



# Asia Pacific Bulletin

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## Understanding China's Foreign Policy Crisis Behavior

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The recent standoff between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea has further increased suspicions regarding the rise of China and regional security. As the United States claims to “rebalance towards Asia,” the diplomatic and military crises between China and its neighbors will inevitably involve US interests in the Asia-Pacific. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of China's foreign policy crisis behavior, as in when China will take risks to escalate conflict and when China will avoid risks to seek accommodation, is crucial for US policy makers.

**Kai He, Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington and Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Utah State University, explains that “China's foreign policy crisis behavior is influenced by three integrated factors.” These three factors are “Crisis severity, leadership authority, and international pressure.”**

### Getting China Wrong?

Existing studies of Chinese crisis behavior focus mainly on military conflicts, such as the Korean War, the Sino-Indian War and the Sino-Vietnamese War. Moreover, since the end of the Cold War, China has not engaged in any overt military conflicts with another state. However, there have been sporadic “near crises” between China and other countries which had the latent potential to escalate further into military confrontations, such as the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Crisis, the 2001 EP-3 incident, and the Sino-Japanese boat collision in 2010 near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

There are puzzles in explaining the patterns of China's foreign policy crisis management since the end of the Cold War. For example, why did China act so dramatically in response to Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui's visit to Cornell University during the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Crisis? If military deterrence was the major goal, China's multiple rounds of military exercises and missile tests actually reveal more weakness than strength. On the other hand, why did China seek accommodation with the United States in the 2001 EP-3 incident and release the US crew after receiving a vaguely-worded “apology” from Joseph Prueher, the US Ambassador to China? What are the conditions that determine Chinese leaders' decisions for coercion or compromise during a foreign policy crisis?

### Crisis Severity, Leadership Authority, and International Pressure

China's foreign policy crisis behavior is influenced by three integrated factors. The severity of the crisis is the first factor. If China is a victim of the crisis or its core interests are seriously challenged, it is difficult for China to back down, at least immediately. Therefore, China's outrage to the NATO bombing of its embassy in Belgrade in 1999 should come as no surprise.

The authority of Chinese decision makers is another key factor in shaping China's behavior. If a Chinese leader has not yet established his authority within the communist political and military bureaucracy, he may not be able to control the interests of other factions when coordinating a response. For example, President Jiang Zemin encountered serious domestic challenges from both the military and other senior party members during the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Crisis. This partly explains why Jiang decided to escalate rather



than defuse the crisis, because the primary audience was Jiang's domestic rivals, not the United States or Taiwan.

Last, but not least, international pressure—the status of China's relations with the United States and other great powers—also plays a crucial role in influencing Chinese leaders' foreign policy crisis behavior. Prior to the 1999 Belgrade embassy bombing, US-China relations were already strained over China's bid to join the World Trade Organization and the release of the Cox Report, which accused China of stealing nuclear technology secrets from the United States. These tensions helped kindle domestic Chinese anti-American nationalism even before the embassy bombing, which in turn constrained Jiang and other Chinese leaders' policy responses. Limited escalation became the best strategy for Chinese leaders to channel—and contain—domestic anger and sentiments of surging nationalism.

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These factors frame Chinese leaders' policy choices during crises in a very dynamic way. A domestically and internationally confident Chinese leader may choose an accommodative way to deal with a serious foreign policy crisis, such as what Jiang did in the EP-3 incident. A weak leader may choose to escalate or even initiate an unnecessary crisis to divert domestic strife or consolidate domestic authority. This year there will be a leadership transition in China, and maybe the election of a new president in the United States. The new Chinese political leadership will need time to consolidate their domestic authority, and if elected, Mitt Romney's Chinese policy will take some time to unfold. Depending on circumstances, it may be “the best of times” or “the worst of times” in US-China relations.

### **Understanding and Shaping, Not Demonizing, China**

Some analysts suggest that since 2008 China's foreign policy behavior has become more assertive. However, is this really a surprise? An economically and militarily stronger China needs to adapt its position to secure its now growing global interests. Demonizing or equating China to 20th century Japan and Germany will not stop China's rise and an assertive China may or may not be aggressive in nature.

First, the United States needs to adjust its own policies toward China. It is not constructive to deal with China using policies from the last century. For example, during the 1990s China's reaction to US arms sales to Taiwan was not as vehement as they have been of late. Today, because of China's increased global standing, it has to more forcibly condemn and react to what it perceives as provocative unilateral actions towards Taiwan on behalf of the United States. US policy makers would be well-advised to consider developing a new China policy that is more considerate of China's interests going into the 21st century.

Second, the United States should avoid meddling in China's domestic affairs and let China deal with its own domestic problems. This does not mean that the international community should ignore what Chinese leaders do to their people in their own country. Instead, the United States and other nations should encourage, rather than try to force, China to abide by global rules and norms, both diplomatically and strategically.

Finally, the United States needs to make use of *Mianzi* (“saving face”) strategies to help shape Chinese leaders' policy choices, especially during foreign policy crises. Some US politicians frequently claim in public that confrontation between the United States and China is inevitable. However, Chinese leaders are reluctant in public to claim rivalry or enmity with other countries. If US leaders can spare Chinese leaders' from losing “face” in public without jeopardizing US interests, then Chinese leaders are more likely to cooperate within the realm of international affairs, especially during foreign policy crises. To quote Joseph Nye: “If we treat China as an enemy, it will definitely become one.” If the United States treats China as a friend, it may or may not become one that shares the same interests and values with the United States. However, Chinese leaders will at least behave more conciliatorily towards the United States, especially during future foreign policy crises.

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