

CHINA A BULLY? DEPENDS ON WHO'S JUDGING

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Currency Manipulator, World's Polluter, Human Rights Violator, and Top Corruptor are some of China's recent titles. Oh yes, not to mention the region's biggest bully.

This last designation comes in response to its perceived aggressions in the South China Sea. While China is not the only state that throws punches by dispatching paramilitary boats, building shelters, and exploring oil contracts, it is harshly judged for being the strongest country picking on others that are weaker than it.

Is China a bully? Has it not been a responsible rising state?

If you ask Chinese leaders, the answer is a firm NO. China takes its responsibility as a rising state very seriously. The gaping disconnect lies in the fundamental difference of norms and responsibilities between China and its critics.

China is expected to clean up its act and become a responsible state that respects international law. China is being subjected to a foreign standard, or more precisely, the Western-democratic standard. Obviously, China is a non-democratic country – it is governed by an autocratic single-party system. Still, critics use a one-size-fits-all lens to view China, charging that rising powers are responsible for looking out for weaker states and not resorting to aggressive maritime actions. Because economic interests serve as the basis for Chinese foreign policy, it is following a different path than those of its critics.

Controlling the South China Sea guarantees the country a secure energy supply – over 200 billion barrels oil reserve, a significant amount of natural gas, and maritime jurisdiction over the Sea Lines of Communication. Another benefit from expanding its sphere of influence is the fishing rights, which can be used as a bargaining chip at the negotiating table.

The Chinese government's compliance with the Western-democratic standard would jeopardize its legitimacy and responsibility to its population of 1.3 billion people. China needs oil for a productive and growing economy and to feed its people. Thus, China's large population is both an asset and a liability. Lower economic growth could have disastrous effects that risk the country's stability and survival since the impressive growth over the past decade has served as the source of government legitimacy. Productivity requires a reliable supply of oil. This can be achieved through investments in many oil-producing countries, but these efforts have sometimes proven to be anything but secure. China is increasingly concerned with the interruption of its oil supply due to political instability in oil-producing regions in its near-abroad. One feasible option is to control the oil reserve in the disputed area. A long-term option is to

transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources in a way that minimizes economic and social instability, but this path is a long way off.

China is a rising superpower, and in our globalized world, China's stability is in the world's best interest. By keeping domestic order, China is doing the world a favor. Imagine what happen to the world's economy if the Chinese economy collapses. A Chinese economic crisis is not going to affect the global economy any less than the U.S. financial crisis. While weakened U.S. consumption affected world producers with excess goods, China's economic downturn will also lead to world producers with excess supply.

China's perceived acts of aggression are part of a deliberate political strategy. It is the most powerful country in the region, with significant military modernization and double-digit annual increases in military spending. There is no doubt that it has the ability to effectively use force if it so chooses. Still, China has agreed to follow the diplomatic route with ASEAN mediation to solve disputes. As a rising power and the birthplace of great political thinkers like Sun Tzu and Mao, China is strategically playing its role as a rising power. It is responsible to master the game, to know when to signal strength, and when to back down. So far in the game, China has shown strength and determination, but in the end, it is very unlikely to use force.

In its rise as a regional and global superpower, China is not adhering to Western calls to democratize and modify its foreign policy. Instead, China is basing its moves in its near-abroad on economic interests to bolster its hegemonic status. In so doing, China's leaders follow realist and pragmatic foreign policy approaches in an effort to maintain the legitimacy of their rule and ensure domestic stability.