

Rethinking East Asian Regional Order and China's Rise*

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Abstract

After the end of World War II, East Asia gradually formed what can be referred to as a quasi-anarchical regional order. The quasi-anarchy system is defined by the anarchy system associated with a sub-hierarchical system, so this system possesses the characteristics of both anarchy and hierarchy in terms of security relations among states. The states in a quasi-anarchical order can be differentiated into three types according to the method through which they seek security. They comprise that of self-help states, the state that provides security guarantees to client states (security guarantor), and states that receive security protection from the security guarantor (client states) within the quasi-anarchy. The standard security relationship between states consists of two types: the first is a competitive security relationship; the second is a security-dependent relationship. The quasi-anarchical order in East Asia has restricted the continuance and positive effect of a rising China's reassurance policy through three mechanisms: dependence, reliance on support, and imitation.

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, Chinese economic and military capabilities have gradually increased, resulting in rising strategic concerns on the part of East Asian states.¹ To construct a favorable regional security environment, since the middle

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¹ In this article, East Asian states refer to China, Japan, South Korea, North Korea, ASEAN states, and the United States.

of the 1990s China has consistently worked to try to reduce the concerns of its neighboring states, and, in October of 2003, it formally promised to pursue a policy of bringing harmony, security and prosperity to neighbors,² which it immediately began to implement.³ For example, in November 2002, China signed the *Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea* with ASEAN, alleviating the conflict between China and several ASEAN states over the South China Sea, and representing a comprehensive improvement in ties between China and ASEAN.⁴ More recently, in June of 2008, China and Japan reached a consensus in principle on the East Sea, the two states agreeing to cooperate to the extent that they do not damage one another's legal positions during the transitional period before the boundary is demarcated.⁵

However, it is often difficult for China to maintain its reassurance policy, and the positive effects of the policy are often short-lived.⁶ For example, after 2004, the dispute over the South China Sea between China and the states of Southeast Asia gradually flared up once again, and from 2009 to 2012 bilateral disputes continued to emerge between China and Vietnam and China and the Philippines.⁷ The tensions between China and Japan also flared up over Japan's arrest of the captain of a Chinese fishing boat in waters near the Diaoyu Islands in September 2010, and the Japanese central

² On the proposal of China's policy, see Wen Jiabao, 'China's Development and the Revitalization of Asia', speech at the ASEAN Business and Investment Summit, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/gjhdq/gjhdqzz/lhg_14/zyjh/t27173.htm. China's policy of 'bringing harmony, security and prosperity to neighbors' is actually the same as reassurance policies as discussed in international relations theory. Theoretically speaking, a reassurance policy refers to efforts by one state to the fears that other states have with respect to its intentions (capabilities) in principle and practice. See Tang Shiping, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Times: Defensive Realism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 132. For the sake of simplicity, this article uses the term reassurance policy to refer to China's policy of 'friendship, peace and security between neighbors'.

³ On China's reassurance policy towards ASEAN states, see David Shambaugh, 'China Engages Asia: Reshaping the Regional Order', *International Security*, 29, 3 (2004/05): 64–99; Sun Xuefeng, 'Why Does China Reassure South-East Asia', *Pacific Focus*, 24, 3 (2009): 298–316.

⁴ See Shi Jiazhu, 'Nanhai jianli xinren cuoshi yu quyuan anquan (Trust Building Measures in the South China Sea and Regional Security)', *Guoji guancha (International Observer)*, 1 (2004): 42–7; D. M. Jones and M. L. R. Smith, 'Making Progress, Not Progress ASEAN and the Evolving East Asian Regional Order', *International Security*, 32, 1 (2007): 178–9; M. Taylor Fravel, 'Power Shifts and Escalation Explaining China's Use of Force in Territorial Disputes', *International Security*, 32, 3 (2007/2008): 44–83.

⁵ 'China and Japan Reach a Consensus in Principle on the East Sea', <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/xwfw/fyrth/t448568.htm>.

⁶ The core objective of China's reassurance strategy is to weaken concerns on the part of other states in the region related to the rise in Chinese power, to lessen security pressures on China to the greatest extent possible, and to maintain an advantageous regional security environment. As such, the means by which this article considers the effectiveness of China's reassurance policy is by looking to see whether China's security pressures are increasing. Specifically, this might include: actions by states in strengthening their sovereign territorial claims; or strategic adjustments or measures taken in response to China.

⁷ International Crisis Group, 'Stirring up the South China Sea (II): Regional Responses', Asian Report No. 229, 24 July 2012, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/north-east-asia/229-stirring-up-the-south-china-sea-ii-regional-responses](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/north-east-asia/229-stirring-up-the-south-china-sea-ii-regional-responses).

government buying the Diaoyu Islands from private Japanese owners in September 2012.⁸

It has been argued that to achieve an ideal effect, China's reassurance policy must simultaneously satisfy the core security interests of East Asian states and the United States.⁹ The flaw with such arguments is that they cannot explain why China's reassurance policy has only short-term effects. A more common argument holds that the limited effectiveness of China's reassurance policy is rooted in the security dilemma.¹⁰ However, the theory of security dilemma cannot be applied to the security contradictions between China and East Asian states.

First, following the conclusion of the Cold War, the rapid rise of Chinese power caused the gradual expansion of China's security interests which continues to present. Against the background of an obviously changing range of security interests, in practice it is very difficult to determine whether China's behavior is intentionally damaging the security interests of its neighbors. One necessary condition for the security dilemma theory is that the strategic intentions of all relevant states are benign, that is that they do not purposely damage the security of other states.¹¹ For this reason, there is a need to carefully discuss whether the theory of security dilemma can be applied to explain the security contradictions between China and East Asian states.

Second, as Chinese capabilities continue to increase, China's territorial disputes in East Asia continue to become the most salient security contradictions in its bilateral relations throughout the region. Central to a territorial dispute is that both parties to the dispute do not recognize the territorial claims advanced by the other party. Such behavior inherently implies that both parties to the dispute purposely damage one another's security, and as such the necessary condition of the security dilemma is not met. In other words, the security dilemma does not apply to security disputes over sovereign territory between China and its neighbors.

Even if we were to acknowledge that China's security contradictions with East Asian states are primarily rooted in the security dilemma, the puzzle as to why East Asian states are so concerned that China will damage their security interests remains. If we argue that it is because China's capabilities are increasing, why would the East Asian states not fear the much more powerful United States? Perhaps some might emphasize

⁸ 'More Protests in China Over Japan and Islands', *New York Times*, 18 September 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/19/world/asia/china-warns-japan-over-island-dispute.html>.

⁹ Sun Xuefeng, 'The Efficiency of China's Multilateral Policies in East Asia (1997–2007)', *International Relations of Asia Pacific*, 10, 3 (2010): 515–41.

¹⁰ Shi Yinhong, 'Dongya de "Anquan Liangnan" yu Chulu (East Asia's "Security Dilemma" and Paths Forward)', *Nanjing zhengzhi xueyuan xuebao (Journal of Nanjing Institute of Politics)*, 6 (2000): 48–51; Thomas J. Christensen, 'China, the US–Japan Alliance and the Security Dilemma in East Asia', *International Security*, 23, 4 (1999): 49–80.

¹¹ On the necessary conditions for the application of the security dilemma theory, see Tang Shiping, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Times: Defensive Realism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 42; For additional details, also see Robert Jervis, 'Dilemmas About Security Dilemmas', *Security Studies*, 20, 3 (2011): 421.

that it is impossible to check US power,¹² and over the past 60 years the United States has provided a reliable security umbrella for its allies and partners in East Asia. Thus, the more interesting question is why these states are so dependent on the United States? Does this imply that these states have now shifted to rely primarily on an external force to maintain their security? What does this shift imply for China to be effective in its effort to maintain a reassurance policy towards East Asia?

This article takes the characteristics of East Asian regional order as its starting point to consider external constraints on the long-term effectiveness of China's regional reassurance policy. The author finds that the East Asia is neither a classical anarchical system, nor a pure hierarchy, but that it is characterized by a quasi-anarchical order. A quasi-anarchical order refers to an anarchical system with a hierarchical sub-system, which demonstrates the characteristics of both anarchical and hierarchical systems in terms of security relations. The reasons why China's reassurance policy is not effective over the long term is rooted in the quasi-anarchical nature of the East Asia system.

Following this introduction, this article is divided into four additional sections. The next section defines the quasi-anarchic order and then demonstrates that the East Asian system in fact represents quasi-anarchy. The third section explains how the quasi-anarchical order in East Asia limits the efficiency of China's reassurance policy; the fourth section offers a case study which analyzes the shifting efficiency of China's reassurance policy with respect to the issue of the South China Sea. The last section offers a conclusion and its policy implications.

The quasi-anarchical order in East Asia

The quasi-anarchical system¹³ is an anarchical system which encompasses a hierarchical sub-system in security issues. In this section, the author applies the concept of quasi-anarchy to describe and define the regional order in East Asia, which has exerted substantial structural constraints on China's rise since the end of the Cold War.

Defining quasi-anarchical system

The most important assumption in international relations theory is that the international system is anarchic. This implies that among the sovereign states that make up the international system, there is no central authority with a monopoly on the use of violent force. As such, under a system of anarchy, sovereign states have the equivalent basic function: relying on their own capabilities to ensure national survival. In other words, sovereign states in the international system are all self-help actors. As

¹² For an overview of relevant literature, see Sun Xuefeng, *Zhongguo jueqi kunjing (The Dilemma of China's Rise)* (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2011), pp. 7–8.

¹³ In discussions of domestic social order and the evolution of international law, both Michael Taylor and Kazuko Hirose have used the concept of quasi-anarchy. See Michael Taylor, *Community, Anarchy, and Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 4, 38; Kazuko Hirose, *A Social Theory of International Law: International Relations as a Complex System* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2003), p. 158. But neither of these two scholars have clearly defined quasi anarchy.

a result, security relations among states are extremely competitive.¹⁴ States may choose to form alliances with other states to collectively respond to major external security threats, but external allies generally can only be a supplementary force in response to these security threats, and the duration of an alliance often does not surpass one generation (20–30 years). Alliances shift and change regularly in their focus, and after a common threat is exterminated, they tend to dissolve.¹⁵ One classic example is the dissolution after the end of World War II of the alliance against fascism.

However, under a quasi-anarchical system, a group of sovereign states largely give up their autonomy in the provision of security, either because they are so weak or to save on the costs of maintaining security, and this illustrates the characteristics of a client state. A client state refers to a state which depends on support and protection from a great power when it comes to responding to core strategic threats.¹⁶ In other words, in a quasi-anarchical system, there is a security guarantor to ensure the national survival of the client states. The security guarantor extends its security protection through military alliances, the establishment of military bases, and an integrated military command system. The client states provide all necessary support within their capabilities to the security guarantor so that it can achieve its security mission.

It is not difficult to see that a hierarchical relationship exists between states the security guarantor and the client states. While the security guarantor is in a position of leadership, the client states are in a position of subordination.¹⁷ For this reason, alliances between the security guarantor and client states tend to be long term, and even should the security threat which first prompted the creation of an alliance disappear, the parties to the alliance will work to identify a new threat to maintain it because neither state desires to leave the alliance. For the client states, many years of receiving security increases the level of dependency on the security guarantor; for the security guarantor, it can take advantage of the dependency of the client states in order to maintain its privileged place in the hierarchy, and can utilize the resources of the client states to decrease its security burden. Since World War II, the relationship between the United

¹⁴ See Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Beijing: Peiking University Press, 2004, reprint edition), chapter 5; John Mearshiemer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), chapter 2; Robert Art and Robert Jervis, 'Anarchy and Its Consequences', in Robert Art and Robert Jervis (eds.), *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues* (New York: Longman, 1999), pp. 2–4.

¹⁵ On the process of shifting alliances of states under the anarchic system in modern Europe, see A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); On shifting alliances of states under anarchy in China during the Warring States Period, see Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), chapter 2.

¹⁶ It is important to point out that these states continue to exhibit the behaviors of independent sovereign states in the areas of trade and finance. For example, Japan is dependent on the US in terms of security, and in this area it is a classic client state; in the economic and financial realms, Japan continues to maintain its own clearly independent position.

¹⁷ For the hierarchy in international relations, see David Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

States and other members of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO) represent a classical case of the security hierarchy, with the United States as the security guarantor and the European countries as the client states.

In addition to the security guarantor and the client states, in the quasi-anarchical system there is another group of states (including both great powers and small and medium sized states) which rely on their own capabilities to maintain their security. Together with the sub-hierarchy system led by the security guarantor, these self-help states collectively form a classical anarchic system with rather intense security competition among them. If the power of one self-help state within the system grows quickly, security competition within the system will be particularly intense.

For self-help states, they are mainly concerned that a rising self-help state will damage their capacity to self-preservation and pose a serious threat to their security. In order to respond to a threat from a rising state, in addition to increasing their own capacity, these states also seek strategic cooperation with the security guarantor. It is important to recognize that such cooperation between self-help states and the security guarantor does not imply that they join the hierarchical sub-system led by the security guarantor. As for the security guarantor, its key concern is that its power advantage will be diluted or reversed, and that the security hierarchy will gradually loosen and ultimately dissolve, causing the loss of its dominant position over the long term. For this reason, it uses its hierarchical system and the worries of other self-help states to check the expanding power of rising powers. As for the states within the hierarchy, they can take advantage of the security guarantor's protection to compete with rising powers, especially with respect to territorial disputes with great powers, where they can gain an advantage and realize core security interests while at the same time creating more space for the security guarantor to offer support.

In sum, the quasi-anarchical system is an anarchical system within which there exists a hierarchical sub-system in terms of security relations among related states. As such, the quasi-anarchic system illustrates the characteristics of both anarchy and hierarchy. States within such a quasi-anarchical system can be divided into three different types according to the means by which they seek security: (1) the security guarantor which not only are capable of self-defense, but which can also provide security guarantees to the client states; (2) client states which have difficulty responding to major security threats, and must depend on protection from the security guarantor; (3) self-help states which rely on their own capacity to deter threats, but are not able to provide security to other states. In terms of the security relations between states, there are two types of relations which predominate in quasi-anarchy: the first is competitive security relations, which are between two self-help states and between self-help states and the security guarantor or the client states; the second is relations of security dependence, which are found between the client states and the security guarantor within the hierarchical subsystem.

The quasi-anarchical order in East Asia

During the Cold War, Asian allies and most ASEAN states relied primarily on US military assistance and security protection,¹⁸ and their security dependency was quite apparent. In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the situation changed slightly, but soon returned to the Cold War status quo, with United States' East Asian allies or strategic partners (including Japan, Korea, Philippines, Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia) trending towards increased security dependence on the United States, increasingly constituting a hierarchical sub-system, with the East Asian states subordinate to the United States. The security alliance between these states and the United States is still evident, and has tended towards deepening; the United States maintains a visible, large-scale military presence in these countries, or has military bases on their soil. Further, the significance of the US security guarantee has become more evident, as these countries are increasingly dependent on US strategic protection from threats by great powers, from small and medium sized states, or even from internal threats.

For example, in October 2009, when then Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio proposed the concept of the East Asian Community, he especially emphasized that as Japan deepened its relations with Asian states (especially China) that it must depend on the Japanese–US alliance.¹⁹ In August of 2011, the Japanese government issued the Self-Defense White Paper, which emphasized even more that the Japanese–US alliance is critical for maintaining peace and stability for Japan and the Asia Pacific Region, and that it would deepen its alliance with the United States in the future.²⁰

To offer another example, facing concerns related to North Korean nuclear missiles, South Korea continues to depend on the ROC-US military alliance. In June of 2009, during his visit to the United States, Lee Myung-bak noted that the ROK-US alliance is critical for resolving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) nuclear and missile threats. He is expected to seek a written promise of continued US nuclear protection.²¹ In November of 2011, the ROK government announced that the ROK Army planned to construct a new military facility at Paekyong Island, west of DPRK territorial waters in order to accommodate an US military deployment in the event of an emergency situation or a military exercise.²²

To offer a further example, at the Nuclear Security Summit held in April 2010, President Arroyo of the Philippines expressed her desire for a US guarantee to prevent a

¹⁸ Yan Xuetong *et al.*, *Zhongguo yu Yatai anquan (China and Asia-Pacific Security)* (Beijing: Shishi chubanshe, 1999), pp. 165–6.

¹⁹ 'Hatoyama Yukio Admits Japanese Dependence on America at Sino-Japanese-Korean Summit', 10 October 2009, <http://news.163.com/09/1010/14/5L95T5QG000120GU.html>.

²⁰ Ministry of Defence of Japan, *Defence of Japan 2011*, pp. 264–311, http://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/e-book/2011/_SWF_Window.html.

²¹ Blaine Harden, 'South Korea Seeks Assurances of US Nuclear Protection', *Washington Post*, 16 June 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/15/AR2009061500944.html>.

²² 'The ROK Plans to Establish American Base in the West Islands to Respond to Crisis or for Military Exercises', <http://news.sohu.com/20111114/n325480665.shtml>.

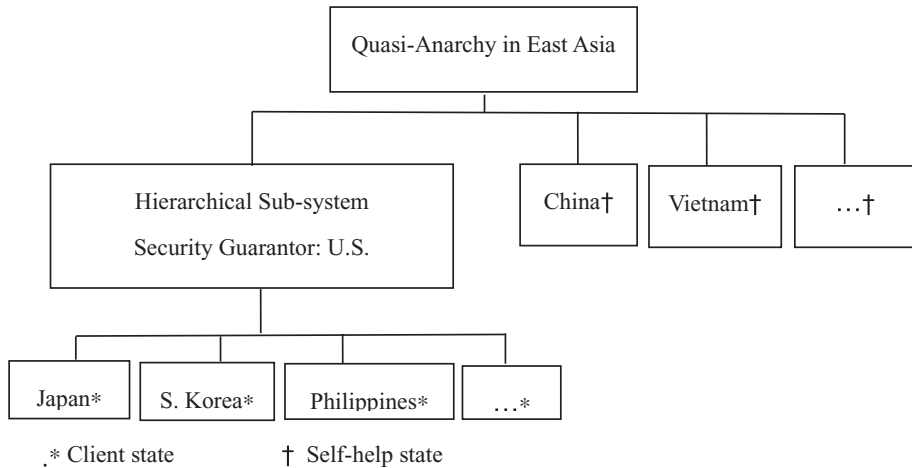


Figure 1. *The quasi-anarchical system in East Asia*

recurrence of the 2009 post-electoral violence that left 46 people dead.²³ On 2 July 2012, the Philippine President Aquino told Reuters in an interview that the Philippines may ask the United States to deploy spy planes over the South China Sea to help monitor the disputed waters because the Philippines does not have aircraft with those capabilities. Aquino also said he would not object to an increased ‘rotational tempo’ for US military forces in his country to help train their Filipino counterparts.²⁴

In addition to the security guarantor and client states, there are a number of self-help states in the East Asia that depend on their own capabilities for security, including China, North Korea, and Vietnam. There is obvious security competition both between these states and the US dominated hierarchy, with the most traditional form of competition being between the US and China, the self-help state rising most rapidly and the primary security guarantor to the region. In the face of increasing Chinese power, the United States is worried that its leadership position in the region will be weakened.²⁵ These strategic concerns have caused the United States to become more actively involved in security disputes between China and US allies, and to work to contain expanding Chinese influence by directly providing security or advocating for cooperation between its allies. This has increased security competition in the East Asia.

²³ <http://news.sohu.com/s2010/hefenghui/>.

²⁴ Manuel Mogato and Stuart Grudgings, ‘Philippines May Ask for US Spy Planes over South China Sea’, 2 July 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/02/us-philippines-aquino-southchina-idUSBRE861oH020120702>.

²⁵ Evan S. Medeiros, *China’s International Behavior: Activism, Opportunism, and Diversification* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009), p. 211.

The self-help states in East Asia have regular security competition with the client states that are dependent on an external security umbrella. For example, China and the Philippines face security conflicts over the South China Sea; China and Japan over the East Sea; and China, the ROK, and Japan over security conflicts related to DPRK efforts to develop nuclear weapons. In the face of these major security threats, the client states look primarily to the United States for support and protection.

There are also obvious security conflicts between the self-help states in East Asia. A classical example of this is China and Vietnam, whose security relations have deteriorated as a result of the dispute over the South China Sea. At the same time, China and the DPRK are also at odds with one another over the DPRK's efforts to obtain nuclear weapons. These security disputes will result in self-help small states (such as Vietnam) taking steps to cooperate with the regional security guarantor (the United States) or with the states under the security guarantor's protection in order to respond to their external security threats. Such cooperation does not imply though that these states (i.e. Vietnam) necessarily lose their self-help and become integrated into US-led hierarchal sub-system.

In sum, the regional security framework in East Asia clearly exhibits the characteristics of quasi-anarchy. Based on the ways in which they seek security, the states of East Asia can be divided into three categories: the United States is the regional security guarantor; the East Asian allies of the United States are client states; the other states, such as China, are self-help. In terms of security relations between states in the region, East Asia continues to face security competition, while dependencies also continue to exist in the region (between the United States and its allies). In other words, the East Asian framework exhibits both characteristics of anarchy and hierarchy, and is a classical example of a quasi-anarchical system.

Quasi-anarchical order and the efficiency of a rising China's reassurance policy

This section analyzes how the quasi-anarchical system presents difficulties for the continued efficiency of a rising China's reassurance policy.²⁶ The author identifies three mechanisms (dependence, reliance on support, and imitation) through which the quasi-anarchical order in East Asia constrain the efficiency of China's regional reassurance policy.

²⁶ Both anonymous reviewers of this revised version challenge the relevance of the quasi-anarchy to explain the success and failure of China's policy. I fully understand their concerns and agree with them that the structural factor cannot fully explain the failure of a policy in real life. The aim of this article is precisely to identify the mechanisms that the regional structure constrains on the efficiency China's regional reassurance policies and explore the strategic efficiency of China's reassurance policy under the quasi-anarchical order. For the explanation based on China's strategy, see Sun Xuefeng, 'The Efficiency of China's Multilateral Policies in East Asia (1997–2007)', pp. 515–41.

Dependency

As China's reassurance policy ease its security contradictions with the client states, these client states within the US security hierarchy seek to rely on support and guarantees from the United States to demonstrate their power to China and gain a position of advantage in the security competition with China. They do so, as improvement in disputes with China does not imply the resolution of deeper security contradictions, while the US fundamentally can provide an effective security guarantee. For example, just three months after China joined the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (January 2004), the United States and the Philippines staged their first joint exercise in the South China Sea, identifying the objective of the exercises as preventing a foreign invasion. President Arroyo of the Philippines publically acknowledged that the US army was training Filipino troops to defend against China and protect the Spratly Islands.²⁷

In addition, as China takes advantage of regional economic cooperation to reassure its neighbors, commercial and trade ties between China and other Asian states deepen, and economic dependence on China gradually increases. As long as security contradictions have not been completely resolved, economic dependence will deepen the concerns of these states. They worry their continued complicity with China's reassurance policy will have negative impacts on their ability to maintain their core interests in the future. This encourages these states to take advantage of the US security guarantee to shape a more favorable environment for their security competition with China, ultimately preventing China from using its comparative power advantage to damage their core security interests.

The provocative behaviors of the client states also weakens China's determination to adhere to its reassurance policy. On the one hand, with the serious security competition that prevails under the quasi-anarchical East Asian system, it is hard for China, which seeks security independently, not to respond to challenges to its core security interests (especially with respect to territorial disputes). On the other hand, the declining efficiency of the reassurance policy also increase domestic pressures to take more efficient policies. From China's perspective, the reassurance policy is fundamentally incapable of changing the provocative policies of the client states in Taking this as a given, China assumes that if it does not respond in a timely fashion, not only will its sovereign interests be excessively encroached upon, but its national dignity will be damaged, provoking massive societal pressures domestically. As a result, China will adopt necessary measures to respond in turn to competitive actions taken by the client states in the region.

However, a targeted response by China is not able to compel those client states to halt challenging China's core interests, and will only result in deepening tensions in China's security relations with these states. The reason for this is that in the end the United States will ultimately provide robust security guarantees to these states which

²⁷ US AP, Manila Cable, 3 April 2004, cited in Zheng Zemin, *Nanhai wenti zhong de daguo yinsu (Great Power Elements of the South China Sea Issue)* (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 2010), p. 85.

allow them to continue to resist China. As for the United States, its incentive to support its allies in the region is to maintain its leadership within the security hierarchy of the region.²⁸ Just as the US naval commander Admiral Carney noted on the South China Sea, the US has already dispatched forces to the Western Pacific and the South China Sea for 50 to 60 years. The United States still wants to maintain its military power in the region as before, and has no desire to step back from such military actions.²⁹ It is important to recognize that the hard response of the US towards China will embolden the client states under the US security umbrella to implement policies of resistance *vis-à-vis* China in support of the US policy shift, deepening their reliance on US security, and thereby creating more favorable conditions to obtain the US protection in future times of need.³⁰ It should be clear that the existence of the US-led hierarchy seriously weakens the otherwise positive effects of China's reassurance policy.

Reliance on support

With improvement in their security contradictions with China, the self-help states in East Asia which have a direct contradiction with China will be concerned that the long-term improvement in the contradiction will ultimately place China in a favorable position (this is especially the case with territorial disputes). As Chinese power gradually expands and its position of advantage deepens, these self-help will be incapable of finding an effective security guarantee, and to the greatest extent possible will look for ways to enhance their capabilities. For instance, in December of 2009, the Vietnamese General Secretary Nguyen Minh Triet demanded that the Vietnamese army rapidly modernize, and protect the state as the situation in the South China Sea becomes more and more tense.³¹

However, the relative gap that these states face *vis-à-vis* China in terms of national power determines that they must find external assistance. For example, in October of 2011, Vietnam and India signed an agreement for cooperation in the joint development of offshore oil resources in disputed waters in the South China Sea.³² More importantly, these self-help states will also leverage the security contradictions between China and the client states in the hierarchical subsystem to check the expansion of Chinese influence. For example, in January of 2004, three months after the US–Philippines Joint Military Exercises, Vietnam organized a group of 60 tourists and 40 ‘invited’ government officials to tour the Spratly Islands to illustrate its ‘effective application of sovereignty’ over the

²⁸ Robert Jervis, ‘Dilemmas About Security Dilemmas’, p. 419.

²⁹ ‘Despite Strong Chinese Opposition, Three American Carriers Port at Danang for Military Exercises’, <http://www.zaobao.com/special/china/southchinasea/pages/southchinasea110716.shtml>.

³⁰ Thanks to Dr. Liu Feng for his reminder.

³¹ ‘Vietnamese President Demands that the Military Rapidly Modernize to Respond to Challenges in the South China Sea’, 23 December 2009, <http://military.people.com.cn/GB/1077/52987/10635531.html>.

³² ‘The US, Japan and India Continue to Interfere in the South China Sea Dispute: Their Goal is to Counter China’, 15 October 2011, <http://world.people.com.cn/GB/15905006.html>.

islands.³³ It also invited oil companies from the United States and other countries to participate in the joint development of disputed parts of the South China Sea. It is not difficult to see that such actions which exploit deep contradictions can lessen the extent of China's attention to security competition with these self-help states, while weakening the legitimacy of a hard-line response on the part of China. If China adopts a hard-line towards these states, it will give the international community the negative impression that China does not dare stand up against the US-led hierarchy.

Even though it may be difficult to adopt measures which can transcend the US alliance, in the face of security challenges from these self-help states, China will inevitably move to check any actions which will damage its core security interests, and, as a result, bilateral security contradictions will flare up once again and China's reassurance policy will fail. However, it is important to observe that as other self-help states can only lean on the United States, but cannot obtain an effective US security guarantee, they will not enjoy long-term improvement in the security situation. So they must adopt measures to prevent the complete deterioration of security relations with China, which could inflict unbearable harm on their security.

Imitation

For self-help states in East Asia which have security contradictions with China, but face the greatest challenge from the US-led hierarchical system, they will look to China for assistance in alleviating their core security threats. They especially hope that China will imitate the United States by offering an effective security guarantee to them. China's reassurance policy generally can only ensure that there is not a sharp rise in the security threats faced by these states, and is incapable of effectively reducing the major external threats they face. The reason for this is that not only do China and these states face a serious common external threat, but there are also security contradictions between China and these states. As such, it is difficult for China to intimate the United States to extend security guarantee to these states. As a result, it is only natural that these countries become increasingly certain that China's reassurance policy will ultimately damage their core security interests, and as a result are not willing to support China's reassurance policy over the long term.

It should be observed that the primary adversary that these countries face, namely the United States and the self-help states within the US-led hierarchy, are all dissatisfied with China's reassurance policy, which they see as a barrier to their adversaries abandoning provocative policies. As a result, the United States and its allies demand that China abandon its reassurance policy, and adopt even more hard-line policies to force their adversaries to change their provocative policies. Under these two kinds of pressures, not only does it become difficult for China's reassurance policy to provide long-term results, the policy itself is further rendered untenable. China's failed attempts

³³ Wu Shicun, *Zonglun nansha zhengduan (On the South China Sea Dispute)* (Haikou: Hainan chubanshe, 2005), p. 121.

to respond to the North Korea nuclear issue through the Six Party Talks from 2006 to 2008 is a perfect example of this.³⁴

China's reassurance policy in the South China Sea

In this section, I select the efficiency of China's reassurance policy with respect to the South China Sea in the wake of the Cold War as a case to test the key hypotheses and mechanisms identified in this article.³⁵ There are three key reasons why we select the case of China's reassurance policy towards the South China Sea.

First, the South China Sea involves all types of states and security cooperation found in the quasi-anarchical system. It involves the client state (the Philippines), self-help states (Vietnam and China), and the security guarantor (the United States). In terms of types of security relations, it includes relations between the client state and the security guarantor within the hierarchy (United States–Philippines); relations categorized by security competition between states (competitive relations between self-help states, China–Vietnam, China–the United States); and security competition between the self-help states and the client states (China–the Philippines).

Second, following the Cold War, the dispute over the South China Sea went through cycles of tension, improvement, tension, which is useful in terms of helping us to identify the critical points in the changing dispute, and to conduct more concentrated comparative analysis. Third, the case has great empirical importance. As the issue of Taiwan is gradually resolved, the issue of the South China Sea is increasingly becoming the issue of greatest strategic significance to East Asian regional security and China's regional diplomacy. An in depth understanding of the limitations of China's reassurance policy in the South China Sea will help us to better understand the factors constraining regional stability and China's regional policy adjustments.

Initial success

The dispute over the sovereignty of the islands in the South China Sea represents the first multi-lateral territorial dispute faced by China. In February of 1995, the Mischief Reef incident brought tensions to a climax.³⁶ Following the incident, the government of the Philippines demanded that the issue be referred to the United Nations Security Council and the International Court of Justice. Vietnam also issued a statement which claimed that China's actions were extremely serious, and had made the situation in the Spratly Islands even more problematic. On 18 March 1995, ASEAN issued a *Statement on Recent Developments in the South China Sea*, which expressed the concern of ASEAN

³⁴ Sun Xuefeng, 'The Efficiency of China's Multilateral Policies in East Asia (1997–2007)', pp. 528–31.

³⁵ In the case of the dispute over the South China Sea, the imitation mechanism is less evident. China's involvement in the Korean nuclear issue can provide more evidence of this, and for more on this see Sun Xuefeng, 'The Efficiency of China's Multilateral Policies in East Asia (1997–2007)', pp. 528–31.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 266–7.

regarding the matter, and urged the parties involved not to take any actions which would undermine regional stability.³⁷

The emergence of the dispute between China and several ASEAN states over the South China Sea caused the ‘China threat theory’ to become quite popular among ASEAN countries. In order to reduce the security pressures from the ASEAN states, China started to experiment with adjusting its East Asian regional policy to reassure its neighboring states and stabilize the dispute over the South China Sea.

In July of 1997, following the outbreak of the Asian Financial Crisis, China provided over 4 billion US dollars of assistance to Thailand and other impacted countries through the International Monetary Fund and bilateral channels. It also provided Indonesia with export credit and emergency medical assistance. At the same time, with a view towards maintaining regional stability and peace, China resolved not to depreciate its currency, a major contribution to fiscal and economic stability in Asia.³⁸ Some years later, the Ambassador of Malaysia to the PRC, Datuk Syed Zaman expressed thanks on behalf of Malaysia to the Chinese government for not depreciating its currency after the 1997 Financial Crisis, noting that this played a critical role in helping the Malaysian economy recover.³⁹

However, it was not long before some ASEAN states began to worry that China’s entry into the World Trade Organization would result in a shock for the economies of Southeast Asia.⁴⁰ In response, China proposed the establishment of the China–ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, and at the end of 2002 it signed the *Framework Agreement for Economic Cooperation between China and ASEAN*. The official signing of the *Framework Agreement* greatly stimulated the growth of the total amount of trade between China and ASEAN. By 2005, trade between China and ASEAN increased from 54.77 billion US dollars in 2002 to 113.4 billion US dollars.⁴¹ This also helped promote industrial development in ASEAN (for example, the electronics industry in the Philippines.)⁴²

As it promoted economic cooperation with ASEAN, China also adopted positive measures to advance resolution of the dispute over the South China Sea. This helped

³⁷ Ibid., p. 266.

³⁸ ‘In the Face of the Asian Financial Crisis, China Adopts Positive Policy’, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/ziliao/wjs/t8973.htm>.

³⁹ An Shilian, ‘Reforms of Four Countries in Crisis’, <http://finance.sina.com.cn/g/20070701/10433742259.shtml>.

⁴⁰ You Anshan, ‘Lun jianli Zhongguo–Dongmeng ziyou maoyiqu de biranxing ji qianjing (On the Necessity of and Prospects for Establishing a China–ASEAN Free Trade Zone)’, *Shijie jingji yanjiu (World Economic Research)*, 9 (2003): 77; Jenny Clegg, *China’s Global Strategy: Towards a Multi-Polar World*, trans. Ge Xuelei (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 2010), pp. 113–14.

⁴¹ Tang Tang, ‘Dongmeng guojia dui Zhongguo Dongmeng ziyou maoyiqu de yilu ji yuanyin fenxi (Explaining Concerns of ASEAN Countries over the China–ASEAN Free Trade Zone)’, MA thesis, Tsinghua University, June 2010, p. 1.

⁴² Jenny Clegg, *China’s Global Strategy: Towards a Multi-Polar World*, p. 115.

to improve China's image among ASEAN states, which responded quite positively.⁴³ In March of 1999, China and the Philippines established a 'Working Meeting to Build Trust between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea', opening a significant channel for the two sides to discuss the South China Sea dispute.⁴⁴ In December of 2000, China and Vietnam signed the *China-Vietnam Beibu Gulf Demarcation Agreement* and the *China-Vietnam Beibu Gulf Fishery Cooperation Agreement*. In addition, Chinese and Vietnamese maritime experts also engaged in several rounds of small group discussions on the South China Sea.⁴⁵

Related to this, China also took a number of concrete steps to increase the level of political trust with ASEAN states. First, in November 2002, China and ASEAN signed the *Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea*.⁴⁶ The Declaration emphasized that the Parties concerned undertake to resolve their territorial and jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means, without resorting to the threat or use of force.⁴⁷ The General Secretary of ASEAN Rodolfo Severino noted that the Declaration marked the emergence of the new code of conduct for the parties, which would help prevent the dispute over the South China Sea from spiraling into open conflict.⁴⁸ In addition, in October 2003, China became the first major non-ASEAN state to enter the *ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation* (TAC). China and ASEAN went on to sign the *China-ASEAN Joint Statement on Strategic Partnership*, declaring the establishment of a strategic partnership relationship towards building peace and prosperity.⁴⁹

From success to failure

It is important to note that this period represented a comprehensive improvement in relations, but not a more fundamental resolution of the issue of concern to the parties to the dispute. As Chinese power continued to rise, the concerns of some claimant states to the South China Sea began to change, and they started to depend on or look to the United States for support to secure their sovereignty over the South China Sea. For example, in January of 2004, President Arroyo of the Philippines publicly acknowledged that the US army was training Filipino troops how to resist China.⁵⁰ At the same time, Vietnam took advantage of the moment to strengthen its sovereign

⁴³ Leszek Buszynski, 'ASEAN, the Declaration on Conduct, and the South China Sea', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 25, 3 (2003): 354; Ho Khai Leong, 'Rituals, Risks and Rivalries: China and ASEAN in the Coming Decades', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 10, No. 29, 2001, p. 686.

⁴⁴ Wang Guanghou, *Lengzhanhou Zhongguo Dongmeng zhanlue guanxi yanjiu (Post-Cold War China-ASEAN Strategic Relations)* (Changchun: Jilin daxue chubanshe, 2008), p. 171.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁴⁷ *Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea*, <http://www.aseansec.org/13163.htm>.

⁴⁸ 'Landmark Pact on Spratly up for Signing', *The Manila Times*, 4 November 2002, cited in Wu Shicun, *On the South China Sea Dispute*, p. 265.

⁴⁹ 'China Enters the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Deepens Mutual Trust with ASEAN', 26 October 2007, http://www.china.com.cn/economic/zhuanti/dm/2007-10/26/content_9128905.htm.

⁵⁰ US AP, Manila Cable, 3 April 2004, in Zheng Zemin, *Nanhai wenti Zhong de Daguo Yinsu (Great Power Elements of the South China Sea Issue)*, p. 85.

presence in the South China Sea.⁵¹ These actions created conditions for an escalation of the South China Sea dispute.⁵²

In July of 2008, Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi said at the China–ASEAN Minister’s meeting that in order to implement the *Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea* that all parties to the South China Sea dispute would need to engage in dialogue, and advance concrete cooperation and joint development of the South China Sea.⁵³ However, according to the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the principles determined by states bound by the Convention, 13 May 2009 was the deadline for maritime states to submit information on the 200 nautical mile boundary of their continental shelf to the United Nations Commission for the Delimitation of the Continental Shelf. As they were concerned that they would be at a disadvantage *vis-à-vis* China in the future with respect to the dispute over delimitation of the South China Sea, beginning from 2009, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia declared their sovereignty by issuing the domestic laws on their territorial sea baseline.

On 10 March the President of the Philippines officially signed the *Territorial Baseline Law*, which identified some of China’s Spratly Islands and Huangyan Islands as territory of the Philippines.⁵⁴ At the same time, the government of the Philippines also noted that six states (or territories) maintained sovereignty over the Spratly Islands, and that it must inform these other countries of its intent to maintain its sovereignty, as doing so is only proper.⁵⁵ On 25 April Vietnam appointed a Chairperson to the governmental organization with authority over the Spratly Islands.⁵⁶

China responded with resolute diplomatic action. On 11 March 2009, the Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines issued a statement expressing strong opposition and serious protest against ‘Territorial Baseline Law’ signed by Arroyo, and reaffirmed China’s historical sovereignty over the Huangyan and Spratly Islands.⁵⁷ On 12 May, in responding to the call to submit to the United Nations information about the exclusive economic zone and the boundary of the continental shelf, Speaker of the Foreign Ministry Mr Ma Chaoxu noted that China had submitted documents regarding the 200 nautical mile outer limit of its continental shelf in the East Sea. However, as China has indisputable sovereignty, sovereign rights and administrative rights over the islands of the South China Sea and their nearby waters, it did not submit such documentation for these islands. China did reserve the right to submit information and data regarding

⁵¹ Wu Shicun, *On the South China Sea Dispute*, p. 121.

⁵² Sun Xuefeng, *The Delimma of China’s Rise*, p. 162.

⁵³ ‘Yang Jiechi Attends China–ASEAN Foreign Minister’s Meeting’, 23 July 2008, http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2008-07/23/content_8754291.htm.

⁵⁴ http://www.senate.gov.ph/republic_acts/ra%209522.pdf.

⁵⁵ ‘President Signs Territorial Baseline Law, Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines Issues Strong Opposition and Serious Protest’, 12 March 2009, <http://ph.china-embassy.org/chn/flbxw/t541835.htm>.

⁵⁶ Li Ran and Chang Liming, ‘Vietnam Appoints Chairman of the Xisha Islands to “Declare Sovereignty”’, 27 April 2009, <http://world.people.com.cn/GB/9200831.html>.

⁵⁷ ‘President Signs Territorial Baseline Law, Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines Issues Strong Opposition and Serious Protest’, <http://ph.china-embassy.org/chn/flbxw/t541835.htm>.

the 200 nautical mile outer limit of its continental shelf in other areas in the future.⁵⁸ Ten days later, China dispatched a fleet of four fisheries patrol boats to the Beibu Gulf to monitor the moratorium on fishing in the South China Sea, and to demonstrate China's sovereign claim over the South China Sea.⁵⁹

During this same period, friction developed between China and the United States around the issue of whether US intelligence-gathering vessels were entering Chinese territorial waters illegally in the South China Sea and the Yellow Sea. However, because the dispute between China and ASEAN remained at the diplomatic level, frictions between China and the United States were insignificant compared to the incident involving a collision in the South China Sea. This was due in part to the fact that China and the United States were cooperating in response to the financial crisis.⁶⁰ As a result, the US was cautious with respect to the South China Sea, and avoided taking steps to become involved in the dispute. On 18 March 2009, US President Barak Obama told Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi that it was extremely important for China and the United States to engage in enhanced military dialogue in order to avoid accidental catastrophes in the future. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed her hope that China and the United States might enhance military ties, to guarantee that an unexpected incident would not result in an unpredictable outcome.⁶¹ On 4 June, during a visit to the Philippines, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates publically declared that the United States would not become involved in the dispute over sovereignty of the South China Sea.⁶²

The soft stance of the US helped to gradually alleviate the dispute over the South China Sea, but one year later, the US suddenly became involved in the South China Sea in a very high profile manner, causing conflict to break out once again. On 24 July 2010, Hillary Clinton attended the ASEAN Regional Forum in Vietnam, where she announced that the US was willing to support multi-lateral talks to resolve the dispute over the South China Sea. This statement was seen as the 'internationalization' of the dispute over the South China Sea, which was a major victory for Vietnam's foreign policy.⁶³ On 24 September, at the second US–ASEAN Leadership Summit, a joint statement was released which claimed that 'to guarantee regional peace and stability, maritime

⁵⁸ 'Speaker of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ma Chaoxu Holds Routine Press Conference', 12 May 2009, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/gxh/tyb/fyrbt/jzhsl/t561871.htm>.

⁵⁹ 'China's Fisheries Patrol Boats Travel to the Xisha Islands on the 23rd to Patrol the Beibu Gulf', http://bt.xinhuanet.com/2009-05/24/content_16613667.htm.

⁶⁰ 'Professor Claims Confrontation between Chinese and American Ships is Insignificant Compared to the Collision Incident', 13 March 2009, <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2009-03-13/1145545342.html>.

⁶¹ 'French Media: Impeccable Incident Harms Development of China – US Relations', 18 March 2009, <http://mil.eastday.com/m/20090318/u1a4250101.html>.

⁶² Cai Penghong, *Meiguo Nansha zhengce poxi (Analysis of American South China Sea Policy)*, p. 2.

⁶³ 'Offering to Aid Talks, US Challenges China on Disputed Islands', 24 July 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/24/world/asia/24diplo.html>.

security and freedom of navigation must be guaranteed'.⁶⁴ On 4 October 2010, the US Ambassador to the Philippines Harry Thomas publically stated that in order to resolve territorial disputes between ASEAN member states and China with respect to the South China Sea, the United States was willing to assist with the determination of a legally binding set of codes of conduct for the region.⁶⁵ Before releasing this statement, the US aircraft carrier the George Washington completed a joint US–ROK military exercise, after which it visited Danang, Vietnam, where the US and Vietnam engaged in a week-long joint military exercise in the South China Sea.⁶⁶

The change in US attitude was primarily a result of fears that the financial crisis might weaken the US dominant position in East Asia. First, the pace of development of China's navy and air force had picked up.⁶⁷ As the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen pointed out, China's military focus had gradually shifted from its army to its navy and air force, and as the Asia Pacific is the most important trade and economic zone, his view of the direction of China's development had already changed from curiosity into concern.⁶⁸

Second was the statement of China's core interests in the South China Sea. In March of 2010, the Japanese media report that during a visit to China, Jeffrey Bader, the Senior Director for Asia of the National Security Council, and James Steinburg, Assistant Secretary of State, were told by Chinese officials that the South China Sea represents China's core interests, similar to Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang. The Chinese government has never issued a policy to clarify this.⁶⁹ Regardless of whether the 'South China Sea is a core interest', this incident heightened US suspicions of China's East Asian security policy, and worries that US freedom of navigation in the South China Sea might be threatened. On 24 July 2010, Hillary Clinton publically stated at the ASEAN Regional Forum in Vietnam that the US would remain neutral with respect to the dispute over the islands of the South China Sea, but that maintaining freedom of navigation in the South China Sea related to US interests.⁷⁰ Analysts argue that Hillary

⁶⁴ 'Joint Statement of the 2ND US– ASEAN Leaders Meeting', 24 September 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/09/24/joint-statement-2nd-us-asean-leaders-meeting>.

⁶⁵ 'The South China Sea: America Shifts from a Neutral Position to High Profile Involvement', 15 December 2010, http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2010-12/15/c_12882125_2.htm.

⁶⁶ 'US and Vietnam Stage Joint Naval Activities', 10 August 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-10925061>.

⁶⁷ The US has always been extremely concerned about the increase in China's overSea investments, see Michael Swaine, *America's Challenge: Engaging a Rising China in the Twenty-First Century* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011), p. 6.

⁶⁸ Sun Xuefeng, *The Delimma of China's Rise*, p. 178.

⁶⁹ Edward Wong and Li Bibo, 'China Hedges Over Whether South China Sea is a "Core Interest" Worth War', *The New York Times*, 31 March 2010, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D0CEFD1230F932A05750CoA9679D8B63&&scp=2&sq=China%20%20national%20interest%20%20south%20China%20sea&st=cse>.

⁷⁰ 'Offering to Aid Talks, US Challenges China on Disputed Islands', 24 July 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/24/world/asia/24dipl.html>.

Clinton's statement illustrated US concerns that if China is not contained, it might change the strategic status quo in the region.⁷¹

The deep involvement by the United States made China realize the severity of the situation it faced in the South China Sea, and in late May 2011 the dispute between China and Vietnam and China and the Philippines became tense once again.⁷² From 28 to 30 July, China's largest and most advanced patrol boat carried out a three-day patrol mission, which had deep implications with respect to illustrating sovereignty.⁷³ Just a little bit more than one month before this, Vietnam engaged in a live-fire military exercise with various types of weaponry off of its central coast.⁷⁴ At an ASEAN Foreign Minister's Meeting, the Philippines Foreign Minister Albert del Rosario publically called on all states to maintain a common position on disputes over sovereignty in order that they might hedge against China.⁷⁵

This action by the Philippines obtained strong support from the United States and other client states in East Asia. On 23 June, Hillary Clinton publically expressed that the US was committed to supporting the Philippines national defense, and that it would implement the defense agreement signed with the Philippines. According to the *Mutual Defense Agreement* between the two states, if the Philippines is attacked in the Pacific region, the US will come to the defense of the Philippines. In this agreement, 'Pacific' includes the South China Sea.⁷⁶ On 9 July the US, Japan, and Australia held a joint military exercise in the territorial waters of Brunei in the South China Sea, and from 2007 to 2010, joint naval exercises among these three states were held to the west of Kyushu and in waters off of Okinawa, locations with obvious implications for China.⁷⁷

At the same time, the United States responded positively to Vietnam's effort to lean on its military power to advance its interests in the dispute over the South China Sea. On 17 June, the US and Vietnam held a diplomatic, security and military dialogue in Washington, DC. In the joint statement released after the meeting, the US emphasized that in recent months accidents in the Sea (the South China Sea) were not helpful for

⁷¹ 'America "Steps Foot" into the Dispute Over the South China Sea', 4 August 2010, <http://www.ftchinese.com/story/001033925>.

⁷² 'South China Sea Dispute: Vietnam Protests Chinese Harassment of Exploration Vessel', 28 May 2011, <http://www.zaobao.com/wencui/2011/05/taiwan110528a.shtml>.

⁷³ 'China's Largest and Most Advanced Patrol Boat to Travel to China-Vietnam Border to Declare Sovereignty', 1 August 2011, <http://mil.news.sohu.com/20110801/n315064180.shtml>.

⁷⁴ 'Vietnam Engages in Live Fire Exercise in Waters Off of its Central Coast on June 13', 14 June 2011, http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/nanhaizhengduan/content-3/detail_2011_06/14/6992436_0.shtml.

⁷⁵ 'Chief of Staff of Philippines Armed Forces: Position Destroyers in the South China Sea; Filipino Destroyers will not Exceed International Waters', 20 June 2011, <http://www.zaobao.com/special/china/southchinasea/pages/southchinasea110620a.shtml>.

⁷⁶ 'American Undertakes to Support National Defense of the Philippines; Will Provide it with Arms to Assist Modernization', 25 June 2011, <http://www.zaobao.com/special/china/southchinasea/pages/southchinasea110625.shtml>.

⁷⁷ 'Japan Makes First Joint Exercise Today in the South China Sea with the US and Australia', 9 July 2011, <http://www.zaobao.com/special/china/southchinasea/pages/southchinasea110709.shtml>.

regional peace and stability. With respect to maritime security, and especially the right of freedom of navigation, the United States expressed concerns.⁷⁸ On 15 July, despite strong opposition from China, three US warships arrived at Danang to participate in the US–Vietnamese maritime military exercises.⁷⁹

In order to support East Asian countries, the US has gradually shifted from its policy of maintaining a neutral position with respect to the dispute over sovereignty of the South China Sea. In July 2011, at the ASEAN Regional Forum, Hillary Clinton publicly called on all parties to use expressions which are consistent with international law in order to support resolution of conflicts in the South China Sea, and emphasized the need to raise legal claims related to the South China Sea.⁸⁰ Clinton's claims clearly run counter to those made by China, while other voices remain close to this position, implying that the US is already beginning to run counter to its principle of neutrality with respect to sovereignty over the South China Sea.

US involvement promoted the deepening of cooperation among the client states protected by the US around the South China Sea. On 28 September 2011, Japan and the Philippines released a joint statement to strengthen military and security cooperation, contain China's maritime activities. At the same time, both parties expressed that as US allies the two would cooperate closely in November at the East Asian Summit in Indonesia to purposely exaggerate the China threat.⁸¹ Vietnam, on the other hand, which is outside of the hierarchal sub system led by the US, took steps to adjust its confrontational attitude towards China, as it feared that uncertainty over the US support would lead to serious damages to its core security interests. In October of 2011, China and Vietnam signed the *China–Vietnam Agreement on Basic Principles to Guide Resolution of Maritime Issues*, illustrating that the two parties would increase efforts to negotiate maritime issues and search for a universally acceptable, long-term solution, while positively discussing temporary measures which would not harm the respective positions and claims of either party. This includes research and discussions around the issue of joint development.⁸²

Conclusion

Since the middle of the 1990s, while the Chinese government has consistently attempted to maintain a reassurance strategy in its regional diplomacy efforts, the

⁷⁸ 'Vietnam and the US Call on All Countries to Maintain the Freedom of Shipping in the South China Sea', 19 June 2011, <http://www.zaobao.com/special/china/southchinasea/pages/southchinasea110619.shtml>.

⁷⁹ 'Despite Strong Chinese Opposition, Three American Carriers Arrive in Danang, Vietnam for Military Exercises', 16 July 2011, <http://www.zaobao.com/special/china/southchinasea/pages/southchinasea110716.shtml>.

⁸⁰ 'Hillary Clinton Attempts in Vain to use International Law to Contain China; Claims that the South China Sea should be Handled According to Topography', 24 July 2011, <http://world.people.com.cn/GB/15230111.html>.

⁸¹ 'Japan and the Philippines Increase Cooperation in the South China Sea', 28 September 2011, <http://www.dfdaily.com/html/51/2011/9/28/672373.shtml>.

⁸² 'Sino-Vietnamese Joint Declaration', 15 October 2011, <http://world.people.com.cn/GB/15906324.html>.

strategy has not been effective over the long term. This article argues that the long-term efficiency of China's reassurance policy has been weakened by the quasi-anarchical security order in East Asia. The quasi-anarchical system includes a hierarchical sub-system and a set of states outside of the hierarchical sub-system, which causes it to demonstrate aspects of both anarchy and hierarchy. Within the quasi-anarchical system, states can be classified into three types based on how they seek security: self-help states, security guarantor, and client states. There are then two types of security relations between states: competition and dependence. The quasi-anarchic order in East Asia constrains the effectiveness and continuity of China's regional reassurance policy through three mechanisms: dependence, reliance on support, and imitation.

If the findings of this article are correct, it implies the following for China's East Asian security strategy: first, China must coordinate its East Asian security policy and its policy towards the US. In the past ten-plus years, China's regional assurance policy has had great difficulty in obtaining its desired results, the main reason for this being the existence of the US-led hierarchical sub-system within the East Asian quasi-anarchical system. As long as this hierarchical sub-system continues to exist, for China's reassurance policy to be effective it must be coordinated with its US policy, and the two can no longer be considered separately. Failure to do so will result in Chinese diplomacy regularly being undermined by issues in Sino-US relations, while also creating intense competition between East Asian countries. China's East Asian security policy and its policy towards the US could be linked mainly by elevating the level of the current Sino-US Asia Pacific security dialogue, and by focusing the dialogue on maintaining overall stability in East Asia. At the same time, a track two bilateral dialogue might be established between China and the US on strategic security in East Asia. This would help to ensure that the official security dialogue could make comprehensive progress.

Second, policies which better respond to the security threats faced by the self-help states in East Asia need to be designed. As the states within the US-led security hierarchy lack an independent security policy, as long as there is a consensus between China and the United States these states will not adopt a seriously confrontational policy towards China. For this reason, China's East Asian security policy should focus primarily on the states within the region that rely on their own capabilities to maintain national security, and should design policies which respond to the characteristics of their security threats. If the primary threat a state faces stems from the US-led security hierarchy in the region, China should provide a level of security protection in order to weaken any confrontational positions the state might adopt towards China. If the main security threat faced by such a state stems from China, China must adopt a package of policies that include reassurance and containment, and take advantage of the fact that these states ultimately cannot obtain US security protection and force them to change their confrontational policies towards China.

In addition, in the course of conducting research for this article, the author found that paying close attention to international relations in East Asia is of great importance for Chinese scholars working to create new theories. The central concept proposed

in this article of a quasi-anarchical system is rooted empirically in the contemporary practice of international relations in East Asia. In reality, most theoretical findings in contemporary international relations are rooted in regional experiences. Taking the characteristics of the order of the international system as an example, the mainstream understanding in modern international relations theory that the international system is made up of sovereign states which exist in a state of anarchy actually is rooted empirically in the modern European international relations. Over the past ten-plus years, US and European scholars such as David Lake have systematically described the characteristics of hierarchy in international relations based on cooperation between the United States and its allies (especially European allies) following World War II. In reality, the source of theoretical creativity has been rooted empirically in European practices, and at most the experiences of the trans-Atlantic community. Meanwhile in the field of international political economy, research on dependency has mainly focused on experiences from Africa and Latin America. For this reason, Chinese scholars might consider attempting to create new international relations theories based on the East Asian experience.⁸³

About the author

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⁸³ For the latest research efforts in this area, see Zhou Fangyin, 'Equilibrium Analysis of the Tributary System', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 4, 2 (2011): 147–78. For the responses to Zhou's efforts, see Zhang Yongjin and Barry Buzan, 'The Tributary System as International Society in Theory and Practice', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 5, 1 (2012): 3–36; Brantly Womack, 'Asymmetry and China's Tributary System', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 5, 1 (2012): 37–54; Song Nianshen, 'Tributary' from a Multilateral and Multilayered Perspective', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 5, 2 (2012): 155–82.