Keywords: maritime disputes, South China Sea, ‘peaceful rise’ of China, identity politics, geobody politics

1. Introduction

The presentation aims to examine the great power rivalry between China and the US, especially over the maritime disputes in the South China Sea, and how this affects the prospect of peace and cooperation in East Asia. It does so by focusing on China’s so-called ‘peaceful rise’. Rather than analysing the discourse through a geopolitical lens, however, the presentation will shed light on the identity political aspects by examining how the territorial disputes lead to the construction of China’s identity, and how, by combining modern and pre-modern elements, the discourse can be a focal point of the emergence of geobody politics in the region.

2. Geopolitics view and its critics

Recent debate among analysts and policy makers revolves around the question on China’s new assertiveness. A typical depiction of China’s assertive policy is its actions in the South China Sea (Kaplan 2014), where some even argue for ‘a kind of suzerainty’ in the making (Majid 2014, 401). Such theme has been taken up in the US, with suggestions gaining grounds such as: the rise of new great power (China) inevitably leads to a clash with the old power (US) (Mearsheimer 2014; c.f. Yan 2011); or that China is trying to ‘replace’ the US as the primary power in Asia, and the US therefore needs to balance against China as a rising power (Blackwill and Tellis 2015). From such views, Chinese actions are interpreted as an opportunistic projection of raw power: ‘peaceful rise’ discourse as a ‘grand strategy’ is merely a calculative gesture.

Sinologists have questioned such analysis, however, arguing that domestic Chinese debate on ‘core interest’ remains vague (Zeng, Xiao, and Breslin 2015). It has also been suggested that the Chinese state should be seen as fragmented, decentralised and internationalised: for instance, various national and subnational government agencies with lack of coordination has been operating in the South China Sea (Hameiri and Jones 2015). The very idea of a Chinese ‘grand strategy’ itself is problematic, therefore, since it projects a modern view of foreign policy, assuming how a fixed and clearly defined identity and interest of a state informs its decisions and behaviours.

3. Geobody politics?

The presentation will try to reverse the equation by looking at how political practices, in turn, constitute identity. Here, the works by William Callahan and Hiroyuki Tosa is useful. Callahan views maps and cartography as political practices that produce ‘geobody’, which connects space and people in a biopolitical manner (Callahan 2009; Callahan 2010; See also Branch 2014). Maps are deployed in the dynamic of cultural governance and resistance in China and Asia, where states seek to match territorial and
cultural boundaries not only through military coercion but also through the management of identity practices. Taking maps of China’s National Humiliation that links imperial China’s unbounded cartography and modern maps of sovereign territory as an example, which was produced for mass education to chart how China ‘lost territories’ to imperialist aggressors, he shows how this is grafted on to narrative of a ‘century of humiliation’. Recent works on the ‘politics of humiliation’ can uncover the dynamics behind such narrative (Saurette 2006; Moisi 2009).

Tosa furthers Callahan’s arguments by drawing on insights from Critical Security Studies and Critical Border Studies (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2010; Vaughan-Williams 2009). For Tosa, geobody is seen as a collective identity created through political practices (cartography) and strengthened by the performativity of borders (Tosa 2014; Tosa 2012). Borders are only made possible by repeated practices and repetitive learning (c.f. national history of humiliation). Building on such views, it could be argued that intensified territorial disputes can lead to further geobody politics and increase the possibility of conflict.

4. Identity, foreign policy and conflict

As David Campbell argues, foreign policy constitutes state identity through interpretation of danger posed by others (Campbell 1992; Bialasiewicz et al. 2007). In addition, Mary Kaldor suggests that war (or the threat of war) constructs unidimensional or solitaristic identities (Kaldor 2013; See also Kaldor 2006); such solitaristic identities, in turn, is seen as the cause of violence and conflict (Sen 2006). Combined together, it sheds light on how territorial disputes and its associated practices (cartography, border management, media representations such as weather forecasts, etc.) feeds into identity formation of the Chinese state, strengthened by geobody politics. Such construction is further complicated by the fact that China is depicted as a ‘civilizational state’ (Shih and Yin 2013), where the logic of modern sovereign states and the logic of the imperial tributary system is fused into one identity under a solitaristic discourse of the ‘peaceful rise’.

5. Conclusion: possibilities for peace and cooperation in East Asia?

While recent analogies of contemporary East Asia and Europe in 1914 seems farfetched (Krause 2014; Chong and Hall 2014), there seems to be a contradiction in terms between China’s ‘peaceful rise’ and its actions in the South China Sea. In fact, talks about a ‘risk of war’ itself is fueling further political, military, discursive practices, in turn deepening geobody politics in the region. Possibilities for peace and cooperation in East Asia, therefore, will depend on whether countries can overcome the dangers of constructing solitaristic identities that increase the chance of violence and conflict, and whether countries (including China) can understand the implications of the toxic mix of Westphalian/Suzerain logic that seems to be playing out in the territorial disputes.

Bibliography


