# CHINA CONTRA MUNDUM?
# The Shifting Rationale Behind Chinese Military Aggression in the Asia-Pacific

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The Western Pacific remains a minefield of unreleased historical tension. China's meteoric economic ascendance in the 1980s through to the 2010s enabled a concomitant military expansion that has upset the traditional landscape of power in the Pacific. Central to the region's inflamed geopolitics is the web of overlapping territorial claims that have triggered military build-ups from Pearl Harbour to the Straits of Malacca.[1] China's renewed emphasis on its territorial claims in the Pacific have brought it into conflict with its southern neighbours (Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei), with its eastern front (Japan and Taiwan), and with the United States, which, though a non-claimant in the dispute, has an important economic and military presence in the region. What began as a regional dispute has swollen into a conflict with global implications.

*Great Wall of China, China*

[1] Beijing now claims ownership of over 80 percent of the South China sea as delineated by the "*nine-dash line* (南海九段)": the nine-segmented which demarcation line use in 1911 maps of the Republic of China, the successor state to the Qing Empire. This relic of China's imperial-era boundaries, never secured international approval, is now embossed on all People's Republic of China (PRC) passports.

The primary loci of the region's territorial disputes the Paracel and Spratly Islands dispute in the South China Sea and the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China.[2] Though China and its neighbours have always had competing territorial claims, the Pacific, with the exception of the Gulf of Tonkin and the Taiwan Straits, has been free of large-scale conflict since WWII.[3] Only recently have these issues of territoriality been expressed through military action.

Why, after a decade of pursuing a 'Peaceful Rise (和平崛起),' has China begun to flex its military muscle over a few barren rocks in the Pacific? Several lines of thought run through the literature at the time of this writing. Some hold that China's territorial assertions are pretext for nationalist expression; the constellation of military bases China is building around the Pacific and its aggressive military patrols of its claimed territory are seen as evidence of Beijing's desire to re-establish itself as a world power capable of challenging American hegemony. Others maintain that these disputes are tactical calculations designed to distract the world from China's internal weakness and the ethno-political ferment of the PRC's autonomous territories. There is, in other words, no consensus on the rationale behind China's military behaviour.

Instead of taking a linear approach to the issue, in which there is a set cast of characters and motives driving the situation forward, Chinese military expansion should instead be viewed as an ever-shifting policy landscape that evolves alongside the political and economic context: a military manoeuvre conducted around a contested island in 2002 is motivated by different factors than the same action conducted around the same island in 2012.

Proffered here is broad sketch of the dimensions of PLA militancy and a suggestion for how best to group the various stages of Chinese militarisation. China's military rise can be bracketed into four rough phases: the 1980-2001 period of economic consolidation, in which the government had no ability nor incentive to assert territorial claims; the 2002-2010 phase of decentralised command, in which Hu's soft power foreign policy conflicted with unilateral PLA action; the 2010-2012 period in which internal leadership succession struggles sparked an unprecedented escalation of the Pacific disputes; and the 2013-Present phase, in which a floundering domestic economy and an unstable international situation have encouraged a newly-centralised CCP to bolster its legitimacy by using bellicose military action to rally popular nationalism. This approach characterises China's military rise as a volatile force torn between pragmatic and nationalist concerns – a balance that, depending on the period, can tilt in either direction.

## I. CONSOLIDATION:

*The Charm Offensive* (1980-2002)

This phase of Chinese militarisation, starting roughly with Deng Xiaoping's accession to the Zhongnanhai[4] and China's ensuant economic liberalisation, was a period of national consolidation best summarised by one of the key ideas of Dengist thought: "hide your capabilities and bide your time."[5] China was, at the time, still shaking off the hangover of Maoist rule, and had no ability nor incentive to instigate provocative military actions. Modernisation, in both Chinese economic and military infrastructure, was instead the central policy thrust of this period, which explains the lack of Chinese aggression in the Pacific during this time frame.[6]

In these twenty years, China engaged in only one minor military skirmish in the Pacific: a small navy confrontation with Vietnam over the Johnson South Reef in 1988.[7] This period, while largely conflict-free, is

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[2] ***See Fig. 1***; Zhiguo Gao and Bing Bing Jia, "The Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea: History, Status, and Implications," *The American Journal of International Law 107.1* (2013): 99-100.

[3] Zhao Hong, "The South China Sea Dispute and China-ASEAN Relations," *Asian Affairs* 44.1 (2013): 31.

[4] *Zhongnanhai*中南海: the official headquarters of the CCP and of the State Council; a historic compound in Beijing's Imperial City often used as a metonym for the Chinese leadership.

[5] Avinash Godbole, "China's Asia Strategy under President Xi Jinping," *Strategic Analysis* 39.3 (2015): 298.

[6] Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), xvii.

[7] Hong, "The South China Sea Dispute and China-ASEAN Relations," 31.

nonetheless notable in that the Pacific territorial disputes – which have been in active contest since 1945 but had never truly been militarised until recently – came for the first time to the fore of Chinese military policy.[8] This was a response to the geopolitical landscape of this period: waning Soviet power, and its eventual fall, rid Beijing of its fear of a Russo-Chinese land war so the PLA could turn its attention to its coastal neighbours.[9] The pivot towards maritime power is epitomised by the 1998 purchase of the old Soviet aircraft carrier, the *Varyag*, from the then newly independent Ukraine.[10] Though China stuck largely to its 'Good Neighbour Policy' under Deng and Jiang's administration, actions such as this purchase and the military reforms discussed below, show that Beijing was already planning a modern armed forces capable of blue-water power projection.

In these decades, Chinese militarisation focussed on refurbishing its bloated, antique army into a more streamlined force. Soviet failure in Afghanistan and American success in the Gulf War proved to Beijing that smaller, high-tech forces with blue-water capability, such as the American-led coalition in Iraq, were more powerful than massive, land-based armies of the Soviet or Iraqi ilk.[11] Under Deng's tenure as head of the Military Commission (1981-1989), the PLA reduced its troop strength to one million, and military staff was cut by over 50 percent.[12] Deng's successor, Jiang Zemin, continued these reforms: his 9th Five-Year Plan (1996-2000) cut military troops by a further 500,000 men, and his 1993 decision to elevate the 'Revolution in Military Affairs' policy of prioritising technological superiority over manpower into official military doctrine is consistent with the general policy goals of this period.[13] Chinese militarisation at this time was focussed on consolidation rather than expansion. The drive for modernisation created a surface illusion of peaceful intent that, as discussed below, should not be mistaken as a representative model of Chinese policy.

Because official PRC documents are not made public and what little information is leaked is often dated, many still use statistics from this era to argue that Chinese military expansion is not a viable threat to global security. Their arguments are usually divided along two lines of thought. The first, espoused by Western military analysts, points to Chinese military weakness in relation to its Pacific rivals: Japan, to China's east, has a technologically superior military with more experience; Russia, who sells China much of its weaponry, has technological and geostrategic superiority in the Russian Pacific Fleet's open sea access and expertise; India has near-unadulterated access to the Indian Ocean and thus has a better-located, better-trained navy as well as a superior air force; South Korea and Taiwan have advanced, American-supplied armies; the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam to China's south have aircraft carriers and powerful navies; and, most importantly, the U.S. Pacific Fleet still wields regional hegemony with its carrier, naval air force, and submarine groups based out of Korea, Japan, Hawaii, Guam, and the Marianas.[14] Analysts in this camp use China's geographic weakness in being surrounded by powerful neighbours to argue that Chinese military aggression is a ploy designed to deter enemy attack and to disguise the PLA's limited strength, rather than a legitimate sign of expansionist intent.[15]

Others reach the same conclusion through economic analysis, positing that, as China's first aim is to continue its economic growth, trade ties and economic cooperation are sufficient to deter Chinese militancy. The Chinese leadership knows that, were it to

[8] Hanyi Shaw, "The Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands Dispute: its History and an Analysis of the Ownership Claims of the P.R.C., R.O.C., and Japan," *Maryland Series in Contemporary Asian Studies* 3.1 (1999), 17-18.
[9] Bates Gill, *Rising Star: China's New Security Diplomacy* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 2010), 4.
[10] David Shambaugh, ed., *Tangled Titans: The United States and China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 240-241
[11] Monika Chansoria, *China: Military Modernisation and Strategy* (New Delhi: Centre for Land Welfare Studies, 2011), 21.
[12] Gill, *Rising Star: China's New Security Diplomacy*, 4.
[13] David M. Finkelstein, "China's National Military Strategy: An Overview of the "Military Strategic Guidelines," in *Right Sizing the People's Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China's Military,* ed. Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College (SSI), 2007), 71-75.
[14] Nathan and Scobell, *China's Search for Security*, xxi-xxii.
[15] Ibid., xxi.

war with Japan, China's second-largest export market, the resulting breakdown of trade would be politically devastating to the CCP regime.[16] Many cite how economic integration between China and the CCP's traditional enemy, the Republic of China (Taiwan), has led to an unprecedented thaw between the Straights.[17] Other commonly cited examples for this theory include how China's increased economic ties with its South East-Asian neighbours resulted in the 2002 Chinese-ASEAN agreement to respect the 'Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea'; and how increased Russo-Chinese trade led to the 2001 Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship.[18]

While these arguments may have reflected the rationale of Chinese militarisation from 1980-2002, they are insufficient to explain the greater sweep of China's military rise. Both theories assume that the Chinese leadership is an inherently pragmatic organisation and both fail to recognise the power of Chinese nationalism. These arguments are also based on the premise that there is a centralised command chain in the PRC – that the Politburo can enforce official doctrines at all levels of government. These assumptions of CCP pragmatism and of bureaucratic efficacy are, however, inconsistent with what we know of the Chinese policy-making process, especially after 2002. Analyses depicting Chinese belligerence as but a benign side effect of military weakness rendered moot by regional economic integration should thus be limited only to this early phase of the PLA's militarisation process.

**I. FRAGMENTATION:**
2002-2010

Hu Jintao's government from 2002-2010 continued the drive for economic and military expansion begun by his predecessors, but with key differences. While the Politburo maintained a pragmatic stance that prioritised the economy over military force, the uniquely fragmented nature of Hu's presidency allowed military elites to conduct increasingly militant manoeuvres in the Pacific independent of official directive. As in the preceding period, military actions during these eight years were not expressions of Chinese nationalism as they were calculated moves by military actors to increase their influence in Beijing.

Officially, Hu's government prioritised soft power over overt displays of strength; it framed China's rise within the context of its increasing cultural and economic influence. China hosted key cultural events during this period, such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai Expo, and also began carving an economic space for itself on the global stage by joining organisations like the BRICS, the 2002 Asian Cooperative Dialogue Organisation, and the G-20.[19]

While military concerns were officially subservient to soft power objectives, the South Sea dispute saw blood for the first time during this period when, in 2005 Chinese patrol boats shot and killed 9 Vietnamese fisherman that had strayed too close to Hainan Island.[20] The South Sea saw no further conflict in these years, except in March 2009 when the Pentagon reported that Chinese destroyers had harassed a U.S. surveillance ship.[21] The PLA in this period, far from harmonising with official doctrine, pursued an independent, more bellicose agenda that some have mistakenly conflated with that of Beijing. Whereas China's military elite largely deferred to official doctrine from 1980-2002, Hu's non-centralised leadership style allowed the military to establish itself as a potent political entity in Beijing capable of dictating unilateral policies.

Although 2002, the year Hu ascended to power, is a useful starting point for this shift in the dimensions of China's military rise, the origins of the PLA's bid for political influence can be traced to 1989, the year the military became instrumental to continued CCP rule.[22] Because the military

[16] David M. Lampton, *The Three Faces of Chinese Power: Might, Money, and Minds* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 96.
[17] Ibid., 90.
[18] Ibid., 90; Jonathan Holslag, *Trapped Giant: China's Military Rise* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 89-91.
[19] Kerry Brown, *Hu Jintao: China's Silent Ruler*, (London: World Scientific Publishing Company, 2012), 3.
[20] Srikanth Kondapalli, "Simmering South China Sea Dispute," *Insitute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, January 18, 2006.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "China's Foreign and Security-Policy Decision-making Processes under Hu Jintao," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 3 (2009): 64-65.

'saved' the CCP regime by quelling the Tiananmen Square protests, Beijing "paid off" the PLA by granting them an ever-expanding military budget and by allowing them a seat at the policy-making table.[23] The PLA's hold on political influence was only consolidated after 2002, as, unlike Deng or Jiang, Hu ruled not by fiat but shared power among the nine members of the Politburo – a policy he once described as '*nine dragons sharing water'* (九龍治).[24]

Military action from 2002 onwards should thus not be mistaken as displays of jingoist expansionism, but should be seen as calculated moves by military commanders to test the boundaries of their political independence from the centre. Though there was an explosion of Western literature in from the 2000s on warning of Chinese nationalism and its threat to global stability, there is no evidence to suggest PLA actions during this period were motivated by nationalism.[25] There were, after all, only two incidents in the Pacific during these eight years, both of which were too minor to be effective triggers for nationalist ferment. Instead, the only convincing explanation of Chinese military action in this era is that of an increasingly independent military elite exploring the extent to which they can defy Beijing authorities.

This view was extensively researched in a 2005 RAND report that analysed the degrees of influence the PLA had at the time on different policy sub-arenas. In 2005, the military had "near total control" of defence policy and could thus order military manoeuvres without Beijing's consent, though it had limited but growing influence on Chinese foreign policy.[26] By launching independent military movements, the military was able to force Beijing to publicly support PLA actions at the risk of losing face on the international stage.[27] According to RAND, power plays such as these were designed to coerce the government into granting ever-increasing military budget increases – money that further bolsters PLA strength as well as padding the pockets of corrupt military staff.[28] Unlike Xi, whose military background will be discussed below, Hu's lack of military connections and experience, as well as his decentralised leadership style relegated his role as president to little more than "signing documents prepared by generals."[29] Some believe the PLA's power plays in the Pacific have had their intended consequence: since 2002, the PLA's budget has risen by an average of 10% a year – an exponential growth rate set to reach parity with American defence spending by the mid-21st century.[30]

**Military objectives are hindered not only by the PLA's weak internal structures, but also by the rise of powerful private actors, such as corporations and oligarchs, birthed from China's capital-driven growth.**

It is, however, important to note that the PLA as an organisation is no more monolithic than the government it purports to serve. While the overall goal of military action in this period was undoubtedly coloured by the PLA's desire to increase its influence in the CCP, the Chinese military is not a centralised, or even an efficient organisation. Aside from modernisation difficulties, rampant corruption among army ranks and problems with bureaucratic structures have resulted in a disorganised military in which individual units are more closely tied to local generals than to a centralised command centre.[31] The military is thus itself a pluralistic, inter-

[23] Arthur Waldron, "Rise of China: Military and Political Implications," *Review of International Studies* 31 (2005): 721.
[24] Brown, *Hu Jintao: China's Silent Ruler*, 5.
[25] Cabestan, "China's Foreign and Security-Policy Decision-making Processes under Hu Jintao," 64.
[26] RAND, National Defence Research Institute, *The Role of the Chinese Military in National Security Policymaking* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2008), ix.
[27] Ibid., x.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Cabestan, "China's Foreign and Security-Policy Decision-making Processes under Hu Jintao," 72-75.
[30] ***See Fig. 2.***
[31] Richard Weitz, *Global Security Watch: China* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013), 39, 50.

competitive entity – a chorus of conflicting voices that form but a part of the general cacophony of Beijing's many lobby groups.

The PLA's bid for increased political influence cannot therefore be said to be an unadulterated success. Military objectives are hindered not only by the PLA's weak internal structures, but also by the rise of powerful private actors, such as corporations and oligarchs, birthed from China's capital-driven growth.[32] China's domestic security issues during this period also served to check PLA power. Protest and secession movements surged from 8,700 incidents in 1993 to 87,000 in 2005; by 2010, towards the end of Hu's presidency, 180,000 'mass protests' were recorded throughout the countryside.[33] While the PLA's budget did increase under Hu's presidency, it was still surpassed by China's internal security budget, as domestic issues were a much more tangible concern to the CCP than stray military actions in the Pacific.[34]

This phase of Chinese militarisation is thus similar to that from 1980-2002 in that both were pragmatic administrations whose aim was not to unbalance regional security. Chinese military power, though significantly increased by 2010, was still weak by regional standards; what few independent military operations that were launched in these eight years were conducted to terrorise Beijing authorities, not China's neighbours. This confused landscape of vying political factions not only disproves monolithic assumptions of the CCP and of the PLA, but it shows how PLA aggression was but one cog in Beijing's dysfunctional decision-making apparatus.

## I. ESCALATION: 2010-2012

Towards the end of Hu's presidency, there was a sudden profusion of military activity seemingly contradictory to the dimensions of Chinese militarisation in the preceding decade. From only two minor incursions in the Pacific from 2002-2010, the two-year period from 2010-2012 saw over twenty major incidents.[35] The most likely reason for this abrupt shift in military rationale is the internal power struggle leading up to the scheduled 2012 leadership change. This "change of tone" in Chinese military policy began in 2010, when the then-unknown bes was appointed both to the office of Vice President as the deputy – and de facto chief – of the Central Military Commission (CMC), the administrative organ of the Chinese armed forces.[36] Although no official documentation of the leadership transition is available due to the highly secretive nature of the CCP, many believe the sudden escalation of the South Sea dispute was a calculated ploy by Xi, who has close ties with the military, to both discredit Hu's outgoing-government and to set the stage for his own nationalist policy agenda.[37] This argument has historical precedent as the military has so far played a role in every PRC leadership transition.[38]

Key to Xi's ability to outmanoeuvre other contenders in the power struggle were his military ties. Xi's intimate ties with the military establishment was clear long before he was tapped to be Hu's successor. Xi is not only the son of a famous Mao-era general, but is married to an army singer, and was a CMC secretary from 1979-1982.[39] Xi always played a leading role in Party-military events, such as parades, and built himself a political reputation for anti-military-corruption and for military welfare advocacy.[40]

It is no coincidence that the sudden profusion of military conflicts in the Pacific coincided with Xi's accession to the Vice-Chairmanship of the CMC.[41] In early 2011, only months after Xi's

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[32] Waldron, *The Rise of China,* 732.

[33] Murray Scot Tanner, "China Rethinks Unrest," *The Washington Quarterly* 27.3 (2004): 137-140.

[34] Bloomberg News, "China's Spending on Internal Policing Outstrips Defense Budget" *Bloomberg News*, March 6, 2011, accessed March 14, 2016, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2011-03-06/china-s-spending-on-internal-police-force-in-2010-outstrips-defense-budget.

[35] Ian Storey, interview by Tim Cook, "Rising Tensions in the South China Sea," *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, June 17, 2011.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Control over the Red Army allowed Mao Zedong to rise to the top of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the 1930s; generals brought down the Gang of Four and supported Deng Xiaoping's return to power in the 1970s; in 1989 Deng looked to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to crush the Democracy Movement and install Jiang Zemin as General Secretary. The 2002 transition from Jiang to Hu Jintao was only a partial exception, because Jiang held on to his position as chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) for two more years.

[39] P.H. Yu, "What Kind of Leader Will Xi Jinping Be?" *American Foreign Policy Interests* 34 (2012): 296, 297-298.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Irene Chan and Mingjiang Li, "New Chinese Leadership, New Policy in the South China Sea Dispute?" *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 20 (2015): 37.

promotion, the Chinese frigate *Dongguan* fired at Philippine fishing boats near the Jackson atoll and the ensuing weeks saw clashes between Chinese patrol vessels and PetroVietnam vessels.[42] So frequent did these conflicts did these conflicts become that in 2011, Obama announced his 'pivot to Asia,' in which American military power would shift its focus to the Asia-Pacific.[43]

Though there is no evidence definitively linking Xi to the escalation of the Pacific conflicts, many have observed the political advantages of ordering such military actions. At a basic level, Xi would be able to demonstrate to other leadership contenders that he had the support of the military. At a higher level, unilateral military actions would serve to humiliate Beijing on the international scene and serve as to remind them of their limited authority. In 2011, for instance, during a meeting with then American defence minister Robert Gates, Hu and the American delegation received word that the PLA had conducted an impromptu test flight of the J-20, a stealth fighter designed to threaten American F-22 air superiority: "Gates saw that Hu was as stunned by the news as he was."[44] American media reported the same day that "it was clear the civilian leadership was uninformed," and Gates later openly expressed his concern over Hu's "weak control in the army."[45]

It was also after 2010 that reports of Hu's shaky grip on power began leaking to Western media sources.[46] After Xi's promotion to the CMC vice-chairmanship, retired generals spoke out for the first time against the regime. Prominent among these rare instances of candour from the PRC military brass are the retired major-general Yang Chungchang, who confirmed to Western media outlets that top generals such as Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong had monopolised power in the military, and an anonymous source from the Chinese military academy that accused Xu of "blatantly [exchanging] promotions for bribes and [making] decisions without informing Hu."[47] For the first time in the West, there was definitive evidence that, at least in military matters, Hu served more as a figurehead than as a potent commander-in-chief.

In sum, while the 2010-2012 period adheres to the pragmatic mind-set characteristic of previous militarisation phases, these two years saw the slow centralisation of the CCP and of the armed forces under Xi. Whereas independent military actions conducted during the 2002-2010 period were not representative of any central military objective, Xi's accession to power in the CMC changed the dimensions of Chinese military aggression into one tailored to suit his political ends.[48] Incidents and reports of unilateral military action were designed to embarrass Beijing and to discredit the current leadership in the eyes of the party, and of the people. These displays of hard power could also be seen as test-runs for the more nationalist foreign policy Xi would adopt in office. By 2012, Xi had been promoted to CMC Chairman and had been made the CCP General Secretary, twin positions that cemented Xi's power in both party and military factions.[49] These appointments, lacking just the symbolic position of the Chinese presidency, made Xi the informal paramount leader of China by mid-2012, thus setting the stage for the next radical shift in Chinese militarisation.

## I. NATIONALISATION: 2013-Present

The 2015 Victory Day Parade celebrating the 70th anniversary of Japan's defeat in WWII, with its spectacle of 12,000 PLA troops and extravagant military displays, is a strikingly appropriate image of

[42] The ensuing months saw a standoff between the Philippine destroyer *Gregorio del Pilar* and Chinese ships in the Scarborough Shoal; another Filipino-Chinese confrontation in the Half Moon Shoal area; the CMC established a large garrison in Hainan Island, close to the disputed South Sea territories; and saw a program established to increase the number of patrols in contested territorial waters. These incidents are but highlights of a conflict-full period.

[43] David T. Jones, "The Pivot to Asia," *American Diplomacy* (2014): 1-2.

[44] Minnie Chan, "Hu Jintao's weak grip on China's army inspired Xi Jinping's military shake-up," *South China Post*, 11 March, 2015, accessed March 14, 2016, http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1734663/hu-jintaos-weak-grip-chinas-army-inspired-president-xi-jinpings-military.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Godbole, "China's Asia Strategy under President Xi Jinping," 298.

[49] Yu, "What Kind of Leader Will Xi Jinping Be?" 299-300.

Xi's presidency.[50] The parade, the first military event to be held on a national level, is emblematic of the PRC's shift from pragmatic policy-making to one openly coloured with nationalism.[51] The current phase of Chinese militarisation is the first to be under central command, where Beijing has the ability to use military force as a tool both for economic expansion and to bolster CCP legitimacy.[52] If under Deng, Jiang, and Hu's 'Reform Era,' China was "biding its time," then 2013 marked its emergence as a power that, at least on the surface, is secure in its own strength.

he ethos of this period is best encapsulated by Xi's 'Confidence Doctrine (自信)' – the signature philosophy of Xi's government that emphasises the importance of confidence and pride in the Chinese nation.[53] The Pacific dispute spiralled from a handful of conflicts over the past three decades, to a situation in which conflict is a daily occurrence. The worsening Pacific security situation can be seen through the framework of the Confidence Doctrine: China's increasingly aggressive military is operating for the first time to incite popular nationalism as a means to legitimise the CCP regime.

To implement this doctrine, Xi's first steps in power were to streamline the military command structure. Corrupt generals such as Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong have been ousted from positions of authority, with the former dead from 'bladder failure' and the latter under investigation for corruption charges.[54] Xi's has also launched a state-wide 'anti-corruption campaign,' which in authoritarian states, as many have observed, is a common pretext for purging the party of rivals and for replacing too-powerful regional leaders with ones supportive of central command.[55] For instance, the Politburo Standing Committee was pared from 9 members down to 7 members. Similarly, the 7 traditional military regions (Lanzhou, Chengdu, Beijing, Jinan, Guangzhou, Nanjing, and Shenyang) have been re-ordered into 5 zones (Central, North, South, East, and West) for increased central control.[56] Beijing now also has direct oversight over the Pacific conflict; Xi created and appointed himself the head of the new 'Office to respond to the Diaoyu Crisis.'[57]

This bid for bureaucratic centralisation comes at a time where China is undergoing severe economic crisis. Though named the world's largest economy by purchasing power last year, China's slowing economy and volatile stock

[50] "China's Military Parade Celebrates World War II Victory," *New York Times*, September 3, 2015, accessed March 9, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/live/china-military-parade/.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Godbole, "China's Asia Strategy under President Xi Jinping," 299.
[53] He Kai and Feng Huiyun, "Xi Jinping's Operational Code Beliefs and China's Foreign Policy," The *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 6 (2013): 214.
[54] Bo Zhiyue, "The Rise and Fall of Xu Caihou," *The Diplomat*, March 18, 2015, accessed March 10, 2016, http://thediplomat.com/2015/03/the-rise-and-fall-of-xu-caihou-chinas-corrupt-general/.
[55] Xinhua, "Xi Jinping on Cleaning Out "Political Dust," *Chinascope* 67 (2014): 22.
[56] Christofferson Gaye, "Crises as Impetus for Institutionalization: Maritime Crisis Mechanisms in China's Near Seas," in *China's Strategic Priorities,* ed. Jonathan H. Ping and Brett McCormick (London: Routledge, 2016), 33.
[57] Ibid., 70.

markets are ever-increasing threats to CCP legitimacy. This explains Xi's focus on contested Pacific territory, which has an economic, as well as a nationalist dimension to the dispute. Though China is the world's largest economy as well as the most populous and third largest country, it ranks 33rd in access to Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), just above Somalia (34th) and below Kiribati (12th).[58] This disparity not only rankles Chinese pride but is an impediment to economic growth; were China to gain full possession of its claimed Pacific territory, its EEZ and fishing areas would double, and Chinese corporations would be able to tap into the mineral wealth speculated to be trapped under the seabed.[59] EEZ issues and these unconfirmed resources have never been worth the trouble of extraction due to the blistering economic growth China enjoyed for the previous three decades. The 2013 economic downturn, however, has changed China's assessment of its economic interests – a change that has leaked into military policy.[60]

Military patrols over the contested islands thus serve the dual purpose of securing economic assets as well as of generating popular nationalist support.[61] Xi's rhetoric makes explicit mention of China's 'century of humiliation' under Japanese and European empires and his regime thus far has sought to imbue China's public image with the pride and patriotism upheld in his 'Confidence Doctrine.'[62] Xi's state visits, most notably to the UK and to the US, and official events such as the Victory Day Parade are full of a pomp and fanfare absent from previous presidents' more subdued leadership styles.[63] China's gladiatorial behaviour in the Pacific since 2013 should be seen as an extension of the leadership's newfound desire to inculcate a sense of unifying national pride as the PRC sails into rocky economic waters.

Xi's nationalism-driven policies, however, do not necessarily translate into a threat to global security. Many of China's old military weaknesses persist – its bloated armed forces, out-dated equipment, and weakness relative to regional and American armies – as does China's desire for stable trade relations, though these challenges are complicated by the rise of nationalist rhetoric and of economic instability. What is clear, however, is that China's military rise over the past few decades does not have a definitive rationale or a set objective: Chinese military actions are neither necessarily a security threat, nor are they empty shows of strengths. Instead, Chinese militarisation is best seen through a progressive series of phases, each period of which has separate motives for bellicose military conduct. While it is too early in Xi's presidency to get a taste of the full flavour of his foreign policy aims, we are likely in the most dangerous phase so far of China's military expansion. The volatile global economy and the failure of multilateral coalitions to solve international conflicts in the Crimea and in Syria will only give further fuel to Xi's military conduct in the Pacific. Assertive Chinese action not only gives economic and political benefits to Xi's regime, but the international context makes it unlikely any American-led coalition will intervene or be successful at curbing Chinese expansionism.[64] Given restricted archival access and inadequate data for sound social-scientific work, researchers of Chinese military expansion must look to historical context, broadly sketched here, to chart the uncertain way ahead.

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[58] National Ocean Service, "What is the EEZ?" *National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration,* December 8, 2014, accessed March 10, 2016, http://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/eez.html.

[59] ***See Fig. 3***; Ronald O'Rourke, "Maritime Territorial and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) Disputes Involving China: Issues for Congress" (Congressional Research Service Report prepared for Members and Committees of Congress, December 22, 2015), 2.

[60] Ibid., 2-3.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Dennis Roy, *Return of the Dragon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 262.

[63] "Xi Jinping Visits the United Kingdom," *Xinhua*, October 19-23, September, accessed March 04, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/cnleaders/xjp201510/.

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