This September the Senkaku/Diaoyu ‘incident’ occupied Chinese and Japanese policymakers, analysts and journalists for three weeks, after Japanese Coast Guard patrol boats seized a Chinese fishing boat and its crew in the waters off the Senkaku islands, controlled by Japan but also claimed by China (which calls them Diaoyu islands). Without any doubt, the incident has negatively affected bilateral relations, which are likely to remain tense in the months to come.

The incident, however, does not only affect Sino-Japanese relations, but also has more general implications for China’s relations with its East Asian neighbours. It was a staunch reminder that the long-standing maritime territorial disputes in the region are still the most likely source of crisis in East Asia.

In this context, the analysis of the relationship between Beijing’s regional policy and the maritime refocusing of its security policies becomes relevant: what is the exact interaction between China’s regional policy and its increasing focus on the sea within the context of its security policies? Is there coherence between the two policies? Or, on the contrary, is the trend to focus security policies on the sea negatively affecting China’s regional policy? If the latter is the case, is there awareness of this problem in Beijing?

The Maritime Refocusing of China’s Security Policies

Over the last three decades China’s security policies have increasingly focused on maritime areas, both at the military doctrine level and at the level of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) military operations. During the late Qing dynasty, as well as during the first three decades of the People’s Republic, China’s security policies had a strong focus on the continent. Since the early 1980s, however, China has begun to refocus its security policies on the sea. This process has been gradual and incremental, beginning with the military doctrine. A first step in this maritime trend was taken at the beginning of the 1980s, when Mao’s doctrine of “people’s war” 轉变” (renmin zhanzheng) was replaced by Deng Xiaoping’s doctrine of “people’s war under modern conditions” 现代条件下人民战争 (xiandai tiaojian xia renmin zhanzheng).
While this change seems to be minor from the lexical point of view, the new doctrine nonetheless introduced some important innovations. The “people’s war” doctrine assumed as a most likely scenario a total war fought deep within the Chinese territory. At the beginning of the 1980s, however, China perceived an improvement in the international environment: as Deng Xiaoping said in 1985, the two main topics of world politics were now peace and development (和平与发展, heping yu fazhan). In this context, the PLA was ordered to prepare for limited wars fought in China’s peripheral areas and especially in its maritime periphery. “Under modern conditions”, therefore, a war was more likely to be fought in China’s coastal areas with the deployment of modern weaponry.

Since then, China’s military doctrine has gradually lost its strongly continental focus and the country’s military planners consider the transition towards a geographically more balanced doctrine accomplished, including some important changes at the operational doctrine level. The traditional Maoist concept of “active defence” (积极防御, jiji fangyu; i.e. defence through counteroffensive) has been reviewed, shifting the theatre of the counteroffensive to “the sources and the bases of the enemy’s war effort” (敌方的战争策源地和基地, difang de zhanzheng ceyuandi he jidi). This requires power projection capabilities, both airborne and maritime.

Maritime refocusing in the context of China’s security policies has also become evident military operations level. Since January 2009 the PLA Navy has taken part in the international antipiracy efforts in the waters off the Somali coast, under the authorization of the UN Security Council. As was noticed, «the current mission represents the first potential combat operation for the fleet outside the Pacific» . To date, the PLA Navy has successively deployed six flotillas to the region, including some of the most advanced Chinese surface ships. In addition to this operation, the PLA Navy has recently conducted naval exercises in the South China Sea, with two Chinese flotillas crossing the so-called “first island chain” for the first time in March and April 2010.

Beijing’s Regional Policies

In the mid 1990s Beijing’s regional policy switched from a relatively passive attitude to an increasingly active and responsible role. The concept of “regional policy” has different denotations in Western and Chinese literature: while Western scholars usually define it as Beijing’s policy toward East Asia, in the Chinese literature the concept refers to Beijing’s policies toward the surrounding countries, including South and Central Asian states.

Considering this wider definition of “region”, the current Chinese regional policies have two fundamental priorities: improvement of bilateral relations with China’s neighbouring countries, including those considered enemies in the past; and secondly Beijing’s participation in and contributions to regional multilateral forums (once perceived as instruments to contain China), which in recent years have in Beijing’s view become instruments with which to increase Chinese leverage and influence in the region.

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Regarding bilateral relations, Beijing has managed to improve its relations with some of its neighbours, including India, Vietnam and Indonesia. With Vietnam, for instance, China signed an “Agreement on friendship, good neighbourliness and longstanding stability” in 1999, resolved territorial disputes on the mainland and in the Gulf of Tonkin (but not disputes on the Paracel/Xisha and Spratly/Nansha islands) and even engaged in some forms of bilateral military cooperation, such as joint military exercises10.

As regards China’s contribution to regional multilateral forums, Beijing has gradually become a crucial partner for ASEAN states through the ASEAN Regional Forum, and later the ASEAN Plus Three (i.e. China, Japan and the Republic of Korea). In 2002, China signed the “Declaration on conduct of parties in the South China Sea” and in 2003 it acceded the “ASEAN Treaty of amity and cooperation”. Regarding economic cooperation, in 2001 China and ASEAN agreed to create a free trade area that came into force on January 1st 2010, thereby taking the lead in regional economic integration between Northeast and Southeast Asia.

Although over the last fifteen years China has been able to implement its regional policies fairly effectively, it has not prevented periodical tensions in its relations with its neighbours around the maritime disputed areas, as recently shown by the Senkaku/Diaoyu incident. What is the nature of the interaction between the maritime refocusing of security policies and Beijing’s regional policy? Are security policies compromising the objectives of regional policy?

China’s Regional Policy Constraining Maritime Refocusing

China’s current regional policy poses a clear limit to the scope of the envisioned maritime refocusing: both the review of China’s military doctrine and the concurrent organizational adaptation of the PLA need to take into account the concerns of China’s neighbours, which could perceive them as threatening or indeed as ‘proof’ of China’s hegemonic ambitions. In practical terms, this means that Beijing’s regional policy has until now decisively contributed to the gradual and incremental pace of China’s maritime refocusing, containing pressures in favour of a faster and wider naval build-up.

Such pressure has become increasingly strong over the last ten years. A coalition made up of like-minded Chinese scholars and opinion makers has consistently supported a more ambitious naval modernization programme.

Many scholars stress that Beijing has strong maritime interests as a consequence of China’s economic development and its integration in the international economic system11. China’s increasing reliance on imported energy supplies created an interest in the protection of the security of the sea lanes of communication connecting the Middle East and Eastern Africa to East Asia12. According to NiLexiong, for instance, China has recently experienced the transition from a “continental rural country” (内陆农耕国家, nei lundong geng zuojia) to a “modern oceanic country” (现代海洋国家, xiandai haiyang guojia)13. Most of these scholars support a naval modernization programme centred on the project of building China’s first aircraft carrier, seen as indispensible for the projection of its military power.

Amongst those scholars there is a consensus that China’s current regional policy restrains its naval modernization programme. For this reason, those scholars who are in favour of the naval build-up tend to support radically different Chinese regional policies, advocating a more assertive stance both in Northeast and Southeast Asia. In Northeast Asia, it is argued in this context, the ‘target’ is Japan as the main challenger for China’s security, not least because Tokyo has supposedly never explicitly recognised the so-called “One-China Principle”14. In Southeast Asia on the other hand, the targets are those countries which (like China) have territorial claims territories in the South China Sea.

10 Ibidem, pp. 34-35.
12 Z. WENMU, Lun Zhongguo Haiquan, [On China’s Sea Power], Beijing, Haiyang Chubanshe, 2009; p. 98.
14 Z. WENMU, cit., pp. 132-150.
Arguments for a wider naval build-up and more assertive Chinese regional policies are gaining popularity in China. *Global Times* (环球时报, Huanqiu Shibao), one of the most popular and widely read newspapers in China, has a specific portal on the South China Sea (under the title “南海, 我们的海”, “Nanhai, women de hai”, “The South China Sea, our sea”) on its website, with daily updates and comments from both the editorial staff and readers. The same newspaper also has a portal on the project for China’s first aircraft carrier (“呼之欲出的中国航母”, “Huzhiyuchu de Zhongguo hangmu”, “China’s aircraft carrier coming alive”).

Despite strong internal pressure, over the last fifteen years consistent implementation of China’s regional policy has implied a good degree of restraint in the naval modernization programme. From this point of view, China’s regional policy has until now constrained maritime refocusing in China’s security policies.

### The Impact of China’s Maritime Refocusing on the Regional Security Environment

There is no doubt, however, that the maritime refocusing of China’s security policies, gradual and restrained as this may be, is contributing to a regional climate of occasional uncertainties and tension, above all in Southeast Asia. A useful indicator of the tense regional climate is data on arms expenditure, as provided by the database of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

The data shows a strong increase in military expenditures in all the major Southeast Asian maritime countries: Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. The only exception is the Philippines, whose military expenditures have remained stable over the last decade, as have the military expenditures of Brunei, Cambodia and Laos. The currently tense and complex regional climate is also confirmed by data on arms transfers: according to the SIPRI *Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2009*, «[d]eliveries to South East Asia nearly doubled in 2005-2009 as compared to 2000-2004. Deliveries to Malaysia increased by 722 per cent in 2005-2009 as compared to 2000-2004, for Singapore by 146 per cent and for Indonesia by 84 per cent».

This tense regional climate, moreover, provides an ideal opportunity for an American “comeback” in Asia. From 2001-2008 the Bush administration adopted some innovative initiatives in the region, including rapprochement with India, a revived security cooperation with some Southeast Asian allies and a first attempt at multilateral coordination amongst Washington’s main allies in the Asia-Pacific. Nevertheless, the foreign and security policies of the Bush administration were strongly focused on the so-called “Greater Middle East”, meaning that its initiatives in Asia remained inconsistent and rather badly coordinated over the years.

In contrast, the Obama administration has repeatedly signalled its focus on continent of Asia. Firstly President Obama’s speech in Tokyo in November 2009 and later Secretary of State Clinton’s remarks in Honolulu in January 2010 aimed to convey the message that the US is “back” in Asia.

A number of recent events and policy initiatives seem to support this revived US interest in Asia and Asian security: in March 2010, the US signed a memorandum of understanding for cooperation in the civil nuclear sector with Vietnam; in the meantime Washington strengthened its military cooperation with Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam through various kinds of joint military exercises; it also planned an upgrade in military cooperation with Indonesia, although the postponement of President Obama’s visit to Jakarta (from March to June, and then from June to November) has delayed the signature of that agreement.

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Last but not least, in summer 2010 several comments by US authorities reaffirmed that the US has an interest in free navigation in the South China Sea, and in the resolution of maritime territorial disputes in the East and South China Sea. In the meantime, Washington has stressed its preference for multilateral negotiations on the issue, a stance that China perceives as ‘interference’ in its relations with Southeast Asian countries, as well as a form of support for Vietnam’s attempts at what China calls the ‘internationalizing’ of the issue. Again, the US expressed its preference for multilateral settings in October, during the first summit of the “ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus”.

As these recent trends show, increased US interest in Asian security in general and in Southeast Asia in particular is further complicating the fragile regional equation. The maritime refocusing of China’s security policies, although gradual and restrained, is contributing to a tense regional climate, especially in Southeast Asia: suspicions on China’s intentions, together with some signals of US re-engagement in the region, are posing new challenges for Beijing’s regional policy.

Conclusions
As explained above, China’s regional policy has until now constrained the maritime refocusing of its security policies, slowing down the pace of its naval modernization programme. On the other hand, although over the last fifteen years Beijing’s regional policy has been aimed at reducing threat perception and easing regional tensions, it has not been completely successful. It cannot be denied that the maritime refocusing of China’s security policies does contribute, together with many other factors, to regional tensions which in turn make it more difficult for China to implement its regional policies.

Beijing is aware of this challenge and is trying to balance two opposing strategies: continuing its maritime refocusing while at the same time seeking to reassure its neighbours that China is committed to maintaining a peaceful and stable regional environment. As noticed by Chinese scholars, Beijing has already adopted some countermeasures, by committing itself to a certain degree of restraint in its naval activities (for example by reaffirming the principle of "not building military bases abroad", 不在海外设立军事基地, bu zai haiwai sheli junshi jidi) and by reportedly exerting restraint in arms transfers to its friends.

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