

New Chinese Leadership, New Policy in the South China Sea Dispute?

Irene Chan · Mingjiang Li

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Abstract Following the inauguration of the new leadership during the annual National People's congress in March 2013, China unveiled a series of maritime institutional reforms. The intensification of efforts to realize China's maritime aspirations and to re-establish effective control over previously neglected maritime space is unprecedented. It raises a critical question: What is the new leadership's South China Sea policy? This paper attempts to address this question by examining the new signs in Beijing's evolving policy on the China's maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea under Xi's strong man leadership.

Keywords South China Sea · Maritime policy · New leadership · Maritime territorial disputes · Xi Jinping

Introduction

Since Xi Jinping assumed the presidency on 14 March 2013, there has been much speculation about his leadership style and management of China's foreign policy. What the new leader will do with regards to territorial disputes remains an enigma as the process of decision-making in Chinese foreign policy is opaque. Xi exercised caution in imposing his personality on foreign affairs both during the leadership transition and his first few months in office. Analysts have argued that, given the current Politburo Standing Committee's consensual leadership style, changes under the new leadership are likely to be insignificant. Chinese diplomacy is likely to remain as one of reactive assertiveness under Xi and that Chinese foreign policy remains predicated on China's domestic agenda [1, 2]. Another factor underscoring this argument is that the new leadership has inherited foreign policy legacies which continuously constrain China's

I. Chan (✉) · M. Li

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Blk S4, Nanyang Ave, Level B4 Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore 639798
e-mail: isirenechan@ntu.edu.sg

M. Li

e-mail: ismjli@ntu.edu.sg

foreign policy behavior. However, one certainty is that the new Chinese leaders are more confident than their predecessors [3, 4]. They also strongly desire to exert more control over existing territorial disputes rather than merely respond to incidents post hoc.

Since becoming the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2012, Xi has shown an inclination to take a tougher stance towards other claimant states in regards to maritime and territorial disputes. Even so, it has been argued that the controversial policies introduced by China in December 2012—the issuance of new Chinese passports containing the watermark of China’s map featuring disputed territories, and the new maritime rules issued by Hainan province—predate Xi’s ascension to party secretary. Moreover, some other instances of increased Chinese assertiveness over territorial disputes such as China upping the ante in the East China Sea (ECS) after Xi’s appointment as head of a special taskforce known as “Office to Respond to the Diaoyu Crisis” in September 2012 have roots predated his ascension [5, 6]. Suffice it to say that the level of pressure which China is exerting on Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has not shown any signs of abating since Xi took office.

Tensions and disputes in the South China Sea (SCS) have significantly worsened the regional security environment and undermined China’s relations with littoral Southeast Asian states. Xi has triggered greater fears in the other SCS claimant countries with his hard line stance. As a result, they have also hardened their stance against China. For instance, the Philippines refused to back down from its legal recourse against China at the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) despite China’s attempts to isolate Manila in punishment. Even key regional players with no claims in the dispute, such as India, Japan and the United States (US), have become increasingly involved [7–11]. To some extent, it can be argued that the contentions in the SCS have entered a new era. The new Chinese leaders are faced with the daunting challenge of managing the volatile security situation in the SCS.

This paper attempts to explore Beijing’s evolving policy on the SCS dispute. More specifically, we explore whether or not there are signs of policy evolution under Xi’s leadership. It is our contention that Beijing is unlikely to reduce the level of assertive behavior that it has displayed in the past few years. Under the new leadership, China is likely to continue to enhance its presence in the SCS and respond firmly against unilateral actions that may be initiated by other claimant countries.

This paper’s three sections contemplate the interactions of various domestic and international factors that will shape China’s SCS policy. The first section presents a detailed overview of the major events in the disputed waters since 2009 to highlight the emergence of a new era of tensions and disputes which the new Chinese leadership has to face in the SCS. The second section examines China’s relations with the major regional players that are non-claimants to the disputed waters and the subsequent impact on the dispute. How the emergence of Xi as a political strongman has contributed to China’s assertive SCS policy will be discussed in the third section. As noted by Blanchard in his introductory chapter in this special issue, “a crisis atmosphere can boost the relevance of a key leader...the power of leaders, an issue that many analysts fail to contemplate systematically, also determines the fitness of an approach.” We contend that as a strong leader, Xi plays a pivotal role in the making of China’s maritime policy and influencing public discourse on China’s maritime rights.

The South China Sea since 2009

The SCS and its mostly uninhabitable islands have been subjected to competing sovereignty claims by five countries—Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam—since the 1970s. The interests of claimants include the acquisition of fishing areas around the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos, the potential exploitation of crude oil and natural gas under various parts of the SCS, and the strategic control of critical sea lines of communication (SLOC). Most of the claimant states have taken steps to strengthen their civil and military capacities in the process of strengthening their respective claims. The dispute has become a potentially deadly flash point in Southeast Asia as a result of rising tensions between several of the claimants over the past 4 years.

China and the rest of the Southeast Asian claimant states have been able to keep a lid on tensions and ride out the storms. 2009, though, was a watershed year in the history of the SCS issue as the tensions that flared up during that fateful year have continued to boil. In March 2009, the US protested after Chinese vessels harassed its naval surveillance ship., Beijing has continued to assert its irredentist claims in the SCS in spite of the high costs in terms of its relations with neighboring countries [12–14]. Since then, its relations with its Southeast Asian neighbors have slipped to the lowest point in years. Developments in the SCS in recent years have eroded much of the goodwill that it took Beijing two decades to build through its friendship diplomacy (*mulin zhengce*) [15].

The first round of tussles between China and the other claimants on the diplomatic front began in 2009 with the submissions by various countries of extended continental shelf claims to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS). Malaysia and Vietnam made a joint submission to the UN Commission which resulted in a series of communications to the UN Secretary-General. China's note verbale, attached with a nine-dashed line map, rejecting the submissions of the other claimants sparked strong opposition from other claimant states and raised old suspicions among non-claimant ASEAN states of China's ambition in the SCS [16].

It was the first time in the international arena that China had officially indicated its maritime territorial claim in the disputed waters based, albeit partially, on the controversial nine-dashed line map. Apart from responses from claimant states to the UN Secretary-General, Indonesia (being the largest ASEAN member littoral state and also a non-claimant) sent official communications contesting China's inconsistent claim to sovereign rights and jurisdiction based on the nine-dashed line map with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) [17].

In 2010, the diplomatic contretemps at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Hanoi, particularly between US and Chinese officials, sparked off high tensions over the SCS issue [18]. At the 17th ARF ministerial meeting in Hanoi in July 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a forceful statement asserting US interests in facilitating the resolution of the SCS territorial disputes. Eleven other ARF members agreed with the US that military vessels have the right of innocent passage in the SCS. China's Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi was reported to have reacted angrily before storming out of the meeting.

There has been an increase in the frequency of disputes concerning fishing activities and energy resource exploration in the disputed waters over the past 3 years. In particular, Beijing has been singled out as the primary aggressor for using forceful

means to intervene in the oil and gas exploration activities of Vietnam and the Philippines in their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) [19, 20]. In the first half of 2011, a series of incidents, such as threats and use of force by Chinese patrol forces against Filipino and Vietnamese fishermen and energy exploration activities in the disputed waters, further exacerbated relations among disputants [21–26].

Over the past two decades, the passage of domestic laws to strengthen claims over the Spratly archipelago has been a common claimant tactic. However, recent years have seen new levels of activism. In 2012, Vietnam passed a maritime law declaring sovereignty and jurisdiction over the Paracels and Spratly Islands. China countered by setting up the Sansha Prefecture to administer the islets, sandbanks and reefs in the Paracels (*Xisha*), the Macclesfield Bank (*Zhongsha*) and the Spratlys (*Nansha*) in July. In November, the Hainan provincial government announced a revised version of a regulation that allows the Hainan police to board and search ships that violate Chinese laws and regulations in contested waters [6]. In December, China issued new passports bearing a watermark map claiming sovereignty over the SCS, inciting strong protests from the Philippines and Vietnam [27].

The Sino-Philippine standoff over the Scarborough Shoal, which resulted in China's de facto control over the reefs, was one of the flashpoints of the SCS dispute recent years. On 8 April 2012, a Philippine Navy surveillance plane spotted Chinese fishing vessels docked at the waters of Scarborough shoal and dispatched the BRP Gregorio del Pilar to inspect the fishing vessels and their ongoing activities. Attempts to arrest the Chinese fishermen for illegal poaching were blocked by Chinese maritime surveillance ships, resulting in a standoff. During the standoff, China's Vice Foreign Minister, Fu Ying, warned the Philippines that China has "made all preparations to respond to any escalation of the situation by the Philippine side". The media, most notably the *Global Times*—a populist newspaper affiliated with the official *People's Daily*—followed up Fu's remarks with reports that China would not rule out the possibility of using force to resolve the conflict with the Philippines. It added that "if the standoff escalates into a military clash, the international community should not be completely surprised" [28].

In July 2012, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) failed to make any progress at the 45th Foreign Ministers meeting in Phnom Penh in managing the security situation in the SCS. Cambodia, the ASEAN chair at the time, had sought to exclude any reference of the SCS disputes in the communiqué. This is a further indication of the troubled state of the SCS dispute. For the first time in 45 years, the meeting failed to issue a joint communiqué due to disagreements on handling the SCS disputes. It also highlighted ASEAN's disunity and threatened its credibility as a regional organization, with long-lasting repercussions for community building in Southeast Asia. Due to Beijing's close relationship with Phnom Penh, China fell under suspicion of wielding undue influence over Cambodia [29].

In January 2013, the Philippines initiated an arbitration process under the UNCLOS to challenge the legality of China's nine-dash claim in the SCS [30, 31]. However, China refused to participate in the arbitration, insisting that the dispute should be solved bilaterally through dialogues "on the basis of respecting history and international law." [32, 33] Analysts have warned that Beijing risks eroding its soft power and damaging its credibility as a great power with its refusal [34]. Interviews with analysts suggest one of the reasons for China's refusal to participate stems from suspicions that the process will not be fair as the President of the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea

(ITLOS), Shunji Yanai, is Japanese by nationality. Other reasons mentioned include China's distrust of supranational mechanisms and its poor understanding of the UNCLOS [35].

Days after Xi's inauguration on 20 March 2013, a People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) South Fleet flotilla held a combined arms amphibious exercise and a symbolic ceremony declaring vows to defend China's sovereignty in the SCS in waters near the James Shoal (*Zengmu Ansha*), located approximately 80 km (50 miles) from the Malaysian coast and about 100 km (62 miles) from Brunei [36]. Analysts have pointed out that while the number of vessels involved in the exercise was insignificant, it was a demonstration of force, by the PLAN with the new Chinese leadership's approval, to the regional countries of China's military capability to operate far from the mainland and to defend their territorial claims [37].

China repeated its show of force following another standoff between Philippine and Chinese vessels in waters off the Philippine-controlled Second Thomas Shoal (*Ren'ai Jiao*) in May 2013 [38]. Chinese state media reported the joint exercise by all three branches of the PLAN North Sea, East Sea and South Sea fleets in the SCS as a show of force against the Philippines [39]. According to Chinese analysts, this rare joint naval exercise comprising warships, submarines and the naval air force also comes as a strategic protest to the recent presence of the US carrier, USS Nimitz, in the SCS amid tensions between China and the Philippines [40].

China's Relations with Major Players in the South China Sea

After 16 months in power, the new Chinese leadership is widely seen to be more confident in handling major power relations and more inclined to assert China's interests than its predecessors. Not only has Xi extended Hu Jintao's initial concept of "new type of [great power] relations" (*xinxing daguo guanxi*) as part of his repertoire of measures to manage China's relations with major powers, particularly with US, he also set a new status quo in the ECS with the establishment of China's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in November 2013 [41–45]. More importantly, Xi was seen to have proven his mettle by holding China's ground despite strong protests from the US and Japan. In fact, instead of demanding China to rescind the ADIZ, US Vice President Joe Biden urged Beijing and Tokyo to establish a crisis communication mechanism in his meeting with Xi in December 2013 [46].

Since taking office, Xi has made a number of statements about boosting China's security and military capabilities [47, 48]. This and his "China Dream" vision have been associated with the nationalistic discourse in China that feeds off the perceived decline of the West as a result of the 2008/09 global financial crisis and China's ascent in the international arena. According to analysts some of this rhetoric is meant for domestic consumption. Nevertheless, the new Chinese leadership undoubtedly is serious in taking US involvement in the SCS as a threat to its interests [6].

Sino-US in the SCS

In his article for this special issue, Advincula pointed out that the SCS disputes "may have a significant impact on US-China relations because it shapes Washington's

offshore balancing strategy in the APR (Asia-Pacific region) and towards China and Manila's buck-passing and chain-ganging strategies." The current dilemma for the US in the event of a military confrontation in the SCS is that it would be forced to choose between Philippines—a strategic partner—and China, its largest creditor and biggest trade partner.

China has long complained that the increasing involvement of non-claimant major powers, particularly the US, in the SCS dispute is complicating matters and reducing the possibility of peaceful resolution. The mainstream Chinese policy camp is steadfast in its belief that the US and other non-claimant powers, such as India and Japan, do not have any right to intervene in the SCS dispute. In the official statements targeted at Washington, China frequently makes known its opposition to perceived US intervention.

At the 2011 East Asia Summit in Bali, former Premier Wen Jiabao cautioned external forces against involvement in the SCS issue. He reiterated the Chinese stance that any disputes should be resolved bilaterally between the claimants [49]. In August 2012, China objected vociferously to the US Department of State's statement that "as a Pacific nation and resident power, the US has a national interest in the maintenance of peace and stability, respect for international law, freedom of navigation, and unimpeded lawful commerce in the South China Sea." [50] A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson reportedly questioned the US's motive for stirring up tensions "at a time when countries concerned in the region are stepping up dialogue and communication in an effort to resolve disputes and calm the situation." [51]

China blames the US for colluding with regional claimant states such as the Philippines and Vietnam to stir up tensions and disputes in the SCS in recent years, as part of its rebalancing strategy which it views as a US strategy to undermine China's development [52]. Beijing views trends such as the closer military links that have emerged among Washington, Hanoi, and Manila following Secretary of State Clinton's aforementioned forceful stance on the SCS interests at the 2010 Hanoi ASEAN meeting, as evidence of an American attempt to build a military coalition to offset China's growing military presence in the SCS [53, 54]. Beyond this, Beijing sees the US recent attempts to strengthen its regional hub-and-spokes security alliance as a growing threat to its national security.

Sino-Indian Relations in the SCS

As the race for energy security heats up in Asia, India's involvement in the SCS dispute has also complicated the regional security environment as China is increasingly suspicious of India's deepening engagement with Southeast Asia. In September 2011, in an incident both countries reportedly downplayed, a Chinese naval official confronted, via radio, an Indian warship for intruding into Chinese territorial waters after the latter ended its port call to the Vietnamese port of Hai Phong [55]. There is potential for conflict between China and India over the SCS energy resources as India and Vietnam have signed an agreement to expand and promote oil exploration and exploitation in October 2011 [56]. India reconfirmed its plans to carry out the agreement despite China's objections.

Vietnam accepted a bid from India's state-owned oil company, ONGC Videsh Ltd (OVL) for two oil blocks in July 2012. However, China's state-owned China National

Offshore Oil Company (CNOOC) opened one of the two blocks, Block 128, belonging to OVL in an attempt to expel India from the SCS [57]. India responded by showing strong support for freedom of navigation and access to resources in accordance with international law at the 2012 ARF in Phnom Penh [57]. In addition, in December 2012, Indian Navy Chief, D.K. Joshi, reportedly made a strong statement that the Indian navy was ready to deploy vessels to protect India's maritime and economic interests in the SCS [58].

Mindful of China's naval modernisation in the Indian Ocean, India has taken steps to improve its strategic ties with both claimant and non-claimant countries such as Japan and Vietnam [59, 60]. China has voiced displeasure at the growing Indian naval presence in the region, but it is still too early to tell if the Indian navy will be a permanent player in the SCS.

Sino-Japanese Relations in the SCS

Japan's involvement in the SCS dispute is relatively more bounded than India's, but nonetheless remains a constant source of frustration for China. Like India, Japan has stakes in oil fields off the Vietnamese coast. For instance, the private Japanese joint investment of Nam Rong-Doi Moi offshore oil field in the Vietnamese EEZ achieved its first production in February 2010. Private Japanese companies such as Idemitsu Kosan, Nippon Oil and Teikoku Oil hold interest in the Nam Rong-Doi Moi offshore field as well as in two other Vietnamese offshore fields which are currently under exploration.

Japan is also concerned about the freedom of navigation. The rise of China and its expanding influence in Southeast Asia has changed Japanese perceptions towards the SCS in the past decade. Given that 90 % of Japan's oil imports are shipped via the SCS, conflict between claimant parties could have a serious adverse effect on the weak Japanese economy. Not surprisingly, then, in an interview with the *Financial Times*, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda said that though Japan has no territorial claims in the SCS, Tokyo shares the worries of the nations in the area as it views the SCS as a vital trade route [61]. Most importantly, Japan's interest in the SCS dispute is also related to with its ongoing struggle in the ECS with China. In a bid to form a united front against China, Japan has been rallying the other SCS claimants. For instance, Japan pledged to provide patrol ships to Vietnam bolster its maritime law enforcement capabilities [62].

Concerned that China could repeat to what it is doing in the Scarborough Shoal around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Japan has been working closely with the Philippines on the SCS dispute since 2011. In September 2011, both countries reached a defense cooperation agreement in which Japan committed to provide capacity building support to the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) [63]. The Philippines is currently in talks with the Japan International Cooperation Agency for the acquisition of ten new patrol boats by late 2014 or early 2015 to enhance the PCG's maritime surveillance capabilities [64]. Japan also signed a similar strategic partnership agreement in October 2011 and is currently looking to boost defense ties with Vietnam [65].

Moreover, as a key US ally in East Asia, Japanese interest in the dispute also links to that of the US [66]. Since the US asserted an its interest in the SCS at the 2010 ARF, Tokyo has accordingly realigned its strategic objectives in support of US rebalancing

efforts in East Asia [67–69]. Letting the US play the heavy in the SCS, Japan has attempted to use its soft power multilaterally such as in ASEAN, ARF, and the East Asian Summit (EAS) to challenge China for influence in Southeast Asia [70–74]. As such, the SCS has become a convenient battleground for the Sino-Japanese competition for influence as evidenced by Japan's persistence in leading calls to raise the SCS issue at the multilateral level [75]. At the 2014 Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe condemned China for changing the status quo in East Asia in his keynote address while US Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel denounced China for destabilizing the region with its irredentism. This prompted China's angry accusation that both the US and China were acting in tandem to target China, rather than promoting dialogue [76].

Xi's Emergence as a Political Strongman and China's Maritime Policy

Chinese attitude towards regional maritime issues has been evolving since 2005. China's 2005 National Defence White Paper noted that China should build a strong and modernized navy to protect its growing maritime interests. In 2008, former President Hu Jintao first pointed out that China must make a transition from being a land power to being a maritime power. In November 2012, China made a major announcement regarding the inclusion of a maritime strategy at the 18th National Congress of the CCP. The slogan of "building a maritime power" has appeared in the 18th Party Congress report and numerous other policy documents [77–79].

This new maritime strategy covers the following aspects: (1) formulating an effective control, management and protection of previously neglected maritime domain, particularly the ECS and SCS; (2) exerting significant influence on regional and international maritime regulations and practices with assertive maritime diplomacy; (3) becoming a powerful maritime economy through effective use of maritime resources within and outside of China's sovereign space [80]. Following Xi's inauguration in March 2013, China unveiled a series of maritime institutional reforms. The pace at which efforts taken to realise China's maritime aspirations and to re-establish effective control over previously neglected maritime space is unprecedented.

Some Sinologists doubt that China has a well-developed foreign policy and suggest that China is being reactively assertive in its SCS policy [81–83]. They see Beijing's actions as a knee-jerk response to perceived provocations from neighbouring states. The prevailing view was that China was prepared to shelve maritime territorial disputes and maintain an ill-defined status quo. China's recent moves in the ECS and SCS—various military deployments, policy proclamations, provocative naval maneuvers and rhetorical stridency—pose serious challenges for how analysts have traditionally perceived China and its foreign policy pursuits.

China's moves in the ECS and SCS over the past 18 months show that Xi's China seems to be increasingly acting of its own volition. On 5 December 2013, a US guided missile cruiser, USS Cowpens was forced to take evasive action to avoid a collision with a Chinese warship maneuvering nearby. It had been operating near China's only aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, at the time. This demonstrated the heightened tensions over China's military assertiveness and raised concerns of the potential of a minor incident in disputed maritime waters to escalate. In addition to the ECS ADIZ, the

PLAN's provocative naval maneuver against the USS Cowpens in December 2013 was interpreted as an intentional action by China to bend the rules in the SCS [84, 85].

In May 2014, China acted further on its own initiative to deploy its indigenous built oil rig, the *Haiyang Shiyou* 981 (HYSY-981), in the disputed Paracel Islands. While demonstrating China's ability to "go it alone" in terms of resource exploitation in the SCS, the deployment of over 100 escort vessels (including military ships) and scrambling of fighter jets to protect HYSY-981 against Vietnamese boats during the standoff was a carefully choreographed act to show Beijing's resolve in consolidating its irredentist claims. Analysts have pointed that there is a much more concerted intergovernmental co-ordination and collaboration with non-state actors during the standoff [86].

As the HYSY-981 standoff was heating up, the Philippines also released images of alleged Chinese land reclamation on the Johnson South Reef claimed by the Philippines in the Spratly archipelago on 15 May 2014. The images released by the Philippine Ministry of Foreign Affairs showed the progress of Chinese construction on the reef from 13 March 2012 to 11 March 2014 [87]. These allegedly premeditated gambits are seen as part of the salami-slicing strategy employed by Beijing to eliminate opposition "slice by slice", thereby resulting in "the slow accumulation of small actions, none of which is a casus belli, but which adds up over time to a major strategic change." [88] Some analysts have begun to see this as the emergence of a new grand strategy to enhance its national interests and defend its territorial interests [89, 90]. Here, we would like to further the debate by contending that China's recent moves is closely linked to the Xi's rising political fortunes as China's new strongman.

For starters, China has undoubtedly become more willing to show off its military might since Xi came to power. Xi is demonstrating his image as a strongman who is willing to take tough political and military action to protect China's interests. In order to foster this image, Xi has paid more attention to the military than his two predecessors. After becoming General Secretary and Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) in November 2012, Xi made frequent visits to military commands of land, navy and air forces to consolidate his power over the vast Chinese military organization. His inspection of the South Sea Fleet, along with his call for the navy to be prepared for "hardship" and "struggle" further underscored Beijing's goal of asserting itself as a maritime power in response to the US rebalancing strategies [91]. However, analysts have argued that although Xi is likely to take advice from the military, he has the final say over all decision-making [92]. For instance, Taylor Fravel and You Ji have argued that there is little evidence that the PLA escalated the SCS disputes against CCP leaders' wishes and that the PLA remains subordinate to the CCP through party mechanisms [93, 94].

In a recent article on China's evolving foreign policy under the new leadership, Professor and Dean of the Institute of Modern International Relations in Tsinghua University, Yan Xuetong pointed out that Xi has adjusted China's foreign policy from its traditional policy of keeping a low profile to the current one of striving for achievement. Although he did not pinpoint when this transition had begun, he argued that Xi had provided the necessary legitimization for it in three important documents published since he took office in March 2013 – Foreign Minister Wang Yi's speech at Tsinghua University's Second World Peace Forum in July, State Councilor Yang Jiechi's article in *Qiushi* (求实, Seeking Truth) in August and Xi's own speech at a foreign policy work conference in October [95].

Wang and Xi's speeches and Yang's article are regarded as important examples of the new leadership's foreign policy announcements made at two high-level events and in an influential periodical widely circulated among high-level party officials. Xi's speech at the foreign policy work conference was deemed crucial by Chinese analysts as it was the first of its kind in Chinese history, attended by the entire Politburo Standing Committee. It determined the strategic goals, basic guidelines, and overall direction of China's foreign policy towards neighboring countries for the next 5 to 10 years. More importantly, it clarified the ideas and implementation plans for resolving major diplomatic issues with China's East Asian neighbors. Yan also argued that Xi's foreign policy adjustment is appearing to be more effective than the traditional policy of keeping a low profile in shaping an environment favorable to China's rise [95].

Xi's personal role in foreign policy making is unmistakable. His predecessor, Hu Jintao, had a highly-institutionalised process for foreign policy making under state councillor Dai Bingguo. However, it is largely unclear who is directly involved in the decision-making process with Xi. Some analysts have identified a possible candidate as the influential director of the Central Policy Research Office, Wang Huning, who serves as a top adviser to Xi and the Politburo Standing Committee. It should be noted that Wang ranks above the two-tier foreign affairs establishment led by current State Councillor Yang Jiechi and Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

On the domestic front, observers have also noted signs that Xi is increasingly reversing the CCP's traditional collective leadership and consolidating his power as the master of China's neo-authoritarianism. In December 2013, Xi was named Chairman of a new CCP superagency, the Leading Group on the Comprehensive Deepening of Reform (LGCDR). In January, he became Chairman of the National Security Commission (NSC), which controls the Chinese police, intelligence and judicial systems. These developments mean that in addition to party, foreign and military affairs, Xi is in charge of the labyrinthine state-security and law-enforcement establishment.

A survey jointly done by the International Herald Leader and three prominent internet content providers in April 2009 revealed that as many as 90.4 % of the respondents were dissatisfied with the government's efforts in protecting China's maritime interests. When asked to identify the biggest threat to China's maritime security, 26.9 % of respondents said it was China's insufficient attention to maritime security, 32.4 % mentioned anti-China forces, 20.7 % referred to states with disputes with China [96].

In a survey conducted by *Global Times* in November 2010, over one-third of the respondents noted that they would support the use of force to resolve the territorial disputes [97]. Twenty days after the Sino-Philippines standoff over the Scarborough Shoal in April 2012, a *Global Times* survey found that nearly 80 % of the respondents supported military means in response to "provocations" and "aggressiveness" of other regional states in the SCS [98]. In another survey among urban residents in seven cities, the *Global Times* found that about 90 % of the respondents support adopting all necessary means, including the use of force, to protect the Diaoyu Islands [99].

Xi has kept up his political rhetoric on the "China dream" to cope with a society that is becoming even more devoid of ideology. There is concern that Xi's "China dream" political campaign might stir up a new surge of nationalist sentiment that has already been on the rise in the past few years [100]. Such political mobilization activities that

urge all Chinese people to subscribe to the “China dream” notion will certainly condition them to be more vigilant against the undesirable actions of regional states in territorial disputes.

Xi reigns supreme even in the realm of public discourse. Since he took over presidency in March 2013, there has been a systemic clamping down on professional and citizen journalism in China. This new and tightly restricted media environment has ensured that the Xi administration will have better control over public discourse on SCS and other sensitive issues. For instance, China Digital Times recently published a leaked set of censorship instructions handed down to the media by an unnamed Chinese government agency. The Chinese media was instructed to monitor and take down various inflammatory articles about sensitive issues in China. They also requested that the media find and stop the spread of news regarding the HYSY-981 standoff and the subsequent anti-China riots [101]. It should be noted that in this case, the media clamp down on the standoff and the riots was effective in tempering the domestic reactions.

Another example of Xi setting the public discourse is China’s maritime economic policy. This is evident in the current enthusiastic policy debate over the new Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century—an ambitious concept which he proposed when addressing the Indonesian Parliament in the October 2013. Recent interviews conducted at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce and round-table discussions with Chinese journalists and analysts between May–July 2014 have revealed increasing efforts from the central and provincial government levels to bring Xi’s concept to fruition.

By many accounts, Xi can be acknowledged as the most powerful Chinese leader at this stage of his tenure in comparison with any previous CCP leaders since Mao Zedong. Although these are still early days, Xi does appear to have a better grasp of the bureaucratic apparatuses for achieving what he wants to get done than his predecessor. Xi’s SCS policy is likely to remain hard line and this raises the possibility of incidences at sea escalating into a short but sharp conflict between China and the other claimant countries, particularly Vietnam and the Philippines.

Conclusion

Tensions and disputes in the SCS in recent years have significantly worsened the relations between China and some of its Southeast Asian neighbours. Notably, they have made many regional states more suspicious of China’s long-term strategic intentions in the Asia-Pacific. The volatile security situation in the region has also made other major players in regional security, such as the US, Japan, and India, more interventionist. All these indicate that a new era in the SCS issue has arrived, with skirmishes and disputes being a frequent and constant phenomenon. China’s new leader Xi is increasingly the factor behind this new reality.

Inside China, however, the mainstream view seems to be that the sources of these troubles lie in the collusion between Washington and other claimant states, not in China. The Chinese elite, and particularly the society, also strongly believes that China has been bullied by the smaller regional states in the past few years. The Chinese government has repeatedly stated that Beijing was simply responding to the “provocations” of other SCS claimant parties. This discourse has had a powerful impact on

China's behaviour in the dispute. China's over-reactions to some unilateral steps by regional states and in many cases, assertive actions of its own—have all been perceived by the Chinese themselves as rightful protection of China's legitimate maritime interests. The prevalence of this mindset within the Chinese foreign policy community certainly is unlikely to prompt the decision makers in Beijing to seriously reflect and reconsider their SCS policy.

This new foreign policy environment in China that is likely to sustain China's assertive posture and policy in the SCS dispute. The growth of Chinese power, rising nationalism, the national aspiration of transforming China into a maritime power, the emergence of Xi as the Chinese strongman and his inclination towards heavy-handedness favours a tough policy line in the SCS disputes, mean that the possibility for a military conflict with other claimant countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines has increased. Thankfully, Chinese decision makers are still well aware that there is a conspicuous gap in military power and strategic influence between China and the US in the Asia-Pacific region, which would make harder for China to unilaterally pursue its own national security interests while undermining American security role in the region.

Beijing may also very well understand that it will still need positive economic ties with neighboring countries, including those claimant states in the SCS dispute, for China's sustained domestic prosperity. Because of these considerations, China may be wise enough not to act too aggressively. But given what has happened in the SCS in the past few years and the new political realities in regional states and China, it is probably safe to conclude that Beijing is at least likely to maintain the same level of assertiveness in the dispute as it has demonstrated in the recent years.

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Irene Chan is a senior research analyst with the China Programme in the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. She received her Master of Science in Asian Studies from RSIS. Her research interests are Chinese foreign policy, China-ASEAN and China-US relations, regional security and China's territorial disputes in East Asia.

Dr Li Mingjiang is an Associate Professor at RSIS. He is also the Coordinator of the RSIS China Program. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Boston University. His main research interests include China's diplomatic history, Sino-U.S. relations, Asia-Pacific security, and domestic sources of Chinese foreign policy. He is the author (including editor and co-editor) of nine books. His recent books are *Mao's China and the Sino-Soviet Split* (Routledge, 2012) and *Soft Power: China's Emerging Strategy in International Politics* (Lexington-Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).