

Whether the “China Threat Theory” Represents China’s International Role

—Analysis Based on the Transformation of Chinese Foreign Policy

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Abstract: In recent years, China has actively adjusted its foreign policy, integrated into the international order with a more open attitude, and strived to play China’s role in the region and the world and shoulder “China’s responsibilities.” However, the United States and some of China’s neighbors view China’s rise with suspicion and fear, and vigorously promote the “China threat theory.” Based on this background, this paper puts forward the research topic of whether the “China threat theory” represents China’s international role from the perspective of the transformation of China’s foreign policy. As a rising power, it is of great significance in the field of international relations to understand whether the purpose of China’s rise poses a threat to other countries and the current international order. This paper uses the qualitative analysis method to analyze and study the South China Sea dispute and the Diaoyu Island issue as cases, and draws the conclusion that the “China threat theory” is not China’s current international role.

Keywords: defensive nationalism, foreign policy, China Threat Theory, territorial dispute, domestic strategy

1. Introduction

Since the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CPC held in December 1978, China believes that the theme of the world has changed from “war and revolution” to “peace and development” [1]. The United States and other nations have recently developed a growing sense of crisis that China wants to challenge the current international order, and the “China threat theory” has grown more exaggerated internationally as a result of China’s active adjustment of its foreign strategy and the enhancement of its international comprehensive strength. Yan claims that as structural tensions between China and the United States have grown, the latter has enacted more aggressive tactics to stop China from closing the gap in their relative power [2]. According to Xu and Du, the United States promoted the “China threat theory” since New China’s creation, which holds that the success of the Chinese revolution might have a domino effect on Southeast Asia and jeopardize the US’s status as a superpower [3]. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping’s “be enthusiastic and press on” foreign policy, China is currently participating in regionalization and globalization with a more active and open stance as a major power, leading to the increasing mention of the “China

threat theory” at the international level. Therefore, it has become a hot topic in the field of IR to determine if the “China’s Threat Theory” really depicts China’s current international position. In order to discuss whether the “China threat theory” is China’s current international role, this article adopts a qualitative analysis research method. This paper demonstrates the goal of China’s peaceful rise from the transformation of China’s foreign policy since its founding to the present. In addition, in order to analyze more specifically the transformation of China’s foreign policy from “keep a low profile” proposed by Deng Xiaoping to “be enthusiastic and press on” proposed by Xi Jinping, this essay uses the Diaoyu Islands dispute and the South China Sea issue as case studies. This paper will also use the theoretical knowledge of nationalism and the “China responsibility theory” to further study whether the “China threat theory” is China’s current international role.

2. Literature Review

Previous literature on China’s foreign policy mainly focused on the comparative analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of two different diplomatic attitudes, “low-key” and “enthusiastic and upward”, on China’s future development. However, as a rising power, the United States and some Asian countries are actively urging China to assume major responsibilities on global issues such as climate change and terrorism [4]. In this global context, scholars’ debate whether Deng’s “low profile” policy still applies to China today. Previous literature has ignored China’s current role as a rising power that overthrew colonialism at the international level, and the impact of nationalism at the domestic level in shaping the image of a stronger great power and foreign policy. This article will integrate David Shambaugh’s defensive nationalism and China’s responsibility theory to further analyze whether the “China threat theory” represents China’s current international identity through the transformation from the “keep a low profile” during the Deng Dynasty to the “be enthusiastic and press on” of Xi.

3. Deng’s Diplomatic Strategy of “Keeping a Low Profile”

In 1990, with the collapse of communist countries such as Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, Deng Xiaoping proposed that China, as a third world, should preserve its strength, avoid tough diplomacy, and act low-key internationally. In the early phases of reform and opening up, the central leadership group headed by Deng suggested the external policy of “keeping a low profile, making progress” in order to create an ongoing secure external environment for China’s diplomacy and advance domestic modernization development. As Wang claimed, Deng proposed this foreign policy at a time when China was at the end of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the international polarization pattern [5]. Faced with the complex international situation, China needs to avoid confrontation with Western countries and develop its own path of “independence and opening up”. Deng’s policy of “keeping a low profile” not only met the national conditions of China at that time, but also to some extent ensured the smooth progress of China’s “peaceful rise” path [5]. When facing territorial disputes, Deng Xiaoping also proposed the measure of “shelving disputes and promoting common development”. Judging from the literal meaning of the external attitude of keeping a low profile, China did not have the purpose and national strength to challenge the hegemony of the United States at that time. Yan claims that the summary of Deng Xiaoping’s suggestion to maintain a low profile in Chinese political circles was that China should avoid a zero-sum competition between its efforts to achieve national renewal and the United States’ undisputed global dominance established since the end of the cold war [4]. Zhao noted that China’s growth is a gradual process and that it is not as powerful as it first appears [6]. China’s military and political strength after the Cold War is far less than that of the United States. Deng’s policy is not only the foreign policy at that time, but also a response to the “China Threat Theory”.

Deng Xiaoping's strategy of maintaining a low profile is consistent with Chinese national circumstances from the standpoint of the post-cold war diplomatic environment, which is relevant to China. Taking the SCS issue as a notable example. As an active propagandist of the "China Threat Theory", the United States tried to intervene in China's South China Sea issue through ideological war and trade war. As Gu *et al.* stressed that the United States is actively involved in the SCS issue, trying to internationalize China's own territorial sovereignty through the Philippines, Australia and other "island chain" countries [7]. As Gu *et al.* also concluded, during Deng Xiaoping's period, the US tried to interfere in China's diplomatic relations with the participants in the SCS issue by inserting this issue [7]. For example, the US predicted several times that the SCS would become the next area where violent armed conflict broke out. This kind of international exaggeration of the terrorist atmosphere that China is trying to gain territorial sovereignty through armed means through the SCS issue has increased the spread of the "China Threat Theory".

Against the international background of repeated provocations by the United States and suspicion of the "China Threat Theory" by countries with territorial disputes with China, Deng Xiaoping continued to implement the foreign attitude of "keeping a low profile". In the 1970s and 1980s, Deng put forward the proposal of "shelving disputes and joint development" when establishing diplomatic relations with Southeast Asian countries. According to Yu and Li, Deng suggested that in order to forge cordial diplomatic ties between the two sides in the conflict, the two sides should put the issue of territorial ownership on hold and adopt the strategy of joint development while maintaining their position that the Nansha Islands are China's inherent territory [8]. Deng's strategy of shelving disputes to deal with territorial disputes is consistent with the guidelines of "keeping a low profile". It can be said that the method of shelving disputes is a concrete measure of this foreign attitude. Deng's decision to "shelve disputes and jointly develop" reflects China's goodwill and sincerity in properly handling the South China Sea issue, which is conducive to creating a good atmosphere and conditions for the thorough settlement of the SCS dispute in the future. As Yan claimed that the strategy of "shelving disputes" enabled China, which was relatively weak at that time, to establish good diplomatic relations and develop economic and trade relations with nations around the South China Sea [2].

4. The Transformation of China's Diplomatic Strategy

Yan came to the conclusion that while a developing nation will produce more self-assured citizens, its citizens will also want the government to engage in more diplomatic outreach [4]. This raises the question of whether Deng's "keeping a low profile" foreign policy still holds true for the country as it becomes a stronger force. Consider the ongoing disagreement between Japan and China on the ownership of the Diaoyu Islands. Since Japan took control of the Diaoyu Islands during the 1894 Sino-Japanese War, there has been a territorial dispute that has impacted Sino-Japanese ties and the islands have become a historical legacy. 2010 saw the detention of Chinese ships sailing close to the Diaoyu Islands by the Japanese government. To stop China's ascent, the US adopted the "Asia Pacific rebalancing" plan that same year. The Noda Cabinet started suggesting that the Diaoyu Islands be "nationalized" in 2012, as the absurdity of Japan's desire to "buy the islands" escalated following the government's proposal to do just that. The charade of the Japanese government has formally elevated the dispute over the Diaoyu Islands' territorial ownership to the level of diplomatic Sino-Japanese ties, further inflaming Chinese anger at home [9]. As Liu also claimed that Japan's idea of categorizing the Diaoyu Islands as internal territory is an illegal act of stealing other countries' territories. The national sentiment of the Chinese people has erupted under the dual stimulation of historical legacy and Japan's infringement of territorial sovereignty [9]. According to the report by the Global Times on August 17, 2012, seven patriotic individuals boarded the Diaoyu Islands and rushed to the main island of the island by shoal flushing, planting a five-star red flag on the island.

According to Shambaugh, China's nationalism encourages China's determination to rise from the humiliation of the West and Japan [10]. China's belief in restoring pride and dignity is full of vitality. This concept is deeply rooted in China's national psychology. Not only from the international perspective, America, Japan and other countries continue to suppress China's rise, but also from the domestic perspective, the drive of nationalism makes it increasingly questionable whether the diplomatic strategy of Deng is applicable to China's current development.

Zhao claims that China has become the second-largest economy in the world thanks to the post-World War II global order that was spearheaded by the US [11]. The question of whether China, as a developing nation, will face fundamental difficulties with the US is one that both Beijing and Washington closely monitor. Zhao also asserted that China has surrendered its might and ability to retaliate because it feels the current global order benefits the US and its allies, a belief fostered by US propaganda known as the "China Threat Theory" and the suppression of China's ascent. In this international context, China's nationalism has driven China's attitude toward foreign relations to change from a "keeping a low profile" to a more tough attitude [11]. For instance, in recent years, China has dared to voice its displeasure with the maritime territorial disputes with its neighbors, the US's involvement in the Taiwan dispute, and other violations of China's sovereignty. Meanwhile, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also made repeated, solemn declarations of China's diplomatic principles. However, as Shambaugh concluded that China's current nationalism is defensive nationalism [10]. China's current domestic nationalism drives China to dare to defend its interests in the form of a solemn statement at the international level, which does not mean that China wants to challenge the current international order. He summarized that the characteristics of this nationalism were initiative on the surface, but in fact it was a response. Zhao also pointed out that China is not only unable to surpass the United States in a short time, but also has not clearly demonstrated its desire to change the world order [6]. China does not want to challenge the existing world order. Instead, it wants to establish itself in the world order through its "peaceful rise" of increasing its national strength and international influence.

5. "Be Enthusiastic and Press on" Diplomatic Strategy and "China's Responsibility Theory"

China has consistently used the diplomatic tactic of "keeping a low profile" in its foreign policy ever since Deng Xiaoping suggested it. As Yan said, the US-China relationship is still erratic even though Deng hopes to prevent further structural disputes with the US through this foreign strategy [4]. Deng Xiaoping's policy of "hide one's capacities and bide one's time" has not been able to properly quell American fears about China's ascent and the "security dilemma" that arises in China's surrounding countries, despite China's increased comprehensive national power. On October 24, 2013, the President Xi delivered an important speech on promoting peripheral diplomacy more vigorously at the Central Diplomatic Work Symposium. Nowadays, "be enthusiastic and press on" has become the core feature of China's diplomatic strategy. In the face of the change of China's diplomatic strategy from soft to hard, many conservative domestic scholars raised doubts. However, Yan noted that America's devotion to the "China Threat Theory" and the surrounding nations' concern of China's ascent will not change, regardless of China's adherence to the guidelines of "keeping a low profile" [4]. Deng's guidelines of "keeping a low profile" have been successful in fostering an international climate that has been supportive to China's economic growth over the last 20 years. The share of China's overall commerce in global trade rose from 0.02% to 10% between 1992 and 2011 [4]. That notwithstanding, neither China's international standing nor its relations with other nations and areas of the world have much improved. The "China Threat Theory" has long existed. Meanwhile, many international scholars question whether China's policy of "keeping a low profile" is a manifestation of China's desire to evade the responsibility of a major country. In recent years, China has been

actively engaged in multilateralism and regionalization construction with neighboring countries, thereby promoting the construction of strategic relations with them. It can be challenging to achieve China's long-term objective of achieving "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" in light of its significant role in regional cooperation in Asia and the inevitable "security dilemma" if it does not actively shape the external international environment and assume the responsibility of a major nation. This lack of action also negatively affects China's reputation as a "responsible" major nation, which decreased the security of neighboring countries. As Yan argued, China's future goal in strategy is to revitalize the country rather than assuming hegemony to challenge the standing of its neighbors and even the US as a superpower [4]. Therefore, it is crucial to highlight the approach of "be enthusiastic and press on" with strategic credibility in order to foster an international environment that is conducive to the fulfillment of national rejuvenation.

When comparing the two diplomatic stances of "hide one's capacities and bide one's time" and "be enthusiastic and press on," it can be seen that the former emphasizes the need for national renewal while the latter emphasizes the importance of stability and security in the region. Different from the content that China's rise will lead to aggression against China's neighboring countries proposed in the "China Threat Theory", "be enthusiastic and press on" emphasizes the establishment of closer and friendly political relations with neighboring countries. According to Yan [4], the diplomatic strategy of "be enthusiastic and press on" requires China to take measures on its own initiative, shoulder the responsibility of a major country, and guide the external environment to develop in favor of China through diplomatic relations. This diplomatic strategy has the same goal as the "China Responsibility Theory". As Wang also claimed that China will take more responsibility in international issues [12]. The diplomatic strategy of "be enthusiastic and press on" is conducive to enhancing China's strategic credibility, and even provides security guarantees for neighboring countries by taking the initiative to establish friendly political relations and security cooperation with them.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, the change of China's diplomatic strategy from "keeping a low profile" to "be enthusiastic and press on" shows that China wants to actively shape the image of a great power on the international stage and stand firm in the international order. In order to create an international environment that is favourable to national rejuvenation, China, which is on the rise, must actively direct its outside environment rather than quietly adjusting to changes in the external situation and carrying out economic construction by resolving disputes and using other methods. Although defensive nationalism is an important factor driving China's foreign policy towards "be enthusiastic and press on", China's current comprehensive national strength is not sufficient to lead to a change in the international order. The transformation of China's foreign policy does not mean that China will challenge the US to establish a hegemonic position, but rather establish strategic credibility in neighbouring countries and even in the world order, and carry out regional cooperation with a proactive image of a major power. Therefore, the "China Threat Theory" does not represent China's current international identity. The diplomatic tactic of "keeping a low profile" in Deng's period helped China, which was not strong enough, to establish relatively friendly economic relations with neighbouring countries, so as to achieve the results of developing its own economy. However, driven by defensive nationalism at the domestic level in China, China actively promotes a shift in its diplomatic strategy towards "be enthusiastic and press on" and dares to adopt a stronger attitude when facing territorial disputes such as the Diaoyu Islands issue. This diplomatic strategy in the Xi era represents that China will take more initiative to assume the responsibility of a major country and establish closer political relations with neighbouring countries. As Yan summarized, the anarchy of the international system determines that the structural contradictions between rising countries and

hegemonic countries, and between rising countries and other powers will cause the “rising dilemma” of rising countries. In order to realize its goals of national renewal and building a solid foundation for the international order, China is currently actively supporting the development of strategic partnerships with its neighbours. It is also China’s international identity to rise peacefully as a responsible power.

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