

Event Report

Chinese Assertiveness in the South China Sea

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“Chinese assertiveness” has become an infamous phrase – it is regularly used by media, pundits, and politicians, yet there is little scholarly work that would clarify the meaning of the concept. A similar situation exists when it comes to China’s power. Although it is generally assumed that “China is rising,” there are surprisingly few systematic studies of China’s power being done comprehensively and rigorously.

Dr Richard Turcsanyi’s recent book *Chinese Assertiveness in the South China Sea* addresses these issues. It defines the concept of “Chinese assertiveness,” establishes what policy actions qualify to be included, and then tests explanations as to why China conducted such policies. The South China Sea is taken as the case study since this is the area where there is nearly a consensus that China acts assertively. By providing a detailed account of the events in the SCS and by analyzing power dynamics in the region, it identifies the driving forces behind China’s assertive foreign policy. Considering China’s power on a domestic as well as an international level, it examines a number of different sources of hard and soft power, including military, economics, geopolitics, and domestic legitimacy.

Dr Turcsanyi demonstrates that Chinese assertiveness in the SCS can be explained not only by increases in China’s power, but also by effective reactions to other actors’ foreign policy changes.

Introduction

Mr Alberto Turkstra, Programme Coordinator at the European Institute for Asian Studies, delivered his introductory remarks presenting Dr Richard Turcsanyi's last book "Chinese Assertiveness in the South China Sea", which has the aim to offer some conceptual clarity around the term "assertiveness" and analyse whether China's actions in the South China Sea can be categorised as such.

The South China Sea as a Case of Chinese Assertiveness

Dr Richard Turcsanyi, Associate Researcher at the European Institute for Asian Studies and Associate Research Fellow at the Institute of International Relations in Prague, introduced his latest book "Chinese Assertiveness in the South China Sea", which deals with two topics: China's assertiveness and power, conceptualising the South China Sea "issue" as a case to learn more about these two subjects. Regarding the main question of the book – why China started to act assertively – Dr Turcsanyi found three main explanations.

First, Dr Turcsanyi argued, it is because of its rising power. Secondly, China's assertiveness can be interpreted as a response to concrete actions of other actors and to a changing international environment. Dr Turcsanyi's findings show that this is the best explanation. A third explanation can be attributed to various domestic politics.

Dr Turcsanyi explained what is meant by Chinese assertiveness. Firstly, it describes China's bold actions. Secondly, it describes China as acting in its narrowly defined interest. Thirdly, this assertiveness is marking a new era of China's foreign policy, because China's assertiveness is not unique – but its actions differ in quality and proportion from the actions of other actors and other periods. Taking the South China Sea (SCS) as a case of Chinese assertiveness in geo-political terms, Dr Turcsanyi found that before 2011 there were no Chinese actions that could fulfil the three above-mentioned criteria for assertiveness. However, the discourse that China is acting assertive, started to develop in 2009-2010. For instance, the SCS was often labelled as a Chinese core interest (in 2010). Other incidents such as the USNS Impeccable or the submission of the nine-dash line to the UN in the same year also heated this discussion. However, Dr Turcsanyi does not classify these actions as assertive but rather as a continuous Chinese growth of pro-action, because China reacted in response to other countries submitting claims.

However, since 2011, there have been five cases of China acting assertively in the South China Sea: the cable-cutting incidents in 2011-2012, the Scarborough Shoal stand-off in 2012, the Second Thomas Shoal stand-off since 2013, the oil rig incident in 2014 and the land reclamation, constructions, and militarization of the outputs since 2014.

Dr Turcsanyi's book also discusses Chinese power, analysing it on three levels, divided in different areas. On the state level, besides the economic and military power, a country also displays power in national performance, as it has to put the economic and military sources in use and create an operational system. At the structural level, power is divided in institutional setting (a country's position in international organisations), the geopolitical position and the position in international economy. On the societal level, Dr Turcsanyi differentiated between soft power – how the country is perceived by other countries'

populations – and domestic legitimacy, namely the amount of support a country's government has among its population.

Applying this structure, Dr Turcsanyi found out that China's power is increasing, especially when it comes to economy, military and geo-economics. Stabilised sources of power in China are the institutional setting, the national performance and domestic legitimacy, with approximately 80-90 percent of the Chinese population supporting its government. Soft power and geopolitics are still two problematic fields of China's power. Even though China is militarily and economically growing, it is not a hegemonic power. It has 14 neighbours on land, putting the country in a geopolitically challenging environment.

Findings of this power analysis show that from the five instances of Chinese assertiveness only in the oil rig incident China acted assertively because of its rising power. In the remaining four incidents China did not act immediately after it had the power to do so.

These findings led Dr Turcsanyi to find that Chinese actions can be defined as "reactive assertiveness". In the above-mentioned cases, China responded to an external event, by reacting assertively. All the assertive events happened after 2011, at a time when the American Pivot to Asia was taking place. From a Chinese perspective, this was perceived as an evidence of intentions to contain China and China felt that it had to improve its geopolitical conditions. An additional explanation to China's assertiveness is, in Dr Turcsanyi's opinion, China's domestic politics, namely a growing nationalism and public pressure.

A Wider Perspective on China's Rise

Mr Xavier Nuttin, Senior Associate at the European Institute for Asian Studies, introduced his opinions on why China is becoming more assertive. China's goal is to push the US back to the Pacific. With alliances such as South Korea, Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines, China feels that the US have always been too close. More importantly, by refusing the dispute settlement mechanisms of UNCLOS and rejecting the ruling, China put UNCLOS at risk and may put it at risk in other seas, like the Arctic and Mediterranean.

Mr Nuttin compared China's position in the SCS with China's position in the Arctic. In the SCS China claims that outside countries should not interfere. In the case of the Arctic Ocean however, China is not a claimant state, but has a policy which states that when it comes to the Arctic Ocean all countries who are interested should be included in the discussion – it should not be restricted to the claimant states.

However, these approaches shed a negative image on the country. China wants to show that it is a responsible power, but in Mr Nuttin's opinion, with these contradictory actions and statements, the country is achieving exactly the opposite and putting at risk the international rule based order.

China is challenging the post-war order on the military, economic, financial and soft power aspect. All this in a context of slow decline of the US and at a time when China is sending clear political messages, such as Xi Jinping's words during the 19th Party Congress in October 2017: "It is time for China to transform itself into a mighty force that could lead the world on political, economic, military and environmental issues". China is assertive, it

has decided to win back its “rightful” position in the world and sees an opportunity in doing so at a time when the West is perceived as weak (Trump, financial crisis, Euro crisis, Brexit). However, China is not yet a global power. Its goal for the moment is to become a regional hegemony and have a larger security role in the region.

The South China Sea in the Perspective of Foreign Policy Making

Mr Tim Rühlig, Visiting Fellow at the European Institute for Asian Studies and PhD candidate at Goethe University of Frankfurt, agreed with Dr Turcsanyi that China is a responsive actor. China cares about its perception and its position internationally. Xi Jinping’s speech at the Party Congress, in his opinion, indeed has a nationalistic rhetoric emphasizing that China is back on the world stage, but it also carries a second message: being a great power is correlated with the fact of being a responsible power. Making a connection to history, Mr Rühlig stated that the Chinese perception is that China has been a civilized nation and moral power until the mid 19th century. The Chinese Communist Party took over the country in 1949, Mao unified the country, Deng made it rich again and Xi Jinping sees himself as the leader putting China back in its historically right position. In this regard for China being a strong power means being a respected power. And a country can only be respected if its actions resonate with what the world believes.

At the same time, it is right to say that China is also a responsive actor with Chinese characteristics. Domestic affairs in China are crucial to understand this concept. The Communist party has basically lost the ideological imprint that it had during the Mao time. Another source of its legitimacy now is the wealth accumulation and very strong economic performance. The communist party is carefully considering whether this is a sustainable form of its legitimacy or whether it needs a more solid pillar.

A second domestic layer is the fragmented and decentralized party state. The Chinese State and the foreign policy making show four cleavages: 1) between the Party and the state (it is a double layer when foreign policy decisions are taken), 2) between the national and local state (local interests are strong but this is a gradual process), 3) the special linkage between economic and political leads (economic influences in political decisions) and 4) between the PLA and the civil leadership (also a double layer).

Thirdly, also referring to the 2016 UNCLOS ruling, Mr Rühlig explained that China’s approach of rejecting the ruling was very characteristic. China has rejected the ruling by referencing legal reasons and stating that the dispute was a matter of overlapping sovereignties. It seems there is this underlying different approach to law having a much more functional understanding in China. Law is seen as a mean to achieve political goals, but law is not a value in itself, which is a challenge in international order.

Q&A

A first question asked whether the oil rig incident can be classified as reactive assertiveness and what was the coordinating effort of the military in this case.

Dr Turcsanyi reminded that four out of five incidents after 2011 are attributed to the changing international environment. The oil rig incident is the only one Dr Turcsanyi did

not classify as a reactive action. The oil rig incident was a decided action taken from China after it gained more power. Regarding the military coordination, Dr Turcsanyi explained that the military does not play a big role in China's assertiveness, as the two stand-offs show. In these cases China wanted to prevent vessels of Vietnam and the Philippines to enter the relevant areas. The first layer stopping these vessels were Chinese fishing vessels, the second one were coast guards and only as a third layer there was the military. This case explains that the military is not a driving force in Chinese assertiveness.

A second question inquired about China's role in the international environment. Taking as an example the de-escalation between North and South Korea during the Winter Olympic games, the question was raised, whether this de-escalation is in the sense of China and if people that want to cooperate on this de-escalation can count on China.

Dr Turcsanyi explained that a North-South Korea de-escalation is indeed in China's interest, also because it puts the SCS issue in a lower level of international attention. He added that the major limitations for China in the SCS are not the US or other claimants. China does not take over the post of the Philippines or Vietnam because of the massive repercussions in terms of geopolitics and bad image.

Dr Turcsanyi continued to explain that the time of boldly inappropriate actions in China is over. We are now in the Belt and Road Initiative period. China wants to be proactive in a way that satisfies the national public with its government. Also, BRI is a proactive initiative which is seen positively internationally. With BRI China managed to improve its perception internationally – all in accordance with China's goals.

Another question asked whether resources can be counted as an external environment factor leading to Chinese assertiveness. This question focused especially on the fact that China's neighbouring countries of the SCS have more than 1,000 oil rigs, which China is not capable of exploiting.

Dr Turcsanyi argued that in fact the disputed waters do not have so much oil as many would expect. The SCS is very important as a route for Chinese energy transport, but he does not see the resources as an economic interest for China. Also, the oil rigs which are under control of Brunei, The Philippines, Vietnam etc. are in non-disputed waters, outside of the nine-dash line.

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