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1. China needs new strategies to secure its maritime borders

Antoine Bondaz

Sources:

Jin Canrong, "The context and resolution of Chinese maritime territorial disputes", *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, No. 8, 2012[1].

Chu Shulong, "The current situation in remote Chinese territorial waters and its external strategic design", *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, No. 8, 2012[2].

Lin Hongyu, "Causes of Chinese maritime distress and measures to take in response", *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, No. 8, 2012[3].

Liu Jianfei, "The challenges of maritime territories issues for the rise of China", *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, n°8, 2012[4].

These articles come from a special issue of the CICIR's journal, *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*. The journal devoted an issue to China's "disputes in territorial waters" (领土领海争端, *lingtu linghai zhengduan*), after the research centre brought together more than 30 Chinese experts at a conference on 3 August 2012 to discuss "the problem of Chinese maritime borders and China's international strategy".

The articles suggest that, by increasing maritime trade and modernising its navy, China has gradually created real naval strength. However, its maritime rise has been met with opposition by its neighbours and by the United States. Maritime territorial disputes are not an isolated problem. Instead, they are part of a wider security issue that is characterised by China's emergence and the US's new strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. To secure its position, the articles suggest, China must develop a real maritime strategy and assert its rights.

Becoming a power at sea as well as on land

Although China lies on the edge of the Eurasian continent, the authors agree that it has neglected the sea in favour of building strength on land. It has continued this policy even though all the "humiliations suffered from the 19th century onwards have come from the sea" (饱受海洋之屈辱, *baoshou haiyang zhiquru*), according to Lin Hongyu. These humiliations were mostly brought about by Chinese negligence. Lin Hongyu says the country had not yet developed a "maritime awareness" (海洋意识, *haiyang yishi*), so it could not competently manage its maritime borders. Chu Shulong points out that all China's wars between 1949 and 1979 – with Korea, India, and the USSR – were land-based. After the fall of the USSR, China again prioritised resolving land-based territorial disputes. China has only recently started to concern itself with maritime issues, coming to a new realisation that it is not only a "continental Loess civilisation" (黄土文明, *huangtu wenming*) but also a "marine blue civilisation" (蔚蓝色文明, *weilanse wenming*). Jin Canrong says that all China is doing is normalising its strength, developing real power that is based not on its history as a continental power, but on its geography, which makes it a dual power – that is, a power both on the continent and at sea.

China has the second largest economy in the world and is the world's largest trading power. But it has waited a long time to upgrade its power at sea. Its naval strength is nowhere near that of its neighbours such as Japan or India, much less that of the United States. Lin Hongyu says that China faces several major obstacles in increasing its maritime power. Its geography is unfavourable – where the US has access to three oceans, the Atlantic, the Pacific, and the Arctic, China has no direct access to the ocean, not even to the Pacific. It has to contend with several ongoing territorial disputes. And the US, the world's strongest military power, has an interest in what would otherwise be China's maritime sphere of influence. Chu Shulong says that, in the face of this "precarious maritime situation" (海洋困境, *haiyang kunjing*), China is not actually being "aggressive" (咄咄逼人, *duoduobiren*), but is in fact projecting "weakness" (软弱, *ruanruo*). Similarly, Lin criticises China for being "on the defensive" (防御的状态, *fangyu de zhuangtai*), underlining its inferiority in maritime affairs.

Territorial disputes and the US

China is currently involved in territorial disputes in all of its bordering seas. Jin Canrong says that these disputes have become more pressing since 2010. In that year, the South Korean warship *Cheonan* was sunk by a North Korean torpedo in the Yellow Sea. A collision between a Chinese fishing boat and the Japanese coastguard in the East China Sea caused friction with Japan. And tensions increased between China, Vietnam, and the Philippines in the South China Sea. Chu Shulong, however, says that these territorial disputes, which are historical and non-cyclical, are not just China's problem. In fact, China is not even a key player in some of the regional disputes. China is in a strong position in the South China Sea. It is at a slight disadvantage to Japan in the East China Sea, but its regional position is gradually improving. More importantly, China's neighbours are the ones who are revising their views on the situation; China, Chu says, is completely comfortable with the status quo.

Some internal factors have helped to intensify China's

[1] Jin Canrong is vice-dean and professor at the School of International Studies at Renmin University of China, Beijing.

[2] Chu Shulong is deputy director of the Institute of International Strategic and Development Studies and professor of Political Science and International Relations at Tsinghua University in Beijing.

[3] Lin Hongyu is professor of International Relations and dean of the Department of International Politics at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR).

[4] Liu Jianfei is director of the Chinese Foreign Affairs Division and professor at the Institute of International Strategic Studies at the Central Party School of the Communist Party of China.

territorial disputes. Jin Canrong talks about the modernisation of the Chinese navy, which has obtained submarines as well as the country's first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning. This modernisation has finally given China a "blue-water navy" (远洋蓝水, *yuanyang lanshui*). China's interest in defending its maritime borders is increased by the fact that 9.7 percent of the country's GDP depends on the maritime economy. Liu Jianfei also says that nationalism is very important to the Chinese people. He thinks that they commonly see their government as too timid, and that public opinion favours a radicalisation of the country's foreign policy.

The writers believe that the US is playing a crucial role in the deterioration of the regional situation. Jin Canrong says the US cannot accept China gaining true maritime power. If China were to become a major naval power, it would challenge US hegemony over international waters and so would be detrimental to its national interests. The US already benefits from two key advantages over China: it has superior materiel and it maintains an effective system of regional alliances. To give it an added edge, the US is also trying to legitimise its intervention in China's territorial disputes. Washington hopes to fan the flames (煽风点火, *shanfeng dianhuo*) by relying on neighbouring countries, which want to involve the US in order to internationalise the conflicts and balance Chinese power.

> All China is doing is normalising its strength, developing real power that is based not on its history but on its geography.

Liu Jianfei says that US involvement in the dispute allows it to legitimise its "pivot" to Asia. This strategy is aimed at containing China and gaining support from China's neighbours. The US is using the territorial disputes as its "trump card to put pressure on China" (美国打压中国的一张牌, *Meiguo daya Zhongguo de yizhangpai*). At the same time, it officially remains in the background, manipulating its allies "from behind the scenes" (自己则站在幕后, *ziji zezhan zai muhou*). This stance encourages China's neighbours, particularly Japan and Vietnam, to adopt offensive strategies that negate Chinese efforts to build a policy of good neighbourliness.

Developing a major maritime strategy

The authors suggest several ways to reinforce Chinese maritime strength and promote Chinese interests in the various territorial disputes. Liu Jianfei thinks China must above all try to improve its international reputation, so as not to risk fuelling the "Chinese threat theory" (中国威胁论, *Zhonguo weixie lun*). Beijing must also "maintain stability" (维稳, *weiwen*) throughout the region and within China.

Jin Canrong says the territorial disputes must be viewed in the regional context of Chinese emergence and the US return to the Asia-Pacific region. He thinks the solution lies in communication and coordination between China and the US, so as to put an end to the "mutual strategic distrust" (战略互疑, *zhanlüe huyi*) and "chronic lack of confidence" (互信赤字, *huxin chizi*). The two countries must recognise each other's interests. Washington must accept a stronger China, along with the enhancement of China's maritime power. China must build cooperation with its Asian neighbours. It should advance the idea of an "ocean GDP" (海洋GDP), which would enable some of the wealth of the sea to be shared with neighbouring countries, thus perhaps encouraging them to drop some of their demands. China must also develop a structured defence of its rights on the basis of law and of historical claims.

Lin Hongyu thinks that competitiveness and maritime security are essential to China's economic development. Beijing must develop true maritime awareness. He thinks that there is a role here both for the government and, more surprisingly, for civil society. Through NGOs, civil society should help build patriotism among the Chinese people. Specific projects should be created to support the disputed islands, and financial contributions should be solicited to support these projects. At a strategic level, China must do everything to break through the encirclement created by the first island chain[5]. By strengthening its sea power, and transforming itself from a "maritime nation" (海洋大国, *haiyang daguo*) to a "marine superpower" (海洋强国, haiyang qiangguo), China would protect its influence in the Pacific while creating a real deterrent against other navies in the region.

Referencing Sun Yat-Sen's statement that the twentieth century was dominated by continental powers, Lin says that the 21st century belongs to the maritime powers. China must develop maritime strength proportionate to its economic power. Direct confrontation with the US is not an option, but China should still modernise its navy and assert its territorial claims. The situation is uncertain, but not disastrous. Liu Jianfei says that China has one significant advantage on its side: time. Its leverage over its neighbours will grow along with its economy. And it will continue to grow in influence as its neighbours, including the US, become increasingly dependent on the Chinese economy – which will limit their room for manoeuvre.

[5] Theorised by the man responsible for modernising the Chinese navy, Admiral Liu Huaqing (who is praised by Liu Hongyu elsewhere in his article), the first chain of islands corresponds to the archipelagos that separate the seas bordering China from the Pacific Ocean, including Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines.