

The Making of China's Foreign Policy towards Vietnam in the South China Sea Dispute : The Analysis of The Idiosyncratic Factors of Xi Jinping in Considering China's Strategic Environment (2012-2016)

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Abstract:

Perselisihan di Laut Tiongkok Selatan telah berakar sejak beberapa dekade yang lalu, namun ketegangan telah semakin meningkat dalam beberapa tahun terakhir ini, dimana masing negara 'claimants' memiliki kebijakan luar negerinya sendiri untuk mengklaim wilayah yang saling tumpang tindih dan di saat bersamaan juga melakukan aktivitas militer di daerah tersebut. Xi Jinping, Presiden RRT, memiliki peran yang sangat besar dalam pembuatan kebijakan luar negeri Tiongkok, termasuk dalam perselisihan teritorial di Laut Tiongkok Selatan. Sejak kepemimpinannya, tindakan yang lebih tegas telah dilakukan oleh Tiongkok, terutama terhadap Vietnam sebagai salah satu penggugat yang paling vokal. Tulisan ini menjelaskan lingkungan strategis Tiongkok yang memfokuskan pada kebijakan luar negeri Tiongkok dan Kebijakan "Rebalance" AS di Asia Pasifik, tujuan kebijakan luar negeri Tiongkok dalam perselisihan Laut Tiongkok Selatan, dan akhirnya menganalisis bagaimana faktor-faktor tersebut dipertimbangkan oleh Xi Jinping dalam pembuatan rasionalitas kebijakan luar negerinya terhadap Vietnam dalam perselisihan Laut Tiongkok Selatan (2012 - 2016). Tulisan ini menyimpulkan bahwa pengaruh pihak luar di wilayah tersebut telah mengakibatkan Xi Jinping beralih untuk membuat kebijakan luar negeri - dari bersikap asertif hingga lebih kooperatif - yang bertujuan untuk mempertahankan hubungan bilateralnya dengan Vietnam yang menjadi keputusan paling rasional untuk mempertahankan status quo Tiongkok dalam perselisihan tersebut.

Keywords: *Xi Jinping, idiosyncratic, strategic environment, foreign policy, Vietnam*

Introduction

The ongoing South China Sea dispute will not only hurt the relationship between the claimants, but it will also lead to regional instability – the worst one being war – not only between the claimants but rather the superpower supporting the claimants as the dispute has become global with their involvement. The six claimants of South China Sea, namely: People's Republic of China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam³, are competing for their claims over the territory within South China Sea. They need to protect South China Sea as their claimed territory and sovereignty on the ocean; and as a vital point in the region for its abundant natural resources beneath, strategic international trade and shipping line, and fishing ground for many as well.⁴

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³ "Why is The South China Sea Contentious?", BBC, July 12, 2016 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-13748349>

⁴ *Ibid.*

Foreign policy making is a complex process which involves a lot of factors, one of them being the state leader himself, who takes a major role in the process. The leader of China, Xi Jinping, therefore holds an even more significant influence especially since China is led through an authoritarian system. Xi Jinping is the current leader of China, succeeding Hu Jintao and was elected as the chairman of both Communist Party of China (CPC) and Central Military Commission (CMC) in 2012, and officially became the president of China in 2013. In October 2016, Xi was made the 'core' leader by the CPC, symbolizing the dominance of his leadership. His father was a Vice Premier during Mao Zedong era, but was then purged with Xi Jinping being sent for 7 years of countryside service in a small village of Liangjiahe, where he acknowledged many of his ideas and characteristics were formed.⁵ He is well-known for his emphasis on anti-corruption campaign and Chinese Dream ambition – which aims for national rejuvenation of the country to be both prosperous and strong in military.

The decision of a state leader itself is influenced by many factors – the ones that will be emphasized in this research being the **strategic environment** of the state, how it is perceived by the **idiosyncratic factors** of the leader, and finally be projected as the state's foreign policy as the most rational decision. Therefore the question which this research would like to address is: **“How did President Xi Jinping consider China's strategic environment in making foreign policy towards Vietnam in their South China Sea dispute?”** In order to answer the question, the analysis in this paper will be divided into three parts. Firstly, analyzing the purpose of China's foreign policy; followed by the analysis on Xi Jinping's idiosyncratic factors; and lastly, leads him to assess the strategic environment and the foreign policy purposes by himself and resorting to the decision that is most rational to him.

China-Vietnam Dispute over South China Sea: Why Vietnam?

Despite the number of claimant states, this research would only discuss the overlapping claims of the territory between China and Vietnam. China claims the largest area, 80 percent of the whole South China Sea, while Vietnam is the strongest, most vocal claimant (next to the Philippines) to be against China. Vietnam is in a unique situation where it shares similar ideological background with China, where they could have much more to build but had to crumble because of this dispute. Furthermore, the competition over claims between the two did not just begin recently, but from decades ago, where they were engaged in the 'Battle of the Paracel Islands' in early 1974

⁵ Connor, Neil, *“The Cave the Chinese President Called Home”*, The Telegraph, published on October 19, 2015, <http://s.telegraph.co.uk/graphics/projects/xi-jinping-cave/>

and also followed by a series of conflicts regarding border territory from land border to naval battle in the latter years.

Since 2012, the tension among claimants has been rising significantly, including between China and Vietnam. Through the past several years, both have been involved each other in several issues, such as boats ramming, oil rig standoff, and artificial island building within the contested area. In 2014, the establishment of Chinese giant oil rig Haiyang Shihou 981 within Vietnam's claimed Exclusive Economic Zone had even brought down Sino-Vietnamese bilateral relationship down to an all-time low diplomatic crisis and caused devastating anti-China riot in Vietnam.⁶ However, from late 2016, the tension between China and Vietnam has managed to cool down and leader from both sides have agreed to find a solution through peaceful negotiations and that their 'common interests may far outweigh differences if they adopt pragmatism in diplomacy'.⁷

Strategic Environment of China: China's Foreign Policy Planks & U.S. Rebalance Policy

Firstly, China's strategic environment that will be discussed is divided into two: the internal environment being several planks of foreign policy of China under Xi Jinping, and the external environment being the projection of U.S. Rebalance Policy in the Asia-Pacific.

Starting from the internal environment, there are three emphasis of foreign policy of China as of Xi's leadership: 'Peaceful Development', 'Period of Strategic Opportunity (POS0)', and 'Chinese Dream'.

'Peaceful Development' was first announced on September 2011, the China's White Paper on China's Peaceful Development defines the path of 'peaceful development' as the country developing through 'upholding world peace and contribute to world peace through its own development'. This rejects the view that the rise of China is to take revenge for its past sufferings from wars. Oppositely, as quoted from the White Paper on China's Peaceful Development published by Xinhua⁸:

"From their (Chinese nation) bitter sufferings from war and poverty in modern times, the Chinese people have learned the value of peace and the pressing need of development. They see that only peace can allow them to live and work in prosperity and contentment and that

⁶ Kwok, Kristine, "Chinese Oil Rig's Return in South China Sea, Off Coast of Vietnam, Touches Nerve in Hanoi", South China Morning Post, January 26, 2016 <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1905384/chinese-oil-rigs-return-south-china-sea-coast-vietnam>

⁷ Huang, Cary, "Once Comrades and Brothers, China and Vietnam are Going Their Own Way Down the Socialist Path", South China Morning Post, published on September 20, 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2020895/once-comrades-and-brothers-china-and-vietnam-are-going-their>

⁸ White Paper on China's Peaceful Development pg. 2, can be read on Xinhua, published on November 9, 2011, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-09/06/c_131102329_2.htm

only development can bring them decent living. Therefore the central goal of China's diplomacy is to create peaceful and stable international environment for its development."

The second plank is 'Period of Strategic Opportunity' (POSO), in which Xi Jinping stated that China is still in, and will still be until at least the end of his presidency in 2020. POSO puts in concise the main external strategic guideline of CPC and serves as a reflection of leadership's judgment, that China is experiencing a favorable external security environment which enables China to focus on its domestic development. It plays a good deal of role especially in terms of China's defense. However, during his leadership Xi has repeatedly stated his ambition for the Chinese military to prepare themselves to 'fight and win wars'. Not to mention that in the same period, Chinese officials have also explicitly described the U.S. Rebalance Policy as one obstacle towards China's security interest. This situation has caused reaction whether the external environment of China has higher chance of conflict rather than previously assessed in the POSO by CPC. Regardless, Xi denied this and continued to encourage to just focus on POSO and "*not allow our views to be blocked by intricate developments*" in the international system.

The implementation of POSO by China and by how Xi introduces it to the world signifies that in line with the concept of 'peaceful rise', China does not have the ambition to disruptively rise as neither a regional nor global hegemon. This is also stated in the China's White Paper of Peaceful Development⁹:

"...China does not seek regional hegemon or sphere of influence, nor does it want to exclude any country from participating in regional cooperation. China's prosperity, development and long-term stability represent an opportunity rather than a threat to its neighbors...."

Last but not least, the Chinese Dream has become globally known as a catchphrase of Xi Jinping.¹⁰ The Chinese Dream is simply, according to Xi, a dream of the people – the Chinese people living their life happily and in satisfaction.¹¹ Xi believes that a peaceful and developed world is needed in order for 'Chinese Dream' to be realized. The world and China based on the Chinese Dream has a reciprocal, mutual relation: "*a prosperous and stable world community offers opportunities to China, while China's development presents great opportunities to the world.*"¹² He also stated sternly that China will not tolerate anything that may harm China's interests in sovereignty, security, and development. Therefore, Chinese Dream also serves as a completion of China's Peaceful Rise/Development.

⁹ White Paper on China's Peaceful Development pg. 4

¹⁰ Das, Shaheli, "*The Awakening of Xi's Chinese Dream*", East Asia Forum, published on April 7, 2016, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/04/07/the-awakening-of-xis-chinese-dream/>

¹¹ "*Xinhua Insight: Chinese Dream is a Dream for All*", Xinhua, published on December 3, 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-12/03/c_135878166.htm

¹² "*Xi Jinping: Pursuing Dream for 1.3 Billion Chinese*", Xinhua, published on March 17, 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-03/17/c_124467411_4.htm

Located within Asia-Pacific as its strategic environment, China is not the only country that focuses its foreign policy towards it. Since early of Barack Obama presidency in 2011, the U.S. has been taking approach to Asia Pacific region through its so-called 'U.S. Rebalance Policy', making it a geostrategic priority involving three major focuses, which are security, economic, and diplomatic elements. This shift of U.S. foreign policy is seen by many as a way to contain China's rise in the region, but it is stated that the shift is triggered by a set of strategic, economic, and political considerations.¹³

As the U.S. Rebalance Policy is seen as one way to expand and strengthen its influence or hegemony in the region, it is not welcomed by China which, from its cornerstone of foreign policy, opposes hegemony. Chinese officials criticize U.S. for its policy mainly for its military activities expansion in the region, and its diplomatic activities that are seen as supporting other countries involved in the maritime territorial disputes with China.¹⁴ Therefore, to China this particular U.S. foreign policy poses the most challenge towards China's conduct of foreign policy in the region. Aside from being put into critics by the officials, the policy is also stated in official documents, such as the White Paper on China's Armed Forces published in April 2013. In the first chapter of the content, "New Situation, New Challenges, and New Mission", it is stated in the paper:

*"The Asia-Pacific region has become an increasingly significant stage for world economic development and strategic environment for major powers. The U.S. is adjusting its Asia-Pacific security strategy, and the regional landscape is undergoing profound changes... Some country has strengthened its Asia-Pacific military alliances, expanded its military presence in the region, and frequently makes the situation there tenser."*¹⁵

Recently, the U.S. has also been trying to improve its relations with Vietnam, some moves that could be of China's worries, such as its historical move on fully lifting its arms embargo to Vietnam since 1984, on May 2016. It was a move taken following the intensifying China's assertiveness in the South China Sea – even though Obama denied the lift having any relations with China's growing aggressiveness – and just a few months after Vietnam elected the new president, General Tran Dai Quang.¹⁶ On a further note, since late September 2016 Vietnam has also been engaging with the U.S. more for their new Naval Engagement Activity, a non-combat program

¹³ Sutter, Robert G., Brown, Michael E., and Adamson, Timothy J.A., with Mochizuki, Mike M., and Ollapally, Deepa, "Balancing Acts: The U.S. Rebalance and Asia-Pacific Stability", pg.1, published in August 2013.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ "The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces", published by the Information Office of the State Council on April 2013, taken from Xinhua, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-04/16/c_132312681.htm

¹⁶ Thompson, Mark, "Why Lifting the Vietnam Arms Embargo is All About China", Time, published on May 23, 2016, <http://time.com/4345639/vietnam-arms-embargo-barack-obama-china/>

which focuses on preventing hostilities or incidents in the South China Sea; and is separated from other naval exercises with other ASEAN countries.¹⁷

China's Foreign Policy Purpose (Two-Good Theory)

The second part of this research is to analyze the purpose of China's foreign policy, by using the Two-Good Theory from the book 'Theory of Foreign Policy' by Palmer and Morgan.¹⁸

According to the *Theory of Foreign Policy* book, states are assumed to be both relatively unhappy with the status quo of some issues, and relatively content with the status quo of other issues. These two conditions are what lead states into a maintenance and change-seeking behavior: changing things that are not favorable to them and maintaining those which please them. It simply explains why (two, if not more) states would go into conflicts. When one state seeks to maintain the status quo but at the same time other state (or supposedly its adversary) seeks to change the existing condition, the clash occurs and thus the conflict happens.

Background of Maintenance/Change-Seeking

Firstly, China is trying to maintain the peace and stability in the South China Sea, as it has stated so and committed in the Framework of the Declaration of Conduct of Parties made with ASEAN.¹⁹ This also goes accordingly with China's foreign policy that is based on peace and as stated in its foreign policy towards the Asia-Pacific region itself: the Peaceful Development. At the same time, China will still be maintaining its status quo regarding the dispute, particularly on how it is going to participate in solving it and including to maintain its relations with other claimants – which in this case, Vietnam. China will still be favoring to peaceful, bilateral negotiation with other claimants.

China's growing activities in the disputed area has been questioned by other claimants. However, in 2015 the China's Foreign Ministry explained through its spokesperson, that the purposes of reclamations are for:

“Optimizing their functions, improving the living and working conditions of personnel stationed there, better safeguarding territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, as well as better performing China's international responsibility and obligation in

¹⁷ Slavin, Erik, “US, Vietnam Navies Work on Preventing South China Sea Incidents”, Stars and Stripes, published on September 27, 2016, <http://www.stripes.com/news/us-vietnam-navies-work-on-preventing-south-china-sea-incidents-1.431279>

¹⁸ The Two-Good Theory is a theory by Glenn Palmer and T. Clifton Morgan, elaborated in their book “*A Theory of Foreign Policy*”, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2006.

¹⁹ Yosephine, Liza, “China Reaffirm Commitment to Maintaining Peace in South China Sea”, The Jakarta Post, published on July 25, 2016, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/07/25/asean-china-reaffirm-commitment-to-maintaining-peace-in-south-china-sea.html>

maritime search and rescue, disaster prevention and mitigation, marine science and research, meteorological observation, environmental protection, navigation safety, fishery production service and other areas."²⁰

Determining Factors of Maintenance/Change-Seeking

The capability of a state maintaining or changing its status quo is determined by two factors: resource endowment and preferences of the state. Firstly, resources are needed by the state to make maintenance and change. The more resources a state has, the more capability to make foreign policies it will have.

Firstly, in terms of resource endowment, China is a huge country blessed with many kinds of natural resources, but it is accompanied with a huge population of 1.3 billion to feed as well. China's current situation is unique, where it is now the second largest economy in the world but at the same time is still a developing state, with more than 15 percent of its population living in poverty.²¹ As reported by the World Bank, in 2015, China's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was 11,008 trillion USD. With the recorded total population of 1,371 billion, China's Gross National Income per capita was only 7,930 USD²², ranking only 97 out of 217.²³ This means even though China's economy is growing well, its people's welfare is not and thus leading to the pursuit of Chinese Dream. Since its rise, China began consuming and importing more natural resources and raw materials for its production.²⁴ Although China stays positive of its economy that in fact still contributes 25 percent of the world's economy²⁵, its temporary industrial slowdown in 2016 has in consequence contributed to the lower raise of China's defense spending.²⁶

From this fact, China's economy seems to be growing well because of its innovation, but the country itself is still in the struggle of looking for resources to sustain its consumption. In fact, it is also understandable with being the reason with China protects the South China Sea – for its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and of course for its resource-rich potential to ensure the welfare of

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Matthews, Ron, Ping, Xiaojuan, and Ling, Li, "Learning from China's Foreign Aid Model", The Diplomat, published on August 25, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/08/learning-from-chinas-foreign-aid-model/>

²² Data of China as of 2015 (data processed by the World Bank using Atlas Methodology), The World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/country/china>

²³ Ranks of Gross National Income per capita (GNIPc) 2015 per country (data processed by the World Bank using Atlas Methodology), The World Bank, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GNIPC.pdf>

²⁴ Kanani, Rahim, Forbes Interview with Economy, Elizabeth as the author of the book "By All Means Necessary: How China's Resource Quest is Changing the World", Forbes, published on March 15, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/rahimkanani/2014/03/15/by-all-means-necessary-how-chinas-resource-quest-is-changing-the-world/2/#1479d69f4bf3>

²⁵ Worstall, Tim, "China's Only 15% of the Global Economy but Contributes 25-30% of Global Growth", Forbes, published on October 30, 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/timworstall/2016/10/30/chinas-only-15-of-the-global-economy-but-contributes-25-30-of-global-growth/#587ebc0d3586>

²⁶ "China Focus: China Announces 7.6-pct Defense Budget Rise, Lowest in Six Years", Xinhua, published on March 5, 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-03/05/c_135158243.htm

the people. Therefore, it seems to be more suitable for China to maintain its position in the South China Sea with the environmental constraint that it has, accordingly to the theory.

Secondly, are the preferences of the state, which consist of 2 factors: **the distance**, and **the level of threat**. The distance here does not refer to geographical, measurable length. It refers to the distance of the state's status quo with its ideal point. The closer a state (its status quo) is to its ideal point, the more change it will pursue. The further it is, state will prefer to maintain it. The second factor is the level of threat. A threat here means that a state is feeling threatened when its status quo is being forced to change by other state – and the solution is for the threatened state to maintain it. Therefore, the more threatening it is, the more a targeted state will try to maintain it.

Based on the theory, this research will assume that China's ideal point in this issue is when it finally wins its claims of the disputed South China Sea. Meanwhile, its status quo right now is in the middle of disputes with the other five claimants. Moreover, this is also followed with three other states outside the region that openly oppose to China's position and support the Philippines' instead: the U.S., Japan, and Australia. Taking the case where a trilateral joint statement regarding the South China Sea dispute was issued on the night of July 25, it was seen by China as untimely, raising the tension of the dispute, putting the blame on China, and damaging what China and ASEAN countries had reached in harmony for the 11-states joint statement of their DOC implementation.²⁷ Not only such unfortunate event would break the trust that had been reached by the countries with China and prolong the path to the dispute solution, but this form of hegemony would also badly impact the regional stability – one that China is trying to maintain while fighting for its territorial sovereignty. Concluding from this, China is not yet anywhere close to its ideal point in claiming the whole South China Sea to its own, and therefore accordingly to the theory, China is maintaining its status quo in the issue.

The second aspect influencing the state's preference is the level of threat. In case of China, this research believes that it will be an understatement that China does not feel threatened by other states simply for its advantage in geographical size and military power. This is for the fact that there are several states that in the eyes of China, violating and challenging China's sovereignty and maritime territorial integrity in the South China Sea. It is challenging the foundation of China's conduct of foreign policy, even challenging the purpose of the Chinese Dream. On the first part of China's 2015 White Paper on Military Strategy, it mentions that China *'still faces multiple and complex security threats, as well as increasing external impediments and challenges'*.²⁸ A

²⁷ "Wang Yi Refuting the Joint Statement by US, Japan, and Australia: Peacekeeper or Troublemaker", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, published on July 27, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1384823.shtml

²⁸ China's Military Strategy, White Paper published by The Information Office of the State Council, Xinhua, on May 2015. Can be seen on the website of Ministry of National Defense The People's Republic of China, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Press/2015-05/26/content_4586805.htm

comprehensive paragraph in the same part stressing the state's concern about its situation in the Asia-Pacific, states as follows:

“On the issues concerning China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, some of its offshore neighbors take provocative actions and reinforce their military presence on China's reefs and islands that they have illegally occupied. Some external countries are also busy meddling in South China Sea affairs; a tiny few maintain constant close-in air and sea surveillance and reconnaissance against China. It is thus a long-standing task for China to safeguard its maritime rights and interests.”

The fact that the disputed South China Sea holds an abundant amount of resources should not be ignored either because it is deeply related to China's foreign policy and goal. In its Chinese Dream, China as a developing country is trying to achieve and ensure the welfare and prosperity of Chinese people. The resource of the South China Sea that is able to sustain the lives of Chinese people, therefore, is of the interest of China. The fact that China is struggling for maintaining its resources, and at the same time having the biggest population on earth, only adds more to the importance of the South China Sea.

Based on these analyses, this research believes that the situation is threatening to China, and therefore, as the theory concludes, is trying to maintain its status quo in the South China Sea dispute.

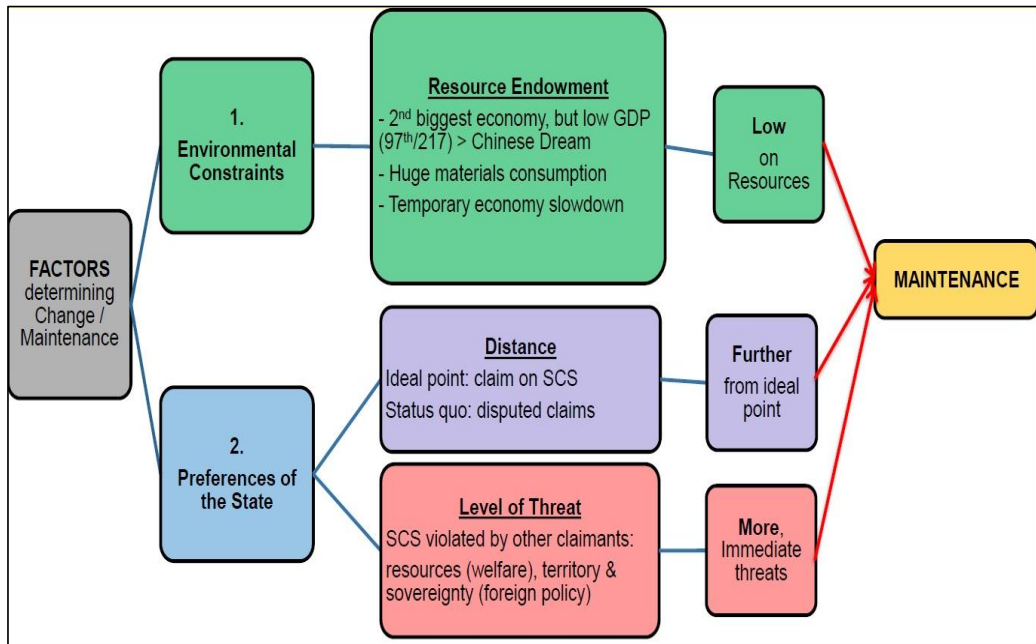


Figure 1 Two-Good Theory on China Maintenance-Seeking²⁹

²⁹ Figure of Two-Good Theory was inspired from the book *“A Theory of Foreign Policy”* by Glenn Palmer and T. Clifton Morgan, edited by the authors for the purpose of this research.

Hence after analyzing the condition that China is in with the principles and assumptions of the theory, it is concluded that China's foreign policy or behavior is that of maintenance-seeking, rather than change-seeking. As the theory has stated in the book, the power of a country is not necessarily related to the amount of change that it pursues – meaning a state's foreign policy does not always seek for change despite having the power to do so. In this case, China is a representation of that statement. Even though China might be a powerful country – looking at its rising economy and military power that are both currently the second rank in the world, China is trying to maintain its position in the South China Sea issue. An extreme change-seeking behavior might be China starting a war to chase away all the other claimants, but it is not possible because China's power is still just rising. However, the most important thing is that, China will always stand up to protect its sovereignty, but it will not initiate a war – simply for the fact that it does not go with its foreign policy principle. Therefore, China will stick to maintaining the peace and stability in the region, and seek to gradually solve the dispute through peaceful bilateral negotiation with each claimant.

Idiosyncratic Factors of Xi Jinping.

The idiosyncratic factors of Xi Jinping will be analyzed using the five factors elaborated from the book *“International Politics on the World Stage”* by John T. Roure.³⁰

Personality

There are many ways to categorize a leader's political personality, but one of the most well-known that this thesis refers to is the active-passive scale and positive-negative scale (Barber, 1985). The scale of active-passive shows how leader makes policy – whether he is active as policy innovators or is only a reactor. Meanwhile, the positive-negative scale the personality of the leader – whether he can accept or even enjoy the contentious political environment, or is vulnerable to feel burdened or even abused by political criticism.³¹ However, this research would like to focus on the active-passive personality only.

Xi Jinping himself has been making quite a lot of major policies and changes during his leadership so far. Xi has been very vocal on the high profile anti-graft issue that has its roots deep in the country since he rose to power by becoming the General Secretary of CPC in late 2012. He even instructed the Party to make a new anti-corruption body to strengthen the supervision. In late 2013, he created the NSC body in order to have easier communication of the security problems in the country, both at home and abroad – also headed by himself. He also made himself the commander-

³⁰ Roure, John T., *“International Politics on the World Stage”*, Chapter 3: Levels of Analysis and Foreign Policy, 2008, pg. 73-77.

³¹ Roure, John T., *“International Politics on the World Stage”*, pg.74

in-chief of CMC – even though he is already the chairman – so he will have a more direct role in military decision-making. His Chinese Dream which encourages for great national rejuvenation also becomes the base of many other policies that he issues, such as continuously advising the armed forces to improve themselves, and the economic reform in China through Xi's supply-side structural economic reform. The objective of the supply-side reform is to force closure and mergers of enterprises in steel, coal, and metal industries which are currently experiencing overcapacity.³² Being active in making policy does not always mean that the policy is good, however. For example, the supply-side reform is causing China's economic growth to slow down, since China's economic growth is transitioning from manufacturing-based (export and investment) into domestic demand and consumption-based, which will take a long time to adapt. Consequently, the supply-side reform would also cause millions of job loss for steel and coal workers – predicted to be around 3 millions in the next two years.³³

So from the numbers of policies that Xi himself has initiated and even directly taken control of, it can be seen that ***he is more of an active than passive personality, more of a policy innovator rather than reactor.***

Ego & Ambition

Policy can also be influenced by the ego and personal ambitions of a leader. In case of Xi Jinping, **he likes to keep the power centralized to him.** He takes control of almost every important body in China, from administrative to military, both chairman and commander. Eventually, the CPC honored him the 'core leader' title, a title to show his significance and absolute power that shall not be crossed by anyone, a term that clearly reflects Xi's power. His ego of keeping the power to himself also makes him, more or less, trusts limited number of people and subordinates. Hence the reason he cut the number of Standing Committee from 9 to 7 members. His anti-corruption campaign receives large support, since it is indeed necessary for a better maintenance of CPC. However the campaign also has a click on it, as experts analyzed: it is for Xi Jinping to get rid of the powerful, potential high-ranking officials that might become his competitor; so it all goes back to him securing his power.

Xi's **Chinese Dream ambition** aims for foreign policy strategies which are dedicated to 'strive for achievement' in order to achieve the great national rejuvenation: from strengthening the armed forces, asserting China's territorial integrity in the South China Sea, and the ambitious cross-

³² "Xi Jinping's Supply-Side Plan Now the Genuine Article of Economic Reform for China", The South China Morning Post, published on May 16, 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1945530/xi-jinpings-supply-side-plan-now-genuine-article>

³³ Buckley, Chris, "Xi Jinping's Remedy for China's Economic Gloom has Echoes of Reaganomics", The New York Times, published on March 3, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/04/world/asia/xi-jinping-china-economic-policy.html?_r=0

continental project of ‘One Belt One Road’. His Chinese Dream puts an emphasis on China’s sovereignty and ‘strong military and strong country in unison’, thus the more assertive moves by China in the disputed sea. Understanding the inevitability of maritime power around the country, China has been intensifying its activities regarding the island reclamation and establishment of military facilities in the area – despite receiving complaints from the other claimant states – and continuously encouraging for joint maritime exercise with its neighboring ASEAN countries.

Political History & Personal Experience

Xi Jinping did not have all of his title now because he is the son of Xi Zhongxun. His titles are all well-earned, he climbed the political ladder slowly by himself, and he did not even give up on his attempts to join the Party when his and father’s name had been black-listed. His career began to shine after he graduated from Tsinghua University, in between 1979 – 1982 in the CMC as vice premier where he gained his experience in military. For around 25 years, since 1983, his career revolved in serving in provinces where he had different experience each. In 2007 he became the member of the Standing Committee, was elected as the vice president to Hu Jintao in 2008, until Hu’s second term ended and he relinquished the position of General Secretary of the CPC to Xi in late 2012.³⁴

Even though he is a princeling and his father was imprisoned, he did not turn his back against Mao during the Cultural Revolution. He experienced both being a princeling and hardship during his countryside service, but he never turn away from the CPC. Xi Jinping is the first president from the Red Guard generation, and by being sent to the countryside with his princeling status he would have more knowledge and field experience on the rural condition – which should be of help for him to be more aware and setting up policies that are fit for his pursue of Chinese Dream. It is most likely that his own experience in the countryside is what makes him understand the life of the people there and thus initiating the Chinese Dream.

Perceptions & Operational Reality

Policy makers are influenced much by their own perceptions, how they perceive the situation, whether they are accurate or not. Xi Jinping of course, believes that the South China Sea is China’s, and the Chinese will not give up their claims on it. The sea is said to have been China’s, along with the disputed islands within, since ancient time. The growing nationalism within the people supporting China’s claim on the South China Sea only adds more reason for China to assert

³⁴ Timmons, Greg, “*Xi Jinping Biography*”, The Biography.com, last updated on October 19, 2016, <http://www.biography.com/people/xi-jinping-031016>

its stance against other claimants – which in the case that is highlighted by this thesis – to Vietnam in particular.

On the other hand, Xi Jinping believes that it is especially important for China to maintain relations with Vietnam. On Xi Jinping's visit to Vietnam on November 14, 2015, he emphasized the similar socialist characteristics of both countries, urging that both should stay as “trusted comrades”, “win-win partners”, “good neighbors”, and “friends”. He stated in his speech that both of them “*must trust and help each other to move forward together, not letting anybody hinder our steps or shake our systems.*” At that time, Xi did not include about South China Sea dispute in his speech. The purpose of the visit itself was to **rebuild their relations** over the uncertainty of what kind of leader will come out from Vietnam's five-yearly party congress which will be held two months after his visit, in January 2016.³⁵ The timely visit of Xi Jinping shows that China **is paying close attention to Vietnam**, since the new leader will influence Vietnam's policy in their relations – and especially in the intensifying South China Sea dispute.

How Xi's Idiosyncratic Factors Perceives the Strategic Environment

There are two idiosyncratic factors of Xi that will be the main factors influencing his decision-making as observed by this research: perception & operational reality and personality.

As Xi perceives that maintaining Sino-Vietnamese relations is important, it is necessary to be aware of the surrounding strategic environment that may influence their relation. In this case, it is the U.S. Rebalance Policy in Asia-Pacific especially in Southeast Asia, in which the U.S. has previously been taking some moves that are considered as strengthening U.S. hegemony in the region – an unfavorable action for China as the nation despises hegemony. China became more wary as the U.S. tried to establish relations with Vietnam, from the arms embargo lift and the naval cooperation. Should the two become closer, the U.S. influence might penetrate deeper in the region, and interfere further on the South China Sea issue on behalf of Vietnam – just like how it did by supporting the Philippines. Therefore, China must prevent that possibility so that Vietnam stays in its line, by mending Sino-Vietnamese relations. China changed its strategy regarding the South China Sea dispute with Vietnam – from what seen as aggressive (in the previous years), heading to a more peaceful and cooperative ones.

As both countries come from a similar background of ideology, Xi Jinping believes that there is **more cooperation** that China and Vietnam can pursue to develop together in solving their dispute. When the Prime Minister of Vietnam, Nguyen Xuan Phuc visited China on September 15,

³⁵ Chung, Hoang, “*President Xi Jinping Tells Hanoi Parliament China and Vietnam can Survive 'Disruptions', but Fails to Mention South China Sea Dispute*”, South China Morning Post, published on November 7, 2015, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1876440/president-xi-jinping-tells-hanoi-parliament-china-and>

2016, Xi Jinping told him that “*the communist leadership and socialist system are our greatest common strategic interests,*” and further suggested that their ‘common interests may far outweigh differences if they adopt pragmatism in diplomacy’.³⁶ Even though mending their relations on maritime disputes will be difficult, both still agree to find a **solution through peaceful negotiations**. Moreover, China under Xi Jinping is also promoting the ‘major power diplomacy with Chinese characteristic’ that is of socialist path. Looking from the similar background that they have, it is worth trying for China to implement it to Vietnam in solving the dispute.

Rational Decision Making.

In rational actor model, decision is taken after sorting out goals and priorities of the national interest, and then choosing which alternatives can be implemented and benefit more with lower costs. In foreign policy decision-making, several factors are being put into consideration and this is where the idiosyncratic factors play its role in affecting the leader’s decision based on his subjective perception. Below is the model of foreign policy decision-making as applied to the analysis of this research.

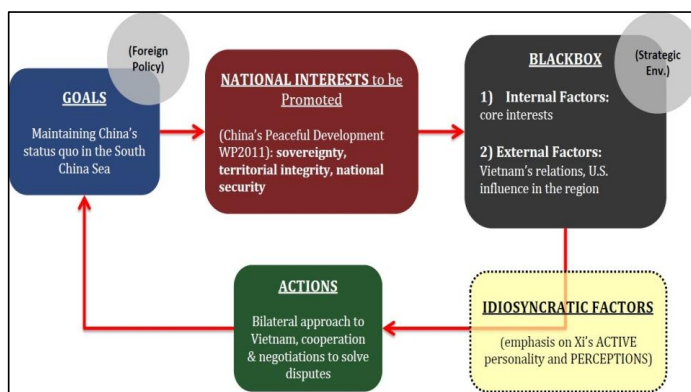


Figure 2 Rational Actor Model – Foreign Policy Decision-making Process³⁷

Meanwhile in making the most rational decision, there are several steps taken by rational actors: (1) Determine **goal(s)** of given problems based on priority, (2) Identifies and analyzes every possible **alternatives**, (3) Investigate **consequences** of each alternative – advantages & disadvantages, (4) **Choose** option giving the most benefit.

Based on the analysis above, this research tries to provide an example of why China resorted to its foreign policy, following the steps above illustrated in the table below. The goal of China’s foreign policy is to maintain its status quo in the South China Sea, including its relations with

³⁶ Huang, Cary, “Once Comrades and Brothers, China and Vietnam are Going Their Own Way Down the Socialist Path”, South China Morning Post, published on September 20, 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2020895/once-comrades-and-brothers-china-and-vietnam-are-going-their>

³⁷ Figure was edited by authors.

Vietnam over the dispute. Therefore, China takes the most rational decision that can bring China closest to its goal.

Scenario / Action	Military / Activities in SCS	Relations with Vietnam	South China Sea DOC	Possible Result/ Consequences
A – Grow aggressive	Increase	Ignore	Ignore	1. More authority in the South China Sea
				2. Bitter relations with Vietnam and the region
				3. Higher chances of U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation in the disputed sea
B – Keep calm	Decrease / Stagnant	Mend	Adhere	1. Less tension in the South China Sea,
				2. More cooperation, negotiation, and trust-building with Vietnam
C – Stay and wait	Do nothing	Do nothing	Do nothing	1. No changes on Sino-Vietnam already-tensed relations
				2. More chance for external parties to condemn China, and attract Vietnam

Figure 3 Possible Scenario of China-Vietnam in the South China Sea³⁸

China's current situation is represented in Scenario B, where it manages to maintain relations with Vietnam by either keeping its military activities in the South China Sea in the same rate as before or decreasing it, conducting its 'Peaceful Development' diplomacy with Vietnam to mend their relations and build their trust on each other on the issue, and together agreeing in solving the dispute in peaceful manner while adhering to the DOC.

The result of this rational scenario can be seen by looking at China's foreign policy under Xi Jinping, which is the POSO. In this case, POSO is used by China as the basic instrument to assess the strategic environment and the role of Vietnam. The strategic environment in which the U.S. Rebalance Policy becomes the main consideration, and the role of Vietnam, have both made China chose the options in scenario B as the most rational decision: giving the most benefit to both China's domestic and foreign development.

Other scenarios, with either making China acting more aggressive and dominant in the South China Sea or just staying still about it, do not seem favorable because these options can lead

³⁸ Figure was edited by authors

China further from maintaining its relations with Vietnam – whether they are both going opposite ways or Vietnam walking away to the external parties by itself to seek for help.

Conclusion

The process of decision-making of foreign policy involves different interests on different levels, but in the end it is the leader's call to decide what the state will do. In case of China's foreign policy decision-making process, the role of Xi Jinping as the 'core' leader of China is undeniable. Xi Jinping's idiosyncrasy will affect how he perceives the strategic environment of China in making China's foreign policy towards Vietnam regarding the South China Sea dispute.

The internal factor of China's strategic environment, its foreign policy planks become the guide and consideration for Xi Jinping as a leader in making foreign policy towards Vietnam. Where 'POSO' is used to analyze the strategic environment where the nation will work its foreign policy in, 'Peaceful Development' directs the peaceful path that China will take including in fulfilling 'Chinese Dream' - to achieve a prosperous nation with strong military. Meanwhile, the U.S. Rebalance Policy happening within China's external strategic environment becomes a challenge that China must be aware of since the interference may change the 'game' regarding the South China Sea dispute, particularly in this case between China and Vietnam.

The purpose of China's foreign policy in the South China Sea dispute itself is to maintain its status quo with Vietnam. This includes how China wants to maintain its relations with Vietnam as it is now and solve their dispute only through peaceful bilateral negotiation. It is caused by the capability of China itself to better pursue maintenance-seeking, is in line with China's foreign policy principles, and is a better choice to cope with the dynamics of China's strategic environment.

Putting all of them together, Xi's idiosyncrasy affects him on looking at the strategic environment of China to make foreign policy to Vietnam. Had Xi not had his set of idiosyncratic factors as analyzed previously, he would have perceived the strategic environment differently, and thus leading to different outcome of foreign policy towards Vietnam. His active personality encouraged himself to initiate lessening the aggressive policies towards Vietnam and at the same time preventing any influence of U.S. towards Vietnam in the dispute, as perceived from his perception that the U.S. is expanding its hegemony in the region and including to Vietnam. Following these, Xi took a decision that he viewed as the most rational that can bring the most advantages for China, closer to the goal to maintain its status quo.

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