

Is Southeast Asia Really Balancing against China?

For all of China's new assertiveness since 2010, the East Asian territorial and maritime disputes, especially those with Southeast Asian claimant states bordering the South China Sea, stand out as the most significant. Yet a decade before, Southeast Asia was also the region where China's diplomacy had been most successful. So skillful was Chinese policy at the time that the noted China scholar David Shambaugh wrote in 2004 that "most nations in the region now see China as a good neighbor, a constructive partner, a careful listener, and a non-threatening regional power."¹ It is puzzling that China should have squandered so much diplomatic goodwill and strategic gain painstakingly built up since the late 1990s. For many observers, Beijing has engaged in a self-defeating strategy of alienating its neighbors, damaging its image, and reigniting regional fears of Chinese power, with the risk of strategic isolation and even encirclement.²

Yet, China has not abandoned Southeast Asia as a pivotal front in its international strategy. Despite difficulties in the South China Sea, Beijing still considers the region most amenable to its strategic influence in Asia. Looking around China's vast and troubled periphery, one must feel sympathy for this judgment. From Russia in the north, Japan in the east, the two Koreas in the northeast, and India in the south, Beijing is facing impenetrable barriers, implacable foes, or incalculable risks. In Southeast Asia, major strategic breakthroughs still look

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promising. Generations of Chinese have emigrated to establish a significant economic and cultural presence. Regional states have refrained from openly opposing Chinese influence. Individual resistance exists, but not collective balancing.

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The strategic promise of Southeast Asia for China raises an even more intriguing puzzle: If the region commands such enduring significance in Chinese strategy, why has Beijing pursued policies that have made Southeast Asia more fearful of China's power and influence? Why does Beijing discount the consequence of a possible regional backlash that may undermine its interests? Does Beijing fear

the possibility of renewed regional mistrust of China leading to a deteriorating strategic environment less amenable to its influence?

Answering these questions requires consideration of *Chinese* understandings of their strategic interests and goals, and the changing contexts within which to achieve them. From these perspectives—some conventionally realist, some indigenously Chinese, and some interestingly counterintuitive—China's strategy is by no means self-defeating. On the contrary, many would appraise it as an overall success. Tension in the South China Sea has been kept under control since July 2016. The United States is uncertain about its response. And regional states—from the traditional bandwagoners of Cambodia and Laos, to the careful hedgers of Indonesia and Singapore, and to the former challengers of the Philippines and Vietnam—are to varying degrees rubbing along with and even embracing Chinese influence. Chinese assertiveness—even the most coercive sort as understood by international observers—has not engendered a regional backlash detrimental to its interests. Though decried by critics outside of China and a few lone voices inside, Beijing's strategy, so hard to resist given the feebleness of a regional and international backlash, may be working well after all.

The Enduring Significance of Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia has always occupied an important place in Chinese strategy. Beijing's support of Communist movements in the region and tumultuous relations with major regional countries such as Indonesia and Vietnam during the Cold War damaged its standing. It swiftly tried to remedy old faults and make new gains by improving relations with regional states after the Cold War, resuming severed diplomatic ties with Indonesia and establishing a new relationship with Singapore in 1990. In 1991, China began a dialogue process with the premier regional organization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN),

which would become a hallmark of Beijing's new regional policy. Twelve years later, in 2003, China became the first extra-regional country to accede to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which cemented Beijing's strategic partnership with ASEAN. This was the first partnership that China had signed with a regional intergovernmental organization.³ Meanwhile, Beijing had gained considerable goodwill with Southeast Asian states by not devaluing its currency during the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis, proposing and then creating a China–ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, and signing a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) in the South China Sea with the 10 ASEAN member states. This “charm offensive” peaked with the Beijing Olympics in 2008, and had almost neutralized regional suspicions at the time about an emerging threat from a rising China.⁴

Tensions with many regional states since 2009, however, have produced the superficial impression that Beijing no longer values Southeast Asia. In reality, Southeast Asia still appears as a diplomatic priority in major Chinese policy documents. The first white paper from the Chinese government on Asia-Pacific security cooperation, released in January 2017, affirms that “China always regards ASEAN as a priority in its neighborhood diplomacy (*zhoubian waijiao*).”⁵ And neighborhood diplomacy has become such a high priority of President Xi Jinping's foreign policy and in China's overall strategy that he convened China's first high-level conference devoted to it in October 2013.⁶

Xi has signaled Southeast Asia's significance for China in other ways. He proposed building a new maritime silk road running through Southeast Asia during a visit to Indonesia in October 2013.⁷ That maritime silk road, joining the overland silk road economic belt proposed during Xi's September 2013 visit to Kazakhstan, quickly became a major strategy known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). During the same Indonesian visit, the idea of building a “China-ASEAN community of shared future” was floated.⁸ The “community of shared future” (*minyun gongtongti*) is Xi's grand vision for international relations, replacing his predecessor Hu Jintao's idea of a “harmonious world” as the guiding principle for Chinese foreign policy. In his report to the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2017, Xi called on all countries to “work together to build a community with a shared future for mankind, to build an open, inclusive, clean, and beautiful world that enjoys lasting peace, universal security, and common prosperity.”⁹ Believing in the fertility of Southeast Asia as a testing ground, Xi chose to outline his new vision and strategy in Indonesia, the presumed natural leader of Southeast Asia.

In both principle and practice, China has sought to keep Southeast Asia in its orbit. Despite tensions in the South China Sea, it has produced many cooperative initiatives. First, to cement political trust, Beijing affirmed its support for ASEAN's centrality in East Asian cooperation in all major policy statements.¹⁰ But what of

China's growing role in East Asian regionalism? Aren't major initiatives like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) signals of China's interest in leading regional cooperation, thus diminishing the centrality of ASEAN?

China sees its current role as an active facilitator of ASEAN-centered regional cooperation, rather than as the leader of a new regional order centered on Beijing.¹¹ This role allows it to discharge great power responsibility without competing for institutional leadership with ASEAN. Chinese policymakers believe that the 2010 China–ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, the multilateralization of the Chiang Mai Initiative in the same year, and the establishment of the ASEAN + 3 (China, Japan, and South Korea) Macroeconomic Research Office in 2011 are outcomes of the successful performance of this role. Even when the role falters, such as the failed suggestion of establishing an ASEAN + 3 free trade area due to a competing proposal from Japan, the eventual compromise outcome—the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) currently under negotiation by ASEAN + 3 members plus Australia, India, and New Zealand—is not a bad result for China.¹²

Second, despite—or perhaps because of—South China Sea tensions, China has been seeking to expand its already deep economic engagement with ASEAN members. Economic ties have been the foundation of China–ASEAN relations since the late 1990s, and Beijing never runs out of initiatives. The 2015 upgrade of the China–ASEAN Free Trade Agreement and the rolling out of the BRI reveal China's determination to create economic interdependence between the two sides.

A cynical reading from some Southeast Asian observers, however, would put

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these initiatives as entrenching Southeast Asia's economic dependence on China. Economic influence is now the most potent leverage that China holds over Southeast Asia. Beijing may be partly motivated to offset the still substantial U.S. economic and strategic influence in Southeast Asia. A more prominent motive, however, is to create an economic–security linkage whereby deeper economic ties help dampen security tensions in territorial and maritime disputes. China hopes economic interdependence will help to improve its security ties with Southeast Asian

states—the Achilles' heel of its relations with the region.

Third, having established government trust and economic cooperation as two pillars of its relationship with Southeast Asia, China is now trying to build a third for the future: people-to-people diplomatic contact in the social, cultural,

and educational fields.¹³ Without a deep societal foundation, Chinese policymakers now realize, governmental trust and economic cooperation are inadequate and unsustainable bases upon which to maintain the relationship over the long term. Chinese policymakers hope better mutual understanding between the peoples of both sides will facilitate regional countries' acceptance of Chinese power and influence.

The Strategy of Conditional Reassurance

Beijing tries to embellish the cooperative side of Chinese–Southeast Asian relations for regional and international audiences. Unconvinced, international observers have focused on the coercive side of its strategy. Although Beijing rarely mentions it, this coercion has often roiled its regional ties and rekindled regional mistrust of its strategic intentions. Why, then, has China embarked on coercion, knowing that such a strategy might damage its regional relations and provoke a countervailing backlash?

Coercion has appeared on Chinese policy menus because Chinese leaders find it both feasible and useful in securing the interests they hold dear. The converse is also true: coercion was not a notable strategy before 2009 because it held little promise to secure Chinese interests at that time. Chinese leaders' understanding of China's interests and goals, and the changing contexts within which to achieve them, provides a critical understanding of China's changing strategy.

During the decade 1997–2008, now lionized by so many inside and outside of China as the “golden decade” of China–Southeast Asia relations, China's dominant interest was to secure a peaceful and stable external environment to allow internal development and international engagement. Although China was rising quickly in the late 1990s, it was still a weak country navigating great uncertainties in the post-Cold War world. During this period, Beijing made a pivotal judgment that its interests would be best served by opening up and joining the world. As Southeast Asia was China's critical gateway to the world, it was imperative that cooperation, not confrontation, become the central theme of their relationship. Chinese policymakers were acutely aware of territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea. They could nevertheless ill-afford to make these disputes a major stumbling block in advancing their overall relationship with ASEAN. Regional integration was a more important grand strategic objective than territorial struggle.

Guided by such thinking, China was amenable to compromise in the South China Sea. A major, but little noted, concession that Beijing made at that time was to concede the existence of disputes regarding the Spratly Islands (although not the Paracel Islands). The most important signal of Chinese restraint was the signing of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) in 2002. The

DOC called upon claimant states to exercise self-restraint and defused tensions for nearly a decade. Thus stabilizing the security front, China launched a free trade agreement with ASEAN, ushering in the most productive period of their relationship. Alongside economic engagement, Beijing further signaled strategic restraint by embedding itself in regional security multilateralism centered on ASEAN. In effect, China was adopting a regional strategy of general reassurance by practicing self-restraint, focusing on economic cooperation, and downplaying territorial and maritime disputes.

This strategy of general reassurance, so successful in creating an image of Chinese magnanimity then and so missed by regional governments now, was no longer sustainable after 2009 because China's strategic calculation toward the region changed. Changes occurred in its rank ordering of foreign policy interests.

The strategy of general reassurance changed to conditional reassurance and targeted coercion after 2009.

Without dismissing the general interest of stability and cooperation, Chinese policymakers now ranked the substantive interests of territorial sovereignty and maritime rights higher than relational amity. Reputational interests—soft, unmeasurable, and fickle in any case—consequently paled in comparison to the hard, calculable, and stable interests of territorial and maritime rights. If the previous motto was “let's cooperate for the sake of our relationship,” the new motto became “let's struggle for every inch of our territory.” A relational strategy for maintaining stable foreign relations

gave way to an instrumental strategy for achieving narrow self-interest. As a result, the strategy of general reassurance was truncated into one of conditional reassurance and targeted coercion.¹⁴

This strategic adjustment gathered force between 2009 and 2012 during the last years of the Hu Jintao administration. It was completed under the stronger, successive leadership of Xi Jinping after 2013. Those years coincided with a major domestic debate on the priority of national interests under new conditions, resulting in the elevation of territorial interests in China's overall strategy. Chinese analysts and officials grumbled that while Beijing exercised self-restraint in accordance with the DOC, regional claimant states—especially Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines—continued to solidify their occupation and administration of islands in the South China Sea.¹⁵ Equally important, Chinese policymakers perceived a faster shift in the regional balance of power in China's favor than they had anticipated. In combination with China's rising maritime law enforcement and naval capabilities, the new power balance created favorable conditions for coercive strategies. In addition, Beijing felt threatened by the Barack Obama

administration's Asian "rebalance" strategy (originally announced as the "pivot" in 2011) and feared adverse consequences on its territorial interests in Asia. It thus decided to challenge U.S. resolve by stiffening its own resolve and strengthening its capabilities.¹⁶ These changing perceptions of Chinese interests, goals, and capabilities in a new geopolitical context made the strategic adjustment of conditional reassurance possible.

Conditional reassurance does not mean Chinese abandonment of cooperative endeavors toward Southeast Asia as a whole—far from it, as earlier discussion shows. It does mean that reassurance would hence be offered only to those states willing to shelve disputes and pursue cooperation with China. To those states wedded to a confrontational mindset and intent on challenging Chinese interests, notably the Philippines under the Benigno Aquino III administration (2010–2016), coercion would replace reassurance as the primary Chinese strategy. If there was a shift to a cooperative mode, reassurance—and with it, economic benefits—would readily follow. China's approach since June 2016 of reassurance toward the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte administration is a dramatic demonstration of such a switch.

These days, a common Chinese refrain regarding its relations with small neighbors in Southeast Asia holds that although China, as a great power, will not bully small powers, small powers should not provoke China either.¹⁷ Nothing is more useful than this open admonishment in understanding China's new strategy of conditional reassurance. In the Chinese thinking, reassurance is still its preferred strategy, but only if other countries refrain from provoking it. Only by respecting and accommodating Chinese interests will Chinese magnanimity once again be offered, it once was—unconditionally—a decade earlier. Any provocation deemed serious will be met with determined opposition and pushback, with coercion if not force lurking behind.

China Now Calls the Shots

At the heart of the strategy of conditional reassurance is coercive diplomacy based on deterrence and compellence.¹⁸ Deterrence attempts to prevent an undesired action occurring by convincing the party who may be contemplating it that the cost will exceed any possible gain. Compellence, in contrast, tries to convince another party to carry out some action it otherwise would not. Both seek to manipulate the cost-benefit calculations of another party by increasing the perceived cost of noncompliance.¹⁹ These realpolitik strategies of competition and conflict, born a long time ago and theorized by American strategists during the Cold War, have now found a prominent place in Chinese approaches to territorial disputes. Deterring Southeast Asian claimant states as well as the United States from damaging Chinese interests and

compelling them to respect those interests has become a central task of Chinese policy. Indeed, China's massive island building in the South China Sea since December 2013 may be best understood as laying the necessary groundwork for successful operations of these strategies in the future. Similarly in 2012, in a less dramatic but still significant fashion, China took control of Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines, after a major standoff at sea, in an attempt to deter Manila from further damaging Chinese territorial interests.²⁰ In July 2017, Beijing successfully deterred Vietnam from drilling for oil in a disputed area in the Spratly Islands.²¹

Strategies of deterrence and compellence are bound to instill fear in the targeted countries, as fear is crucial to change those countries' cost-benefit calculations. Is China blind to the possibility that such fear may prompt these countries to form balancing coalitions by strengthening security relations between themselves and the United States? According to some realist international relations theory, balancing is a natural tendency in international politics, and is something that rising powers like China must try to prevent.²² But the Chinese have surpassed such conventional realism by thinking in terms of a fear offensive. They argue that fear is necessary because, in the past, regional countries' lack of fear of China led them to ignore Chinese power and to challenge Chinese interests. Accordingly, an exercise in frightfulness, backed up by a clear superiority in material capabilities, would compel these challenger states to respect Chinese power and interests. This would in turn lead to peace and stability in maritime Asia, as no country would dare challenge China for fear of reprisal. So goes Beijing's logic that fear of China is good for China.²³

Fear is not the only tactical element of China's composite strategy—the other is inducement. This strategic dialecticism, a favorite of many Chinese policymakers since Mao Zedong made it famous as a mode of thought, is informed by China's famed farsightedness. It is said that the Chinese always consider things from a

By combining coercion with inducement, China believes no regional backlash will be unmanageable.

long-term perspective, longer than most other states are capable of. So, Chinese elites aver that although Southeast Asia has suffered in recent years, it can expect to receive compensation from Beijing once the current round of tension is over and once Beijing's strategic objectives are achieved. For over the long term, the cumulative effect of China's composite strategy of conditional reassurance is to make Southeast Asia China's friend, not enemy. Chinese policymakers assess that in

principle, no country in Southeast Asia wants a bad relationship with China, and thus all countries are amenable to rewards and inducements. Compensation has come earlier than most have thought possible. President Duterte of the

Philippines has been promised a whopping \$24 billion economic package for shelving disputes with China.²⁴ Malaysia, a “quiet” claimant state in the South China Sea, has been awash with Chinese investments and political support. Combining coercion with inducement in a dialectical fashion, the Chinese believe that no regional backlash will become serious or unmanageable.

Extending this logic further, Chinese strategists ask what the United States, lacking resolve and declining in relative power, can do in the face of China’s iron-clad resolve and rapidly advancing capabilities? The faltering hegemon has not prevented Beijing’s island building; nor has it come to the aid of either the Philippines, a treaty ally, in Scarborough Shoal in 2012, or Vietnam, a new security partner, in 2017. Would the United States risk a conflict with China over a few barren rocks in the South China Sea? The Chinese assumption is “no,” vindicated by the U.S. reluctance to defend Scarborough Shoal for its ally in Manila. Indeed, since former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared the South China Sea a U.S. national interest in 2010, China has been calling Washington’s bluff.²⁵ This has provided Beijing with reason to believe that Southeast Asia will not rally behind the United States to balance China in the South China Sea.

The last remaining puzzle is the Chinese assessment of ASEAN’s response. Since the late 1990s, China has bandwagoned with ASEAN for regional cooperation by supporting an ASEAN-centered East Asian institutional order. Having now become the region’s resident great power, it is still trying to enhance political trust, deepen economic cooperation, and build societal ties with ASEAN members, as described earlier. If Beijing does not fear a strategic backlash from regional states, nor from the United States because of its lack of capabilities, resolve, or both, does it worry that fraying ties with ASEAN may cost it a key supporter in regional cooperation? Beijing no longer needs ASEAN in the same way that it did in the past. Now a great power, China has completed its necessary integration into the world and possesses the leverage and leeway to drive territorial settlements. The new thinking in Beijing is that ASEAN needs China more than China needs ASEAN.²⁶

In practical terms, China has boxed-in ASEAN at both the strategic and tactical levels. Strategically, China understands ASEAN’s desire to flourish as a successful regional organization. The series of dialogue partnerships that ASEAN has established with external powers help to maintain the organization’s relevance in the regional order. For this reason alone, ASEAN must at least cultivate a working relationship with China. An ASEAN-centered regional institutional architecture without Chinese participation would be a regional order cut in half, meaningless and dangerous. By contrast, China could conceivably construct its own regional order without ASEAN, or even by splitting ASEAN and snatching some of its member states. ASEAN can only stand up to China if in alignment with the United States, and Beijing is confident that ASEAN will not risk a complete

break-up of their relationship. Moreover, as veteran diplomat from Singapore Bilahari Kausikan argues, the Chinese role in Asia is a geopolitical fact whereas the United States' is a geopolitical calculation.²⁷ China's confidence in shaping the U.S. choice will only grow in the years ahead.

Tactically, Beijing is keenly aware that ASEAN's first survival principle is consensus-based decision-making among its 10 members; no consensus, no ASEAN. The practical consequence of this unique ASEAN model of decision making is to privilege form over substance. Grasping this truism, China has realized that as long as it has one ASEAN member willing to sing to its tune, ASEAN will never be able to inflict significant harm on Beijing. Indeed in July 2012, the organization experienced the greatest diplomatic debacle in its 45-year history when it failed to produce a foreign ministers' joint statement because Cambodia, a loyal supporter of China and ASEAN's chair that year, disagreed on the language of the draft statement, particularly in regard to the disputes in the South China Sea.²⁸ Keeping Cambodia in its pocket, Beijing is satisfied with its tactical success in limiting ASEAN's ability to do harm.

ASEAN's dilemma is well illustrated by its willingness to negotiate a code of conduct (COC) for the South China Sea with China. ASEAN's understandable preference is a legally binding, treaty-like document with a dispute-settlement mechanism to restrain Chinese behavior with legal teeth. Yet its officials know, and the agreed May 2017 framework text of the COC shows, that China's preference is the exact opposite: a non-binding text mainly for promoting trust and managing incidents.²⁹ Meanwhile, China continues to enhance its presence at sea, creating more favorable material conditions for future settlements of disputes. Beijing has now reached the stage where it can only be restrained by itself.

Why does ASEAN expend sizable diplomatic resources to negotiate a non-binding agreement that is disagreeable to its taste? Because it has no other choice. China has once again cornered it by proposing COC negotiations. The proposal is difficult to refuse because a COC was initially an ASEAN idea. It is dangerous to reject because otherwise China will go its own way in the South China Sea, and the relationship between China and ASEAN will be severely damaged, with adverse implications for ASEAN's centrality in the regional order. For the sake of regional order, going forward with China is better than going sideways alone. Some Chinese officials may now be thinking: "It is ASEAN that is begging us to negotiate a COC, not the other way around."

Notice also that China's support for ASEAN's centrality is not unconditional. Recognition of ASEAN's unique role in East Asian institutionalism and an appreciation of its support for China's integration with the region after the 1990s have certainly played a role. Increasingly, however, the Chinese attitude is driven by a pragmatic assessment that, as yet, China lacks region-wide legitimacy to lead institutionalized cooperation in East Asia.³⁰ Many regional countries, and

the United States in particular, will view Chinese-led efforts at regional institution-building as attempts to exclude the United States and diminish its influence in the region. Currently, ASEAN is the only regional actor acceptable to all sides to play a grand leadership role in regional cooperation. China has benefited from ASEAN's centrality in the past, and can live with it for as long as it serves its interests.

This last point is important: China is already trying to restrict ASEAN's centrality in areas where important strategic interests are at stake. Thus, in the South China Sea, it does not want its behavior to be moderated by ASEAN-centered security multilateralism such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) or the East Asia Summit. During a raucous meeting in June 2016, a senior Chinese official bluntly told ASEAN foreign ministers that ASEAN has no centrality in the South China Sea issue.³¹ Even in "low politics" areas such as economics, finance, development, and non-traditional security where China is still committed to ASEAN's centrality, Chinese officials are increasingly complaining about ASEAN's inability to drive the next round of East Asian cooperation, especially in the ASEAN + 3 forum.³²

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Ultimately, as the eminent historian Wang Gungwu puts it, "Beijing wants a united ASEAN for it, not against it."³³ If skillful, China may put itself at the center of regional order-building in the long run. China does not even need to push the United States out of Asia to claim centrality and displace ASEAN. If China can reach a strategic accommodation with the United States in Asia, it will have succeeded in diminishing ASEAN's centrality. It is hard for Beijing to resist the conclusion that it is enjoying more options than ASEAN for shaping the future regional order.

The Big Question

The rapid rise of Chinese power and the swiftness with which it has executed the new strategy of conditional reassurance have made the big question of Southeast Asia's future relations with China increasingly clear: Having already accepted China's rise as a geopolitical fact, will Southeast Asian countries further support China's dominance in recognition of a new normative order? Is Beijing trying to "re-create a regional hierarchy with China at the top," as Singapore's Kausikan puts it?³⁴

Currently, searching for evidence from China's top leadership of a quest for such a normative hierarchy yields scant results. But influential Chinese analysts

have begun to discuss foreign relationships, such as the one between China and Singapore, in hierarchical terms.³⁵ Although hierarchy is not yet the dominant principle of Chinese foreign policy, and it is by no means certain that it will be, it has a strong tradition in Chinese history.³⁶ It is an open question whether future Chinese leadership would be able to resist the temptation of establishing a normative hierarchy in Asia in parallel to the material hierarchy currently forming. Southeast Asian countries, all “small” relative to China, will need to ponder this uncomfortable question for a long time to come.

For its part, China is betting that its composite strategy of conditional reassurance—combining reassurance with coercion in its own dialectical style—will be able to manage tension and entrench its influence in Southeast Asia. It may be right, if it can recognize the essential truth of another strategic principle from the Chinese tradition: the need to maintain a proper balance between contrasting goals and approaches (*du*). *Du*, variously described as balance, appropriateness, or a golden mean (*zhongyong*), is Chinese dialecticism par excellence. The popular notion of China’s *yin-yang* philosophy is an exact reflection of the centrality of *du* in Chinese thought. Confucius, China’s greatest thinker of all time, was also the superlative model of *du*. His disciples described him as being “always gracious yet serious, commanding yet not severe, deferential yet at ease.”³⁷ Indeed, Chinese strategists today may understand being “commanding yet not severe” as denoting the boundary of effective diplomacy and establish it as a fundamental principle of strategy.

While elites in Beijing fret that China had been too generous toward Southeast Asia by almost turning a blind eye to regional claimant states’ attempts to enhance their positions in the disputed South China Sea before 2009, thus violating the principle of *du*, they may well also think that exorbitant goals and excessive coercion will run the same risk by triggering a counterbalancing coalition against China. Such an outcome has not happened yet, at least not in an overt or mechanical fashion—much to their gratification, and contrary to a fundamental realist prediction.

But if they are to continue demonstrating the superiority of Chinese wisdom over Western theory, they must uphold *du* as an inviolable golden rule. And the nature of *du*, paradoxically, is the affirmation of the importance of strategic self-restraint. If China can sustain *du* and practice the self-restraint demanded by it, regional fears of Chinese hierarchical dominance will subside, and China will be able to enjoy a higher degree of authority and influence than that achievable by hierarchical dominance.

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