Chinese soldiers preparing for a military parade in Inner Mongolia, July 2017. Photo: Xinhua

China's Core Interests and the Rising Tension with the United States: Implications for the World Order

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The term "core interest" began to appear frequently in Chinese official statements in 2003, and has been used increasingly as China's sense of strength and self-confidence have grown. For China, core interests refer to issues not subject to negotiation and compromise, and which justify the use of force, if necessary. The South China Sea region became a substantial addition to these interests following the election of Xi Jinping as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China in late 2012, joining the existing core interests of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and stability in Xinjiang and Tibet. Recently, concern has grown that the rising tension between the United States and China in regions defined by Beijing as core interests is liable to lead to friction, and even a military conflict. This article describes China's core interests, and questions whether, if China becomes stronger, it will extend its core interests to additional regions. The article considers to what extent Chinese policy will affect changes in the future global order.

Keywords: China, core interest, sovereignty, global order, Taiwan, South China Sea, Tibet, Hong Kong, Russia, United States

Introduction

In mid-April 2020, at a time when most of the world's countries were occupied with measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in their territory, the State Council in Beijing announced the establishment of two new districts on island reefs in the South China Sea, in addition to Sansha City in the island province of Hainan. On May 28, 2020, *Global Times*, a Chinese Community Party official mouthpiece, reported that Chinese ships had "expelled" a US warship cruising near one of the islands in the South China Sea. In mid-June 2020, Taiwanese airplanes were sent to expel Chinese warplanes that penetrated into the airspace of Taiwan, whose territory is defined by China as among its core interests.

The term "core interest" began to appear frequently in official Chinese statements in 2003, and has been used increasingly as China's sense of strength and self-confidence have grown. In China's eyes, core interests are defined, both internally and to the international community, as issues on which China has an ironclad position that is not subject to negotiation and compromise, and which justify the use of force to defend them, if necessary. The basic core interests are Taiwan and the One China principle, Hong Kong and Macau, and stability in Xinjiang and Tibet—regions that contribute to China's idea of territorial integrity, and where China is also concerned about separatism and aspirations toward political independence. Inclusion of the South China Sea region in the Chinese list of core interests began late in the term of former Chinese President Hu Jintao, and became a significant part of those interests following the nomination of Xi Jinping as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in late 2012 (in 2016 Xi himself was referred to as a "core leader"). Core interests also include Chinese declarations of fundamental domestic interests, led by continued economic growth amidst strong internal stability and the absolute preservation of the one-party regime headed by the Communist Party of China (CPC).

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In recent months, concern has grown that the rising tension between the United States and China in regions defined by China as core interests, especially Taiwan, the South China Sea, and Hong Kong, is liable to lead to friction, and even a military conflict. This tension, particularly in the South China Sea, raises questions about Chinese policy: whether China's core interests will expand and spread to additional regions as its military and strategic capabilities grow; whether the Chinese classification of the South China Sea as a core interest is a sign of change and expansionism; and whether China will classify regions not currently included in Chinese sovereignty as part of its core interests. For example, Mongolia was under the sovereignty of the Chinese imperial dynasties (in the 13th and 14th centuries, the Mongolian Yuan dynasty controlled the entire territory of the Chinese Empire). In 1921, as a result of the weakness of the Republic of China, Mongolia was declared an independent state under the protection of the Soviet Union. The Republic of China (now Taiwan) did not recognize this declaration, and asserted Chinese sovereignty over Mongolia, while the People's Republic of China recognized Mongolia as an independent state.

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Furthermore, in two agreements, signed in 1858 and 1860, China ceded large territories in northeastern Asia to Russia, including the Vladivostok region, which it had controlled since 1689. During the 2004 visit to Beijing by Russian President Putin, China and Russia signed an agreement delineating the borders between China and Russia, which included China's recognition of Russian sovereignty over these territories. In the distant future, in a situation in which China becomes stronger, while its neighbors become weaker, will China seek to reannex these territories? Of particular interest are the consequences of a Chinese resurgence and the expansion of its core interests for changes in the global order. Will past ideas influence future decisions, with China continuing to focus on the core interests near its borders and utilizing its economic power, cultural influence, and, if necessary, military power for this purpose? Or, as part of the change in the global order, will the Chinese superpower spread beyond the extensive region in Asia under its control?

Taiwan and "One China"

The idea of One China and a future unification with Taiwan is a political, military, and economic fundamental principle of Chinese policy. The island of Taiwan, one of the two largest islands in the South China Sea (the other is Hainan), was part of the Chinese Empire under the Qing dynasty starting in 1683, before its transfer to Japanese sovereignty under the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki, following China's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War. China regards this treaty as one of the low points in China's weakness during the "century of humiliation" at the hands of the foreign powers.

In late 1945, with the end of World War II and Japan's surrender, the island of Taiwan reverted to Chinese sovereignty. The civil war in China began at this time, and ended in October 1949 with the founding of the People's Republic of China by the Communist Party and the flight of the Chinese Nationalists to Taiwan. In subsequent years, both sides supported the One China principle: after gaining control of the Chinese mainland, the Communists wanted to bring Taiwan back under Chinese sovereignty. The Nationalists built a country on the island with the same name they used when they controlled all of China (the Republic of China), with the aim of regaining control of all of China in the future.

From 1949 to 1971, the United States continued to support Taiwan's membership in the UN as the Republic of China, and gave the island military and political protection. During this entire period, the People's Republic of China insisted that there was only one China, and that two entities representing China could not sit in the UN. On October 25, 1971, after failing for many years to muster a majority, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2758. This resolution deprived Taiwan of UN membership, and stated that the People's Republic of China was the sole representative of China in the UN. Israel, which maintained a One China policy during this entire period, cast a decisive vote in favor of the resolution, together with a majority of the non-aligned countries. The United States voted against. China renewed its full diplomatic relations with the United States on January 1, 1979, only after President Jimmy Carter recognized the One China principle, closed the US embassy in Taipei (Taiwan), and transferred it to Beijing.

China resists any effort by Taiwan, international organizations, and other countries to recognize Taiwan as an independent country. Due to China's burgeoning economic power and its political and economic pressure on various countries, the number of countries that officially recognize Taiwan has gradually fallen to only 15. The Chinese monitor measures and actions by Taiwan around the world designed to express or strengthen symbols of sovereignty, and lodge immediate protests with the relevant foreign ministries. If a country deviates from the tacit Chinese consent to "economic" and "cultural" activities with Taiwan, China does not hesitate to

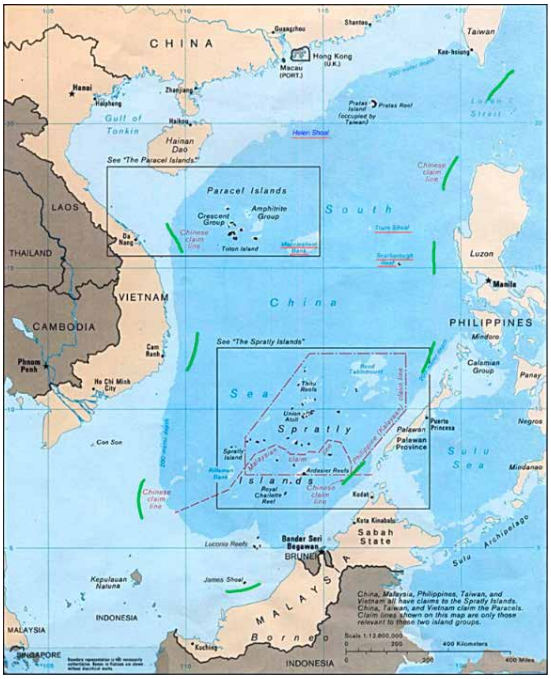
take countermeasures, and to impose political and economic sanctions, if necessary.

The coronavirus crisis has accelerated Chinese activism, out of concern that the Taiwanese, who have demonstrated impressive capabilities in dealing with the pandemic, will exploit the crisis to gain legitimacy in international institutions, such as the World Health Organization (WHO). The Taiwanese are backed by President Trump, who signed the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act on March 26, 2020, after it passed both houses of Congress by acclamation. The Act calls on the US administration to reinforce its ties with Taiwan, and to encourage other countries to tighten their official relations with it. Beijing fears that this American support will boost the aspirations of Taiwan's leaders to declare Taiwan an independent country, at the expense of their "traditional" adherence to the mainland and the One China idea, which will have the effect of thwarting the idea of unification that China seeks to promote and present as "inevitable."

South China Sea

The South China Sea lies between China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. The region, which contains oil and gas deposits and fishing areas, is the main shipping route between Western Asia and the Middle East via the Strait of Malacca, which connects the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. About one quarter of the world's marine cargo and one half of all global oil traffic pass through this strait.

The Chinese claim ownership and economic rights over most of the South China Sea. Inter alia, they use the "nine-dash line" map, which received its name after being displayed by diplomats of the Republic of China in the 1940s. This map showed nine lines around most of the marine territory parallel to the coasts of the various countries, and these diplomats claimed that these territories belonged to China. The countries in the region oppose the Chinese claims to sovereignty and economic rights over marine territories in the region. Because of the historic connection, Taiwan supports China's position.



The "Nine-Dash Line" Map in the South China Sea

In recent years, China has taken unilateral action to strengthen its hold in the area. Some of the reefs there have been artificially raised and widened, and military bases have been built on them. During the dispute, China argued that a bilateral solution should be found, and opposed international intervention. A bilateral and regional crisis put China's political power to the test on July 12, 2016. At the request of the Philippines, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague ruled that according to the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), China had no right to sovereignty over the entire South China Sea, and that the Philippines had the legal right to use the economic waters up to 200 miles from its coastline. The PCA ruled that there was no legal basis for China's assertion of historic rights to all of the nine-dash line territory, and that China must recognize the Philippine rights and act in accordance with its obligations as a signatory of UNCLOS. China responded

that it did not recognize the PCA's authority and rulings. A few parties around the world supported the Philippines, and the United States State Department (although the US itself is not a signatory of UNCLOS) declared that this ruling should be recognized and observed. Most of the world's countries, however, preferred to avoid a confrontation with China. Shortly after the ruling, Rodrigo Duterte was elected President of the Philippines, and he has since tightened his country's ties with the Chinese leadership, including five visits to Beijing in three years. China did not compromise, but has offered the Philippines more economic cooperation, including in the oil and gas fields in the disputed area.

China has tightened its grip over the islands in recent years, expanding infrastructure there, including for military use (despite a public promise to US President Obama that it would not introduce weapons into the region). Recently, while the world's attention was concentrated on the coronavirus crisis, China stepped up its military activity in the South China Sea area. For example, Vietnam asserted that one of its fishing vessels had been rammed and sunk by a Chinese vessel.

Hong Kong, Macau—"One Country, Two Systems"

For the Chinese, the history of Hong Kong symbolizes the beginning of the "century of humiliation" in 1842, when the "unequal treaties" were forced on China and the major powers annexed Chinese territories. Britain ruled Hong Kong for 150 years in a leasing agreement forced on the Chinese Empire under the Qing dynasty, following the First Opium War—an agreement that was renewed in the late 19th century. When British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher visiting Beijing in 1982, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping emphasized that China could not compromise on Hong Kong's sovereignty, but could accept a compromise on the territory's administrative features after Hong Kong was returned to China. The One Country, Two Systems principle paved the way for a joint Chinese-British declaration in 1984. Even before the territory was handed over to China, Deng stated publicly that Chinese sovereignty over Hong Kong would be absolute and include the entry of Chinese army forces, if necessary. Following the agreement, China enacted the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in 1990, which became effective for 50 years when the territory was handed over to Chinese sovereignty in July 1997.

Portugal held Macau starting in 1557, after receiving a lease on the territory from the Chinese Empire under the Ming dynasty. The territory was returned to China under a similar agreement in 1999.

In 2003, the local regime in Hong Kong attempted to enact a law strengthening the security connection to Beijing, but public protest prevented the legislation. In February 2019, an attempt was made by the local regime to debate a bill that would facilitate the extradition of suspects to China and strengthen Chinese control. The attempt resulted in months of widespread demonstrations, culminating in the postponement of debate about the bill. Nevertheless, despite measures by Beijing that included the use of force, many arrests, and a ban on public gatherings during the coronavirus crisis, the anti-regime demonstrations resumed in even greater force. In May 2020, when Beijing felt that the measures taken were not deterring the demonstrators, the National People's Congress in Beijing enacted a national security law designed to highlight China's opposition to "foreign intervention," which the Chinese claimed was assisting the demonstrators, and to strengthen security control over Hong Kong.

Xinjiang

Located on China's northwestern border, Xinjiang is China's largest province, with an area of 1.66 million square kilometers. The original residents are Uyghurs—Muslims of Turkish origin. The region has experienced hundreds of years of revolts and leadership changes. The

Chinese Empire under the Qing dynasty gained control over part of the province in the 18th century, and it was unified with China in 1884. After the fall of the empire, during the period before the Communist takeover, the Muslims in the province declared independence twice. They revolted against Chinese Nationalist rule in 1933 and declared the First East Turkestan Republic. Another revolt took place late in World War II in Ili, culminating in the founding of the Second East Turkestan Republic.

Following the end of the Chinese civil war and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in October 1949, the Communists took control of Xinjiang. Since the early 1950s, with the aim of diluting the Muslim majority in the province, many members of the Han ethnic group were transferred there. The Han ethnic group accounts for 92 percent of the inhabitants of China, and all the senior leaders in China belong to it. At the same time, measures were taken to reduce external and religious influences on the population.

In the early 1990s, around seven million Han, eight million Uyghurs, and other minorities, among them approximately one million Kazaks, lived in Xinjiang. In February 1997, extremist Muslims staged severe riots in the city of Yining. Dozens of residents were killed during the suppression of the riots, which took five days; hundreds were arrested and several Muslim leaders were executed. Following the riots, the Chinese leadership concluded that a zero-sum game was involved, that no religious activity should be allowed, and that no extremist leadership should be allowed to emerge. In October 2013, five people were killed and dozens injured when a car exploded in Tiananmen Square, an event attributed by the authorities to a suicide attack by Uyghur terrorists. Since this attack, the regime has oppressed the Muslim minority, including with "reeducation" camps, in line with the belief that severe measures should be used against the Muslims and any other group seeking to undermine Chinese sovereignty or Communist Party rule.

Tibet

Tibet is the second largest province in China, with an area of over 1.2 million square kilometers. It is sparsely populated, with about three million residents. Local rulers, the Mongol Empire, and the Chinese imperial dynasties have vied for control of this isolated mountainous area since the seventh century. In periods in which the Tibetans were strong and the Chinese central government was weak, local control expanded from the capital of Lhasa to areas of Tibetan influence, including the provinces of Sichuan and Qinghai. In the early 20th century, Britain gained control over part of Tibet, and created a quasi-independent state under its protection. Other parts of Tibet were controlled by the Republic of China and local rulers.

In 1949, when the Communists took control of China, Mao Zedong ordered the Chinese army to march into Tibet and unify China, even as the Tibetans attempted to declare and maintain their independence. Following two years of talks and power struggles, the Chinese army invaded Lhasa in October 1951. At the head of the Tibetan leadership was the Dalai Lama, who was 16 years old at the time of the invasion and was saddled with the challenge of dealing with the regime in Beijing. Eight tense years passed, until the Chinese tried to arrest and imprison the Dalai Lama in March 1959. The Tibetans revolted in opposition, and the Dalai Lama escaped on foot to India in a journey lasting two weeks.

Since that time, China has operated extensive control and supervisory agencies in Tibet in order to prevent steps toward independence. The Chinese oppose full cultural autonomy for the Tibetans out of concern that any compromise now granting cultural freedom will enable the Tibetans in the future to demand political freedom in a large territory in western China, including the provinces adjacent to Tibet.

Conclusion

In the perspective of the Chinese leadership, core interests designate—both internally and

to the international community—key areas and issues on which it will not compromise. In recent months, against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic and growing hostility between the two superpowers, the United States has challenged these core interests, mainly with respect to Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the South China Sea region. Will China use force to defend these areas? In recent years, China has invested heavily in expanding and improving its air and naval military power, including the construction of aircraft carriers, and extending the range of its capabilities to possible military activity beyond its borders. At the same time, since the six weeks beginning in February 1979, when China fought Vietnam and suffered a military defeat (followed by the modernization of the Chinese army), it has not been involved in a significant war, beyond individual incidents and military maneuvers in the Taiwan region, the South China Sea, and disputed areas on the border with India. China is not eager to use military force; it prefers to demonstrate its power and achieve its objectives without war by using economic and political means, in line with its traditional strategic concept dating back 2,500 years to the famous book *Art of War* by military strategist Sun Tzu. War involves risk and great uncertainty, while the Chinese concept requires patience and a long-term view for achieving specific purposes. Nevertheless, crossing red lines on its core interests, with an emphasis on a breach of China's sovereignty, especially major steps in Taiwan leading to a change in the One China policy there, are liable to cause friction that could result in a large-scale military conflict.

Assuming that existing concepts will guide future decisions, China will continue to focus on the core interests close to its borders, and will try to consolidate these interests with the help of its economic power and cultural influence. Will this indeed be the case, or will Chinese power expand as part of a change in the global order, including through the use of military power, beyond the extensive area in Asia under its control? This intriguing question, like many of the questions about China's future policy, remains open to future observation and research.

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