

## Beijing's New Charm Offensive

By Ted Carpenter

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After years of pursuing hard-line policies toward many of its East Asian neighbors, China has shown signs in recent months of embracing a more conciliatory approach. One clear indicator was Beijing's decision to withdraw a controversial oil drilling rig in disputed waters near the Vietnam coast. At the same time, Chinese officials adopted a decidedly less confrontational tone toward Hanoi regarding the broader territorial disputes between the two countries in the South China Sea. Instead of emphasizing China's alleged historical and legal rights to widespread swaths in that body of water, Beijing stated that such bilateral controversies can and should be addressed through concerted diplomacy.

Hanoi is not the only recipient of such conciliatory gestures. Xi Jinping's government has conducted a noticeable charm offensive toward South Korea. Just a few years ago, Beijing continued to support its communist North Korean ally without much criticism. That stance even included countenancing Pyongyang's aggressive policy toward its southern neighbor—a point that became all too apparent in March 2010 when the Chinese government declined to condemn North Korea's sinking of the South Korean naval vessel Cheonan. Frictions also surfaced in late 2013 after Beijing proclaimed an air defense identification zone between the Chinese mainland and both Japan and South Korea. Seoul joined with Washington and Tokyo in strongly condemning that move as an unacceptable attempt to interfere with air travel rights.

China's actions toward South Korea have been markedly different in 2014. Beijing has taken steps to distance its policies from those of Pyongyang, including issuing thinly veiled warnings to Kim Jong-un's regime not to disturb the peace and stability of East Asia. Xi followed those steps with a summit visit to Seoul, in which he emphasized the mutual benefits of closer political and economic ties between China and South Korea. Highlighting the courtship of Seoul, Xi ostentatiously snubbed Kim Jong-un's government by declining to stop in Pyongyang either before or after his journey to Seoul.

Beijing has even put out cautious feelers to India and Japan for better relations. Chinese officials recently stressed that there was no need for a crisis involving the long-disputed border with India—a flashpoint that exploded into a full-fledged war in 1962. Xi’s government also dialed back its confrontational policy toward Tokyo, stressing the importance of continued economic links between the two countries.

The general tone of China’s foreign policy is noticeably less strident and confrontational than it was just a year ago. True, not all capitals have received equal measures of Chinese conciliation. For example, Beijing has shown little willingness to compromise with Manila regarding their territorial dispute involving the South China Sea. And the Chinese government’s stance toward Taiwan even seems to have hardened slightly in recent months. Still, there is little doubt that Beijing’s overall approach to its neighbors is now less abrasive.

It is not entirely clear why such a course correction has taken place, much less why it has done so at this time. There appear to be two possible explanations.

One is that Beijing is simply continuing a long-term strategy of alternating periods of assertiveness with periods of accommodation. We have certainly seen such patterns before. In its policy toward Taiwan, for example, the Chinese government pursued a highly confrontational, uncompromising approach from the communist revolution in 1949 until the late 1980s. A more conciliatory policy then emerged in the early 1990s. During that period, Chinese and Taiwanese negotiators came up with the formula that while both sides agreed there was only one China, they had different interpretations of what that concept meant. The period of cautious accommodation ended abruptly in 1995, when in response to signs of rising pro-independence sentiment on the island, Beijing repeatedly conducted provocative naval exercises in the Taiwan Strait and issued pointed warnings that it reserved the right to use military force if such “splitist” behavior continued. That hard-line stance continued throughout the administration of Taiwanese leader Chen Shui-bian, but a new period of conciliation emerged in 2008 in response to the election of the more pro-mainland Ma Ying-jeou as Chen’s successor.

Although Beijing’s current, softer approach in East Asia may just reflect a similar, “cyclical” policy dynamic, there is another possibility. Chinese leaders may have calculated that they overreached with their highly assertive actions, especially those regarding the South China Sea and East China Sea, during the previous four or five years. There were ample signs of blowback against that policy. Not only did the United States announce a “rebalancing” of its military forces to the western Pacific, but Washington worked assiduously to draw East Asian nations into a de

facto containment policy directed against China. Such nations as Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam responded favorably to the U.S. moves, and there were even indications of greater security cooperation among various regional powers. China's nemesis, Japan, was often at the center of such initiatives, playing a much more active security role than at any time since the end of World War II.

China has every incentive to try to disrupt a possible web of informal alliances designed to constrain its power. The charm offensive should be viewed in that larger context. The key question, though, is whether Beijing's recent enthusiasm for more cooperative diplomacy merely reflects a short-term tactical shift or a long-term prudent adjustment. The primary argument for the former interpretation is that, as much as China's leaders are no longer communist in terms of economic policy, they remain committed Leninists when it comes to political strategy. One important Leninist maxim is that if one plunges in a bayonet and encounters soft resistance, continue to press, but if one encounters steel, pull back. Chinese leaders may have concluded that their previous initiatives had encountered steel from the United States and a growing roster of both formal and informal U.S. allies. However, it is also possible that those leaders concluded that the ongoing, ultra-assertive approach was counterproductive, and that if China wanted to preserve peace and continue to enjoy the vast economic benefits of being part of the global community, a permanent policy shift was required.

We may not have a definitive answer about the reasons for Beijing's charm offensive for years. The early signs, though, are at least marginally encouraging. The United States and its allies should be careful to respond favorably to China's more accommodating policy and not needlessly press Beijing or create renewed tensions.

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