

China Spooking Allies with the See-Saw Between Soft and Hard Power

Written by Richard Rousseau, Contributor | 25 April 2012

Chinese leaders spend considerable time and energy in assuring the international community that they have no reason to be afraid of China's "peaceful rise" and rapid emergence as one of the most important economic and diplomatic players on the international stage. Many countries, however, equate China's growing economic might with greater political influence and are less accepting of the benign image that Beijing now wants to portray to the world. Although China's current policy may appear at first impression to be a rather soft variety of imperialism, it is still perceived by many as "hard" imperialism.

There are now mounting signs that other countries, especially China's neighbors, are not totally convinced of Beijing's proclaimed benevolent intent. Those countries are presently taking measures to protect themselves in case China's "soft" imperialism eventually turns out to be more aggressive or of the "hard power" variety.

Evidence of Beijing's increasing political and economic strength can be found practically on all continents, but it is most obvious throughout East and South Asia. U.S. President Barack Obama found out right away in his term that the fast-growing economic ties between China and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN - Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam), South Korea, and Australia had important, but not always positive, diplomatic consequences for the United States. While visiting the region in November 2010, the President Obama soon realized that a country like South Korea, a longtime U.S. ally, was annoyed by any policy proposal between the two countries that might irritate Chinese leaders. The Americans' caution was salient despite Seoul's vexation at China's refusal to go along with the imposition of punitive measures against North Korea after it sunk a South Korean naval vessel and shelled a disputed South Korean island in what proved to be a kind of muscle flexing gesture.

There is nothing at all unusual about such diplomatic standoffs in this neighborhood. Obama experienced similar cool receptions in Indonesia and India during the same visit. There seemed to be widespread belief among the leaders of these countries that China's power is waxing and America is losing its influence, and that not antagonizing China has, therefore, become imperative in their foreign policy.

At times the manifestations of Chinese power are quite subtle, as in the case of various trade and investment agreements between China and ASEAN countries. Such agreements benefit both parties, but the terms seem more and more dictated by Beijing. For instance, the Sino-Tajik agreement signed in January 2011, which ended a border dispute dating back to the time of the Soviet Union, was not imposed unilaterally by Beijing. However, it gave China sovereignty over more than 1,000 square kilometers of land which formerly belonged to the Soviet Union and which had been under the control of Tajikistan since 1991 – and it is highly likely, based on the assessments of energy experts, that these areas hold important oil and gas reserves. It was obvious to the Tajik government that the further development of economic relations with China was conditional on making territorial concessions in the disputed region.

China's approach to this border dispute with Tajikistan was a perfect example of how "soft diplomacy" can work. However, analogous disputes with India and Japan are not being dealt with in the same manner. Beijing continues to be utterly uncompromising in its border dispute with India, a policy that led to an armed conflict between the two countries in 1962. A small, but significant, incident also occurred in January 2011, when the Indian government protested against China's issuance of separate visas to Indian citizens residing in the north-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh – over which China claims territorial rights. Beijing brusquely brushed off the protest about its brash practice and reiterated its claims to the disputed area.

China's already firm stance on boundary disputes with Japan was even more pronounced during the fall of 2010. In September 2010 a Chinese fishing trawler deliberately collided with a Japanese coastguard ship near the uninhabited islets called Senkakus in Japanese and Diaoyus in Chinese. In response, the Japanese detained the vessel's captain and crew. By all accounts a relatively minor diplomatic incident, the ship collision affair dramatically escalated when the Chinese government responded with harsh denunciations of the detentions and violent demonstrations fueled by these statements took place in many Chinese cities. Tokyo decided to dilute tensions by releasing the crew, but to no avail. Beijing took advantage of the situation to humiliate the Japanese government, demanding both a formal apology and monetary compensation.

China's abrasive conduct during that episode was not the only element which alarmed Japan and other East Asian neighbors. Equally distressing was Beijing's unyielding position regarding the disputed territorial waters. Chinese officials acted as though there could be no doubt whatsoever about the legality and legitimacy of their most expansive demands. That hard line attitude was also patent regarding China's assertive territorial claims in the South China Sea. China's stance, if taken seriously, would give it the right to control vast territorial waters currently considered international waters.

The extent of China's claims in the South China Sea has not only created unease among other countries, especially Vietnam and the Philippines, but also in the United States, the world's largest naval power. Washington considers the protection of the sea lanes in these waters as vital to U.S. national interests. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton clearly stressed these concerns in her speech to an ASEAN conference held in July 2011 and repeated them in more recent official U.S. State Department statements.

China's neighbors and the United States have also taken careful note of Beijing's willingness to flex its military muscles. It is highly likely that Tokyo and Seoul's decision to bury the hatchet over long-standing disputes dating back to the time of Japanese colonial rule over the peninsula at the beginning of the twentieth century was partly prompted by China's bullying toward Tokyo. Within weeks of the fishing vessels incident, the two countries came closer to one another and approved a set of bilateral security cooperation agreements. Common sense suggests that the rapprochement between Japan and the South Korea reflects their shared anxiety over North Korea. This factor undoubtedly pervades their relationship, maybe even plays the leading role, but China's growing power is also a reality which make Tokyo and Seoul keep their guard up.

Another indication that Beijing's neighbors do not feel comfortable in the face of China's toughness is the steps they are taking to improve their own military capabilities. Even Taiwan, whose incumbent President Ma Ying Jeou was re-elected on January 14th, has expressed a desire to purchase more weapons from the United States. During the January presidential campaign, President Ma stressed that it is in the interest of Taiwan to maintain close ties with mainland China and

continue cross-Strait dialogues; however, Taipei must engage in negotiation from a position of strength rather than weakness.

Other East Asian countries are also developing their armed forces to counterbalance China's increasing diplomatic and military might. Especially significant is the fact that their military procurements are concentrated on their air and naval systems – precisely the forces most appropriate to any eventual Chinese threat in East and South East Asia.

China's behavior is not different from that of other rising powers throughout history: exerting greater influence on its peripheral Asian neighbors and forcing weaker states to cave in and make concessions. This is not surprising under current geopolitical circumstances. Neighboring countries are also good students of history and can grasp the repeating patterns. This explains why they are trying to both accommodate the Chinese increasing clout and make moves to counter China's military strength. They are also doing all possible to enhance their own ability to protect their immediate national interests. The crucial issues, therefore, are how China will react to the resistance from its neighbors and how its "soft" imperialism will unfold over time.

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