



Chinese Assertiveness in the South China Sea.

Power Sources, Domestic Politics, and
Reactive Foreign Policy

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Research goals

- Main question: Why China started to act assertively in the South China Sea?
- H1: Because of its rising power
- H2: Because of changing international environment
- H3: Because of its domestic politics

Assetiveness (conceptualization)

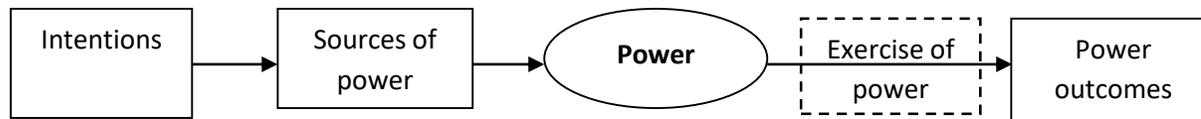
- (Inappropriately) bold action
- Narrowly defined own interests, even if contradictory to interests of other actors
- Qualitatively/quantitatively different to other actors' actions
- Qualitatively/quantitatively different to other periods
- (happened in the area/topic of the SCS disputes)

Chinese action	Time of occurrence	Category of behaviour
labelling the SCS as a Chinese core interest on a par with Tibet and Taiwan	2010	Not relevant (misinterpreted)
the Impeccable incident	2009	Not relevant (it took place in an undisputed Chinese EEZ)
submission of the nine-dash line to the UN	2009	No policy change (China's longstanding position, triggered by a new external development)
the more active defence of Chinese fishing activities, including the imposition of a fishing ban	since 2009	Policy adjustment (expansion of the scope of previous policy, a reaction to a new external development)
more frequent patrols by administrative agencies	since 2005	Policy adjustment (reactions to a new external development, a continuing rise of China's presence)
the diplomatic pushback against other states' oil-related activities	since 2007	Policy adjustment (reactions to a new external development in line with China's longstanding position, no shift in 2009-2010)
increasing PLA Navy activities	since the 1990s	Policy adjustment (a continuing rise of activity, no explicit evidence of new assertive action)

Chinese action	Time of occurrence	Category of behaviour
The cable-cutting incidents	2011-2012	Assertiveness (qualitatively new policy behaviour)
The Scarborough Shoal stand-off	2012	Assertiveness (a quantitatively unusually bold action, the qualitatively new policy of economic sanctions)
The Second Thomas Shoal stand-off	since 2013	Assertiveness (an unusually bold action)
The oil rig incident	2014	Assertiveness (a qualitatively new policy move)
Land reclamation, constructions, and militarization of the outposts	since 2014	Assertiveness (a qualitatively and quantitatively unusually bold action)

1. Power (conceptualization)

- Power = an ability of an actor to achieve and/or sustain a desired situation
 - Issue specific
 - Contextual
 - Intentional
 - Dynamic
 - Relative, but not zero sum



1. Sources of (state) power

Structural/international level	Institutional setting	Geopolitical position	Position in international economy
State/government level	Economy	National performance	Military
Societal level	Domestic legitimacy		Soft power

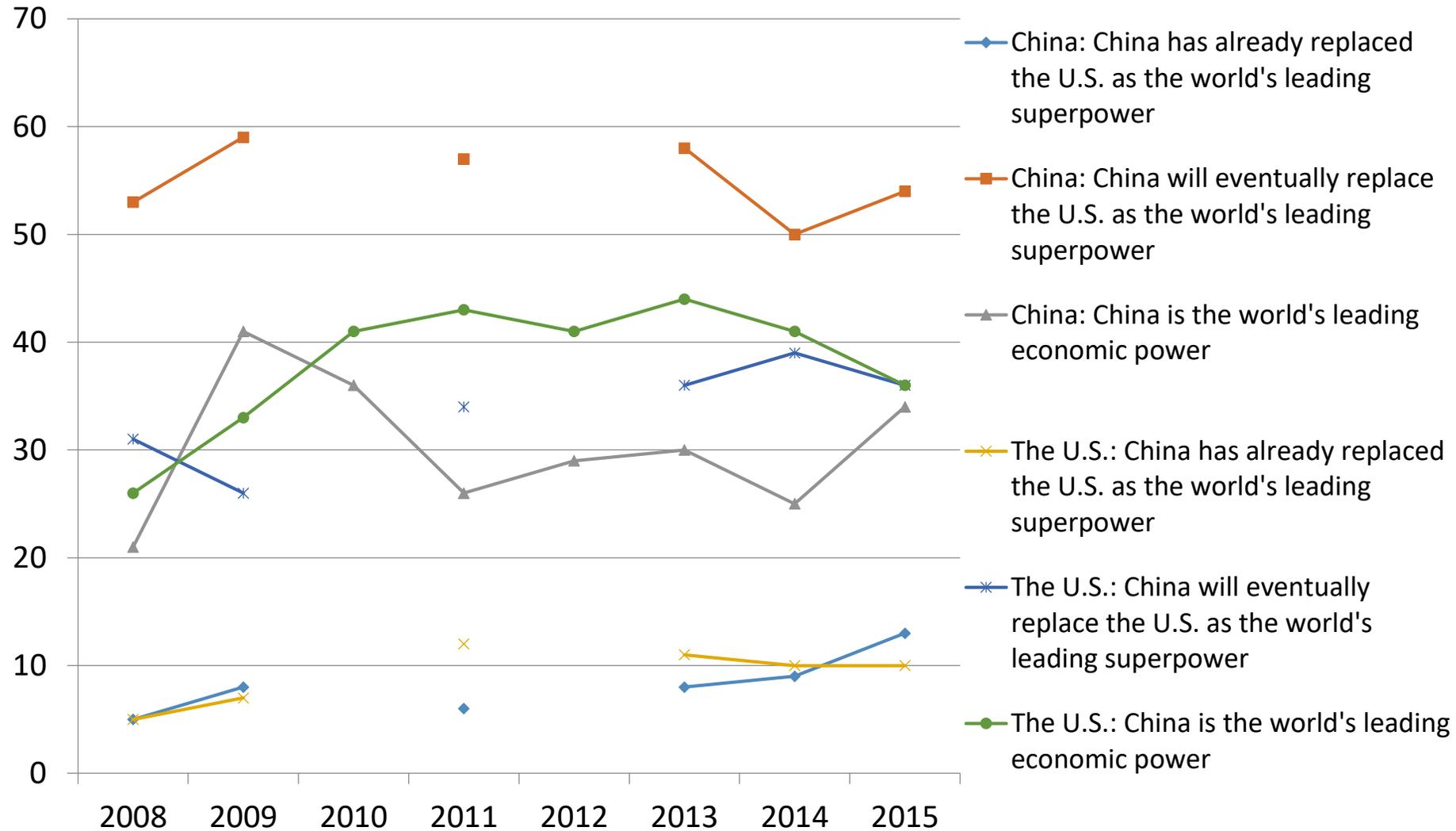
1. Development of China's sources of power

Increasing sources of China's power	Economy, military, geo-economics
Stabilized/moderately increasing sources of China's power	Institutional setting, national performance, domestic legitimacy
Decreasing and/or problematic sources of China's power	Soft power, geopolitics

1. Chinese assertiveness and sources of power

Chinese action	Time of occurrence	Utilized sources of power
The cable cutting incidents	2011-2012	military, economy
The Scarborough Shoal stand-off	2012	military, economy, geo-economics
The Second Thomas Shoal stand-off	since 2013	military, economy
The oil-rig incident	2014	economy, military, national performance
Land reclamation, constructions, and militarization of the SCS outposts	since 2014	economy, military

1. Perception of China's power



2. Reaction to changing int. environment

The Chinese assertive (or policy adjustment) action	Time of occurrence	Level of assertiveness	External event/development
The cable cutting incidents	2011-2012	Reactive assertiveness	seismic surveys of other countries within China's nine-dash line
The Scarborough Shoal stand-off	2012	Reactive assertiveness	crisis, the Philippines dispatching a Navy vessel that tried to arrest Chinese fishermen
The Second Thomas Shoal stand-off	since 2013	Reactive assertiveness	the Philippines trying to improve its outpost
The oil rig incident	2014	Assertiveness	none
Land reclamation, constructions, and militarization of the SCS outposts	since 2014	Reactive assertiveness	the Philippines initiated the arbitration process in The Hague in 2013

3. Domestic politics

- Options:
 - Intergovernmental rivalry (loss of control of the top leadership)
 - Domestic problems (unsatisfied public, growing domestic problems)
 - Nationalism (growing nationalism, public pressure)
- 1. No, since Xi Jinping decreasing the likelihood
- 2. No, good satisfaction rates, national performance
- 3. Yes, but no evidence of direct causality

Conclusion

- China started to behave assertively in the SCS since 2011 – altogether five instances in 2011-2016
- Power necessary condition for the assertive actions
- Only one (oil rig case in 2014) sufficiently explained by the theory no. 1
- Four cases sufficiently explained by the theory no. 2 – reactions to changed international environment
- Domestic politics – no evidence of direct causality, possible indirect contribution of the rise of nationalism

Research takeaways

- Chinese FP decision making process:
 - Responsive actor with Chinese characteristics
- Shift of power in Asia-Pacific and the Trump factor:
 - Geopolitics and soft power main limitations of China, but Trump is making it better for China
- Power in IR:
 - “Football game rather than boxing match“