The People's Republic of China's Security Dependence on Semi-Autonomous Territories

Kathleen Richardson

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Abstract

This paper explores how the People's Republic of China's (PRC) recent domestic and foreign policies have weakened the PRC's national security and undermined their grand strategy in the East Asian region. The presented analysis does so by dissecting the PRC's interference in Hong Kong's election law since 1997 and the effect this interference has on independence movements in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Likewise, it scrutinizes the shift in diplomatic communiqué since the 2012 elections and how this shift has escalated tensions both domestically and regionally. Finally, the presented analysis addresses potential physical security issues for the PRC in the South China Sea if the quasi-state of Taiwan were to declare formal independence and align itself with other East Asian actors. By the end of this paper, it should be clear how it is imperative for the PRC to shift their grand strategy from a hard power approach to a soft power approach in order to secure their influence in East Asia. If the PRC cannot counterbalance the need for state security with the need for human security, then their growing hegemony in the East Asian region may be significantly diminished in the years to come.

Historical Overview of Chinese Territories

Following the exploitation associated with the "century of humiliation" and the trauma of the Chinese Civil War, the unification of the Chinese state became a matter of national pride and honor for the People's Republic of China (PRC). However, the PRC's claim to sovereignty in several territories has been heavily debated since the PRC's founding in 1949. All throughout the republic there are regions that have a fractured loyalty to the PRC due to their political and cultural heritage. This fractured loyalty has caused sustained hostility within the Chinese state as the PRC continues to consolidate their power within these regions—often at the expense of the people.

In Macau and Hong Kong, the development of their governance systems under foreign rule is the main cause of tension with the PRC. Until the late 1990s Macau and Hong Kong remained under the colonial rule of Portugal and the United Kingdom, respectively. Although democratization was slow to materialize under both colonial governments, progress was made through proposals such as the Green Paper: A Pattern of District Administration in Hong Kong. Through the Green Paper and other similar documents, the citizens of Macau and Hong Kong were able to achieve constitutional reform to promote local representation in the government. By the time Macau and Hong Kong were returned to the PRC, many democratic values had already flourished in the collective consciousness of citizens as non-negotiable rights—such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and universal suffrage. This was taken in consideration as negotiations in 1980s between the colonial governments and the PRC commenced.

These negotiations over the transfer of power led to the development of the "one China, two systems" philosophy and when negotiations were completed both Macau and Hong Kong were transformed into Chinese special administrative regions. This special administrative status was a compromise between the colonial governments and the PRC that granted the PRC sovereignty over both territories as part of a unified China (one China) while guaranteeing the right for Hong Kong and Macau to maintain certain administrative, economic, and democratic rights that are not found in other parts of the PRC (two systems). Since then both territories have sought to bolster their autonomy under the PRC's watchful eye—though Macau often seeks much less autonomy than Hong Kong (*Why Macau is less demanding of democracy than Hong Kong*, 2017; Yick, 2014). The precarious equilibrium of "one China, two systems" has led to the rise of pro-independence movements in both regions as critics claim that the PRC has progressively interfered with the democratic processes guaranteed under basic law (*Hong Kong profile*, 2018; Yick, 2014).

Similarly, in Taiwan the precedent of a separate government as the Republic of China (ROC) has led to disaccord with the PRC. This conflict can be traced back to the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949 when the Kuomintang (KMT) fled to the island of Taiwan and established the ROC as the official government of China. While Taiwan originally developed as a province under the autocratic rule of Chiang Kai-shek, after his death in the 1970s Taiwan began to transition into a self-governing democracy. However, while democratization was taking place, Taiwan's sovereignty began to falter as the PRC gained international influence. During

this time foreign states began to recognize the PRC as the official government of China in the place of the ROC, reducing Taiwan's international status (*Timeline: Taiwan's road to democracy*, 2011). Since then the PRC has sought to further constrain Taiwan's diplomatic relations with foreign states and international organizations in order to inhibit Taiwan's capability to establish formal independence and declare itself a fully sovereign state (Kuo, 2018). Currently Taiwan functions as a quasi-state that is neither entirely separate from China nor completely unified with China (Romberg, 2016; Everington, 2019). Even though Taiwan still has its own government as the ROC and regularly attempts to re-legitimize its sovereignty as a state, Taiwan faces constant pressure from the PRC to unify with Mainland China. As a result, tensions between the governments of the PRC and the ROC have continued to escalate

The provinces of Tibet and Xinjiang are also in conflict with the PRC. However, their clashes with the PRC stem from religious and cultural repression. In Tibet the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1913 led the Buddhist Tibetan government to act as its own de facto independent state for several decades (Bajora, 2008). Thus, when the PRC invaded in 1950 to reclaim the region, it was met with a strong resistance by the people of Tibet. While a year later the Tibetan government signed an agreement to grant sovereignty of the region to the PRC, the subsequent banishment of the Dalai Lama in 1959 and the repression of the Tibetan people has led to a pro-independence movement that still thrives in the present (*Tibet Profile*, 2017; Bajora, 2008).

Likewise, the attempts by the PRC to subjugate the Uighurs—a Muslim ethnic group composed of around 12 million people—has led to extremist groups and pro-independence movements to develop in the PRC's Xinjiang province (Fish, 2014; Buckley, 2018). After a series of violent anti-government attacks took place in China between 2013 to 2014, President Xi Jinping ordered Xinjiang authorities to "strike hard" and "strike first" in a campaign to survey and detain Uighurs for suspected extremist activity (Shih, 2017; Buckley, 2018). Since the start of this campaign the United Nations estimates that up to a million Uighurs have been sent to "education centers" by Xinjiang police (Leigh, 2019). At these centers it is reported that Uighurs are forced into indoctrination programs that can last up to two years. In these programs, the detainees are forced to renounce their religion and praise the Communist Party of China (CCP) (Leigh, 2019; Shih, 2017; Buckley, 2018). Meanwhile the PRC claims that these centers merely offer job training and that no one is forced to stay within these centers (Buckley, 2018).

Many Beijing officials view the suppression of independence movements in their territories as a necessary step to ensure the PRC's national security. However, as this paper will show, the tactics used by the PRC only serve to estrange citizens and decrease the faith in the "one country, two systems" philosophy. This in turn fuels rather than inhibits independence movements. Consequently, the PRC's national security is currently threatened more from consolidation efforts than it would be if the PRC truly offered these regions the autonomy to self-govern.

The Disillusionment of Chinese Citizens

When the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed in 1984 by Margaret Thatcher and Deng Xiaoping, a document entitled Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China was also created to outline the governance of Hong Kong after the transfer of power. This document served three important objectives for the negotiators: (1) to embody the "one country, two systems" concept conceived by Deng Xiaoping during negotiations, (2) to ease the mind of investors who were anxious about the stability and future of Hong Kong under communist rule, and (3) to serve as a constitution to Hong Kong until least 2047 (Yahuda, 1993).

However, Basic Law is far from perfect. Per Chinese law, "basic statutes" –-which the Basic Law falls under—come second to the Chinese Constitution in legal matters (Palumbo, 1990). This means that the PRC can use the Chinese Constitution to undermine or circumvent Basic Law without breaking the Sino-British Joint Declaration or violating international treaty law. When the PRC denied Hong Kong the right to sit at the table in the Sino-British Joint Declaration negotiation in the 1980s, it set a clear precedent about the way the PRC would view power relations going forward with all their contentious territories: desire for autonomy would be secondary to the PRC's demand for consolidation.

Since Hong Kong's return to the PRC's governance canopy in 1997, Sino-Hong Kong relations have been embroiled in controversy. Beijing appointed Tung Chee-Hwa to be Executive Chief to Hong Kong, but this appointment was met with disapproval as Tung Chee-Hwa was "a Shanghai-born former shipping tycoon with no political experience" (*Hong Kong profile*, 2018, para. 20). However—from Beijing's perspective—what Tung lacked in political savvy, he made up in loyalty to the Mainland (Siu-Kai & Hsin-Chi, 2002).

Tung would prove this loyalty in 2002, when his administration introduced an attempt to legislate Article 23 of the Basic Law. Article 23 states that "Hong Kong should enact laws on its own that prohibit treason, secession, sedition, subversion, theft of state secrets, and linkage with foreign political organizations" (Ngok, 2017, p. 20). This effort to create legislation on Article 23 was met with intense criticism from the Hong Kong public and political elite because of the potential for Article 23 to reduce the individual rights of citizens—such as the right to peaceful protest and freedom of speech (Kellogg, 2003). By 2003, when the new Article 23 legislation was close to being passed, "an estimated 500,000 people marched through the streets of Hong Kong in order to voice their disapproval" (Kellogg, 2003, p. 310). The outcry of the public led Tung to withdraw the proposed amendments only a few months later (Kellogg, 2003).

Since 2004 no renewed attempts to pass legislation based around Article 23 was pursued. However, during this time the issue of universal suffrage (the right of Hong Kong citizens to elect leaders through general elections without interference from the Beijing) would become the new point of contention. In 2005, Donald Tsang—a civil servant elected to Chief Executive after Tung was forced to resign among controversy—attempted to bridge the gap between Hong Kong's democratic needs and Beijing's desire for consolidation by pursuing amendments to Articles 7 and Article 3 of Basic Law via the 5th Report (Chen, 2005). The goal of the 5th Report

was to pave the way for universal suffrage within Hong Kong, but due to pressure from Beijing, the 5th Report lacked a clear timeline of when the reforms for universal suffrage be initiated (Chen, 2005). It wasn't until 2007, after years of protest and pressure from Hong Kong, that Beijing finally relented and announced plans to allow for universal suffrage by 2020 (*Hong Kong profile, 2018*).

From 2007 to 2014 universal suffrage continued to be a contentious issue between Hong Kong and Beijing, but universal suffrage didn't gain a large international public forum again until 2014, when several protests, referred to as the Umbrella Movement, took place throughout Hong Kong (Kaiman, 2014; *Hong Kong profile*, 2018). This movement was an act of civil disobedience against Beijing inspired "after China announced that Beijing would vet candidates to run in the 2017 elections, thus regulating the race to be Hong Kong chief executive" (*Hong Kong profile, 2018*; McCarthy, 2014, para. 3). The protests lasted 79 days and involved around 100,000 protesters total (Wong, 2016). Despite the mostly peaceful nature of these protests, Beijing censored the news coverage of the protests in Mainland China and publicly condemned the demonstrators (Wong, 2016).

Since the transfer of power in 1997, the PRC has used the Basic Law loophole to implement officious tactics to sway Hong Kong election law in favor of politicians with pro-Beijing stances (Siu-Kai & Hsin-Chi, 2002). However, these tactics have done little to increase the control the PRC has over the governance of Hong Kong. Instead, it has mostly caused harm to consolidation efforts by causing disillusionment among the youth of Hong Kong to the "one country, two systems" ideal as well as pro-independence groups in Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang who watch the tension in Hong Kong with wary apprehension.

This disillusionment can be best understood through the gradual change in identification from the national title of 'Chinese' to the regional title of 'Hongkonger' or 'Taiwanese.' The University of Hong Kong's Public Opinion Programme found that "between 2008 and 2016, those who see themselves as Hongkonger or a Hongkonger in China rose from 47.4 percent to 63.7 percent while those who identified as Chinese fell from 47 percent to 33.9 percent" (Zhang, Yau & Tsui, 2017, para. 5). Comparable statistics can be found in Taiwan that state "in 1992, when democracy just began in Taiwan, only 20 percent of the respondents to an annual poll held by Taiwan's National Chengchi University called themselves "Taiwanese only." In 2018, more than 50 percent did so. And those identified solely as Chinese dropped from a quarter of those asked in 1992 to less than 3 percent" (Pomfret, 2019, para. 7). As the youth of China began to identify more with their region than they do with the PRC, it will be more difficult for the PRC to push the idea of a unified China under the strict leadership of Beijing, especially if the promise of "one China, two systems" continues to fail in the eyes of those that are supposed to trust in it.

The growing connection between territories since the 2014 protests within the China may also prove to be a hurdle for the PRC's consolidation efforts. In the news analysis *Under the Shadow of China* by Samson Yuen, Yuen points to the increase in partnership between Hong Kong and Taiwanese activists in 2013: "the organizers of Hong Kong's budding pro-democracy campaign, Occupy Central, travelled to Taiwan to give public talks about the election reform

movement in the hope of borrowing insights from Taiwan's social movements" (2014, p. 75). As part of the insight offered by Taiwanese activists, Hong Kong organizers learned invaluable skills such as how to coordinate supplies and quickly spread information on the internet (Sui, 2014). This cooperation eventually led to further collaboration between Hong Kong activists and Taiwanese activists a year later during several different protests in both regions. This includes the Taiwanese Sunflower Student Movement, which was a "protest against the attempt by the Kuomintang (KMT) to pass a service trade pact with China" (Yuen, 2014, p. 69). Though the PRC has since attempted to blacklist known activists to prevent travel between the two regions, Taiwanese activists stated that they will continue to offer assistance to Hong Kong activists as "supporting each other will help both sides" (Sui, 2014, para. 25).

Even within Mainland China, support for the protests during 2014 could be found on the social media platforms WeChat and Weibo—though Chinese citizens condemning the protesters were also easily found on these platforms (Werime, 2014). Despite lacking the same amount of freedom of expression within Tibet and Xinjiang, independence leaders from these regions also emphasized how important the connections were between Hong Kong, Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan activists towards struggle for more autonomy from the PRC. Uighur leader Rebiya Kadeer expressed that the protests had taken place in other territories—particularly in Hong Kong—were an inspiration to the international Uighur independence movement, which at the time was concerned about the discrimination towards the practice of fasting in the month of Ramadan in the Xinjiang province (Fish, 2014; *Why is there tension between China and the Uighurs*, 2014). Similarly, Tibetan activist Tenzin Jigdal stated that "what we have in common with the people in Hong Kong is that we are all fighting for freedom and justice against an authoritarian regime that has broken its promises again and again" (Jacobs, 2014, para. 17). Activists like Jigdal hoped that the international attention brought to the PRC's handling of Hong Kong and Taiwanese protesters would also help bring attention to the less press-friendly regions of Tibet and Xinjiang (Jacobs, 2014, para. 3).

If the PRC cannot find a way to temper their consolidation policy within these regions, the materialization of one of the PRC's largest fears may arise—the mismanagement of one territory and its subsequent secession leading to support for secession throughout other Chinese territories. Unlike citizens in Taiwan where there is a very clear lack of enthusiasm for unification with the PRC (below 3.0% in 2012), many citizens in Hong Kong don't seek complete independence from the PRC (Magcamit, 2014). Rather, they simply desire the unfettered autonomy that was promised to them in spirit of the Basic Law such as the freedom of press or the freedom to protest. In the same way, various activists in the Tibetan independence movement have supported the "middle-way approach" rather than complete independence as way appease both sides of the conflict. This includes endorsement of the plan from the Dalai Lama (Bajoria, 2008). Therefore, if the leadership in Beijing would step away from the hard power approach it has traditionally used in these territories, it might find more success. However, since 2012 evidence has grown that the PRC is headed in the opposite direction.

2012 Elections: A Watershed Moment to PRC Grand Strategy and Rhetoric

When Deng Xiaoping took over as the head of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1978, he changed the trajectory of the PRC from an ideological Maoist state to "socialism with Chinese characteristics" driven market-economy (Guo, 2009). Not only would this change lead to the liberalization of Chinese markets, it would also eventually form the PRC's economic integration strategy in domestic and foreign policy (McGuire, 2017).

As the Chinese economy has grown since the 1980s, so has the international trade relations between the PRC and other countries (Guo, 2009). In 2014 the PRC replaced the United States as the world's top trading partner; 43 countries reported China as their top export partner compared to the 31 countries that reported the United States as their top export partner (Holodny, 2015). Throughout East Asia the PRC has sought to use this top export partner status to their advantage. By enacting economic sanctions and other methods of coercion, the PRC has hoped to discourage East Asian states from straying away from Chinese grand strategy—such as the PRC's attempt to reduce U.S. influence in East Asia (McGuire, 2017). However, the PRC has had limited success with economic integration strategy as a deterrent because no East Asian state desires full dependency on the PRC. South Korea proved this when it agreed to the install the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system on the Korean Peninsula. This is despite repeated threats from the PRC that is would impose sanctions on South Korea if South Korea agreed to host the missile system (McGuire, 2017).

Correspondingly, the PRC's lack of success in using economic integration strategy as tool of coercion can also be observed via bilateral relations between the PRC and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN). For nine years the PRC has been the largest trading partner of ASEAN. By 2009 the PRC accounted for "11.6% of ASEAN's total trade of $1.54 trillion" (Raine, 2011, p. 82). Despite this economic dependence, most of the disputes between ASEAN and the PRC in the South China Sea remain unresolved. To further delegitimize the Chinese economic integration strategy, there is an argument put forth by Avila & Goldman that the PRC's aggressive maneuvers against other East Asian states is likely what has led to more interregional cooperation outside of the Chinese scope (2015).

The inability to limit the countervailing domestic and international interests to Chinese grand strategy has led the central government in Beijing to increase the use of militaristic approaches in East Asian relations. According to several analysts, this militarized policy serves several purposes for the central government. The first is that it channels the rising nationalism among the country's *fenqing* ('angry young men') into a more manageable space by directing it towards non-domestic issues, such as the disputes in the South China Sea (Raine, 2011, p. 81). Along the same vein, the militarized rhetoric shifts the public spotlight away from widespread national issues such as faltering GDP to more on regionally-focused issues—like the unification of Taiwan to Mainland China (Haass, 2019).

In 2012 internal speeches surfaced from the newly elected President Xi to senior military personal that declared "The Central Military Commission's 'first requirement'… was to forge a military that could 'fight and win' a modern war" (Lewis & Litai, 2016, p. 216). While this

announcement by itself isn't far from past Beijing rhetoric, this hardened approach signaled the central government's attitude towards language in diplomatic communiqué moving forward both domestically and internationally. For example, in the release of the 2018 EU policy paper, the PRC set clear redlines by shifting the use of language from a suggestive lexicon to an absolutist lexicon regarding how the EU should address Chinese governance issues in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Tibet (Chan, 2019).

The language that President Xi has used in public speeches has also taken a more militarized or aggressive approach. In 2017 Xi delivered a pointed speech at the end of his 3-day visit to Hong Kong on the 20th anniversary of the handover. In it he said:

> "…making everything political or deliberately creating differences (will) severely hinder Hong Kong's economic and social development… any attempt to endanger China's sovereignty and security, challenge the power of the central government… (or) use Hong Kong to carry out infiltration and sabotage against the mainland is an act that crosses the red line and is absolutely impermissible" (Ramzy, 2017, para. 5-6).

This universal declaration of redlines is disconcerting, as pointed out by political analyst Willy Lam, because "this is the first time Xi Jinping or anyone in the leadership has mentioned a 'red line.' It's a warning to the pro-independence or other so-called anti-China elements to not challenge the authority of the central government" (Ramzy, 2017, para. 8).

The tough rhetoric from President Xi would reach crescendo in January 2019 when Xi delivered a controversial speech aimed directly at Taiwanese leadership (Van der Wees, 2019). In his speech President Xi "warned that the Taiwan 'problem' could not be put off for another generation" (Pomfret, 2019, para. 8). As pointed out by Van de Wees, "while he (Xi) did call for peaceful unification, in the next breath Xi warned that China reserved the option of using force if Taiwan didn't go along" (2019, para. 3). This firm stance on the use of force if Taiwan doesn't consent to unification quickly set off alarm bells in the international community. Xi's speech shifted the dialogue away from the globally-supported maintenance of the status quo in the cross-strait conflict to instead a call for action from the Taiwanese leadership to choose between unification or war.

Since the 2016 elections in the Taiwan that resulted in the majority win for the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Tsai Ing-Wen and her party, the tension in the Sino-Taiwanese conflict has persistently escalated. For example, immediately after the election the PRC broadened economic sanctions as on the quasi-state in retaliation to the pro-independence party's win (Stewart, 2019). Before President Xi's speech to Taiwan, President Tsai attempted to maintain a moderate approach in cross-strait relations through the promotion of both peaceful diplomatic resolutions and the democratic rights of the Taiwanese people (Romberg, 2016). However, President Tsai's rhetoric changed drastically after President Xi's speech to Taiwan.

In response to President Xi's speech, President Tsai Ing-Wen stepped away from her moderate platform to firmly reject President Xi's position. Tsai stated that the Taiwanese government "would not accept a 'one country, two systems' political arrangement with the China" (Lee, 2019, para. 1). Furthermore, President Tsai has gone on to say that "It is impossible for me or, in my view, any responsible politician in Taiwan to accept President Xi Jinping's recent remarks without betraying the trust and the will of the people of Taiwan" (Horton, 2019, para. 2). By clearly opposing President Xi, it has been theorized that President Tsai hoped to garner more steadfast support from international allies (Horton, 2019). However, thus far most actors such as the U.S., the EU, or Japan have only continued to reiterate the importance of peaceful cross-strait negotiations while covertly supporting Taiwan through other means. If tensions continue to rise in the cross-strait conflict, many international actors will be forced step away from the status-quo and officially declare a side.

The PRC's National Security Dilemma in the South China Sea

Maintenance of the PRC's presence in the South China Sea is vital to the national security of China for two major reasons: physical security and economic security. The issue of physical security is predominantly due to the proximity of the numerous island states within the South China Sea in relation to the southern coast of the PRC—including Taiwan and Hong Kong. However, these physical security problems can also be tied to the economic security of the PRC. For example, as the Chinese economy grows more dependent on imported oil to fuel energy demands, the PRC has been forced to rely on ships that carry petroleum from the Middle East to pass through the Spratly Islands quickly and uncontested (Lewis & Litai, 2016). This dependency has led the PRC to use hard power tactics such as land reclamation and military aggression to strengthen their presence in the territory (Przystup & Saunders, 2017). Though these tactics help promote the might of the PRC, they have also often served to exacerbate hostilities within the region.

Due to the PRC's reliance on trade and limited success with coercion, the PRC has also attempted to use soft power in South China Sea relations. The PRC has accomplished this through the promotion of maritime cooperation with ASEAN on issues related to security, environment, and public health (Rain, 2011; Yee, 2017). In 2002 the PRC also used soft power to advance the non-binding Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. The goal this agreement signed with ASEAN was to "work towards adopting a legally binding code of conduct whilst exercising 'self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes'" (Raine, 2011, p. 70).

Though Southeast Asia has been responsive to this soft power approach conducted by the PRC, the overall success of diplomacy in the South China Sea has been hampered by the hard power the PRC still applies to the region. Even China's Foreign Ministry has expressed frustration at what it has called the "counterproductive effect" from the central leadership's "more assertive statements of Chinese rights in the South China Sea" (Rain, 2011, p. 82). Amid these bellicose relations between the PRC and other Asian states, Taiwan has taken the

opportunity to advocate its soft power and influence within East and Southeast Asia. As a result, there are several states that look more favorably on Taiwan than they do the PRC.

Taiwanese and East Asian Alliances

Since the demotion of Taiwan into a quasi-state status in the 1970s, the island has attempted to recreate global diplomatic ties through security alliances and trade agreements. As of 2014 Taiwan has formed free trade agreements (FTAs) with Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, and Singapore (Magcamit & Tan, 2014). Overall, the PRC has supported these FTAs Taiwan has developed with other East Asian states, but the PRC has adamantly objected to the command Taiwan has used a quasi-state to forge security alliances throughout East Asia.

In the eyes of the Beijing leadership, Taiwanese security alliances not only delay the unification of their "defiant province" with Mainland China, but these alliances also decrease the capacity for the People's Liberation Army's to use military force against Taiwan. For instance, if Japan or the U.S. were to provide a theater missile defense system to Taiwan through current security alliances, the PRC will lose the ability to credibly threaten the use of ballistic missile attacks (Christensen, 1999). The PRC is aware that any diplomatic or security alliances could weaken the PRC's ability to politically coerce Taiwan into accepting unification. As a result, the PRC has sought to limit the ability of Taiwan to form diplomatic or security ties. Despite this Taiwan and other East Asian states have continued to build up their bilateral relations—albeit through subtle means. Japan is an excellent example of this.

Over the last several decades bilateral relations between Japan and Taiwan have continued to improve through various initiatives such as the Taiwan-Japan Fisheries Agreement in 2013 (Chen, 2017; Thim & Matsuko, 2014; Leng & Chang Liao, 2016, p. 370). As a result of these trust-building measures between Japan and Taiwan, the positive views between the two nations' citizens have continued to solidify. In 2008, 60 percent of Taiwanese people were found to have friendly views regarding Japan while "the proportion of Japanese who felt 'close' to Taiwan rose from 56.1% in 2009 to 66.9% in 2011" (Leng & Chang Liao, 2016 p. 370). This means that while Japan may not yet publicly acknowledge the diplomatic ties it has with Taiwan, the support from the Japanese public is strong. Japanese politicians have taken this public support into consideration when dealing with Taiwan. In 2013 Japan released white papers that "included a PRC attack on Taiwan as one of the scenarios that could prompt a Japanese conflict with China" (Thim & Matsuoka, 2014, para. 2). These white papers confirmed the PRC's fear that even unofficial diplomatic relations could boost Taiwan's claim to independence. However, Japan is far from the only state with alliances to Taiwan. The U.S.'s relationship with Taiwan also poses a risk to the PRC's claim over the quasi-state.

Since the end of WWII, the United States has maintained a strong security presence in East Asia. Through security alliances created via bilateral treaties—such as the Mutual Defense Treaty signed with the Philippines in 1951, the Mutual Security Agreement signed with South Korea in 1954, the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation signed with Japan in 1960, or the Taiwan Relations Act signed in 1979—the U.S. has create a strong interconnected network within East

Asia that has often overcome regional conflict to cooperate with their ally. For example, Japan and South Korea put aside the historical tension stemming from WWII to join the U.S. in their first trilateral ballistic missile tracking drill in 2016 (McGuire, 2017).

The U.S. also has sought to strengthen ties within Southeast Asia and one of the strongest security alliances the U.S. has within the region is with the Philippines. Currently the PRC and the Philippines have a contentious relationship due to their dispute over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. If the Philippines were to join a U.S.-backed security alliance against the PRC, it would be a hard blow the presence of the PRC's freedom to navigate within the South China Sea. This is because as of 2016 the Philippines has eight outposts in the Spratly Island region. Therefore, if the Philippines was incentivized by a security alliance, it could make passage through the region difficult for China and threaten their physical and economic security (Lewis & Litai, 2016).

Before the Trump Administration, the U.S.'s previous approach to cross-strait relations had been to promote the status quo. However, ever since President Trump's phone call to President Tsai in 2016, there has arguably been a shift in strategy from the U.S. government. Since then there has been a visible uptick in U.S. military operations in the Taiwan Strait. This uptick has raised concerns in the PRC and hope in Taiwan that the U.S. has changed its official stance towards the "one China" policy in cross-strait relations (Stewart, 2019). While there is no guarantee that East Asian states or the United States would choose to support Taiwan if it declared formal independence, many of these actors have economic, diplomatic, and security interests that support the concept of a completely sovereign Taiwan. Japan's unofficial diplomatic ties with Taiwan and the Philippines' security interest in securing the Spratly Islands are examples of this. Furthermore, if the U.S. does choose to side with Taiwan, it is likely that other East Asian states with U.S. security alliances will follow suit as they have in other U.S.-led East Asian initiatives. Therefore, it is in the PRC's national security interest to placate tensions with Taiwan rather to continue with its hard power approach that has been escalating cross-strait relations since 2012.

Conclusion

It is difficult to decipher whether Xi Jinping or other Beijing officials recognize the risks associated with their insistence on a unified China regardless of the cost. However, what is clear is that the harder the PRC pushes their territories or the quasi-state of Taiwan to fall in the line, the harder these territories push back. The growing disillusionment of the youth in China has created a generation that identifies more with their territory, religion, or ethnic group than they do as citizens of China. The more this disillusionment grows, the more difficult it will be for the PRC to push for a unified China without consideration of the democratic rights of those that it governs.

While the toughening of rhetoric since 2012 has solidified Beijing's power domestically among nationalists and other Mainlanders, internationally this rhetoric has left bilateral and multilateral relationships frayed. Correspondingly, the push from Beijing to consolidate their

power in the territories of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang has fueled pro-independence movements throughout these regions. If any of these movements were to officially declare independence from the PRC and gain steady internal and external support, the unity that has grown between these regions could be a catalyst for the other regions to follow suit with their own declarations of independence. For Taiwan and Hong Kong in particular, the PRC faces unique physical security threats because of the location of these two territories in the South China Sea.

Furthermore, the hard power coercion tactics that the PRC uses through military strength, aggressive rhetoric, or economic sanctions has proven to have limited the overall success in the promotion of Chinese dominance within East Asia. Instead, where Chinese hegemonic strength has gained momentum is through soft power diplomatic avenues like the treaties and agreements negotiated with ASEAN in the South China Sea. Yet diplomatic treaties or agreements themselves are not enough. It has also proven critical for the PRC to follow the spirit of the agreements and participate in trust-building measures with their allies lest tensions continue to escalate—like they have in Hong Kong over the PRC's exploitation of Basic Law.

Going forward, the Beijing leadership faces a difficult decision on how to approach domestic and international relations. If the PRC wishes to once again see a unified China that acts as a global leader then it must recognize the growing importance of soft power. Once the PRC is able to do this, their hegemonic power in East Asia will only continue to grow.

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