

South China Morning Post 南華早報

China has too many hands steering its maritime policy

Monday, 29 December, 2014, 3:03pm

Comment › Insight & Opinion

Linda Jakobson

Linda Jakobson says volatility is inevitable with each pushing their own agenda

President Xi Jinping's recent speech on China's foreign policy offered a bit of something to everyone. He lent credence to those who, of late, have started to view Beijing's approach to its neighbourhood as more conciliatory.

Between the lines, one could sense a tacit acknowledgement by Xi that China's assertive maritime actions have been detrimental to its international standing. At the same time, those who remain sceptical of any change in Beijing's approach can point to Xi's message that China will resolutely defend sovereignty and its maritime rights.

The speech was similar in tone and substance to the one Xi gave a year ago about China's peripheral diplomacy. Xi said neighbours are to be treated "as friends and partners, to make them feel safe and to help them develop". No doubt Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam, the three neighbouring countries that have borne the brunt of China's provocative maritime behaviour, wonder how China would treat non-friends.

Xi's statements are intentionally ambiguous. He wants to assure neighbours, others in the region and the US in particular, that the "big guy" - as he called China in Australia last month - is not a bad guy. Why? Because to continue to grow more powerful, China needs the outside world. But at the same time, Xi wants outsiders to realise - and accept as inevitable - that big guys do things their own way.

Chinese leaders rely on vaguely formulated guidelines - so vague that a guideline can be used to justify an array of sometimes competing policy objectives.

Take, for example, the way Xi has outlined the direction in which China should pursue its maritime interests: China should "plan as a whole the two overall situations of maintaining stability and safeguarding rights". Previously, during the Hu Jintao era, preserving stability was paramount. Xi has elevated safeguarding rights to an equally important position, giving rise to a feverish "rights consciousness" that fits well with the prevailing nationalist undercurrents in China.

But Xi has not provided specific guidelines on how the two objectives should be balanced. This leaves room for a diverse set of maritime security actors to shape the policies and decide on specific actions, often motivated by their own narrow interests.

Besides the coast guard, the most important maritime security actors are senior officials in coastal provinces, the Ministry of Public Security, the State Oceanic Administration and the National Development and Reform Commission, and senior People's Liberation Army officers as well as senior executives in the national oil companies. In China's stovepiped, non-transparent political system, one that breeds fierce competition over government money and political power, these groups grasp every opportunity to gain commercial advantage, prestige or government funding.

Because of these unpredictable actors, China's provocative behaviour in the maritime domain will continue to take place unsystematically and organically. There is no evidence of a central-government-approved "grand plan" that mandates different actors coercing other claimants in a tailored way towards a mutual goal.

For international policymakers, a "grand plan" would in fact be less threatening than the uncertainty caused by a situation in which various Chinese actors are pursuing ad hoc measures in their own interests. In the present nationalistic atmosphere, Xi cannot denounce an action taken in the name of protecting China's rights.

On the positive side, Xi has made it clear that stability must be maintained. China does not seek conflict over its maritime rights.

At the same time, those who foresee Beijing stepping back from defending what China perceives to be its maritime rights are bound to be disappointed. The volatile situation on China's maritime periphery will continue. China's innumerable maritime security actors will not cease to push their own agenda.

Linda Jakobson is a non-resident fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy and a visiting professor at the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney

Source URL (retrieved on Dec 31st 2014, 7:24am): <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1670456/china-has-too-many-hands-steering-its-maritime-policy>