

Review Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Seth Offenbach
Production Editor: George Fujii

Andrew Cottey. "Europe and China's Sea Disputes: Between Normative Politics, Power Balancing and Acquiescence." *European Security* 28:4 (2019): 473-492. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2019.1636784>

Published by ISSF on **22 April 2020**

<https://issforum.org/to/iar135>

Review by **Ketian Zhang**, George Mason University

Andrew Cottey's article "Europe and China's Sea Disputes" analyzes Europe's approach to China's maritime territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas. The author argues that there are three major European approaches toward Chinese maritime disputes: "a normative approach emphasizing the resolution of disputes within the framework of international law; a power balancing approach, led by France and the United Kingdom, involving support for freedom of navigation operations and strengthened bilateral and EU ties with other Asian states; and de facto acquiescence to Chinese advances in the region" (473). The article further notes that these three approaches also follow a sequence. That is, Europe first took the normative approach, and then turned to power balancing when the normative appeal was not effective. Nevertheless, the author suggests that Europe has not taken a unitary stance regarding China's territorial disputes; rather, divisions exist among European Union (EU) member states, with some members acquiescing to China.

This article is an important contribution to the research agenda on maritime territorial disputes in East Asia. While prior research focuses on China's rationale or the response from South or East Asian states, the involvement of external states has rarely been analyzed.¹ This article examines the European perspective, thus expanding the scope of the research on East Asian maritime territorial disputes. It is particularly timely as Sino-EU relations constitute a crucial relationship which is often overshadowed by analyses of Sino-U.S. relations or China's relations with East Asian countries. The approach of the EU to maritime disputes in East Asia is also an underexplored research agenda. As such, this article is a necessary addition to the study of East Asian maritime territorial disputes.

¹ For prior research on the South China Sea, see, for example, M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong borders, secure nation: cooperation and conflict in China's territorial disputes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33:3 (2011): 292-319; Ketian Zhang, "Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing's Use of Coercion in the South China Sea," *International Security* 44:1 (Summer 2019): 117-159; Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion," *International Security* 42:2 (Fall 2017): 78-119; David Shambaugh, "U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia: Power Shift or Competitive Coexistence?," *International Security* 42:4 (Spring 2018): 85-127; Andrew D. Taffer, "Threat and opportunity: Chinese wedging in the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute," *Asian Security*, published online, 12 Feb 2019, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2019.1567493>.

In terms of sources and evidence, the article uses ample primary sources and documents. Cottey utilizes official EU documents dating from the early 2000s, including "official EU policy statements on Asia, specific EU policy statements on the South and East China sea disputes, EU policy documents vis-à-vis individual Asia states and bilateral policy documents and statements between the EU and Asian states, as well as a review of member state policies" (474). The author particularly tracks changes in the EU's approach to China's maritime disputes over time, which provides a comprehensive description of changes and continuity in the EU's policies. Nevertheless, the article could benefit from the use of interviews and speeches, especially when it comes to explaining why the EU preferred the normative approach at one time but proceeded to resort to power balancing subsequently. For example, such evidence can include internal speeches or documents from high-ranking EU officials or diplomats, as well as interviews with such officials.

Relatedly, as important as the description of EU's policies is, the paper is, at times, too descriptive and could be more analytical. While the article offers an impressive description of the EU's three approaches to China's maritime disputes, it neither asks specific analytical questions, nor uses definitive evidence to explain why the EU changes from the normative approach to the power balancing approach. For example, the author states that "China has sought to exclude the South and East China Sea issues from the agendas of EU–China summits and other bilateral dialogues" (480). It is not clear whether this means that it was because of China that the EU changed its approach, or on what evidence this claim is made. If Chinese influence is the critical factor, what kind of influence did China exert – coercion, inducement, or a wedging strategy?² Also, another contributing factor to the EU's change from balancing to acquiesce could be that the South China Sea is not as heated an issue as it was in 2016. My in-person conversations with some Vietnamese diplomats suggest that this could be the case.³ It is also possible that the stakes are simply not high enough for the EU to directly challenge China. As such, the paper leaves many interesting questions unanswered, such as what explains the EU's policy change and how to evaluate its policy on China's maritime disputes.

Moreover, since the paper provides a comprehensive description of the EU's approach to China's maritime disputes, it should be accurate in its definitions of concepts. One prominent definitional issue concerns the concept of 'power balancing.' The author does not provide a specific definition of power balancing and instead lumps balancing with soft balancing. If one follows the traditional realist definition of balancing, it is defined as constituting external balancing through military alliance and internal balancing via military build up, targeted at another state.⁴ According to the author, "the most explicit way in which France and the UK have engaged in power balancing vis-à-vis China in the South China and East China Seas is through FONOPs" (481). That is, through freedom of navigation operations. Applied to the traditional definition of balancing, however, FONOPs are neither external nor internal balancing. The author uses French Minister of Defense Jean-Yves Le Drian's speech at the June 2016 Shangri-La Dialogue Asian Security Summit as evidence that there were threats to freedom of navigation in the China seas on page 481, yet Le Drian's speech did not explicitly target China or any state in particular. Also, the author argues that European states, such as the UK and France, are militarily involved in the South China Sea. It is not clear, however, what militarily involved entail? FONOPs are on a different scale of the escalation ladder compared to military exercises, missile shooting, or engagement in conflicts.

Furthermore, even in the case of U.S. FONOPs, China is not the only country that these operations target. The United States also challenges the excessive maritime claims of Vietnam and the Philippines through FONOPs. The author does not provide specific details of the EU's FONOPs, but they may follow the U.S. examples. If the EU's FONOPs do not

² For wedging strategy, see Taffer, "Threat and opportunity: Chinese wedging in the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute."

³ Interviews by the author with anonymous Vietnamese diplomats on 28 May 2018 in Palo Alto, California and on 10 December 2019 in Arlington, Virginia. The diplomats wish to remain anonymous.

⁴ For balancing, see Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979).

target China exclusively, and no evidence explicitly suggests so, then such behavior should not be defined as power balancing. Rather, they could be signaling behavior.⁵

Similarly, the author contends that the EU's control on arms exports to China and expansion of markets to Southeast Asia constitute power balancing, but does not provide primary evidence that proves the link between such behavior and the intention of balancing China in the South China Sea. For example, the EU's gradual move away from the Chinese market to Southeast Asia could be related to the ease of market access, the rise of production costs in China, and the worsening investment environment in China. Also, Europe's rationale could be trying to maintain stability instead of balancing China. Many European energy companies, including BP and Shell, work with ASEAN or China in oil blocks in the South China Sea.⁶ It might as well be that they are driven by profits and are not necessarily involved in balancing behavior regarding the South China Sea. Without direct evidence, it is difficult if not impossible to prove that arms control and market expansion can be classified as intentional balancing behavior.

Finally, the paper sometimes makes assertions without providing factual confirmation. For example, the author argues that China has been pursuing an increasingly assertive approach to maritime disputes, but does not provide an indicator of how to measure assertiveness, and offers no evidence to prove the increase in assertiveness. My research, however, suggests that China acted assertively (and even more so) in the 1990s.⁷

To conclude, this article makes an important contribution to the research on maritime territorial disputes in East Asia, especially by taking an EU perspective. The author provides a comprehensive analysis of the EU's approach to China's maritime disputes. In future research, scholars can further explore the many interesting questions that arise from this article, such as the rationale behind EU's policy change, the effectiveness of the different approaches, and what is the weighting among these approaches.

Ketian Zhang is an assistant professor of international security in the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University. Ketian researches rising powers, coercion, economic statecraft, and maritime disputes, with a regional focus on China and East Asia. Her current book project examines when, why, and how China uses coercion when faced with issues of national security, such as territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas, foreign arms sales to Taiwan, and foreign leaders' reception of the Dalai Lama.

©2020 The Authors | [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License](#)

⁵ For relevant literature on signaling, see Zhang, "Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing's Use of Coercion in the South China Sea;" Xiaoyu Pu, *Rebranding China: Contested Status Signaling in the Changing Global Order* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019); Oriana Skylar Mastro, *The Costs of Conversation: Obstacles to Peace Talks in Wartime* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

⁶ Ketian Zhang, "Calculating Bully: Explaining Chinese Coercion" (Cambridge: Ph.D. dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2018).

⁷ Zhang, "Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing's Use of Coercion in the South China Sea."