

The Roots of China's Assertiveness in East Asia: Analysing the Main Driving Forces in Chinese Foreign Policy

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Abstract

In order to analyse the main driving forces in Chinese foreign policy, this article advances a neoclassical realist argument detailing how certain domestic dynamics that develop between an authoritarian leadership and the society when the country is 'rising' constrain its foreign policy behaviour in complex ways. Subsequently, the derived analytical framework is applied in an analysis of China's 'assertive turn' in East Asia. It shows how certain authoritarian regime concerns intensify as China's great power capabilities and influence grow, resulting in a different room to manoeuvre for Beijing in East Asia, which both encourages and enables a more assertive foreign policy behaviour. In the foreign policy literature, there is general agreement that regime type matters and has explanatory power when seeking to specify the domestic restraints on states' foreign policy. However, there is still a lack of systematic conceptualisation of the regime type variable and theoretical explanations for how it matters. The neoclassical realist argument on the foreign policy of rising authoritarian states developed in this article is a step in this direction bridging the research fields of international relations, comparative politics and area studies.

Keywords: foreign policy; realism; rising powers; authoritarianism; China

Introduction

When their power position in the international system dramatically improves, authoritarian states show a tendency to conduct a more assertive foreign policy as currently seen in the case of China, while Germany and Japan stand as historical cases (Allison 2017: 244-86). In order to understand why, there is a strong need to break with the prevalent tendency in International Relations (IR) scholarship to treat rising powers as unitary actors and to take regime type more seriously in analyses of foreign policy.¹ Neoclassical realism presents itself as a good overall theoretical frame for such an endeavour. Neoclassical

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realists recognise the primacy, but indeterminacy, of international structure – their main claim is that in order to understand and explain the complexity and variety of foreign policy behaviours, focus needs to be on the interplay between international structure and domestic politics (e.g. Rose 1998). However, neoclassical realism is often criticised for not providing details on how the two interact and influence foreign policy (e.g. Smith 2018). Engaging such criticism, this article advances a neoclassical realist argument on the foreign policy of rising authoritarian states detailing how certain domestic dynamics that develop between an authoritarian leadership and the society when the country is ‘rising’ constrain its foreign policy behaviour in complex ways. Subsequently, the derived analytical framework is applied in an analysis of the main driving forces behind the so-called ‘assertive turn’ in China’s East Asia-policy since 2008.

With its focus on rising authoritarian states, the theoretical argument developed in this article highlights the relevance of neoclassical realism in analyses of the foreign policy of non-democratic and non-Western states bridging the research fields of international relations, comparative politics and area studies.

The debate on China’s foreign policy assertiveness, i.e. questions of whether and how Beijing has started adopting more assertive foreign policies pushing back against the U.S.-led international system, dominates the current literature on Chinese foreign policy. This article holds that Beijing on certain issues and in certain cases has adopted a more assertive foreign policy line, i.e. is more confidently pushing back against the U.S. and promoting its own ‘core interests’ (*hexin liyi*) applying military and other coercive diplomatic and economic levers. This is especially evident in East Asia. There is, however, also a high degree of stability and continuity in Chinese foreign policy over the last decade (e.g. Zhu and Peng 2015; Scobell 2020).

The added value of the neoclassical realist explanation of China’s assertive turn is its emphasis on Chinese foreign policy behaviour as contingent upon both systemic stimuli and intervening domestic-level processes highlighting how certain authoritarian regime concerns intensify as China’s great power capabilities and influence grow. This emphasis facilitates taking a step deeper, contextualising and analysing both the incidents and signs of more assertive Chinese foreign policy behaviour and those of continued – even strengthened – Chinese efforts to display and reassure regional neighbours about Chinese status quo intentions. Hence, by detailing how intervening domestic-level

processes are linked to systemic pressures and further influence Chinese leaders' ability to react to these systemic pressures, the neoclassical realist argument offers an explanation of the different tendencies and contradictory developments in China's East Asia-policy in recent years.

The article proceeds in three steps. It first develops a neoclassical realist argument on the foreign policy of rising authoritarian states. Secondly, the derived neoclassical realist analytical framework is applied in an analysis of the main driving forces behind China's assertive turn in East Asia. In the third and last part of the article, important perspectives on further developments in China's East Asia-policy are discussed as is the value of neoclassical realism as an overall theoretical frame for bringing the regime type variable into explanations of states' foreign policy, and of the specific neoclassical realist argument developed in this article.

A Neoclassical Realist Argument on the Foreign Policy of Rising Authoritarian States

Seen through a neoclassical realist lens, what are the constraints facing a rising authoritarian state like China? The focus of neoclassical realism is first on systemic variables and the developments in these. Polarity, i.e. the number of great powers, is central in this regard. A key neorealist argument is that different polarities result in different dynamics in the international system and thus further present states with different overall systemic pressures and opportunities (Waltz 1979: 15). It therefore makes a difference that China's rise takes place in a unipolar system – with one superpower, the U.S. – and not in a bipolar or multipolar system. Unipolarity is defined as a highly asymmetric distribution of relative capabilities on a global scale leaving one state significantly stronger than the rest and too strong to be counter-balanced (Wohlforth 1999: 9). As for the dynamics derived, unipolarity on the one hand creates strong incentives for states to balance the unipole, but on the other hand also makes the potential cost of balancing very high (Hansen 2011). Soft balancing, i.e. actions that do not directly challenge the preponderance of the unipole, but use military and non-military means such as territorial denial and entangling diplomacy to delay, frustrate and undermine the policies of the unipole, is the most likely option if a state seeks to balance the unipole. Hard balancing, i.e. military build-up and military alliances against the

unipole, is not to be expected, because it requires a strong combination of the capabilities of the secondary powers, which is likely to be difficult, not least because of the transaction costs and burden-sharing problems as well as the fear of punishment by the unipole (e.g. Paul 2004, 2018). In addition, in contrast to bipolar or multipolar environments, where hard balancing is the primary mechanism to preserve the status quo, hard balancing under unipolarity becomes the very definition of revisionism. The state leading a hard balancing strategy therefore risks being portrayed as a dangerous threat to international order (Schweller and Pu 2011: 70).

As well as balancing of the strongest state, the risks of miscalculation and misperception at the global level also decrease under unipolarity due to the clear distribution of relative power. However, the situation at the regional level is different with a higher risk of misjudgement in relation to the degree of attention that the unipole devotes to security in the different regions. This follows from an important argument on the relationship between the global and the regional level. The polarity in focus is the global polarity, which is unipolarity. However, when a new great power rises, i.e. dramatically improves its relative capabilities like China since the late 1970s, this will at a certain point start to challenge the unipolar system and weaken the unipolar dynamics described above, and changed or new dynamics will start to appear (Womack 2015: 116; Schweller and Pu 2011: 43). As a logical consequence of the neorealist emphasis on the importance of anarchy, geographic proximity and the security imperative, this will first appear in the region of the rising power. It is in its own neighbourhood that the rising power will be most directly confronted with the dominant position and the privileges of the unipole, and because of its strengthened economic and military capabilities, the rising power can start to do – or with more confidence start to threaten to do – something about it. The basic argument here is simple. Great powers do not want military bases and forward-deployed troops of great power rivals next to one's own borders. A rising power will therefore gradually seek to establish some form of control over its immediate external environment or a sphere of influence around its borders. The unipole, however, wants to prevent the rising power from getting too influential – too big a challenger – and therefore seeks to expand its diplomatic, economic and especially military influence in the region of the rising power. Because of what could be termed 'the effect of distance', it is more difficult for the unipole as it is not located in the region and therefore has to project

its power. Hence, the structure, i.e. the polarity, on the global level is in focus, but the process – the implications – appears first at the regional level, i.e. in the region of the rising power.

The first important question for the neoclassical realist analysis of China's assertive turn in East Asia, therefore, is whether and how the unipolar dynamics are weakening and other dynamics are strengthening, presenting Beijing with a different room to manoeuvre in East Asia. This question is analysed in the next section. The key here is not about U.S. unipolarity ending. It is about changes *within* unipolarity, and hence, weakening unipolar dynamics presenting rising powers such as China with different system-induced challenges and opportunities showing first and strongest in the region of the rising power.

The next step in the pursuit of specifying the room to manoeuvre for a rising power, and specifically an authoritarian one like China, is to examine domestic constraints. Neoclassical realists focus on a wide variety of intervening domestic variables (e.g. Taliaferro, Lobell and Ripsman 2009). A recurring focus, which can be traced back to classical realists such as Morgenthau (1947, 1948), is on the relationship between state leaders and their people, i.e. state-society relations. A central assumption among twentieth-century classical realists was that a state would only be as strong as its ability to extract resources and support from society. Despite this emphasis, only scant attention was devoted to specifying the relationship between state leaders and society and what the character and degree of support from society depended on (Taliaferro 2006: 472-73).

Several neoclassical realists have sought to elaborate on the relationship between state leaders and society and present more specific expectations about its influence on foreign policy. They often focus on state leaders' domestic political authority and the combination of their need to preserve both external security and internal stability (e.g. Schweller 2004). A common notion is that state leaders almost always face a two-level game in devising and implementing foreign policy strategies. On the one hand, they must respond to developments in the external environment, and on the other hand, they must extract and mobilise resources from society, work through existing domestic institutions and maintain the support of key domestic stakeholders (Taliaferro, Lobell and Ripsman 2009: 7). The degree of autonomy vis-à-vis society varies over time and across policy issues, and this variation, in turn, affects how state leaders respond to systemic pressures.

My point is that specifically in the case of rising powers, the state-

society relationship is under change and pressure, and this is an even more acute concern and challenge for the leadership in an authoritarian rising state. In other words, the key argument is that there are certain domestic dynamics between an authoritarian leadership and the society when the country is 'rising', i.e. when its relative economic and military capabilities are dramatically increasing.

In particular, regarding the part of the argument that relates to the 'rising' aspect, the notion is that when a state experiences strong economic growth and military modernisation, its society is also undergoing major changes, such as extensive urbanisation and unequal geographical and social developments. In addition, the rapid economic development experienced in the case of a rising power is in itself a socially destabilising process requiring a large number of people to change both their location - rural to urban - and their class identity (Buzan 2014: 389). These major changes in society and the subsequently growing societal expectations and tensions have implications for the state-society relationship and the social contract existing between the two parties and, therefore, require increased attention and resources from the leadership.

In his research on the drivers of politics in authoritarian regimes, Svoblik (2012: 3-13) underlines how an authoritarian leadership generally faces two fundamental challenges: keeping the elite together and keeping the society under control. He further argues that the dismal environment in which authoritarian politics takes place shapes how these challenges play out. In this regard, especially two characteristics are important: the inherent lack of an independent authority with the power to enforce agreements among key political actors and the fact that violence is ever-present and the ultimate arbiter of conflict. These two environmental characteristics are uniquely formed over time, explaining why authoritarian leaders confront different variations of the two fundamental challenges mentioned above as well as different constraints in dealing with them. Specifically, in relation to the challenge of keeping the society under control, which, as argued above, especially intensifies in the case of a rising authoritarian state, Svoblik (2012: 10-11) argues that authoritarian leaderships cannot ensure their control over time with violence and repression only, but have to rely on co-optation and persuasion, in particular by way of ideology and propaganda.² Authoritarian leaders, therefore, often seek to co-opt the most capable and opportunistic persons and groups in society in order to strengthen themselves. They tend to invest a lot of resources

in promoting ideological constructs and nationalist narratives about their great accomplishments and promises for even more accomplishments in the future. Such 'authoritarian politics' dynamics constrain the foreign policy behaviour of authoritarian states in complex ways, influencing e.g. what their foreign policy interests are, how they react to external pressures, and how they align and realign. The key issue for the analysis is how the specific authoritarian leadership has sought to build up its domestic legitimacy, e.g. what is the core of the propaganda and the promises that the leadership has given to its society, and furthermore, how do such promises link up with foreign policy issues, relations with other states, and certain outstanding conflicts? If there are close linkages, then the authoritarian leaders face strong domestic constraints on these foreign policy matters, potentially pulling the foreign policy behaviour in specific directions.

Consequently, the second important question for the neoclassical realist analysis of China's assertive turn in East Asia is whether and how the domestic demands and expectations facing the Chinese leaders are currently changing, further narrowing Beijing's room to manoeuvre in East Asia. This question is analysed in the next section.

Explaining Chinese Assertiveness – Strengthened Regionally, but Domestically Challenged

Since the early 1990s, the Chinese leaders have been keenly aware of the challenges that China's geopolitical location results in – a big country with many neighbours has to work hard to avoid its neighbours seeing its rise as threatening (Buzan 2014: 384). Therefore, Beijing has carefully sought to reassure neighbouring states about its 'peaceful rise' (*heping jueqi*) and restrain itself, e.g. by engaging with established regional multilateral organisations such as ASEAN. Beijing has also made a great effort to promote so-called 'win-win' (*gongying*) relations with neighbouring states e.g. through trade and investment deals. However, in the recent decade, Beijing has – on certain issues and in certain cases – adopted a more assertive foreign policy line, i.e. more confidently pushing back against the U.S. and promoting its own core interests, applying military and other coercive economic and diplomacy leverages. Despite strong protests from involved neighbouring states and from the U.S., Beijing has, for example, intensified the construction of airstrips and military facilities on the artificial islands in the South China Sea and increased the control of fishing and oil explo-

ration activities of neighbouring states in their own exclusive economic zones. Furthermore, Beijing has increased the economic, diplomatic and military pressures on Taiwan and neighbouring states, such as the Philippines and Japan, and continued to strengthen its military activities in the East China Sea (e.g. Scobell 2020). What are the main driving forces behind China's assertive turn in East Asia? Following the neo-classical realist argument on the foreign policy of rising authoritarian states presented above, the answer is found in the interaction between the changing systemic pressures facing Beijing and the changing authoritarian regime dynamics.

China's East Asia-policy under a Weakening Unipolar Order

The unipolar system with its derived dynamics has nurtured and benefitted China's development and high level of economic growth. Not having to worry about positioning China in an overall great power competition, it has been possible for the Chinese leaders to direct their primary attention and resources towards the domestic modernisation process (e.g. Jia 2007). Furthermore, the unipole, i.e. the U.S., has undertaken the main burden of delivering the international public goods from which China has benefitted greatly. China's neighbours being confident in the American security guarantees have been able to focus primarily on the economic advantages of China's rise and not on the long-term implications of an economically and militarily stronger China (Womack 2015: 129). Unipolarity has therefore been the overall external condition for Beijing's foreign policy strategy since the mid-1990s – the 'peaceful development' (*heping fazhan*) strategy – and has in many ways contributed to ensure its credibility and success in the region.

The foreign policy guidelines following China's peaceful development strategy emphasise that a high priority must be given to the development and maintenance of stable relations with neighbouring states and important trading partners and, in addition, Beijing must seek to maintain a low profile. The Chinese leaders must avoid international leadership and avoid being drawn into the domestic affairs of other states or use too many resources on developments and conflicts in the international system not involving China's core interests (Dittmer 2010: 52).³ The peaceful development strategy has worked well for Beijing. However, in recent years, the strategy's limitations have started to appear, especially complicating China's East Asia-policy. The

main reason is that the strategy has been designed to ensure important Chinese priorities in the context of U.S. unipolarity, where China is allowed and able to free ride, and where China does not have strong economic and security interests outside its own region making the low profile approach possible. These conditions are no longer in place.

China is still not directly challenging the U.S. position – the hard balancing option. However, in recent years, Beijing has intensified the cost imposing strategies and the everyday resistance vis-à-vis the U.S. – the soft balancing option. This reflects how Beijing now has the economic and military capabilities relative to the U.S. to start questioning and challenging the U.S. dominant position and its privileges in the region. Beijing has focused its military modernisation in order to guard itself against the most threatening elements of U.S. power. For example, the Chinese Anti-Access-Area-Denial (A2/AD) military build-up is designed to push the U.S. naval and airpower further away from Chinese territory and prevent the U.S. from intervening in the Taiwan Strait, as was the case in the mid-1990s.

The changing systemic pressures – again this is *not* a question of an end to unipolarity but of changes *within* unipolarity and hence weakening unipolar dynamics – present Beijing with new challenges. At the same time, China's growing economic and military capabilities provide Beijing with new opportunities to act. For example, in order to ensure its national security, China has a strong incentive to prevent the U.S. military from operating near China's coast as it has done for many years. The difference now is that China actually has the military capabilities to prevent the U.S. military from doing so and to establish strategic control over its near seas. The military parades held in Beijing in recent years have sent a similar message to the U.S. with the display of newly developed Chinese anti-ship ballistic missiles, e.g. the so-called 'carrier killer' developed to damage and destroy equipment, aircrafts and sensors on the flight deck of an aircraft carrier, or even to sink an aircraft carrier. The U.S. military continues to be superior, but the asymmetric focus of the Chinese military modernisation means that the nature of the regional military balance has changed (e.g. Murphy and Roberts 2018). As also underlined by Brooks and Wohlforth (2016: 49), China's rapid augmentation of A2/AD capabilities has greatly raised the costs and risks for the U.S. of operating its aircraft and surface ships in China's near seas. Furthermore, Beijing has increasingly adopted so-called 'shaping strategies' in an attempt to shape international developments

without directly confronting the U.S, e.g. through a more active and agenda-setting role in multilateral organisations.

In such settings, Chinese leaders more often and in clearer language denounce U.S. unilateralism. A case in point is the Conference on Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) summit held in Shanghai in May 2014, where Xi Jinping in a speech outlining the Chinese ideas about the future security structure in Asia emphasised that strong military alliances, i.e. the U.S. military alliances, would be opposed (Xi 2014a). Even more noteworthy, Xi emphasised that Asians best deal with Asian security, which is the first time since the end of the Cold War that a Chinese leader has so clearly questioned the U.S. role in regional security (Xi 2014a; Heath 2014).⁴ In the economic sphere as well, China has formulated clearer responses and alternatives to the U.S.-led economic and financial order, specifically to the U.S.-led regional free-trade agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) promoted by the Obama administration, which aggressively lobbied to get regional states involved (Manyin et al., 2012). In response, Beijing has intensified efforts to promote the Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific (FTAAP), which is basically a Chinese version of the proposed trade bloc, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) deal. With the Trump administration pulling the U.S. out of the TPP, the China-led regional free-trade agreement proposals look more compelling to several of its neighbouring states. In November 2020, the RCEP deal was concluded between China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Indonesian, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and the Philippines. Among China's neighbouring states, only India chose not to participate in the RCEP deal. Beijing has also launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and established the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) with a specific focus on facilitating and financing infrastructure projects in Asia. Overall, according to Xi Jinping, these initiatives are designed to create 'a new pattern of regional economic integration', and he wants China to control and drive this process (Xi 2014b). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese focus on strengthening relations with neighbouring states has only further increased (e.g. Kuik 2021).

As discussed above, a strong neorealist expectation is that the unipole, in order to prevent the rising power from getting too influential and becoming too serious a rival, seeks to expand its diplomatic, economic and especially its military influence in the region of the rising power. In that regard, the U.S. so-called 'pivot' or 'rebalance to Asia'

strategy initiated under the Obama administration in 2011 stands out. The U.S., seemingly determined to maintain its dominant position in the region and also acknowledging that future global growth is primarily dependent on Asia, increased its focus on East Asia and on China, prioritising the strengthening of American military presence, security relationships and alliances in the region. The intensity with which China has started to push for its own ideas and alternatives on regional security and economic arrangements is also a Chinese counter-balancing measure to the U.S. rebalance to Asia strategy (e.g. Swaine 2014). The dominant analysis in China is that with the rebalance to Asia strategy, the U.S. sought to contain China and to create tension between China and its neighbouring states (e.g. Jin, Liu and Huang 2013).

While the Trump administration's approach to China and East Asia was rather incoherent, resulting in growing uncertainty among U.S. allies and partners in the region about the American engagement and commitment, the Biden administration seems determined to get back on a steady 'rebalance' track. The Biden administration has a stronger focus on confronting China and pushing back on Chinese behaviour deemed aggressive and threatening in Washington. The U.S. has strengthened the so-called Quad cooperation with Japan, Australia and India with the first ever head of state summit held in March 2021. They have also sought to strengthen the U.S. engagement with ASEAN. The Biden administration has confirmed the overall assessment of China as the main – revisionist – rival to the U.S. and remains dedicated to the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' strategy (e.g. White House 2021; DoD 2019).

Summing up, the rise of China has reached a point where China's power and influence start to seriously challenge the unipolar position of the U.S. resulting in new systemic dynamics. The system-induced pressures are growing and making it impossible for China to keep a low profile, but they also open for new opportunities. This is most acutely visible in East Asia, where China is located, and where Beijing's growing power is directly clashing with the U.S. dominant position and its privileges. The growing strategic rivalry and competition between China and the U.S. in East Asia makes it more difficult for Beijing to improve relations with neighbouring states. The neighbouring states do not wish to choose sides in their relations with China and the U.S., but they are becoming increasingly under pressure to do so. Rather than focus on the economic advantages of China's rise, the concerns about the long-term implications of an economically and

militarily stronger China are growing. As Womack (2015: 129) has noted, it is good for the neighbours to have China in the neighbourhood, but it is not good to become China's backyard.

The Chinese Leaders' Quest for Domestic Control and Legitimacy

China maintains an authoritarian political system with no opposition to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), but many developments in the system have taken – and are continuously taking – place. The last four decades of rapid economic development have had huge implications for the Chinese society and for the relationship between the CCP and the Chinese society (e.g. Guo 2013: 199-236). As stressed above, a modernisation such as the one China is undergoing is in itself a socially destabilising process, resulting in new dynamics and tensions in the Chinese society. Furthermore, in order to continue the economic reform process, certain adjustments of the Chinese political and bureaucratic system have been necessary, including the need to gradually allow more room for Chinese societal actors, encouraging private initiative and entrepreneurship and a higher degree of flexibility and dynamism in the Chinese economy. Consequently, a more diverse and active Chinese society has developed, where critical voices regarding developments in and outside China have emerged. In addition, the Chinese society has become increasingly capable of showing its disappointments and anger, as well as taking advantage of the spread of new social media platforms and communication technologies. The CCP has so far been able to co-opt – or suppress – new groups and tendencies in the Chinese society, but this represents a continuous and growing challenge. That is, China's spectacular economic growth has produced sweeping societal changes now challenging the CCP's capacity to rule. There are strong signs of a Chinese leadership more concerned about – and preoccupied with – maintaining domestic control and legitimacy (e.g. Blanchette and Medeiros 2021). Under the current Chinese leader Xi Jinping, the party has employed increasingly repressive methods to deal with the new pressures and demands arising from the livelier and, especially due to the spread of social media and mobile phones, more connected Chinese society. It meets resistance both internally in the CCP and in the Chinese society, and it hampers the domestic economic agenda promoting innovative and critical thinking (Overholt 2018). The efforts to reinvigorate the societal support to the Chinese party-state have therefore also been intensified.

Since the start of the economic reform process in China in the late 1970s, the ideological legitimacy of the Chinese leadership has been gradually undermined and replaced with a performance legitimacy (e.g. Wang 2005). The Chinese leaders must continuously deliver on domestic stability, economic growth, growing prosperity and higher standards of living. Furthermore, they must fulfil the growing domestic expectations about (re)gaining great power influence, status and respect. This is what they have pledged to do in their social contract with the Chinese population. It is still the main claim on legitimacy of the CCP leaders led by Xi Jinping, but it is getting more difficult to deliver while the expectations from the Chinese society are only growing.

Which constraints on Chinese foreign policy follow from these developments? The first and most important constraint arises from the growing importance of public opinion, which is especially characterised by strong nationalism (Weiss 2019). In China, nationalism has developed into being the most important glue between the party-state and the society. As Nathan and Scobell (2012: 33) argue, 'With the fading of the CCP's utopian ideals, nationalism remains the party's most reliable claim to the people's loyalty'. In recent years, the relative decline of the U.S. power position in East Asia has further increased the nationalist ambitions and expectations in parts of the Chinese population that China now will stand up and take what is seen as its rightful great power position and demand great power status and respect (Weiss, 2019; Zuo 2021). That is, the interaction between the Chinese growing economic and military power compared to the U.S. and Chinese nationalism produces stronger drivers for a more assertive Chinese foreign policy behaviour.

Several Chinese nationalisms exist as nationalism in China is powered by feelings of historical humiliation, as well as by historical pride and pride over more recent Chinese achievements. The Chinese leadership has long used nationalism to ensure domestic political and social stability. The main argument in such top-down nationalism is that only a united China led by the CCP can regain China's rightful great power position and thus resist outside forces seeking to keep China weak. However, top-down nationalism has become increasingly difficult for the Chinese leadership to control as it has also opened a legitimate room for activism and mobilisation within the Chinese society (Wallace and Weiss 2015: 404). For example, participants in demonstrations often rally behind signs stating 'patriotism is not a crime' (*ai-guo wuzui*) and carry emblems of state-sanctioned patriotism, such as

pictures of fallen martyrs (Wallace and Weiss 2015: 408). Nationalism, therefore, has developed into a double-edged sword. On the one hand, Chinese leaders can use nationalism to mobilise the Chinese population aiming to put pressure on other states and direct focus away from their own weaknesses or mistakes. This is in line with the general argument on how political leaders under domestic pressure often use diversionary foreign policy strategies to deflect the domestic audience from internal problems (e.g. Levy 1988). On the other hand, this also implies the development of higher nationalist ambitions and expectations for the Chinese leadership to act – and not act – in certain ways in Chinese foreign policy. Such nationalist ambitions and expectations increasingly put pressure on Chinese leaders in international negotiations and conflicts, where they cannot appear weak or be seen giving in to external demands. Specifically, in conflicts related to Chinese territorial demands or other issues strongly related to Chinese nationalism and history, the Chinese leadership has become more sensitive and responsive to public opinion and does not risk being perceived domestically as soft and passive (e.g. Zhou 2016: 881). In other words, the growing nationalist sentiment in the Chinese society and the following constraining influence on Chinese foreign policy are unintended consequences of one of the main strategies that the CCP has used – and still uses – to ensure its own domestic legitimacy and mobilise societal resources for regime security. There are clearly complex and continuously changing dynamics between the top-down nationalism and the bottom-up nationalism in China. Under Xi Jinping, the CCP has promoted a more uncompromising nationalism and been more willing to accept risks, including domestically, to advance what are seen as Chinese legitimate rights and claims. This is further combined with a tightening of political control and party discipline inclining Chinese officials at all levels, as well as societal actors, to take a tough nationalist stand, e.g. the so-called ‘wolf warrior’ diplomats are both reacting to a more nationalist public opinion and seeking to satisfy their superior and follow the party line.⁵ Rather than having a satisfying and calming effect on the popular or bottom-up nationalism, it is only further strengthening in such a context. The top-down nationalism and the bottom-up nationalism in China are thus interdependent and tend to mutually reinforce each other.

The best example of how nationalist expectations growing in Chinese society have had a constraining effect on the Chinese leadership, is Beijing's initially fumbling but gradually tough and uncompromising

response to Tokyo's decision in September 2012 to nationalise three of the contested Diaoyu-Senkaku Islands – a group of five islets and three barren rocks, 200 miles off the Chinese coast northeast of Taiwan, which are claimed by China, Taiwan and Japan. Since 1978, China's position has remained consistent – the two sides, Japan and China, hold different positions on the sovereignty of the islands, which, however, should be set aside as they pursue joint development in the area in line with the concept of 'setting aside dispute and pursuing joint development' [*zhizhu gaoge*] advanced by Deng Xiaoping in 1979. Japan's position is that there is no dispute, since Japan has both legal sovereignty and effective control over the islands (Reilly 2014: 203). In practice, Chinese leaders have been satisfied to declare Chinese sovereignty over the islands and to criticise Japanese efforts to demonstrate Japan's sovereignty claims, while not actually taking steps to challenge Japan's de-facto control over the islands. This, however, has changed, especially since 2012, and heightened concerns in the Chinese leadership about meeting growing nationalist demands and expectations play a significant role. There is a broad base of popular distrust and animosity towards Japan in the Chinese population, which early decades of anti-Japanese state propaganda have contributed to. What happened in 2012 was that the Japanese decision to nationalise the islands quickly sparked a swell of public anger and mobilisation in China. There were violent anti-Japanese protests across China with thousands of angry Chinese demonstrating in front of Japanese diplomatic missions and destroying Japanese businesses, cars and restaurants (Wallace and Weiss 2015: 406). The anti-Japanese sentiment was also strongly expressed in popular media and on the Internet (Reilly 2014: 209). Despite official efforts to maintain order, the protests soon began to spiral out of control and included implicit criticism of the Chinese leadership accusing it of being too soft (Reilly 2014: 210). The Chinese leaders responded with a mix of responsiveness and repression. Official media called for 'rational patriotism' (*lixing aiguo*) and ordered local governments to maintain order and not encourage anti-Japanese protests while also sending out text messages, especially to young university students, instructing them to legally and rationally express their patriotic spirit. Censorship in media and on the Internet was strengthened. On the diplomatic side, the rhetoric, however, echoed the public anger, and, generally speaking, during the crisis, Beijing's rhetoric and negotiating stance, and the timing, direction and extent of policy steps and decisions, seem to more closely reflect the

degree of public anger and mobilisation than to come as reactions to developments in Japan's stance and policy. The Chinese leaders were compelled not only to reiterate China's sovereignty claims and to issue strong statements, but also to take concrete retribution, such as cancelling summits and meetings with Japanese leaders and making conditions for Japanese businesses in China more difficult, e.g. by delaying visas for Japanese employees. Also, the Chinese civilian and military patrols and presence in the area increased dramatically (Reilly 2014: 212-214). In contrast to previous diplomatic crises between Japan and China over the islands, e.g. in 1996 and in 2004, the crisis initiated in 2012 lasted much longer with stronger negative economic and diplomatic consequences for China despite efforts from Chinese leaders to demobilise, e.g. redirecting public attention, ramping down sensational media coverage, cooling down online sentiments and constraining demonstrations.

Nationalism, therefore, links the maritime territorial disputes in East Asia to the issue of Chinese leaders' domestic legitimacy. It is in East Asia that the 'unhealed scars' after the 100 years of 'national humiliation' (*guochi*) are most clearly visible with the unresolved territorial disputes and the Japanese - seen from China - continual rejection to acknowledge and apologise for its behaviour before and during World War II. In addition, the U.S. response to a stronger China, which, as argued above, is primarily perceived in China as led by efforts to keep China weak, has further fuelled Chinese nationalism. An important domestic constraint on China's foreign policy in general, and on China's East Asia-policy in particular, is therefore related to the need to show strength and determination in order to deliver on the nationalist demands and expectations growing in the Chinese society.

However, because the domestic legitimacy of the Chinese leadership also rests on the party's ability to deliver continuously on domestic stability, economic growth and growing prosperity, a difficult balance is needed. This is the balance sought in recent years, where Beijing, on the one hand, has intensified the diplomatic and economic offensive towards neighbouring states, while, on the other hand, is leading a tougher line focused on protecting and promoting China's core interests and especially in relation to outstanding maritime territorial disputes conducts a more assertive behaviour. The relative weight that the Chinese leaders place on legitimacy derived through economic growth versus legitimacy derived by achieving nationalist goals will be an important factor in the development in East Asian

politics and security in the years to come. Since the start of the economic reforms, Chinese leaders have prioritised economic growth to raise living standards with the consequence that they, given China's economic interdependence with its neighbours, have been highly sensitive to any economic consequences of assertive foreign policy actions. They have generally preferred policies that are more restrained when more nationalist-driven actions threatened economic cooperation. This is, however, changing. The growing nationalist expectations in the Chinese society affect Beijing's willingness to risk conflict and raise the cost of compromise.

The point is *not* that public opinion and popular nationalist emotions dictate Chinese foreign policy. However, because Chinese leaders are more concerned about domestic control and legitimacy, they are increasingly sensitive and responsive, which to a higher degree influences the foreign policy agenda narrowing the set of policy options, changing the pace of policy-making and implementation and influencing the direction of the final decision. The Chinese leadership is under growing domestic pressure – the last four decades characterised by a dramatic growth in China's relative economic and military capabilities and overall rapidly improving standards of living for a majority of the Chinese population with the promise of even more to come have contributed to growing domestic demands and expectations.

Conclusion

The analysis above has proposed a neoclassical realist explanation of China's assertive turn in East Asia pointing to how the conditions – both externally and internally – for China's East Asia-policy are changing, and, furthermore, how the new conditions under development work against and even undermine the credibility of China's peaceful development strategy. The rise of China has now reached a point, where China's power and influence start to seriously challenge the unipolar position of the U.S., resulting in new systemic dynamics and pressures. This is especially playing out in China's own neighbourhood, where Beijing is most directly confronted with – and challenged by – the U.S. dominant position and its privileges. In addition, Beijing, due to China's stronger economic and military capabilities relative to the U.S, also faces new opportunities both in countering the American military activities around China's borders and in proactively shaping regional economic and security arrangements and pursuing China's

long-standing territorial claims in the region. That is, Beijing faces a different room to manoeuvre in East Asia, which both encourages and enables a more assertive foreign policy behaviour. Heightened concerns in the Chinese leadership about regime security further influence Beijing's room to manoeuvre in East Asia and on certain issues and in certain cases pull China towards a more assertive foreign policy posture especially as growing nationalist demands and expectations in the Chinese society increase the domestic political risks associated with more compromising and reassuring foreign policy choices. The nationalist demands and expectations are fuelled and legitimated by China's growing economic and military capabilities relative to the U.S. The Chinese leadership has built its legitimacy with promises to deliver stability, economic growth and international status and respect for China as a great power. These promises connect closer with some foreign policy matters than others, and therefore, the Chinese leaders face different degrees of domestic attention and are under different degrees of domestic pressure. As the analysis has shown, the domestic constraints are strongest when there is a nationalist 'revival from historical humiliation' dimension to the foreign policy matter. How to exercise greater resolve without exacerbating strong Chinese interests in stable relations with neighbouring states and without risking a confrontation with the U.S.? China's East Asia-policy for the coming years will continue to reflect the search for a balance and an answer to this key question.

In accordance with neoclassical realist reasoning, the systemic change, i.e. the shifting distribution of relative capabilities, especially as it manifests itself in East Asia, is the key driver encouraging and enabling a more assertive Chinese foreign policy behaviour in the region. However, in order to more fully explain why such assertive Chinese foreign policy behaviour is seen on certain issues and in certain cases and is continuously accompanied by Chinese efforts to reassure and strengthen relations and cooperation with neighbouring states, the key domestic drivers have to be included. In other words, the changing systemic dynamics and pressures open up room for China to manoeuvre. Where Chinese foreign policy behaviour – on certain issues and in certain cases – ends up within this room to manoeuvre is further contingent upon the degree and character of Chinese leaders' concerns about potential domestic risks and the implications for regime security, which reinforce or weaken Chinese foreign policy reactions to the changing systemic dynamics and pressures.

The neoclassical realist research agenda is fast evolving (e.g. Fiammenghi et al. 2018; Smith 2018). The analysis above indicates how the study of Chinese foreign policy could benefit from neoclassical realism. In general, neoclassical realism provides a valuable point of departure for dialogue between realists, comparative political theorists like Svoblik (2012) focusing on the distinctive characteristics of authoritarian regimes and China specialists in order to improve the understanding and explanation of the main driving forces in Chinese foreign policy.

In the foreign policy literature there is general agreement that regime type matters and has explanatory power when seeking to specify the domestic restraints on states' foreign policy. However, there is still a lack of systematic conceptualization of the regime type variable, and, furthermore, of theoretical explanations of *how* it matters. This article represents a step in this direction. It develops a neoclassical realist argument on the foreign policy of rising authoritarian states specifying how there are certain domestic dynamics developing between an authoritarian leadership and the society when the country is rising, and how these dynamics lead to certain foreign policy constraints. The analysis of the main driving forces behind China's assertive turn in East Asia aims to illustrate the added explanatory value of the argument, not at empirically confirming it. Here more work, including comparative analyses, is needed.

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NOTES

1. Cf. Hameiri, Jones and Heathershaw (2019) who also strongly argue against treating rising powers as unitary actors. For discussion on how the relationship between regime type and foreign policy continues to be an under-researched field, see Kneuer (2018).
2. Svoblik's main point here is that if an authoritarian leadership only relies on repression, it becomes dependent on the military and security forces and has to spend a lot of resources on keeping them happy, further risking the gradual buildup of a powerful rival for domestic control.
3. The guidelines were introduced by the former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in the mid-1990s. More specifically, Deng's 28-character guidelines for Chinese

foreign policy were to 'observe patiently' (*lengjing guan*), 'respond sensibly' (*chenzhuo yingfu*), 'consolidate our footing' (*gonggu zhenjiao*), 'be skilful in hiding capacities and biding time' (*taoguang yanghui*), 'guard weakness' (*shanyu shouzhuo*), 'never take the lead' (*juebu dangtou*) and 'take proper initiatives' (*yousuo zuowei*) – see e.g. Xu and Du (2015: 254).

4. The Chinese confidence reflected here strengthened significantly in the wake of the 2008/09 global financial crisis that seriously damaged assessments of the U.S. power position (e.g. Nye 2010).
5. The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewer for highly insightful and valuable comments on the importance of the development in top-down nationalism in China under Xi Jinping, where taking a tough nationalist stand might have become a new type of 'political correctness' in Chinese foreign policy.

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