The Spring 2014 Incidents in the South China Sea: Trigger of a More Intense and Assertive Security Discourse in China?

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Introduction

The month of May 2014 saw heated events in the South China Sea (SCS): After the deployment of the Chinese oil rig Haiyang shiyou 981 140 nautical miles off the Vietnamese coastline, Chinese and Vietnamese vessels collided, followed by both sides mutually blaming each other. Only few days later a Chinese vessel was seized by the Philippine police and Chinese fishermen were arrested and later sentenced to severe prison sentences. In mid-May 2014, massive protests in Vietnam rose against China’s action in the South China Sea with Chinese property being looted and Chinese as well as other countries’ citizens injured and even killed, thousands others were evacuated from the country. Being mostly unrelated to each other, some of these events (such as the arrest of fishermen or the collision of boats) were recurring and often to be observed in the past, others were new – even in these troubled waters: The South China Sea conflict has never seen such a massive uprising by citizens against one country with an outburst of violence aimed directly at the country itself and its citizens.

All these events – be they old or new – triggered a security discourse by the Chinese government that will be the center of this paper. It aims at assessing to what extent these events initiated an intense and more assertive security discourse which could lead to a more assertive behavior by China in the South China Sea conflict. The underlying assumption of this paper is that “securitizing” the events in spring 2014 might help Beijing to legitimize further action both internally and externally. Or in other words: If the events in the South China Sea and Vietnam are sufficiently framed as immediate threats to China’s national security (or other security dimensions), the government might find enough grounds to eventually dispatch its military into its proclaimed territorial waters of the South China Sea and rage war against other claimants involved in the conflict.

This paper therefore asks the following research question: How did the events in Vietnam and the South China Sea in spring 2014 influence the security discourse in China? The research question is followed by several sub-
questions. Firstly the paper asks: Which types of security discourses unfolded in the course of the events? Here, it aims at identifying dominant discourse streams. Is each event represented by its own discourse stream or are certain events either omitted or amalgamated with other events? Secondly, the paper asks: Which dimension of security prevailed for each type of discourse? This sub-question inquires whether either one security dimension (i.e. that of national security) dominates the discourse or whether one can speak of a comprehensive security discourse. Thirdly and fourthly, the author inquires: Can the events be seen as a trigger of a more intense and assertive security discourse in China? How does the discourse fit into China’s current understanding of security in the context of the South China Sea? Here, the paper aims at grasping the intensity of the discourse and estimating the consequences of the concrete security discourse by embedding it into China’s long-term security strategy in the South China Sea.

In order to adequately answer all research questions, the author will pursue the following structure within this paper. It will elaborate briefly first on the theoretical and methodological frame of this analysis to then introduce six discourse streams that could be extracted in the wake of the spring 2014 events. It will further closely look at the basic notions and security implications of each of these streams, before assessing which dimension of security dominated the discourse. Finally, we will embed the discourse into the broader picture of China’s security strategy in the South China Sea and discuss whether or not the events did trigger a more intense and assertive security discourse.

**Theoretical Framework: Security, Comprehensive Security and Securitization**

This paper follows a constructivist tradition regarding International Relations. It rather places a strong emphasis on ideational instead of material aspects of international politics. It claims that there is no objective knowledge and reality, as this reality is historically and socially constructed. As for the notion of security, this paper likewise follows a constructivist path and disagrees with the traditional schools of Realism and Neo-Realism which understand security primarily as related to the state and military. As Buzan (1991) argues, security needs to be understood also under socio-economic aspects and the subjective feeling of security or insecurity of individuals within a society. Buzan’s arguments rather privilege concepts like identity and integration instead of material and objective means of security. This concept of comprehensive security therefore adds an economic, environmental, human and individual dimension...