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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Non-Confrontational Assertiveness: China's New Security Posture**

By Li Mingjiang

### **Synopsis**

*Non-confrontational assertiveness may best characterise China's new regional security posture. This will be the new reality that regional actors may have to deal with.*

### **Commentary**

MANY PUNDITS believe that China has jettisoned its "low profile" international strategy and has instead become more aggressive in pushing its own narrowly-defined national interests. Critics frequently cite China's behaviour at the Copenhagen climate negotiations, its heavy-handed response to American arms sales to Taiwan, and its tough stance on security issues in the Korean Peninsula, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea in 2010. These have been cited as examples of Beijing shifting its hitherto moderate security posture to a more assertive one.

In the past few months, however, top Chinese leaders have made strenuous efforts to assuage regional and international apprehensions and reassure neighbouring countries of China's peaceful intentions. President Hu Jintao, for instance, pledged at the recent Bo'ao Forum for Asia in Hainan that China sought to resolve its territorial disputes with neighbouring states through peaceful means and was intent to build a "harmonious Asia". Premier Wen Jiabao also spared no effort to highlight China's willingness to intensify engagement and cooperation with neighbouring countries during his recent trips to Malaysia and Indonesia.

What do we make of China's security policy in the midst of all these events and signals? What has changed and what remains constant in China's security posture?

### **Non-confrontation to Stay**

These questions are crucial for the rest of the world, particularly for China's East Asian neighbours. While acknowledging that China has become more assertive and is likely to remain so in the foreseeable future, we also have to note that China is unlikely to pursue any kind of confrontational strategy with other actors in East Asia. Non-confrontational assertiveness is likely to undergird China's security policy in the coming years; this is the reality that the rest of the region should be prepared for in their relations with China.

What does China's non-confrontational assertiveness essentially mean? It means that at the strategic level, Beijing is not likely to pursue any confrontation with other regional actors. China's non-confrontation strategy has been shaped by a number of factors. As long as these factors exist, its non-confrontation approach is likely

to continue. First of all, Beijing's top priority continues to be domestic economic growth. China's elite believe they will still need a stable and peaceful external environment for domestic economic modernisation. Today, there is very little evidence to show that the Chinese leaders are considering or willing to sacrifice the imperative of economic development by confronting other major powers.

Secondly, Chinese decision-makers clearly understand that China's overall strategic position in East Asia does not provide it leverage to be confrontational with any other major player in the region. After two decades of hard work consolidating its foothold in the region, China is, by and large, still a strategically isolated big power in East Asia. Beijing is not happy about this but its leaders understand that China will have to live with for a long time. China's missteps will only result in the further consolidation of US security role in East Asia and thus exacerbate what China sees as its unfavourable strategic position.

### **Surging Nationalism**

But at the same time, China is becoming more assertive in regional security affairs. First of all, China's power has grown to the extent that it can afford to be more assertive. Its military modernisation efforts have borne quite impressive results. Its economy has become the second largest in the world and a crucial growth engine for many regional states. China's maritime law enforcement capability has been significantly augmented in recent years and appears to grow further in the coming years. The growth in capabilities seems to come with a temptation to use pressure tactics and assertive means diplomatically.

Secondly, partially because of the increased power capability, China's self-confidence has also grown, especially in the wake of the financial crisis. It is not just about self-confidence. Among the Chinese public, there has been a discernible growth of nationalistic sentiment in recent years.

Thirdly, domestic politics in China do not contribute to any effective restraint on the growing nationalistic streak. The growth of societal discontent over corruption, rising housing prices, social injustice, and abuse of power by local governments has been of serious concern for the ruling elite. The top leaders may worry that any compromise or perceived weak response to regional security issues could be used by the discontented forces as an excuse to trigger a popular revolt over domestic problems.

Chinese leaders understand this possibility because of the power of the social media. The ongoing political power transition further complicates China's security policy. No Chinese leader wants to appear weak on issues concerning China's "core interests".

### **Impact of Domestic Politics**

All these create an atmosphere in China that only assertive stances are politically correct. While the outside world believes that China made blunders one after another in East Asia in 2010, the Chinese themselves may have drawn a very different conclusion. They may have firmly concluded that China's tense security relations with neighbouring states were a result of regional states pushing the envelope in collusion with the United States.

It is no surprise then that many Chinese analysts who are sober-minded find it increasingly more difficult to publicly discuss and suggest moderation in China's security policy. The new political environment has also significantly changed the dynamics of bureaucratic politics in China. Forces and agencies that favour a tougher policy line have gained prominence in decision-making. Various maritime law enforcement agencies, for instance, have taken advantage of the domestic political atmosphere for their own benefits; this largely explains why China has become more assertive in the maritime domain in recent years.

This combination of non-confrontation and assertiveness is likely to dominate China's security behaviour in East Asia in the coming years. The East Asian region may see many conflicting signals in China's security policy: abundant expression of goodwill and heavy-handedness on specific disputes. There will be frequent displays of Chinese assertiveness but Beijing will refrain from escalating the tensions and conflicts into any major confrontation.

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