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China's (mostly) soft imperialism

Ted Galen Carpenter - Asian Waves - 28/2/2011

Chinese leaders repeatedly assure other nations that they have nothing to fear from China's "peaceful rise"—its emergence as a major economic and diplomatic player on the global stage. There are indications, however, that China's increasing economic strength is translating into applications of influence and power that are less benign than Beijing would have the world believe. At the moment, it more often constitutes soft imperialism than the hardcore variety, but it is imperialism nonetheless.

There are also mounting signs that other nations in the international system, especially China's neighbors, do not entirely believe Beijing's assurances of benevolent intent. Those nations are taking steps to hedge their bets in case China's peaceful rise does not turn out to be all that peaceful.

Manifestations of Beijing's growing clout can be found nearly everywhere, but they are most evident throughout East and South Asia. President Obama discovered that China's rapidly expanding economic links with the ASEAN nations, Australia, and South Korea had important, and not entirely welcome, diplomatic implications for the United States. During his visit to the region in November, the President found that even a long-standing US ally like South Korea was cool to any policy proposal that Seoul worried might attract Beijing's displeasure. That caution was prominent despite Seoul's own annoyance at China's refusal to back punitive measures against North Korea following the sinking of a South Korean naval vessel and the subsequent shelling of a South Korean island.

Obama encountered similar wariness in Indonesia and India. There seemed to be a pervasive attitude among the governing elites in those countries that China's power was waxing and America's was waning, and that the need to avoid antagonizing Beijing, therefore, had become a foreign policy imperative.

Sometimes, China's displays of strength are fairly subtle, as with the various agreements on trade and investment with the ASEAN countries. Such accords are beneficial to both parties, but the provisions seem increasingly to be on Beijing's terms. Likewise, the recent agreement that ended China's border dispute with Tajikistan, a spat that went back to the days of the Soviet Union, was not totally one-sided. But it did give Beijing sovereignty over some 1,000 square kilometers of land that had been part of the USSR and that Tajikistan had controlled since independence in 1991—territory that might well contain important oil and natural gas reserves. It was clear to Tajik authorities that expansion (and perhaps even preservation) of crucial economic ties to China was contingent on making the territorial concession.

China's handling of the border controversy with Tajikistan, though, was a model of quiet

diplomacy compared to its dealings with India and Japan on such matters. Beijing is utterly intransigent regarding the disputed border with India that led to a nasty armed conflict in 1962. A small, but telling, incident occurred in January when the Indian government protested China's issuance of separate visas to Indian nationals living in the northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh—territory that China claims as its own. Beijing brusquely dismissed the protest about its brazen practice and reiterated its claim to the disputed land.

China's hard-line position on territorial controversies was even more evident during the autumn of 2010 with respect to Japan. An incident flared in September when a Chinese fishing trawler apparently rammed two Japanese coast guard vessels in waters near some uninhabited islets (called the Senkakus in Japan and the Diaoyus in China).

The Japanese responded by taking the captain and crew—and the boat—into custody.

What should have been a relatively minor diplomatic problem escalated dramatically when Chinese leaders responded with shrill denunciations and countenanced violent anti-Japanese demonstrations in several cities. Tokyo sought to dampen tensions by releasing the crew, but Beijing seemed to go out of its way to try to humiliate the Japanese government, demanding both a formal apology and compensation.

Abrasive style was not the only part of China's behavior in that episode that worried Japan and other East Asian neighbors. Equally bad was the uncompromising nature of Beijing's position regarding the disputed territorial waters. Chinese officials acted as though there could be no question about the validity of even their most expansive demands. That posture was also apparent regarding China's long-standing territorial claims in the South China Sea. If taken seriously, Beijing's stance would give China control over a vast region of what are currently considered international waters.

The scope of China's claims has alarmed not only Vietnam, the Philippines, and other countries in the area that have their own, more limited, claims, but it worries the United States, the world's leading maritime power. Washington regards the protection of the sea lanes through those waters as an important US economic and national security interest. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made that point very clear during a speech to an ASEAN conference in July.

China's willingness to flex its diplomatic and military muscles has not gone unnoticed by its neighbors or the United States. It was probably not a coincidence that Tokyo and Seoul decided to bury the animosity that has existed since Japan's harsh colonial rule over the peninsula in the early twentieth century and approve an unprecedented degree of bilateral security cooperation. That decision occurred within weeks of Beijing's bullying behavior toward Tokyo. The conventional wisdom is that the rapprochement between Japan and the ROK reflects the worries that both countries harbor about North Korea. That factor undoubtedly plays a role, perhaps even the leading role, but mutual concern about China's power is also a relevant consideration.

Another indicator that Beijing's neighbors are uneasy about China's rise is the steps they are taking regarding their own military postures. Even Taiwan, which is currently governed by the Sinophilic Kuomintang Party of President Ma Ying-jeou, has placed a request to purchase more arms from the United States. Ma stressed that while Taiwan wants extensive ties with the mainland, Taipei must “negotiate from a position of strength.”

Other East Asian countries are building up their military forces as well, at least partly to counterbalance China's power. Most telling, they are concentrating their weapons purchases on air and naval systems—precisely the forces most relevant to dealing with any Chinese threat that might emerge.

China is acting the way most other rising great powers in history have behaved—asserting greater influence throughout its region and pressing weaker states to make concessions. There is nothing surprising in this. And neighboring states are also following the historical pattern, trying to accommodate that rising power, but also hedging and attempting to strengthen their ability to protect their core national interests. The key question is how China will respond to such resistance to its soft imperialism.

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[3] <http://www.aspeninstitute.it/aspenia-online/article/perché-la-valuta-cinese-non-è-pronta-sostituire-il-dollaro>

[4] <http://www.aspeninstitute.it/aspenia-online/article/come-la-cina-è-diventata-il-motore-dell'economia-tedesca>

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