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China's "Core Interests" and the East China Sea

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Introduction

Amid growing tensions between China and Japan over the disputed Senkaku Islands (Diaoyu in Chinese) in the East China Sea, recent Japanese press reports claimed China officially designated the islands a “core interest.” These reports cite a statement made by a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson at a daily press conference on April 26, 2013. According to Tokyo Kyodo News Service (Kyodo), the spokesperson said: “The Diaoyu [Senkaku] Islands are about sovereignty and territorial integrity. Of course, it’s China’s core interest.”^{1 i}

If China has indeed elevated the Senkaku Islands to a core interest, then this could represent a significant shift in China’s policy and rhetoric on the dispute. However, close examination of China’s historical use of the “core interest” formulation and its carefully crafted statements during and following the April 26 press conference suggest the Chinese government has not changed its approach to the Senkaku Islands dispute.

What are China’s “Core Interests”?

Chinese officials began making core interest declarations in 2003 to characterize Beijing’s concern that Taiwan was steadily moving toward de jure independence.² Some examples of high-level statements about core interests in the past decade include:³

- “The Taiwan issue concerns China’s core interests [and] proper handling of this issue is key to ensuring the stable development of U.S.-China relations.” (2003)ⁱⁱ
- “Regarding China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity of Taiwan, we absolutely do not tolerate any foreign powers’ conduct that damages China’s core interests.” (2004)ⁱⁱⁱ
- “The position of the Chinese Government is resolute and clear-cut on issues of major principles, including those involving China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, its national core interest and the feelings of the Chinese people. We resolutely oppose [the Dalai Lama’s] separatist activities in any country in whatever capacity, and his contact with foreign governments and leaders in whatever form.” (2008)^{iv}

ⁱ Japanese television networks aired the spokesperson’s remarks with the following, slightly different, translation: “The issue of the Diaoyutai [Senkaku Islands] relates to issues of China’s territorial sovereignty. Of course [it] belongs to China’s core interests.” *Open Source Center*, “China-Japan – Video of PRC Remarks on Senkakus as ‘Core Interest’ Differs from Official Transcript,” OSC ID: CPP20130507358001. May 7, 2013. <http://www.opensource.gov>.

ⁱⁱ Then Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaquan said this to then U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell. This was the first time a Chinese official spoke publicly about core interests in a diplomatic context. Xinhua, “Tang Jiaquan Meets U.S. Secretary of State” (translation), January 20, 2003. http://news.xinhuanet.com/zhengfu/2003-01/20/content_697563.htm.

ⁱⁱⁱ Then Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Kong Quan made these remarks in reference to the United States’ decision to sell Taiwan a long-range radar system. “Foreign Ministry spokesperson Kong Quan warns the U.S. for its decision to sell Taiwan the long-range radar system and answers a reporter’s question” (translation), *People’s Republic of China Foreign Ministry*, January 1, 2004. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/wjdt_611265/fyrbt_611275/t82122.shtml.

^{iv} Then Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Qin Gang said this at a daily press conference in response to a question about then French President Nicolas Sarkozy’s meeting with the Dalai Lama. “Foreign Ministry Spokesman Qin Gang’s Regular Press Conference on November 27, 2008,” *Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other International Organizations in Switzerland*, November 28, 2008. <http://www.china-un.ch/eng/fyrth/t524172.htm>.

It was not until 2009 that Beijing publicly and authoritatively defined China's core interests. In his closing remarks at the July 2009 U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, then Chinese State Councilor Dai Bingguo listed and ranked China's core interests, stating: "for China, our concern is we must uphold our *basic systems, our national security*; and secondly, the *sovereignty and territorial integrity*; and thirdly, *economic and social sustained development*" (emphasis added).⁴ A 2011 White Paper entitled "China's Peaceful Development" reiterates these general themes.^v State Councilor Dai's list and the 2011 White Paper represent the most authoritative articulations of the general principles comprising China's set of core interests.⁵

In most cases, Chinese officials and media use one of several generic formulations when discussing core interests. For example, Chinese officials emphasize that another country should "respect" or never "damage" China's core interests,⁶ or that an issue is "relevant to," "bears on," "touches on," or "concerns" China's core interests.⁷

Stating core interests broadly provides Chinese policymakers with the flexibility to highlight specific issues — including but not limited to Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang — as they become salient. Though China began using the core interest formulation in the early 2000s, it did not explicitly identify Tibet and Xinjiang^{vi} as core interests until 2006.⁸ Prior to this, Taiwan generally was the only specific issue described as a core interest. Chinese officials occasionally identify other issues as core interests or as being associated with core interests, including "national unity," "reunification," "independence," and "human rights."⁹

Invoking Core Interests in Diplomatic Contexts

Chinese officials usually make core interest declarations, especially those focused on national sovereignty and territorial integrity, to advance foreign policy objectives. In public statements during high-level visits and meetings, Chinese officials use these declarations to signal to the United States and other countries that China is unwilling to compromise on particular policy issues. Occasionally, Chinese officials have indicated Beijing would be willing to use force to protect China's core interests.¹⁰

Chinese officials often use high-level visits and meetings with the United States as a platform to voice core interests (as State Councilor Dai did in 2009). Specifically, they attempt to pressure U.S. officials to publicly acknowledge China's core interests and elicit U.S. commitments to support, or at least not oppose, certain Chinese policies.¹¹

- Beijing was successful in doing this in the 2009 U.S.-China Joint Statement coinciding with U.S. President Barack Obama's state visit to China, which noted that "[The United States and China] agreed that respecting each other's core interests is extremely important to ensure steady progress in U.S.-China relations."¹²

^v China's 2011 White Paper states: "China is firm in upholding its core interests which include the following: state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification, China's political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability, and the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development." Xinhua, "China's Peaceful Development," September 6, 2011. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-09/06/c_131102329.htm.

^{vi} Chinese official statements characterizing Xinjiang typically refer to the "East Turkestan terrorist forces," rather than the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region itself. "Carry On Traditional Friendship And Deepen All-round Cooperation," Address by former president Hu Jintao of the People's Republic of China At Islamabad Convention Center, November 24, 2006. <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg/yzs/gjlb/2757/2758/t285917.htm>.

- However, the 2011 U.S.-China Joint Statement coinciding with then Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to the United States did not include a reference to core interests. According to Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, Northeast Asia Project Director at the International Crisis Group, "this was the result of serious negotiation, with a deliberate effort by the U.S. to exclude any direct reference to 'core interests'" in the 2011 Joint Statement.^{13 vii}

As tensions involving China's maritime disputes in the East China Sea and South China Sea have grown since 2009, official and unofficial commentators in China, the United States, and elsewhere have drawn connections between China's maritime claims and its core interests. According to *The New York Times* and other Western media sources, in March 2010 Chinese officials privately told U.S. officials that the South China Sea was one of China's core interests.¹⁴ Later that year, then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said State Councilor Dai told her the South China Sea was a core interest during the 2010 Strategic and Economic Dialogue.¹⁵ State Councilor Dai must have made this statement in private, as there is no public record of him discussing core interests there.¹⁶

Following these media reports, it became "conventional wisdom" that China had elevated the South China Sea to core interest status in 2010, according to Alastair Iain Johnston, Laine Professor of China in World Affairs at Harvard University.¹⁷ Moreover, regional and international observers have continued to cite this as a sign China was becoming more assertive or aggressive in its stance in the South China Sea territorial disputes.¹⁸

Despite these perceptions, Chinese officials neither publicly confirmed nor denied that Beijing had raised the South China Sea to core interest status.¹⁹ Beijing's ambiguous response was likely a political calculation. An explicit denial may have invited criticism from domestic audiences that China was caving to foreign threats, as well as potentially weakened China's negotiating position in its territorial disputes.²⁰ On the other hand, an overt affirmation may have prompted the other South China Sea claimants (and the United States) to strengthen their positions or otherwise escalate the disputes.²¹

The April 26th Press Conference: Differing Japanese and Chinese Press Statements on Senkaku Islands

Japanese media reports^{viii} claimed the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially elevated the Senkaku Islands to a "core interest" in an April 26, 2013 daily press conference. Some Japanese commentators expressed concern that the designation of the islands as a "core interest" signals a

^{vii} Michael Swaine, Senior Associate at the Asia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, notes that following the 2009 U.S.-China Joint Statement, "some observers argued that the Obama administration had shown undue weakness in allegedly acceding to a Chinese demand to include a phrase closely associated with Beijing's claim to sovereignty over Taiwan, and other supposed territorial ambitions." Dr. Swaine suggests this criticism may have led U.S. diplomats to exclude references to core interests in the 2011 Joint Statement. Michael Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior: Part One: On 'Core Interests,'" *China Leadership Monitor* no. 34 (February 22, 2011), pp. 8-9. <http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/article/67966>.

^{viii} Several Japanese media outlets reported on the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs press conference statement. Jiji Press, a private press agency, and Kyodo, Japan's largest domestic and international news agency, reported in print (Japanese) and online (English). Asahi Shimbun, a prominent center-right newspaper, reported on the statement online, as did Yomiuri News Online, a center-left newspaper. Other sources include Nihon Kezai Shimbun, a business daily newspaper; Naha Ryukyu Shimpo, one of the two largest newspapers in Okinawa; and Tokyo Nippon Hoso Kyokai Online, Japan's public television broadcast network. *Open Source Center*, "Japan – Perceived Hardening of China's Senkaku Policy Possibly Complicates Relations," April 30, 2013. OSC ID: JPF20130501304001. <http://www.opensource.gov>.

shift in Beijing's approach to the maritime dispute and indicates China "will make no concessions on the islets."²²

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement was made in response to a question about U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Martin Dempsey's reported comments that his Chinese counterparts "[used] the phrase core interests several times" in discussions about the East China Sea during his recent visit to China.²³ According to Kyodo, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson replied to the question: "The Diaoyu [Senkaku] Islands are about sovereignty and territorial integrity. Of course, it's China's core interest."²⁴

Significantly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs took steps to soften the spokesperson's April 26 remarks when it posted the official transcript of the daily press conference. In her oral remarks, the spokesperson stated with certainty ("of course") that the Senkaku Islands issue "is" a core interest. However, in the transcripts posted subsequently, the spokesperson is quoted as stating the Senkaku Islands issue "touches on" core interests.²⁵ ^{ix} This difference was reported in several Japanese news outlets. This editing suggests the spokesperson either misspoke, or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs determined subsequently that its statement had been too strong. According to the Open Source Center, "select [Japanese] outlets speculated that Beijing had softened the expression out of concern for the impact the remarks could have on relations with Japan."²⁶

Outlook

Despite the media attention to the comments made at the April 26 press conference, as of May 10, 2013, Beijing has made no additional statements seeking to clarify whether it has designated the East China Sea or the Senkaku Islands a core interest.

China likely will continue to make ambiguous statements in response to requests for clarification, mirroring how it handled widespread claims in 2010 that it had elevated the South China Sea to core interest status. By providing neither a confirmation nor a denial, Beijing is able to (1) maintain flexibility in its approach to the dispute; (2) prevent any domestic accusations that China is adopting a weaker stance; and (3) deny that it is taking unilateral actions or escalating tensions. Based on China's historical use of the core interest formulation and its statements during and following the April 26 press conference, the Chinese government likely has not changed its approach to the Senkaku Islands dispute.

^{ix} Moreover, the Chinese- and English-language versions of the transcript contain subtle differences. In the Chinese-language transcript, posted on April 26, the spokesperson says the Senkaku Islands dispute "touches on" China's core interests. However, in the English-language version, posted on April 28, the spokesperson says the dispute "concerns" China's core interests. "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on April 26, 2013," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*. April 28, 2013. <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2511/t1035948.shtml>; "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on April 26, 2013" (in Chinese), *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*. April 26, 2013. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/fyrbt_602243/t1035595.shtml.

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- ¹ *Kyodo* (Tokyo), "China Says Senkaku Islands are its 'Core Interest,'" April 26, 2013. OSC ID: JPP20130426969071. <http://www.opensource.gov>; *Asahi Shimbun* (Tokyo), "Japanese, Chinese Defense Officials Meet to Ease Tensions Over Senkakus," April 27, 2013. <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/asia/china/AJ201304270049>.
- ² Michael Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior: Part One: On 'Core Interests,'" *China Leadership Monitor* no. 34 (February 22, 2011), p. 5. <http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/article/67966>.
- ³ Commission staff translated these statements from the original Chinese.
- ⁴ State Councilor Dai delivered these remarks in Chinese; the U.S. Department of State translated them. "Closing Remarks for U.S.-China Security and Economic Dialogue," *U.S. Department of State*, July 28, 2009. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/july/126599.htm>; Michael Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior: Part One: On 'Core Interests,'" *China Leadership Monitor* no. 34 (February 22, 2011), p. 4. <http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/article/67966>.
- ⁵ Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt (contributor), "Does Promoting 'Core Interests' Do China More Harm than Good?" *ChinaFile Conversation*, May 2, 2013. <http://www.chinafile.com/does-promoting-core-interests-do-china-more-harm-good>; Michael Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior: Part One: On 'Core Interests,'" *China Leadership Monitor* no. 34 (February 22, 2011), p. 4. <http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/article/67966>.
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- ⁷ Xinhua, "Cambodia, China sign deal on scientific, technological cooperation," December 7, 2012. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-12/07/c_132026664.htm; Xinhua, "Sarkozy's meeting with the Dalai Lama an unwise move detrimental to Sino-French ties," December 7, 2008. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-12/07/content_10466919.htm; Xinhua, "Netizen's support China's decision to postpone Sino-EU summit," December 1, 2008. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-12/01/content_10436445.htm; and Xinhua, "Tang Jiaquan meets U.S. Secretary of State" (translation), January 20, 2003. http://news.xinhuanet.com/zhengfu/2003-01/20/content_697563.htm.
- ⁸ Michael Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior: Part One: On 'Core Interests,'" *China Leadership Monitor* no. 34 (February 22, 2011), p. 8. <http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/article/67966>.
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- ¹⁰ Michael Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior: Part One: On 'Core Interests,'" *China Leadership Monitor* no. 34 (February 22, 2011), p. 7. <http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/article/67966>.
- ¹¹ Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt (contributor), "Does Promoting 'Core Interests' Do China More Harm than Good?" *ChinaFile Conversation*, May 2, 2013. <http://www.chinafile.com/does-promoting-core-interests-do-china-more-harm-good>; Michael Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior: Part One: On 'Core Interests,'" *China Leadership Monitor* no. 34 (February 22, 2011), p. 6. <http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/article/67966>.
- ¹² The White House Office of the Press Secretary, "U.S.-China Joint Statement," November 17, 2009. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/us-china-joint-statement>; Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt (contributor), "Does Promoting 'Core Interests' Do China More Harm than Good?" *ChinaFile Conversation*, May 2, 2013. <http://www.chinafile.com/does-promoting-core-interests-do-china-more-harm-good>.
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- ¹⁴ Edward Wong, "Chinese Military Seeks to Extend Its Naval Power," *New York Times*, April 23, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/24/world/asia/24navy.html?pagewanted=all>.
- ¹⁵ Michael Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior: Part One: On 'Core Interests,'" *China Leadership Monitor* no. 34 (February 22, 2011), pp. 9, 23. <http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/article/67966>.
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- ¹⁷ Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security* 34:7 (Spring 2013), pp. 17-18.
- ¹⁸ Ronald O'Rourke, *Maritime Territorial and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) Disputes Involving China: Issues for Congress*, (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, April 9, 2013), pp. 72-73. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42784.pdf>; Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security* 34:7 (Spring 2013), pp. 17-18.
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pp. 17-18; Michael Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior: Part One: On 'Core Interests,'" *China Leadership Monitor* no. 34 (February 22, 2011), pp. 9-10. <http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/article/67966>.

²⁰ Michael Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior: Part One: On 'Core Interests,'" *China Leadership Monitor* no. 34 (February 22, 2011), p. 10. <http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/article/67966>.

²¹ Michael Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior: Part One: On 'Core Interests,'" *China Leadership Monitor* no. 34 (February 22, 2011), p. 10. <http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/article/67966>.

²² *Kyodo* (Tokyo), "China Says Senkaku Islands are its 'Core Interest,'" April 26, 2013. OSC ID: JPP20130426969071. <http://www.opensource.gov>; *Asahi Shimbun* (Tokyo), "Japanese, Chinese Defense Officials Meet to Ease Tensions Over Senkakus," April 27, 2013. <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/asia/china/AJ201304270049>; and *Yoimuri Shimbun* (Tokyo), "Editorial: China's 'core interests' comment over Senkaku Islands uncalled for," April 29, 2013. <http://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0000173671>.

²³ "Interview: General Martin Dempsey," Tokyo Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK) Newslines (Tokyo), April 26, 2013. <http://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/newslines/specialinterviews/index20130426.html>.

²⁴ *Kyodo* (Tokyo), "China Says Senkaku Islands are its 'Core Interest,'" April 26, 2013. OSC ID: JPP20130426969071. <http://www.opensource.gov>.

²⁵ *Open Source Center*, "China-Japan – Video of PRC Remarks on Senkakus as 'Core Interest' Differs from Official Transcript," OSC ID: CPP20130507358001. May 7, 2013. <http://www.opensource.gov>.

²⁶ *Open Source Center*, "China-Japan – Video of PRC Remarks on Senkakus as 'Core Interest' Differs from Official Transcript," OSC ID: CPP20130507358001. May 7, 2013. <http://www.opensource.gov>.