

**The PLA and National Security Decisionmaking:
Insights from China's Behavior in its Territorial Disputes**

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Original Draft: October 2011

Revised: October 2013

Paper prepared for the 2013 CAPS-RAND-NDU Conference on the PLA
Taipei, Taiwan
November 2011

Introduction

A central question in the study of China's foreign policy is the role of the PLA in national security decisionmaking. Many observers have argued that the influence of the PLA at least partly accounts for the more active and assertive posture that China adopted following the global financial crisis in 2008. As Joshua Kurlantzick writes recently in the *National Journal*, for example, "At times, the PLA appears to have initiated or escalated international disputes—against the wishes of the top leadership in Beijing—in order to push Chinese policy in a more hawkish direction."¹ Kurlantzick captures a sentiment in the media that the influence of the PLA on policymaking in Beijing accounts for China's recent behavior.²

Nevertheless, assessments of the PLA's influence in national security decisionmaking are often based on conjecture or speculation, not facts. This paper seeks to illuminate this question by examining one specific issue area, territorial disputes. Territorial disputes arguably offer an "easy" test for observing the influence of the PLA on decisionmaking. The defense of China's sovereignty and territorial integrity has been the core goals of the PLA since the founding of the PRC in 1949 (in addition to defense of the CCP's rule). Since 1949, many of China's uses of force have involved the defense of territorial claims, such as the 1962 war with India.³ As a result, territorial disputes should be one policy arena where the influence of the PLA can be observed and identified.

My argument is that the role of the PLA in decisionmaking in China's territorial disputes has been limited to bureaucratic influence within existing policymaking structures and processes. With the partial exception of China's interpretation of the rights of coastal states under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the PLA has not played a significant role influencing the initiation of China's territorial disputes, in the content of these claims or in how China has chosen to defend these claims. Instead, China's

¹ Joshua Kurlantzick, "After Deng: On China's Transformation," *The Nation*, 17 October 2011.

² See, for example, Christopher Bodeen, "Chinese succession highlights military's role," AP, 17 October 2011.

³ On China's use of force in territorial disputes, see M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

behavior in territorial disputes, including its recent assertiveness in the South China Sea and East China Sea, reflects the consensus of China's top party leaders to respond to what are seen as challenges and provocations from other states. In other words, the PLA and China's leaders share the same preferences for a robust but non-militarized defense of China's claims in these disputes. There's little evidence to support the view that the PLA has escalated these disputes against the wishes of top leaders. As other scholars have argued, the PLA remains subordinate to the party through existing mechanisms of party (or civilian) control.⁴

This paper proceeds as follows. First, I review the challenges that scholars and analysts must confront when seeking to determine the influence of the PLA on national security decisionmaking in China. Second, I examine the general ways in which the PLA might influence China's policies on territorial disputes, including the initiation and content of specific territorial claims as well as China's approach to managing and defending its current claims. Third, to create a baseline for the analysis of recent events, I review the role of the PLA in China's past territorial disputes. Fourth, I examine the role of the PLA in recent territorial and maritime disputes, including China's interpretation of the rights of coastal states under UNCLOS as well as the conflicts in the South China Sea and East China Sea. Overall, the findings presented below support other recent studies regarding the role of the PLA in national security decisionmaking.⁵

Analytical Challenges

Scholars or analysts who seek to identify the influence of the PLA on policymaking in China must overcome a variety of analytical challenges, including the kinds of influence that the PLA could exercise, the types of policies over which the PLA might

⁴ Dennis Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Michael D. Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior—Part Three: The Role of the Military in Foreign Policy," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 34 (Winter 2012); You Ji, "The PLA and Diplomacy: Unraveling myths about the military role in foreign policy making," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 23, No. 86 (March 2014).

⁵ Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior—Part Three: The Role of the Military in Foreign Policy"; Ji, "The PLA and Diplomacy."

exert influence, and the evidentiary basis for determining whether influence that has been exercised. Each challenge is discussed below.

The first challenge is to define the concept of influence. What motivates a great deal of concern about the nature and degree of the PLA's influence over policy today is the fear that the PLA might be able to "capture" the state in certain policy domains, which may push China to adopt more "assertive" or "hawkish" policies than it otherwise would have adopted in the absence of pressure from the PLA. Nevertheless, as a key actor within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the PLA could also exert influence through existing institutional or bureaucratic channels, such as in leading small groups established to coordinate policy among different actors in the party-state.

As a result, it may be useful to identify two types of potential influence over policy. The first draws on traditional conceptions relational power and could be called *capturing influence*. That is, through lobbying or independent action outside existing bureaucratic channels, the PLA could push the party-state to adopt a specific policy that it would not have otherwise adopted. By definition, such influence would represent an act of disobedience and violation of party norms. The second type of influence draws on research in bureaucratic politics and could be described as *bureaucratic influence*. That is, through lobbying or independent action, the PLA helps to shape the content of a given policy. The key difference between these two conceptions of influence is that, in the bureaucratic view, the PLA is only one of a number of actors that provides input on a certain decision. The final decision is taken by the party-state, who is not captured by the PLA. Part of bureaucratic influence would include the PLA's influence over tactical and operational matters, including how specific policies are implemented in the military arena. The potential for PLA influence to occur here as increased with its growing autonomy with the party system over the past twenty-five years.

A second analytical challenge concerns the types of policies over which the PLA can exert influence. The core concern revolves around whether the PLA is exerting influence beyond its military and defense portfolio to advance more parochial interests versus those of the party-state. At the level of grand strategy, for example, the PLA could seek to influence non-military issues such as the overall guiding principle for Chinese foreign

policy beyond the role of the armed forces as reflected in party guidelines.⁶ Similarly, because of the broader implications for overall national interests, decisions to use force lie beyond the PLA's military domain and would be made by China's top leaders on the Politburo Standing Committee. Within a specific foreign policy issue such as nonproliferation with a military component such as nonproliferation, the PLA could seek to prevent China's accession to key international agreements such as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.⁷

Taken together, these two challenges require that scholars and analysts be precise about the type of influence being exercised and the level at which the influence is being exercised. In the jargon of political science, it requires that analysts clearly and precisely define the "dependent variable." Nevertheless, whether, in fact, the PLA has exercised influence over national security decisionmaking must confront a more difficult analytical challenge. This challenge concerns the nature of the evidence that can be mobilized to determine whether the PLA has influenced a particular policy and how. More specifically, the conclusions that can be drawn from observing the presence or absence of the PLA in a particular issue. If the analyst observes the PLA playing a visible role in implementing China's approach to a particular issue, this does not necessarily mean that the PLA played a role in shaping the content of China policy on that issue. Instead, the PLA may have been carrying out the instructions of the party-state. If the analyst fails to observe the PLA playing a visible role in China's approach to a particular issue, this does not necessarily mean that the PLA did not play a role in influencing China's policy on this issue. Instead, the PLA may have shaped the policies that were adopted even if it did not help to implement them. Similarly, if analysts observe "aggressive" or "hawkish" behavior, it is not necessarily the case that it reflects the influence of the PLA on national security policy. China's top leaders might have adopted such policies for other reasons or because they share the PLA's preferences on the issue at hand.

Given this challenge, how should analysts proceed? How do we "know" that the PLA has influenced a particular policy? No simple solutions exist. Nevertheless, the

⁶ That is, the party determines the overall framework for military strategy.

⁷ At the same time, the PLA does enjoy a great deal of autonomy over military affairs at the operational level. Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior—Part Three: The Role of the Military in Foreign Policy; Ji, "The PLA and Diplomacy."

following approach may be useful. First, state clearly and precisely the nature of the influence and the type of policy being affected. Second, bring evidence to bear to demonstrate the role of PLA in the formulation of this policy. If the data permits, bring direct evidence to bear, not circumstantial evidence. Simply because a policy might be consistent with what may be known or assumed about the preferences of the PLA is not direct evidence of the PLA influencing the implementation of the policy. Third, consider carefully alternative explanations for the policies that may be adopted. If China might have had strong reasons to adopt a particular policy that can be attributed to other factors, then this suggests that the influence of the PLA was not high and, at a minimum, that the PLA did not capture the party-state's position on this particular policy.

Pathways of PLA Influence in Territorial and Maritime Disputes

How might the PLA influence China's policies? In this paper, I adopt a broad definition of territorial disputes to include claims to land territory and claims to maritime jurisdiction such as an Exclusive Economic Zone.

In general terms, the PLA could influence China's policies in territorial disputes in three different ways. First, the PLA could push for China to initiate a new claim to a piece of territory. Second, as the initiation of disputes is relatively infrequent, the PLA could push for China to alter the scope or content of an existing claim. That is, the PLA could push the state to claim additional land in an existing dispute. Both types of influence would reflect instance where the PLA would be exerting influence beyond its traditional domain of military affairs to change policy on a national issue.

Third, in an existing dispute, the PLA could push for a change in China's strategy for managing its claims. In general, a state can pursue three generic strategies for managing its territorial claims.⁸ First, it can pursue a strategy of cooperation, which excludes threats or uses of force and involves an offer to either transfer control of contested land or drop claims to an existing piece of territory. Second, by contrast, a state can pursue a

⁸ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*.

strategy of escalation, engaging in coercive diplomacy to achieve a favorable outcome at the negotiating table or using force to seize contested land. Finally, a state can adopt a delaying strategy, which involves maintaining a state's claim to a piece of land but neither offering concessions or using force. Given these strategies, the PLA could influence China's policies in its territorial disputes in several ways. The PLA could seek to prevent China from pursuing a strategy of cooperation and offering compromises or territorial concessions to another state in an existing dispute. The PLA could push for threats or uses of force in an existing dispute. Finally, when a delaying strategy is being pursued, the PLA could lobby for demonstrations or exercises of sovereignty, such as a more aggressive patrolling posture.

The PLA in Past Territorial Disputes

The review below of the PLA's role in shaping China's policies in territorial disputes demonstrates that its influence has been limited and mostly bureaucratic in nature.

Since 1949, China has participated in twenty-three territorial disputes and six maritime rights disputes. Although many of these disputes trace their origins to the Qing Dynasty, most of the disputed arose for the PRC in the early 1950s during the process of consolidating China's boundaries after the end of the civil war. No evidence exists that the PLA played a prominent role in the decisions to initiate these territorial claims. Similarly, no evidence exists that the PLA played a role in the PRC's first claim to the Senkakus, which was issued in December 1970. (As discussed below, evidence does exist to suggest that the PLA has played a role in shaping China's interpretation of the rights of coastal states and foreign military activities in the EEZ under UNCLOS.)

Since 1949, China has offered territorial concessions twenty-five times in seventeen of its disputes. No evidence exists that the PLA blocked or limited any of these compromises. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the PLA delayed compromise in the boundary negotiations with Vietnam in the 1990s by refusing to participate in the joint working group created to negotiate with Vietnam. The PLA reportedly objected to offering concessions to a country with which it fought an embarrassing and costly war in

1979. Nevertheless, when Jiang Zemin announced in 1997 that land border negotiation would be completed by 1999, the PLA was either unable or unwilling to block this agreement.⁹

Since 1949, China has used force sixteen times in six of its territorial disputes. Consistent with the chain of command within the CCP, the majority of decisions to use force were made by top party leaders, not by senior PLA officers in opposition to the instructions or intent of the party. Nevertheless, the PLA appeared to play a prominent and leading role in the decision to use force in three disputes. The first concerns a brief clash with India in September and October 1967 at two different mountain passes along the line of actual control, Nathu La and Cho La.¹⁰ The clash occurred amid competition between China and India to consolidate their positions at the passes and resulted in PLA troops firing on Indian soldiers that were erecting a barbed wire fence. Following three days of fighting, thirty-six Indian and an unknown number of Chinese soldiers were killed. The account of the clash by the commander of the Tibetan Military District, Wang Chenghan, suggests that it had not been authorized by the CMC, much less top party leaders.¹¹ As a result, it had the potential to capture China's policy in the dispute with India. Nevertheless, senior party leaders acted quickly to prevent further hostilities. In addition, the PLA played a significant role in the decision to occupy some of the features that it claimed in the South China Sea in 1988. Amid growing tensions in the South China Sea, including the occupation of features by Vietnam and other claimants, the PLAN in cooperation with the State Oceanographic Administration submitted drafted a plan that called for the occupation of nine vacant features in the South China Sea.¹² This represents a form of bureaucratic influence, as the PLA submitted a plan for entry into the Spratlys that was vetted and approved both by the CMC and state organs. The clash itself, the local commander reportedly opened fire without receiving permission

⁹ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 148.

¹⁰ Wang Chenghan, *Wang Chenghan huiyilu* [Wang Chenghan's Memoirs] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 2004), p. 482; P. B. Sinha and A. A. Athale, *History of the Conflict with China* (New Delhi: History Division, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, [restricted], 1992), p. xxiv; G. S. Bajpai, *China's Shadow over Sikkim: The Politics of Intimidation* (New Delhi: Lancer Publishers, 1999), pp. 156-195.

¹¹ Wang Chenghan, *Wang Chenghan huiyilu*, pp. 481-482.

¹² Liu Huaqing, *Liu Huaqing huiyilu* [Liu Huaqing's Memoirs] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 2004), pp. 534-535; Xu Ge, *Tiemaoguo haizhan shiji* [Steel Anchors Consolidating Maritime Frontiers: Record of the Republic's Naval Battles] (Beijing: Haichao chubanshe, 1999), pp. 308-325.

from the General Staff Department, violating China's guideline for the engagement to "not fire the first shot."¹³ Finally, the PLA may have played a central role in the occupation of Mischief Reef in late 1994. Although the occupation was consistent with the 1988 plan (to seize vacant features), the action may not have been authorized and undertaken independently by the Guangzhou MR in collaboration with the South Sea Fleet.¹⁴

At the same time, evidence exists that party leaders have overruled the PLA on several occasions. The first concerns Su Yu's ambitious plan to seize all the offshore islands off the coast of Fujian and Zhejiang that remained under Nationalist control in the 1950s. Mao's opposition to Su Yu's plan was likely one factor that resulted in his demotion and transfer from 1958 to the Academy of Military Science.¹⁵ Su Yu's plan was never implemented. A second example occurred after the first few clashes between Chinese and Indian troops on the China-India border in August and October 1959. Front-line commanders repeatedly sought permission to attack Indian positions, which Beijing refused. A third example occurred during the clash with Vietnam over Johnson Reef in March 1988. After the clash, the CMC denied a request from the local commander to assault other features under Vietnamese control.¹⁶

Why has the PLA played mostly a limited role? The short and over-simplified answer is the structure of civil-military relations, namely, that the PLA is a party-army under the leadership of the CCP and not a national army supervised by the state. The PLA, most of the time, operations within procedures established by the party and in support of the party's objectives, not the PLA's own goals.¹⁷

¹³ Xu Ge, *Tiemaos*, p. 312; Lu Ning, *The Dynamics of Foreign-Policy Decisionmaking in China* (Boulder: Westview, 1997), p. 126.

¹⁴ Greg Austin, *China's Ocean Frontier: International Law, Military Force, and National Development* (Canberra: Allen & Unwin, 1998), p. 91; Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, pp. 296-297.

¹⁵ Zhu Ying, ed., *Su Yu zhuan* [Su Yu's Biography] (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 2000), p. xxx.

¹⁶ Lu Ning, *The Dynamics of Foreign-Policy Decisionmaking in China*, p. 126.

¹⁷ On party control of the army, see, for example, David Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2002).

The PLA in China's Recent Territorial and Maritime Disputes

Similarly, the role of the PLA in China's territorial disputes in the past few years reflects largely limited bureaucratic influence. Consistent with bureaucratic influence, the PLA appears to have played a role in the evolution of China's interpretation of provisions of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In the summer of 2010, the PLA appeared to capture China's policy regarding China's objection to U.S. naval exercises in the Yellow Sea with the carrier *George Washington*. Nevertheless, little evidence exists to support the assertion that the PLA influenced strategic decisions in China's policies toward the disputes in the various disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea. Instead, China's more assertive policies can largely be explained in terms of the interactive nature of these disputes, which are prone to spirals of instability.

Maritime Jurisdiction and the Interpretation of Coastal States Rights in the EEZ

Although China signed and later ratified UNCLOS, Beijing has adopted domestic legislation and policy positions that challenge some of its provisions. In particular, China seeks to limit foreign military activities in waters that it claims in two ways. First, China asserts that foreign military ships must request prior permission for "innocent passage" in China's territorial seas (that is, within waters 12nm from its coast). By contrast, article 17 of UNCLOS states that all ships "enjoy the right of innocent passage" without prior permission. Although UNCLOS does prohibit military activities in the territorial seas such as weapons exercises and intelligence gathering, it does not prohibit the movement of military vessels. China's requirement of prior permission is contained both in its 1992 law on territorial seas and in a note submitted with its instrument of ratification in 1996.

Second, China opposes military activities in its 200nm EEZ for two different reasons. China views all military-related surveys as "marine scientific research" over which a state can claim jurisdiction in its EEZ. As a result, China opposes intelligence-gathering activities by foreign countries in these waters, which has resulted in the 2001 *Bodwitch*

and 2009 *Impeccable* confrontations.¹⁸ China has also challenged the freedom of navigation by military vessels within the EEZ as being inconsistent with “peaceful purposes” provisions in UNCLOS (88, 141, 301). This relies on a broad interpretation of these articles, which are typically interpreted as referring aggressive actions outlined by the UN Charter, not intelligence activity, exercises or other non-aggressive actions.¹⁹

What role did the PLA play in the evolution of these positions held by China? Although a definitive answer remains elusive, the negotiating record of UNCLOS provides one clue and suggests that the role of the PLA in the desire to restrict innocent passage in the territorial seas was limited. During the negotiations over UNCLOS in the 1970s, China expressed concerns about the scope of innocent passage and argued that only non-military vessels could enjoy this right.²⁰ Efforts to include language regarding prior notification failed to receive a majority vote, but it was a position that China actively supported. At this time, China’s stance was probably informed by its traditional conception of national sovereignty when applied in the maritime domain and not the specific views of the PLA. In fact, it is unclear if the PLA even participated in the Chinese negotiating team and would have been able to exert much influence over it.

The PLA has probably played a greater role in China’s positions on military activities in its EEZ. The PLA’s position on these issues appears to have been formed by the mid-1990s, when it was raised in the talks that resulted in the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement with the United States that was signed in January 1998.²¹ At this time, Chinese international legal scholars did not raise the issue of restrictions on military activities in the EEZ in their own analysis of China’s 1998 EEZ law.²² This gap between the public writings of China’s legal scholars and the positions of the PLA in defense-talks with the United States suggests that, in a manner consistent with bureaucratic influence,

¹⁸ Raul Pedrozo, "Close Encounters at Sea: The USNS *Impeccable* Incident," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (2009), pp. 101-111.

¹⁹ Erik Franckx, "American and Chinese Views on Navigational Rights of Warships," *Chinese Journal of International Law*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2011), pp. 187-206.

²⁰ For an excellent review of China’s role in the drafting of UNCLOS, see Zhiguo Gao, "China and the Law of the Sea," in Myron H. Nordquist, Tommy Thong Bee Koh and John Norton Moore, eds., *Freedom of seas, passage rights and the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention*, (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 2009).

²¹ Interview

²² See, for example, Zou Keyuan, "China's Exclusive Economic Zone and Continental Shelf: Developments, Problems, and Prospects," *Marine Policy*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2001), pp. 71-81.

the PLA helped to shape China's position on the rights of coastal states in the EEZ.

To be sure, the PLA has actively sought to enforce its interpretation of state's rights in the EEZ. In 2001, the PLA sought to enforce its interpretation of the limitations on foreign military activities, first when a PLAN frigate challenged and threatened the USNS *Bowditch* in the Yellow Sea in March 2001 and then when a PLAN aviation fighter collided with a U.S. EP-3 flying 70 miles south-southwest of Hainan. Similar challenges occurred in 2002 and in several times in 2009. Analysis of the 2001 incidents suggest that there was little if any coordination between the PLA and either the state or the top party leaders, suggesting that the PLA may have been trying to capture China's policy on this issue.²³ In 2004 and 2005, PLA scholars detailed China's position in *Marine Policy*, an important international journal on maritime affairs.²⁴ These military scholars were the first to offer detailed arguments in support of the interpretation that the PLA had been implementing, again suggesting a degree of PLA influence over the evolving content of China's interpretation of the rights of coastal states in the EEZ. The role of the PLA in the 2009 *Impeccable* incident is consistent with bureaucratic influence. According to You Ji, the plan to confront the USNS survey ship was approved by both the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group and the CMC, indicating the coordination between key party and military bodies.²⁵ The actual confrontation involved fishermen, boats from two different civil maritime law enforcement agencies, and the PLAN, again consistent with high-level coordination including the military and a number of state agencies. Given the military focus of the *Impeccable*'s activities, it is likely that the PLA raised the issue within China's policymaking process in a way consistent with bureaucratic influence, as PLAN lawyers helped to shape China's overall position on the EEZ. Nevertheless, it was not an unauthorized operation taken without knowledge of key party leaders.

Perhaps the clearest example of the PLA influencing national security policy in territorial and maritime disputes concerns China's objections to U.S. and Korean naval

²³ At the same time, there was significant regional variation in the pattern by which China intercepted U.S. surveillance flights. The pattern of intercepts was most aggressive in the south, where the EP-3 incident occurred, suggesting that there was not necessarily coordination within the PLA, either.

²⁴ Ren Xiaofeng and Cheng Xizhong, "A Chinese Perspective," *Marine Policy*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2005).

²⁵ Ji, "The PLA and Diplomacy," p. 16. On the incident, see Pedrozo, "Close Encounters at Sea."

exercises in the Yellow Sea in the summer of 2010. Although the exercises were designed to signal American resolve to deter North Korea following the sinking of the South Korean ship, the *Cheonan*, China viewed them as threatening because of their proximity to China.²⁶ China did not oppose the exercises when they were first announced, but changed its policy in response to pressure from public opinion, which was shaped partly by military academic commentators, and by comments that Deputy Chief of Staff General Ma Xiaotian made in a television interview.

The influence of the PLA in this case is perhaps most easily demonstrated by reviewing the chain of events. On June 8, 2010, the *Huanqiu Shibao* (Global Times), published a report from the South Korean Yonhap News Agency about upcoming U.S.-South Korean exercises in the Yellow Sea. In the report, the *Huanqiu Shibao* interviewed several Chinese military commentators, who described the exercises as provocative. The report did not state where in the Yellow Sea the exercises would occur. On the same day, the *Huanqiu Shibao* published an editorial that stated “emotionally, the Chinese people cannot accept the presence of the U.S. aircraft carrier in the Yellow Sea.”²⁷ The MFA’s first comment on the exercises, also on June 8, was to call “for calmness and restraint from all parties concerned to avoid further escalation of tension.”²⁸ In other words, China had not yet formulated a position toward the exercises.

The following day, June 9, attention to the exercises in the Chinese media increased. The *Huanqiu Shibao* published the results of an online poll from its website, in which more than 96 percent of respondents agreed that the exercises “pose[d] a threat to China.”²⁹ In the weeks that followed, the story spread and additional military commentators like retired Major General Luo Yuan began to weigh in, expressing

²⁶ On this episode, see also Alastain Iain Johnston, “Stability and Instability in Sino–US Relations: A Response to Yan Xuetong’s Superficial Friendship Theory,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2011), pp. 5-29.

²⁷ “Zhuanjia: Mei he hangmu kaijin huanghai yu Hanjun junyan yi beke bimian [Expert: U.S. nuclear aircraft carrier conducting exercises with Korean military in the Yellow Sea is inevitable],” *Huanqiu Shibao*, June 8, 2010, <http://mil.huanqiu.com/Observation/2010-06/846675.html>; “Sheping: Hanguo xiuba Meihangmu dairu Huanghai [South Korea should not take U.S. aircraft carrier into the Yellow Sea,]” *Huanqiu Shibao*, June 8, 2010, <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/roll/2010-06/846455.html>;

²⁸ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang's Regular Press Conference on June 8, 2010,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China), <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2511/t707494.htm>

²⁹ “Yin Mei hangmu ru Huanghai jinu Zhongguo wangyou Hanguo xingxiang kanyou [Angered over U.S. aircraft carriers entering the Yellow Sea, Chinese netizens’ image of Korea is worrying],” *Global Times Online*, June 9, 2010, <http://mil.huanqiu.com/china/2010-06/849599.html>.

opposition to the exercise. On June 22, 2010, the MFA issued a second statement on potential US exercises in the Yellow Sea. Again, the statement indicated that China had not yet formed a clear position. According to Qin Gang, “We are very concerned about the relevant report and are following the development closely....relevant parties should stay calm, exercise restraint and refrain from doing things that could aggravate tension and harm the interest of nations in the region.”³⁰

Amid the growing media attention, a statement by PLA Deputy Chief of Staff Ma Xiaotian helped harden China’s position. In what appeared to be an impromptu interview in the lobby of a hotel or office building, Ma answered a few questions from a Phoenix Television reporter.³¹ In particular, Ma asserted that China was not merely “concerned” about the exercises, but “extremely opposed” (*feichang fandui*) to them because they were “close to Chinese territorial waters.”³² Ma’s statement appeared to catalyze a change in China’s declaratory position. On July 6, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang stated, “We have taken note of the remarks of Deputy Chief of General Staff Ma Xiaotian. We will follow closely the situation and make further statements accordingly.”³³ Two days later, Qin Gang used much stronger language that appeared to endorse the position articulated by General Ma. He stated that China “resolutely opposed” (*jianjue fandui*) the presence of “foreign ships” in the Yellow Sea and “other coastal waters [*jinhai*]” that would influence “China’s security interests.”³⁴ Thus, in approximately one month, China’s position evolved from a “call for calmness and restraint” to “resolute opposition.” This change shift can be attributed to the PLA in the context of a more liberalized media environment. A combination of public attention

³⁰ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang's Regular Press Conference on June 22, 2010,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China), <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2511/t711047.shtml>

³¹ In the interview, Ma was wearing a business suit and not his military uniform.

³² For the text and video of Ma’s interview, see http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/detail_2010_07/01/1702694_0.shtml.

³³ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang's Regular Press Conference on July 6, 2010,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China), 7 July 2010, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2511/t714568.htm> For an explicit assertion, based on information provided by unnamed diplomats, that “[P]olitical pressure from the military community forced the central government to change the text of its official statements several times in the past two months to harden its tone over the US-South Korean joint naval drill near its territorial waters,” see Cary Huang, “PLA ramped up China’s stand on US-Korea drill,” *South China Morning Post*, August 6, 2010.

³⁴ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang’s regular press conference on July 8, 2010,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China), 8 July 2010, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2511/t715219.htm>

generated by China's unofficial media, along with commentary on the issue by retired military officers and statements by senior generals, pushed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to adopt the increasingly strong language and, ultimately, opposition to the exercises.³⁵

To the degree that the PLA did capture China's policy on this issue, it did not last for long. In November 2010, the United States announced that it would conduct another exercise in the Yellow Sea with an aircraft carrier. The MFA responded quickly to register China's objections. However, its statement backtracked from the language used in July 2010 in two ways. First, it stated only "opposition" to the exercises, dropping "resolute" and "extreme" as modifiers of China's position. Second, it referred only to China's EEZ and not its "coastal waters," thereby framing its objection within the UNCLOS framework. This left open the possibility that the exercise might be confined to South Korea's EEZ, which does not overlap with China's entirely in this area.

In sum, China has exercised largely bureaucratic influence regarding China's position on maritime jurisdiction, which reflects instances of the PLA influencing the content of China's territorial or maritime claims. The PLA did capture policy during the summer of 2010 regarding China's position on U.S. naval exercises in the Yellow Sea, appearing to compel the MFA to change its articulation of China's position. However, this change in China's position was revised only a few months later, limiting the PLA's influence.

The South China Sea

Since 2006, and especially from 2009 to 2011, China has adopted a more active and assertive approach to managing its claims to contested islands and disputed maritime rights in the South China Sea.³⁶ Many observers suggest that this apparent change in the China's policy reflects the influence of the PLA. Nevertheless, in the South China Sea, China has relied principally on diplomatic and political tools to advance its claims, not military ones. China has not used its naval forces to seize contested features or threaten

³⁵ At the same time, this chronology indicates that statements by military commentators alone were insufficient as a factor in the change in the MFA's articulation of China's position.

³⁶ For a review of China's actions in these disputes since 2006, see M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (December 2011).

or use force against the naval forces of other claimant states. The possibility remains, however, that the PLA advocated for a hardening of the policy and an emphasis on consolidating China's claim, but given the issues at stake and the dynamics of the disputes, China's leaders likely shared the PLA's preferences on the issue.

In the past few years, China has taken a range of actions to strengthen its claims the various disputes over sovereignty and maritime rights in the South China Sea. Diplomatically, China has sought to actively defend its claims when challenged by others. Between 2006 and 2008, Chinese diplomats challenged the legality of foreign-invested hydrocarbon exploration and development projects in Vietnam in waters where China claimed maritime rights. In May 2009, China submitted a note along with a map of the infamous "nine-dashed line" (*jiu duan xian*) to the UN after Vietnam and Malaysia formally expanded their claims to maritime rights by asserting extended continental shelf rights in the South China Sea, especially in waters around the disputed islands and coral reefs. Politically, China used the activities of civil maritime law enforcement agencies to demonstrate and exercise its sovereignty in these waters. Starting in 2008, the South Sea regional fisheries administration bureau began to increase its presence in these waters. In 2009, it detained an unprecedented number of Vietnamese boats and fishermen. At the same time, vessels from the State Oceanic Administration's China Marine Surveillance Force (*haijian budui*) began to increase its presence around the Spratlys. In the first half of 2011, it began to openly challenge seismic surveys conducted by the Philippines and Vietnam, cutting the towed cables of a Vietnamese ship in late May 2011.³⁷

In the South China Sea, however, the PLA has played a secondary role and not a primary one. As the brief review of China's actions above demonstrates, China has not sought to actively defend its claim through use of its armed forces, especially the PLAN. Instead, the PLA has played a secondary role, namely, to underscore China's ability to defend its claims by force, if necessary. China has done so through a series of large-scale military exercises, especially in 2010. In March 2010, the North Sea Fleet conducted a long-distance exercise with a task force of six ships, including one destroyer, three frigates, a tanker, and a salvage vessel. The task force traveled from Qingdao through the

³⁷ This paragraph draws on Fravel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea."

Miyako Strait and then turned south, passing through the Bashi Channel between Taiwan and the Philippines before stopping at Fiery Cross Reef in the South China Sea.³⁸

According to the deputy commander of the North Sea Fleet, one purpose of the exercise was “to protect its maritime territorial integrity through long-distance naval projection.”³⁹

In July 2010, the South Sea Fleet organized a large-scale live-ammunition exercise held at an undisclosed (though likely undisputed) location in the South China Sea that involved China’s most advanced vessels from all three fleets. Although the exercise was held to promote the “transformation in military training” and the operational concept of “a system of systems operations,” Chief of the General Staff Chen Bingde also noted the broader context in which it occurred at the time: “we should pay a high degree of attention to developments and changes in situations and tasks [to] carry out preparations for military struggle.”⁴⁰ In November 2010, the South Sea Fleet organized an amphibious landing exercise named *Jiaolong-2010* involving more than 1,800 marines, which was observed by more than 200 foreign military officers.⁴¹ Nevertheless, China has not sought to use its growing naval power to compel other states to accede to its demands, to enforce its sovereignty claims or to seize contested features.

The secondary role of the PLA was underscored by the standoff over Scarborough Shoal in April 2012. According to one mainland publication, the decision to dispatch maritime law enforcement vessels to protect the Chinese fishermen found by the Philippines inside the shoal was made within civilian channels by the MFA. When the incident occurred, Chinese fishermen used their satellite phones to send a distress signal, which was received by vessels from China Marine Surveillance, a maritime law enforcement body under the State Oceanic Administration (and now part of the newly established China Coast Guard). The incident was then reported to MFA via the SOA’s headquarters in Beijing. Following a decision by China’s top leaders, a command post was established within the China Marine Surveillance force, whose ships were instructed

³⁸ “Chinese navy’s new strategy in action,” *Strategic Comments*, Vol. 16, May 2010; Greg Torode, “Exercises Show PLA Navy’s Strength,” *South China Morning Post*, 18 April 2010.

³⁹ Quoted in “Chinese navy’s new strategy in action.”

⁴⁰ Zhong Jijun, “Zhuoyan shengcheng tixi zuozhan nengli, jiji tuijin junshi xunlian zhuanbian [Grasp Generating Systems Operations, Actively Promote the Transformation in Military Training,” *Jiefangjun Bao*, 29 July 2010, p. 1

⁴¹ Deng Ping and Liu Fenggan, “Nanhai jiandui zuzhi ‘jiaolong-2010’ shibing shidan yanxi [South Sea Fleet Organizes ‘Jiaolong-2010’ Live Fire Exercise],” *Jiefangjun Bao*, 4 November 2010, p. 2

to aid the Chinese fishermen in the shoal.⁴² Although the PLA and CMS reportedly have a close working relationship, focused primarily on information-sharing and limited joint training, Chinese sources indicate that the initial decision in the crisis were made by civilian leaders and not military ones. In addition, Chinese naval vessels were never deployed in close proximity to the shoal as part of an effort to limit the potential for escalation. Noted Chinese military historian Xu Yan describes this as “Naval forces on the second line, coast guard forces on the first line” (*haijun er'xian, haijing yixian*).⁴³

In the Scarborough standoff, top military leaders indicated their support for the government's approach. In an impromptu television interview, a Phoenix TV reporter tried to interview General Ma Xiaotian in early June 2012 at a conference on cyber security in Beijing.⁴⁴ In particular, Ma said: “The question you ask is very sensitive. We have the ability to defend our waters, but at the moment we have still not prepared to use military force to go defend [our waters]. If we were to do so, it would be as a last resort. Now we are still conducting bilateral talks, using diplomatic means and some civilian [i.e., law enforcement] means to resolve the conflict. This way is the best.”⁴⁵ Ma's statement countered rumors that Chinese forces in the Guangzhou Military Region had been placed on alert (indicating preparations to use force) and highlighted the consensus between party and military elites.⁴⁶ Earlier, in May 2012, Defense Minister Liang Guanglie also underscored the importance of a diplomatic solution to the standoff in a meeting in late May with his Philippine counterpart Voltaire Gazmin. Although PLA-affiliated media commentators such as Major General Luo Yuan have called for China to adopt a more forceful response, uniformed officers such as Ma Xiaotian and Liang Guanglie have not.

Even though the PLA has not played a more active role in China's assertiveness in

⁴² Han Yong and Guan Xiangdong, “Duizhi Huangyan Dao [Standoff over Huang Yan Island],” *Zhongguo xinwen zhoukan*, No. 16, May 2012, p. 28

⁴³ Xu Yan, “ZhongFei Nanhai zhengzhi jishinian [Several Decades of Chinese-Phillipine Wrangling in the South Sea],” *Xuexi shibao*, 21 May 2012

⁴⁴ This draws on M. Taylor Fravel, “The PLA and the South China Sea,” *The Diplomat* (blog), June 17, 2012

⁴⁵ For the video, see http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/nanhaizhengduan/content-3/detail_2012_05/28/14866227_0.shtml

⁴⁶ On the rumors, see <http://southseaconversations.wordpress.com/2012/05/21/unpopular-military-commentary-and-a-scapegoat/>

the South China Sea in the past few years, the possibility remains that China adopted this approach in response to PLA pressure that outside analysts cannot observe. Nevertheless, this is unlikely for two reasons. Although PLA-affiliated commentators have written on the issue, they often seem to write in reaction to events. This suggests that they are responding to developments, not driving decisionmaking. In any case, whether commentators such as Luo Yuan speak for the PLA as a whole remains unclear and is unlikely.⁴⁷ More importantly, however, China's assertiveness in these disputes can be explained as a reaction to the efforts by other claimants to strengthen and bolster their own claims. In other words, PLA influence over decisionmaking is not necessary to explain the policies and positions that China's government and party leaders would have adopted anyway. From Beijing's perspective, it has faced many challenges to its claims in the past few years. These challenges, not PLA pressure, offer a superior explanation for China's assertiveness, as one can clearly link China's policies to the actions of other states. China's detention of Vietnamese fishermen in 2009, for example, occurred as the number of Vietnamese fishing around the Paracels increased dramatically. Likewise, China's efforts to interfere with seismic surveys being conducted by Vietnam and the Philippines in the first half of 2011 was a response to the launch of new survey activities by both countries. Finally, the standoff at Scarborough occurred when the Philippines distributed photos of its armed soldiers inspecting Chinese fishing boats within the shoal.

Evidence from key authoritative Chinese newspapers suggests little divergence between the PLA and the party in the South China Sea disputes. Figure 1 plots the number of articles per year in the *People's Daily* (the CCP's main newspaper) and the *PLA Daily* (the PLA's main newspaper) with the word "Spratlys" (*nansha*) in the title. As Figure 1 shows, a strong correlation exists between articles on the Spratlys in both the *PLA Daily* and the *People's Daily*. Although the *PLA Daily* consistently publishes more articles on the Spratlys, many of these reflect "soft" coverage emphasizing the hardship and contributions of the troops who are garrisoned on the seven features that occupies.

One area where the PLA has almost certainly exerted influence concerns China's refusal to clarify the meaning of the nine-dashed line. Although the line has been used on

⁴⁷ In addition, as Johnston notes, there's a substantial diversity of opinion among the PLA's academic commentators. Johnston, "Stability and Instability in Sino-US Relations," pp. 43-45.

Chinese maps since the founding of the PRC, the Chinese government has never clarified its meaning. The urgency with which to clarify the line became evident after China submitted a map with the line to the UN in May 2009. Whether the line indicates a claim to the enclosed land features in a manner consistent with international law or whether it indicates other types of rights, such as historic rights or even sovereignty, is an important issue that shapes the perceptions of other claimants in these disputes. At least some in the PLA believe that the line represents historic rights or a traditional form of sovereignty, views that would be inconsistent with UNCLOS. The *PLA Daily*'s openly referred to the line as China's "traditional maritime boundary" (*chuantong haijiang xian*).⁴⁸ This phrase has appeared ten times in this paper, including eight times in 2009 and 2011. By contrast, the *People's Daily* has never used this language to describe China's claims in the South China Sea. Thus, the PLA may be exerting a form of bureaucratic influence that prevents China from issuing a definition of the line that is inconsistent with what appears to be the PLA's definition (or at least the definition of some in the PLA). Other relevant actors, including the Bureau of Fisheries Administration and the State Oceanographic Administration, appear to maintain similar historic definitions of the line, indicating that China may prefer ambiguity for a variety of reasons and not just in response to pressure from the PLA.

The East China Sea

The East China Sea involves several distinct disputes between China and Japan over the sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands and over maritime jurisdiction in the East China Sea. China also contests Japan's claim to maritime rights from Okintorishima in the Western Pacific, but does not claim sovereignty over the atoll itself. Although this dispute was largely dormant for much of the past two decades, it has become a focal point of tension between China and Japan since 2010.

Before September 2010, China had pursued a largely passive approach to the dispute over the Senkakus. Indeed, China sought to minimize attention to the dispute. As shown

⁴⁸ "Haijun diqipi huhang biandui jiaru zuguo chuantong haijiang xian [The Navy's Seventh Escort Task Force Enters the Motherland's Traditional Maritime Boundary]," *Jiefangjun Bao*, 3 May 2011, p. 4

in Figure 2, the dispute was rarely discussed in articles in either the *People's Daily* or the *PLA Daily* until the crisis with Japan in 2012. Typically, an article would appear simply noting that China had restated its claim in response to some event involving the disputed islands or in response to a Japanese claim. In the mid-2000s, China began to play a more active role in limiting the potential for escalation in the dispute by preventing Chinese activists from sailing to the islands from ports on the mainland and detaining “*baodiao*” activists during the 2005 protests against Japan.⁴⁹

During this period, the PLA has played no visible role in the dispute over the Senkakus. Almost no public reports exist of PLAN vessels approaching the 12nm territorial waters around the islands or even the broader 24nm contiguous zone. Similarly, PLAAF reconnaissance flights that approach Japan's ADIZ in the East China Sea usually occur several hundred kilometers from the islands themselves.⁵⁰ The PLA has played a direct role, as the transit of PLAN ships through the Japanese islands to the Western Pacific casts a shadow of China's growing military power over the dispute. Nevertheless, PLA forces have not been used to threaten Japan explicitly in the dispute over the Senkakus, much less coerce or compel a change in Japan's policy.

On a few occasions, the PLAN appears to have played a more visible role in the dispute over maritime rights in the East China Sea. In January 2005, a single *Sovremenny* destroyer from the East Sea Fleet was spotted in the waters around the disputed gas field. In September 2005, a five-ship task force including a *Sovremenny* destroyer was again spotted in these waters.⁵¹ These actions occurred during the peak of the dispute over the gas field and were probably intended to signal China's resolve to defend its claim to the field (which lies on the Chinese side of Japan's median) in response to challenges from Japan that China was stealing oil. However, no evidence exists that the PLA pursued these deployments to influence China's policy. Instead, they appear to have been designed to bolster China's existing policy and to resist pressure from Japan.

⁴⁹ M. Taylor Fravel, "Explaining Stability in the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Dispute," in Gerald Curtis, Ryosei Kokubun and Jisi Wang, eds., *Getting the Triangle Straight: Managing China-Japan-US Relations* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010).

⁵⁰ See maps in Japan's annual *Defense of Japan* reports.

⁵¹ James C. Bussert, "Oil May Be Focal Point of Sino-Japanese Dispute," *Signal* (November 2006)

Many observers have speculated that China's harsh response to Japan's detention of a Chinese fishing boat and its crew in September 2010 reflected PLA influence over government policy. The crisis began on September 7th, when a Chinese fishing vessel entered the territorial seas around the Senkaku Islands, refused instructions to halt, and rammed a Japanese Coast Guard vessel. Although Japan released the crew and the ship on September 13th, it continued to hold the captain and considered prosecuting him under Japanese criminal law. China reacted swiftly. China summoned the Japanese ambassador at least once a day, often in the middle of the night, from September 8 to September 11. China also postponed negotiations over the East China Sea (September 11), cancelled a slew of high-level visits (September 13), detained four Japanese nationals for entering a military restricted area in Shijiazhuang (September 20), and slowed the shipment of rare earth metals (September 24).⁵²

Can PLA influence explain China's forceful response? Probably not. In general terms, the government's response was likely consistent with the PLA's own preferences, namely, the unconditional return of the captain. The speed with which the government reacted, and the policies it adopted, suggests that the PLA could not have influenced the policymaking process. Instead, they can be explained in terms of what was seen as a change in Japanese policy (of subjecting Chinese citizens detained around the islands to criminal prosecution), an issue that perhaps was especially salient because it occurred just before 69th anniversary of the Mukden Incident. Under these conditions, the government probably sought to preempt domestic criticism of failing to defend China's interests, perhaps including from the PLA, for failing to protect a Chinese citizen detained by Japan. In contrast to the discussion about the Yellow Sea in June 2010, military commentators such as Luo Yuan, Dai Xu, and others were completely silent during this period. They did not author any articles nor did they apparently give any interviews, at least according to one database of Chinese newspaper articles. Likewise, blog and webpages for Luo Yuan and Dai Xu, for example, no articles were authored or posted in September 2010.⁵³

⁵² James J. Przystup, "Japan-China Relations: Troubled Waters," *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (October 2010)

⁵³ Based on a survey of their known blogs.

Following the September 2010 crisis, tensions spike again in 2012 after the Japanese government purchased three of the islands from a private Japanese citizen. The purchase was intended to prevent a deterioration in China-Japan relations, as the right-wing governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, had launched a public bid to buy these three islands and justified his efforts in terms of what he viewed as the inability of the national government to defend them. China's reaction to the purchase was rapid and severe: Beijing issued territorial baselines around the islands to demarcate China's territorial waters and then dispatched vessels from the China Marine Surveillance force to "patrol" these waters, directly challenging Japan's claims to sovereignty over the islands. Nationwide protests were permitted on the 15th, 16th, and 18th of September, while foreign ministry officials used exceptionally undiplomatic language to describe the purchase as an "atomic bomb."⁵⁴ Since then, China has conducted more than sixty patrols within the territorial waters of the islands, always using vessels from the China Marine Surveillance force and, after June 2013, the newly established China Coast Guard.

It is of course possible that the PLA pushed hard for a strong and powerful response to the Japanese purchase. Nevertheless, China's top civilian leaders likely shared the same preferences as the PLA. Following Ishihara's public bid in April 2013, the prospect of the purchase had become a diplomatic issue being waged in full view of the public. Moreover, it involved a dispute over sovereignty with Japan, a country with whom China has had repeatedly strained ties since the end of the Cold War. The purchase itself occurred shortly after Hu Jintao personally requested that Noda halt the sale. Finally, it occurred on the eve of a delicate moment in Chinese politics on the eve of the 18th party when a significant leadership change would occur, a moment that would heighten China's sensitivity to external threats.⁵⁵

In the crisis itself, the PLA did not appear to be pushing for an even more assertive policy. As shown in Figure 2, the number of articles on the Diaoyu Islands in the PLA Daily was almost identical to those in the People's Daily, indicating the high-level of attention throughout the party-state. In addition, articles in the PLA Daily did not

⁵⁴ "Remarks by Assistant Foreign Minister Le Yucheng At Symposium Marking the 40th Anniversary of The Normalization of Relations Between China and Japan," September 28, 2012, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/diaodao/t975066.htm>

⁵⁵ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*.

endorse positions beyond those expressed by top party leaders. For example, on Sept 12, the *PLA Daily* published a signed opinion by piece by noted commentator Luo Yuan entitled “China Will Absolutely Not Concede over Territorial Sovereignty.”⁵⁶ However, the content mirrored closely themes from the MFA statement. Perhaps the most noteworthy piece in the *PLA Daily* warned Japan “not to play with fire,” but was written by a civilian analyst and remained consistent with China’s objective of deterring Japan from taking further steps to consolidate its position.⁵⁷ More recently, statements by a leading general gained attention, when Lt. Gen Qi Jianguo stated that “The Diaoyu Islands are within the range of [China’s] core interests.”⁵⁸ However, his language mirrored almost to the word a statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in April 2013, which marked the first time that the ministry or any other top government body had suggested that the islands were a core interest.⁵⁹

Overall, military forces have played a secondary role in China’s response to the purchase. China has not dispatched any military vessels into the territorial waters around the disputed islands. On several occasions, PLAN tasks forces transited through the contiguous waters adjacent to the territorial waters of the contested islands, usually returning to home ports in China after conducting training exercises in the Western Pacific that also require Chinese vessels to transit through the Japanese home islands. What has garnered the most attention was an incident involving a PLAN frigate and JMSDF destroyer in waters roughly 100 km of the disputed islands. According to Japanese press reports, the Chinese vessel “painted” the Japanese ship with its fire-control radar, which could have been interpreted as the first-step in an attack. Needless to say, the incident reflects the potential for tactical or operational military considerations can escalate a much broader political dispute. The PLA denies that the incident occurred and it did not occur again, suggesting that it was either not part of China’s policy in the dispute or that the PLA was overruled by top party leaders.

⁵⁶ Luo Yuan, “Zhongguo zai lingtu zhuquan wenti shang juebuhui tuirang banbu,” *Jiefangjun Bao*, 12 Sept 2012, p. 4

⁵⁷ Yang Xiyu, “Ribei zhengfu buyao wanhui,” *Jiefangjun Bao*, 11 Sept 2012, p. 3

⁵⁸ Faith Acquino, “Chinese military scholar claims the Senkakus as a ‘core interest’,” *Japan Daily Press*, 20 August 2013

⁵⁹ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on April 26, 2013,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China), <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2511/t1035948.shtml>

Conclusion

The role of the PLA in national security decisionmaking is perhaps one of the most important and most challenging aspects of Chinese foreign policy to study. In the past few years, analysts and observers have speculated that the PLA has sought to push China to adopt more assertive or hawkish foreign policies that China's top leaders would otherwise not have pursued. To help illuminate this question, this paper the PLA's role in China's behavior in its territorial disputes, an issue where the PLA can seek influence as a security issue and an issue where China has been more assertive in the pursuit of its claims since the mid-2000s.

The available evidence does not suggest that the PLA has "captured" national policy in this arena. Instead, the PLA has exercised more limited bureaucratic influence in line with existing national policies. The PLA has not pushed for China to initiate new territorial claims nor to expand the content of its existing claims, with exception of the interpretation of certain aspects of UNCLOS. The PLA has not blocked China's past compromises in territorial disputes, including those throughout the 1990s and in the early 2000s. To the degree that more assertive postures have been adopted in specific disputes, these postures reflect the shared preferences of the PLA and China's top leaders.

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