

# Assessing China's Practice of Peaceful Development and Peaceful Coexistence: China's Behaviours towards the South China Sea Dispute

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## Abstract

China has long been known for its adherence to cultural and philosophical value in its foreign policy which becomes a guideline to pursue its interest in international relations. However, as China is rising both in economic and military power, it has a challenge with various international issues including territorial disputes with some countries. One of territorial dispute which is vital in China's national interest is the South China Sea dispute because this area is rich with gas and oil reserves to support China's industries. Examining China's policy in the South China Sea is essential as this maritime dispute becomes Beijing's core interest in recent decades and becomes a source of sovereignty and economic contestation. This study aims to assess whether China is consistent with its foreign policy guideline, peaceful coexistence and peaceful development, in its policy towards the South China Sea dispute. The structure of this paper is as follows. It will begin by briefly explaining the peaceful approach in China's foreign policy then it will highlight China's foreign policy in the South China Sea as a study case. Finally, it will examine whether China's foreign policy contradicts with peaceful coexistence and peaceful development principles in the South China Sea. This study found that the objective of China's foreign policy guideline is it would never become a threat to others even if it is getting stronger. Meanwhile, China's behaviors in the South China Sea threaten other states, so there is an inconsistency with peaceful coexistence and peaceful development principles.

**Keywords:** China, Foreign Policy, Peaceful Coexistence, Peaceful Development, South China Sea Dispute

## Introduction

China has long been known for its adherence to cultural and philosophical value in its foreign policy which becomes a guideline to pursue its interest in international relations. However, as China is rising both in economic and military power, it has challenges with various domestic and international issues including territorial disputes with some countries.

Therefore, it is critical to assess the way China apply the values of Confucianism in dealing with its sovereignty dispute. One of territorial dispute which is vital in China's national interest is the South China Sea dispute. China claims almost the entire of the South China Sea. Other states involving in this dispute are Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam. As China is growing in its economy, many scholars argue that the South China Sea is vital for China because this area is rich with gas and oil reserves to support China's industries. Moreover, this disputed area also important for international shipping. Therefore, the South China Sea becomes a source of sovereignty and economic contestation which tests China's foreign policy.

This study aims to assess whether China is consistent with its foreign policy guideline, peaceful coexistence and peaceful development, in its policy in the South China Sea dispute. Examine China's policy in the South China Sea is essential as this maritime dispute becomes Beijing's core interest in recent decades. The structure of this paper is as follows. It will begin by briefly explaining the peaceful approach in China's foreign policy then it will highlight China's foreign policy in the South China Sea as a study case. Finally, it will examine whether China's foreign policy contradicts with peaceful coexistence and peaceful development in the South China Sea. It is argued that there is an inconsistency with peaceful coexistence and peaceful development principles in China's behaviors in the South China Sea as it threatens other states while objective China's foreign policy guideline that it would never become a threat to others even if it is getting stronger.

### **A Brief of Peaceful Approach in China's Foreign Policy**

Most scholars argue that China's strategic belief is strongly influenced by its culture and traditions (Feng, 2007, p. 17; Nordin, 2016, p. 17; Harris, 2014, p.5). Apart from this, Confucianism is one of the philosophical thoughts that influenced the institutional and spiritual of China such as education system, military affairs, societal relations and relationship with other countries (Feng, 2007, p.18). The idea of Confucianism believes in the harmony of life and peace (Feng, 2012, p. 47). This idea indicates that China prefers a defensive strategy in nature instead of pursuing an offensive strategy.

In line with the values of Confucianism, China's foreign policy also adhere to the principles of peaceful coexistence. This principle was first advocated in the 1950s at the Non-Aligned Movement summit in Bandung, Indonesia by the Prime Zhou Enlai under Mao Zedong administration (Odgaard, 2017). It consisted of five principles: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; mutual Non-Aggression; Non-Interference in each other's international affairs; Equality and mutual benefits; Peaceful Coexistence (Kornberg & Faust, 2005). Although the Bandung conference's final communiqué resulted in 'Ten Principles', it accepted those five principles whereas Zhou Enlai (as cited in FMPRC, 2006) considered it as "an extension and development of the five principles of peaceful co-existence". Following this, most studies convince that peaceful coexistence principles become Beijing's standard and guideline to pursue its interests in International relations with other states (Kornberg & Faust, 2005, p.14; Nordin, 2016, p. 18). Moreover, Deng Xiaoping (1985) insisted in his work that "not only I but also other Chinese leaders, including the late Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai, have stated on many occasions that China desires peace more than anything else". This explanation implies that Chinese leaders always try to convince the world that it is never seeking for hegemony and practice a peaceful means in its international behavior.

Furthermore, peaceful coexistence becomes a foundation of China's concept of 'peaceful rise' and 'peaceful development' which were seriously discussed by Chinese leadership in the early 2000s. Some scholars state that the term 'peaceful rise' was introduced at Boao Forum in 2003 in Zeng Beijan's speech entitled *The New Road of China's Peaceful Rise and the Future of Asia* (Zhao, 2010; Guoli, 2008). Some analysts claim that the term rise may lead to the perception that China is a threat (Zhao, 2010; Guoli, 2008). Therefore, Hu Jintao changed the term 'rise' to 'Peaceful development' in his speech at Boao Conference in April 2004. Hu Jintao (2004) insists in his speech said that "China would follow a peaceful development path holding the banners of peace, development and cooperation, joining the other Asian countries in bringing about Asian rejuvenation and making a greater contribution to the lofty cause of peace and development in the world". Nevertheless, the term peaceful rise is still used in some publications about China. Scholars agree that peaceful development concept is deeply rooted in the values of Confucianism which implies that China's international strategy is less confrontational and avoiding hegemony (Odgaard, 2017; Nordin, 2016). The concept of Peaceful Development then realised in China's 2005 white paper entitled *China's Peaceful Development Road*, which emphasises the harmonious world, cooperation, peace, and win-win (The Central People's Government of The People Republic of China, 2005). One sentence which is very interesting is "China did not seek hegemony in the past, nor does it now, and will not do so in the future when it gets stronger. China's development will not pose a threat to anyone" (The Central People's Government of The People Republic of China, 2005). In this sense, by promoting the term 'Peaceful development', China has invested public diplomacy and built an image as a responsible power and loving peace.

Feng (2012, p.5) argues that to comprehend China's behaviour in international politics, we may not ignore the characteristics of individual leaders during a different time of period. The influence of major Chinese leaders such as Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping and the stimulation of philosophical Confucianism could not also be undermined even today. Unlike Deng Xiaoping who pursues low profile foreign policy, some researchers claim that the current Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, chooses to undertake more proactive foreign policy. However, the peaceful coexistence principles are still included as a guideline in his foreign policy. Xi Jinping (as cited in Delisle & Goldstein, 2017, p.172) stated in his speech that "We will keep walking on the peaceful development road, but we must not forsake our legitimate rights and interests, must not sacrifice core national interests". Zhang (2015, p.9) argues that Xi Jinping's speech indicates there is conditionality in prioritizing peaceful development principles. This statement implies that Xi Jinping tries to move slightly from his predecessor emphasizing the importance of safeguarding China's core national interest such as those in its territorial conflicts.

From above explanation, it can be understood that after decades, China's approach in its foreign policy always uses a peaceful term. However, the endeavours of Chinese leadership in convincing the world that "it would never seek for hegemon and would never become threat other states" are still vulnerable to criticism. Nevertheless, while China is now considered as a rising power and promising peaceful coexistence, it is facing regional challenges with its neighbouring states. Among them is the South China Sea dispute where little progress has been made. So, it is now essential to see one empirical study case to examine whether China consistently practices the peaceful coexistence principles in its foreign policy. Therefore, the next section of this paper would analyse China's policy towards the territorial conflict of the South China Sea.

### China's Policy towards the South China Sea Dispute

While China is considered as a rising power in recent decades, it still has territorial disputes with four South East Asian Countries in the South China Sea. The Sovereignty dispute with Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei Darussalam, and Malaysia could not achieve any resolution until now. Taiwan is also a claimant in this case, but this paper does not consider it as a core actor because its status is still not an independent country from the People Republic of China. Recently, China and ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) have concluded the framework of Code of Conduct (CoC) on the South China Sea, but it still far from expected to gain peace in the disputed area. Some scholars claim that this conflict is potentially harming China's relations with South East Asian states. This section intends to trash back how China deals with the South China Sea.

In analysing the South China Sea dispute, we can begin by looking at the history in 1914 when Chinese Cartographers made a map of China's territory which covered almost the entire area of the South China Sea (Hong, 2013). Some studies note that in 1947, Chinese Government released an eleven-dash line map to indicate its claim over the South China Sea which two dashes line are erased in 1953 and revised into a nine-dash line (Gao & Jia, 2013; Malczewska, 2015; Zheng, 2015). The map which included the nine-dash line was continued to be issued by the Government of the People Republic of China as an official map and considered their claim in the South China Sea as *indisputable water* (Hong, 2013). Scholars agreed that before the publication of 1970s report on the potential natural resources in the South China Sea and The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) this disputed area was not considered as vital by some claimants (Zheng, 2015; Beckman, 2014). UNCLOS gives the right to every state to claim 200 nautical miles from its territory as EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone) which make states have an overlapping claim (Malczewska, 2015). As a result, UNCLOS and natural resources motivate other states to claim some area of the South China Sea.

The areas claimed by the disputants overlapping each other. The core disputed area is around the Spratly islands which claimed by China, the Philippines, Vietnam and Brunei Darussalam. The foundation of China and Vietnam's claims are their historical approach while Brunei and Malaysia's are based on the EEZ rights (Weatherbee, 2005). Furthermore, the Philippines' refers to its discovery history and proximity. The second major disputed area is around Paracel islands which are contested by China and Vietnam, and another area is Scarborough Shoal conflicted by China and the Philippines (Djalal, 2014). Some direct military clashes had happened in the disputed areas prominently by China, Vietnam, the Philippine and Malaysia (Majumdar, 2015). Interestingly, China also ratifies this convention and admit the right of EEZ, but China's government argues that UNCLOS cannot be applied to resolve the South China Sea because this conflict occurred before the ratification of UNCLOS (Zheng, 2015). This condition implies that UNCLOS is still difficult to use as justification to resolve the South China Sea Dispute.

In 1992, China realised *Law on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone of the People Republic of China* to emphasise its claim on almost the entire area of the South China Sea. This law was responded by ASEAN member states by having *1992 Declaration on the South China Sea* which highlighting the need for resolving this conflict "by peaceful means without using force" (ASEAN, 1992). Weatherbee (2005, p. 136) argues that this condition indicates that ASEAN claimants see this conflict with regional eyes. However, China would only adopt a bilateral approach in resolving this dispute instead of multilaterally under ASEAN (Fravel, 2014). Therefore, on behalf of China's government, Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, rejected to

associate in that declaration but it agrees to practice peaceful settlement in resolving the conflict (Severino, 2014). However, the disputants continued to use force in the conflicted area including China. For example, in 1995 China's occupation of Mischief Reef and 1997 invasion of Scarborough Reef which were considered as a direct attack on the Philippines's territory (Majumdar, 2015). The Philippine became a soft target of China at that time because it is considered having weak naval capabilities (Weatherbee, 2005). Considering the conditions where the 1992 declaration was not effective, ASEAN agreed to formulate a document Code of Conduct (CoC) on the South China Sea which the draft concluded in 1999 (Majumdar, 2015). However, China rejected that draft because it contained a resolution how to settle the conflict while China disagreed to resolve the dispute in a multilateral basis (Buszynski, 2003). After going through long negotiations, the draft finally adopted in 2002 as a declaration instead of a code. This declaration is emphasising the commitment to peaceful settlement, self-restraint, functional cooperation and consultation (ASEAN, 1992). So, the objectives of the *2002 Declaration of Conduct (DoC)* on the South China Sea are a voluntary action, and it has no binding power.

Furthermore, a period of 2002-2009, was a quiet phase in the south China Sea which there was no significant conflict among the parties (Sinaga, 2015). Nevertheless, as the 2002 DOC of Parties in the South China Sea is not legally binding, this measure has been ignored particularly by China then it referred the South China Sea as one of its major interest (Lanteigne, 2013). In 2010, Chinese government asserted that the South China Sea becomes one of Beijing's core interests (*hexin liyi*) which indicates that China intends to push its claim in that area (Lanteigne, 2013). It is reported in many media that China built seven reclamation islands which some of them host harbours, missiles, and radar (Pomfret & Morales, 2017; Goedecke, 2016). Many researchers convince that in last couple of years China is more assertive by increasing its navy's presence in the South China Sea (Weatherbee, 2005; Majumdar, 2015; Yahuda, 2013). Yahuda (2013, p.452) highlights that Chinese military budget is three times bigger than combined all ten ASEAN member states' budget. China's maritime power developed massively, and currently, China has around 71 submarines, 78 Combat Ships, 211 patrol and coastal combatants, 87 ambitious landing ships and other advanced military equipment (Yahuda, 2013). Moreover, China builds a nuclear submarine at Sanya, and it is homing Liaoning aircraft carrier and advanced weapons (Majumdar, 2015). This submarine also functions to restrict any fishing activity done by other states (such as Vietnam and the Philippines) and surveys or oil exploration conducted by foreign vessels (Majumdar, 2015). Therefore, the rapid development of China's military capacity allows it to increase its presence and expansion in the disputed area.

Other claimants also increase their military capability but not as massive as China. Realizing the lack of military capabilities that they have, some littoral states, the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia, welcome the presence of the United States as a hedge or to counterbalance China's military power (Sinaga, 2015). This condition is in line with the US' foreign policy during Obama administration, *Pivot to Asia*. As a result, although the US is not a claimant but its involvement in the south China sea to help its allies made China unhappy. Furthermore, It is important to look the way China counters other claimants that try to occupy the disputed areas. When Philippine's navy discovered Chinese Boats in April 2012 around the *Huangyan islands* or Scarborough Shoal, China responded by launching some measures including sending its stronger maritime vessels to that area (Pan, 2013). As a result, it took back the control of Scarborough Shoal and left a rope to symbolise its permanent control over the Islands. Another case to consider was when Vietnam released its new maritime law, China

unprecedentedly launched its new prefectural administration covering Spratly, Paracel and Macclesfield Bank Islands and increased the frequency of its surveillance ships patrolling the conflicted areas (Pan, 2013).

While China is increasing its control over the disputed areas, it is continuing the negotiation with ASEAN in concluding the framework of Code of Conduct on the South China Sea without giving up in its stance to resolve that conflict peacefully in bilateral basis. The good news in this case is that China still shows its willingness to negotiate with ASEAN as regional organization although it wants to resolve the South China Sea dispute bilaterally without having another party in the process. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang (as cited in Pomfret & Morales, 2017) stated in the 20th ASEAN plus Three Commemorative Summit in Manila on November 14 that "China's greatest hope is for peace and stability in the South China Sea". The COC has not been signed, but ASEAN member states and China have concluded the framework in August 2017. It means that there is an ambiguity in China's behavior the South China Sea as it promises peaceful settlement in some occasions but also continuing its assertiveness as well.

This section has provided analysis of China's policy towards the South China Sea dispute. It is comprehended that China is like promising a peaceful settlement which in line with its peaceful coexistence principles, but the big question is, why does China continue establishing a military basis in the disputed areas, exploring the resources and sometimes involving in direct clashes with other claimants? Therefore, the next part of this paper would examine whether Chinese foreign policy in the South China Sea is still consistent with its peaceful principles or not.

### **Does China's Behaviour in the South China Sea follow Peaceful Approach?**

The increasing assertiveness of China's behaviour in the south China sea undoubtedly leads to the perception of other claimants that it intends to take over the control the entire of the South China Sea. This section is designed to test China's peaceful development and peaceful approach in its foreign policy towards the South China Sea Dispute.

There is a perception among scholars that the increasing assertiveness of China in the South China Sea is a form active defensive behaviour. As mentioned previously that China's strategic behaviour is defensive in nature which has been inherited from Confucianism values (Feng, 2007). China's strategy in the early stage of South China Sea Conflict management, which pursued "low profile" foreign policy was considered less effective (Lanteigne, 2013). So, in recent decades, beginning in 2010, China is prioritising its national interest in the South China Sea by declaring that the South China Sea is one of China's core interest (Lanteigne, 2013). This mission is reaffirmed by Xi Jinping (as cited in Delisle & Goldstein, 2017, p.172) in his speech that "We will keep walking on the peaceful development road, but we must not forsake our legitimate rights and interests, must not sacrifice core national interests". Unprecedentedly, in 2012 take over the control the Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines with its stronger military capabilities. Moreover, there are others incidents, and China is continuing to increase its military base in the South China Sea.

However, this strategy leads to the reemergence of "China Threat" perception which was tried to be eluded particularly in the early 2000s. Increasing China's presence in the South China Sea by establishing a military base, submarines, reclamation, regularly patrolling the disputed area, and restricting any fishing and research activities are likely to destabilise the region's stability, particularly with the ASEAN member states. China's maritime conflicts with four ASEAN member states increases the anxiety of other states because it became a

flashpoint that could harm the stability of the region and it could bring negative effects to the international shipping lanes (Kim, 2015). For instance, although Indonesia is not a claimant, in this case, it worried about China's patrols near Natuna Islands, Indonesia's EEZ (Daniels, 2013). Therefore, it could be argued that China has inconsistent with its foreign policy guideline namely peaceful coexistence and the peaceful development.

Considering the explanation in the previous part of this paper, it could be argued that during the 1990s until early 2000s, China acted to moderate the conflict with ASEAN by agreeing to practice peaceful settlement stop using force after the ASEAN member states' Declaration on the South China Sea in 1992. Furthermore, associating itself in the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct on the South China Sea drove a temporary peace which was remarked by the absence of significant tension in the disputed water (Sinaga, 2015). However, this trend did not continue to happen so this paper noted that there is a shifting behaviour in China's foreign policy towards the South China Sea dispute which slightly inconsistent with the principle of the peaceful development and peaceful coexistence. It is clearly explained in the first part of this paper that the objective of China's foreign policy, which rooted from Confucianism values, written in its white paper is not to become a threat for other states and not seeking for hegemony even if it is getting stronger (Odgaard, 2017; Nordin, 2016). Therefore, it proves the argument in the first part of this paper that in case of China's foreign there is conditionality in China's foreign policy to prioritise peaceful development approach in its foreign policy.

A further question is if China is increasing its assertiveness in the South China Sea and does not give up in its stance that this conflict should not be resolved in multilateral basis, why does China involve in the negotiation of COC with ASEAN member states until this year? Yahuda (2013, p.449) claims that the willingness of China to Join the discussion with ASEAN to formulate a COC which would have more power and legally binding than the 2002 Declaration due to its intention to limit The United States' involvement in the south China Sea dispute. It could be argued that if the United states elude its presence in the South China Sea Dispute, the other claimants would not have military ties to counterweight China's military power, which far greater than other claimants'. Another thing to consider is that according to Darby & Ginty (2000, p.7-8) one of five general principles of the peace process is that the actors should restraint itself in using force while they are in the process of negotiations. Therefore, if the actors, particularly China with its powerful navy is continuing to build its military base, reclamation, patrol, and increase its modern military tools then in some occasions catch other states' ships in the South China Sea, a peaceful settlement is difficult in the near future. This is due to one of the requirements of the peace process is not fulfilled.

## **Conclusion**

This study has explained how peaceful approach is used in China's foreign policy guideline. China's foreign policy cannot be separated from its cultural tradition value such as Confucianism. This value is inherited in China's foreign policy which has influenced China's concept of peaceful Coexistence and peaceful development which are used as China's guideline in pursuing its interest in international relations. One case that China's behaviours indicate ambiguity is its policies in the South China Sea which are disputed by China and four ASEAN member states. While China keeps in its stand to resolve the conflict in bilateral basis, it is continuing the negotiations to formulate COC with ASEAN and increasing its military capability in the disputed area at the same time. Moreover, on some occasions, China promises a peaceful settlement. Therefore, this study found that there is inconsistency in China's behavior to follow the peaceful development and peaceful coexistence in its policy

towards the South China Sea Dispute. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, China became more aggressive than before by increasing its military power and presence in the disputed area which threatens other states. This strategy also leads to the perception of China Threat. Moreover, while it is still in its stance to resolve the conflict in multilateral basis, the willingness of China joining the discussion with ASEAN to formulate COC on the South China Sea, which would have more power than DOC, is because there is an intention to limit the involvement of the US as balancing to China's power. As a result, this strategy would weaken other claimants' position and power. Therefore, considering the effect of China's policy in the South China Sea, it is argued that China's foreign policy contradicts with the principle of peaceful development and peaceful coexistence.

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