

CHINA'S ASSERTIVE POLICY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA – ANY CHANCE(S) FOR HU'S 'HARMONIOUS WORLD' CONCEPT IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY?

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Introduction

Ideational leadership and domestic politics have increasingly been considered as important factors in shaping state's foreign policy (FP) and behavior. Given China's growing weight in international arena, Chinese President Hu Jintao's proposal of 'harmonious world' concept at the 2005 UN General Assembly has drawn special attention from academic and policy community. Since then, fundamental changes have yet to be witnessed in Chinese foreign policies and strategic behavior. China's assertiveness in territorial disputes in the South China Sea over the past few years seems to further obscure the world community in understanding what China has meant of 'harmonious world'.

This paper aims to investigate the key question "to what extent Hu's 'harmonious world' has influenced the ways whereby Beijing conducts FP in the South China Sea disputes in the early 21st century?" There are three important points to be presented in this paper. Firstly, while acknowledging the increasing importance of ideational factors in the policy-making process, the paper argues that the 'harmonious world' concept has primarily been directed to the harmonization of divergences in big power relations, especially in China-US relations. It seems to be increasingly obvious that 'harmonious world' term has been exclusively designed as 'harmonious' compromises among big players. Secondly, the paper contends that the combination of 'harmonious world' concept and realpolitik mindset has basically helped to advance China's interests in the early decade of the 21st century and beyond. China's strategic policy and behavior in the territorial disputes in the South China Sea will be examined as the test cases of President Hu's 'harmonious world' concept. Thirdly, it is predicted that this trend will keep going under Chinese next generation's leadership, and 'harmonious world' still constitutes a good decoration for Chinese actions given challenges to China's position in global power balance, as well as political legitimacy for its rule both at home and abroad.

I. Rationale and background

1. Ideational factors rooted in Chinese ancient thoughts, especially Confucianism in Chinese foreign policy in the past

The current debates focus on the increasing role of ideational factors in influencing Chinese leadership mindset and their strategic preferences. The abundant literature on Chinese traditional culture, especially Confucianism has been thought to concur with China's growing materialist power. Cultural and historical studies tend to argue for the pivotal role of Chinese traditional culture in shaping Chinese FP. A historian states that, "A historical and cultural comparative perspective is generally the best and most indispensable tool for producing major insights and innovative ideas in the field."¹ Chinese scholars even go further

¹ Yinhong Shi, "The Returned China in History and World Politics: A Deeper Understanding with Intellectual Guidance from Wang Gongwu," in *The Chinese View and the Contribution of Wang Gongwu*, ed. Yongnian Zheng (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2010).

with a call for a separate Chinese theory in international relations (IR) to account for China's claimed unique ascendancy.²

It is note of worth that while Chinese scholars contend for the pacifist nature of Chinese strategic culture in Chinese foreign policy making, other scholars in the West, including even some Chinese ones, voice with reasonable criticisms against the idealistic cover of traditional culture. Cultural theorists largely identify China's strategic culture as a defensive one and China's ideational leadership as exclusively peace-loving.³ It is commonly argued that Chinese tradition of international behavior was benevolence-based one,⁴ or the Chinese dynasties' tribute system (*chaogong tixi*) was merely a symbol of cultural attraction and moral value (rule by virtue and rites), not actual control.⁵ Historians also share the view that China was not territorially expansionist even Chinese material power could allow her to project influence beyond her borders, and if China was forced to enter wars, such wars were all legitimate ones in conformity with Confucian norms and values.⁶ Yet, such arguments are challenged by Yuan-kang Wang's findings that Imperial China was ready to use force to conquer other territories when it grows strong, and that Confucian pacifism only had a limited role in preventing China going to war.⁷ A Chinese historian, Wang Gungwu justifies China's historical interventionist behavior with two reasons, "one was protecting the small, and the other was safeguarding what the Chinese court thought was the legitimate order".⁸ In fact, the historical evidence archived by the neighbors of the imperial China has testified against the judgements by some leading Chinese scholars, based on the so-called historical evidence recorded by Chinese courts, that old China as having no ambitions to dominate their neighbour. To put it bluntly, it was China, the Middle Kingdom, who has long enjoyed the unparalleled superiority over the region and claimed the right to legitimize any actions as long as they suit Chinese interests. It is essential to note that a Chinese philosopher, Zhao Tingyang has attempted to revive the All Under Heaven (*tianxia*) idea.⁹ For Zhao, *tianxia* is significant concept not only for China but also for the whole world; Zhao even promotes *tianxia*'s universality to 'a philosophy for the world institution', and reinterpretes *tianxia* as a world view that eventually lead to the ideal of '*tianxia yijia*' (or 'one family under the heaven').¹⁰ A Chinese key strategist and a

² Shi Bin, "'Guoji Guanxi Yanjiu 'Zhongguohua' de Zhenlun" (Debate about the 'localization' of international studies in China," in *Zhongguo Guoji Guanxi Yanjiu (1995-2005) (IR Studies in China (1995-2005))*, ed. Yizhou Wang (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006).

³ Huiyun Feng, *Chinese Strategic Culture and Foreign Policy Decision-making: Confucianism, leadership and war*, Asian Security Studies (Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2007).

⁴ Xiao Ren, "Traditional Chinese theory and practice of foreign relations," in *China and International Relations - the Chinese View and the Contribution of Wang Gungwu*, ed. Yongnian Zhang (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2010).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Paul Evans, "Historians and Chinese world order - Fairbank, Wang, and the Matter of 'Indeterminate relevance'," in *China and International Relations - the Chinese View and the Contribution of Wang Gungwu*, ed. Yongnian Zheng (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2010); *ibid*.

⁷ Yuankang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

⁸ Ren, "Traditional Chinese theory and practice of foreign relations."

⁹ Tingyang Zhao, *Tianxia Tixi: Shijie Zhidu Zhexue Daolun (The Tianxia System: A Philosophy for the World Institution)* (Nanjing: Jiangsu Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2005).

¹⁰ Ren, "Traditional Chinese theory and practice of foreign relations."

realist, Yan Xuetong also attempts to separate the Western concept of power and Chinese concept of *tianxia*, thus paving the way for his meticulous elaboration on the composition of power and leadership.¹¹ However, the intellectual and practical values of transformed *tianxia* idea need to be seen. The noble idea of all states belong to 'one home' may be abused as the pretext for the big states (big brothers) to resort to force to teach smaller ones a lesson at their discretion. In other word, China (and other powers) may enjoy the privileges of punishing those who violate the norms and principles in the eyes of China, (or just simply stand in China's way), or safeguarding what the Chinese leaders thought was the legitimate order. Cultural theorists claim that harmony can be achieved in a reasonably just order if countries find their own appropriate places in their relationship (including the respect for leadership legitimacy) and treat one another in line with rites. In that sense, a Chinese hierarchical system is, at best, a more legitimate ruling with less visible resistance from followers. As some note it, *tianxia* is nothing new but a update version of hegemony for the twenty-first century.¹²

In my perspective, dualists' argument has found a niche in the ongoing discussion. They argue that both material determinism and conceptual determinism help shape the state's behavior in international affairs. For example, through an acknowledgement that Confucian pacifism is a widely held opinion in existing scholarship on Chinese strategic behavior, Wang counter argues that Imperial China's security policy was largely driven by power-based realist logics rather than the ideal Confucian culture of peace and harmony.¹³ Consequently, the author argues that China has been a practitioner of realpolitik for centuries and he, unsurprisingly, reaffirms the widely held realist prediction that China's quest for power and expansion would inevitably lead to U.S.-China competition for the dominant position.¹⁴ In the same vein, while appealing to a political power attributed by humane kingly way, Yan steadily holds high of economic and military power (material power).¹⁵

However, an important question "when and to what extent can ideational thoughts influence Chinese President Hu Jintao in shaping China's FP?" can only be examined in reality. Based on Yan Xuetong's prescription for a benevolent leadership vis-à-vis the US hegemony, it stands a daunting task for a China, preoccupied with both domestic and international troubles, can reach such an inspiring and normative (even utopian) political vision. The next section will deal with that question.

2. Ideational factors in Chinese foreign policy making under Hu Jintao

Given the fact that China's strength and influence has steadily been on an upward trajectory, the questions of what China thinks and how China behaves herself to the rest of the world accordingly have aroused growing curiosity and attention from scholars and policy-makers worldwide. International relations (IR) theories in general and Chinese politics in particular are traditionally dominated by materialist perspective. Therefore, it is essential to examine how far the Chinese leaders can go with Confucianism-rooted 'harmonious world' concept. Chinese leaders have taken a variety of pre-emptive measures to guard against negative responses from world community to China's ascendancy. 'Harmonious world' is an integral component in a set of Hu's ideational policy initiatives. Hu took power from Jiang

¹¹ Xuetong Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thoughts, Modern Chinese Power*, ed. Bell A. Daniel and Zhe Xun, trans. Edmun Ryden (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹² William A Callahan, "Chinese visions of world order: post-hegemonic or a new hegemony?," *International Studies Review* 10 (2008).

¹³ Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thoughts, Modern Chinese Power*.

Zemin in 2002-2003, and launched a big propaganda internationally. In the aftermath of the second US-led Gulf War in 2003, China's self-claimed 'peaceful rising' was adjusted to be known as 'peaceful development', and subsequently associated with the call for 'harmonious world' in 2004-2005 and 'scientific development' since 2007. In his 'harmonious world' speech at the United Nation General Assembly in September 2005, Chinese President Hu Jintao sketches out a future in which the harmonization of differences will be the prevailing trend in the international system. President Hu has become the very first Chinese top leader who has explicitly initiated the internationalization of a Chinese term in the world's largest inter-governmental organization since 1949. Hu called for 'the respect for the right of each country to independently choose its social system and development road, and the support for the efforts of countries to realize rejuvenation and growth according to their own national conditions.' Hu supported 'the diversification of civilizations in the spirit of equality and openness, (in order to) reinforce dialogue and exchanges among different civilizations and join hands to build a harmonious world where various civilizations coexist.'¹⁶ From Hu's perspective, the UN should continue to play a key role in the process of establishing a fair and equal world order for all nations.¹⁷

The 'harmonious world' introduction has primarily been directed to the harmonization of divergences in big power relations, especially in China-US relations to protect China's interests (power, influences, etc.), and to manage its rising power in international politics and economics. In particular, China is most concerned with the US's attitude and policy, the only superpower who has unparalleled power in the world and also the major hurdle to China's strategic ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region. The concept introduction is of great significance especially within the contexts of power transition, cycle of history, and power and order in the international system. Power transition and significant changes in the relative power of key states often result in instability within the international system and often times with major war as a consequence. China's rise and how it, and the reigning power the United States, manage the change would provide a critical test case in IR theory. Likewise, the policy relevance of the 'harmonious world' concept is becoming all the more obvious given ongoing realignments among key states in Asia, the re-emergence of territorial disputes amidst rising nationalism in many of the claimant states, and challenges in crisis management, conflict prevention, and escalation control. In that light, the outcomes of bargaining between China on one side and the US and other powers on the other will inform the way China may adopt in its affairs with smaller states.

While the US has enjoyed an overwhelmingly strategic position across trans-Atlantic continent, in Middle East and the American continent, it has reluctantly agreed to the power-sharing with other regional powers, previously with the Soviet Union in the Cold War, and then with China and India in East Asia and South Asia respectively. To offset for its geographical distance, the US has projected a large number of front deployment forces and weaved in a number of security alliances with regional countries (Japan, South Korea, Australia, Philippines, Thailand etc.) In the aftermath of the Cold War, the US has shifted its privileged attention to other parts of the world, leaving the 'vacuum power' to be filled by China and other powers in the region. For the first two decades since the end of the Cold War, China has preoccupied with social and economic stabilization at home, and has actively built up both military strength and diplomatic attractiveness.

Over the past few decades, China has obtained tremendous achievements in economic development, thus setting the stage for long-standing political and strategic ambitions. Some

¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. Available at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t212614.htm>

¹⁷ Ibid.

in the Chinese elite view the US as a declining power, which will ultimately be replaced by China in the region and atop the international system.¹⁸ Chinese leaders view the current situation as a timely moment to strengthen strategic footholds and expand its sphere of influences. Though Chinese leaders may be aware of the limits in their comprehensive strengths, especially in military terms, in comparison with the US, they cannot miss such a big strategic opportunity. The US's relative decline coupled with other powers' difficulties since the 2008 global financial crisis and economic stagnation serve as a push for China's assertiveness in territorial disputes in the Asia-Pacific as Chinese leaders adopt a "now or never" attitude to dispute settlement. China under Hu Jintao has pragmatically switched from 'hiding and binding time' to 'taking (big) opportunities' (from 'taoguang yanghui' to 'yousuo zuowei', even 'dayou zuowei'). In this sense, China needs a brand new ideational cover to grasp the opportunity without alarming other stakeholders, especially the US.

In a nutshell, a primary comparative finding can be drawn from the imperial China in the past and modern China under Hu Jintao's leadership, in which history can be utilized as a reference guide for contemporary era. In the past, Confucianism was construed as the official ideology in old China's external relations. In fact, pacifist Confucianism only took the second place after the predominantly material (realpolitik) factors in Chinese Emperors' ideational leadership. Confucianism was upheld only after realist policy fail to solve the security issues, or a weak China could not afford a costly power extension policy. Under Hu Jintao's leadership, a discredited Communism is still labeled the official ideology, with other non-Communism attributes. For instance, Hu Jintao has resorted to Confucianism with harmonious world concept in the foreign policy making. Realpolitik is the predominant factor. While communism as an official guiding thought has almost lost its attractiveness, and China has been striking a very hard bargaining with the US and other big power, communism plus Confucianism is of great help to Beijing. The 'harmonious world' concept introduced in 2005 fits well in Beijing's foreign policy making.

	Imperial China in the past	Modern China under Hu Jintao (2002-2012 ++)
Formal Ideology	Confucianism	Communism plus X factor
Hierarchical order	Realpolitik – predominant Confucianism - secondary	Realpolitik - predominant Communism plus X factor-secondary
Terms and Conditions	Confucianism will be an option if Realpolitik fails to resolve issues, or weak China cannot afford a power overreach policy	Communism plus X factor will be highlighted as Communism loses attraction, and realpolitik drives a hard bargaining

Table 1: Comparison on the role of ideational factor in Chinese foreign policy making in the imperial past and under Hu Jintao's respectively

II. China's assertiveness in the South China Sea– a test case of 'harmonious world' concept in the early 21st century

1. Territorial disputes in the South China Sea and China's policy under Hu Jintao's leadership

¹⁸ Peter Brookes's Testimony Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Beijing as an Emerging Power in the South China Sea*, September 12 2012.

The paper contends that the combination of 'harmonious world' concept and realpolitik mindset has basically helped to advance China's interests in the early decade of the 21st century and beyond. Although China claims to never wage war without legitimate reasons given its (harmony-based/peace-loving) defensive *strategic culture*, such 'legitimate reasons' are always defined by the outcomes of bargaining between China and other major stakeholders instead. In term of this view, China may, on the one hand, adopt Confucianism as supplementary principle in conjunction with discredited Marxist-Leninist official ideology to keep up beautifying China as a new world power. China's rise may be interpreted in the noble language of Confucianism as the very first non-Western rising model (peaceful rise with Chinese characteristics) in a worldwide propaganda of a newly-emerging unprecedented 'kingly authority' (wangdao) versus the US 'hegemonic authority' pattern (badao).¹⁹ On the other hand, China proactively searches for behind-the-scene bargaining among major stakeholders to set up a new balance of power or a new sphere of influence in the region, or to impose any approaches to existing and/or emerging security problems, in favor of China's interests. In this section, the logic of great power politics will be examined in the way China stir up the disputes with ASEAN claimants in South China Sea disputes over the past few years.

The South China Sea disputes refer to both bilateral and multilateral territorial ones among China, Taiwan and other Southeast Asian claimants. The South China Sea disputes, Korean Peninsula, and Taiwan Strait have been labeled as the three most dangerous security hotspots in the Asia-Pacific. Straddling over one of the most geo-strategic chokepoints in the Pacific Ocean, the South China Sea with rich estimates in oil, gas, and fish reserves has become the way-out for China as it has grappled with limited resources and population burden in its modernization for development and influence projection. Attempts to gain possession of the South China Sea, and to strengthen control and exploitation of maritime resources stand as a long-standing objective that China has persistently pursued over the past few decades. China's claimants are small countries, not the targeted stakeholders identified in the 'harmonious world' concept. And most importantly, China's military strength, especially navy force is far more superior to the other claimants'.²⁰ It is essential to note that China's 'good neighborliness' and 'charm offensive' launched in the past decade fit well with ASEAN's policy of a comprehensive multilateral engagement strategy with China. In particular, good neighbourliness with ASEAN countries is much expected to play a positive role when China's relations with the US and Japan turn sour. Seen from that angle, territorial disputes between China and several ASEAN member states in the South China Sea stand as severe security challenges, dubbed 'dynamite' to China's political-security relations with its neighbouring countries. China's increasing attention to the South China Sea islets and water areas has resulted in clashes and tensions, auguring ill a potential breakout of hostilities in the region. Out of alarming concerns over China's growing naval build-up and assertive statements on the PRC's sovereignty in disputed areas in the South China Sea, other states in the region have hastily sought for self-help and help from outsider. Regional countries have spent more on arms purchases and military modernization. In separate moves at varying levels, ASEAN states have been encouraging Washington's presence in the SCS to guard against China's military adventures. As a Vietnamese scholar has noted that China should not commit strategic miscalculations in the South China Sea, reminding Beijing of the truth that

¹⁹ Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thoughts, Modern Chinese Power*.

²⁰ Toshi Yoshihara's Testimony Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Beijing as an Emerging Power in the South China Sea*, 2012.

'troubles with close neighbors would affect the image and position of China in the world'.²¹ However, it seems to be that Chinese leaders do not yet to recognize such ideational consideration in policy making process. Again, it is the outcomes of great power politics that inform Chinese policy and behavior in the South China Sea.

The US's attitude and policy constitutes a crucial determinant of Chinese strategic choices and behavior. As evidenced in the past, a combination of wise and firm policies by Washington and its partners regarding Chinese aggressiveness in the Taiwan Straits did work effectively in undercutting reactive and aggressive policies, and fostering the ascendance of more moderate thinking in Beijing instead.²² However, the declining US power has forced Washington to offer what Beijing has long desired in exchange for China's a more assertive diplomacy in addressing global and international issues of mutual interests. Though Beijing might be rankled by the US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton regarding the former's management of the territorial disputes in the South China Sea at some diplomatic forums, it is obvious that the US is not at odds with China over that issue. A US scholar has subtly put a reminder to Washington in his Congressional Testimony that 'the gains for US alliance and partnership relationships in maritime Asia (*with China's neighbors*) may be offset by increased risks of being drawn into conflicts (*with China*) that are not of American choosing and/or US broader global interests'.²³ In other word, the message has been interpreted by Beijing in the sense that for the time being, as long as China recognizes the US's interest over the safety of communication lanes in the sea and does not attempt to project Chinese dominance in one of the world's most important sea-lanes, then the South China Sea disputes are not the problem between China and the US. That Beijing has exerted 'low-grade but unremitting pressure on rival claimants to South China Sea islands and waters', mainly based on non-military forces,²⁴ demonstrates Beijing's efforts to avoid triggering any big military clashes to give Washington any unnecessary concerns. While it remains to be seen whether it is a secret deal made between the two powers, it is clear that the US that has practically dropped its protest to China's adventurous actions in the South China Sea. Recent hassles stirred up by China feed the theory of China threat, ironically paying the US some unintended dividends. In term of strategic dimension, the US may get the invitation from its allies and other regional countries, including Vietnam, to play as a security stabilizer to the Asia-Pacific region against an ambitious China. In so doing, the US can expand and strengthen its hub-and-spoke strategy on one hand, and can profit from selling expensive weapons to regional states on the other. The US would enormously benefit from economic and commercial ties with the region as a result. In other word, China is playing a game with the US's tacit agreement. Therefore, what some publications have recently labeled the US's view and policy as standstill,²⁵ or ambiguous one, is simply a pragmatic 'wait-and-see' perspective of the US leaders. It is noteworthy to recall the US ship Impeccable Incident in March 2009 in which the US accused Chinese ships of harassing the US ship in international water off the Chinese coast while Beijing blamed the Impeccable was caught undertaking spy activities in China's claimed exclusive economic zone (EEZ). To put it bluntly, Beijing just took the

²¹ Anh Tuan Hoang, "Chinese Strategic Miscalculations in the South China Sea," *Asia-Pacific Bulletin* September 24, 2012.

²² J. Thomas Christiansen, "The Advantage of an Assertive China: Responding to Beijing's Abrasive Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs* March/April 2011.

²³ Richard P. Cronin's Testimony Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Beijing as an Emerging Power in the South China Sea*, September 12 2012.

²⁴ Yoshihara, "Beijing as an Emerging Power in the South China Sea."

²⁵ Thuy Trang Le, "America in Response to China's Rise: Standing Still is not an Option," *Issues and Insights* 12, no. 4 (2012).

initiative to test the US's nerves and determination in the Asia-Pacific. The stand-off was followed with an important decision by the top leaders in Beijing and Washington to set off the first round of China-US Bilateral Strategic and Economic Dialogues (S&ED) in late July 2009.

Prior to 2009, Beijing has actively accelerated regional cooperation schemes in an attempt to lure smaller Southeast Asian states from the US-led order to Chinese sphere of influence in the region. China and ASEAN signed important documents such as the Declaration on the Code of Conduct (DOC) in the SCS, Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), and implemented China-ASEAN Free trade area Agreement since 2002, so on and so forth. Beside regional cooperation, significant achievements have been witnessed in China's bilateral relations with individual ASEAN countries. Thanks to these efforts, Beijing has killed 'many birds at one shot', gaining the initial confidence in the self-proclaimed 'great power with responsibility', especially 'harmonious world' concept since 2005, thus partly rebutting China Threat theory and diminishing, if not dismissing, other claimants' concerns of Beijing's 'hegemonic ambitions' in Southeast Asia. Along with skillful maneuvering tactics to divide ASEAN countries, Beijing has sought to obstruct other powers' participation and influences in regional affairs. On the one hand, Beijing has publicly issued series of warnings and intimidating hints to both claimants and non-claimants in the disputes. On the other hand, Beijing has secretly worked out any opportunities to bargain with big powers over the smaller states to win the upper hand in asserting and supporting its sovereignty. For example, China has sought way to keep US and other powers at bay with regard to disputes in the South China Sea, declaring that the disputes in the South China Sea are the problem between China and concerned states only, and Chinese government advocates resolving disagreements through negotiations, and outsiders' intervention do no good but further complicate the situation. China has also warned that 'regional stability will hardly be guaranteed if other Southeast Asian states are volutary to be controlled by the US.'²⁶

However, since 2009, China has embarked on different path, contrasting with the self-claimed peaceful and harmonious policy Beijing has hold high since the turn of the century. In March 2010, Chinese senior officials first spelled out the so-called 'Chinese core interests' in the SCS, sparking off controversial debates among academic and policy circles. In that context, the US Secretary of State had no way but to voice out the US concerns over situation in disputed areas at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) held in Hanoi in July 2010 to reassure ASEAN countries of its presence in the region. Chinese aggressiveness varies from Beijing's ban on fishing, People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy live ammunition exercises, other claimants' fishing net/cable cutting, establishment of Sansha City, bidding offers in disputed areas, even in other claimants' offshore water areas, etc. A detailed analysis of the reason why Beijing turns its attention to the SCS has been provided in an hearing titled 'Beijing as an Emerging Power in the South China Sea' held in September 2012 at the US House of Representatives. It is largely assumed that the developments involving the Chinese military – or People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the issue which has emboldened Chinese behavior in the South China Sea most.²⁷ Based on its increasingly power, China has sought to translate its wide-spread diplomatic recognition into rightful sovereignty claim to the disputed islands and water areas in the South China Sea.²⁸ While Beijing's nine-dotted (or U-shaped) line claim remains contestable, it is clear that when China develops necessary power, China has spared no efforts in expanding its borders and legitimizing such actions. It is essential to note that 'contrary to the widespread external criticism of China for its growing

²⁶ Frank Ching, "A Clash of Interests in Asia," *Japan Times* 29 July, 2010.

²⁷ Brookes, "*Beijing as an Emerging Power in the South China Sea.*"

²⁸ Ibid.

assertiveness, the predominant view among Chinese analysts is that all the tensions and disputes are mainly attributable to the collusion between the US and regional claimant states'.²⁹ In other word, Chinese leaders have attempted to build the image of China as a victim whose security environment has been threatened by external states. Beijing has constantly mentioned noble phrases such as peaceful talks to solve the disputes, joint exploitation and self-restraint pending a final resolution, and demonstrated its desire to turn the South China Sea into the sea of peace and cooperation.³⁰ In fact, in adopting 'divine and rule' stratagem with respective ASEAN countries, China has successfully neulified an ASEAN's united position on the issues. At the ASEAN Summit held in Phnompenh on July 2012, ASEAN has, for the first time in its 45-year-history, failed to work out a joint communique.

Ironically, the US's verbal support and ambiguous policy in the South China Sea suits both China and the US's interests. Chinese leaders might not miss the golden opportunities to take actions in the SCS in the midst of relative decline of the US and other powers. China's increasing significance in many international affairs would yield many returns for China in bargaining with the US and major stakeholders in the region. The paper contends that the regular bilateral dialogue mechanism (US-China Strategic Dialogue) between the US and China might provide Beijing with the US's de facto guarantee to stay aside the hassles in the region. Before 2009, China proposed 'harmonious world' concept in a friendly manner to win widespread support in its bargaining with the US. From 2009 until now, a dual policy has been noted with the harmonious policy in relations with the US and big powers, and aggressive policy in relations with other smaller claimants in the South China Sea disputes. In her speech at the third round of China-US S&ED in May 2011, Hilary Clinton hailed 'the S&ED as an important mechanism for the two countries to conduct in-depth commnication on a wide range of issues', and that 'S&ED aims at strengthening the bilateral trust, in particular in understanding each other's strategic purpose and common interest, avoiding misunderstanding and wrong judgement'.³¹ Recently, in face of China's growing assertiveness in the region, Washington has strategic moves to expand military build-up in the Asia-Pacific, marking initial departure from its long-standing "neutral" or wait-and-see perspective with President Barack Obama's the Asia-Pacific pivotal policy or rebalancing US priorities to the Asia-Pacific. In response, China adopts a dual policy. On the one hand, China keeps issuing warnings of military confrontation. On the other hand, China repeats its willingness to resolve the disputes through bilateral negotiations with individual claimants that are much in favor of Beijing given its superior strength.

The paper assumes there may exist some relationships between the 'harmonious world' concept and the outcome of bargaining between China and other major powers (the US) as in table 2 below. Possibility of the application of 'harmonious world' in real policy-making (A) varies from high to low. Possibility of compromises between China and other powers, especially the US (B) varies from high to low.

²⁹ Mingjiang Li, "Chinese Debates of South China Sea: Implications for Future Developments," *RSIS Working Paper* 17 May 2012.

³⁰ "Chinese FM stresses joint effort with ASEAN to maintain peace in South China Sea," *Xinhua Agency*, 11 August 2012.

³¹ "The Third Round of China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue Opens." Available at <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/dialogue3/t821578.htm>

A \ B	High	Low
High	'Harmonious world' is highly referred and practiced, and US accepts China's rising: Non-feasible future. It is unlikely that China can drive a balance between a harmonious policy to all and maximum bargaining outcomes with other powers at the same time.	'Harmonious world' is highly referred, but China could not get US's approval for power sharing: prior to 2009. Harmonious policy is seen as a political manoeuvre to win widespread support for China in its hard bargaining with other major stakeholders.
Low	'Harmonious world' is less referred but China wins US's (tacit) approval for power sharing: after 2009. FP making is driven by realpolitik calculations (Interests and power matter). China adopts dual policy: harmonious to big powers, and non-harmonious to smaller states. China's 'harmonious world' turns out an illusion. Regional stability may be challenged	China drops 'harmonious world', adopts aggressiveness in the disputes and challenges the US and balance of power: worst scenario. Adverse consequences for the region and the world. Possibility of a military conflict cannot be ruled out.

Table 2: Relationship between 'harmonious world' concept and big power's bargaining outcomes

2. Any Chance(s) for Hu Jintao's 'harmonious world' concept beyond 2012?

Mixed combination of 'harmonious world' concept and realpolitik mindset has constituted a good decoration for Chinese actions and helped promote China's interest in the first decade of the 21st century. This trend will be expected to keep going under Chinese next generation's leadership. Such cultural-realist approach remains pertinent to Chinese next generation leaders given challenges to China's position in global power balance, as well as political legitimacy for its rule both at home and abroad.

To maintain the long-founded political legitimacy, Chinese next generation leaders would resort to an ideational combination of Communism, Confucianism, Nationalism, Patriotism, etc. with Communism as the official ideology. The de facto guiding thought could be the Communism plus X, or Y, or Z formula. There are several main reasons for the next generation leaders to integrate this 'harmonious world' concept into China's realpolitik-driven policy in the South China Sea beyond 2012.

- (i) The US's neutral policy and its verbal support to the region mean a green light for Beijing to go with assertive behavior in the disputed areas. The possibility of Chinese military adventure in the SCS disputes cannot be ruled out if Beijing perceive any Washington's weakening position or appeasement to a rising China's demands. However, given the asymmetry between China and US power, Beijing may practise 'self-restraint' of its ambitions, attempting to keep its harassment in the disputed areas at low profile for the time being,
- (ii) In response to criticism of the gap between China's words and actions in the South China Sea disputes, Beijing might argue that 'harmonious world' would be the ultimate goal while leaving room for manoeuvre for taking more advantage in the disputed areas. Under the 'legitimate use of force' pretext, Beijing's control of some more island may suit best China's territorial

ambitions, especially those PLA hawkish and radical nationalists. It is worth of note that although the U-shaped line is increasingly referred as a claim, Beijing has not yet officially declared and clarified the legal basis for the line.³²

- (iii) In short-term at least, China's military muscle-flexing in territorial disputes and diplomatic hassles with neighbouring countries have not yet to undermine China's respected truly power model (kingly authority). Yet, it does matter in the immediate or long-term future. In addition, it is noteworthy that China still can handle the domestic problems (separatist movement in Xinjiang and Tibet, Taiwan Straits Relations, or economic stagnation, etc) and pay increasing attention to the South China Sea. However, when China may be faced with difficulties in all fronts, and uncompromising perspectives of the US and the West, it is expected that Beijing may adjust its current aggressiveness into a more moderate perspective in the South China Sea disputes.
- (iv) It is widely assumed that China is a fragile superpower with high burdens in many fields. Beijing leaders themselves still leave the question of what kind of leadership or governance China may provide to international community unanswered. Currently, the integration of both ideational and materialistic factor might be a big dream that a rising China think they may afford.
- (v) Hu Jintao's 'harmonious world' concept in conjunction with realpolitik calculations proves to work well in service of Chinese interests. Such ideational legacy will be pursued by Hu's successors. Given power arrangement in Chinese policy-making body, in particular in the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau, Hu will not leave substantial power until 2014. He may resign from the post of the People's Military Commission (PMC) Chairman two years after the power transitional period, as the case of of his predecessor Jiang Zemin may suggest. Not less importantly, Hu's protégé Li Keqiang and his cliques still hold important post as result of power-sharing in Chinese top echelons.

Given above consideration, it is most likely that the Chinese next generation would stick to Hu Jintao's 'harmonious world' concept in the years to come. The new leaders may adopt two-pronged harmonious policy, being harmonious to the US and other major power while maintaining aggressive policy to smaller claimants in the SCS disputes. In other word, possibility of conflict or military confrontation between China and other ASEAN claimants cannot be ruled out.

Peter Brookes's Testimony Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. *Beijing as an Emerging Power in the South China Sea*, September 12 2012.

Toshi Yoshihara's Testimony Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. *Beijing as an Emerging Power in the South China Sea*, 2012.

³² Truong Thuy Tran, "China's U-shaped Line in the South China Sea: Possible Interpretation, Asserting Activities and Reactions from Outside," in *The Practices of the UNCLOS and the Resolution of South China Sea Disputes* (Taipei 3-4 September, 2012).

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