

**SOURCES OF CHINA'S ASSERTIVENESS
IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA**

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Executive Summary

1. Since 2009, China has adopted increasingly muscular actions in the South China Sea. For Beijing, it is largely reacting to the equally or more assertive moves of other claimant states. To other claimants, Beijing's moves are signs of a rising power's creeping assertiveness and even aggressiveness.
2. The perceived decline of US power relative to that of China after the 2008 global financial crisis has largely given China the opportunity to advance its interests, leading to an increased deployment of its military and non-military resources to the disputed waters.
3. US rebalancing to Asia strategy and regional realignments since 2010 had deepened the perception of a US-led encirclement, paradoxically pushing China to pursue a new round of assertiveness in a move to assert its interests and deter regional countries from further aligning with America.
4. The growing pressure however has compelled China to moderate (albeit selectively) its actions after mid-2010 when it took steps to repair relations with claimant states and to manage the disputes in a more conciliatory manner.
5. China's continuing assertiveness is attributable to growing political insecurity, rising nationalism and increasing pluralisation of external policy process.
6. China is promoting a "new type of major power relations" [*xinxing daguo guanxi*] to cultivate peaceful and stable relations with all big powers, particularly the United States.
7. This global strategy goes hand-in-hand with the "regional" strategy of periphery diplomacy, which, by 2014, anchored on "the Belt and Road" [*yidai yilu*] initiative to transform China's geo-economic and geopolitical landscape through regional connectivity initiatives to provide regional public goods and reshape the long-term security order in the Asia-Pacific.

8. Driven by the imperative of nationalist legitimization, China has continued its assertiveness by taking actions to defend its maritime rights and constructing enormous artificial islands from reefs; at the same time, it has taken care not to incite region-wide backlash that will destabilise the regional environment, which might undermine its performance legitimization efforts.
9. Beijing strives to offset the adverse effects of its maritime assertiveness by showcasing, materialising and multiplying the opportunities of its economic inducement and diplomatic reassurance to the regional audience to preserve regional stability and prosperity as an attempt to *strike a balance between Party elites' contending pathways of legitimization*.