Chinese Foreign Policy: The Debate and Ambiguity

Presented at the Brookings Institution
27 February 2015
Akio Takahara
The Debate over Foreign Policy Continues

 Assertive or Conciliatory Foreign Policy

★ Deng Xiaoping’s line of “tao guang yang hui” (low profile, conciliatory diplomacy) is out of date. Must switch from “you suo zuo wei” (achieving something) to “fen fa you wei” (exerting yourself)

★ We must stick to Deng’s line. China is still a developing country. We thrive in the current world order. We must not lose our good image.

Cf. Aggressive discourse in the media (2008--
Related Debates

China Model of Development or Reforms


★ Without privatisation, liberalisation and distributive reforms, and those coming soon, China will be in trouble. Accept universal values.
Response to the US Pivot to Asia

Two-fold:

★ Return to low-profile diplomacy towards the US, promoting the “New Major Power Relationship”

★ Heighten alert against containment/encirclement (“US is a global tiger, Japan is an Asian wolf”)

Divided Views on the Senkakus

Hardliners: Japan’s act of purchasing the islands was open provocation and challenge to sovereignty

Moderates: Japan’s act was to cool things down, had nothing to do with sovereignty

NB Affinity b/n neo-Maoism and chauvinism/xenophobia

Cf. CCP’s traditional method to unite the Party and the nation

= set a target of struggle
Information Gap b/n Japan & China
e.g. Trawler Collision Incident, Sept. 2010

The Chinese Version

http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2010-09/08/c_12529310.htm
Information Gap b/n Japan & China
e.g. Trawler Collision Incident, Sept. 2010

The Japanese Version

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVVM2AmvD5U
Information Gap b/n Japan & China
e.g. Abe’s Visit to the Yasukuni Shrine

Chinese view: Abe went to arouse nationalistic sentiments, unite the nation and increase his popularity

Japanese survey results
Asahi: 41% Good that he went;
        46% Should not have gone
Sankei Fuji: 38% Positively appraise it;
            53% Do not positively appraise it
Gentle Words, Tough Deeds

★ Oct. 2013 Peripheral Diplomacy Workshop
--conciliatory policy line announced: intimacy, sincerity, benefit, tolerance (親、誠、惠、容: four Chinese characters added by Xi Jinping)

★ Oct. 2013 Speech at the Indonesian Parliament

“With regard to differences and disputes between China and some Southeast Asian nations on territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, peaceful solutions should be sought, and differences and disputes should be properly handled through equal-footed dialogue and friendly consultation in the overall interests of bilateral ties and regional stability.”
Gentle Words, **Tough Deeds**

- Nov. 2013 Announcement of the Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea
- May 2014 Deployment of an oil rig near the Paracels; land reclamation and base construction
- Intrusion by Chinese patrol boats into the Senkaku territorial waters continues
- Airmiss b/n Japanese & Chinese military planes (May & June 2014)

NB Usual tactic against Japan: to justify China’s assertive action by using the history card
Lack of Coordination

★ Lack of horizontal coordination in Chinese bureaucracy—a perennial problem

MoFA: conciliatory

Propaganda Dept: nationalistic

PLA & Oil Dept: secure interests, create *faits accomplis*
What do the Chinese want?

★ Conflicting targets

- to unite the Party & the nation: struggle with the neighbours proves useful
- peace and prosperity: cooperation with the neighbours is useful and necessary
- to establish control in the Western Pacific: hopefully without fighting, but by increasing presence – implementing Sun Zi’s Art of War ← unacceptable to all the neighbours & US