

Analyzing Beijing's Signals—Things to Consider

Beijing's traditional calculus of threat and retaliation statements remains a critical tool in its array of foreign policy and security instruments in responding to and managing tensions and disputes in which it engages. Analysts seeking to assess its use in contemporary contexts, however, must take into consideration several points that bear on its interpretation.

First, due account must be taken of the fact that PRC media have evolved dramatically. Commentary formats come and go, including those that are authoritative. *People's Daily* editorial department articles—long the most authoritative format in the party's newspaper—have disappeared, and “observer” articles have become exceedingly rare. Editorials and commentator articles remain reliable indicators of authoritative commentary in *People's Daily*, but analysts must remain aware of the ongoing evolution in media practices.

Second, much of the vocabulary employed in China's warnings calculus is not unique to authoritative commentary and may be found in low-level commentary that does not speak authoritatively for the regime, as authoritative commentary does. Warnings to “rein in before the brink of the precipice,” not to “turn a deaf ear,” to “make a correct assessment,” or that Beijing cannot “stand idly by” frequently occur in low-level, nonauthoritative comment. Such warnings may be regarded as low-level expressions of Beijing's concern about a situation, but they do not carry the weight of the same themes expressed in authoritative commentary. It is the authority of the source, not the themes themselves, that merits attention.

Third, as China's engagement with the world has advanced over the past four decades, the foreign and security policy institutions and the instruments available to Beijing to shape pursuit of its interests have proliferated. This means that the range of institutions and voices that may respond with some authority in any international dispute has broadened correspondingly. In the 1950s and 1960s, when the People's Republic was recognized by a small minority of countries in the international order, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was an underdeveloped mechanism for engaging China's interest through ordinary state-to-state diplomacy, while the party's International Liaison Department (ILD) served as a primary mechanism in international affairs, especially with fraternal Soviet bloc states and foreign communist parties and revolutionary movements. Since Beijing's admission to the United Nations in 1971 and as the PRC was increasingly recognized diplomatically, the ILD receded in significance and took on new foreign relations tasks.

In addition, as Beijing's economic and military relationships have flourished abroad, new institutions and sub-bureaucracies now take part in Chinese foreign policy. The consequence of this proliferation of actors and instruments has been to deepen the hierarchy on institutional

authority. It also adds to the sophistication of Beijing's means to respond to an international dispute. When the National People's Congress (NPC) Foreign Relations Committee protests a U.S. congressional resolution on a Taiwan issue, its statement should not be discounted, because the NPC is really an instrument of policy made in the party, the real seat of power. It should be seen instead as Beijing's use of the corresponding institution by protocol in responding to the specific source on the U.S. side, and so be taken with due regard for its authority, not its actual power and policy influence within the Chinese system.

Conclusion—A Hypothetical South China Sea Signaling Scenario

Nothing would be more destructive of Sino-American relations and Asia's security dynamics than a decision by China to threaten a military confrontation in order to change a U.S. course of action Beijing perceived as threatening its interests in the South China Sea. It would create a political-military crisis far exceeding those that erupted from the accidental 1999 bombing of China's Belgrade embassy or the 2001 collision between two U.S. and Chinese military aircraft. Such a crisis would stem from two conditions. The United States would view such a threat as the first Chinese effort to challenge American military supremacy in Asia's maritime periphery. Second, all of Asia would perceive the potential military confrontation as possibly determining the future security dynamics of the region. Beijing's decisionmakers would recognize the probable strategic implications of such a decision. Conceiving of events that could lead to such a perilous decision is in itself confounding. Consequently, the suggested scenario will focus on a low level of coercive diplomacy that goes beyond the harassment which U.S. intelligence-collection missions have faced over the past decade, but which is far less threatening than an outright military confrontation.

The Scenario

The core of this scenario is based upon the proposition that Beijing perceives closer military ties among the United States, the Republic of the Philippines (RP), and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) as a threatening strategic trend much as it did Hanoi's November 1978 security treaty with Moscow. It is a trend Beijing identifies as originating in U.S. Secretary of State Clinton's firm position on U.S. South China Sea interests at the Hanoi-hosted ASEAN meetings of July 2010. Whereas Beijing saw the Hanoi-Moscow treaty as confirming its perception that Vietnam and the USSR were colluding to establish "regional hegemony" over Hanoi's Indochina neighbors and possibly over all Southeast Asia, the closer links it sees emerging among Washington, Hanoi, and Manila are viewed in this scenario as potentially