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Role of Military Diplomacy in the PRC's Foreign Policy in the South China Sea

Dmitry V. Mosyakov¹, Marina A. Shpakovskaya², Tatyana I. Ponka²

¹Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS, Moscow, Russian Federation

²RUDN University, Moscow, Russian Federation

mosyakov.d@gmail.com

Abstract. The article is devoted to the peculiarities of military diplomacy as an instrument of China's foreign policy aimed at achieving the goal of the "great revival of the Chinese nation." A special role is given to the process of conceptualization of military diplomacy in the foreign policy discourse of the People's Republic of China (PRC), which allowed the authors to identify the tasks and forms of this means of implementing foreign policy. The close connection of military diplomacy with ensuring the fundamental interests of the People's Republic of China is noted. A special place is given to the region of Southeast Asia, where the PRC has unresolved disputes over maritime rights and national jurisdiction of offshore facilities and mineral deposits with several states. The authors assess the effectiveness of military diplomacy in bilateral relations with the countries of the region. The theoretical foundation of the work is the neorealist approach, which allows us to evaluate military diplomacy as a set of non-forceful measures aimed at achieving national interests. The authors conclude that the country and regional priorities in China's military-diplomatic cooperation seem to correspond to the priorities of China's broader foreign policy. The PRC's intensive use of military diplomacy in the South China Sea demonstrates China's growing leadership potential on the world stage and world-building ideas in neighboring regions.

Key words: military diplomacy, China's foreign policy, Xi Jinping, The great revival of the Chinese nation, South China Sea, ASEAN, Vietnam

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Роль военной дипломатии во внешней политике КНР в Южно-Китайском море

Д.В. Мосяков¹  , М.А. Шпаковская² , Т.И. Понька² 

¹Институт востоковедения РАН, Москва, Российская Федерация

²Российский университет дружбы народов, Москва, Российская Федерация

mosyakov.d@gmail.com

Аннотация. Исследуются особенности военной дипломатии как инструмента внешней политики КНР, направленного на достижение цели «великого возрождения китайской нации». Особая роль при этом уделяется процессу концептуализации военной дипломатии во внешнеполитическом дискурсе КНР, что позволило авторам выявить задачи и формы данного средства осуществления внешней политики. Отмечается тесная связь военной дипломатии с обеспечением коренных интересов КНР. Важное место отводится региону Юго-Восточной Азии, где КНР имеет неразрешенные споры по морским правам и национальной юрисдикции островов и месторождений полезных ископаемых с рядом государств. Авторами оценивается эффективность военной дипломатии в двусторонних отношениях со странами региона. Теоретическим фундаментом работы выступает неореалистический подход, который позволяет оценивать военную дипломатию как комплекс несиловых мер, направленный на достижение национальных интересов. В заключении авторы приходят к выводу, что страновые и региональные приоритеты в военно-дипломатическом взаимодействии Китая, по-видимому, соответствуют приоритетам более широкой внешней политики Китая. Интенсивное использование военной дипломатии КНР в Южно-Китайском море демонстрирует наращивание Китаем лидерского потенциала на мировой арене и мироустроительных идей в сопредельных регионах.

Ключевые слова: военная дипломатия, внешняя политика КНР, Си Цзиньпин, великое возрождение китайской нации, Южно-Китайское море, Ассоциация государств Юго-Восточной Азии, АСЕАН, Вьетнам

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Introduction

Xi Jinping's ascension to the Chinese leadership in 2013 brought about a number of major changes in China's domestic and foreign policies. The distinctive feature of Xi's leadership is the idea of the "Chinese Dream," which is intertwined with the concept of the "great rebirth of the Chinese nation." This concept is based on world-building ideas, primarily in neighboring regions (Vinogradov, 2021, p. 29). A well-established narrative in this regard is the course towards the implementation of the concept of a "community of one destiny,"

which implies the achievement of common and mutually beneficial security. The formulation of the PRC's own approach to security issues seems relevant and timely due to the growing of contradictions between the PRC and the United States.

The acuteness of the U.S. — China confrontation is related to the problem of power transition, i.e. changes in the configuration of the world political system under the influence of the redistribution of comprehensive power from the United States to China (Degterev, Ramich & Tsvyk, 2021, p. 212). This process has a global and systemic nature, so it has the potential to

entail changes in the system of international relations itself, which negatively affects regional security in the region that is strategically important for China.

China's most important regional foreign policy priority at its current stage of development is control over 80% of the water area and islands of the South China Sea (SCS). As the Russian sinologist E.N. Grachikov, "China's disputed maritime zone is 3 million square kilometers" and includes more than 230 islands, reefs, and shoals, the sovereignty over which is disputed by five coastal states (Grachikov, 2015, pp. 149, 151). The PRC's interest is due to both the economic and military-strategic importance of this maritime space. The South China Sea is the world's artery of maritime trade: 25—30% of all world trade carried by sea passes through it (Grachikov, 2015).

From a military and strategic point of view, the South China Sea is the fastest route for transferring naval forces from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, which increases its importance as a transit space for maneuvering forces of any country, especially the United States. Accordingly, the loss of China's strategic advantage in this water area is fraught with the loss of regional leadership and the complication of prospects for large-scale economic initiatives. In addition, stability in the South China Sea is necessary for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to build up its naval power to protect China's "core interests."

In this regard, the problem of the specifics of China's interaction with the countries of the region to develop a favorable legal regime in the South China Sea becomes relevant. In the vast foreign policy toolkit, the instrument of military diplomacy looks remarkable, the main purpose of which is to minimize the negative opposition of the regional countries from the gradual build-up of the naval component of the Chinese army (Grachikov, 2019). Given the relative novelty of such a term as "military diplomacy,"

it is worth noting that it is designed to form a conflict-free environment through diplomatic activity, which is carried out by the army.

This issue is partly reflected in the scientific works of such authors as C. Le Mière (2014), E. Pajtinka (2016) and others. One of the first to raise the issue of the PRC military diplomacy was a team of authors from the U.S. National Defense University K. Allen, F.S. Saunders and D. Chen (Allen, Saunders & Chen, 2017). This topic is also studied by H. Elmahly and D. Sun (Elmahly & Sun Degang, 2018), F. Saunders and J. Shyy (Saunders & Shyy, 2019), T. Heath (2020), et al.

The problem of China's geopolitical and strategic interests in Southeast Asia, as well as the strengthening of China's international influence found detailed coverage in the scientific works of several domestic scholars: V.B. Kashin (2013), E.V. Koldunova (2019), D.V. Mosyakov (2019), E.A. Kanaev and M.A. Terskikh (Kanaev & Terskikh, 2020), and others. The Department of Theory and History of International Relations of the RUDN University has developed its own niche for studying the PRC strategy at the regional and global level (Grachikov, 2015; 2021; Ponka, Belchenko & Trusova, 2017; Shpakovskaya, Kuklin & Wu Thuy Chang, 2018; Degterev, 2020; Khudaykulova & Ramich, 2020; Mosyakov & Shpakovskaya, 2020; Yunushkina et al., 2020; Degterev, Nikulin & Ramich, 2021). It is characterized by an interdisciplinary approach and extensive use of modeling and situational analysis.

The theoretical foundation of this paper is the neo-realist approach, which allows us to evaluate military diplomacy as a set of non-violent measures aimed at achieving national interests. The hypothesis of the study is that military diplomacy is the optimal tool for China's interaction with regional countries in order to maintain a predictable regional environment in the context of the "rebirth of the Chinese nation."

Conceptualization of Military Diplomacy in the PRC Foreign Policy Discourse

China's military diplomacy (军事外交, *junshi waijiao*) has strong reasons to be singled out as a separate instrument of the PRC's foreign policy activities. The PLA scholars consider military diplomacy an essential part of the strategy to protect national interests, arguing that military relations can serve as the basis for national strategy planning and stimulate national and military construction. Military diplomacy as a means of implementing foreign policy is assigned many functions. At the same time, scholars distinguish between peacetime, wartime, and crisis functions. In peacetime, military diplomacy “maintains and develops bilateral military security relations... provides a framework for addressing international security issues... shapes the strategic environment of the country... provides support for strengthening the country's international influence and the country's armed forces... and contributes to national defense and military building” (Yongzheng Chu, 2015, pp. 117—125). The use of military diplomacy in crisis situations involves trying to manage crisis situations: reducing or enhancing them, depending on the need.

The PLA's involvement in military diplomacy has increased significantly over the past three decades in line with the growing importance of security and national defense issues in China's foreign policy priorities. Historically, the PLA has played a secondary role in China's foreign policy. This was largely due to the context in which foreign policy priorities were shaped before and after the 1990s. Until the 1990s, China pursued a policy of hiding its strengths and biding its time to build capacity (韬光养晦, *taoguang yanghui*). Above all, Beijing sought to maintain an image emphasizing China's peaceful rise. As E. Hagt argues, “The Chinese Foreign Ministry was the dominant actor in this development-oriented

foreign policy approach,” while the PLA “had to wait and be patient” (Hagt, 2015, p. 219).

After the Cold War there was a change in the international environment that influenced China's global strategy and led to an increased focus on defense and security issues. According to American experts C. Allen, F. Saunders and D. Chen, most of China's military diplomacy is bilateral, but the PLA is currently involved in a number of joint military exercises, etc. (Allen, Saunders & Chen, 2017, p. 21). As an instrument of foreign policy, military diplomacy is conducted top-down and subordinate to party and national diplomatic strategy and foreign policy (Cai Penghong, 2016).

For the first time “military diplomacy” as a specific instrument of foreign policy is found in the Chinese White Paper on National Defense in 1998. This document stated: “China's foreign military contacts are subordinated to and serve the modernization of national defense and the armed forces. China insists on deciding its own foreign military relations and engaging in military exchanges and cooperation based on the five principles of peaceful coexistence. In its contacts with foreign military circles, China has always upheld the principles of mutual respect, deepening mutual understanding, developing friendship, mutual benefit and cooperation. China's armed forces are actively engaged in multilateral military and diplomatic activities to fully realize the positive role of China's armed forces in international affairs.”¹ Since then, this message has remained in the national defense concept papers that the PRC regularly publishes.

In 2015, the white paper “China's Military Strategy” stated that while the overall external environment remained generally favorable, China faced the “difficult task of defending the

¹ 1998 Nian zhong guo de guo fang bai pi shu // Zhong hua ren min gong he guo guo shi wang [1998 China National Defense White Paper // National Historical Network of the People's Republic of China]. September 17, 2009. (In Chinese). URL: http://hprc.cssn.cn/wxzl/zfbps/zhefbpp/200909/t20090917_3959028.html (accessed: 04.11.2021).

mission of national unification, territorial integrity and development interests.” The PLA’s tasks include ensuring China’s security and interests in new areas, both at home and abroad, as well as participating in regional and international security cooperation. With the increasing importance of the ocean spaces in Chinese strategy, the PLA Navy was specifically tasked to “participate in international maritime cooperation in order to provide strategic support for the country’s transformation into a maritime power.”²

At the 2015 All-Military Diplomatic Work Conference and the 16th Military Attaché Working Conference, Xi Jinping cited several specific goals of Chinese military diplomacy: supporting the overall foreign policy, protecting national security and promoting military construction. Xi also emphasized the goals of protecting China’s sovereignty, security and development interests.³ He also noted that military diplomacy must be consistent with the “right political direction,” but that those who conduct military diplomacy must “pioneer and innovate,” “build a strong ideological defense line,” and “improve the methods and means” of military activities.⁴

In the 2019 White Paper “China’s National Defense in the New Era,” the role of the Armed Forces has shifted more clearly toward protecting China’s foreign interests, which include ensuring stability of energy supplies, maritime trade, and the integrity of Chinese

citizens and investments.⁵ This emphasis cannot be separated from Xi Jinping’s priority to ensure the implementation of infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. Accordingly, through military diplomacy the Chinese leadership intends to protect and promote national interests, especially national security interests.

Regarding the goals of military diplomacy, Chen Zhixiong, associate professor of strategic studies at the National Defense University of China, notes that Chinese military and political leaders tend to view military diplomacy as a tool to achieve six goals:

1) to shape a favorable international strategic environment through international exchanges and cooperation;

2) to build confidence and reduce suspicions about China’s intentions;

3) to create a favorable international image by participating in peacekeeping or humanitarian aid operations;

4) to develop the military and national defense by studying advanced military thought, military technology and tactics through bilateral exchanges;

5) to expand influence by increasing the foreign partner’s confidence in China’s national defense structure, military command system, and Chinese-made weapons and equipment;

6) to deter a potential adversary by demonstrating the capabilities of the armed forces in bilateral military exchanges and joint military exercises (Zhixiong Shen, 2018, pp. 103—104).

The main forms of military diplomacy include senior military leadership meetings, joint military exercises, naval port calls and functional exchanges.

² 2015 Nian zhong guo guo fang bai pi shu “Zhong guo de jun shi zhan lue” // Zhongguo Ribao [2015 China’s Military Strategy White Paper // China Daily]. May 26, 2015. (In Chinese). URL: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/interface/toutiao/1138561/2015-5-28/cd_20821000.html (accessed: 04.11.2021).

³ Xi Jinping: Jin yi bu kai chuang jun shi wai jiao xin ju mian // Renmin wang [Xi Jinping: Progress in creating a new situation in the field of military diplomacy // People’s Daily]. January 29, 2015. (In Chinese). URL: <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2015/0129/c64094-26474947.html> (accessed: 04.11.2021).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Xin shi dai de zhong guo guo fang” bai pi shu quan wen // Zhong hua ren min gong he guo guo fang bu [Full text of the White Paper “China’s National Defense in the New Era” // Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China]. July 24, 2019. (In Chinese). URL: <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/fgwx/bps/4846424.html> (accessed: 04.11.2021).

High-level meetings and participation in military forums with foreign security leaders provide a channel for cooperation between countries. This form of military diplomacy serves as an important crisis management tool and helps reduce the risk of miscalculation during military operations (Pajtinka, 2016, p. 184).

Joint military exercises are one of the most visible forms of military-diplomatic activity. They typically involve the militaries of the participating countries in traditional and non-traditional operations.

Naval port calls provide opportunities for a country's naval vessels to carry out a range of activities, including functional services, diplomatic exchanges, and humanitarian operations in foreign ports — each of which can help strengthen diplomatic ties between countries (Nouwens, 2021, p. 6).

Functional exchanges are programs, usually organized by military academies or military colleges that enhance the dialogue between foreign service members, academics and functional personnel and their counterparts in the host country. These programs create opportunities to develop military skills, improve interactions with security partners, and develop future military leaders (Canrong Jin & Bo Wang, 2015, p. 21). It is worth noting that all forms of military diplomacy developed emphasize the fundamentally peaceful and inclusive nature of increasing Chinese military power.

Thus, at this point in time, Chinese foreign policy discourse has become firmly embedded in the understanding of the set of activities carried out by the army to strengthen China's bilateral relations with countries in various regions. The functional significance of military diplomacy can be decomposed according to the focus on two groups of objectives: strategic and operational. Strategic objectives include supporting the PRC's overall diplomacy by providing public goods and engaging key countries and shaping the security environment by demonstrating or deploying the PLA

capabilities. Operational objectives include gathering intelligence on foreign military forces and potential areas of operation, learning new skills and tactics, techniques and procedures, and comparing the PLA capabilities with other militaries. Given that defending China's position in territorial disputes is a strategic objective of Chinese foreign policy, it is appropriate to examine the specifics of China's military diplomacy in its relations with Southeast Asian countries.

The Use of Military Diplomacy in China's Relations with ASEAN Countries

Southeast Asia is the most important regional space for testing the means and methods of Chinese military diplomacy. This is confirmed by data from the 2017 U.S. Institute for National Strategic Studies report "Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003—2016: Trends and Implications." Thus, the PLA military diplomacy has a strong focus on Asia (41%). Of this percentage, Southeast Asia has the highest priority (22%), followed by South (9%), Central (5%), and Northeast Asia (4.8%) (Allen, Saunders & Chen, 2017). This report also explains that the PLA's growing engagement with Asia cannot be separated from the U.S. rebalancing strategy in the region that has been launched since 2011,⁶ and Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2012. The first factor has led to increased military-strategic tensions in the region, which at the moment has flowed under the banner of the Indo-Pacific Strategy.⁷ The

⁶ See: Clinton H. America's Pacific Century // Foreign Policy. October 11, 2011. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/> (accessed: 17.11.2021); Opening Remarks by President Obama at APEC Session One // The White House. November 13, 2011. URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/13/opening-remarks-president-obama-apec-session-one> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

⁷ National Security Strategy of the United States of America // WhiteHouse.gov. December 2017. URL: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp->

second factor led to an increased priority in Chinese foreign policy to develop relations with neighboring states (Mokretsky, 2015, p. 46).

Undoubtedly, China's military diplomacy is growing as China's foreign policy evolves. R. Heydarian has identified three major stages of China's foreign policy in Southeast Asia. The first stage came during the Mao Zedong era, when China was engaged in a protracted ideological war in the "surrounding areas," especially in Southeast Asia. Local communist movements relied on Beijing's material and political support in the early stages of the Cold War. Accordingly, military exchanges became the main instrument of the PRC military diplomacy in Southeast Asia (Heydarian, 2020, p. 34).

The second phase followed the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the rise to power of Deng Xiaoping. Deng Xiaoping made high-level diplomatic visits to key Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and the United States. China would then normalize relations with Western countries and neighboring countries such as Japan and other Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states, who had previously feared a Chinese "red" threat. At this stage, however, China sought to be associated with the outside world only to the extent that it strengthened the country's economic development. Therefore, according to Y. Matsuda, China at the time showed a negative reaction to security cooperation with Southeast Asian countries: "China with its tradition of 'horizontal ties' preferred bilateral diplomacy with small countries." China began to establish a bilateral dialogue format with all ASEAN countries around 1992—1993 (Matsuda, 2006, p. 26).

The third stage was initiated by Jiang Zemin, who became the head of China in 1993. In the early 1990s there was a gradual change in the form of the authoritarian state regime.

content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf (accessed: 01.11.2022).

China's political system became more diversified, and representatives of the business community gradually entered the upper echelons of the Communist Party of China (CPC). At this stage, domestic industrialization prompted China to try to establish relations with other countries, especially with the resource base China needed. In addition, this period was also marked by the migration of millions of Chinese citizens (Heydarian, 2020, p. 36).

As a consequence, China began to offer its own economic system as a potential development model for the post-colonial world and began to perceive itself as an emerging economic power with global interests. This required the introduction of military and diplomatic instruments into foreign policy practice in order to ensure that Chinese interests are respected. Thus, since 2001, the frequency of Chinese defense ministers' participation in various formats of military-diplomatic cooperation, such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) format, has gradually increased (Allen, Saunders & Chen, 2017, p. 54). ADMM-Plus is a platform for ASEAN and its eight dialogue partners, namely Australia, India, China, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russia and the United States, to strengthen security and defense cooperation for peace, stability and development in the region. The platform is based on ASEAN's highest mechanism for defense consultation and cooperation, ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM).⁸

However, Penghong Cai emphasized that the "defense diplomacy" developed by ADMM-Plus has a conceptual conflict with China's "military diplomacy." Although China's military diplomacy is still developing, it can be defined as "achieving foreign policy goals under

⁸ About the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting // ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting. January 10, 2023. URL: <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2002-Declaration-on-the-Conduct-of-Parties-in-the-South-China-Sea-1.pdf> (accessed: 02.10.2023).

China's national general strategy by peacefully using military resources and capabilities to maintain national interests (both at home and abroad), security and development," meanwhile, "defense diplomacy" is a "traditional security concept used for a real policy of strengthening Western allies against common enemies." The divergence between the two concepts is that from the Chinese perspective, represented by the Chinese diplomat Qian Qicheng, "as far as international relations are concerned, any armed force for the coordination of diplomatic actions cannot be called military diplomacy" (Cai Penghong, 2016, p. 93).

Under Xi Jinping, as mentioned above, China has become more determined to defend its core interests. These core national interests include sovereignty, territorial integrity, and sustainable socioeconomic development. The 2017 report to the 19th CPC Congress, which provides guidance for the next five years, stresses the importance of defending these interests and China's sovereign rights and not succumbing to external pressure.⁹

The imperative of the situation in the South China Sea is the disagreement with the position of the Chinese side on the jurisdiction of this water area of other regional countries — Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Brunei. Attempts to resolve this issue and agree in international legal and geopolitical formats have been made by ASEAN countries for decades. The most important and at the same time revealing period in terms of the ability of the 10 ASEAN countries and the PRC to agree among themselves on the SCS problem was the 1990s. The insistence of the Philippines and Vietnam led to the initiation of the Code of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, the idea of which was first voiced during the

⁹ Xi Jinping. Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era // Xinhua. October 18, 2017. URL: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf (accessed: 04.11.2021).

29th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in July 1996.¹⁰

After much discussion, the parties agreed to record the common ground they had reached through diplomatic negotiations in a Declaration, which was formally announced at the 8th ASEAN Summit in Cambodia in November 2002.¹¹ However, the adopted document did not become a really working instrument for the settlement of territorial disputes between the parties and, in essence, is more like a declaration of intent (Korolev & Strelnikova, 2021, p. 4). Despite the existence of this declaration, China has systematically pursued policies in the South China Sea that are consistent with its vision for this space. In particular, it has carried out large-scale projects to reclaim land in the South China Sea and create artificial islands, as well as to place an oil platform *Haiyang Shiyou-981* in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) (Ponka, Belchenko & Trusova, 2017, p. 525). Beginning in 2016, China sent its fishing vessels and coast guard vessels into Indonesia's EEZ off the Natuna Islands.¹² In April 2020, the Chinese government research vessel *Haiyang Dizhi 8*, escorted by a Chinese Coast Guard vessel, entered Malaysia's EEZ and worked alongside a drilling vessel under contract to the Malaysian state oil company Petronas.¹³

¹⁰ 1996 Joint Communiqué of the 29th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting // Central of International Law of National University of Singapore. July 21, 1996. URL: <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/29th-ASEAN-Ministerial-Meeting.pdf> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

¹¹ 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea // Central of International Law of National University of Singapore. November 4, 2002. URL: <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2002-Declaration-on-the-Conduct-of-Parties-in-the-South-China-Sea-1.pdf> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

¹² Sulaiman Y. Why Indonesia Keeps Sending Mixed Signals on the Natuna Sea Dispute with China // The Conversation. January 13, 2020. URL: <https://theconversation.com/why-indonesia-keeps-sending-mixed-signals-on-the-natuna-sea-dispute-with-china-129562> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

¹³ Latiff R., Ananthalakshmi A. Malaysia Calls for Peaceful End to Months-long South China Sea Standoff //

In 2017 China published a White Paper “China’s Policy on Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region,” in which it focused on the military-diplomatic component of cooperation with ASEAN countries as a means of promoting regional policy. The focus was on formats for meetings between China’s top military commanders and regional countries.¹⁴

In 2018, when the PRC and ASEAN agreed on the Common Draft Code, they set a goal of finalizing negotiations to adopt a full-fledged document by 2021.¹⁵ However, due to the traditional problems of the negotiation process, the ongoing crises in the waters of the SCS and the COVID-19 pandemic, the resolution of this issue was postponed indefinitely.

If we visualize the frequency of the use of Chinese military diplomacy in bilateral relations with ASEAN countries, it is worth operationalizing this abstract tool through specific variables: joint exercises, naval port calls, and meetings of the heads of military ministries (Table). It is worth taking 2002, when the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the SCS was signed, as a starting point.

The data obtained require qualitative understanding and interpretation.

The Jakarta Post. April 23, 2020. URL: <https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2020/04/23/malaysi-a-calls-for-peaceful-end-to-months-long-south-china-sea-standoff.html> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

¹⁴ “Zhong guo de ya tai an quan he zuo zheng ce” bai pi shu // Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guo wu xun wen ban gong shi [White Paper “China’s Policy on Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region” // Central People’s Government of China]. January 11, 2017. (In Chinese). URL: http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2017-01/11/content_5158864.htm (accessed: 17.11.2021).

¹⁵ Wang Yi: “Nan hai xing wei zhun ze” dan yi cuo shang wen ben cao an xing cheng, zheng ming zhong guo yu dong meng guo jia you neng li da cheng gong tong zun shou de [de di] qu gui ze // Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guo wu xun wen ban gong shi [Wang Y. Formation of a “Single Text of the Draft Code of Conduct for the South China Sea” proves that China and ASEAN countries are able to develop regional rules that they jointly abide by // Central People’s Government of China]. August 2, 2018. (In Chinese). URL: http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2018-08/02/content_5311360.htm (accessed: 17.11.2021).

Quantitative Indicators of the Intensity of China’s Military and Diplomatic Activity with Southeast Asian Countries, 2002—2021

Country	Joint Military Exercises	Naval port calls	Senior-level meetings and military dialogues	Total
Brunei	4	2	14	20
Vietnam	7	5	61	73
Indonesia	17	6	34	57
Cambodia	5	3	35	43
Laos	2	1*	37	39
Malaysia	11	7	38	56
Myanmar	3	5	36	44
Singapore	10	9	37	56
Thailand	26	10	59	95
Philippines	3	6	22	31
Total	88	53	373	514

* — Laos is a landlocked continental country. However, in August 2017, the PLA Navy’s hospital ship *Peace Ark*, which docked at a port in Cambodia, provided medical assistance to Laos residents.¹⁶

Source: compiled by the authors based on (Allen, Saunders, & Chen, 2017, pp. 62—66); How is China Bolstering its Military Diplomatic Relations? // China Power Project. URL: <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-military-diplomacy/#toc-1> (accessed: 17.11.2021); Jun shi xing dong // Zhong hua ren min gong he guo guo fang bu [Military actions // Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China]. (In Chinese). URL: http://www.mod.gov.cn/action/node_46960.htm (accessed: 04.11.2021).

First, naval port calls and high-level meetings still account for the vast majority (72.6%) of military-diplomatic interactions, while the overall structure of military-diplomatic activities has declined. In the most recent visit of Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe to Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei, the two sides reiterated ASEAN’s support for China’s willingness to resolve disputes in the South China Sea through dialogue.¹⁷

¹⁶ How is China Bolstering its Military Diplomatic Relations? // China Power Project. October 27, 2017. URL: <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-military-diplomacy/#toc-1> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

¹⁷ Zhong guo yu dong meng guo jia fa zhan jun shi lian xi // Souhu [China and ASEAN countries develop military ties // Souhu]. September 14, 2020. (In Chinese). URL:

Second, joint military exercises have increased dramatically since Xi Jinping came to power. Third, the number of visits to seaports has increased over time, with mainly escort task forces operating in the Gulf of Aden. They make diplomatic visits to these countries while resupplying for four-month operational patrols. And the non-escort port calls consist overwhelmingly of friendly visits.

It is also worth noting that the PLA has robust academic and functional exchange programs with various regional countries, although detailed information is not available. However, Xiamen University experts note that China — ASEAN cooperation on non-traditional security and dialogue on the South China Sea issue are important elements of military exchanges.¹⁸

China's comprehensive military and diplomatic efforts to enhance cooperation with ASEAN countries allow the country to maintain a positive tone in its proactive policy in the region. The active use of the tool of military diplomacy allows China to act as a guarantor of universal security and to demonstrate in practice its will and its approach to embodying the concept of a "community of one destiny."

The role of military diplomacy in the PRC — Vietnam relations should be emphasized separately. Vietnam wants to discuss the South China Sea issue in the ASEAN — China dialogue, and at the same time supports the importance of dialogue with China through the efforts of the Party, the government, and the military. Using these channels, especially the diplomatic channel, Vietnam often conducts bilateral dialogues on maritime issues, including the South China Sea

https://www.sohu.com/a/418393900_626761 (accessed: 17.11.2021).

¹⁸ Zhong guo yu dong meng jun shi wai jiao: xian zhuang, qian jing ji lu jing // Nanyang wen ti yan jiu [Military diplomacy between China and ASEAN: status quo, prospects and trajectory // Southeast Asian Affairs]. October 8, 2018. (In Chinese). URL: <http://www.yidianzixun.com/m/article/0KD4h3vK> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

issue. In June 2013 General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Trong visited China, which led to the signing of an agreement between Vietnam and China on "Basic Principles for the Settlement of Maritime Issues." According to this agreement, the two countries will deal with and resolve maritime issues in accordance with the following principles:

— the two countries will expand their common understanding in accordance with legal principles, including the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention, and history;

— the two countries will resolve their maritime disputes through consultations and friendly means in accordance with the principles and the spirit of the 2002 Declaration;

— the two countries agreed to hold regular border consultations twice a year and, if necessary, extraordinary consultations, and to establish a hotline for the prompt resolution of maritime issues.¹⁹

Military diplomacy tools are being used to implement the vector set by the two countries, including visits by Vietnamese naval patrol boats and joint patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin with the PLA Navy. Reporting on this, the People's Army published a commentary by Chinese politicians that these activities "should help maintain calm and stabilize the region" with regard to the South China Sea issue.²⁰

¹⁹ Thỏa thuận về những nguyên tắc cơ bản chỉ đạo giải quyết vấn đề trên biển giữa nước Cộng hòa xã hội chủ nghĩa Việt Nam và nước Cộng hòa Nhân dân Trung Hoa // Nhân dân [Agreement on Basic Principles for Solving Problems at Sea between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the People's Republic of China // Nhan Dan]. June 19, 2013. (In Vietnamese). URL: <https://nhandan.vn/theo-dong-thoi-su/thoa-thuan-ve-nhung-nguyen-tac-co-ban-chi-dao-giai-quyet-van-de-tren-bien-giua-nuoc-cong-hoa-xa-hoi-chu-nghia-viet-nam-va-nuoc-cong-hoa-nhan-dan-trung-hoa-178255/> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

²⁰ Yêu cầu các nước liên quan tôn trọng chủ quyền, quyền chủ quyền, quyền tài phán của Việt Nam ở Biển Đông // Quân đội nhân dân [Ask interested countries to respect the sovereignty, rights and jurisdiction of Vietnam in the East Sea // People's Army Newspaper]. January 29, 2021. (In Vietnamese). URL: <https://www.qdnd.vn/chinh-tri/tin-tuc/yeu-cau-cac-nuoc-lien-quan-ton-trong->

In bilateral relations, cooperation between the navies is also supported by the Strategic Defense Dialogue. Vietnam believes that the South China Sea issue will be properly resolved if the two countries continue dialogue and reach consensus. The channel between the Vietnamese and Chinese armed forces has been maintained even as tensions in the South China Sea have risen. Its function is to explain to China the activities of the Vietnamese People's Army, especially its security cooperation with the United States. The deputy defense minister visits China immediately after the Vietnam — US joint military exercises, where he meets with his counterparts, the deputy chiefs of the PLA's Joint Chiefs of Staff. The official position of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam remains that Vietnam's military exchanges with the United States are unrelated to the South China Sea problem and Sino-Vietnamese relations. Vietnam rigorously follows the "three no's" (*Ba "Khong"*) policy: no alliances with any country; no military bases of any country on Vietnamese territory; and no requests for third countries to interfere in Vietnam's confrontation with other countries (Shoji, 2016, p. 54).

The close cooperation between China's and Vietnam's Border Defense Forces also serves to reduce fears of growing Chinese power in the region and build constructive bilateral relations. At this stage of the relationship, from the perspective of Major General Li Wencang, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Vietnam Border Defense Force, cross-border non-traditional security challenges require deep, broad and effective cooperation between the two countries' border guards.²¹

chu-quyen-quyen-chu-quyen-quyen-tai-phan-cua-viet-nam-o-bien-dong-650530 (accessed: 17.11.2021).

²¹ Yue nan jun fang: jiang jia qiang yu zhong guo bian fang he zuo da ji kua jing fan zui // Renmin wang [Vietnamese military to strengthen border cooperation with China to fight cross-border crime // People's Daily]. February 11, 2015. (In Chinese). URL: <http://military.people.com.cn/n/2015/0211/c172467-26545659.html> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

In general, military diplomacy under Xi Jinping's leadership and course on "revitalizing the Chinese nation" has been a key tool for achieving diplomatic goals in the context of the quantitative increase and qualitative modernization of the Chinese army. This change in the PRC's foreign policy has had two major consequences for the PRC policy in the Southeast Asian region. First, this development has led to a growing sense of confidence, especially in the South China Sea, which is seen as a core national interest.

While the growing assertiveness has caused uneasy relations between China and some ASEAN countries, China's military diplomacy, which has a different approach to ASEAN, has led to "ongoing negotiations without progress" on the South China Sea dispute. Second, China's strengthening of military diplomacy with neighboring countries can be seen as an indicator of China's increasing leadership capacity on the world stage, expanding international responsibility and exploring opportunities to form Chinese-centric segments of the world. Therefore, so far, China has deliberately maintained various levels of bilateral military diplomacy with several ASEAN member states.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals a concerted effort by the PRC to use the PLA to achieve various objectives, with a particular emphasis on supporting China's foreign policy, shaping the security environment and securing Chinese foreign interests.

The country and regional priorities of China's military-diplomatic engagement appear to be closely aligned with its broader foreign policy priorities. This includes a broad focus on building good strategic relations with Southeast Asian countries and neighboring countries like Vietnam. An analysis of PLA military relations from 2002 to 2021 confirms that China intensively uses the tool of military diplomacy to shape a more predictable environment in a

strategically important region. For example, most port calls unrelated to Gulf of Aden operations are friendly port visits, highlighting China's attempts to reassure neighbors concerned about its naval power and unyielding stance on territorial jurisdiction.

In general, the concept of “the great renaissance of the Chinese nation,” according to which military diplomacy has become a key tool for achieving China's foreign policy goals, demonstrates China's increasing leadership capacity on the world stage, expanding

international responsibility and exploring opportunities to form Chinese-centered segments of the world, primarily in neighboring regions. In the face of increasing risks to core interests, including the SCS problem, China has shifted to its own strategic initiatives at the regional level that have world-building potential. To eliminate alarmism among regional players and promote a favorable regime in this maritime space, China is engaging in military diplomacy.

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About the authors: *Mosyakov Dmitry Valentinovich* — Dr. of Sc. (History), Professor, Head, the Center for the Study of Southeast Asia, Australia and Oceania, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences; ORCID: 0000-0003-2701-3533; e-mail: mosyakov.d@gmail.com
Shpakovskaya Marina Anatolievna — Dr. of Sc. (History), Professor, Department of Theory and History of International Relations, RUDN University; ORCID: 0000-0003-4463-880X; e-mail: shpakovskaya-ma@rudn.ru
Ponka Tatyana Ivanovna — PhD (History), Associate Professor, Department of Theory and History of International Relations, RUDN University; ORCID: 0000-0003-4944-115X; e-mail: ponka-ti@rudn.ru