

How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?

Alastair Iain Johnston

In recent years, it has become increasingly common in U.S. media, pundit, and academic circles to describe the diplomacy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as newly or increasingly assertive.¹ Some observers have even suggested that this new assertiveness reflects a fundamental shift in Chinese diplomacy away from Beijing's more status quo-oriented behavior of the previous thirty years.² Many believe that it reflects a conscious decision by the top leadership in the wake of the 2008–09 financial crisis to be much more proactive in challenging U.S. interests in East Asia and, indeed, elsewhere around the world. The new assertiveness meme has “gone viral” in the U.S. media, the blogosphere, and in scholarly work.

This article argues, however, that the new assertiveness meme underestimates the degree of assertiveness in certain policies in the past, and overestimates the amount of change in China's diplomacy in 2010 and after. Much of China's diplomacy in 2010 fell within the range in foreign policy preferences, diplomatic rhetoric, and foreign policy behavior established in the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao eras. Moreover, the claims about a new assertiveness typically do not provide a definition of assertiveness, are unclear about the causal mechanisms behind this shift toward assertiveness, and lack comparative rigor that better contextualizes China's diplomacy in 2010.

Why should policymakers and scholars worry about a problematic characterization of Chinese foreign policy? Putting aside the intellectual importance of accurately measuring the dependent variable in the study of a major power's foreign policy, there are two good reasons. First, if it persists, the new assertiveness meme could contribute to an emerging security dilemma in the U.S.-China relationship. “Talk” is consequential for both interstate and intra-state politics during intensifying security dilemmas and strategic rivalries.

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1. For examples of this type of commentary, see Michael Swaine, “Perceptions of an Assertive China,” *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 32 (May 2010), p. 10 n 1.

2. Daniel Twining described China's diplomacy as “militant assertiveness.” See Twining, “Were U.S.-India Relations Oversold? Part II,” *Shadow Government, Foreign Policy*, blog, June 12, 2012, <http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com>.

How adversaries are described reverberates in the domestic politics of both sides.³ The effect is often the narrowing of public discourse. As public discourse narrows and as conventional wisdoms become habituated, it becomes more difficult for other voices to challenge policy orthodoxies.⁴ Similar to the “containment” meme in China,⁵ the new assertiveness meme or others similar to it in the United States could, in the future, reduce the range of interpretations of Chinese foreign policy, potentially narrowing policy options available to decisionmakers (assuming this discourse becomes accepted by national security decisionmakers).

Second, the new assertiveness meme may reflect an important but understudied feature of international relations going forward—that is, the speed with which discursive bandwagoning (or herding, to use a different metaphor) in the online media and the pundit blogosphere creates faulty conventional wisdoms. As I show later, a growing literature on the intensive and extensive agenda-setting interaction between the online media and the blogosphere has emerged in U.S. political discourse. The implications of this interactivity for interstate conflict, however, remain unexplored.

The first section of this article reviews examples of PRC assertiveness prior to 2010 to contextualize the emergence of the new assertiveness meme in 2010. The second section looks in more critical detail at several PRC foreign policy actions in 2010 that observers have described as newly assertive. The third section asks why the inaccuracies in the characterization of Chinese diplomacy during this period occurred. I focus, in particular, on the tendency of analysts to select on the dependent variable; on the ahistorical nature of much of their analysis; and on the generally poor specification of their causal arguments.

3. John A. Vasquez, *The War Puzzle Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); and William R. Thompson, “Identifying Rivals and Rivalries in World Politics,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (December 2001), pp. 557–586.

4. For examples of the literature on discourse and participation, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press); Richard M. Weiss, *Managerial Ideology and the Social Control of Deviance in Organizations* (New York: Praeger, 1986); Murray Edelman, *Political Language: Words That Succeed and Policies That Fail* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977); Karin Fierke, “Links across the Abyss: Language and Logic in International Relations,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (September 2002), pp. 331–354; and Ted Hopf, “The Logic of Habit in International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (December 2010), pp. 539–561.

5. Over the past few years, Chinese analysts have increasingly used the term “containment” to characterize U.S. strategy toward China. These analysts claim that the United States wants to prevent China’s rise, a view that resonates with deeply held beliefs about the humiliations that China suffered at the hands of stronger modern states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet it is hard to find any evidence from official U.S. documents, policymakers’ memoirs, or journalist exposés published after 1972 that the containment of China is the national security strategy as determined by U.S. presidents. Thus this particular claim is even more problematic empirically than the newly assertive China meme.

Assertiveness before 2010

Beginning in late 2009 and into 2010, U.S. analysts and media started to claim that Chinese rhetoric and behavior had begun to demonstrate substantial change. As evidence of a newly assertive China, they pointed to China's allegedly more assertive diplomacy at the Copenhagen conference on climate change in December 2009; to its angry reaction to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan in January 2010 and to the Dalai Lama's visit in February 2010; to its apparently more expansive claims over the South China Sea in March 2010; to its diplomatic defense of violent actions by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in March and November 2010; and to its tough response to the Japanese arrest of a Chinese fishing captain in September 2010.⁶ As figures 1–3 show, the new assertiveness meme took off in the media, pundit, and academic communities. Judging from the sharp spike in these graphs beginning in 2010, if this discourse accurately reflected reality, one would expect there to have been a radical change in Chinese foreign policy.

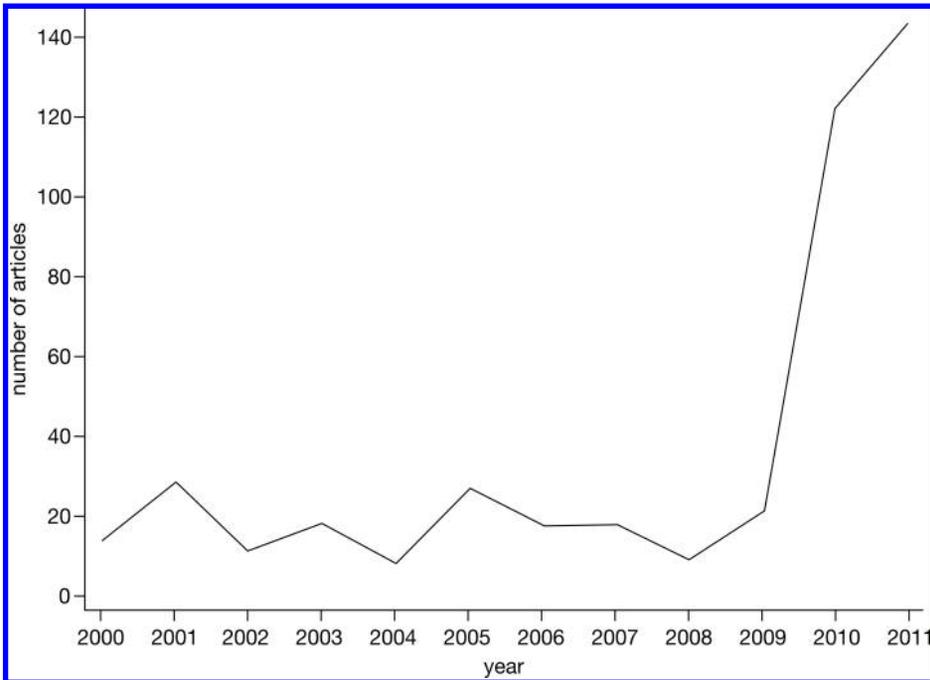
This perception of a new assertiveness, however, is problematic on two grounds. First, it ignores persistent assertiveness in Chinese foreign policy on sovereignty and territory issues prior to 2010. Second, it misreads many of the specifics of the cases of alleged assertiveness in 2010. Let me turn to the first problem. I take up the second problem in the next section.

There are two requirements for making the claim of a new Chinese assertiveness beginning in 2010: (1) a clear definition and indicators of assertiveness; and (2) evidence that diplomacy displayed a substantially higher value on these indicators in 2010 compared with previous years. Unfortunately, the discourse about a newly assertive China has suffered from a dearth of definitions and valid indicators. Analysts have used a number of synonyms in lieu of a definition: truculent, arrogant, belligerent, hard-line, tough, bullying, militant, and even revolutionary. The implication is that China's diplomacy was notably more threatening, exhibited more hostile preferences, and expressed these preferences in more conflictual language than at any other time after the end of the Cold War (though the newly assertive argument is unclear about the temporal baseline one should use). Today, there is still no consensus definition of "assertive" in the international relations literature on which to draw. Some scholars use assertive to refer to a constructive activism in international life.⁷ Others use it to describe imperialistic, nationalistic, or anti-normative be-

6. See Swaine, "Perceptions of an Assertive China," pp. 2–4.

7. Andrew Hurrell, "Brazil and the New Global Order," *Current History*, February 2010, pp. 60–66; Marco Overhaus, "German Foreign Policy and the Shadow of the Past," *SAIS Review*, Vol. 25, No. 2

Figure 1. Frequency of U.S. News Articles That Refer to “Assertive” within Five Words of “China”



SOURCE: LexisNexis.

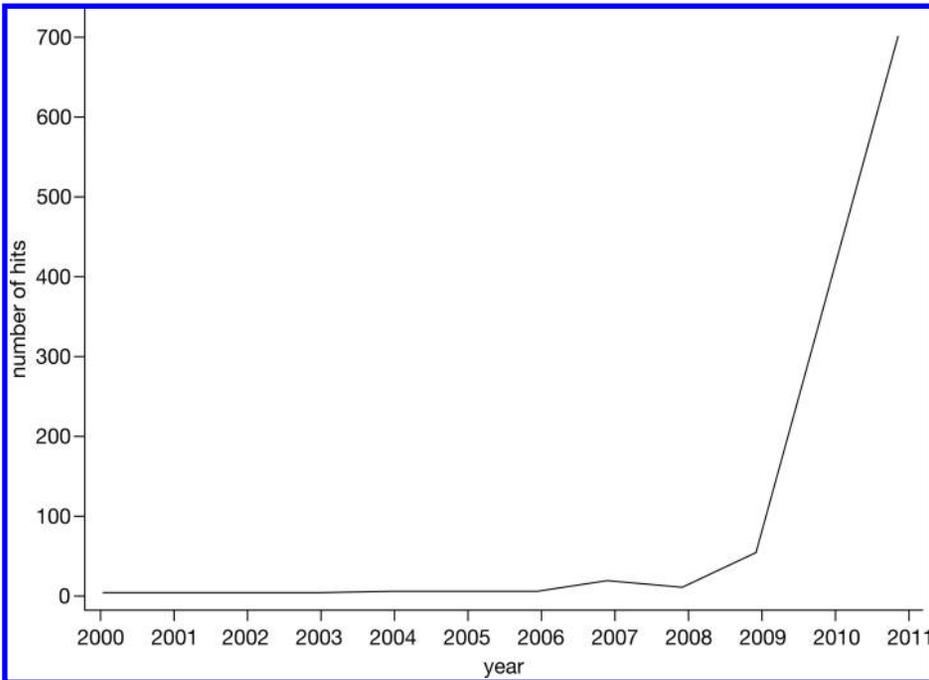
havior.⁸ There is no international relations theory that employs a typology of state behavior that includes “assertive” as a category. From usage, however, one can come up with a relatively simple and clearer definition than is implied in most of the commentary, namely, a form of assertive diplomacy that explicitly threatens to impose costs on another actor that are clearly higher than before (e.g., “if you sell weapons to Taiwan, we will harm you in much more costly ways than before”; or “if you let the Dalai Lama visit, the costs for you will be substantially greater than before”).

Given this definition, it is hard to conclude that 2010 saw an unprecedented spike in Chinese assertiveness compared with other periods after the Cold

(Summer–Fall 2005), pp. 27–41; and Henry Laurence, “Japan’s Proactive Foreign Policy and the Rise of the BRICS,” *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (2007), pp. 177–203.

8. Michael Cox, “Is the United States in Decline—Again? An Essay,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (July 2007), pp. 643–653; Andrei P. Tsygankov, “Russia’s International Assertiveness: What Does It Mean for the West? Problems of Post-Communism,” Vol. 55, No. 2 (March/April 2008), pp. 38–55; and Carol Migdalovitz, “AKP’s Domestically-Driven Foreign Policy,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Winter 2010), pp. 37–45.

Figure 2. Number of Hits for English Language Blogs That Use the Term "Assertive China"

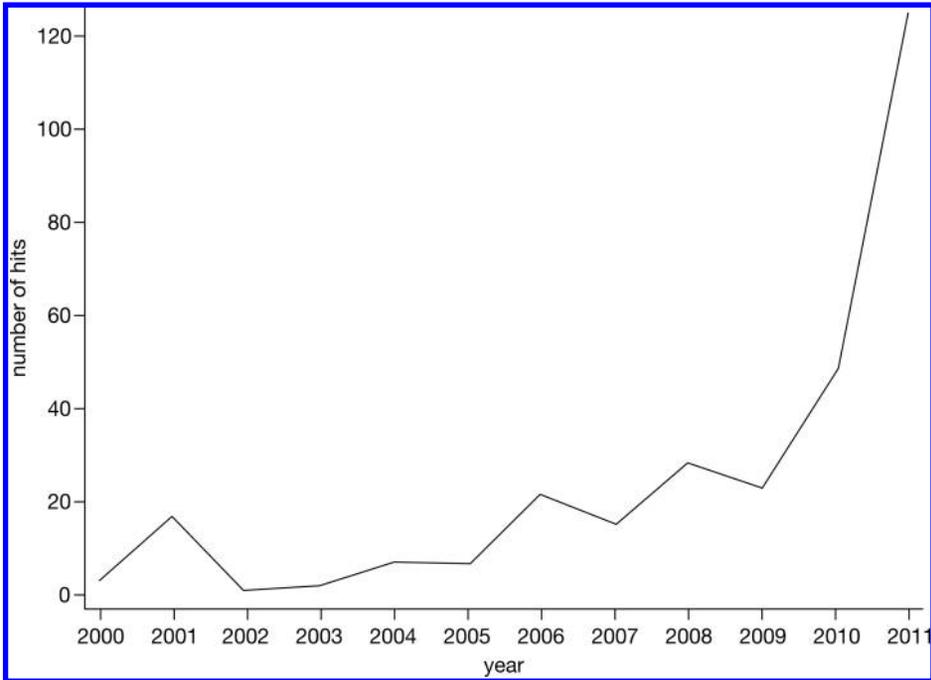


SOURCE: Google Blog Search.

War. One need only recall the massive exercises, including missile firings, that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) held opposite Taiwan in 1995–96 to signal to the United States that the PRC was still involved in the Chinese civil war and that, as a result, Washington could not expect a permanent peace. Or the reaction to the U.S. bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade in 1999, where the Chinese government allowed students to violate international law and to bombard the U.S. embassy with rocks and bottles. Anti-U.S. rhetoric was unremittingly shrill for several months after the bombing. For instance, through the rest of 1999, out of 447 reports on the embassy bombing in the *People's Daily*, 165 (37 percent) referenced "barbaric" (*yeman*) U.S./NATO behavior. On June 22, 1999, an "observer" piece in the *People's Daily*—representing some, though not all, voices in the Chinese leadership—likened the United States to Nazi Germany.⁹ Then, in April 2001, after a midair collision between a U.S. EP-3

9. Guanchajia [Observer], "Fengquan dangjin baquanzhuyi zhao yi zhao lishi zhe mian jinzi" [May we advise today's hegemonism to look in history's mirror], *Renmin ribao* [People's daily], June 22, 1999.

Figure 3. Frequency of Academic Books and Articles That Refer to “Assertive China”



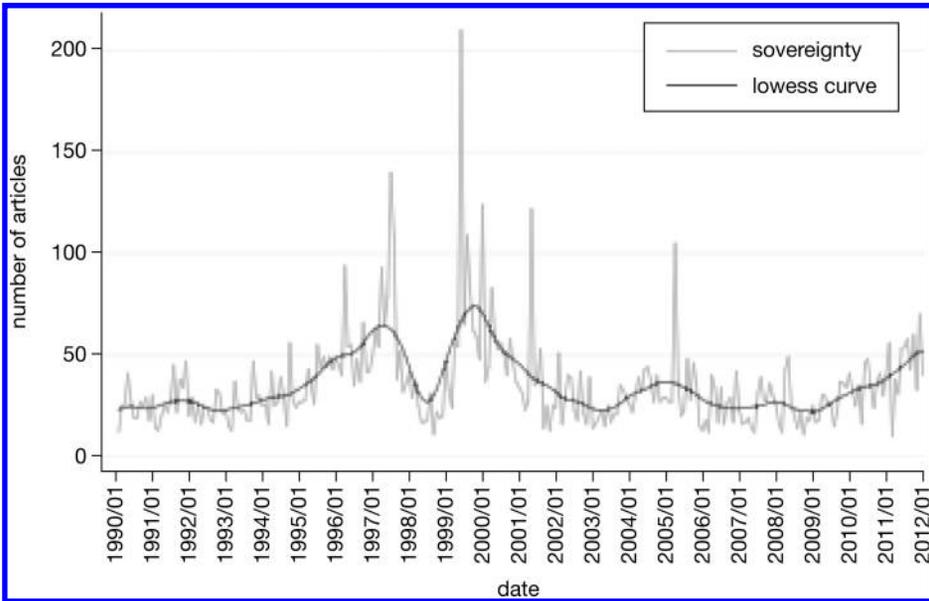
SOURCE: Google Scholar.

surveillance airplane and a Chinese fighter jet compelled the EP-3 to land at a Chinese military airport on Hainan Island, China held the downed U.S. military personnel essentially as hostages for more than a week to extract an apology from the United States for an accident caused by a reckless Chinese pilot. The reported rudeness of Chinese diplomats toward President Barack Obama at the Copenhagen climate change conference in December 2009, as well as other reports about the new arrogance of Chinese diplomats of late, would seem to pale in comparison with these sorts of actions.¹⁰

These are well-known anecdotes of pre-2010 assertiveness, but a more systematic indicator of assertiveness—the official discourse about issues of sovereignty—also suggests that 2010 does not represent as dramatic a shift as most analysts claim. The sensitivity to challenges to sovereignty is at the

10. For a similar point about the history of China’s rhetorical assertiveness, see Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China’s Rise: An Insider’s Account of America’s Asia Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), p. 80; and Alan Wachman, “Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Commission: Hearing on China’s Current and Emerging Foreign Policy Priorities,” Washington, D.C., April 13, 2011.

Figure 4. Monthly Number of Articles That Reference "Sovereignty" in *The People's Daily*, January 1990–December 2011



heart of much of China's more uncompromising foreign policy positions on territory. Figure 4 shows the monthly frequency of articles that reference "sovereignty" (*zhuquan*) in the *People's Daily* from 1990 to 2012, with trends highlighted by a lowess curve.¹¹ Despite an increase beginning in 2009 and into 2010, the sovereignty discourse did not reach the levels expressed following the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis; the May 1999 embassy bombing; the EP-3 downing in April 2001; or the anti-Japanese demonstrations of the spring of 2005. The data appear to show that the most recent increase in the frequency of references began in the first half of 2009 partly in response to the Philippines passing a law claiming the Scarborough Shoal (Huangyan Island) as Philippines territory and Malaysia's and Vietnam's submission of their continental shelf claims to the United Nations Commission on the Limitations of the Continental Shelf.¹²

Together, these past examples of Chinese assertiveness and the data on the of-

11. The lowess (locally weighted least squares) curve is a smoothing technique that fits a regression line to a specified fraction of time-series data. I thank Robert Lee, who graciously allowed me to use the data he collected for his master's thesis. Lee, "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in the People's Republic of China: An Econometric Analysis," master's thesis, Harvard University, 2012.

12. On China's response to these events, see M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (December 2011), pp. 292–319.

ficial sovereignty discourse suggest that 2010 was not a watershed in Chinese diplomacy toward sovereignty and territorial integrity issues. I now turn to the second problem with the conventional wisdom about an assertive China—the misreading of several positions taken by Chinese diplomacy in 2010.

Examples of China's New Assertiveness?

Much of the commentary on China's new assertiveness has centered on seven events that occurred in late 2009 and 2010. Yet if one pays close attention to the carefully crafted linguistic formulae that the Chinese government uses to express authoritative diplomatic positions¹³, as well as to the actual foreign policy behavior "on the ground," there is no obvious pattern of new assertiveness across all these cases.

COPENHAGEN SUMMIT ON CLIMATE CHANGE, DECEMBER 2009

The Copenhagen conference held in December 2009 was aimed at strengthening states' commitments to mitigate climate change. Many analysts pointed to China's behavior at Copenhagen as the first example of an increased level of assertiveness. Some commentators focused on the allegedly rude and in-your-face behavior of some Chinese diplomats as evidence of a new assertiveness.¹⁴ Others, however, saw China's diplomacy at the conference as symptomatic of a more proactive effort by China to resist demands from Europe, the United States, and many developing countries to commit to a timetable for greenhouse gas reductions and to accept monitoring of national performance. This interpretation misreads Chinese diplomacy in Copenhagen (or misuses the term "assertive"). Rather than representing a new assertiveness, the Chinese position in Copenhagen—no commitments on ceilings and timetables and resistance to strict verification of national performance—reflected an enduring position, dating to the early 1990s.¹⁵ In other words, there was virtually no change in Chinese diplomacy at the summit. Chinese diplomacy on this issue was risk averse—avoid any changes in policy and try to prevent outcomes in-

13. On the importance of understanding the hierarchy of authoritative statements in the Chinese system, see Paul H.B. Godwin and Alice Miller, "China's Forbearance Has Limits: Chinese Threat and Retaliation Signaling and Its Implications for a Sino-American Military Confrontation," *China Security Perspectives*, No. 6 (March 2013).

14. Anthony Faiola, Juliet Eilperin, and John Pomfret, "Copenhagen Talks Show U.S., China May Shape Future," *Washington Post*, December 20, 2009; and John Pomfret, "Strident Tone from China Raises Concerns in West," *Washington Post*, January 31, 2010.

15. On the absence of change in China's global warming policy, see Gloria Jean Gong, "What China Wants: China's Climate Change Priorities in a Post-Copenhagen World," *Global Change, Peace, & Security*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (June 2011), pp. 159–175.

consistent with this policy. What had changed was the reaction to China's position. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was unprepared for the level of activism by the United States and Europe in criticizing China's position on climate change, and it overestimated the unity within the developing world on the issue. In particular, it was unprepared for being singled out so vociferously by various actors as a major part of the global warming problem. In short, it was unprepared for the changing diplomatic alignments on global warming. As a result, some of its prickly diplomacy was likely a conservative backlash to changed diplomatic conditions, not a change in preferences or tactics on the issue.

TAIWAN ARMS SALES, JANUARY 2010

Many analysts characterized Beijing's reaction to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan in January 2010 as distinctly tougher than in the past.¹⁶ This portrayal is too simplistic. China's reaction to the arms sales can be divided into two distinct responses.¹⁷ The first was to the Pentagon's decision in late December 2009 and early January 2010 to approve contracts to U.S. arms industries for sales agreed to by the George W. Bush administration in 2008. This response was relatively mild. Using the basic standard language for a reaction to U.S. arms sales, the MFA denounced the Pentagon's decision as "harming China's national security" and as "interference in internal affairs." In contrast to statements from 2000 to 2008, the MFA moderated its position slightly by omitting the term "crude" (*cubao*) to modify "interference in internal affairs" and omitting "endangering" (*weihai*) to modify "national security."¹⁸ These linguistic choices were most likely designed to signal China's understanding that the Department of Defense announcements were about a Bush administration decision.¹⁹

Beijing's second response was to a new package of arms sales of about \$6.4 billion authorized by the Obama administration in late January 2010. This

16. Australian scholar Ron Huiskens describes the Chinese reaction as "fierce." See Huiskens, "Taiwan: Is Beijing Testing Obama's Mettle?" *East Asia Forum*, blog, East Asian Bureau of Economic Research, February 24, 2010, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/02/24/taiwan-is-beijing-testing-obamas-mettle/>. See also John Pomfret, "Obama Meeting with Dalai Lama Complicates China Ties," *Washington Post*, February 19, 2010; and Peh Shing Huei, "China Chafes at 'Tough' Label," *Straits Times*, March 8, 2010.

17. For details about these sales, see Alan Romberg, "2010: The Winter of PRC Discontent," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 31 (February 2010).

18. "Waijiaobu fayanren Jiang Yu jiu Mei dui Tai junshou da jizhe wen" [Foreign Ministry spokesperson Jiang Yu answers journalists' questions about U.S. arms sales to Taiwan] (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, January 7, 2010), http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/wjdt_611265/fyrbt_611275/t649080.shtml.

19. Comments by Chinese government foreign policy analysts at the time also indicated that the announcements were not seen as Obama administration sales. Author interviews with Chinese government foreign policy analysts, Beijing, January 2010.

time the reaction was stronger. In rhetorical terms, the MFA restored the term “crude” to modify “interference” and replaced “harming” with the tougher term “seriously endangering” to modify “national security.”²⁰ Still, the MFA’s rhetorical response to the second arms sales decision fell within the boundaries of past public responses to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan dating back to at least 2000.

In addition to its standard rhetoric, the MFA announced the suspension of U.S.-China military-to-military contacts; but China had taken a similar measure after a round of arms sales in October 2008.²¹ The only truly new element in Beijing’s 2010 response was an MFA statement about sanctioning U.S. companies that sold arms to Taiwan. This possibility had been discussed inside the Chinese interagency process when the United States had announced previous arms sales, but the MFA and the Ministry of Commerce had apparently resisted calls for sanctions in the past. In 2010, though, they agreed to the sanctions language. To date, however, no evidence has emerged that China applied any sanctions to U.S. companies. In short, this “newly assertive” element of the Chinese response to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan was indeed new, and it did establish a baseline marker for future reactions.²² In practice, however, it was a symbolic element in an overall response within the range of past Chinese reactions.²³

THE DALAI LAMA’S VISIT TO THE UNITED STATES, FEBRUARY 2010

The Dalai Lama had hoped to visit President Obama in the fall of 2009. The United States was worried, however, that a meeting that close to the upcoming November 2009 summit with Hu Jintao might damage the atmosphere of the summit. So with the Dalai Lama’s approval, the United States delayed his visit

20. “Waijiaobu fubuzhang He Yafei jiu Mei shou Tai wuqi wenti xiang Mei zhu Hua dashi tichu yanzheng jiaoshe” [Vice Foreign Minister He Yafei raises solemn representations to the U.S. ambassador to China on the issue of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan] (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, January 30, 2010), http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/zyxw_602251/t654807.shtml.

21. Michael Wines, “U.S. and China Revive Military Talks,” *New York Times*, February 28, 2009.

22. Interestingly, the sanctions language was not used in Beijing’s response to the U.S. decision in November 2011 to offer upgrades for Taiwan’s F16A/Bs, perhaps because the Chinese government wanted to signal its preference for this outcome over the sale of more advanced F16C/Ds. The rest of the MFA language in November 2011 was standard. See the statement by MFA Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Zhijun, “Waijiaobu fubuzhang Zhang Zhijun jiu Mei xuanbu dui Tai junshou jihua zhaojian Mei zhu Hua dashi tichu qianglie kangyi” [Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Zhijun lodges a strong protest with the U.S. ambassador to China for the U.S. announcement of plans to sell arms to Taiwan] (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, September 21, 2011).

23. Unlike the 2010 U.S. arms sales case, China imposed real economic costs on France for arms sales to Taiwan in the 1990s. China retaliated against French sales of Mirage fighters in 1993 by dropping plans to buy Airbus aircraft and by prohibiting French companies from bidding for the Guangzhou subway project. I thank Alison Kaufman for reminding me of this case.

until February 2010.²⁴ Not surprisingly, the Chinese expressed their opposition to the February visit. But contrary to much of the characterization by U.S. analysts of the Chinese response,²⁵ the Foreign Ministry's statements were slightly milder, certainly no tougher, than the last time the Dalai Lama had visited a U.S. president in 2007. In 2007 the MFA had used the phrase "crude [*cubao*] interference in internal affairs" to characterize the meeting. In 2010, however, the MFA replaced "crude" with the milder term "serious" (*yanzhong*). This difference in terminology likely reflected a decision by the Chinese government to temper its reaction as compared with that of 2007 in recognition of Obama's decision to delay his meeting with the Dalai Lama until after the November 2009 summit with Hu Jintao.

THE SOUTH CHINA SEA AS A "CORE INTEREST," MARCH 2010

In late April 2010, a *New York Times* article cited a single U.S. government source who claimed that during a meeting in March between senior Chinese officials (including State Councillor Dai Bingguo) and two senior U.S. officials (Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg and National Security Council Asia Director Jeffrey Bader), China had stated for the first time that the South China Sea was a "core interest, on par with Taiwan and Tibet."²⁶ If true, this would have signaled a major change in China's policy toward the area. It would have been a clear indication that Beijing had dropped the idea of negotiation over maritime disputes in the region, just as there could be no negotiation over the formal status of Taiwan or Tibet. The *New York Times* report spread rapidly through the media and pundit blogosphere in the United States.²⁷ At a minimum, it was responsible for 36 percent (and almost certainly much more) of the subsequent U.S. media coverage of the "core interest" story through late 2011. In the English-language blogosphere, at least 51 percent of the blogs that referred to China's alleged claim about core interests and the South China Sea

24. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, pp. 49–50.

25. John Pomfret cites "analysts and US officials" who claim that China's response to the visit was "tougher than in the past." See Pomfret, "Obama Meeting with Dalai Lama Complicates China Ties," *Washington Post*, February 19, 2010. See also Helena Cooper's ahistorical account of the Chinese response, "Obama Meets Dalai Lama, and China Is Quick to Protest," *New York Times*, February 18, 2010.

26. Edward Wong, "Chinese Military Seeks to Extend Its Naval Power," *New York Times*, April 23, 2010.

27. China's Xinhua news agency repeated the claim in Wong's *New York Times* story a few days later. See "Mei mei jianyi Meijun dingqi zai Nanhai yanxi fangzhi Zhongguo kongzhi" [U.S. media proposes that the U.S. military will regularly exercise in the South Sea to prevent China's control], Xinhua news agency, April 28, 2010. Many in the Chinese media and a number of Chinese analysts also assumed the claim to be true, as did pundits throughout East Asia. A number of Asian participants in the PLA organized Xiangshan Forum in October 2010, for instance, prefaced their remarks and questions by noting that China had declared the South China Sea to be a core interest.

were ultimately derived from the *New York Times* story and its single anonymous source.²⁸ It became conventional wisdom that senior Chinese officials had announced this change in their meeting with Steinberg and Bader.²⁹

There is, however, no corroborating evidence that Steinberg and Bader were told that the South China Sea was a “core interest” similar to Taiwan or Tibet. Michael Swaine reports that high-level U.S. officials deny that it was the message they took away from the meeting with Dai Bingguo.³⁰ My own conversations with relevant U.S. officials confirm Swaine’s findings. Bader himself notes in his recent book about Obama’s Asia policy that no Chinese official at that meeting said that the South China Sea was a core interest.³¹

The Chinese government was slow to try to control the effects of this story, however. Only in August 2010, when it became clear that the supposed “core interest” statement was producing blowback from other states, did the Chinese government begin to counter the story through surrogates in China’s academic and media worlds. Some well-connected Chinese academics suggested that Steinberg and Bader might have been told that the islands China occupied in the South China Sea were core interests or that the islands were related to China’s territorial integrity, which, in turn, was a core interest. These suggestions would be consistent with long-standing general statements that defending sovereign territory is a core interest.³² Regardless, the academics claimed, no senior foreign policy official had said that the entire South China Sea was a core interest similar to Taiwan or Tibet.³³ As part of the subtle push-

28. These figures are based on a search of articles in LexisNexis and of blogs in Google that explicitly used language unique to the *New York Times* article, the phrase “on par with” in particular. Thus, these are conservative figures because they do not include what is likely a large number of articles and blogs that relied on the article but did not use language specific to it.

29. Two slightly different articles (one from *Kyodo* and one in the *Washington Post*) later reported a similar story, though their impact on the U.S. public discourse was more limited. See “China Told US South China Sea Is ‘Core Interest’—Kyodo,” *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific*, July 3, 2010; and John Pomfret, “U.S. Takes Tougher Stance with China; Strategy Acknowledges Beijing’s Rise in Power but Lays Down Markers,” *Washington Post*, July 30, 2010.

30. Michael D. Swaine, “China’s Assertive Behavior, Part One: On ‘Core Interests,’” *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 34 (2011), p. 8. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated publicly that Dai Bingguo told her at the May 2010 Strategic and Economic Dialogue that the South China Sea was a core interest, but Swaine claims there is no evidence of this. Sources I have asked also suggest there is no evidence in the State Department record of such a comment by Dai to Clinton. It is possible Clinton is misremembering, or perhaps remembers a memo about the alleged Chinese claim.

31. Bader, *Obama and China’s Rise*, p. 77.

32. Author interviews, Beijing, 2010.

33. The first public doubts about the credibility of the “core interest” story were raised by Peking University professor Zhu Feng to the Singaporean newspaper *Lianhe zaobao* [United morning news] in August 2010. “Jiaoshou: Jiang Nanhai shengji wei hexin liyi de tifa bu mingzhi” [Professor: Raising the South China Sea to the level of a core interest is unwise], *Lianhe zaobao*, August 23, 2010. The first major figure to categorically claim that senior leaders had never officially declared the South China Sea to be a core interest was retired Adm. Wang Haiyun, in “‘Nanhai shi Zhongguo hexinliyi’ bing fei guanfang biaotai” [“The South Sea is China’s core interest” is not an

back, Premier Wen Jiabao repeated a standard list of core Chinese interests—sovereignty, unification, territorial integrity—in a speech to the United Nations in September 2010, a list that pointedly excluded the South China Sea.³⁴

The MFA's indirect effort to deny the story was apparently a function of its sensitivity to appearing too soft on territorial issues. As a senior Chinese foreign policy official put it, once the story was out, the MFA could not publicly say that the South China Sea was not a core interest—China does not want to preempt the possibility of making such a declaration. Nor could it state publicly that no senior official had said the South China Sea was a core interest, that the *New York Times* source was wrong. This, too, might have raised the ire of nationalists within the population and the elite.³⁵ It would seem, then, that the preferred response was to try to counter the story through the media and through closed meetings with governments in the region.

It is likely, then, that the source for this particular story about China's rhetorical new assertiveness was wrong. Nonetheless, it appears that China lost control of the discourse to the foreign media, to the quasi-commercialized media in China, and to the pundit world outside China. To be sure, in 2009 and 2010 China's military and paramilitary presence in the South China Sea was more active than in previous years. Indeed, the South China Sea is perhaps the only example where China's diplomatic rhetoric and practice did shift fairly sharply in a more hard-line direction in this period.³⁶ As Taylor Fravel points out, however, some of this activity was in response to more proactive diplomacy by other claimants to establish the legal boundaries of their claims in the region.³⁷ Some of this activity may also have been a function of a decision to begin to assert the extent of China's claims so as to clarify what it can (and will) diplomatically and militarily defend. So even though China's diplomacy on this issue was more active in defending its maritime interests, these interests and preferences con-

official expression], *Dongfang pinglun* [Oriental commentary], October 13, 2010. Xue Li, a researcher at the government think tank the China Academy of Social Sciences, also stated that no Chinese leader had openly called the South China Sea a core interest. "Nanhai shi Zhongguo nei ge cengmian de liyi" [What level of China's national interest is the South Sea?], *Huanqiu shibao* [Global times], October 26, 2010.

34. Wen Jiabao zai di 65 jie Lianda yibanxing bianlun shang de jianghua [Wen Jiabao's speech at the 65th UN General Assembly general debate] (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, September 23, 2010).

35. Author interview with a senior Chinese official involved in foreign policy making, Beijing, June 2011.

36. 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.

37. See Fravel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea"; and Michael D. Swaine and M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Assertive Behavior, Part Two: The Maritime Periphery," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 35 (Summer 2011).

cerning its claims were unchanged. The timing of the most recent increase in rhetorical toughness (as measured by references to sovereignty in the *People's Daily*; see figure 4) would be consistent with this assertiveness.

RESPONSE TO U.S. DEPLOYMENT OF CARRIER TO THE YELLOW SEA, JULY 2010

In response to the DPRK's sinking of the South Korean naval vessel, the *Cheonan*, in March 2010, the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) engaged in a series of military deterrence exercises. In early June, the South Korean media reported—evidently based on leaked Pacific Command contingency plans³⁸—that the United States was planning to deploy an aircraft carrier to the Yellow Sea to participate in these exercises.³⁹ China's tough response to these reports contributed to a view in the United States that China was not just ignoring North Korea's provocative actions, but enabling the North by refusing to condemn it and by criticizing U.S. (and ROK) efforts to deter Pyongyang. The Chinese reaction was seen by many as part of Beijing's new assertiveness.

It appears, however, that in this instance, PLA hard-liners were the first to respond to the initial reports that the United States was planning to exercise an aircraft carrier in the Yellow Sea. In late June 2010, the PRC announced it would conduct live-fire exercises in the East China Sea.⁴⁰ Whether such an exercise could have been conducted without at least Hu Jintao's approval is doubtful. The rhetorical response, however, seems to have been driven by the PLA. On July 1, Deputy Chief of Staff Ma Xiaotian was asked by Hong Kong media what he thought about a U.S. carrier exercising in the Yellow Sea. He stated that because the Yellow Sea was very close to China, Beijing was "extremely opposed" (*feichang fandui*) and that its attitude was "resolutely opposed" (*jianjue fandui*) to such exercises.⁴¹ On July 6, the MFA spokesperson was asked whether Ma's comments represented the official position of the government. The response was fairly mild. The spokesperson stated, "I have paid attention to Deputy Chief of Staff Ma Xiaotian's words," but then issued the standard MFA line that all sides should maintain a "cool head, exercise self-restraint, and refrain from doing anything to aggravate the situation."⁴²

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

39. Jung Sung-ki, "Korea-US Naval Drills to Begin in Late June," *Korea Times*, June 6, 2010; and "South Korea, US to Hold Naval Drills 7-10 June," *Yonhap*, June 3, 2010.

40. Michael Sainsbury and Rick Wallace, "China's Navy to Match S Korea-US War Games," *Australian*, June 30, 2010.

41. "Jiefangjun gongkai biaotai fandui Mei Han Huanghai jun yan" [PLA publicly expresses opposition to U.S.-ROK military exercises in the Yellow Sea], *Huanqiu shibao*, July 3, 2010.

42. Waijiaobu fayaren Qing Gang juxing lixing jizhehui [Foreign Ministry spokesperson Qin Gang holds regular press meeting], July 6, 2010.

Two days later, in response to another question from the press about China's reaction to the exercises, the MFA spokesperson was tougher. Indeed, he used Ma's words, noting that China "resolutely opposes (*jianjue fandui*) foreign militaries exercising in China's "near seas" (*jinhai*).⁴³

This sequence of events raises an interesting question. If Ma had not been given the chance to define a hard line, would the MFA have said much at all? Was the MFA's preference in fact more moderate than Ma's, whereas the ministry felt that it had to take a tougher line so as not to be outflanked by the PLA? It is worth noting that later in November, after the DPRK bombarded the ROK-controlled Yeongpeong Island, killing a number of ROK citizens, the MFA moved quickly to enunciate China's official response. It took a more moderate position than in July by dropping the term "resolutely" to modify "oppose" when it referred to a possible new round of U.S. military exercises in the Yellow Sea, and it provided a more legally precise and slightly less expansive definition of where it did not want foreign military forces to exercise, namely within China's exclusive economic zone (EEZ).⁴⁴

In sum, this particular instance of new assertiveness may have been more a function of interbureaucratic conflict and poor coordination than a reflection of a decision by top leaders to be more proactive in diplomatically challenging a U.S. military presence close to China's territory. In essence, the PLA's Ma Xiaotian ended up claiming the Chinese position before the MFA had responded. Interestingly, in 2009—before the *Cheonan* sinking—the Obama administration had judged that China's default position on the DPRK's behavior was passive acquiescence, not a newly proactive defense of Pyongyang's interests.⁴⁵ As North Korean behavior became even more provocative in 2010, China's default approach appeared increasingly unconstructive.

SENKAKU/DIAOYUDAO TRAWLER INCIDENT, SEPTEMBER 2010

On September 7, 2010, a Chinese trawler captain ordered his ship to ram Japanese coast guard ships that were trying to chase the trawler away from the Senkaku/Diaoyudao Islands.⁴⁶ The crew was sent back to China, but the captain was detained, and Japanese authorities began a legal investigation of his

43. *Ibid.*, July 8, 2010.

44. "Waijiaobu: Zhong fang fandui renhe yifang wei jing yunxu zai Zhongguo zhuanhu jingqu caiqu renhe junshi xingdong" [Foreign Ministry: The Chinese side opposes any side engaging in any military exercises in China's exclusive economic zone], *Xinhua*, November 26, 2010.

45. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, pp. 37–38.

46. The islands are called the Senkaku by Japan and the Diaoyu by China. Both countries claim sovereignty over them.

actions. The Chinese government responded with repeated and increasingly tough demands for the captain's release. For the most part, the foreign media defined China's reaction as unprecedentedly assertive.⁴⁷

Chinese leaders believed that Japan was engaging in unusually provocative behavior by refusing to release the captain early on.⁴⁸ The Chinese claim that there has been an unwritten norm to release fishermen who violate the twelve-mile limit around the islands, and that past Japanese practice had led China to believe the captain would be released quickly and without publicity.⁴⁹ Different Chinese analysts proposed other reasons for Japan's decision to use its domestic legal process to detain and investigate the captain.⁵⁰ Some believed it reflected paralysis in Japan's decisionmaking process resulting from the distraction of a leadership contest in the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) at the time. Others suggested that the DPJ's unfamiliarity with how previous Japanese governments had handled similar situations was to blame. Still others pointed to a general hardening of Japan's diplomacy on all of its territorial disputes, whether with China in the East China Sea or with Russia over the Northern Islands.

It is true that China escalated its diplomatic rhetoric to compel Japan to release the captain. One concern might have been the upcoming anniversary (on September 18) of the Japanese invasion of northeastern China in 1931. Chinese leaders generally do not like popular expressions of public opinion because they find that these constrain their options. They were likely worried that if the captain were not released before September 18, China would look diplomatically weak, thus making it even harder to control anti-Japanese demonstrations on or around that special day in nationalist history.

47. Calum MacLeod, "China's Aggressive Posture Stuns Japan; Nation Dishes Out 'Shock and Awe' in Territorial Disputes," *USA Today*, September 28, 2010; Michael Richardson, "Beijing's Arm-Twisting Poses a New Challenge," *Australian Financial Review*, November 24, 2010; "Is Obama Ready for a Stare-Down with China? China's Provocation of Japan over the Senkaku Islands Shows a Need for Obama to Be Ready for a Crisis in Asia," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 1, 2010; and Mark McKinnon, "China's Chance: How 9/11 Played into Beijing's Plans in Asia," *Globe and Mail*, September 9, 2011.

48. Even Obama's top Asia specialist at the time, Ambassador Jeffrey Bader, noted in his analysis of the event that the Japanese did not follow their "usual practice" of sending the boats out of the area. See Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, p. 106. See also Martin Fackler, "Japan to Release Chinese Captain: Detention Near Islands Claimed by Both Nations Had Prompted Standoff," *International Herald Tribune*, September 25, 2010.

49. Author interview with a senior Chinese official involved in foreign policy making, Beijing, June 2011. Past practice also included the quick release of Chinese nationalist activists who were arrested in 2004 while trying to land on the Senkaku/Diaoyudao shortly after Japan started legal proceedings against them. See James Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State: The Rise of Public Opinion in China's Japan Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 145–146.

50. Author conversations with Chinese international relations specialists, Beijing, 2010.

From a crisis management perspective, however, China's official response was systematic and relatively controlled. Over the two-week period after the captain was first detained, the demand for his release moved systematically from the Chinese embassy in Japan to the Foreign Ministry spokesperson to the foreign minister to the state counsellor in charge of foreign policy and eventually to Premier Wen Jiabao.

As the demands moved up the chain of command, the Chinese government's language became tougher, escalating from statements about the need to "protect" sovereignty to the need to "defend" sovereignty, and from "dissatisfaction" with the Japanese response to "strong indignation." Wen Jiabao's tone was the harshest. He referred to the islands as "sacred territory" (*shensheng lingtu*), the only time in the crisis that a China official described the islands this way.⁵¹

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. Some observers believe that China's assertiveness was especially evident in two other actions: the demand for compensation and an apology from the Japanese government after the captain had been released; and an embargo on Chinese rare earth exports to Japan.⁵² The demand for compensation, however, was perfunctory and clearly aimed at a domestic Chinese audience. The MFA mentioned this demand only once (on September 25) and then promptly dropped it from the official discourse. In this regard, it is hard to see it as a particularly escalatory move.

The rare earth embargo, if true, would constitute a new assertiveness because it threatened to impose much higher costs on a key Japanese economic interest. There have been conflicting reports, however, about how many rare earth exports were delayed, for how long, and by whom. Some reports suggest that Chinese customs officials, anticipating further deterioration in the relationship with Japan, might have taken it upon themselves to slow down export approvals.⁵³ This seems uncharacteristically proactive for a Chinese bureaucracy, however. Others suggest that the central leadership made an explicit decision to

51. In fact, this term was rarely used to describe the Diaoyudao—it had last been used in the *People's Daily* in the early 1970s.

52. Paul Krugman wrote that China's embargo "shows a Chinese government that is dangerously trigger-happy, willing to wage economic warfare on the slightest provocation." See Krugman, "Rare and Foolish," *New York Times*, October 17, 2010.

53. Author conversations with Chinese international relations specialists and with a senior Chinese foreign policy official, Beijing, 2010–11.

reduce shipments as a warning to Japan, which is possible: the timing of the alleged embargo—reported to have begun on September 21⁵⁴—was the same as that of Wen Jiabao’s tough demands in New York. Other reports suggest, however, that little evidence exists that the leadership decided to embargo rare earths, and that Japanese media and some industry experts misinterpreted the rather volatile nature of Chinese rare earth shipments in general. Previous months had seen more dramatic drops in shipments having to do with Japanese demand bumping up against a quota system for exports, yet there was no speculation about embargoes then.⁵⁵

More problematic for the embargo story are the patterns, or lack of patterns, in Japan’s import data for rare earth from August to December 2010. If there had been a centrally determined and enforced Chinese embargo, one would expect to see a uniform drop in imports that come through all Japanese customs ports. Four customs ports handle the vast majority of rare earth imports: Kobe, Osaka, Tokyo, and Yokohama. Japanese customs data classify rare earths into six categories. So there are twenty-four observations per month to examine. If China had ordered an embargo, then one would expect a dramatic decline in imports across all rare earths commodity categories across all ports.

There is, however, little or no statistical relationship between import figures for each commodity for each port from August to December 2010.⁵⁶ In only about a third of the cases was a decline in rare earth X imported through port Y associated with a decline in rare earth X coming through port Z.

In about two-thirds of the cases, there was no relationship. In 46 percent of the observations (commodity category by customs port), rare earth imports actually increased from August to September. It is possible that because the embargo was reported to have started on September 21, and given the shipping times between Chinese ports and Japanese ports (three to five days, say), the effects of the embargo might not show up until October’s figures. Although October did see a decrease in many rare earth imports, in 17 percent of the observations rare earth imports increased from September to October. In addition, contrary to one *New York Times* report about a continuation of an embargo into November,⁵⁷ in 41 percent of the observations rare earth imports grew in November over October. Figure 5 shows an increase in cerium oxide imports

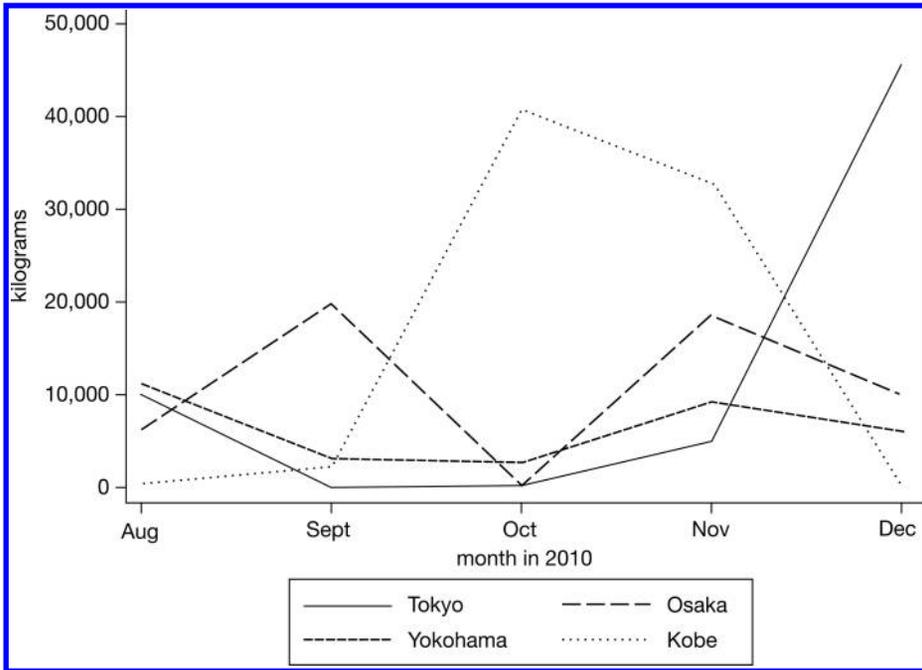
54. Keith Bradsher, “China Restarts Rare Earth Shipments to Japan,” *New York Times*, November 20, 2010.

55. “Rare-Earth Furor Overlooks China’s 2006 Industrial Policy Signal,” *Bloomberg News*, October 21, 2010.

56. These data and rare earth categories are from the Japanese Ministry of Finance.

57. See Keith Bradsher, “China Still Bans Rare Earths for Japan, Executives Say,” *New York Times*, November 11, 2010.

Figure 5. Cerium Oxides

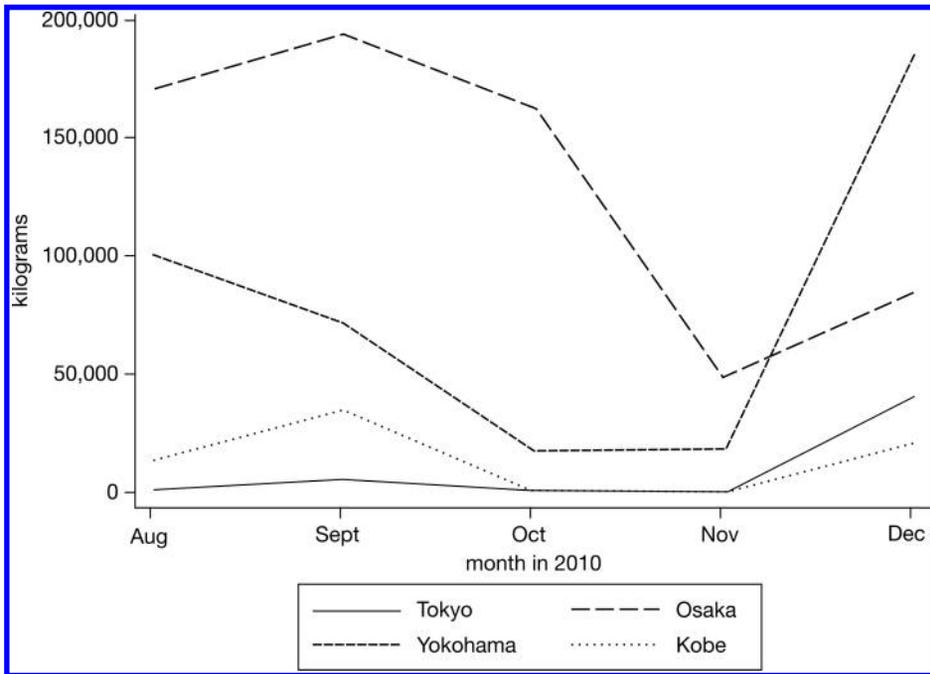


from China into Kobe in October, while imports into other ports declined; figure 6 shows only a minor decline in the import of other cerium oxides from China into Osaka in October. Figure 7 indicates an across-the-board decline in yttrium imports from China from August to October, but then an increase in imports into Osaka in November; figure 8 shows only a gradual decline—certainly no cut-off—in lanthanum imports from China through Yokohama in the months after the alleged embargo. Figure 9 shows that there was virtually no decline in September to October for shipments through Yokohama of what the Japanese refer to as “other” rare earths. Tokyo experienced a small decline in October followed by an increase in imports in November. Figure 10 shows an across-the-board decline in what the Japanese call a miscellaneous category of rare earths, but an across-the-board increase in November, again in contrast to the *New York Times* report cited above.

In short, if China’s leaders had ordered an embargo, it was a very ragged one affecting rare earths and different Japanese ports differently.⁵⁸ Some indus-

58. One possibility is that Chinese rare earths were essentially smuggled out of China and shipped to Japan via a third country. The *New York Times* reported that Chinese government of-

Figure 6. Other Cerium Compounds



try experts suggest that there was no obvious pattern in these data, and no clear evidence for or against an embargo.⁵⁹ At the very least, the data suggest that the conclusion about an embargo requires considerably more evidence than much of the media and pundit coverage has heretofore provided.

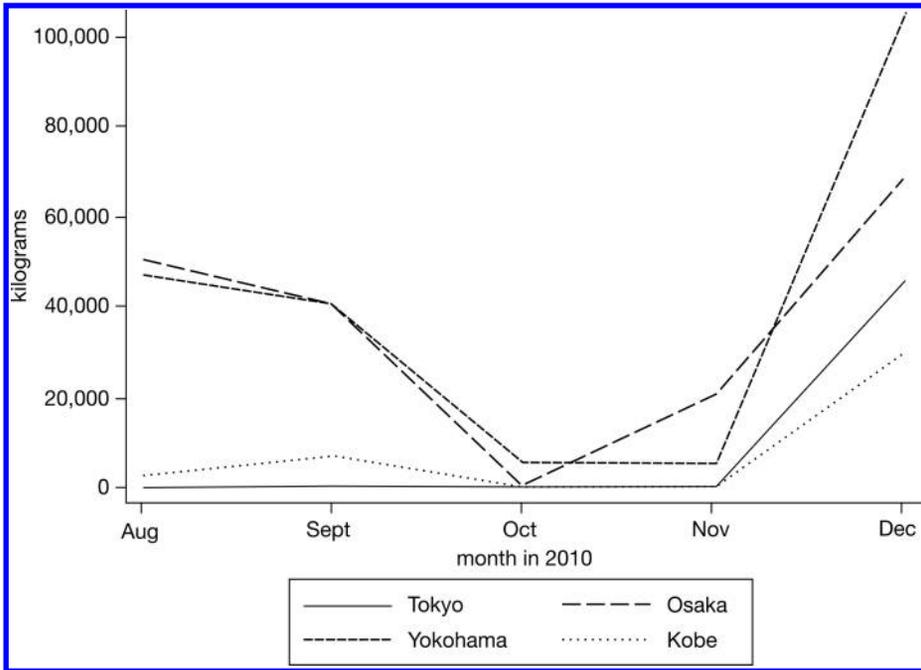
For all of China's rhetorical escalation, in some ways Beijing took efforts to control domestic reactions and to prevent large-scale anti-Japanese demonstrations. As the crisis escalated in mid-September and as both sides began to worry about a repeat of the large-scale anti-Japanese violence in 2005 in response to Japan's efforts to obtain a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, the Chinese Communist Party-connected *Global Times* explicitly signaled that 2010 would not be a repeat of 2005. The editorial stated that the violent escalation of 2005 demonstrations was a "road to ruin," that is, too extreme.⁶⁰

officials warned Chinese exporters not to do this, but perhaps many chose to ignore the warning. It is unclear, however, whether Japanese customs would count imports as coming from China if the shipment information did not clearly indicate this.

59. See Gareth Hatch, "On Rare-Earths, Quotas, and Embargoes," *Technology Metals Research*, blog, October 24, 2010, <http://www.techmetalsresearch.com>.

60. "Zhongguo bu shi yi nu jiu shitai de xiangbalao" [China isn't a bumpkin who in a fit of anger loses control], *Huanqiu shibao*, September 16, 2010.

Figure 7. Yttrium Oxide

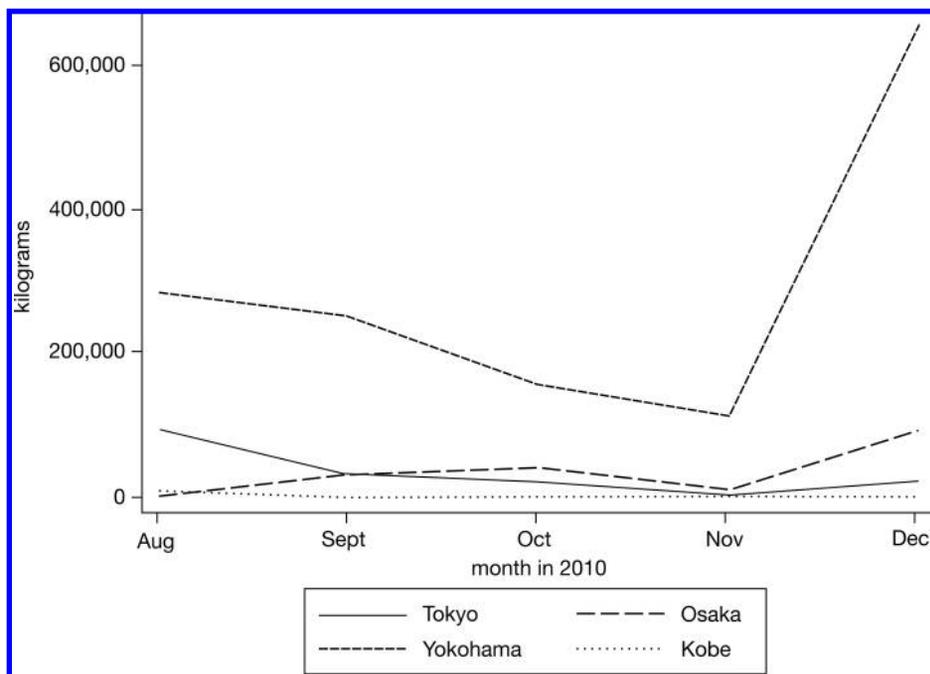


Moreover, the government took steps to dampen harsher expressions of anti-Japanese emotion. For example, on or around September 16, about two days before the September 18 anniversary and not long after a Japanese school in Tianjin had been damaged by anti-Japanese vandals, even the *Global Times* stopped all anonymous postings from netizens, shutting down a forum that had seen increasingly racist postings inciting violence against Japanese in China. It appears, too, that the authorities prevented most of the high-profile, hard-line PLA media commentators from writing or talking publicly during the Senkaku/ Diaoyudao dustup.⁶¹

To conclude that the Chinese response to Japan's detention of the trawler captain reflected a new assertiveness requires wrestling with a counterfactual: assuming that this particular incident was an exogenous, random event, if a similar incident had happened the previous year, or two or five years prior, how would China have responded to the lengthy detention of a

61. Based on an analysis of more than 600 blog posts, op-eds, and media quotes by four of the most prominent PLA commentators (Dai Xu, Han Xudong, Luo Yuan, and Zhang Zhaozhong) between 2007 and 2011, it appears that none of them made any public comments about the Diaoyudao issue during September 2010, whereas they had mentioned it relatively frequently in previous and in subsequent months.

Figure 8. Lanthanum Oxide



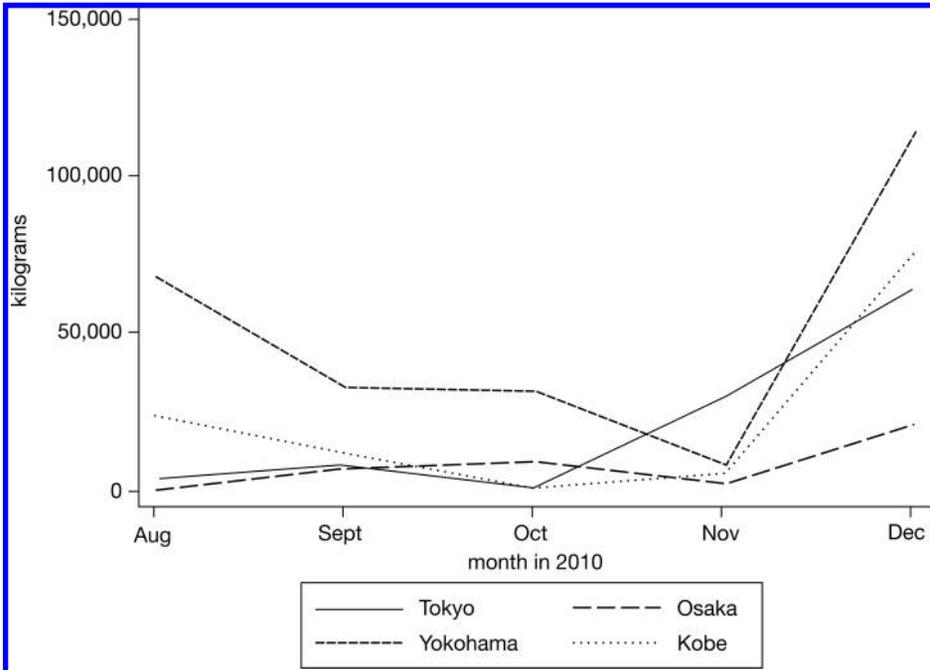
Chinese captain? If one can plausibly claim that the reaction would have been milder, then the case for this incident reflecting a new assertiveness would be stronger. If, however, one could imagine a similar reaction in previous years, then it is harder to conclude that 2010, in particular, reflects an assertive turn in Chinese diplomacy on such detentions.

RESPONSE TO THE DPRK SHELLING OF YEONGPYEONG ISLAND, NOVEMBER 2010

On November 23, 2010, the DPRK shelled ROK-held Yeongpyeong Island, killing four military and civilian personnel and wounding several more. The ROK responded by shelling the North Korean batteries. In the wake of the DPRK attack, the U.S. chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Adm. Michael Mullen, bluntly noted that Pyongyang's "reckless behavior" was "enabled by their friends in China."⁶² His reference, and that of others, was to China's unwillingness to directly criticize the DPRK after the *Cheonan* sinking and the Yeongpyeong shelling. Some contrasted China's apparent acquiescence to North Korea's

62. Donna Miles, "Mullen: Trilateral Cooperation Best Response to North Korea" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense American Forces Press Service, December 9, 2010).

Figure 9. Other



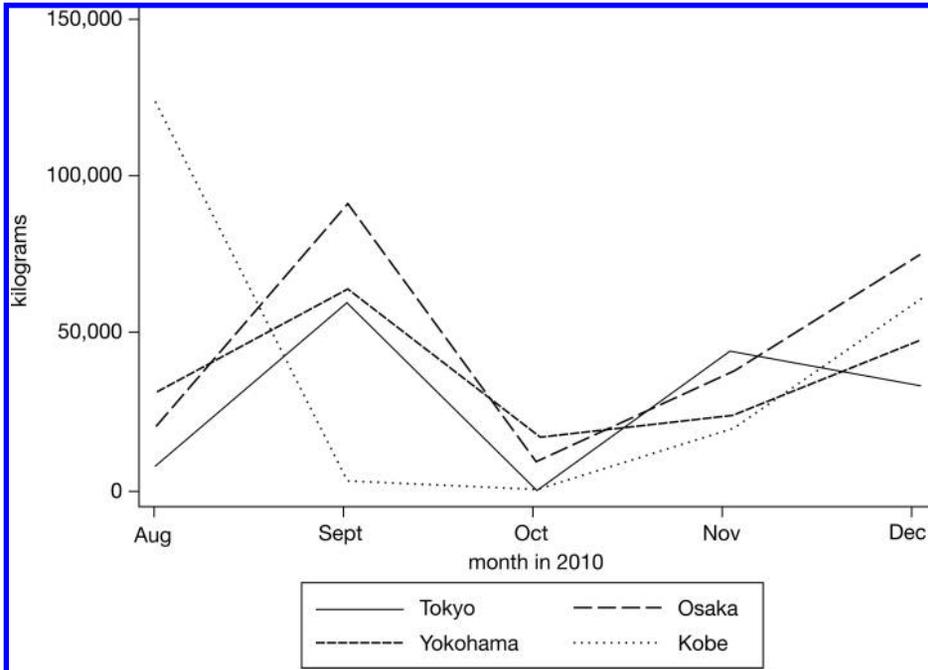
provocations in 2010 with the harsh language that Beijing had used to criticize its first nuclear test in 2006.

Although China officially used a particularly pointed term in 2006—flagrant (*hanran*)—to criticize the North Korean test, it also tempered this criticism by noting that all sides should respond coolly, use peaceful means to resolve problems, and avoid actions that would increase tensions.⁶³ Since then, the Chinese government has employed similar language whenever Pyongyang has engaged in behavior that raises tensions on the Korean Peninsula, including in its 2010 response to the *Cheonan* sinking and the shelling of Yeongpyeong Island.⁶⁴ In

63. See “Zhonghua Renmin Gonghe Guo Waijiaobu shengming” [Statement by the People’s Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs], October 9, 2006; and “Zhongfang xiwang Chaofang zai heshiyan wenti shang wubi baochi lengjing he kezhi” [The Chinese side hopes the North Korean side will be sure to maintain a cool head and self control on the question of nuclear testing], Xinhua news agency, October 4, 2006. For an account that sees China’s DPRK policy as essentially constant, notwithstanding the initial reaction to the 2006 test, see Victor Cha, *The Impossible State: North Korea Past and Future* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), pp. 329–334.

64. Waijiaobu fayanren Mao Chaoxu jiu Zhong-Han, Zhong-Ri waizhang huiwu youguan qingkuang da jizhe wen [Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Chaoxu answers journalists’ ques-

Figure 10. Miscellaneous Rare Earth Metals



other words, it was not new language, and for Beijing it embodies the basic principles of crisis management that all sides should follow.

These principles reflect the PRC leadership's preference for preserving the existence of a stable DPRK. One internal assessment of crisis management on the peninsula, written by regional experts at the PLA Academy of Military Sciences, summarized Beijing's concerns: North Korea is an unstable regime that engages in provocative and unpredictable behavior, "walking on the margins of war."⁶⁵ Yet war on the peninsula would mean the regime's collapse. This, in turn, would threaten not only China's border security, but also the peaceful international environment necessary for China's economic development, and the existence of a buffer against the United States. Thus North Korea's survival is a question of China's national security.⁶⁶ By this logic,

tions about issues related to the Sino-ROK and Sino-Japanese Foreign Ministers meeting], May 15, 2010; and Waijiaobu fayaren Hong Lei juxing lixing jizhehui [Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei holds regular press meeting], November 25, 2010.

65. Li Xiaodong, Wang Yisheng, and Li Rui, *Chaoxian bandao weiji guanli yanjiu* [Research on Korean Peninsula crisis management] (Beijing: Academy of Military Sciences Press, 2010), p. 85.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 52. See also International Crisis Group, "China and Inter-Korean Clashes in the Yellow Sea," *Asia Report*, No. 200 (January 2011); and Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, p. 83.

Chinese policy should thus focus on minimizing threats to the DPRK's internal stability and preventing shocks to the political and military relationship between the relevant parties. Even though many in China recognized that North Korea's behavior in 2010 was a main source of instability on the peninsula, Beijing believed that, given the regime's fragile condition, it made little sense to add to the pressure on the DPRK, or to publicly humiliate it by endorsing the ROK's version of the *Cheonan* incident.⁶⁷ Rather, China appears to have taken a two-pronged approach to resolving the DPRK problem, arguing that the United States should provide security assurances and improve the DPRK's external security environment, while China should be responsible for helping the DPRK reform its economy and open to the outside.⁶⁸

The problem for Beijing was that, in the context of DPRK behavior in 2010, its standard position of all sides avoiding provocative behavior was rightly viewed as taking the DPRK's side. In other words, Beijing's policy prescription for stability on the peninsula had not changed as much as the situation had, leaving China's status quo-oriented policy even more in tension with the preferences of other states.⁶⁹

SUMMARY

These seven major events in Chinese foreign policy in 2010 represent a mixture of new assertiveness (South China Sea), old assertiveness with a twist (the threat to sanction U.S. arms manufacturers that sell to Taiwan); reduced assertiveness (the Dalai Lama visit); probably predictable responses to exogenous shocks (Senkaku/Diaoyudao incident); the continuation of reactive/passive policies in the face of changed and less-hospitable diplomatic circumstances

67. See Jonathan D. Pollack, *No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons, and International Security* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 201–203; and Bonnie Glaser, “China’s Policy in the Wake of the Second DPRK Nuclear Test,” *China Security*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2009), pp. 1–11. Some Chinese analysts even make a credibility of commitment argument. That is, if China dropped the DPRK as an ally, then it might be harder to play for support from other smaller powers in the developing world. See Lin Jianyi, “Zhong Mei guanxizhongde Chaoxian wenti” [The North Korea issue in Sino-U.S. relations], *Jianbao* [Briefing], No. 22 (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Regional Security Research Center: October/November 2010), p. 2. Interlocutors from Northeast China who specialize in Korean issues noted that the credibility of commitment issue gave the DPRK more leverage over China. This, they said, was a similar phenomenon to the relationship between the United States and its small allies, such as Israel, so the United States ought to understand China’s predicament. Author conversations with Jinan University specialists, Changchun, June 2011.

68. Yang Xiyu, “Chao he wenti yu Chaoxian bandao heping tizhi wenti” [The North Korean nuclear problem and the question of a peace system on the Korean Peninsula], *Shijie fazhan yanjiu* [Research in world development], No. 8 (2010). Yang was an important player in the Chinese six-party talks team.

69. On China’s reactivity on the DPRK issue, see Andrew Scobell, “The View from China,” in Gilbert Rozman, ed., *Asia at a Tipping Point: Korea, the Rise of China, and the Impact of Leadership Transitions* (Washington, D.C.: Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies, 2012), pp. 70–81; and Bader, *Obama and China’s Rise*, pp. 37–39.

(Copenhagen, DPRK policy); and in one case, empirical inaccuracy (the South China Sea as a core interest claim). In toto, the differences across these cases suggest that there was no across-the-board new assertiveness in Chinese diplomacy in 2010.

Analytical Problems with the New Assertiveness Meme

The argument that China's diplomacy in 2010 was newly assertive contains at least three analytical flaws that have characterized much of the commentary on Chinese foreign policy in the United States and elsewhere—selection on the dependent variable; ahistoricism; and poor causal specification. The first two are general methodological problems that often plague media and pundit analysis on a range of public policy questions; though serious, I do not go into them in detail here. The last deals with problematic empirical claims associated with causal arguments, the evaluation of which requires critical examination of the available evidence.

SELECTING ON THE DEPENDENT VARIABLE

A common problem in the new assertiveness analyses is that they consider only confirming evidence while ignoring disconfirming examples. The risk here is exaggerating change and discounting continuity. The pundit and media world thus tended to miss a great deal of ongoing cooperative interaction between the United States and China throughout 2010. Examples include the continued growth of U.S. exports to China during the year; the continued high congruence in U.S. and Chinese voting in the UN Security Council;⁷⁰ Chinese support for UN Security Council Resolution 1929, which imposed tougher sanctions on the Iranian regime—a move appreciated by the Obama administration;⁷¹ Beijing's abiding by its 2009 agreement with the United States to hold talks with representatives of the Dalai Lama;⁷² a Chinese decision to con-

70. China and the United States voted together 98 percent of the time in 2010 and 97 percent of the time in 2011, continuing the trend toward convergence in voting among the permanent members from previous years. For pre-2010 data, see Joel Wuthnow, "Discord and Collaboration in UN Security Council Negotiations: The Case of China, 1971–2009," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., September 2–5, 2010, p. 35.

71. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, p. 117. Similarly, Thomas Christensen, a former Bush administration official in charge of China policy, also thought that China's policy on this score did not fit with the standard "new assertiveness" narrative. Christensen, "The Advantages of an Assertive China: Responding to Beijing's Abrasive Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (March/April 2011), pp. 54–67. Indeed, on this American "core interest," the State Department cables distributed by Wikileaks reveal evidence of common purpose with China, though some differences in tactics. Wikileaks, "Deputy Secretary Steinberg's September 29, 2009 Conversation with State Councilor Dai Bingguo," <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/10/09BEIJING2965.html>. See also Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, p. 78.

72. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, pp. 74–75. As in the past, the PRC conceded nothing to the Dalai

tinue the appreciation of the renminbi prior to the Group of Twenty meeting in Toronto in June 2010; Hu Jintao's decision to attend the U.S.-hosted nuclear summit in April 2010 (in the wake of the January 2010 Taiwan arms sales decision, the Chinese had hinted that Hu would not attend the summit); a Chinese decision to pressure the Sudan government to exercise restraint should South Sudan declare independence; and China's more constructive cross-strait policies, in the wake of Ma Ying-jeou's 2008 election as president of the Republic of China, which have contributed to a decline in tensions between China and Taiwan, thus reducing the probability, for the moment, of a U.S. military conflict with the PRC.

In addition to these U.S.-specific cooperative actions, throughout 2010 China continued to participate in all of the major multilateral global and regional institutions in which it had been involved for the past couple of decades, including the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations Security Council, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Plus 3, the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, UN peacekeeping operations, and antipiracy activities in the Gulf of Aden. There is no evidence that, beginning in 2010, it began to withdraw from global institutional life or to dramatically challenge the purposes, ideology, or main organizational features of these institutions to a degree that it had not in the past. Diplomacy in these institutions continued to show the expected mix of focused pursuit of status and material interest, defense of sovereignty, and functional cooperation that has characterized China's approach to these institutions over the past couple of decades.

This list of examples is not exhaustive, of course. I present these only as examples of a more general point: that determining whether, on balance, Chinese diplomacy became much more assertive in 2010 requires considering the full range of Chinese conflictual and cooperative behavior, not just China's noncooperative actions. Methodologically, therefore, selecting on the dependent variable makes it difficult to arrive at any conclusion about a new assertiveness.

AHISTORICISM AND THE ASSUMPTION OF MAJOR CHANGE

A second major analytical problem with the assertive China meme is ahistoricism. Ahistorical analysis is the tendency to assume that what observers witness now is new, different, and unconnected to the past. Thus they are more likely to see the present in terms of "transitions," "turning points," and "fundamental changes." Ahistorical conclusions are often reinforced by a related analytical flaw—the lack of comparison. Many journalists, think tank analysts,

Lama about greater Tibetan autonomy, but an assertive China could have easily broken its commitment on this issue.

and pundits are either insufficiently trained or do not have the space to report on three basic comparisons that are at the heart of sound analysis: (1) comparison across time (how different is current action from past actions?); (2) analysis across issue areas (how different is current action from action on different issues?); and (3) analysis across countries (how different is current action from what other states are doing?). A rigorous assessment of Chinese foreign policy, therefore, should start with explicit comparisons along these dimensions before coming to any conclusions about the degree and novelty of change.

An example of this absence of comparison is the coverage of China's diplomacy at Copenhagen in 2009. Many observers saw Chinese diplomacy as newly assertive because Beijing stonewalled on credible mitigation commitments and on international monitoring and verification of China's performance. Descriptions surfaced of finger-pointing, angry outbursts, and disrespectful behavior as though these were somehow important indications of something new in the content of Chinese diplomacy. Yet, in context of these three types of comparison, Copenhagen was actually a case of more of the same. As I noted earlier, China's bargaining position up to Copenhagen had changed little from 1990—the purpose of diplomacy has always been to avoid commitments to ceilings and timetables and to intrusive monitoring of China's performance. This has not been all that different from its approach to international arms control issues, which has been characterized by wariness of hard constraints on weapons systems and intrusive verification, among other threats to sovereignty. Nor was China's climate change position much different from that of other major developing countries such as India—both are trying to minimize the economic costs of greenhouse gas mitigation.

What was new at Copenhagen was the PRC delegation's poor understanding of how much Europe, the United States, and some other developing countries had moved on climate change; of their increased sense of urgency to get the major polluters to make meaningful commitments; and of the greater willingness of many states to blame China as part of the problem. The Chinese delegation was apparently unprepared for the criticism. The delegation returned to Beijing and was criticized for its performance⁷³—not what one might have expected if it had been faithfully representing a new assertiveness in climate change policy.

73. Author interview with a Chinese environmental policy specialist, Beijing, 2011. For a subtle analysis of the diplomatic problems China faced at the Copenhagen conference and after, see Zhang Haibin, "2010 nian Moxige qihou bianhua tanpan dahui qianjing yu Zhongguo duice sikao" [Prospects for the Mexico climate change assembly, and thoughts about China's responses], *Zhongguo guoji zhanlue pinglun* [China international strategic review], No. 3 (2010), pp. 302–309.

PROBLEMATIC CAUSAL ARGUMENTS

A third problem with China's newly assertive meme is the poor specification of the causal arguments that observers use to explain this alleged change in diplomacy. The first rule of causal argument concerns timing: any change in the explanatory variable has to occur prior to a change in the variable to be explained. Thus any change in the main explanatory factors had to have been quite quick and acute prior to the new assertiveness of 2010. Was this, in fact, the case? Typically analysts point to four main explanations for China's new assertiveness in 2010.

CHANGE IN THE DISTRIBUTION OF POWER. The first explanation for a newly assertive China is a change in Chinese leaders' perceptions of the distribution of power, whereby they interpreted the 2008 financial crisis as a clear signal of the decline of U.S. power relative to China's. Chinese leaders therefore felt more confident in ignoring Deng Xiaoping's longtime axiom not to treat the United States as an adversary, and in challenging the United States on China's interests. Undoubtedly, such arguments appeared throughout 2009 and 2010 in China, particularly among more nationalistic commentators. Yet there was, and continues to be, an ongoing debate as to how much power has shifted between the United States and China, and what advantages this creates for China.

Beginning in mid-2009, influential think tanks at the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) School and the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) hosted a series of internal conferences to debate whether the U.S. relative decline meant that China had new opportunities to press its interests and challenge U.S. power. More moderate voices—those who believed that there had been no major shift in power and that Deng's axiom of avoiding conflict with the United States remained valid—were not obviously on the defensive in these debates.⁷⁴ In other words, the question about whether and how much the United States was in relative decline had not been answered prior to the alleged assertive turn in Chinese foreign policy in 2010.

Moreover, there is no evidence that the core decisionmaking group on foreign policy in this period—Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping, and Dai Bingguo—accepted the claim that a major shift in the distribution of power had occurred or had given China new opportunities to push its interests.⁷⁵ Cui Liru, an adviser to

74. On these debates, see Wang Dong and Li Kan, "Eying the Crippled Hegemon: China's Grand Strategy Thinking in the Wake of the Global Financial Crisis," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., September 2–5, 2010; comments by a senior PLA officer at the Xiangshan Forum, October 2010; CASS Regional Security Research Center, "Meiguo chongfan Yazhou xueshu yanjiuhui" [Academic research meeting on the U.S. return to Asia], *Jianbao*, No. 21 (Beijing: CASS, October 2010), p. 6; and comments by a senior analyst at the Central Party University, June 2011.

75. Author interviews with academics, think tank analysts, and government officials, Beijing, 2010. See also Christensen, "The Advantages of an Assertive China," p. 60.

the top leadership, and president of CICIR, argued in an internally published speech to Chinese university students in March 2010 that the goal of Chinese foreign policy was still, as it had been in the Deng era, to create a peaceful environment for national development. This required above all stable relations with the United States, given that China has no choice but to enter into the U.S.-dominated international order. Under these conditions, China does not challenge the current international system.⁷⁶

Later in 2010, the top leadership authorized a major essay by state councillor Dai Bingguo, published in December 2010.⁷⁷ Dai's essay reaffirmed the political axioms that undergird Deng Xiaoping's basic grand strategy of rapidly developing China's economy and avoiding highly conflictual relations with neighbors and major powers. This strategy is summarized in the phrase "peace and development." Over the years, the leadership added on ancillary axioms, including the concepts of "not taking the lead but getting some things done"; the "period of strategic opportunity," in which China should avoid major conflict with the United States to concentrate on economic development; and building "new type major power relations" based on the recognition that U.S.-China interdependence creates major costs for China resulting from any U.S. economic decline.⁷⁸ These axioms matter; they are symbols of particular visions of China's status, power, and identity that are more or less agreed on by China's top leaders. Much time and effort is put into composing, employing, and refining them in official documents because they constitute general guidelines for foreign policy. Yet, as Dai's essay implies, none of these core axioms was repudiated by top leaders in, or prior to, 2010, as one might have expected if (1) hard-liners truly dominated decisionmaking; or (2) a decision had been made to fundamentally alter China's foreign policy.⁷⁹

76. Cui Liru, "Xin shiqi de Zhong Mei guangxi xunqiu gongchu zhidao" [Sino-U.S. relations in the new era seek the way to coexistence], *Zhanlue yu guanli* [Strategy and management], Vol. 3, No. 4 (2010), pp. 66–67. Even the more hard-line newspaper, the *Global Times*, published articles in 2010 that warned readers not to exaggerate U.S. decline or to underestimate the United States' ability to revive its power and purpose in the face of strategic setbacks. See Liu Mingfu, "Xuexi Meiguoren de weiji yishi" [Study the sense of crisis of Americans], *Huanqiu shibao*, February 22, 2010; Zhou Fangyin, "Bie wei 'Zhongguo di yi zixun fannao'" [Don't let China become the first to ask for trouble], *Huanqiu shibao*, April 27, 2010; and Huang Renwei, "Xuexi Meiguocai neng he Meiguoda jiaodao" [Study the U.S. and only then can we deal with the U.S.], *Huanqiu shibao*, August 26, 2010.

77. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise*, p. 123; and Dai Bingguo, "Jianchi zou heping fazhan daolu" [Adhere to the path of peaceful development], December 7, 2010, www.chinanews.com/gn/2010/12-7/2704984.shtml.

78. Author conversation with a senior PRC government think tank official, Beijing, June 2012.

79. On the persistence of Deng's axioms and guidelines, see Shin Kawashima, "The Development of the Debate over 'Hiding One's Talents and Biding One's Time,'" *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (December 2011), p. 25; and Feng Zhang, "Rethinking China's Grand Strategy: Beijing's Evolving National Interests and Strategic Ideas in the Reform Era," *International Politics*, Vol. 49 No. 3 (May 2012), pp. 318–345.

RISING CHINESE NATIONALISM. A second explanation for the new assertiveness is rising Chinese nationalism or anti-Americanism or both. This is also a problematic explanation. For example, few of the new assertiveness analyses provide indicators of rising nationalism, let alone show a dramatic spike in nationalist sentiment just before 2010. In fact, empirically, the evidence for rising nationalism is mixed and depends on the indicators one uses. Some indicators suggest that the portion of the population with strongly anti-Japanese sentiment is increasing, but the portion of those with strongly anti-American views appears to be steady.⁸⁰ Other indicators suggest that, while pride in nation is at high levels (and increasing),⁸¹ uncritical support for the government (a version of “China, love it or leave it”) is much lower.⁸² The denigration of American lifestyles and culture among the Chinese population appears to remain relatively low compared to criticisms of U.S. foreign policy.⁸³

Even if there had been a steep jump in nationalism in 2009, for it to have a causal effect one would have to demonstrate how and why in 2010 Chinese leaders decided to take rising nationalism into greater account when making foreign policy decisions. Proponents of the nationalism argument offer no theory about how popular sentiments are translated into foreign policy. The explanation makes an assumption about the hypersensitivity of the top leadership to nationalist public opinion for which there is almost no systematic evidence as yet. In a political system where there are no electoral costs to ignoring public opinion, it is unclear why China's authoritarian leaders would care much about public views. Nor is it clear that China's top leaders would want public opinion to matter on strategically important questions—they prefer maneuverability, not constraint. One can develop at least four hypotheses for why the regime might be more sensitive to nationalism: (1) the more it fears that

80. The Beijing Area Study (BAS), a random sample of people living in the Beijing municipality, includes questions that measure Chinese respondents' perceptions of the warlikeness of Chinese, American, and Japanese as people, and the warlikeness of China, the United States, and Japan as major powers. I define anti-Americans and anti-Japanese as those respondents who believe that the Chinese are maximally different from Americans and Japanese and who also believe there is no difference between Americans and Japanese and their countries. In other words, anti-Americans and anti-Japanese believe Americans and Japanese are, like their countries, maximally warlike. In 2007, 41 percent of respondents could be classified as anti-Japanese; in 2009 this figure increased to 52 percent. In contrast, at 34 percent of the sample, the proportion that fit this definition of anti-American did not change between 2007 and 2009.

81. In 2007, 74 percent of BAS respondents agreed with the statement that “in general China is better than most other countries.” In 2009, this figure jumped to 93 percent.

82. According to BAS data, in 2007, 35 percent of respondents agreed that one should support his or her government even if it is wrong; in 2009, this increased to 46 percent, though a majority still disagreed with this statement.

83. Alastair Iain Johnston and Daniela Stockmann, “Chinese Attitudes toward the United States and Americans,” in Peter J. Katzenstein and Robert O. Keohane, eds., *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 157–195.

anti-foreign protests might turn into anti-CCP protests, the more it tries to head off nationalist protest by co-opting certain hard-line foreign policy rhetoric; (2) the more that political leaders normatively believe that the leadership should respond to the “minds of the people” (*minxin*), the more public opinion will be taken into account; (3) the more intense elite political struggle is, the more likely political competitors will use public opinion as a political tool against opponents; (4) and the more public opinion is emotional and mobilized (e.g., on relations with Japan or perhaps on alleged foreign intervention in China’s relations with ethnic minorities), the more likely leaders will take public opinion into account (through one of the first three mechanisms).⁸⁴ No one has systematically tested these hypotheses on Chinese foreign policy in 2010.

THE POLITICS OF LEADERSHIP TRANSITION. A third explanation for China’s new assertiveness concerns the political succession process leading up to the 18th Party Congress in November 2012. Here the argument is that, for the last few years, Hu Jintao focused on preserving his accomplishments and his political legacy once he left his posts. He was loathe to be seen as weak in foreign policy, especially in the context of a rapidly growing concern about social stability and regime legitimacy. Perceived weakness could encourage elite and mass criticism of the regime, thus undermining his legacy and weakening the CCP’s rule. Presumably Hu’s successor, Xi Jinping, is also determined not to be seen as weak in foreign policy as he maneuvers to consolidate his power and that of his possible allies.

Still, this is speculation. One could plausibly make an alternative argument: that during a succession process where leaders fear that social instability could be used against them by political rivals, the leadership should be especially risk averse in foreign policy behavior. Giacomo Chiozza and Hein Goemans, for instance, find that leaders who believe they face a relatively high risk of being removed are less likely to initiate conflict than those who are more secure.⁸⁵ These general findings would not predict foreign policy assertiveness.

In addition, it is unclear how the succession process might have affected foreign policy decisionmaking. Prior to the leadership transition in November 2012, it is likely that Hu’s main concern was to establish his legacy and to ensure personal and family perks and privileges once he held no senior posi-

84. For recent research on public opinion and foreign policy in China, see Jessica Chen Weiss, “Autocratic Signaling, Mass Audiences, and Nationalist Protest in China,” *International Organization*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (January 2013), pp. 1–35; Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State*; and Wang Jun, *Wangluo minzuzhuyi yu Zhongguo waijiao* [Cybernationalism and China’s diplomacy] (Beijing: China Social Science Press, 2011).

85. Giacomo Chiozza and Hein Goemans, “Peace through Insecurity: Tenure and International Conflict,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (August 2003), pp. 443–467.

tions. Despite some evidence that his preferred successor was Li Keqiang over Xi Jinping, there is no evidence that Hu and Xi did not get along or that Hu believed his legacy was threatened by Xi's rise.⁸⁶ Hu spent many years putting people in positions of authority in the CCP, the government, and the PLA who will, to some degree, be beholden to him.⁸⁷ So it is not at all evident that defense of his legacy or perks required, beginning in 2010, a new assertiveness in foreign policy rhetoric or practice. As for Xi, it will be a few years before he consolidates and distributes his power and the privileges it entails. He may therefore be more vulnerable to political challenges, including on foreign policy issues, at least initially.⁸⁸ But since he was not the top leader in 2010, Xi's influence over foreign policy could not have been greater than Hu's, and therefore Xi's political succession concerns are unlikely to explain any new assertiveness at the time.

THE POWER OF THE PLA. A fourth explanation for the new assertiveness centers on the possibility that the PLA is playing an increasingly independent role in foreign policy, either by acting with little policy guidance and presenting *faits accomplis* to the political leadership, or by taking high-profile public positions that political leaders are compelled to accept or, at least, consider seriously. This explanation is even more speculative than the other three. No one really knows the working relationship between the top political leadership and the PLA, as one hears different versions in Beijing.⁸⁹

Some observers suggest that the PLA's preferences are increasingly divergent from the civilian leadership as evidenced by hard-line proposals floated by retired and quasi-retired PLA commentators in the Chinese media. Others point out that there is virtually no civilian control over the PLA—the only two civilians with military authority are Hu and Xi as chairman and vice chairman

86. Alice Miller, "Splits in the Politburo Leadership?" *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 34 (February 2011).

87. See Victor Shih, Wei Shan, and Mingxing Liu, "Gauging the Elite Political Equilibrium in the CCP: A Quantitative Approach Using Biographical Data," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 201 (March 2010), pp. 89; and Zhengxu Wang, "Hu Jintao's Power Consolidation: Groups, Institutions, and Power Balance in China's Elite Politics," *Issues & Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (December 2006), pp. 97–136. See also the confidential analysis of elite politics from the U.S. embassy in Beijing, "Top Leadership Dynamics Driven by Consensus, Interests, Contacts Say," Wikileaks, July 9, 2007, <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/07/09BEIJING2112.html>; and "Contacts Assess Hu Jintao's Strength after the Party Congress," Wikileaks, November 7, 2007, <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2007/11/07BEIJING7004.html>.

88. See Cheng Li "China's Midterm Jockeying: Gearing Up for 2012," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 33 (June 2010), p. 3.

89. For the claim that the PLA is in control of Chinese foreign policy, see Willy Lam, "China's Hawks in Command," *Wall Street Journal*, July 1, 2012. For a careful discussion of this problem, see Michael D. Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior, Part Three: The Role of the Military in Foreign Policy," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 36 (January 2012); and Dennis Blasko, "The Role of the PLA," in Chris Ogden, ed., *Handbook of China's Governance and Domestic Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

of the Central Military Commission. Operationally, the PLA can do what it wants with little to no restraint from civilian institutions such as the Foreign Ministry or top foreign policy officials such as Dai Bingguo.

Many PLA analysts do tend to stress that there has been a basic change in power trends in China's favor over the last few years and to speak of a turning point in great power relations. Some in the PLA also want China to be more assertive on territorial issues. They blame Mao and Deng for shelving territorial disputes with Japan or Southeast Asian states in the interests of better strategic relations. Over time this led to facts on the ground (e.g., the physical occupation of various land formations by other claimants) that make it more costly diplomatically for China to assert its claims today. Many in the PLA were probably not unhappy with media stories stating that the South China Sea was a core interest; indeed, some were surprised to find out that senior Chinese officials had not told U.S. officials that the South China Sea was a core interest.⁹⁰ PLA voices have been clear about the need for the PRC to have higher-profile jurisdictional presence in disputed maritime spaces;⁹¹ about the need for more military spending; and about the undesirability of removing weapons opposite Taiwan, because this would symbolize limits to where China could deploy its forces in its territory. Elements of the PLA, such as the nuclear forces, are leery of transparency and engagement with the U.S. military and have tried to delay or dilute such contacts.⁹² None of these preferences, however, is particularly new, certainly not new enough to explain a new assertiveness in 2010. So for the PLA explanation to work, one would have to posit a rather dramatic increase in the PLA's autonomy or influence on foreign policy in 2010.

Yet there is no evidence that basic foreign policy decisions have not been made by Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping, and Dai Bingguo with input from the Politburo Standing Committee. There is no evidence that in 2010 the PLA did not view Hu Jintao as the commander in chief, if only because he controlled promotion and the budget.⁹³ Moreover, in 2010 Hu had been on the Central Military Commission (CMC) as a vice chair or chair since 1999, giving him considerable experience interacting with the PLA.⁹⁴ As chair, he was responsible for a major

90. Author conversations with PLA officers, Beijing, October 2010.

91. See Maj. Gen. Zhu Chenghu, "Nanhai zhengduan, Zhongguo keyi zuode geng duo" [South Sea disputes, China could do more], *Huanqiu shibao*, July 1, 2011. It is possible that Zhu's essay reflects a plan to increase China's presence in the South China Sea that began implementation in 2008–09.

92. Author conversations with senior PLA officers, Beijing, 2009–11.

93. Author interview with well-connected PRC academic, Beijing, 2010.

94. Author interviews, Beijing, 2010–11; and Nan Li, "Chinese Civil-Military Relations in the Post-Deng Era: Implications for Crisis Management and Naval Modernization," *China Maritime Studies*, No. 4 (Newport, R.I.: U.S. Naval War College, 2010), pp. 13, 16.

clarification and definition of the external missions for the PLA that enhance its presence farther away from continental China.⁹⁵ It is thus not obvious what sort of change in Hu Jintao's relationship with the PLA could have produced a sudden increase in PLA autonomy that, in turn, led to a new assertiveness in Chinese foreign policy in 2010. The proponents of this explanation have yet to provide evidence of such a change.

Nan Li suggests a very different explanation. He argues that Hu has focused in particular on energy security. Given that the South China and East China Seas may have considerable hydrocarbons, he asserts that the PLA Navy in particular should play a critical role in securing these resources.⁹⁶ Thus, as noted earlier, the only clear example of new assertiveness in Chinese foreign policy in the last few years has been in maritime spaces along China's periphery. Here there has been relatively effective tactical coordination between the MFA's message, the PLA, and various maritime administration forces' activities aimed, apparently, at increasing China's physical presence in waters where other countries have heretofore been more active in asserting their claims than China (e.g., Vietnam and the Philippines in the South China Sea).⁹⁷

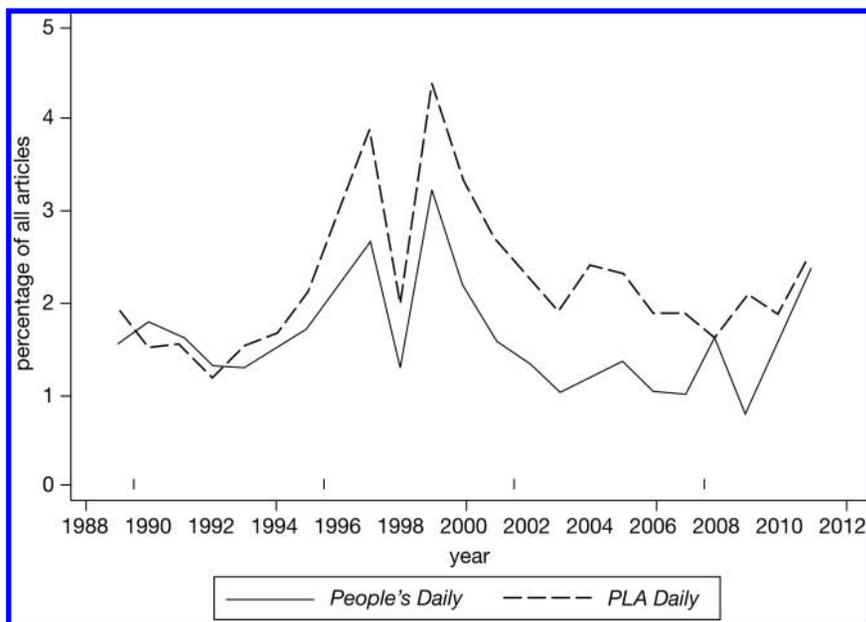
The answer to the question of PLA influence might best be divided, roughly speaking, into operations and strategy. On the one hand, the PLA has a near monopoly of expertise on operational issues and considerable institutional autonomy from other civilian institutions. This means there is limited civilian oversight of PLA operational activities, and whatever CCP monitoring there is depends on the time and expertise of the chair of the Central Military Commission (Hu Jintao in 2010) and his close advisers. When Hu was focused—as he most often appears to have been—on economic problems and political legitimacy issues, the PLA may ultimately have taken actions that were inconsistent with or in tension with China's overall foreign policy goals.⁹⁸ This is not a problem unique to the Chinese system—the United States has a considerably larger and more powerful civilian oversight apparatus of U.S. military operations, but even so civilians on the National Security Staff have complained that parts of the Department of Defense are not always as forthcoming about operational details as the civilians would like. In comparison with the United States, the problem facing Chinese civilian leaders may be one of degree not of

95. See the discussion of Hu's "historical missions" for the PLA in Li, "Chinese Civil-Military Relations in the Post-Deng Era," p. 18.

96. *Ibid.*, pp. 36–37.

97. As of this writing, there is, apparently, an informal coordinating mechanism headed by Dai Bingguo that brings together vice ministerial-level officials from relevant ministries and agencies on the South China Sea issues. Dai is in close contact with top leaders on such issues when they flare up diplomatically.

98. Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior, Part Three," pp. 8–9.

Figure 11. Relative Number of Articles That Reference “Sovereignty” (*zhuquan*)

kind. As in the U.S. case, however, the operational actions of the military are not necessarily a good guide to the more basic foreign policy preferences and intentions of the civilian leadership.

On the other hand, as an institution the PLA is not publicly expressing views on major policy issues and strategic orientation that are far from the CCP's message. There is a strong correlation between foreign policy rhetoric in the CCP's civilian voice—the *People's Daily*—and its military voice—the *PLA Daily*. As figure 11 shows, articles that reference sovereignty (*zhuquan*) as a percentage of all articles in the *People's Daily* and the *PLA Daily* are closely correlated from year to year ($r = 0.77$, $p = 0.000$).

An anecdotal example of this consistency was the recent, apparently off-the-cuff comments by Deputy Chief of the General Staff Ma Xiaotian. When asked by the press in early June 2012 about the use of force in territorial disputes with the Philippines, he replied that diplomacy was the best method to resolve the issue and that force was a last resort. This was in contrast to PLA-connected pundits who have called for the early use of force to enforce China's claims.⁹⁹

99. See M. Taylor Fravel, "The PLA and the South China Sea," *China Power, Diplomat*, blog, June 17, 2012, <http://thediplomat.com/china-power/pla-and-the-south-china-sea/>.

This example underscores another problem with attributing China's new assertiveness to the autonomy of the PLA—uncritically assuming that a handful of PLA pundits and commentators have influence on foreign policy. Many analysts argue that evidence for the PLA's independent, hard-line institutional influence comes from the blog posts, op-eds, and commentary of a handful of retired, quasi-retired, and sometimes still active PLA intellectuals (e.g., Adm. Yang Yi, Maj. Gen. Luo Yuan, Col. Dai Xu, Senior Col. Han Xudong, Maj. Gen. Zhang Zhaozhong, and Maj. Gen. Peng Guangqian are among the main voices). Some analysts cite these individuals as evidence of more aggressive, anti-American, or expansionist preferences within the PLA.¹⁰⁰ Other commentators argue that these voices may be representative of the PRC leadership in that, as CCP members working within the strict hierarchy of the PLA, these individuals have no room to express their own views. Whether the public commentary from hard-line PLA voices reflects official messages from the PLA as an institutional actor, let alone the preferences of China's top civilian leaders, is open to question.¹⁰¹ The reality is much more complicated. First, it is clear that political space has opened up in public commentary on Chinese foreign policy for a wider range of voices. To be sure, space is greater for more nationalistic and militaristic voices, and there appear to be no legal strictures or norms requiring these PLA voices to coordinate with government policymakers. Thus these commentators, as PLA-connected opinion-makers, ironically have more space to try to push the government in harder-line directions. Some civilian analysts in China complain that there is no norm whereby a senior political leader can publicly admonish military officers who talk out of turn. Thus in the new media environment in China, these PLA authors (especially the quasi- and fully retired ones) may sometimes represent only themselves.

Second, despite this political space for hard-line views, these individuals have occasionally been criticized internally for their commentary by central authorities and have had to tone down their rhetoric to stay within certain policy boundaries. When Maj. Gen. Luo Yuan labeled ROC President Ma Ying-jeou's policy toward the PRC as "peaceful separation" in a speech in late November 2009, for instance, he was criticized internally and required to retreat from his comments.¹⁰² Other senior civilian foreign policy officials have

100. See, for instance, Lam, "China's Hawks in Command"; and Lam, "Military Hawks Push Beijing to Take Harder Line," *Oxford Analytica*, July 27, 2012.

101. Support for increasing the PLA budget is the one obvious exception. Even a hawk such as Luo Yuan has argued, however, that China cannot sustain double-digit increases in military spending. See Kou Liyan and Liang Hui, "Zhongguo 2010 guofang yusuan an chutai muhou" [Behind the scenes of the public launch of China's 2010 national defense budget], *Guoji xianqu dabao* [International Herald Leader], March 12–18, 2010.

102. "Jiefangjun shaojiang Luo Yuan: Ma Yingjiu san bu zhengce shi heping fenlie" [PLA Maj.

noted that when the opinions of these PLA commentators are too inconsistent with official policy, their influence is actually diminished.¹⁰³ In the second half of 2010, Hu Jintao reportedly issued orders for PLA commentators to exercise more self-restraint.¹⁰⁴

Third, PLA commentators are less in agreement than meets the eye. Col. Dai Xu's xenophobia or Senior Col. Liu Mingfu's advocacy of Chinese hegemonism are not shared by other high-profile officers such as Adm. Yang Yi or Senior Col. Han Xudong.¹⁰⁵ Dai Xu's claim that instability on the Korean Peninsula is entirely a function of the United States provoking the DPRK in hopes of triggering a crisis is inconsistent with an Academy of Military Science study that acknowledges the unpredictability and belligerence of the DPRK regime.¹⁰⁶ Liu Mingfu's argument that China can and should strive to replace the United States as the leading global power has been criticized by Adm. Yin Zhuo and Maj. Gen. Luo Yuan, who believe that his projections are unrealistic.¹⁰⁷ Yet Adm. Yin Zhuo and Maj. Gen. Luo Yuan have disagreed over the

Gen. Luo Yuan: Ma Yingjiu's "three no's" policy is peaceful separation], *Lianhe zaobao*, November 23, 2009; Michael D. Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior, Part Four: The Role of the Military in Foreign Crises," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 37 (April 2012), pp. 13–14 n. 22; author interviews, Beijing, 2010–11. It is perhaps for this reason that in December 2010 Luo publicly stated that defining national interest was the purview of the uppermost civilian leadership. See "Luo Yuan shaojiang: Jiefangjun wanquan you nengli baowei guojia liyi" [Maj. Gen. Luo Yuan: The PLA is completely capable of defending the national interest], December 20, 2010, <http://military.people.com.cn/GB/13533185.html>. Luo's views were also criticized by a number of PRC Taiwan specialists as unrepresentative of PRC views and unfair to Ma. See Meng Jian and Li Junfeng, "Wo shaojiang pi 'heping fenlie' yin zhendong" [A China major general criticizes "peaceful separation," creates a great shock], *Huanqiu shiye* [Global horizon], November 23, 2009.

103. Author interview with senior Chinese official involved in foreign policy making, Beijing, June 2011.

104. Ng Tze-wei, "Louder Military Voice Raises Concerns; Neighbouring Countries and US See China Becoming Tougher When Engaging the World," *South China Morning Post*, January 18, 2011; and Chris Buckley, "PLA Researcher Says U.S. Aims to Encircle China," Reuters, November 28, 2011. See also Zhang Jianfeng, "Yinpai Luo Yuan" [Luo Yuan the hawk], *Nanfeng chuan* [South reviews], April 9, 2012. I thank Dennis Blasko for finding this article.

105. Indeed, on average, Dai Xu's commentary is more critical of the United States than Zhang Zhaozhong's or Han Xudong's, or even Luo Yuan's. Using a computer-aided text analysis program, Yoshikoder, I analyzed all the blogs and op-eds written by the more high-profile and more prolific PLA authors—Dai Xu ($N = 247$), Zhang Zhaozhong ($N = 196$), Han Xudong ($N = 76$), and Luo Yuan ($N = 85$) between 2007 and 2011—that mention the United States. I determined the relative number of positive terms per reference to the United States in each text using the following formula: (N of positive terms – N of negative terms) / total N of references to the United States. A simple difference of means t -test (unpaired, unequal variances) shows statistically significant differences, with Dai Xu's texts being significantly more negative than Zhang Zhaozhong's ($t = 2.08$, $p = 0.02$), Han Xudong's ($t = 1.68$, $p = 0.05$), and Luo Yuan's ($t = 1.45$, $p = 0.075$). I also used an alternative measure (positive references to the United States as a percentage of total positive and negative references) and, again, Dai Xu was significantly less positive about the United States.

106. Dai Xu, *C-xing baowei* [C-shaped encirclement] (Shanghai: Wenhui Press, 2010), p. 21; and Li, Li, and Wang, *Chaoxian bandao weiji guanli yanjiu*, p. 85.

107. "Guofang Daxue jiaoshou zhuzhang Zhongguo zheng zuo shijie di yi junshi qianguo yin reyi" [National Defense University professor advocates China strive to be the world's no. 1 mili-

degree to which China should use overt military power to resolve its maritime disputes.¹⁰⁸ There is often no particular coherence to some of the views held by some PLA commentators, so it is doubtful the public expression of these views is well coordinated.

Finally, in some cases these commentators are not in any position to know much about foreign policy decisionmaking, let alone to influence it. Some of the PLA commentators, for instance, come from propaganda and political work backgrounds; their main responsibilities or training have been in political mobilization, morale, and CCP control of the PLA. Dai Xu, Liu Mingfu, as well as Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui (the authors of *Unrestricted Warfare*, a text whose authoritativeness was overblown by many in U.S. national security circles), are all from the political control system in the PLA; they are not strategists, commanders, or operational planners.

In short, the small number of PLA public commentators do not appear to constitute an organized cadre of messengers and signalers, though they reflect some portion of PLA views. What can be said is that the PLA may constitute a constraint on “new thinking” on territorial and sovereignty issues. It is not yet, as an institution, pushing China in a more militant direction as much as it is perhaps ensuring that China does not go in more cooperative directions on issues directly related to the purview of the PLA such as territorial security.

Conclusion

The seven events in Chinese diplomacy in 2010 that observers point to most frequently to support the new assertiveness argument did not constitute an across-the-board new assertiveness or a fundamental change. Much of the media, pundit, and academic analysis glosses over crucial evidence, decontextualizes Chinese diplomacy, or relies on poorly specified causal arguments. This does not mean there was nothing newly assertive about Chinese diplomacy in this period. As noted, the one 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. Perhaps triggered by more proactive efforts by other claimants to legalize their claims through dec-

tary power, raises heated debate], *Xinlang boke* [Sina blog], March 2, 2010, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4c604c2f0100gwed.html; and comments by a senior Academy of Military Sciences analyst at the Xiangshan Forum, Beijing, October 2010.

108. “Shaojiang Luo Yuan zai lianghui ti an: Zhongguo haijun yinggai pai junjian xunshi Diaoyudao” [Maj. Gen. Luo Yuan's proposal at the “two Congresses”: China's navy should deploy a navy vessel to inspect the Diaoyu Islands], *Zhonghua wang luntan* [Zhonghua net forum], blog, March 5, 2011, <http://www.fxingw.com/wwjx/2011-03-05/3010.html>.

larations and actions relating to the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea, PRC presence activities have generally increased in the last few years (e.g., more frequent patrols by various maritime-related administrative agencies, more risk-acceptant action to defend Chinese fishing activities, the encouragement of tourism, and more vigorous diplomatic pushback against other state's claims). Judging from the responses of other countries in the region, these activities clearly contributed to an escalation of tension in the East Asian maritime space.

Still, one should be cautious about generalizing from these maritime disputes to Chinese foreign policy writ large. During the 2000s, China pursued a mix of tough, often coercive, military and diplomatic policies toward Taiwan to deter and punish pro-independence forces, yet few serious analysts generalized from this behavior to China's approach to international institutions, major bilateral and multilateral relations, or international norms. Similarly, in the wake of the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq it would have been too simplistic to conclude that these actions reflected the emergence of a wholly "revisionist" and unilateralist United States. In other words, it is possible for a state to be newly assertive on some limited range of issues while leaving other major policies unchanged.

Why, then, does it matter whether PRC diplomacy as a whole in 2010 can or cannot be characterized as "newly assertive"? It may matter because language can affect internal and public foreign policy debates. There is a long-standing and rich literature on the role of the media in agenda setting. What does agenda setting mean in concrete terms? It means focusing attention on particular narratives, excluding others, and narrowing discourse. In the agenda-setting literature, it refers to the power of information entrepreneurs to tell people "what to think about" and "how to think about it."¹⁰⁹ It can make or take away spaces for alternative descriptive and causal arguments, and thus the space for debates about effective policy. The prevailing description of the problem narrows acceptable options.¹¹⁰

The conventional description of Chinese diplomacy in 2010 seems to point to a new, but poorly understood, factor in international relations—namely, the

109. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, "The Evolution of Agenda-Setting Research: Twenty-Five Years in the Marketplace of Ideas," *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Spring 1993), p. 62; Maxwell McCombs, "A Look at Agenda-Setting: Past, Present, and Future," *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (August 2005), pp. 543–557; and Shanto Iyengar and Adam Simon, "News Coverage of the Gulf Crisis and Public Opinion: A Study of Agenda-Setting, Priming, and Framing," *Communication Research*, Vol. 20 (June 1993), pp. 365–384.

110. This is similar to the definition of media framing offered by Robert Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Autumn 1993), p. 52.

speed with which new conventional wisdoms are created, at least within the public sphere, by the interaction of the internet-based traditional media and the blogosphere. One study has found, for instance, that on some U.S. public policy issues, the blogosphere and the traditional media interact in setting the agenda for coverage for each other. Moreover, on issues where this interaction occurs, much of the effect happens within four days.¹¹¹ Other research suggests that political bloggers, for the most part, do not engage in original reporting and instead rely heavily on the mainstream media for the reproduction of alleged facts.¹¹² The media, meanwhile, increasingly refers to blogs as source material. The result is, as one study put it, “a news source cycle, in which news content can be passed back and forth from media to media.”¹¹³ Additional research suggests that the thematic agendas for political campaigns and politicians themselves are increasingly influenced by blogosphere-media interaction.¹¹⁴

Together, this research suggests that the prevailing framework for characterizing Chinese foreign policy in recent years may be relevant for the further development (and possible narrowing) of the policy discourse among media, think tank, and policy elites. As the agenda-setting literature suggests, this is not a new phenomenon. What is new, however, is the speed with which these narratives are created and spread—a discursive tidal wave, if you will. This gives first movers with strong policy preferences advantages in producing and circulating memes and narratives in the electronic media or in high-profile blogs, or both. This, in turn, further reduces the time and incentives for participants in policy debates to conduct rigorous comparative analysis prior to participation.¹¹⁵ This is ironic, of course, given the proliferation of easier-to-access

111. Kevin Wallsten, “Agenda Setting and the Blogosphere: An Analysis of the Relationship between Mainstream Media and Political Blogs,” *Review of Policy Research*, Vol. 24, No. 6 (November 2007), pp. 567–587. I also benefited from a conversation with Steve Clemons on this issue.

112. Tanni Haas, “From ‘Public Journalism’ to the ‘Public’s Journalism’? Rhetoric and Reality in the Discourse on Weblogs,” *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (August 2005), pp. 387–396.

113. Marcus Messner and Marcia Watson DiStaso, “The Source Cycle: How Traditional Media and Weblogs Use Each Other as Sources,” *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (April 2008), p. 447.

114. Kevin Wallsten, “‘Yes We Can’: How Online Viewership, Blog Discussion, Campaign Statements, and Mainstream Media Coverage Produced a Viral Video Phenomenon,” research paper presented at the *Journal of Information Technology and Politics* annual conference, “YouTube and the 2008 Election Cycle,” University of Massachusetts, Amherst, April 2009, pp. 43–44. See also Stefaan Walgrave, Stuart Soroka, and Michiel Nuytemans, “The Mass Media’s Political Agenda-Setting Power: A Longitudinal Analysis of Media, Parliament, and Government in Belgium (1993 to 2000),” *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 6 (June 2008), pp. 814–836.

115. Interestingly, this cyclical sourcing is not practiced by all blogger types. One study shows that science bloggers are more likely to link to original academic research and data than are political bloggers. See Gina Walejko and Thomas Ksiazek, “Blogging from the Niches,” *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (June 2010), pp. 412–427. I am unaware, however, of any study that looks at the sourcing cycle between the internet-based news media and foreign policy bloggers. Anecdotally, many high-profile Asia- or international relations-related blogs in the United States seem to rely heavily

data and original information sources on the internet with which to conduct such rigorous comparative analysis.

In security dilemmas, discourses about Self and Other tend to simplify and to polarize as attribution errors multiply and ingroup-outgroup differentiation intensifies.¹¹⁶ The newly assertive China meme and the problematic analysis on which it is based suggest that the nature of the media-blogsosphere interaction may become an important factor in explaining the speed and intensity of future security dilemma dynamics between states, including those between the United States and China.

on mainstream media sources and do not often engage in original research or incorporate the original research of other scholars.

116. For empirical examples that show how perception of difference with outgroups helps to explain competitive or conflictual foreign policy preferences, see Edward Mansfield and Diana Mutz, "Support for Free Trade: Self-Interest, Sociotropic Politics, and Out-Group Anxiety," *International Organization*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (Summer 2009), pp. 425–457; Donald R. Kinder and Cindy D. Kam, *Us against Them: Ethnocentric Foundations of American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); David L. Rousseau and Rocio Garcia-Retamero, "Identity, Power, and Threat Perception: A Cross-National Experimental Study," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 51, No. 5 (October 2007), pp. 744–771; and Paul Sniderman, Louk Hagendoorn and Markus Prior, "Predisposing Factors and Situational Triggers: Exclusionary Reactions to Immigrant Minorities," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (February 2004), pp. 35–49. See also Tang Shiping, "The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis," *Security Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (July 2009), pp. 587–623.