Thinking Systematically about China: Anti-Access, Submarines and the Security Dilemma

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ROBERT POTTER, MAR 3 2013

The naval situation along the coast of China could be charitably described as a 'nonlinear dynamic'; a variable subject to a multiple of causes and self-reinforcing effects. Others would use the term 'confusing mess'. Each of the countries that interact strategically with China in the East and South China Seas has a submarine capability of some description, and most are expanding those forces. China itself is engaging in the expansion of its submarine forces. In order to understand the impact of this, it is necessary to understand the strategic system in which these forces operate, identify the variables in the situation and explore the risks and consequences that are likely from their interaction. I will begin by describing the capabilities of these forces and states that interact in the South China and East China Seas, as not all submarine platforms are designed for the same role. Secondly, I will discuss why these states are seeking to develop their capabilities in these areas. Finally, I will explore the relation between deterrence and anti-access.

In his work on a potential U.S.-China conflict, Aaron Friedberg asks the question: 'is conflict with China inevitable?' While an answer to this question is perhaps too ambitious for this paper, Friedberg's method is pertinent to unpacking this topic. Core to his analysis of the Chinese security environment and its future is the concept of feedbacks.[1] Certainly, over time feedbacks loops are possible; using the analogy of liberalism, domestic economic growth, democracy and international trade can be seen to become a feedback loop. From such a view, to borrow the old Marxist phrase, it is no accident that prosperity and democracy are correlated. What becomes clear from this is the interaction of variables, both independent and dependent. By studying these variables we can see how independent and reinforcing positions create the international system.

As a concept, anti-access is primarily defensive in orientation. It is, in effect, the application of force to deny operational space to one's enemy. In this context, defensive simply means that one is responding to the forces of the other and seeking to both counter them and deny them access to territory. In the case of China, that strategy focuses on the East and South China Seas. Certainly, we can envision circumstances in which area denial can be strategically offensive, but it remains primarily an action contingent on the capabilities of another. Interesting, this conceptual separation between offense and defense is not found in the Chinese understanding of the anti-access strategy.[2] The People's Liberation Army (PLA) planners who have approached the topic call their position 'active defense'.[3] Anti-access as a concept does not really exist within the Chinese literature. Chinese authors certainly reference Western works on the subject, and the term aptly describes the Chinese doctrine that focuses on defeating militarily superior opponents.[4]

From the Chinese point of view, the greatest conventional threat is from the military preponderance of the United States. In order to provide the most descriptive analysis to the strategic situation between the United States and China, it is important to acknowledge the wider developments in Chinese defense capabilities. Within these changes to the force structure and capabilities of the People's Liberation Army, Navy (PLAN) submarines play only one part of a broader strategy. The submarine forces within the PLAN are part of a three-component expansion of anti-access capabilities.

Perhaps the most illustrative example of the impact of the expansion of the PLAN was the 2006 Kitty Hawk incident,

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when a Chinese submarine surfaced within firing range of the Aircraft Carrier USS Kitty Hawk.[5] Chinese naval planners are interested in keeping the United States Navy (USN) operating away from the coastlines of mainland China.[6] The possibility of conflict over Taiwan remains central to Chinese military planning, having been designated a core interest for some time. However, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has also designated the South China Sea as a core interest.[7] This action, combined with the expansion of its submarine birthing facilities at Hainan Island, revealed by the Federation of American Scientists, creates a narrative of undersea expansion, in both capabilities and core strategic interests, on the part of the PLAN.[8]

If, however, anti-access is a contingent strategy, dependent upon the forces of another, such forces can usefully be described as dependent variables. The key to contextualizing a security dilemma is to identify the independent variable. In the case of the South China Sea, the PLAN finds itself engaging in a reactive manner to the force power of the USN, the increasing capabilities of the PLAN, however, has caused the USN to develop a counter-doctrine.[9] What then develops is an interaction between dependent variables, creating feedbacks that reinforce the other. In the case of the regions under discussion, the deployments of the other are being reacted to, in order to pursue or counter a strategic advantage of the other. Each, by acting defensively, creates the interaction of two dependent variables, causing feedbacks that can lead to escalation: the very definition of a security dilemma. Thus, by drawing on Friedberg, we can develop a logical framework through which we can describe the interaction of two contingent strategies.

The PLAN submarine force is estimated to be around sixty submarines, as of December 2012.[10] However, most of those submarines are of an older generation and designed primarily for anti-surface combat.[11] Complimenting the older platforms are twelve Kilo-Class submarines purchased from Russia.[12] Alongside these are several locally-produced diesel and nuclear attack boats.[13] Recently, the PLAN has switched focus towards locally-produced submarines but has encountered difficulty developing an independent indigenous capability. As a result, the development of their submarine force has slowed considerably and China does not seem to be investing greatly in increasing its Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) capability.[14] As a result, while the PLAN is becoming a more capable force generally, its faces significant challenges going forward.

Additionally, the PLAN faces the reality that its forces have become an independent variable for other states in the region; regardless of whether these forces are seen as a threat, states that wish to develop their own security are forced to respond. Vietnam, for example, is purchasing six capable Kilo Plus Class Diesel submarines from Russia.[15] Although the threat Vietnam represents to China is asymmetric, they increase the cost of conflict. Japan is also increasing its submarine fleet by six to a total of twenty- two.[16] This trend, found in the case of Vietnam and Japan, can also be seen in Australia, which is seeking to double its submarine numbers to twelve boats.[17] The Philippines is also seeking to field its first submarine in the next eight years, and Malaysia has purchased two submarines from France and Italy.[18] A major expansion of the submarine capabilities of the Republic of Korea is underway with the order of nine modern German-designed submarines, which will effectively double the total number of submarines.[19] India is also expanding its submarine forces, building on a base of ten Kilo-Class submarines, it has also leased two Russian Akula-2 Class nuclear attack submarines and is now purchasing six more from France and Italy.[20] From these figures, it becomes evident that there is a noticeable amount of submarine expansion occurring in the region. The focus on quiet, short-range boats indicates that a large amount of these purchases are being made to operate in the South China and East China Seas; given that the limited range precedes long range deployments.

From the widespread increase in submarine acquisition, it is clear that other states are reacting to the expansion of capability by the PLAN.[21] It is evident that Chinese defense modernization and expanding interests are causing feedbacks within the regional system PLAN expansion might be a contingent reaction to the USN's preponderance in power, but other states are in turn responding to China. As such, the security dynamic that includes the United States and China has created security dilemmas throughout the region. As each state seeks to preserve its own security, it undermines the security of others. Given the territorial disputes and historical factors at work within the region, the area is especially susceptible to the creation of these security dilemmas. The interaction of these variables does, however, help us to structurally interpret the security system in which they operate.

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The variables at work, however ,are not necessarily additive. For example, it is possible that the security dilemma involving Vietnam and China might be eased towards diplomacy, because of a successful asymmetric strategy on the part of the Vietnamese. It is theoretically possible that the construction of the situation could favor deterrence. The development of these capabilities could lead to a level of deterrence developing due to the price of action being raised. It is also conversely possible that the variables might trigger a path-dependent outcome, in which a combination of accidents could cause either positive or negative feedback throughout the system. As a theoretical example, natural disaster relief efforts have drawn states closer together in the past. Yet, within security dilemmas it seems much easier to forecast circumstances that lead to deterioration.

Given the exceptionally unpredictable environment in which these new submarine units operate, it is possible for those actors within the system to foresee circumstances in which the security dilemmas could deteriorate. While outright mitigation of these security dilemmas is probably a far too ambitious objective, there are certainly actions that could increase regional communications, develop incidents guidelines and make accidents at sea between these weapons of war less likely to escalate to armed conflict.

In conclusion,the security environment that the modernizing Chinese navy is involved in is dynamic and is open to systematic exploration. The variables involved describe the multiple security dilemmas that exist in the East and South China Seas and how they are layered upon one another. It is certainly true that these descriptions are stark, but it shows that by applying systematic thinking to the environment, it can be unpacked and contextualized. This context allows observers and participants to understand how specific actions lead to consequences, such as the Chinese directly increasing their submarine force and indirectly causing other security dilemmas within the environment. This allows us to understand the mechanisms that push states into competition and gives us a rational grounding for reconciling how nominally defensive, security-seeking actions can cause security dilemmas. This allows us to separate assumptions of intention a decrease from those of result, since a state may not intend escalation or to directly reduce another's security. Thus, if the analysis is conducted accurately, it accomplishes the important goal of pointing out the sorts of evidence states should look at with regards to establishing aggressive intent and what those states should not look at. It also shows how the interaction of two great powers can spawn security dilemmas elsewhere within the system.

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