

The Evolution of China's Security Policy: From Deng to Xi

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Abstract

The increasingly aggressive security policy of China in the past recent years has demonstrated significant departure from Deng-prescribed foreign policy practiced since the 1980s and therefore raised the eyebrows of many observers. As Chinese security policy inevitably has meaningful implication on not only regional but also global peace and stability, this visible deviation definitely deserves a closer examination. In order to explain China's changing security policy posture, this paper has traced changes in China's national identity from Deng to Xi era and analyzed how they defined the regime's interests which consequently shaped security policy. Based on constructivists' assumption, this paper posits that the way the world see China and the new Chinese perception of themselves as a great power has thus far contributed to the vigorous move in China's security concerns, especially in the East and South China Sea.

Keywords: *China, Identity, Security Policy, Deng Xiaoping, Xi Jinping, Constructivism*

1. Introduction

Soon as we entered into the year 2019, the world was extremely shocked by President Xi Jinping's remarks that China reserved the right to use force to bring Taiwan under its control. "Reunification" under a one-China principle was the only choice Beijing laid down to Taipei. Such a bold statement made at Beijing's Great Hall of the People on the 40th anniversary of a landmark Taiwan policy statement of course reflected clearly confident China. Although Taiwan's Foreign Minister Joseph Wu seemed to be confident in his theory about Beijing's possible military attack in the face of economic slowdown (Lee & Hamacher, 2019), whether China's threatening statement would eventually be transformed into a series of aggressive actions or not has yet to be proved. Nonetheless, what we have witnessed in the past years after President Xi took office was a growing assertive security policy of this giant Asian country in the geographic areas ranging from the East China Sea to the South China Sea. In the past decade, Beijing has constantly increased military activities in the East China Sea and around the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. In November 2013, China unilaterally declared an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over an area of the East China Sea. Apparently, since 2013 China has undertaken land reclamation and construction in the South China Sea at a rapid rate as it seeks to actively stress its sovereignty claims in the area (Dolven, Elsea, Lawrence, O'Rourke, & Rinehart, 2015).

Based on my observation that China's changing identity from Deng era to Xi era is closely related to the development of China's security policy into somewhat much more aggressive, this paper will adopt constructivist approach in order to prove its hypothesis. Although realists agree with the constructivists that states' interests guide their behaviors and thus foreign policies, they contend that, regardless of the types of states, whether they are authoritarian, liberal-democratic or monarchical, states' interests are pre-given and are broadly identical (Burchill, 2005). Structural realists, in particular, posit that national interests are shaped by anarchy (Donnelly, 2000). These arguments suggest that under anarchy all states would behave similarly because their interests are indifferent.

In contrast, constructivist theorists argue that interests diversify from state to state because each state has different identity which is usually corresponding to forms of state. Wendt (1999, p.233) pointed out "states are actors whose behavior is motivated by a variety of interests rooted in corporate, type, role, and collective identities". While identities designate who or what actors are, interests define what they want, creating motivations for their behaviors (Wendt 1999, p.231). George and Keohane (1980) disagreed with Waltz's assumption (1979) about states having survival as their only national interests but instead added life, liberty, and property as other national interests. Wendt (1999) then added "collective self-esteem". Collective

self-esteem is defined as “a group's need to feel good about itself, for respect or status” (Wendt, 1999, p. 236). He continued that relationship with significant others will decide whether collective self-esteem is negative or positive, and that negative self-images are likely to emerge from perceived disregard or humiliation by other states whereas positive ones tend to emerge from mutual respect and cooperation.

In the study of IR, relational constructivists argue that identity could possibly be used in explanation of policy (Hangström & Hanssen, 2016). As contended by Hanssen (2020, p. 8) identity creates “common sense” and helps shape “our decisions on actions”. As a result, identity and action mutually constitutes each other. Hanssen’s study demonstrates that Japan’s identity in the post-Cold War period has changed in accordance with the interaction with and perception of aggressive neighbors, namely China and North Korea, and thus explains how the country’s security policy has developed into a “proactive pacifism” stance (Hanssen, 2020, p. 10).

Clearly, realists ignore, if do not completely refuse, the role of identity on shaping interests and accordingly guiding states’ foreign policies. Therefore, in order to analyze the role of changing identity and interests on security policy in the case of China, this research paper will prove its hypotheses based on constructivists’ assumptions. In this section, I will discuss further about the definition of national identity, its main concept and independent variable of this paper.

National identity is defined as “the sentiment of belonging to a specific nation, endowed with its own symbols, traditions, sacred places, ceremonies, heroes, history, culture, and territory” (Guibernau, 2001, p. 243). As suggested by Guibernau, states steadily seek to unite their people and instill in them the sense of common national identity through various strategies, some of which are described as follows:

- The building and spreading of a shared image of the nation based on the dominant ethnic group within the countries’ territories.
- The creation of common enemies to strengthen the sense of unity among states’ population against external threat.
- The use of national education system and media to promote states’ preferable image. (Guibernau, 2004, p. 669-670).

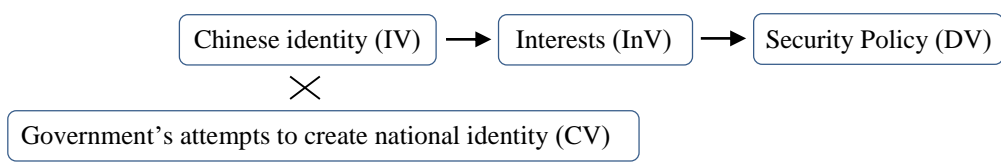
2. Objectives

This paper was prepared with a main purpose to understand the evolution of China’s security policy since Deng Xiaoping era until Xi Jinping era by proving constructivist theorists’ assumption regarding the close relationship between national identity and policy outcomes. By doing so, this study will make a meaningful theoretical contribution and at the same time help policy makers and general audiences to understand better China’s increasing aggressive stance in its current security policy.

3. Materials and methods

The research adopts a generalized assumption of constructivist theorists that national identity provides a framework for shaping a state’s interests and consequently states’ foreign policy options (Kim, 2004; Li, 2009; Wendt, 1999). I adopt case study analysis and China is the case study in this paper. When applied the supposition above to the correlation between China’s identity and its security policy, my hypothesis is that if China’s national identity develops, its interests will be reshaped to comply with the new collective identity and so is its security policy.

Accordingly, the independent valuable in this research paper is set as the identity of China, while the dependent variable is China’s security policy. Interests of Beijing are designated as an intervening variable in this paper. An antecedent condition that governs the impact of China’s national identity as well as interests that have on security policy is the government-backed attempts to create a new national identity. Relationships between explanatory variables are demonstrated in the diagram below.



In order to accurately determine the explanatory variables as much as possible, this paper specifies the time period for the purpose of research focus and thus will only trace the state-backed development of Chinese identity back to the period as early as Deng-era and as latest as Xi Jinping administration. This paper will examine the relationship between changes in identity of the socialist China and the adjustment of its security policy from Deng to Xi era.

Within the case study, the paper will undertake a process tracing-analysis in order to trace the links between possible causes and observed outcomes. My hypothesis is defective if the connection of the causal process is found broken at any point among those cases.

Primary sources include, but are not limited to, news reports, magazines official and unofficial records of organizations and government agencies, and government documents available in printed and online format. In addition, I will rely on journal articles and books related to the research topic for the secondary sources.

Security in this paper is defined as what Bull (2012, p.18) described: security in international politics is basically safety, either objective or subjective safety. According to him, objective safety means actual safety while subjective safety emerges from a nation's past experience. Therefore, a nation's security policy means a plan about pursuing safety of that nation.

4. Results

4.1 Chinese Identity: from Deng Xiaoping to early Hu Jintao era

I would rather call China's national identity during this period and in the following decades until late into Hu Jintao's second term as "victim-based identity". This identity is closely built upon China's historical memory and has some special characteristics. Chinese people always take great pride in the long history of its civilization but Chinese people remain disgraced and will never forget the century of humiliation (Callahan, 2004). Because weak China tended to fall victim to other great powers, China must become a strong, united, and prosperous nation, which will never let the hundred years of humiliation happen again (Zhao 2004, 214-17). The Chinese Communist Party was the embodiment of Chineseness (Zhao 2004, 209-47). The identity and its characteristics are repeatedly emphasized during the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and remained intact until late in the second tenure of Hu Jintao.

The identity of communist China underwent a significant transition in the late 1970s after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and his complete mistake of Cultural Revolution. The ideology of communism was severely shaken as there was considerable disillusion amongst some elites and people alike, leaving the nation amidst the "ideological vacuum". Chinese leaders after Mao era, especially those who were deemed as reformers such as Deng Xiaoping, Hu Yaopang, and Zhao Ziyang, had their opinion diverted from Chairman Mao as they believed only if China focuses solely on economic development and discards the matter of class struggle will the country become great again. Laid upon at the heart of "Deng Xiaoping Theory" was a call for loyalty to the nation (which means the Communist Party) rather than class struggle and socialist egalitarianism (Hughes, 2006). Deng shifted CCP's priority to the four modernization: agriculture, industry, national defense, and science modernization. (Goodman, 1994).

However, the increasing popular support for economic reform started to backfire. A call for political reform also emerged in accompany with the departure from class struggle. In the aftermath of the "Beijing Spring" of 1979, Deng decided that what the new generation needed was the patriotic values permeated before the emergence of the ideological vacuum (Hughes, 2006). Therefore, in the 1980s Communist leaders had started to neatly woven the patriotic values into communist ideology. While pushing ahead with the "reform and opening", Chinese leaders abandoned the discourse about class struggle and its victory over the Kuomintang (KMT) but instead used the invasion of imperial Japan as a crucial tool to preserve the CCP's legitimacy. Schools were no longer used as the field of class struggle but as a birthplace for working-class intellectuals instilled with the combined virtues of being red and expert (Hughes, 2006).

Japan was depicted as the most important enemy in films and cartoons. The reason why the CCP began to target Japan in its endeavor to build nationalistic sentiment in the early 1980s was partly attributed to the facts that threat from the Soviet Union was diminishing as the Soviets could yet earned a decisive victory in the war in Afghanistan while Vietnam could not defeat Khmer resistance. In spite of the Chinese government's attempt, the image of Japan as the principal enemy was not yet firmly formed because some

Chinese elites still looked up to Japan as China's model for economic development (Yahuda, 2013). As Allen Whiting (1989) pointed out, China's admiration for Japan's education system, innovation, social structure, and economic development between 1984 and 1986 were distinguished from their historical conflict. However, the Chinese's mixed impression about the Japanese would change in the 1990s.

In the late 1980s, there was a major crisis as the question about Communist Party's legitimacy was shown obviously in the Tiananmen incident (Li, 2009; Yahuda, 2013). Apart from that, the confidence of Chinese leaders were seriously shaken by the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the challenge of the economic reform, inflation, and widespread corruption. The Chinese elites and policy makers in Beijing now believed they needed to create a new identity in order to maintain national unity (Li, 2009). Consequently, the CCP had to constantly reinforce its own version of nationalism. After 1989, President Jiang Zemin promoted the narrative of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation", which blamed Japan and the West as the sources of China's backwardness and suffering (Yahuda, 2013).

In 1991, in order to bolster the Communist Party's diminished legitimacy, Jiang Zemin administration started to launch a patriotic education campaign, targeting at the young generation (Wan, 2006), promoting Chinese culture, history, and tradition, and stressing on national pride, unity, and territorial integrity (Li, 2009). This patriotic education campaign was also then promoted by China's following leader – Hu Jintao. The Japanese invasion of China in the 1930s – 1940s was emphasized to a great deal in the textbooks for students from primary school to university level as well as in news articles, cartoons, or television programs while over 10,000 memorial statues, education centers, and museums were built in the 1990s (Wang, 2012). The reason why Japan was singled out as the number one villain is because although other imperialist countries were also responsible for their acts of cutting Chinese watermelon, Japan was the country that inflicted the most severe damage on China. Bush (2010, p. 2) noted that imperial Japan fostered "a deep sense of victimization among the Chinese and leaving scars on the Chinese psyche". At the same time, Chinese leaders and the Communist Party were depicted as the guardians of the country and its people, protecting national interests and expelling the Japanese and Western imperialists out of their homeland.

The Outline on the Implementation of Education in Patriotism issued in 1994 made the patriotic education campaign a long-term project. Hu introduced an initiative on education reform in higher education in 2007. Accordingly, Chinese modern and contemporary history became a required core course for all college students, replacing traditional core courses on Marxism-Leninism and Maoism (Wang, 2012). Hu's endeavor to reinforce victim identity and whip up nationalistic sentiment could also be explained by internal disorder and unrest within the Chinese society, which happened against the backdrop of rapid rise in both economic and political power. Like his predecessors, Hu was obsessed with 'stability'. Deng emphasized that stability must come before all else, when Jiang prescribed stability as the precondition to reform and economic development – he proposed three national tasks. Hu then put forward 'harmonious society' notion of which stability was the prerequisite and important foundation (He, 2017). Stemming from the regime's concern about severe domestic crises, Hu administration, therefore, resorted to an ethnocentric rhetoric that amplified China's national identity (He, 2017). Apart from daunting domestic factors, the U.S. strong presence, its regional strategy in East Asia, and its policy regarding Taiwan issue was viewed by Beijing as an intention to obstruct China's revitalization and great power aspirations. Thus, Washington role and strategy continued to reinforce China's victim-based identity (Atanassova-Cornelis, 2012).

4.2 Chinese Identity: from late Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping Era

Later in Hu's administration, victim-based identity of the Chinese nation seemed not to suit a series of glorious achievements of the nation as well as perceptions of itself and of external others. Although the concept of dominant power identity has become more evident during Xi Jinping era, this identity has continually evolved since the late 2000s when China and the world witnessed a series of positive developments that entitled China the right to reclaim the status of world leader. In 2007, China was able to launch Chang'e 1 to study and explore the moon. As noted by Yahuda (2013), much patriotic pride was reflected in the opening ceremony of the 2008 summer Olympic Games. China's national ego was significantly boosted further after the country was able to overcome the difficulties of the 2008/09 financial crisis, standing in stark contrast with the American and European economies. While world's economy was in recession, Chinese economic growth was recorded at around 10 percent between 2008 and 2009. As noted

also by Ross (2013), the Chinese realized very well about the superior status of their economy compared to the West during the crisis. If there is anything to boost the Chinese self-esteem to the roof, it would be China being able to surpass Japan's economy to become the world's second largest economy in 2010. Undoubtedly, the aforementioned developments contributed to China's exceptionally assertive international behavior in 2009 and 2010 (Yahuda, 2013). This observation is agreed by Foot (2013) as she noted that Chinese people tend to look for a proof about how their economic achievement brings about concrete benefits in their relations with other countries. Hu, in the late 2000s, vigorously championed the idea of the "great rejuvenation" of China which means strong and prosperous China (Wang, 2012), while at the same time, maintained the official discourse that propagates distinctive China's economic and political model that is different from that of the West.

When Xi was picked as the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2012 and consecutively the president of China in March 2013, he ushered in an era of increased assertiveness and authoritarianism as he has been "front and center of China's push to cement its position as a superpower" ("Profile: China's President Xi Jinping," 2018). Under the presidency of Xi, China's new identity became noticeable regionally and globally.

Xi raised the slogan of "Chinese Dream" the key of which is "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (Xiangqing, 2013) soon after he took the office. Xi first articulated about his version of nationalistic tool during a visit to an exhibition titled "The Road to Revival" at the National Museum in Beijing (Ho, 2018). Over the next few months he repeated the Chinese Dream in several speeches, including the one at the 19th National People's Congress in March 2018, which, as he elaborated further, means "achieving a rich and powerful country, the revitalization of the nation, and the people's happiness" (Ho, 2018, as cited in Callahan 2014, p. 2). Chinese Dream originally implies a strong China with a strong army (Wong, 2017; Xiangqing, 2013). Xi later added economic dimension to his Chinese Dream vision, envisioning three milestones – a moderately well-off society by 2020, a modern socialist economy by 2035, and a prosperous and strong country by 2050 (Wong, 2017). Chinese identity under Chinese Dream mantra is therefore a strong China with intact economic health and strong army.

An interesting question here is why does Xi have to forge a new identity of dominant power under the idea of national rejuvenation while China seems to already become a very powerful nation militarily and economically, second only to the U.S.? From her study, He (2017, p. 84) argued that the identity of dominant power has been created amidst the "paradoxical backdrop of both remarkable national strength and severe weakness". On the one hand, China has emerged as a world's great power in terms of economic and military strengths. On the other hand, a long list of problems has troubled the CCP, including the economic slowdown, corruption, income disparity, environmental problems, and centrifugal tendencies in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Taiwan. In the face of crucial challenges, the regime needs to use nationalistic sentiment to unite the Chinese people and to distract them from domestic troubles but to concentrate instead on national pride (He, 2017). Above all, this newly emerged nationalism will help underpin the legitimacy of the CCP as well as the authority of Xi Jinping himself (Sørensen, 2015).

Xi's version of national identity has two dimensions – "China's tradition and socialist modernity" and "its historical trauma and current glory" (He, 2017, p. 84). He articulated further that China's traditional view of the world which is premised on a cultural hierarchy in which the Middle Kingdom is the center of civilization whereas others are subordinates to the center has a significant influence on China's relations with other states. Traditional culture and socialist values has thus far justified China's quest for regional dominance and objection to any interference from Western countries, especially the United States (He, 2017). Chinese narrative with Confucianism as the most important feature explains why China became superior to other civilizations over thousands of years and will allow the nation to prevail also in the future (Rozman, 2011). For Xi, therefore, the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is to revive the Sinocentric international order in East Asia (He, 2017), and probably later in world system.

4.3 Development of China's Security Policy: From "Tao Guang Yang Hui" to "Fen Fa You Wei"

Deng Xiaoping laid down a strategic guideline for Chinese foreign and security policies as he suggested that the country should maintain the low posture of Chinese foreign policy and avoid becoming embroiled in international conflicts. "Tao Guang Yang Hui" or as translated as "hide our abilities, and bide

our time, but also get some things done” (Shirk, 2007, p. 105) was championed by Deng and applied in over two decades later. Deng’s concept has become a framework for foreign and security policy making for the next two generations of Chinese leaders. It makes sense for China to avoid any trouble while the country remained relatively weak and needed to continue to grow merely economically. On top of that, from 1989 to 1990 the Chinese Communist Party faced several challenges from both domestic and international sources, e.g. the Tiananmen Square incident, the bringing down of the Berlin Wall, and eventually the collapse of the Soviet Union (Keith, 2018).

The low-key security policy implied that China should refrain from initiating any conflicts with its neighbors or the United States as well as exercise the utmost restraint if another country is provocative (Mearsheimer, 2001). Regarding the sensitive issue like the dispute over and around Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Deng in 1978 said “perhaps the next generation will be wiser than us and find a way of actually resolving this problem” (“Deng’s heirs ignore his advice,” 2010), suggesting that China and Japan should then put this conflictual matter on the shelf.

The legacy of China’s peaceful rise was passed on to Jiang Zemin who embraced multilateralism in relation to the country’s new security concept. The concept was initially announced by Jiang at the UN in October 1995 and was then repeated by Chinese elites on several occasions as well as was mentioned in China’s defense whitepaper (Li, 2009). Jiang’s security concept consists of four main elements with the first stressing mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and cooperation. The second demands the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and other universally recognized norms governing international relations” to be a foundation for world peace. The third element underlines the importance of “mutually beneficial cooperation and common prosperity” as the requirement for the economic assurance for peace. The fifth calls states to use “dialogue, consultations and negotiations on an equal footing” as the way to solve interstate disputes and safeguard peace (Fanhe & Qian, 2005, as cited in Li, 2009).

Hu Jintao’s foreign and security policy hardly saw significant deviation from those of his predecessors. The discourse of his concept of “harmonious world” first mentioned in Jakarta in April 2005 and elaborated further at a UN speech in September that year seemed to re-express the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence and new security concept (Li, 2009). Hu shared his view with Jiang as he also regarded China as a rising power in the international arena but he emphasizes much more on China’s “peaceful development” and aversion to challenging the international system. Hu insisted that China should improve its security and strategic policies by continuously pursuing its good-neighbor policies while expanding them outside Asia (Lanteigne, 2013).

Beijing did a good job in pursuing Deng’s prescribed security policy until recently Xuetong (2014), a prominent Chinese scholar, pointed out that Xi Jinping adjusted Chinese foreign policy from Tao Guang Yang Hui” (the keeping low profile) to “Fen Fa You Wei” (the striving for achievement). In essence, the goal of each policy stance is different. “The keeping low profile” aims at keeping China being able to adjust itself to changes in the international environment while “the striving for success” implies that China will take initiatives to shape its external environment in the way it prefers (Xuetong, 2014). The new strategy demonstrates a discernable departure from Deng’s guideline. Xu Jin, another Chinese scholar, explained that the brand new posture now allows China to defend its interests and “openly maintain our bottom line” in territorial sovereignty disputes which the country avoided previously (Xu Jin, 2014, cited in He, 2017).

Clearly, strong China is not going to compromise in its national interests. This means it is unlikely that China will yield under international pressure or will hesitate to clash with other countries (He, 2017). The century of humiliation has taught Beijing an expensive lesson about the unfortunate fate when the country was weak. Recently, we have witnessed Chinese actions increasingly matched with its intentions. In July 2016, China said it would not accept a ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague over the disputed waters of the South China Sea. The judgment came down overwhelmingly in favor of claims by the Philippines and thus seriously upset Beijing (“Beijing rejects tribunal’s ruling in South China Sea case.”, 2016). This rejection is tantamount to its refusal to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Prior to the court’s conviction, on 1 July 2016, the 95th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi made a remarks referring to the disputed South China Sea that no foreign country should expect China to trade in its core interests. “Do not expect us to swallow the bitter fruit of damage to our sovereignty, security, and development interests,” said Xi (Blanchard & Lee, 2016).

In 2014, Xi raised the concept of the new Asian security. At the 4th Conference on Interaction and Conference Building Measures in Asia (CICA), he mentioned that “matters in Asia ultimately must be taken care of by Asians, Asia's problems ultimately must be resolved by Asians, and Asia's security ultimately must be protected by Asians,” and also criticized military alliances for harming regional security (“China president speaks out on security ties in Asia”, 2014). The rebuke of Western-led alliance systems inherent in Xi’s call is clear. A year later, the concept was reiterated in the 2015 and 2017 defense whitepapers. Again in October 2016 at the 7th Xiangshan Forum organized in Beijing, Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin repeated the concept, outlining a framework for regional security architecture amidst the emergence of challenges and opportunities in the new century (McCaughrin, 2017). The essence of new Asian security concept, as McCaughrin noted, is China’s opposition to formal alliances and fancy for more direct ties between security and economic interests while its goal is to progressively displace global security order led by Washington. Beijing expects to translate its economic clout into a powerful leverage over regional security and global influence. The ongoing efforts through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific (FTAAP), for examples, indicated China’s acquisition of influence via economic clout.

5. Discussion

Under the ruling of Deng Xiaoping, China started to forge the identity of a war victim which then shaped the interests of the nation as a weak and developing country. The country had received official development assistance (ODA) from Japan since 1979 with the totaled amount of 3.65 trillion yen (\$33.15 billion), mostly in the form of low-interest loans for the construction of major infrastructure facilities. According to the information from Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China is its second largest recipient of Japanese ODA. Although China refused the war reparations from Japan in 1972, during the 40 years as a recipient, Chinese leaders did regard Japanese ODA as a form of compensation (Takamine, 2006, p. 51). It was very prudent for Deng and the succeeding Chinese leaders to keep a low-profile security policy when the country had to mainly focus on national and economic development. However, Chinese identity as a victim became mismatched with the country’s actual economic and military power unveiled in the late 2000s. The Chinese people and their leaders alike came to realize about their nation’s prevailing capability and expected that their impressive achievement would lead to a tangible advantage over interstate relationship.

Since the late second term of President Hu, China has forged a new identity of a superpower, which was further strengthened under the leadership of Xi Jinping. Under this superpower identity, it is evident that its security policy and behavior have become increasingly vigorous. This newly bred identity has noticeably made change to China’s interest which has not narrowly focused on economic development but been extended considerably to the projection of its influence throughout the globe in past years. Ideologically, President Xi has been championing socialism with Chinese characteristics, offering the tenet as an alternative to Western liberalism. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a perfect exemplar of Chinese attempt to extend its leadership within and outside Asia. In terms of security, China’s naval base in Djibouti became the People’s Liberation Army’s first overseas base to secure its foothold in Africa, the policy that would be beyond imagination for President Xi’s predecessors.

Changes in China’s security policy and behavior have been demonstrated in the territorial disputes over the South China Sea as well. Beijing failed to convince other claimants that it would solve the problem peacefully through consultations and negotiations and Chinese leaders often insisted that China respects international law. On top of that, China’s 2017 defense whitepaper stated that “China has indisputable sovereignty over the Nansha Islands and their adjacent waters” (The State Council. The People's Republic of China, 2017). Whenever territorial conflicts erupted with its neighbors, China did not seem to hesitate using force or exercising the utmost restraint. On the contrary, Beijing has been acting provocatively. In May 2014, the state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) even moved an oil drilling rig into waters also claimed by Vietnam, provoking military confrontation and political tensions between them (Kurlantzick, 2015).

On the conflictual issue of East China Sea, Beijing has similarly adopted an aggressive stance, which is considerably different from Deng’s suggested guideline. China has steadily increased the number of oil platforms near the median line separating exclusive economic zones between China and Japan despite the

fact that both countries had agreed in 2008 under the leadership of Hu Jintao to negotiate for the purpose of co-development. Thus far, China has built around 16 drilling platforms near the median line (“Beijing defends oil, gas activity in East China Sea”, 2017). After the nationalization of the Senkaku Islands by Japanese government in 2012, China’s military activities have since increased to a significant level in the waters around the islands, heightening the likelihood of military contingency. In 2016 alone, Japanese fighters scrambled 1,168 times, 70 percent of which were against Chinese military jets (Copp, 2016). The intentions of the Chinese were in question again in November 2013 when Beijing unilaterally declared Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea (Harlan, 2013). This provocative action was widely regarded as a reaction to nationalization of Senkaku Islands by Japanese government. Recently, China’s defense whitepaper asserted that “the Diaoyu Islands are an integral part of China’s territory” (The State Council. The People’s Republic of China, 2017).

6. Conclusion

This research paper attempts to trace the relationships among three variables, namely Chinese identity (independent variable), interests (intervening variable), and security policy (dependent variable) in a bid to prove its hypothesis that Chinese security policy changes when its identity and interests transform. As discussed in details above, it is evident that from Deng era until late second term of Hu Jintao, China has clung on the victim-based identity as the interests of China during that time was to boost its economic strength, unify the people, rally mass support, and shore up legitimacy of the CCP. As a result, “Tao Guang Yang Hui” (keeping low profile) had been shaped and practiced as it best served China’s preference for the identity and interests at a specific period. However, as China’s self-esteem was extremely amplified since the late 2000s due to several positive developments, the victim-based identity and keeping low-profile security policy did not match with Chinese status as well as domestic and world perception anymore. The 2010s ushered in a new page of Chinese history which saw Chinese growing economic and military power in coupled with the strong character of the new leader – Xi Jinping. The Chinese leaders and people strongly feel their rightfulness to reclaim the position of regional and even global leadership. Thus, the identity of a great power has been built to achieve this particular interest. Doubtlessly, evolution of this superpower identity explains China’s adoption of vigorous security posture – “Fen Fa You Wei” or striving for achievement -- in Xi era.

Regarding the implication of China’s evolved identity and concomitant change in security policy on relations with the existing great powers in Asia Pacific, namely the United States and Japan, certainly the region will witness an escalation in strategic tensions with both the United States and Japan in the South and East China Seas. In order to secure the freedom of navigation of those shipping routes in the South China Sea, the United States, under cooperation of its allies, is expected to continue to conduct the freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) regularly. One of the U.S. recent attempts took place near Chinese-held islands in the Paracel Islands in September 2019, provoking the People’s Liberation Army to deploy navy vessels for the purpose of observation (Panda, 2019). This action and reaction can become a dangerous game if proximity of warships of both sides results in misunderstanding or misjudgment by either side (U.S. to blame, 2019). Moreover, hostility between China and Japan in the East China Sea is not foreseen to easily and quickly taper off in the near future as long as both are not able to reach a concrete and permanent resolution yet. Whether Beijing will surrender the country’s recently expanded interest amidst its increasing economic and military clout and while its new purpose is to reclaim global leadership is doubtful. As long as power struggle between Beijing and Washington as well as territorial disputes between Beijing and Tokyo continue, it will not bode well for the future of Asia-Pacific security.

All in all, this study has found concrete evidence that there is a strong relationship between national identity and security policy as argued by some constructivist theorists. Nevertheless, I, in this paper, focused mainly on the top-down process in domestic environments as the factor that shapes state identity and thus left out the bottom-up dimension of identity construction. However, there have been a growing number of scholars that have underlined the bottom-up approach. Li (2014, p. 243), for example, has made an interesting observation that “Chinese nationalism has gradually become the product of a more popular-nationalist, bottom-up approach”. The study about bottom-up identity construction and its influence on the shaping of foreign and security policy of China is therefore deserved to be explored further in the future research.

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