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The timing of China's move to seek oil in disputed waters may have more to do with technical advances than strategy.

China Brief is a bi-weekly journal of information and analysis covering Greater China in Eurasia.

China Brief is a publication of The Jamestown Foundation, a private non-profit organization based in Washington D.C. and is edited by David Cohen.

The opinions expressed in China Brief are solely those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Jamestown Foundation.



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## In a Fortnight

### 'A CLASH OF SECURITY CONCEPTS': CHINA'S EFFORT TO REDEFINE SECURITY

By David Cohen

If there was any doubt, last week's Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore made it clear that China is unhappy with the behavior of the United States in Asia. Following speeches by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel that criticized Chinese actions, General Wang Guanzhong departed from his prepared speech to accuse the two countries of revealing a "taste of hegemony" and trying to "stir up trouble" (IISS.org, June 1). But his scripted remarks highlighted something which may be an even more fundamental challenge to the U.S. role in the region: China's "New Security Concept for Asia." This concept appears to be an effort to redefine the idea of security on terms that cast China as a regional security provider and the United States as an over-assertive outsider that threatens to undermine regional security. Official Chinese interpretations of the argument largely accords with a headline from the online edition of the *People's Daily*: "The Shangri-La Confrontation is a Clash Between Old and New Security Concepts."

The core of the New Security Concept, introduced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in a May 21 speech at the Conference on Interactions and Confidence-Building in Asia, is the idea that "development is the greatest form of security"

(People's Daily Online, May 21—see also *China Brief*, May 23). As the largest trading partner of most countries in the region and a major contributor to infrastructure investment, China already has a good claim to be the chief driver of the region's development. If security is development, China is therefore also the main provider of Asian security—killing two birds with one stone. But to make this argument persuasive, China must refute understandings of security that emphasize traditional concerns such as territory and national sovereignty. This means contesting international norms with the United States. Ultimately, like the earlier Five Principles for Peaceful Coexistence, the New Security Concept will “gradually become a universal norm of international relations” (*PLA Daily*, May 23).

This concept is more than a bit of rhetorical slight of hand—it is both an application of the Deng-era verdict that the goal of security policy should be to “maintain a peaceful external environment for development,” and an effort to promote this understanding abroad. It most likely represents beliefs genuinely used in Chinese policy-making: A similar effort is simultaneously underway in China's domestic security sphere. Xi has recently emphasized the concept of “overall national security,” a comprehensive view of security which has been defined to include both fairly conventional matters such as military and territorial security, and non-traditional fields such as economic, cultural and ecological security (see “Terrorism Fears Push Muscular Approach to ‘Overall National Security,’” *China Brief*, May 7). What unites this eclectic list is the risk of interruptions to the project of national construction under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. You Ju, a political expert in a military research institute, told People's Daily online: “The New Asian Security Concept and our Overall Security Concept are closely linked. Every country has its own security needs, and all of them cannot be separated from cooperation with peripheral countries and the path of peaceful development” (People's Daily Online, May 21).

Both Xi's and Wang's speeches, and their analysis by the Chinese media, heavily emphasized the concept of “nontraditional security”—a bridge between Chinese analysis and mainstream international relations theory. When discussing the New Security Concept, Chinese experts point to problems such as terrorism, transnational

crime, securing investments overseas and ensuring financial stability, emphasizing transnational issues related to development (*Beijing Times*, May 22; China.com, May 22). One expert commentary in the party-affiliated Hong Kong newspaper *Wen Wei Po* brought up the recent anti-China riots in Vietnam as an example of the danger of focusing on an old definition of security, warning that they had already greatly harmed the Vietnamese economy (*Wen Wei Po*, May 25).

The New Security Concept was introduced at CICA, a forum established by Kazakhstan and populated with countries ranging from the Middle East, to Central and South Asia, to Southeast Asia. But it applies especially to China's territorial disputes with Southeast Asian countries and India. According to this analysis, the security of China and the region are threatened not by unresolved disputes over territory, but by an “old” or “zero-sum” understanding of security that encourages China's neighbors to focus on these disputes rather than the positive story of economic growth and integration. “Unfortunately,” a commentary in the military newspaper *Liberation Army Daily* wrote, “some people have their heads stuck in the past, and cannot get over Cold War thinking” (*PLA Daily*, May 26). According to this framing, Japan and especially the United States are real threats to the security of Asia—by treating territorial disputes as central issues, and offering political and military support to China's Southeast Asian neighbors, they encourage those countries to challenge China rather than focusing on the positive side of its rise.

This analysis apparently recognizes that the logic of territorial security pushes many regional powers toward bandwagoning with the United States to “encircle” China—but it frames that logic as the real threat. Thus, as Ruan Zongze, deputy director of the China Institute for International Relations, told Xinhua, the real cause of the arguments in Singapore was old-fashioned thinking: “As you saw, the recently-concluded Shangri-La Dialogue was full of outdated ‘old security concepts,’ or zero-sum security theory” (Xinhua, June 3).

China's goal for the years ahead is to win a war of ideas—to make suspicious neighbors into friends not changing its own behavior, but by persuading them to understand their own security in a way that accepts it. Chinese analysis claims that this contest is taking place on

favorable ground—ultimately, the *People's Daily* “Clash of Security Concepts” story concluded, even U.S. allies will abandon their grievances against China if confrontation threatens the real security of development. “American and Chinese ‘Asian Security Concepts’ will continue to collide—but which one is more conducive to the well-being of the people of Asia, more to the benefit of regional development and more favorable to shared prosperity, history will decide.”

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## CHINA TAKES STEPS TOWARD REALIZING SILK ROAD AMBITIONS

By Lauren Dickey

China’s vision for a new “Silk Road economic belt,” as recently announced by Xinhua, is establishing regional integration around China as an attractive economic direction for Central Asian countries. With a series of strategic agreements between Chinese President Xi Jinping and leaders of central Asian countries inked over the last month, the vision for the land- and sea-based Silk Roads is fast becoming reality. As a key component of China’s diplomacy, Beijing is careful to ensure that its bilateral agreements with Central Asian leaders have multilateral implications. Not only are Central Asian states drawing closer to one another, but Beijing’s Silk Road strategy will ultimately link three continents, generating geopolitical reverberations around the world.

Little detail is known about China’s plans for two Silk Roads. Official maps highlight Beijing’s aspirations of an east-west trade route that will reinvigorate Chinese historical and cultural legacies while spreading awareness of China’s friendly policies towards its neighbors (Xinhua, May 8). According a map published by Xinhua, the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt will begin in Xi’an, stretching west through Lanzhou, Urumqi, and Khorgas before running southwest across Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe where it will meet up with the maritime Silk Road in Venice (Sohu, May 2014). The sea-based Maritime Silk Road, hitting Quanzhou, Guangzhou, Beihai, and Haikou en route to the Malacca Strait and Indian Ocean, will traverse the Horn of Africa before entering the Red Sea and Mediterranean. Once complete,

the Silk Roads will bring “new opportunities and a new future to China and every country along the road that it is seeking to develop.”

China’s recent shift in focus toward countries along the new Silk Road route offer clues to better understanding what exactly the Silk Roads entail. Russian President Vladimir Putin’s trip to China last week was the capstone of weeks of strategic agreements for Beijing. The successes of Putin’s meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Shanghai—most notably a \$400 billion gas deal to transport thirty-eight billion cubic meters of gas yearly into China beginning in 2018—were preceded by equally significant meetings between Chinese leadership and their counterparts from Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. These bilateral meetings point to Beijing’s commitment to the development of the Silk Road economic belt; taken in sum, they are a major step toward making China’s Silk Road economic belt more than just talk.

In the lead up to the Shanghai Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) the first central Asian leader to signal the strategic depth of central Asia’s ties with China was Turkmenistan’s President, Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov. One week before Berdymukhamedov’s mid-May visit to China, China opened a new \$600 million processing plant at Bagtyarlyk gas field, the location of a 4,375 mile China-bound pipeline (Reuters, May 7). Turkmenistan’s gas exports to China have increased in recent years, with officials aiming to reach 40 billion cubic meters by 2016 thanks to China’s financial backing of Bagtyarlyk. Upon arriving in China, Mr. Berdymukhamedov signed a gamut of deals with Beijing, formalizing Turkmenistan’s ascension as the last central Asian nation to sign onto a “strategic partnership” with Beijing (EurasiaNet, May 13). The two countries agreed to strengthen cooperation in areas ranging from natural gas extraction to cross-border infrastructure development and cultural exchanges (Xinhua, May 13).

Next to have a strategic tête-à-tête with President Xi was Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev. Like his Turkmen counterpart, Nazarnbayev signed a series of energy agreements and agreed to further strengthen bilateral security cooperation, with particular attention to the situation in Afghanistan (Xinhua, May 19). In addition

to mutual support for the peace, stability, and development of both Afghanistan and the region, Nazarbayev expressed Kazakhstan's enthusiasm for providing energy support to China's economic development, welcoming any resulting Chinese investment in his country (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 19). Memorandums of understanding were signed between China's ExIm Bank, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), and state-owned investment company CITIC Group for development loans and pipeline construction (Azernews, May 20). China even reiterated an interest in helping Kazakhstan acquire warships (EurasiaNet, May 24).

A day before China signed nearly fifty agreements with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Xi met with Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev to ink deals on energy, infrastructure, technology and banking (Azernews, May 22). Azerbaijan, like the other central Asian nations, is a key transit country linking Asia to Europe. Azerbaijan is currently building the largest port on the Caspian Sea, the International Trade Seaport, in Alat near Baku. Once complete, this port will increase the volume of cargo ultimately to 20 million tons per year, no small number for Chinese eyeing markets in Europe and elsewhere.

With this series of meetings and strategic agreements in mind, it is hardly surprising that Putin continued his pivot eastward, pushing through the Gazprom-CNPC deal and 49 other agreements with Beijing (China Daily Europe Online, May 21). Were Putin to have declined agreements with the Chinese on trade and economic issues, in particular, he would have effectively been cutting off Russian access to the Silk Road economic belt. Now, Beijing and Moscow are positioned to increase bilateral trade to \$100 billion by 2015 (and \$200 billion by 2020) as well as expand local currency settlement and cross-border investment and deepen mutually beneficial macroeconomic policies.

Beijing's agreements with Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Russia, are exactly what is needed to make the Silk Road economic belt a reality for China. For Beijing, the economic belt leverages regional energy cooperation to ensure energy security, sustainable economic growth and to fight against threats to Chinese domestic stability (Xinhua, May 25; *Huanqiu*, May 21). Bilateral agreements between Beijing and the Central Asian states require that each country cooperate with its neighbors, particularly

in the energy sector. Now, Central Asian capitals will be looking at their neighbors in supporting the development of the new Silk Road, as dictated by Beijing. So while these Central Asian countries have successfully signed on to a spectrum of economically enriching deals with Beijing, they have also become game pieces in China's overarching Silk Road grand strategy.

Thus, as the new Silk Roads continue to develop, it is probable Russian and Central Asian focus will continue to look east—these countries would face crippling economic losses otherwise. Trade routes linking three continents, once complete, will challenge both the longevity of the Eurasian economic zone as well as preexisting North American trade networks. Clearly, China's aspirations for a land- and sea-based Silk Road should no longer be thought of as merely another round of orations from Chinese leadership. Bilateral agreements from the past month show that China is making fast progress on its development of the Silk Road vision and offer opportunity for better interpreting what the Silk Roads will ultimately do.

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## Forgetting Tiananmen, and What Came Before It

By Willy Lam

While it has been established practice for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) administration to lock up intellectuals and NGO activists in the run-up to the anniversary of the June 4, 1989 massacre in Tiananmen Square, police action the past month or so has been markedly more draconian compared to the 20th anniversary in 2009. On May 3, prominent lawyer Pu Zhiqiang, legal scholar Xu Youyu and at least three other intellectuals were picked up by Beijing police as they and other friends held a private gathering to mark the 25th anniversary. Pu and Xu were charged with "picking quarrels and provoking trouble," which carries a maximum sentence of five years. Public security

personnel also detained Pu's lawyer and two friends, both journalists (*Hong Kong Economic Times*, May 6; VOA Chinese Service, May 6). Other private commemorative functions, such as one organized by Zhejiang economist Wen Kejian in Hangzhou a week later, were similarly disrupted. Meanwhile, a number of public intellectuals, including respected journalist Gao Yu, were nabbed for reasons including "leaking state secrets" and supplying articles to overseas media (*Ming Pao* [Hong Kong] May 14; *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, May 14).

The CCP security and propaganda apparatus is always keen to scrub clean reminders of events which detract from the carefully nurtured image of the party as "always correct, shining and great." But the political amnesia Xi promotes covers more than the violence of June 4.

"China's [current] leaders are personally vulnerable because they trace their lineage to the winners of the power struggle that cleaved their party in 1989," said veteran China journalist Louisa Lim. [1] As heirs to the conservative faction behind the crackdown, China's current leaders also seek to efface any memory of the liberal side of Deng Xiaoping's legacy. While Deng was the mastermind of the eventual massacre, he was also the leader who backed beloved political reformists and former general secretaries Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang. As Xi seeks to inherit Deng's mantle while rolling back the limits Deng placed on his office, it behooves him to avoid any mention of the more progressive path the patriarch could have taken.

Since taking office at the 18th Party Congress in November 2012, Xi has sought to convince his countryman that he is a worthy successor to Deng. In December the same year, he went on a pilgrimage to Guangdong, Deng's testing ground for economic reform, and told local cadres that he would build on that legacy. "The decision made by Deng Xiaoping on the reform and open door policy is correct and we will continue to walk down this correct road," he said. "This is the road toward a strong nation and rich citizenry. We will not only go down this road resolutely but also make new developments and reach higher levels" (China News Service, January 1, 2013; Xinhua, December 11, 2012).

What Xi has vowed to enrich and develop is only one part of the Deng legacy: pursuing the globalization of

the Chinese economy while using tough tactics against dissent. Xi has also gone about adulterating and reversing aspects of Deng's institutional and political reforms that were celebrated both by liberal cadres and the intellectuals who converged upon Tiananmen Square after the death of Hu Yaobang in April 1989.

Tiananmen Square is thus a useful prism through which to examine the trajectory of political reform since the advent of the Era of Reform and the Open Door. After the gunshots in the Square, the party's liberal faction was obliterated—and political liberalization has been frozen until today. Under Xi, it has begun to move backward.

While Deng was best known for economic liberalization measures, the Great Architect of Reform also initiated impressive institutional changes to prevent the return of Chairman Mao's "one-voice chamber." The rationale behind institutional reform was laid out in Deng's article in the *People's Daily* in August 1980 entitled "On the reform of the leadership system of the party and state." The patriarch argued that to avoid a return of the Cultural Revolution, China must substitute "rule of personality" with rule of law and rule of institutions. Deng said: "If systems [of governance] are sound, they can place restraints on the actions of bad people; if they are unsound, they may hamper the efforts of good people or indeed, in certain cases, may push them in the wrong direction" (Phoenix TV News, January 22, 2013; *People's Daily*, August 19, 1980).

Nearly up to the eve of the June 4, 1989 crisis, Deng—aided by his first two chosen successors, Hu and Zhao—was pushing the following changes in the political arena:

- Collective leadership instead of the "rule of personality." The party and state will be run collectively by the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC). The general secretary is at most a "first among equals." Each PBSC member has clear-cut division of labor. When votes are cast to settle controversial issues, the vote of each PBSC member carries equal weight. [2]
- Separation of party and government (*dangzhengfenkai*). This ethos was spelt out in Zhao Ziyang's *Political Report* to the 13<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of 1987, and championed by Deng. After the Tiananmen Square killings, Deng

said “not one word of the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress *Report* should be changed. The CCP should focus on long-range goals and planning. Day-to-day governance should be left to professional administrators in the State Council and regional governments (21ccom.net [Beijing], January 15, 2013; *People’s Daily*, October 25, 1987).

- The organizational principle of the “five lakes and four seas” and delegation of authority to localities. There should be a balance of factions within the top echelons of the party-state apparatus. More administrative powers should be delegated to local governments under the principle of “to each [locality] in accordance with its characteristics.” (See *China Brief*, “Interpreting the significance of CCP personnel changes,” June 19, 2006).
- Abandoning mass movements (*qunzhong yundong*) and political campaigns in pursuit of ideological purity. The Great Architect of Reform simply declared that “economic construction is the core task of the party.” At least until 1989, Deng opposed several waves of “anti-bourgeois liberalization campaigns” launched by leftist party elders because they were seen as disrupting China’s economic progress. [3]
- Not too long after taking power in late 1978, Deng began the world-famous demobilization of one million soldiers. Annual budget increases for the military were kept to the single digits. Most significantly, the “New Helmsman” indicated that the defense establishment should sub-serve China’s main pursuit of economic progress. While Deng was a beneficiary of actions taken by a gaggle of senior PLA generals to remove the Gang of Four radicals upon the death of Chairman Mao in 1976, the Great Architect of Reform did not favor military involvement in either politics or foreign affairs. [4]

X’s track record in the past one-and-a-half years amounts to a renunciation of much of Deng’s political project. Almost from day one, Xi started a power grab that is as stunning as it is inimical to Deng’s ideals about putting institutions ahead of individuals. For example, the two new super-powerful party organs—the Central National Security Commission (CNSC) and the Central Leading

Group on Comprehensively Deepening Reforms—have given the suprema powers to ride roughshod over the entire party-state-military establishment (*Hong Kong Economic Journal*, February 6; *Ming Pao*, January 25). This concentration of powers at the party’s topmost echelon has amounted to a reversal of Deng’s hard-won separation between the party and the state and a threat to the principle of collective leadership (See *China Brief*, “New High-Level Groups Threaten Line Between Party and Government,” April 9).

In terms of internal party affairs, Xi has run counter to two of Deng’s axioms: avoiding factionalism and giving more clout to regional administrations. While it is true that Xi’s two predecessors—Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao—also put together personal factions, there are indications that the Fifth-Generation potentate is about to outshine his two predecessors in terms of assembling a formidable coterie of trusted confidants (See *China Brief*, “Members of Xi Jinping Clique Revealed,” February 7). Xi, the son of revolutionary-era party elder Xi Zhongxun, has groomed cadres with revolutionary bloodlines for top jobs, also violating Deng’s internal instruction in the early 1980s that the offspring of party elders should focus on business, not politics. Compared to Jiang and Hu, Xi has posted more officials with central experience to regional positions, so as to firm up the grip of the party central authorities on the localities. In terms of the execution of economic and other tasks, Xi’s preoccupation with “top-level design” in policy-making means that the wiggle room of local officials has been constricted (*South China Morning Post*, July 5, 2013; Xinhua, March 20, 2013).

Xi has also rolled back the party’s focus on development over ideological struggle, established to keep peace after the Cultural Revolution. He has argued that that the pursuit of politically correct ideology and thought (*yishixingtai*) and other ideological goals is as important as building up the economy. “The core task of the party is economic construction,” Xi said. “Ventures relating to ideology and thought are the party’s extremely important task.” As the conservative *Beijing Daily* put it: “the fate of the CCP depends on whether it can defend the battlefield of ideology and thought.” Moreover, the General Secretary has launched political movements such as the Mass Line Education Campaign that are reminiscent of the *qunzhong yundong* of Great Helmsman Mao (*China Daily*, April 20; *Beijing Daily*, September 3, 2013; Xinhua, August 21,

2013). Xi has also reiterated that economic developments that may be “subversive”—meaning detrimental to the CCP’s perennial ruling party status—should be quashed.

The military began to reassert itself soon after Deng’s retirement, as Jiang and Hu gave the army double-digit budget boosts. Particularly during the second half of the Hu administration (2007–2012), the generals began to have a bigger say in national-security issues. Yet the political clout of the generals has reached an apogee under Xi, who started his career as secretary to then-defense minister Geng Biao from 1979 to 1982. [5] After the 18th Party Congress, a record number of officials who either served in the PLA or military enterprises have been posted to party and government jobs. Xi underscored his connections with the PLA establishment at a national conference late last month on providing employment for demobilized soldiers. “I too am a military man who has become a cadre [in civilian departments],” said the commander-in-chief (China News Service, May 28; *Ta Kung Pao* [Hong Kong] May 28).

25 years later, Tiananmen Square has become a contest of narratives. The leaders who have governed China since 1989 have emphasized a dictum attributed to Deng: “The gunshots have afforded us 20 years of peace and opportunity for doing business” (Radio Free Asia, June 7, 2011; BBC Chinese Service, June 6, 2004). According to noted China expert Perry Link, the massacre has bequeathed the CCP this terrific inheritance: “Deng Xiaoping’s logic is that shooting to kill can ensure stability,” Link said in a talk last week in Hong Kong. If a massive opposition movement were to recur, Link added, the CCP would again face the choice of either a bloody crackdown or giving up power. “They will still choose force,” he said. Another tool that the CCP is using to consolidate its support base is nationalism. Said French Sinologist Jean-Philippe B  ja: “Xi Jinping has raised the Chinese Dream slogan and bolstered China’s position on the world stage. The CCP is relying on nationalism to uphold its legitimacy” (*Ming Pao*, May 30; *Apple Daily* [Hong Kong], May 30).

But there is absolutely no space in Xi’s “Chinese Dream” to accommodate the rival Tiananmen narrative that emphasizes the possibility of China adopting global norms such as the rule of law and institutional checks and balances. The top priority that Xi has given to

“mega national security”—and repeated moves taken to stake out China’s sovereignty claims in the South and East China Seas—seem to testify that the Tiananmen legacy of propping up the party-state via repression and nationalism will continue for the foreseeable future. [6]

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#### Notes:

1. Author’s interview with Louisa Lim, May 28. Lim has recently published a book on the topic titled *The People’s Republic of Amnesia*.
2. For a discussion of Deng’s idea about a collective leadership, see, for example, Chen Xianku, “Deng Xiaoping’s theory about a central collective leadership,” *CCP Central Party School Journal*, January 2005.
3. For a discussion of Deng’s rationale for giving up mass movements, see, for example, Tan Yuxi, “The historic change from organizing lots of political campaigns to stop holding political campaigns: Learn from Deng Xiaoping’s idea of no more political movements,” *Harbin Academy Journal*, June 2001; Kan Heqing and Chen Changshen, “Rethink on the history of political movements after 1949: Deng Xiaoping’s thoughts on ‘Stop organizing movements,’” *Journal of the Yunnan Administration Academy*, June, 2004.
4. For a discussion of Deng’s stance on the PLA’s role in the polity, see, for example, Yitzhak Shichor, “Demobilization: The Dialectics of PLA Troop Reduction,” *The China Quarterly*, June 1996, pp 336-359.
5. For a discussion of the PLA’s influence in foreign policy, see, for example, Willy Lam,

“The military maneuvers of Xi Jinping,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 14, 2011; Michael Swaine, “China’s assertive behavior: The role of the military in foreign policy,” *China Leadership Monitor*, Hoover Institution, 2012, No. 36; Trefer Moss, “PLA influence over Chinese politics: Fact or fiction?” *The Diplomat*, August 10, 2012.

6. For a discussion of the concept of “mega national security” see, for example, “Top-level design to open up the vista of mega national security,” *Global Times*, November 14, 2013. Also see Willy Lam, “Terrorism Fears Push Muscular Approach to ‘Overall National Security,’” *China Brief*, May 7.

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## The Energy Context behind China’s Drilling Rig in the South China Sea

By James Manicom

On May 3 China placed the Haiyang Shiyou 981 deep water semi-submersible drilling rig 119nm off the coast of Vietnam and 180nm from Hainan Island. The rig lies 17nm from Triton Island, part of the Paracel islands that China occupied by force from then South Vietnam in 1974. Vietnamese and international condemnation was swift and strident. Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Bing Minh called the move a violation of Vietnamese sovereignty and the U.S. State Department described the move as “provocative”. Chinese Foreign Ministry (FMPRC) Spokesperson Hua Chunying said the rig was normal part of regular offshore resource exploration activities China is entitled to conduct in its territorial waters off of the Paracel islands (FMPRC press conference, May 6 and 12). The move is in fact a deliberate Chinese escalation of its territorial and maritime dispute with Vietnam. This marks the first time that any claimant has unilaterally explored for hydrocarbon resources in a disputed part of the South China Sea, although Chinese officials maintain the activity in question is a decade old,

and claimants have previously granted concessions to international energy companies to explore disputed areas (FMPRC press conference, May 14).

From a messaging standpoint, the timing of the move seemed counterproductive. China clearly intends to keep the pressure on its rival claimants through a series of moves that sit below its rivals’ threshold for the use of force, but against which a weaker state has little recourse. But this move broke a year of relative calm in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship on the eve of a summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and seemed to undermine the message of regional cooperation and shared security that Xi delivered later in the month at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building in Asia (Xinhua, May 21).

However, the move was not a sudden decision, but the realization of a years-long effort to develop acquire deep-water technology and deploy it to the region. China deployed the Haiyang Shiyou 981 when it did because it was when it could. The move supports China’s ultimate goals both by asserting China’s ability to tap resources in the disputed area, and by discouraging international companies from working with Vietnam and other claimants. Nevertheless, despite considerable advances in deep water drilling technology, China lacks the capability to produce natural gas so far from its shores, suggesting that the move is driven as much by strategic considerations as by energy considerations.

### Why Now?

China’s maritime capabilities are growing rapidly, including maritime law enforcement, military power projection and offshore drilling. China has invested considerably in becoming a “maritime power,” as called for by former President Hu Jintao. The 12th Five Year Plan calls for the national maritime economy to compose 10 percent of China’s total GDP. In addition to naval modernization, China is developing the capacity to enforce its considerable maritime claims with lightly-armed civilian enforcement vessels. These vessels enforce China’s claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and have enforced China’s claims against fishermen from the Philippines and Vietnam.

China has also made considerable investments in offshore

rig technology. The stated-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) seeks to increase offshore production dramatically, with an emphasis on the deep waters of the South China Sea. Wholly-owned CNOOC subsidiary China Oilfield Services Limited (COSL) allocated 62 percent of its capital to acquiring new rigs in 2013 (Platt's Oilgram News, February 1, 2013). COSL is constructing two semi-submersible rigs capable of drilling in waters of 1500 metres. This is still only half the depth limit of the Haiyang Shiyou 981, but deep nonetheless (Platt's Oilgram News, February 1, 2013). COSL also bought Transocean's Richardson deep water rig in a surprise move in mid-2013 after the Haiyang Shiyou 981 demobilized due to damage related to steel fatigue or welding quality (Petroleum Intelligence Weekly, August 19, 2013). The Haiyan Shiyou 981 is clearly the most capable rig in the fleet. Constructed by China National Shipbuilding Corporation, COSL took possession of the \$900 million rig in May 2012. It first operated in the Pearl River Delta before beginning operations near the Liwan gas field in the South China Sea, 198nm southeast of Hong Kong (Platt's Oilgram News, May 9 2012). When the Haiyang Shiyou 981 was launched in 2012, the *Petroleum Economist* reported that Liu Feng, of the National Institute of South China Sea Studies, had suggested that "with Chinese drilling technology improving, it is just a matter of time before CNOOC pushes into the central and southern sectors of the South China Sea" (*Petroleum Economist*, September 2012).

Finally, deep water resource exploitation is a long term goal that China is rapidly approaching. China operates one of the world's most capable deep water submersibles, the *Jialong*, which can descend to depths of 5000m. China is one of the most active states in the world at the International Seabed Authority in Jamaica, which issues licences for deep water mining surveys on the seabed beneath the high seas. The pursuit of deep sea drilling technology was widely suspected to be a motive in CNOOC's generous offer for Canadian oil company Nexen in 2012. COSL's investments in drilling capability are a product of CNOOC's stated goal to produce 1 billion barrels of oil equivalent per day in deep water by 2020 (*Petroleum Economist*, December 2012). Earlier this year, CNOOC announced a mid-sized find in the Lingshui 17-2 area of the Qiongdongnan basin in its first independent deep water drilling operation. According to

the *Oil & Gas Journal* (March 19), the find was made in 1450 meters of water at a depth of 3510m beneath the seabed. The basin is located south of Hainan and north of the Paracels in waters not claimed by Vietnam.

The economics of this effort are driven by domestic supply shortfalls, high gas prices in the Asia-Pacific and the premium China places on supply security. From CNOOC's perspective, deep water exploration in the South China Sea is integral to the company's future. Its Bohai Bay fields are beginning to peak and its East China Sea sites are locked in a perpetual freeze due to the maritime boundary dispute with Japan (Platt's Oilgram News, April 17, 2012). Reliable natural gas production in the South China Sea supports China's energy security objectives in three ways. First, it supports the diversification of energy source away from coal towards other hydrocarbons. Second, it adds indigenous production that further diversifies China's sources of gas (as does the recent natural gas deal inked with Russia). Finally, the gas would not be imported by sea, which alleviates Chinese anxieties about imports that arrive on ships that travel through American policed sea lanes.

### Discouraging the Competition

As a function of its growing capabilities, CNOOC's interests and the political importance of the South China Sea to Beijing, China's objective is to ensure that any economic activity in a Chinese-claimed part of the South China Sea occurs on Beijing's terms. The economic rationale outlined above is coloured by political and security concerns. In 2012, for the first time, CNOOC released blocks for bidding in two separate rounds. The first round was composed entirely of blocks off the coast of Vietnam that had been licenced by Hanoi to foreign oil companies in partnership in PetroVietnam. This was undoubtedly a political move as China held a more wide-ranging round of bids later that summer, which included blocks in the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, the Pearl River mouth basin and the South China Sea.

By deploying the rig in Vietnamese-claimed waters, China is escalating tensions in waters adjacent to those currently being explored by international oil companies. Vietnam lacks advanced deep water drilling technology and is beholden to foreign partnerships, although PetroVietnam is trying to develop a deep water drilling

rig in a joint venture with a Russian company (Platt's Oilgram News, July 21 2011). By raising the political risk for foreign companies operating off Vietnam, Beijing can prevent Vietnamese drilling while building its own capacity to explore disputed areas unilaterally. China does not yet seem prepared to try to remove foreign oil companies already operating off the Vietnamese coast, although it has pressured foreign majors not to enter into such contracts with Vietnam in the past. ExxonMobil is developing the Ca Voi Xanh gas field in blocks 117, 118 and 119, which are west of the area in which the rig is deployed.

China's determination to deter unilateral drilling in the South China Sea is further evidenced by its posture towards Philippine efforts elsewhere in the South China Sea. Block SC 72, near the Reed Bank, was offered by the Philippines in 2011, but China warned foreign oil companies against making bids. Chinese vessels interrupted Forum Energy's efforts to explore the area. Discussions between Forum's partners and CNOOC were subsequently held to develop a workable solution. In March 2014 Philippine media reported that these talks had stagnated.

Chinese belligerence regarding Vietnam is currently limited to the South China Sea. There is no sign that Beijing seeks to revisit the delimitation of the Tonkin Gulf with Vietnam. PetroVietnam and CNOOC signed a memorandum of understanding on exploration and production in the disputed area in 2006, and the geographic area covered by the agreement was expanded in the summer of 2013. Beijing may be of the view that the Tonkin Gulf is settled in a favorable way, unlike the South China Sea.

### **Limits to China's Ambition?**

There may be practical limits to China's ambition. Despite its growing capabilities, China still confronts considerable limits on its ability to commercially produce oil and gas resources far from its shores. In the current case, even if the Haiyang Shiyou 981 makes a significant discovery, the commercial viability of that discovery hinges on getting the product to market. These costs increase dramatically with distance and the technological challenges associated with laying pipelines in deep water. The nearest Chinese gas pipeline network is on Hainan island, and water depths

would make accessing that network very costly. The most sensible market for the product is Vietnam, which would be loath to pay China for resources it views as its own. These conditions suggest that China's intent, in addition to exercising its jurisdiction in claimed waters, is also intended to dictate the terms of the "joint development" it so often purports to seek.

Furthermore, the Haiyan Shiyou 981 itself may be less impressive than first advertised. As noted above the rig spent part of 2013 undergoing considerable repairs. Consequently, the rig may not be able to operate during the typhoon season of July to September as was originally intended, which casts doubt on Beijing's claim the rig will remain off the coast of Vietnam until August (Petroleum Intelligence Weekly, August 19 2013).

However, it is likely that China will persist in the face of these challenges. For instance, due to the reluctance of foreign majors to partner in the development of disputed areas Beijing seems prepared to proceed independently. Chinese domestic rig capacity continues to be less than that required, yet Beijing insists that foreign operators use Chinese-registered rigs. Foreign operators face considerably higher costs when trying to partner with Chinese firms, due to a 6 percent import tax and 17 percent value added tax added to the cost of operating semi-submersible rigs not registered in China (Platt's Oilgram News, May 25, 2012). Although this slows the exploration process considerably and reduces the commercial viability of discoveries, it is a cost China seems prepared to bear to control offshore activity in its claimed waters.

### **Conclusion**

Western analysts should note the importance of Chinese capabilities. China is now more capable than ever in the exploitation of disputed maritime areas. Moreover, despite the limits noted above and the immense costs CNOOC confronts, Beijing is prepared to pay a premium for energy security. It stands to reason that it is similarly prepared to pay a premium to exploit resources in Chinese claimed maritime areas as this fulfills both economic and political objectives.

On balance, strategic explanations of the timing of the deployment of the rig may hide a more simple truth: that

the move was a function of Chinese resource development plans in the South China Sea. The conclusion that the move was “poorly” timed because increased international opprobrium against China assumes that Beijing’s South China Sea strategy is concerned with regional and international opinion. On the contrary, Chinese leaders may have decided that international condemnation is a small price to pay for leveraging their growing maritime capability to ensure that resource development in waters claimed by China occurs with Beijing’s blessing and under Beijing’s rules.

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## A Legal Sea Change in the South China Sea: Ramifications of the Philippines’ ITLOS Case

By Ian Forsyth

Over the last year, it has become clear that China is determined to pursue its strategy of “salami slicing” in the South China Sea—gradually increasing its control through small moves that fall short of war. Beijing has not been deterred from this strategy by remonstrations from regional powers and the United States, increased military cooperation between rival claimants and Washington or its own push to improve relations with neighboring countries. The best bet for China’s neighbors to change its strategic calculus appears to be the approach of the Philippines: directly challenging Chinese territorial claims in international arbitration under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

On January 22, 2013, the Philippines filed a Notification and Statement of Claim at the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), seeking to invalidate China’s nine-dash Line, which encompasses virtually the entire South China Sea (Notification and Statement of Claim: <http://www.pia.gov.ph/news/piafiles/DFA-13-0211.pdf>). A ruling is not expected prior to 2015, but

the submission is already sending shockwaves across the region. While China has attempted to isolate Manila in punishment, Vietnam has announced plans to seek legal recourse against China, which is a sign of preliminary political success for Manila.

However, there remains considerable uncertainty about the ruling: outcomes could range from validating China’s Three Warfares strategy to seriously undermining China’s soft power strategy and creating an opportunity for the United States to cast itself as a champion of international law.

### Possible Outcomes

#### *Declining Jurisdiction*

The first possible outcome is that PCA decides it does not have jurisdiction to rule on the case, as China demands. Chinese commentators have argued that because China has rejected the arbitration and China refuses to participate, it cannot be bound by its decision. However, precedent suggests otherwise. In a previous case known as *In the Matter of Arbitration between Barbados and the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (2006)*, the tribunal explicitly recognized an applicant-State’s right to unilaterally bring a dispute to arbitration over the defending-State’s objections. [1] Furthermore, according to Article 9 of Annex VII to the UNCLOS, “[a]bsence of a party or failure of a party to defend its case shall not constitute a bar to the proceedings.” Consequently, it is almost certain that the argument that China’s non-appearance and non-participation bars jurisdiction will not prevail.

The second argument and more convincing China asserts to bar jurisdiction is based on substance and nature of the dispute. UNCLOS provides that States may submit a formal declaration to the UN Secretary-General providing notice to all parties that they refuse to accept the compulsory procedures for binding decisions for certain categories of disputes related to territorial sovereignty. In 2006 China made a formal declaration that it does not accept those procedures. The resulting argument is that this case is an attempt to indirectly secure the Philippines’ claim to the different islands, rocks and reefs in the South China Sea that the Philippines the PCA cannot rule on the legal status of China’s actions and installations in the South China Sea unless the tribunal undertakes maritime boundary delimitations to determine who has the right to exercise sovereignty or jurisdiction in the parts of the

seabed on which they are located (*Global Times*, March 31; Xinhua, April 1; English.news.cn, April 3). If the tribunal accepts the Chinese position, then it might decline jurisdiction over the Philippines' claims. In its Memorial, the Philippines attempted to parry these assertions by insisting that it does not seek either a determination of sovereignty over the islands, or a delimitation of maritime boundaries.

### *Ruling on the Claims*

Assuming the PCA decides to rule on the case, the question is what the PCA will actually choose to address. If the PCA concludes that the nine-dash line is a question of territorial seas, then the PCA might decide to rule on only some of the Philippines' pleadings, with the most likely being the status of the land features. Most analysts believe that nearly all of the land features in the region are "rocks" and will accordingly be granted a mere 12 nautical mile (nm) territorial sea, instead of a 200nm Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) allowed for "islands" pursuant to Art.121 of UNCLOS (<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/06/16/south-china-sea-dispute-dynamics/>).

A third outcome is that the PCA rules on the status of the nine-dash-line as well. The PCA might avoid ruling on this issue on the grounds that the line is too vague because China has not submitted that line's precise coordinates, and that China has not clarified what the line asserts sovereignty over (e.g., the land features only, everything within the line, etc.), and that it is neither consistent with nor or contrary to UNCLOS. Yet if the PCA accepts jurisdiction to rule on this question, then there is a strong likelihood that it will rule that the nine-dash line is incompatible with UNCLOS.

### **Impact of a Ruling**

Any ruling will have an immediate impact on regional politics. If the PCA refuses to rule on this case China will likely see this refusal as a validation of its opting out of compulsory arbitration. This outcome would provide China with added leverage in its attempts to confine all dispute negotiations to the bilateral level.

If ITLOS invalidates the nine-dashed-line, the ruling would be a loss of face and a blow to all three of China's "three warfare" efforts in the region (legal warfare, public opinion warfare and psychological warfare) emboldening challenges the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and possibly Indonesia. These countries would be less likely to accept China's insistence that all disputes be resolved bilaterally.

Now bolstered by a clear ruling of its maritime rights issued by the highest legal authority for this issue, other competing claimants would be bolder about submitting ITLOS claims of their own, fishing in their claimed EEZs and awarding hydrocarbon exploration and drilling rights in their EEZs.

Among China's rival claimants, optimism about the outcome of the case is spreading. The Philippines' PCA submission appears promising enough that Vietnam has prepared evidence for a legal suit challenging China's claim to waters off the Vietnamese coast and says that it is considering the best time to file it. Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung declared in an interview: "We are prepared and ready for legal action" (Bloomberg, May 30).

Even Japan has expressed an interest in international adjudication with China to resolve territorial disputes. Former Foreign Minister Koichiro Genba challenged China to do so in an op-ed published in the *New York Times* in November 2012. However, since then Genba's government was replaced by current Abe administration, which has favored more military responses. Given that Tokyo asserts that there is no dispute over the Senkakus/Diaoyus, seeking recourse through legal means remains highly unlikely.

A legally binding ruling would also provide grounds for non-claimants such as the United States, Australia or Indonesia to become more active in support of the Philippines' position.

### **But Will China Listen?**

The most favorable possible ruling for the Philippines would not strip China of all legal rationales for its territorial claims in the South China Sea. The ruling would remove the nine-dash-line as a basis for those claims, but China's claims over land features are not included in the case and will not be invalidated. China would still assert sovereign claims over the Paracel and Spratly islands, along with sovereignty over the territorial seas and potential EEZs surrounding them. However, the waters' range would be greatly reduced if the PCA rules that those features are only "rocks." Although legally binding to both parties, any ruling will have no formal enforcement mechanism (Article 11, Annex VII, UNCLOS).

Despite this, China will still have much to lose. China has hedged against this possibility in two ways: first, by working its economic, legal and diplomatic levers on

other claimants in the hopes of preventing them from trying arbitration. China has to dissuade Manila from submitting its Memorial, allegedly including a mutual withdrawal of forces from the Second Thomas Reef and economic benefits to the Philippines, although Beijing has denied the reports (*Rappler*, February 26). Sticks could include a greater military presence at Scarborough Reef along with completely cutting off re-supply efforts of the BRP *Sierra Madre* at Second Thomas Reef, as well as economic coercion along the lines of what China implemented in 2012.

Manila is already seeking partners to help it resist Chinese attempts to defy a ruling. Reaching out to other regional powers with their own disputes with Beijing, it has strengthened relations with Japan, Vietnam and Indonesia. Leaders from the Philippines and Vietnam met in February, March and May this year to discuss Manila's arbitration against China, while in 2013 Japan agreed to sell several patrol boats to the Philippine Coast Guard and the two countries' defense ministers vowed to cooperate so that the rule of law prevailed in the settlement of territorial disputes (*Asahi Shimbun*, May 23, 2013). Manila has also expressed a willingness to provide Japanese maritime vessels with access to some of its naval facilities (*InterAksyon.com*, June 27, 2013). China's actions are ensuring that this trend of greater Japan-Philippines cooperation will likely continue. Finally, the Philippines and Indonesia have recently improved their security relationship by resolving a maritime border dispute (*BBC*, May 3). The most important partner for Manila, however, is its treaty ally the United States, which has also provided increased political and military support.

If Vietnam does file an ITLOS claim, it will no doubt face retribution from Beijing—and may be offered similar inducements to withdraw the claim. But Hanoi appears to be digging in for a long period of tensions with China, following a similar template to Manila. It has sought to improve its relationships with the Philippines, India and Japan, making joint statements about the disputes (*Kyodo News*, May 22). Voices in Vietnam calling for a strategic partnership with the United States (*cogitAsia*, May 30). Hanoi recently joined the Proliferation Security Initiative, and expressed an interest in purchasing U.S. maritime surveillance aircraft and conducting joint training with the U.S. Coast Guard.

## Conclusion

All claimants in the South China Sea face a range of outcomes from the PCA's ruling. It has already prompted

Vietnam to seek legal relief against China for its South China Sea actions. It could result in maintaining the status quo, or it could result in a sea change of behavior based on legal rights and national pride. Consequently, these parties are hedging against this range of outcomes, most notably further legal actions.

For Washington, a ruling could present an opportunity to align its preference for regional order with international law, thereby allowing it to present itself as a champion of the rights of small states and the use of law over hard power, while Chinese rhetoric is undermined. Such dynamics would hurt China's efforts in its other regional territorial disputes, and potentially bolster U.S. regional soft power.

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## Notes

1. In the Matter of an Arbitration between Barbados and the Republic of Trinidad & Tobago (Award of Apr. II, 2006), available at < <http://www.pca-cpa.org/E?GLISHIRPC/> >.
2. UNCLOS Article 298 (1).
3. Declaration under Article 298 by the Government of the People's Republic of China (August 25, 2006), see online: < [http://www.un.org/depts/los/settlement\\_of\\_disputes/choice\\_procedure.htm](http://www.un.org/depts/los/settlement_of_disputes/choice_procedure.htm) >.

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## China's Information Management in the Sino-Vietnamese Confrontation: Caution and Sophistication in the Internet Era

By Andrew Chubb

After the worst anti-China violence for 15 years took place in Vietnam this month, it took China's propaganda authorities nearly two days to work out how the story should be handled publicly. However, this was not a simple information blackout. The 48-hour gap between the start of the riots and their eventual presentation to the country's mass audiences exemplified some of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) sophisticated techniques for managing information during fast-breaking foreign affairs incidents in the Internet era. Far from seizing on incidents at sea to demonstrate China's strength to a domestic audience, the official line played down China's assertive actions in the South China Sea and emphasized Vietnamese efforts to stop the riots, effectively de-coupling the violence from the issue that sparked them. This indicated that, rather than trying to appease popular nationalism, China's leaders were in fact reluctant to appear aggressive in front of their own people. [1]

By framing the issue in this way, China's media authorities cultivated a measured "rational patriotism" in support of the country's territorial claims. In contrast to the 2012 Sino-Japanese confrontation over the Diaoyu Islands, when Beijing appears to have encouraged nationalist outrage to increase its leverage in the dispute, [2] during the recent incident the Party-state was determined to limit popular participation in the issue, thus maximizing its ability to control the escalation of the situation, a cornerstone of the high-level policy of "unifying" the defense of its maritime claims with the maintenance of regional stability (*Shijie Zhishi [World Affairs]*, 2011).

### Crisis and Bloodshed

The crisis began on May 2, when China positioned a massive oil drilling platform in disputed waters 220km from the Vietnamese coast, in the South China Sea. Dramatic on-water confrontations ensued, with numerous

collisions and water cannon battles resulting in damage to vessels and injuries to personnel (Xinhua, May 11; Tuoi Tre, May 12). This was the clearest example of unilateral escalation by China in years, but the CCP made no attempt to use this aggressive maritime behaviour to impress its domestic mass audience. On May 7, as the clashes raged on the water, an order from propaganda authorities instructed online media to rigorously find and delete reports on Sino-Vietnamese collisions and "immediately report on work progress" (China Digital Times, May 7). Two days later, when PRC media finally began reporting the issue, coverage was dominated by Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) official Yi Xianliang's remark that China was "stunned" to have had its ships rammed 171 times during "completely normal" operations (*Beijing Evening News*, May 9). Since then, officials have repeatedly emphasized that such operations have been carried out in the area for more than 10 years (*Beijing Times*, *Xinhua*, May 9; MFA, May 12; Xinhua, May 16). Rather than making an unprecedented move to assert its claims in the area, China was simply the innocent victim of Vietnamese aggression.

Many in Vietnam saw things differently, and protests against China's action took place in cities around Vietnam on the weekend of May 10–11 (Tuoi Tre, May 11). International media observed that the Vietnamese government appeared at least tacitly to approve of the protests (AP, *Christian Science Monitor*, May 10; *Guardian*, May 11; *Economist*, May 17). The weekend's demonstrations had been largely peaceful, but reports of rioting involving thousands of workers in factory areas began to appear in English-language media on the evening of Tuesday, March 13. Vietnamese media reported that "as of 3 am on Wednesday, 460 companies [had been] infiltrated by vandals" (*Hong Kong Standard*, May 14; Tuoi Tre, May 16; Thanh Nien, May 14). In the worst incident, a mob numbering around 1,000 attacked a Taiwan-owned steel mill that was being constructed by PRC state-owned enterprise China Metallurgical Group Corporation. According to a statement from the company, four Chinese workers were killed and 153 injured, 23 seriously (CMGC, May 20). Yet until late on May 15 the major Chinese media said almost nothing about these dramatic and terrible events. With such a volatile mix of territorial disputes, maritime clashes, riots and bloodshed, how did the CCP manage to keep control?

## Channelling a Media Wave

As overseas media reports of the violence in Vietnam emerged, an order was issued to China's online media to not report the issue, republish foreign coverage or allow discussion in online forums (China Digital Times, May 14). Although some mention of the attacks was permitted on Sina Weibo, users who tried to share foreign news reports on the events in Vietnam had their posts censored. Deleted Weibo posts included many bitter complaints about the lack of information from China's major media, with CCTV, Xinhua and Phoenix TV specifically singled out as having gone missing. One user drily suggested the national broadcaster may have "gone to America to report a hurricane, or Africa to film the animal migrations." Another deleted post summarized this sentiment: "The whole world knows, only China doesn't know!" (FreeWeibo, May 14–15; Tea Leaf Nation, ChinaFile, May 20).

However, this was no simple information blackout. Instead, the CCP allowed information to flow to where it was most needed, at the same time smoothing the natural spike in public attention and holding back media coverage until an official line could be decided. First, despite the major state media's silence and Weibo users' acute sense of information deprivation, there was basic information available to those with sufficient need or desire to search for it. For example, on the morning of March 14, a safety warning from the PRC Embassy in Hanoi on Wednesday morning announced that riots targeting "Chinese-invested businesses" had taken place. This story was reposted at least 80 times on major Chinese news sites, according to Baidu News Search (iFeng, May 14). [3] However, consistent with the order to websites not to republish overseas coverage, a detailed iFeng story compiled from Taiwanese media reports was quickly deleted (iFeng, Archive.org, March 14).

Allowing this basic information to circulate online required further management in order to avoid triggering a spike in public attention that the CCP was not yet ready to lead and shape. Short of banning all reports outright, Party authorities often order online news outlets to simply relegate the issue in question to low-traffic subsections of their sites, or to keep it out of the leading headlines at the top of the page (Author interviews with news supervisors at leading Chinese commercial news portals,

Beijing, October–November 2012). Users can still access the information, but only if they actively search for it. Thus, snapshots of iFeng, one of China's leading news portals, show no mention of the Vietnamese violence on its front page through May 14, while coverage of the issue on May 15 remained tucked away in the Hong Kong and Macao section, as well as the Taiwan section, about half way down the page (iFeng, May 14; iFeng, May 15). Similar patterns were observed on China's other major commercial news portals, as well as *Huanqiu Shibao's* influential website. Together with rigorous censorship of Sina Weibo and other "interactive platforms," this subtle guidance successfully minimized the spread of public attention beyond those who were already following the issue, while allowing access for those sufficiently motivated to search for relevant information.

By the morning of May 15, more than 24 hours after the riots had become a top story in international media, China's authorities began to ease the information faucet open, at least in certain sectors of the media. The print edition of *Huanqiu Shibao* carried a major back-page story titled "Vietnam claims to have arrested 500 'extreme elements,'" and this headline also appeared prominently on the paper's front page (*Huanqiu Shibao*, May 15). Yet this report, easily the most detailed description of the violence published by the Chinese media to that point, was kept off the Internet until late in the afternoon, and few if any other Chinese newspapers made prominent reports on the topic (ABBao.cn, May 15). [4] This suggests that the CCP's information control strategists may consider the estimated 2-3 million left-wing intellectuals and nationalist-leaning citizens who buy *Huanqiu Shibao* in print as a trustworthy audience rather than a source of unwanted pressure, a threat to social stability or a reflection of broader public opinion, as some influential observers have suggested. [5] In any case, in the headlines of the major online, print and television news outlets, the issue remained conspicuously absent until the CCP was finally ready with its own, carefully-calibrated version of events.

## Media Release

If there were any doubts that China's ruling party had been holding back a wave of media interest in the violence in Vietnam, they were dispelled on the evening of May 15, when major commercial news outlets including Baidu,

NetEase, Tencent and Sohu and iFeng all suddenly placed it in their top headlines, and many also pushed the story out as a notification on users' mobile phones (iFeng, May 15; see also author's Twitter feed). Crucially, while giving the green light to prominent coverage of the topic, the CCP also instructed online media to use only official agency copy or information from the Foreign Ministry's website (China Digital Times, May 15). [6] Restricting reporting to official sources gave the CCP the best chance to ensure its own messages could frame the events for the domestic audience at large.

The official line in this case appears to have involved at least two important elements: downplaying the role of the PRC's own assertive maritime actions in precipitating the violence, and limiting domestic anger by carefully attenuating its public accusations against the Vietnamese side, and publicizing the actions the Vietnamese leaders were taking to rectify the situation. China Central Television (CCTV) finally informed a national television audience about the events in its 10pm Evening News bulletin on May 15. Rather mischievously introduced as "information just to hand," the CCTV report characterized the events as "serious violent incidents of beating, smashing, looting and burning against *foreign* investors and businesses" (CCTV, March 15, emphasis added). The report, which was in fact a verbatim readout of a statement on the MFA website, also outlined:

- Foreign Minister Wang Yi's "strong condemnation and stern protest" in a telephone conversation with his Vietnamese counterpart;
- Wang's statement of the Vietnamese government's "unshirkable responsibility" for attacks against Chinese businesses and personnel;
- China's demand for immediate measures to ensure the lives and property of Chinese people in Vietnam, punishment of the perpetrators and compensation for China's losses;
- Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh's assurance that more than 1,000 suspects had been detained, strong measures taken to protect Chinese property and personnel, and that the situation was "trending towards stability";

- Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin's protest earlier in the day, and the dispatch of an MFA-led cross-departmental work team to Hanoi (MFA, May 15).

Neither CCTV nor any of China's official news agencies' other reports mentioned the events leading up to the Vietnamese anger: China's positioning of an oil drilling platform in disputed waters. [7] Viewed casually through the Mainland's mass media, it was as though the violence in Vietnam had come out of nowhere, rather than being the culmination of several days of maritime clashes and anti-China demonstrations. The widespread promotion the following day of Chairman Xi Jinping's remark that "invasion is not in the blood of the Chinese nation" may have been another sign that authorities were minimizing the possibility of everyday Chinese people viewing the CCP's actions in the Paracels as aggressive (*China Daily*, May 16).

The second prominent feature of official reporting on the violence was the emphasis on the substantive measures Vietnam was taking to curb the violence. One of Xinhua's first reports on the events noted that Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung had issued emergency orders to the country's public security apparatus to "take active and tough measures" to guarantee the security of foreign investors and their property, a point also highlighted in provincial television reports (Xinhua, iFeng, May 15; Dongfang Weishi [Dragon Television], Sina, May 15). In contrast, a *Huanqiu Shibao* story about Prime Minister Nguyen sending mass text messages encouraging Vietnamese citizens to patriotic action was taken down from a range of state news websites (see the story at NetEase, May 17). Other prominent state media reports emphasized the hundreds of arrests made by Vietnamese authorities, as did the above-mentioned CCTV/MFA announcement (Huanqiu Wang, May 15; China Daily Online, May 15; Xinhua International, May 15).

China also carefully attenuated its accusations of Vietnamese government complicity in the anti-China violence. MFA spokeswoman Hua Chunying stated in a press conference that the violence was "directly related to the Vietnamese government's indulgence and connivance toward domestic anti-China forces and criminals." However, when the Ministry finally released the official transcript—some hours later than usual—this had been

changed to the milder “unshirkable responsibility” used in the CCTV report (Bloomberg, May 15; MFA, May 15). Thus, when the CCP finally decided to legitimize discussion of the issue, it also appears to have been careful to avoid provoking a strong anti-Vietnamese response from its own public. If reports of almost no protesters showing up for scheduled anti-Vietnam rallies in Kunming are any indication, these measures were largely successful (East by Southeast, May 19).

## Conclusion

The CCP’s management of domestic discourse regarding the anti-Chinese violence in Vietnam was, above all, cautious. Even though the issue concerned the lives and property of Chinese citizens, it was able to keep the issue out of the headlines, off the Internet’s agenda, and away from the Chinese public at large for almost 48 hours, while still allowing relevant information to flow to those who needed or demanded it. When the CCP did decide to inform the public, it ensured the media narratives guiding popular interpretations of what had taken place avoided two extremes: linking China’s own foreign policy actions causally with the Vietnamese violence, and provoking an overly fierce domestic Chinese reaction. This reflects what one commercial online news supervisor has described to the author as a consistent two-track approach to guiding coverage of China’s territorial disputes in recent years: no questioning of China’s actions or positions, and no “irrational” patriotism (Author interview, October 2012).

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## Notes

1. Prominent arguments that China’s assertiveness on the South China Sea issue is driven by the Party’s desire to appease domestic nationalism include Robert Ross, “Chinese nationalism and its discontents,” *The National Interest*, Nov–Dec, 2011 and “The problem with the pivot,” *Foreign Affairs*, Nov–Dec, 2012; Suisheng Zhao, “Foreign policy implications of nationalism revisited,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol.22, No.82, 2013.
2. For a rigorous study of China’s tolerance of

anti-foreign protests in international crises, see Jessica Chen Weiss’s forthcoming monograph, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist protest in China’s foreign relations*, Oxford University Press, Summer 2014. A succinct summary of these ideas can be found in Weiss’s testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on “China’s Maritime Disputes in the East and South China Seas,” April 4, 2013, available at < <http://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Weiss%20Testimony,%20April%204%202013.pdf> >.

3. Brief reports of the Taiwan Affairs Office’s spokesman condemning “illegal violence” in Vietnam were also reposted at least 40 times (NetEase, May 14).
4. Even the paper’s own Huanqiu news website, which usually posts shortened online versions of the print version’s leading stories before the paper hits the newsstands, held back until after 5pm. (Huanqiu Wang, May 15). Posting leading content online early in the morning appears to be a commercial tactic designed at least in part to stimulate sales of the print paper, with the truncated online versions carrying a notice that reads, “For more detailed content please see today’s *Huanqiu Shibao*” (Huanqiu Wang, May 16).
5. For a salient example, see Susan Shirk, *Fragile Superpower*, pp.100-103. Another example of exclusive content being channeled to nationalistic and militaristic constituencies was the *PLA Daily’s* “Military Newspaper Journalist” (*Junbao Jizhe*) Weibo account, which released an exclamation-mark laden commentary opining that “Vietnam’s anti-China-ism will continue to lurch forward”, and calling for the “beheading” of the perpetrators (Duowei, May 15).
6. This technique reflects a similar line of thinking to the “White List” mode observed on China’s online media including Baidu and Sina Weibo, wherein searches for sensitive topics display what appears to be a range of results, but

which are all from a select group of “white-listed” state-run websites (Fei Chang Dao, April 20; Fei Chang Dao, December 21, 2012).

7. Three reports that did mention both the events in the Paracels and the violence in Vietnam were: a May 16 *Beijing News* wrap-up on the violence, the final section of which mentioned Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s conversation with Indonesian Foreign Minister over the Paracels incidents (reposted 80+ times according to Baidu News Search); the *Huanqiu Shibao*’s May 16 editorial, which mentioned the harassment of the HYSY-981 operation as a further example of Vietnamese aggression (reposted 47+ times, including by Xinhua); and a CNS report on PLA Chief of General Staff Fang Fenghui justifying the Paracels drilling operation in comments made in Washington, which also mentioned violence in the second paragraph.

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