicted by structural realists is neither an obvious choice, nor Beijing’s clear choice. Rather, given the importance of states' foreign policy choices to bringing about outcomes, structural realism arguably does a better job of providing a

normative account of what foreign policies ought to be than an explanatory one of what they are. To answer this paper’s research question, a more nuanced assessment is required which expands and improves on structural realism’s systemic explanation. A compelling account of a nation’s foreign policy should include systemic, domestic, and other influences, specifying what aspects of the policy can be explained by what factors. This paper’s argument attempts to do just that, demonstrating the value of certain domestic factors, as well as international developments, to China’s new maritime assertiveness.

Significance of Neoclassical Realism

Neoclassical Realism as a Theory

This paper advances a neoclassical realist argument that a confluence of domestic political interests serves as the most significant complementary variable to international political developments in explaining China’s new maritime assertiveness. In doing so, it builds on an understanding of international relations advanced by authors such as Thomas Christensen, Aaron Friedberg, Gideon Rose, Randall Schweller, Jack Snyder, William Wohlforth, and Fareed Zakaria, some of whom have engaged in significant scholarly work on China utilizing a neoclassical realist lens. Neoclassical realists have sought to

38 Adam Quinn, "Kenneth Waltz, Adam Smith and the Limits of Science: Hard Choices for Neoclassical Realism," International Politics 50.2 (2013), 162.
40 Schweller, “Unanswered,” 164.
explain foreign policy decisions and particular historical events by supplementing third image insights about international structure and its consequences with first and second-image variables, such as domestic politics, internal extraction capacity and processes, state power and intentions, and statesmen’s perceptions of the relative distribution of capabilities and the offense-defense balance. A particular focus in neoclassical realism, and a highly relevant one for this paper, is on the relationship between state leaders and the people. In the case of a rising power such as China, maintaining domestic legitimacy and accomplishing the goals of the state is an especially significant priority for state leaders. Of further relevance to China, neoclassical realists have utilized domestic politics to improve explanations of how a state can be compelled to accumulate power in a way that might override prudent foreign policy (overbalance). As this paper will argue, the increasing strategic significance of the maritime domain to the CCP’s performance-based legitimacy and China’s goal of national rejuvenation (domestic political elements) can be seen to have interacted with the perception of growing relative power (an international political element), leading to a decision among Chinese leadership in regard to China’s new maritime assertiveness post-2008 financial crisis.

---

42 Schweller, “China’s,” 7.
44 Schweller, “China’s,” 32.
Emphasis on Performance-Based Legitimacy

China’s post-2008 financial crisis shift toward maritime assertiveness is rooted in the goal of achieving legitimacy for the Communist regime. In this regard, since the start of the economic reforms, the ideological legitimacy of the Chinese leadership has gradually been undermined, being replaced by a “performance-based legitimacy” grounded in economic prosperity, foreign policy successes, and control of the propaganda message. As a result, the Chinese leadership has to continuously deliver domestic stability and growing prosperity, as well as meet its people’s growing expectations about China’s international influence and status. This expectation that the party will deliver on international influence and status has been fostered by perceptions of growth of Chinese relative power, serving to increase national ambitions among people who believe that China, having rebounded from a century of humiliation, should stand up and take its rightful place as a great power. In this regard, many Chinese analysts attribute the growth of Chinese assertiveness to trends inside the country, with Andrew Scobell and Scott W. Harold noting that “leaders feel besieged or at least greatly constrained,” and that “strident populist nationalism threatens to delegitimize any politician deemed insufficiently ‘tough’ in the defense of Chinese sovereignty and interests.” This pressure was perceived to have reached a new peak in 2008 with Beijing’s hosting of the Olympics, setting the tone for a subsequent policy of increased maritime assertiveness.

45 Nathan and Scobell, 342.
46 Sørensen, “Unanswered,” 376.
47 Ibid.
Augmenting the significance of maintaining performance-based legitimacy is Beijing’s goal of achieving “national rejuvenation.” Domestically, the achievement of this goal depends above all on preserving the CCP’s monopoly on political power so that it can complete the construction of a prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious modern socialist state; internationally, national rejuvenation appears to call for regional preeminence.\(^{49}\) Although officials are careful not to openly advocate this goal, they hint at a desired end state in which the region is centered on Chinese power.\(^{50}\) While this understanding might suggest something more aggressive, at least until 2009 China appeared to follow a coherent strategy broadly consistent with Deng Xiaoping’s admonition that it should hide its capabilities and bide its time (literally, “hide our light and nurture our strength”).\(^{51}\) For the most part, Beijing previously sought to avoid confrontation with other major powers, taking advantage of a stable international environment to expand its trade, build its economy, and cultivate all the other elements of its “comprehensive national power.”\(^ {52}\) Through this effort, Beijing’s evident intention was to “win without fighting,” gradually advancing toward a position of unassailable regional preponderance.\(^{53}\) However, even as Beijing maintains and expands cooperation on many fronts, support for a more assertive foreign policy has been growing among not only the people but also the elites; even scholars that prefer to stay loyal to Deng’s

\(^{49}\) Friedberg, 143.
\(^{50}\) Ibid.
\(^{51}\) Nathan and Scobell, xxii.
\(^{52}\) Friedberg, 143.
\(^{53}\) Ibid.
maxim now say it’s time to stress the second part, “actively getting something done.” In this manner, Beijing’s goal of national rejuvenation can be seen as dovetailing with domestic pressure to encourage a more assertive Chinese foreign policy.

Strategic Significance of the Maritime Domain

Accompanying this growing domestic and strategic emphasis on greater assertiveness has been a growing prioritization of the maritime domain. As its economy has grown, China has become increasingly dependent on the world’s oceans to sustain its people and to move its products to market. This growing significance was made clear through adjustments in Beijing’s policies. While, at the turn of the century, leaders in Beijing spoke about promoting marine development, today they look upon the ocean as an integral part of China’s security and development policy. In this regard, the country’s eleventh five-year plan, for 2006–10, included just one section on the seas, while its twelfth plan, for 2011–15, had an entire chapter on developing the marine economy. Upholding maritime sovereignty is seen as increasingly critical to the nation’s success, and in this vein China appears to be building a powerful navy that can protect its maritime-dependent economic and security interests. In this regard, at a 2013 conference in Shanghai, Chinese maritime officials laid out a timeline calling for China to become one of the top eight navies by 2020, one of the top five by 2030, and one of the

---

57 Ibid.
top three by 2049 (the centennial of the PRC’s founding).\textsuperscript{59} Accompanying China’s naval expansion has been the development of anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities, which China could utilize to erode the United States’ preponderant military position in the region in an effort to maintain both its own security and ensure the success of its efforts to defend its maritime sovereignty. Developments such as these suggest that Beijing desires to have an increasingly active role and presence in the maritime domain in the coming years, a goal that is vital to both the CCP’s goal of performance-based legitimacy and Beijing’s objective of national rejuvenation.

\textit{Diminished Relative Power of the United States}

The importance of securing maritime sovereignty to achieving national rejuvenation and, in this manner, performance-based legitimacy emphasizes the significance of the United States’ relative power, which is perceived as the gatekeeper of Chinese maritime activity. With the United States’ military preponderance undergirding, and thereby maintaining relative dominion in the regional order, during the late 2000s there was a major debate in China over how quickly the country was catching up to America and how badly the United States had stumbled in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis.\textsuperscript{60} While the majority concluded that the United States was remarkably resilient and had regrouped from the global financial crisis, a significant minority influentially insisted that the United States had weakened significantly to the extent that China might be nearing parity.\textsuperscript{61} Furthermore, several diplomatic developments seemed to signal that the

\textsuperscript{59} Cheng.
\textsuperscript{60} Scobell and Harold, 115.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
United States was making room for China. For example, the joint statement issued during President Obama’s visit to Shanghai on November 17, 2009 noted that it was “extremely important” for each country to “respect” the “core interests” of the other. In subsequent bilateral meetings with a range of U.S. officials, China worked to build on this perceived policy victory by continuing to emphasize the concept of “core interests.” According to Scobell and Harold, these developments, and the perception of a cooperative U.S. response to Chinese activity, largely suggested to Beijing that Washington had significantly weakened its resolve in regard to Asia, conceding in principle that the region—at least large portions of it—would be a Chinese sphere of influence. Ultimately, this international matter, in interaction with the aforementioned domestic developments, opened the path for Chinese maritime assertiveness.

Relative Leadership Consensus

Building on China’s goal of defending its increasingly prioritized maritime sovereignty in support of maintaining performance-based legitimacy and national rejuvenation, as well as the perception of declining American power, Chinese leadership appears to have reached a relative consensus on a policy of maritime assertiveness post-2008 financial crisis. In 2008, President Hu Jintao first pointed out that China must make a transition from being from a land power to being a sea power, and in 2010 Chinese

63 Ibid.
64 Ibid, 119.
leaders told American officials that the South China Sea was a “core interest.” In line with the development of maritime assertiveness, Beijing did not compromise in any outstanding territorial or maritime sovereignty disputes since the 2008 consensus agreement with Japan for developing resources in the East China Sea. This shifting attitude under Hu Jintao culminated in his telling the CCP’s 18th Congress in November 2012 that it “should… resolutely safeguard China’s maritime rights and interests, and build China into a maritime power”.

Since then, leadership consensus appears to have been further cemented despite some fluctuations, with President Xi Jinping’s administration continuing along the path that began under Hu Jintao. This understanding is supported by the statements of President Xi Jinping, Premier Li Keqiang, and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, which highlight the belief that unfriendly, and even hostile, powers are besieging China, especially in the maritime sphere. In this regard, Wang Yi has emphasized that China periodically exercises restraint, but must stand its ground when provoked in territorial disputes, Li Keqiang has suggested that Chinese maritime assertiveness is even in defense of the post-World War II international system, and Xi himself has publicly stressed the critical importance of a strong military to a successful foreign policy and dismissed the option of passivity. In this manner, remaining firm in the maritime domain is seen to have become the preferred official Chinese approach, confirming

---

66 Nathan and Scobell, 145.
China’s policy shift as a decision. In support of the understanding presented above, Thomas J. Bickford notes that the assertive speeches by Xi and other civilian and military leaders, official documents, and articles and commentary in authoritative media outlets are fairly consistent in how they discuss the elements of maritime power and how it fits into China’s national strategy.\textsuperscript{70}

\textit{Neoclassical Realism and China’s New Maritime Assertiveness}

In summary, the increasing strategic significance of the maritime domain to the CCP’s performance-based legitimacy and China’s goal of national rejuvenation (domestic political elements) can be seen to have interacted with the perception of growing relative power (an international political element), leading to a decision among Chinese leadership in regard to China’s new maritime assertiveness post-2008 financial crisis.\textsuperscript{71} Maintaining domestic legitimacy and accomplishing the goals of the state are shown to be a significant priority for Chinese leaders, allowing them to mobilize necessary resources for their foreign and security policies, and in the process safeguard their own positions and their ability to govern.\textsuperscript{72} As a result, the aforementioned domestic political processes act as a transmission belt that channels, mediates, and directs policy outputs in response to external forces, with a confluence of domestic political interests encouraging Chinese leadership to pursue a more assertive maritime policy in tandem

\textsuperscript{70} Thomas J. Bickford, "Haiyang Qiangguo: China as a Maritime Power," Center for Naval Analyses (CNA), 15 Mar. 2016.  
\textsuperscript{71} Simplifying this model, 1) the emphasis on performance-based legitimacy and 2) the evolution of the national rejuvenation strategy emphasized 3) the growing strategic significance of the maritime domain. Assisted by 4) the diminished relative power of the United States, a 5) relative leadership consensus subsequently emerged around China’s new maritime assertiveness.  
\textsuperscript{72} Sørensen, 368.
with the evolution of China’s international position. In this manner, unit-level factors are seen to build on systemic factors to better explain how China might choose to accumulate power (balance) in the maritime domain despite relative cooperation in other areas, potentially at the expense of a more prudent foreign policy.

As the prominent neoclassical realist Schweller acknowledges, when “second-image variables define international relations, the overall story of international (or regional) politics will not be simple, straightforward, or even coherent from the big picture perspective.” This is inherent to neoclassical realism’s emphasis on the redistributive aspects of grand strategic choices, highlighting the specific pressures within the state rather than the broader pushes and pulls from outside it. While theories such as neoclassical realism emphasize abstraction to explain international relations, neoclassical realism unpacks this abstraction to explain foreign policy, especially where third-image variables fail to properly explain the state’s actions.

Given this complexity, there is a temptation to encapsulate this confluence of domestic interests in a more simplistic notion, most commonly through a generalized concept of nationalism. However, as noted by Friedberg, while domestic pressures do influence Chinese decision-making, “there is very little to indicate that… the leadership has ever felt compelled by public sentiment to take positions or pursue policies different than those it might otherwise have chosen.” [Author’s emphasis] While the rationality of Chinese leadership’s decisions and the potential for the execution of strategy can be

---

73 Schweller, “Unanswered,” 164.
74 Schweller, “China’s,” 8.
75 Ibid, 1.
76 Friedberg, 141.
debated, Chinese policy is best understood to reflect a strategic calculation. In short, this is not a matter of public sentiment run amok, but instead existing as a prominent consideration for Chinese policy makers among an array of domestic interests.

In this regard, it bears emphasizing that the domestic foundations of China’s policy shift are seen to be not only rooted in public sentiment, but also, through the goal of national rejuvenation, Chinese national interests: a more assertive maritime policy is expected to both boost the CCP’s performance-based legitimacy and further China’s strategic goals. Furthermore, these channeling mechanisms do not exist in a vacuum; in contrast to Innenpolitik’s pure unit-level explanation, neoclassical realism recognizes the prominent role that systemic factors play. As such, China’s relative power vis-à-vis the United States is seen to be significant for unlocking its potential maritime assertiveness. Finally, favorability toward assertiveness in the maritime domain is far from being the sole property of the common Chinese people, but also reflects the attitude of Chinese strategic elites, including those at the highest levels of leadership. Ultimately, then, China’s new maritime assertiveness is best described as a decision by Chinese policy makers reflecting a confluence of domestic political interests, in addition to international political developments.

**Alternative Arguments**

The literature presents additional potential complementary explanatory variables that could help to provide an explanation for China’s shift toward greater maritime assertiveness, with arguably the most prominent being international competition with

---

77 Ibid, 142.
rival states (a “reactive” theory) and domestic competition among rival actors (an “accidental” theory). These alternative arguments contrast with this paper’s perception of the assertiveness shift as a proactive policy decision among Chinese leadership reflecting China’s national interests, instead suggesting that it was largely a response to either inside or outside forces. While acknowledging that both of these potential explanatory variables may have some significance in explaining Chinese maritime assertiveness, the theories they inform are ultimately limited in their explanatory potential.

The first of these explanations, international competition, portrays Chinese maritime assertiveness as a reactionary development responding to external competition. Exemplifying this notion, Thomas Christensen describes China’s actions as reactive: “Despite the image of a more powerful China seeking to drive events under the rubric of a new grand strategy, Beijing—with a few important exceptions—has been reacting, however abrasively, to unwelcome and unforeseen events that have often been initiated by others.” In turn, Michael Swaine emphasizes the United States’ role in Chinese assertiveness, noting that many Chinese analysts “argue that recent US provocations... designed to check China’s rising influence... have essentially compelled a more vigorous response from Beijing.”

However, there are at least two problems with this argument that Chinese assertiveness is, at its core, reactive. First, while the United States’ “Asia rebalance” fits

79 Scobell and Harold, 112.
80 Ibid.
into this narrative of a reactive China, China’s first wave of maritime assertiveness came during a period of relative U.S. cooperation. This understanding is especially relevant given that the pre-Asia rebalance United States appeared to be in at least relative, if not absolute decline to prominent Chinese observers.\(^8\) Second, even if China perceived itself as being provoked in certain cases, this does not warrant Beijing’s decision in recent years to repeatedly escalate rather than wind down disputes.\(^82\) For example, while Japan did arrest the Chinese fishing captain which rammed two Japanese coast guard ship per the 2010 Senkaku/ Diaoyu fishing trawler incident, China’s decision to punish Japan by refusing to sell it rare earth minerals essential to the manufacture of high-end electronics and other products threatened to impose much higher costs on a key Japanese economic interest, constituting a new assertiveness\(^83\).

The second of these explanations, competition among rival domestic actors, presents China’s greater maritime assertiveness as an accidental development resulting from Chinese foreign policy being hijacked by governmental and nongovernmental entities or confused by weak coordination among these actors.\(^84\) This process is deemed particularly ripe for engendering reckless foreign policies when the hijacking groups not only have close ties to the state but also derive parochial benefits from expansion and its associated military preparations and competitive political climate.\(^85\) This argument rests

\(^{81}\) Ibid, 116.
\(^{82}\) Ibid, 135.
\(^{83}\) Johnston, 23.
\(^{85}\) Schweller, “China’s,” 15.
on the emergence of a widening array of groups and organizations—both governmental and nongovernmental—that now appear to have some influence over the policymaking process in the view of some observers. Among these actors are several that may see assertive and even confrontational policies as being in their best interest, particularly the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).

This argument, however, also does not stand up well under scrutiny. First, while the military does seem to have a significant impact in framing debates and shaping policies, the PLA’s role in decision-making on Chinese territorial disputes has largely been limited to bureaucratic influence within existing policy making structures and processes. Even if disagreements exist, the PLA, by all accounts, continues to accept its historical subordination to the CCP, rooting any government responsibility for maritime assertiveness not in the PLA but in the nation’s top civilian leader. Second, the relative persistence of Chinese maritime assertiveness over time, most notably in the period following Xi Jinping’s accession at the end of 2012, has also made it more difficult to sustain the view that this behavior is the by-product of freelancing by lesser agencies and bureaus. Rather, through its continuation and relative consistency, China’s shift toward maritime assertiveness appears to be, on the whole, neither an external reaction nor an internal response, but rather a decision by Chinese policy makers reflecting a confluence

86 Friedberg, 139.
88 Scobell and Harold, 125.
89 Fravel, 249-250.
90 Friedberg, 141.
91 Ibid, 142.
of significant domestic political interests in addition to international political
developments.

**Senkaku/ Diaoyu Trawler Incident, September 2010**

This paper will briefly review its argument and alternatives through a limited case study of the 2010 Senkaku/ Diaoyu trawler incident. On September 7, 2010, a Chinese trawler captain ordered his ship to ram two Japanese coast guard ships that were trying to chase the trawler away from the Senkaku/ Diaoyu islands. While the crew was sent back to China, the captain was detained, and Japanese authorities began a legal investigation of his actions. The Chinese government responded with repeated and increasingly tough demands for the captain’s release.\(^{92}\)

This case exemplifies China’s new maritime assertiveness, displaying behavior that threatened to impose substantially higher costs on a competing state in the maritime domain. The ensuing crisis, which resulted in an unprecedented heightening of Sino–Japanese tensions, appears to have been driven almost entirely by Beijing.\(^{93}\) As the rhetoric escalated, so did the actions taken to signal Beijing’s discontent. These included progressively canceling more and more local and central government-to-government interactions and arresting four Japanese citizens for allegedly photographing military sites.\(^{94}\) China’s assertiveness was especially evident in two other actions: the demand for

---

\(^{92}\) Johnston, 22.  
\(^{93}\) Friedberg, 134.  
\(^{94}\) Ibid.
compensation and an apology from the Japanese government after the captain had been released, and an embargo on Chinese rare earth exports to Japan.\textsuperscript{95}

In exemplifying China’s shift toward maritime assertiveness, this case strongly supports neither the “reactive” theory of international competition with rival states nor the “accidental” theory of domestic competition among rival actors. In regard to the former, it should be noted that Chinese leaders believed that Japan was engaging in atypical behavior by refusing to release the captain early on.\textsuperscript{96} However, this does not change the fact that, as acknowledged by Johnston, “China escalated its diplomatic rhetoric,” resulting in a stance that was unusually confrontational in comparison to that of Japan.\textsuperscript{97} In short, provoking a response does not equate to provoking an assertive response, nor warrant full absolution of responsibility to the respondent. In regard to the latter argument, while the initial crisis was provoked by the actions of a Chinese fishing vessel—one example of the array of Chinese actors increasingly engaged in the maritime domain—the Chinese response demonstrated itself to be one of policy applied through the normal methods and reaching to the highest level, rather than a case of policy confusion or hijacking. In this manner, the Chinese demand for the captain’s release moved systematically from the Chinese embassy in Japan to the Foreign Ministry spokesperson to the foreign minister to the state counselor in charge of foreign policy and eventually to Premier Wen Jiabao.\textsuperscript{98}

Supporting neither the “reactive” theory nor the “accidental” theory of domestic competition among rival actors, this case is most demonstrative of this paper’s

\textsuperscript{95} Johnston, 23.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid, 22.
\textsuperscript{97} Friedberg, 134.
\textsuperscript{98} Johnston, 23.
neoclassical realist “consensus” theory, reflecting a confluence of domestic political interests and accompanying international developments. First, this understanding can be seen in the role of Beijing’s concern about public opinion and, in this manner, performance-based legitimacy. In this regard, Johnston suggests that the initial decision to ratchet up tensions likely reflected the impending anniversary of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, and that the demand for an apology was clearly aimed at a domestic Chinese audience. At the same time, the elevation of the important allocated to the disputed territory appears to reflect the increasing significance of the maritime domain to national rejuvenation. This can perhaps be best seen in Premier Wen Jiabao’s reference to the islands as “sacred territory”, a significant escalation over previous official descriptions. Furthermore, China’s normalized response process demonstrates a relative elite consensus on Chinese maritime policy as displayed this this case, with China’s official response moving up the chain of command from the Chinese embassy in Japan and Premier Wen Jiabao, growing in sternness as it moved to a higher level. While the role of the United States’ relative power in this case is not as explicit, in increasing its pressure on Tokyo, Beijing’s actions appear to reflect a relative lack of concern about a U.S. response that was not previously evident in Sino-Japanese relations. The significance of this aspect can be seen in the counterfactual, with Beijing appearing to return to a relatively more restrained position in the East China Sea after the United States strongly reconfirmed that the Senkaku/ Diaoyu islands fall under Article 5 of the

99 Friedberg, 134.  
100 Johnston, 23.  
101 Ibid.
U.S.-Japan defense treaty.\textsuperscript{102} In this manner, the strategic significance of the maritime domain to the CCP’s performance-based legitimacy and China’s goal of national rejuvenation seems to have interacted with the perception of growing relative power, appearing to result in the Chinese leadership’s decision to respond with greater assertiveness to the 2010 Senkaku/ Diaoyu trawler incident.

Conclusion

What explains China’s new maritime assertiveness? What happened to China’s insistence that it was committed to a “peaceful rise”/ “peaceful development,” and Beijing’s much-touted “charm offensive”?\textsuperscript{103} While China’s systemic development of greater relative power is undoubtedly significant to its pursuit of a more assertive maritime policy, this does not in itself sufficiently serve to explain this development. Rather, this development is best explained by a neoclassical realist theory that contends that states assess and adapt to changes in their external environment partly as a result of their unique domestic structures and political situations. As this paper has argued, the increasing strategic significance of the maritime domain to the CCP’s performance-based legitimacy and China’s goal of national rejuvenation (domestic political elements) can be seen to have interacted with the perception of growing relative power (an international political element), leading to a decision among Chinese leadership in regard to China’s new maritime assertiveness post-2008 financial crisis.

\textsuperscript{103} Scobell and Harold, 111.
While this paper has aimed to answer its research question as comprehensively as possible within its structural constraints, this objective would benefit from subsequent efforts to unpack and test the neoclassical realist theory presented here. This theory is admittedly reliant on abstraction, like all theories, and as such there will be fluctuation in terms of explanatory variables on a case-by-case basis. In this regard, this effort would benefit from a more detailed series of case studies. In particular, there may be value to supplementing this paper’s case study with a pre-new assertiveness, comparative Senkaku/ Diaoyu case study, also including a before-and-after set of South China Sea cases. Locating this paper’s argument in developments in both the East and South China Sea would serve to strengthen its theoretical authority.

With these caveats noted, this paper’s explanation of China’s maritime behavior presents implications for policy as well as theory. This paper’s delinking of Chinese maritime assertiveness from wholesale revisionism, and location of this development not only in international politics but also in domestic politics, encourages a more nuanced assessment of Chinese behavior, and, in turn a more sophisticated U.S. response. In this regard, as most analyses of Chinese assertiveness are built on structural realism, they tend to have a relatively bleak assessment of the future of Chinese behavior. While this paper’s neoclassical realist analysis is not greatly optimistic, its concern is narrower in focus. Chinese assertiveness in the maritime domain is not seen as being necessarily tied to, or predicted to guarantee revisionism more broadly. Rather, this paper’s argument is more accepting of China’s potential to continue engagement in and contribution to significant matters such as trade and the environment despite pursuing a more assertive maritime policy. It suggests that the United States should keep maritime disputes in
perspective, resisting the temptation to overvalue them as a barometer of the U.S.-China strategic relationship.

Furthermore, while this paper’s understanding of China’s new maritime assertiveness does allow that China’s greater relative power portends greater potential for tension, if not conflict, its demonstration of the significance of domestic politics to international relations is heartening for its suggestion that the hegemonic conflict predicted by structural realism is not predestined. While it is nearly impossible to limit China’s rise—the *cause* of potential conflict—without an unthinkably costly war or an economically prohibitive containment policy, it is possible to address the potential for conflict as an *effect*. Having insight into the significant domestic factors which Chinese leaders look to can be immensely useful for this goal. In this regard, U.S. observers should be cognizant of the importance of the growing strategic significance of the maritime domain to the CCP’s performance-based legitimacy and Beijing’s national rejuvenation strategy, in addition to systemic developments.

Ultimately, explaining China’s new maritime assertiveness is significant for the development of policies that might better encourage regional peace and security and minimize the potential for hegemonic war between China and the United States. Toward this end, there are several efforts that Washington can undertake. First, Washington should maintain a firm but calm policy towards Chinese maritime assertiveness. In this regard, it is important to recognize that perceptions of U.S. weakness were significant to China’s initial post-2008 financial crisis policy shift. While not promoting abrasive policy for its own sake, Washington should accept that there are, and will continue to be disagreements over the maritime domain, and should not shy away from proactively
seeking to address these disagreements. At the same time, significant competing interests in the maritime domain need not determine the relationship, given the other areas in which China has chosen cooperate with the United States and the global community.

Second, and in response to the broader relationship, Washington should bolster cooperation outside of the maritime domain. Progress on matters such as trade and the environment can serve as ballast to ensure bilateral and systemic stability, and appear to be areas for future relationship growth as seen in recent Chinese diplomacy. In this regard, efforts by China to achieve an expanded role in institutions such as the IMF or the World Bank should not be looked at with suspicion, but rather as an opportunity to secure China’s commitment to the status quo global order despite competition in other areas. Simultaneously, the United States should seek to insert itself, as is reasonable, into Chinese initiatives such as the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), especially given the general openness of other countries to such an institution.

Third, Washington should seek to improve mutual strategic understanding with Beijing. Such an effort can provide a long-term foundation for the aforementioned efforts to simultaneously address the challenges of Chinese maritime assertiveness while tempering the potential for broader revisionism. In this regard, while strategic understanding may not make its presence known through policy “wins”, it does make its absence known through “losses” e.g. misunderstanding of intentions. In this regard, enhancing dialogue at both elite and non-elite levels can discourage developments such as China’s underestimation of U.S. power post-2008 financial crisis, while simultaneously encouraging a more even-keel U.S. perspective on China’s rise. Through these and other efforts, the United States can build on the nuanced insight generated by
neoclassical realism to proactively address China’s new maritime assertiveness, setting a pragmatic tone of cooperation amidst the reality of continued maritime competition.
Works Cited


