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China's Growing International Role: Words, Deeds and Needs^(*)

The People's Republic of China has undoubtedly increased its international presence – and, increasingly, its military/security role – both at the regional and at the international level. Meanwhile, the importance of Asia to China has grown over time, as noted in the speeches made by President Hu Jintao at the recent BRICS meeting and at the Boao Forum in the southern island of Hainan. These meetings have usually concentrated on cooperation and sustainable development, but recently the security dimension has emerged as a central issue. China has been seen as flexing its military muscles lately, both in the maritime areas around China and also in Greater Central Asia, much to the dismay of its neighbors and of the US. The question is whether China really is adopting a new and more assertive security posture and how these new “changes” are affecting its reputation and impact within Asia and internationally.

What should be noted first is that when dealing with China's military development, emotions and perceptions, both positive and negative, have a tremendous influence on every step that is taken. And China, much like the United States, is often in the position of being “damned if you do, damned if you don't” with respect to its military actions. It should also be noted at the outset that words and perceptions often do not often match reality, and that it is unclear whether China's current actions meet its foreign policy needs, either in the long or the short term.

Understanding China's international military and security role and influence can no longer be reduced to looking at the policy decisions of a small elite. There are differences between sectors of the Chinese government, regional differences, coastal and inland differences, as well as serious differences between political groupings. One cannot discuss the growing Chinese role in the world simply by looking at the policy decisions of “Beijing”, the “PLA” or “the Party”. Therefore, when talking about changes in China's international role, we have to ask ourselves which “China” we are talking about.

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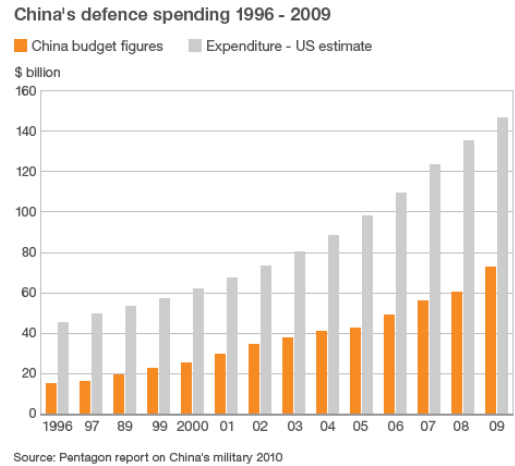
Abstract

As China's economy has grown, so has its international presence in a variety of areas, among which the military and security dimension is particularly important. This paper examines China's increasingly important role both within Asia and at the global level by examining rhetoric, reality and perceptions. It is argued that recent events such as the evacuation of Chinese citizens from Libya – in which the PLA played an important role – and China's involvement in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden both demonstrate the need for China to project military strength at the global level and highlight the limitations of China's current ability to do so, given the work that still needs to be done in integrating and modernizing the armed forces. While suspicions of a “China threat” by the US and among China's neighbors are still high, China's active participation in UN peacekeeping missions shows that it is capable of acting as a positive force in promoting world peace (even if such participation is limited by China's commitment to non-intervention in the affairs of other sovereign nations). China is very active in its involvement in security affairs within Asia, especially in the context of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and in its disputes with its neighbors over territorial issues – such as the Senkaku Islands/Diaoyutai and in the South China Sea – China is becoming increasingly assertive. It is argued that an increase in China's role at the global level to match its influence at the regional level could be a positive development.

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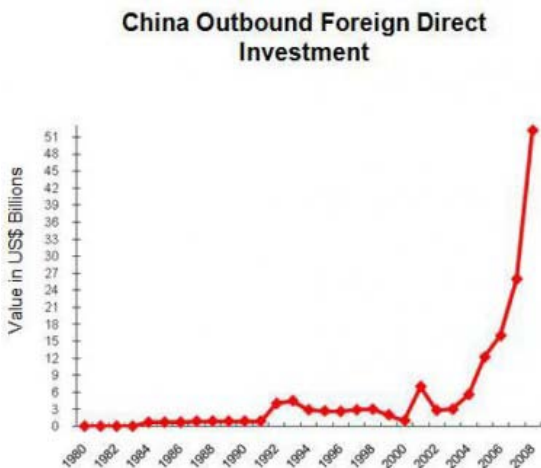
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The growth in China's influence as a state in the international economy and as a political actor, both regionally and internationally, has created new challenges for China and its military forces. This was seen clearly in the case of the evacuation of Chinese citizens from Libya in 2011 by the PLA in cooperation with civilian aircraft and naval vessels. An increased international presence will force China to develop a better capacity to protect and support its own citizens in times of crisis, and as China's international role grows this trend will increase. This is something that has neither been sufficiently accepted by China critics nor by the Chinese civilian leadership. There is much criticism of the increase in the PLA budget, but the reality is that with China's current internal, regional and international challenges and interests, there are good reasons to argue that the current budget is far lower than is needed to maintain a military force proportional to its size and economic interests. Needless to say, building such a military force would create tensions with some actors for good reasons, but for equally good reasons it will also serve international peace and security.

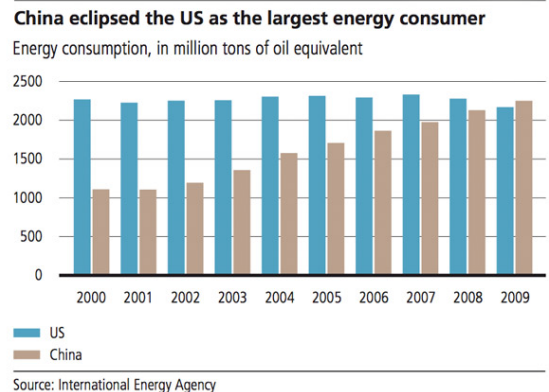


What is said and what you get

There is doubtless some discrepancy between reality and both the claims of the China bashers and the official version from Beijing. China bashers view all of China's actions as potential aggression and fail to grasp the legitimate needs of China to increase its international role, politically, economically and militarily. Meanwhile, the Chinese leadership insists that China is pursuing a path of "peaceful development", which does not pose a threat to any other country, and follows a policy of strict non-intervention in others' internal affairs (historically, China has had different attitudes to intervention at different times, from active support for the "righteous struggles" of like-minded communist groups in the developing world during Mao Zedong's time to the cautious approach of Deng Xiaoping, who advised that China should "keep a low profile and never take the lead" in international affairs). There is an increasing realization that the current situation requires a much more complicated approach, and an interventionist policy is developing in Beijing and among government institutions. This is something that can be seen in the gradual development of the Chinese interest in regional stability and common development, and in the increased understanding that the nation, its regions and international factors are all closely interconnected.



China's changing security situation is closely connected to its growing economic power. China has emerged as the world's second-largest economic power and now looks likely to take the first place much faster than previously anticipated, with the foreign trade and economic interests that follow such a position. The



importance of China's imports and exports has increased rapidly, particularly as domestic consumption remains weak, and foreign trade has been the backbone of its economic expansion.



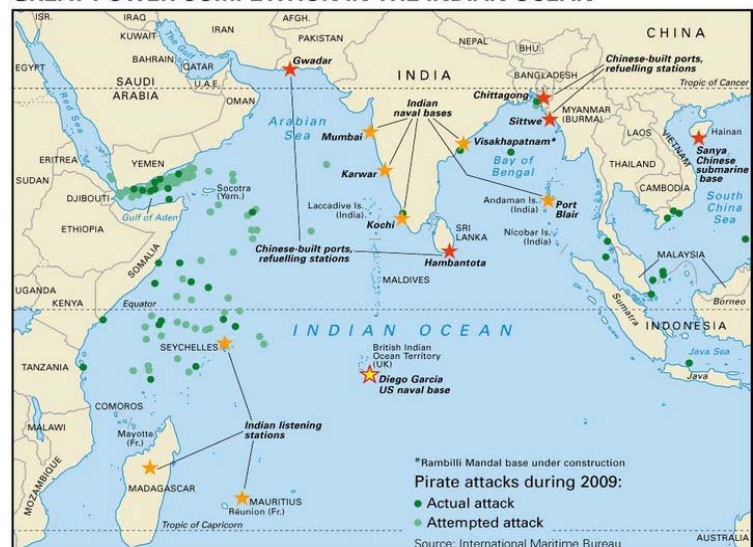
Meanwhile, the strength of Chinese consumers' buying power is felt in luxury shopping district of Ginza in Tokyo and in the California real estate market. Chinese foreign direct investments mushroomed in 2004/2005, and today China is a major investor in many states, not only weak and non-democratic ones, as is so often claimed. The argument for export-driven growth is not without its problems, but nevertheless, this is the preferred approach among many Chinese decision makers. What is more evident is the growing need for Chinese imports of energy and natural resources, something that has taken Chinese trade all

around the world and reinforced the need to secure sea lanes of communications. In line with China's growing economic interests all around the globe, there is an increasing recognition domestically of the need to protect both its investments and its expatriates and traders.

International roles and needs

Despite China's growing international interests, its military capacity to engage internationally is limited, despite the very real need for China to support and protect its trade interests, as was apparent both in the case of the Libya evacuation and in the anti-piracy exercises in the Gulf of Aden. The PLA Navy (PLAN) has simply not developed the capacity to match the needs that increased trade has created. This is not to say that the Chinese rescue operation was unimpressive, but the resources PLAN had at its disposal were markedly limited and it was pure luck that some of some of its naval forces were relatively close at the time. China will need to go far beyond current requirements and strengthen its capacity to act internationally (even if such plans are officially denied at present). It would be sensible to consider a major increase in its naval capacity – and further increased budgets – to be better able to meet such challenges in the future.

GREAT POWER COMPETITION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN



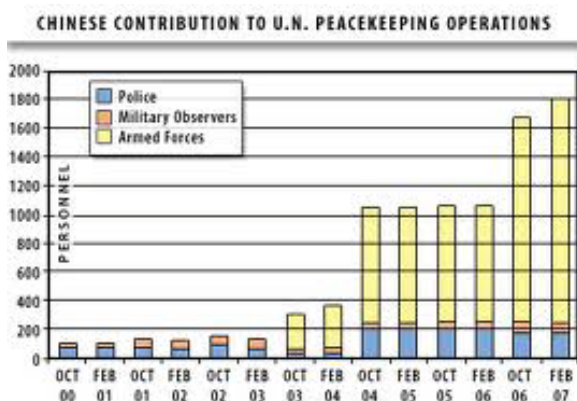
The international component of the PLA mission is increasingly important, given China's increased economic and political interests abroad. Moreover, China's responsibility to maintain world peace

and promote common development has become a theme in both the speeches of the Chinese leaders and in military documents such as the annual white paper on China's National Defense. It has become increasingly clear that China has an important role to play at the international level, both when seen purely from the perspective of China's national interests, but also from a broader, global perspective. This is arguably most notable in Africa and in anti-piracy operations. In this regard, China is a very potent partner, particularly in states in which poverty alleviation is a priority. However, this is a role that it will be difficult for China to play without rethinking its strict non-interventionist policy. There would need to be a fundamental change in the current policy and an acceptance from the international community of increased Chinese engagement, but even then we would expect engagement to be relatively limited – invasions or occupations of sovereign states are extremely unlikely, at least in the short to medium term, not least because of the alarm such actions would cause among China's neighbors and internationally. The fear of China's rise is as real as the Chinese fear of being contained, and China's growing military strength will spur further suspicions of China's intentions.



In Beijing and in some circles within the PLA there is a fear of US containment of China – this is in no way a universal view in China and is more reflective of fears than of the real intentions of the US. The killing of bin Laden increased suspicions in Beijing and among some groups within the PLA that the focus will now increasingly be on China, rather than on the war on terrorism. This is most likely a greatly exaggerated view, but it has its proponents within the decision-making establishment. Improvements in the Chinese armed forces are seen as pivotal in preventing such a development. With regard to Chinese foreign policy, the US looms large in policymakers' minds – perhaps too large – and colors much of China's

defensive intentions (of course, this could be more an argument to increase budgets than a real concern). The map shown to the right is a reflection of the worst fears in Beijing, but also the dream of many people who hold an antagonistic view of China. Containment of China is no longer realistic (or even desirable), as China is already an international actor with not only an impressive peacekeeping capacity but also an increasingly active engagement in anti-piracy and anti-terrorist operations.

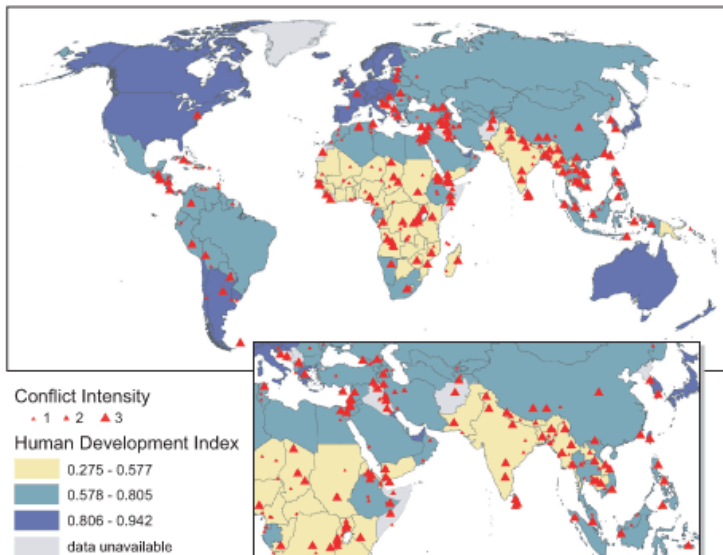


China has gone quite far in its international engagement with the UN and today has the largest contribution of peacekeepers among the five permanent UN Security Council Security members, having sent more than 17,000 military servicemen on 19 assignments since 1990. China is eager to increase this number, in part to gain international prestige, but also because participation in peacekeeping missions allows troops to gain experience. The limiting factor is the restrictive Chinese definition of "peacekeeping", which stops short of any involvement in the security affairs of other states. China continues to stress that it

will not engage in peace enforcement activities, and much of today's international "peacekeeping" is regarded by China as enforcement.

Despite fears of China's military development internationally, there is not much in terms of force projection that could realistically be seen as a threat in the short term, even with the purchase of old Soviet aircraft carriers. Even with improved materials acquisition, there is a lack of integration of new systems into the armed forces, and the new systems acquired overseas still operate largely outside of the integrated armed forces (to the extent that China has succeeded in integrating its armed forces). China would need to invest more resources into additional purchases of long-range capacity material and to devote time and resources to more effectively integrating them into the PLA. The end result is that the impact the Chinese armed forces have had at the international level is modest at most, even if the need is great and growing faster than capacity.

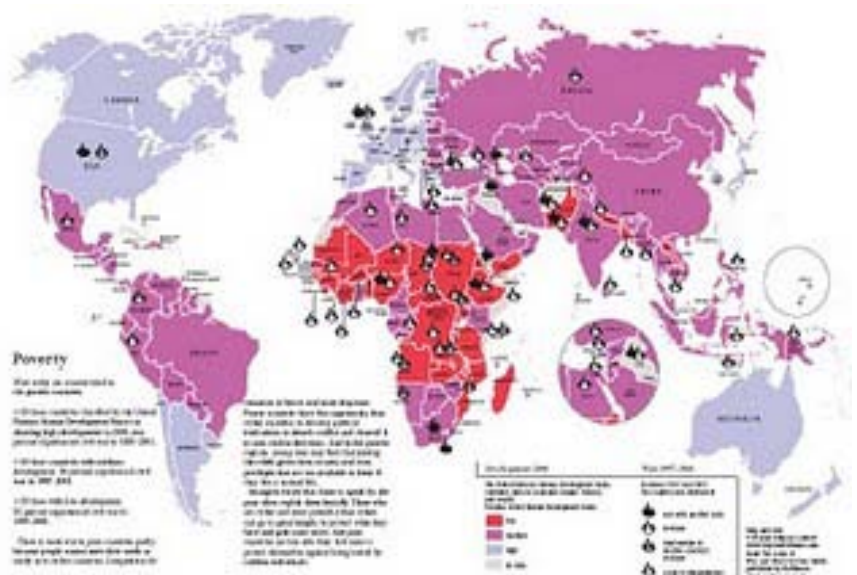
Regional tensions and possibilities



Source: John O'Loughlin 2004

China is facing much greater problems at the regional level, but has been more active there in engaging with security issues, both at the level of rhetoric and in reality. A reality for China that is often forgotten in Beijing and other places is that there are still a number of military conflicts in China's vicinity. The map on the left is from 2004, but unfortunately the conflict intensity has not changed markedly in a positive direction since then (although it fails to address low-intensity conflicts within China as well as regionally). Central Asia would be much more heavily marked in an updated version. Moreover, within China as well as in India and other states, the internal distribution of conflicts and tension would to a large extent closely follow the distribution of areas of poverty.

These conflicts are very much connected to the under-development of the region, as the Chinese government argues. The states bordering on China, with a few exceptions, are to some degree affected by poverty and conflicts. China's attempts to focus on economic development before political change have obvious merits in this regard, but China is limited by its refusal to engage the regional governments to the extent that is needed or even to use a more coercive strategy to force its regional neighbors towards a more constructive path.



Some major complications in this regard are that its regional competitor, India, suffers very much from this weakness itself (as does China) and has been unable to sufficiently address its own problems and that all of China's regional allies, i.e. Pakistan, North Korea and Myanmar, suffer from instability due to poverty. In this respect, Pakistan is a growing problem for China and it is not inconceivable that Pakistan (or North Korea) could give China no choice but to intervene more directly in other states' internal affairs.

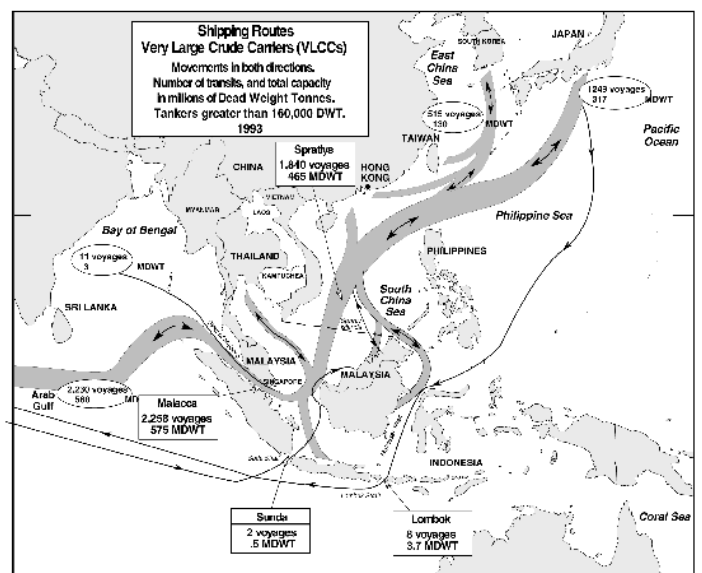
China has taken a much more active and assertive stand in regional affairs, as is apparent in the increased attention it has paid to military cooperation with members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the recent military exercises in Kazakhstan, which clearly went beyond anti-terrorist exercises. The Lanzhou military region responsible for the security of western China and possible threats to the border region has been beefed up with modern equipment and modernized strategic thinking, even if it is far from being one of the strongest military regions in China. However, the extent of the military buildup has been such that the Lanzhou military region today greatly outperforms Russia's Central Military district, which faces the Lanzhou military region. It has become increasingly evident that both the central government in Beijing and, possibly even more so, the PLA have realized the inherent weakness among the Greater Central Asian states and the potential need

for China to act in the region militarily over time. This would in no way be the preferred option – on the contrary, it is feared almost as much as instability – but the recent exercises indicate that China has not ruled out military action if the region continues to destabilize.

When it comes to its eastern border, China is more careful and has been much more active. Needless to say, the issue of Taiwan has colored the security discussion, and the potential involvement of the US is something that has taken a slightly less prominent position today but is still a priority for China. North Korea is another issue on which China has taken a much more direct and proactive role, even if it has refrained from openly getting too involved in its internal affairs. However, there is no doubt that a conflict on the Korean Peninsula would affect China in a negative way, due to the likely spillover of conflict and refugees.

It is also in Northeast Asia that China has taken a much tougher stand against Japan in its

maritime security, something that could partly be explained by perceived Japanese assertiveness (and from a Chinese perspective indeed arrogance), but also in the South China Sea, where China has grown tired of criticism, especially from the US, and feels increasingly forced to act more firmly. This is not a new tendency, but rather a gradual change as China's confidence and capacity have grown (and have arguably decreased among other actors). On the other hand, China's military expansion in Myanmar and the "string of pearls" in Southeast and





South Asia has been greatly exaggerated. However, as seen in the earlier maps, much of the trade goes through a limited area of the South China Sea, and undoubtedly there is great interest in protecting these shipping lanes. The maritime border disputes that characterize the Southeast Asian region further complicate this, but there are clear limitations on Chinese behavior in this regard and a further escalation of the conflicts is not very likely.

There is a tendency for China to begin to be more assertive, especially with regard to Japan, but this is a very special case

for China. This is not only due to the maritime issues, but also to the unresolved historical issues of Japanese aggression against China and the anti-Japanese position of much of the Chinese public. The Chinese government, the PLA and the regional governments have been much more ready to compromise in the South China Sea than in the Sino-Japanese disputes. Neither of the conflicts has the potential to evolve into a military conflict, but the tension has made political and economic relations sub-optimal. Arguably, the security dimension in the Japanese case is seen as more threatening, due to the close security cooperation between Japan and the US.



With regard to its regional influence, China has been inclined to take a much more active role. This is a role that has its limitations, largely due to the self-imposed policy of non-intervention, a policy that is followed in terms of military engagement, although in economic terms it would be foolish to say that China is not intervening in others' internal affairs. Some analysts, especially from the US and India, have a much more negative perception and would rather accuse China and the PLA of being on the march both south and west. The question should be whether the Chinese military expansion has in fact been rather modest.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that China has increased its international presence and that it will take an even more active role in the future. However, the rising influence of China at the regional level has not had an even remotely comparable increase at the international level. In fact, China has been notably absent in the security/military sphere at the international level, especially given its economic influence and interests.

China will have to invest much more in its international capacity if it is to be able to exert more influence internationally and be able to support its economic interests. For China's regional neighbors, this is an argument that will create fear, as China has already begun to flex its muscles; and no one will be able to match Chinese economic development, not even India. The reality is, however, that China will have to further strengthen its military and it is not realistic to assume that it will be satisfied with containing its influence.

In international peace and security matters, China will be forced to act much more forcefully at the regional level, not least in Greater Central Asia and potentially in North Korea if the situation gets out of hand, where increased destabilization will threaten not only Chinese security and economic development but also threaten to spread regionally as well as internationally. If China is prevented

from acting or if China refrains from acting, the impact will be negative. It is evident that China will have to move away from its strict non-interventionist policy if positive results are to be achieved.

In the security field, criticism of China's rise has focused to a large extent on the non-democratic government of China rather than on the security implications of its rise. On the Chinese side there has been a strikingly negative reaction to criticism of its role in international security. China will find itself criticized regardless of what it does – it has to get used to this role, even if its national feelings are hurt. This is very much the same situation as that in which the US finds itself.

Attribution of maps and diagrams

- Figure 1 China's defense spending 1996-2009 (Pentagon report on China's military 2010)
- Figure 2 China Outbound Foreign Direct Investment
- Figure 3 Energy consumption (US/China 2000-2009), International Energy Agency
- Figure 4 China's critical sea lanes (US Defense Department report on China's Military Power)
- Figure 5 Great power competition in the Indian Ocean (International Maritime Bureau)
- Figure 6 How America wants to check China's expansion (Heartland: Eurasian Review of Geopolitics, <http://temi.repubblica.it/limes-heartland/how-america-wants-to-check-chinas-expansion/897>)
- Figure 7 Chinese Contribution to UN Peacekeeping Operations (Stratfor, <http://media.stratfor.com/files/mmf/b/1/b197173a088d4ad531ab939911610ac26f2b2a9c.jpg>)
- Figure 8 Conflict Intensity / Human Development (John O'Loughlin 2004)
- Figure 9 Poverty/Conflicts (*Atlas of War and Peace* by Dan Smith, Earthscan)
- Figure 10 The Chinese Mare Nostrum: tension and conflicts for energy (Heartland: Eurasian Review of Geopolitics, <http://temi.repubblica.it/limes-heartland/the-chinese-mare-nostrum/891>)
- Figure 11 Shipping Routes: very large crude carriers
- Figure 12 Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea (UNCLOS and CIA)
- Figure 13 Map showing claims to Senkaku Islands (Nihon Keizai Shimbun)

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