

ASSESSING ASSERTIONS OF ASSERTIVENESS:

THE CHINESE AND RUSSIAN CASES





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ASSESSING ASSERTIONS OF ASSERTIVENESS: THE CHINESE AND RUSSIAN CASES

The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS)

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Assessing Assertions of Assertiveness: The Chinese and Russian Cases

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Study I – Great Power Assertiveness

In recent years there has been much talk about how two great powers, China and Russia, have allegedly become much more assertive in world politics. These allegations are typically based on a number of particularly striking news events. But how do we know that these events are not just cherry-picked? And if we look a bit further back in history than the ‘commentariat’ typically does, is it really the case that recent behavior or rhetoric has changed dramatically in these two countries?

This study tries to provide evidence-based answers to these questions. It starts out by offering a definition of what international assertiveness means and how such a definition can be operationalized. It then develops a more systematic and replicable method to track this phenomenon. This methods draws upon three different types of sources: the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT, which covers

almost a quarter billion categorized events since 1979 worldwide), the HCSS Off-Base (which contains all web-pages of the websites of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of 7 important powers, including China and Russia) and a number of selected statistical indicators. This broad analysis generated a number of interesting findings.

The first major finding is that both powers have indeed displayed increasing amounts of assertiveness over the past decade. In this period, China appears to have ratcheted up both its rhetorical and its factual assertiveness significantly more than Russia has, although it started from a significantly lower baseline and still remains below Russia's level. [Note: we stopped collecting the data for this study around mid-2013 and therefore 'missed' some of the more recent indications of assertiveness such as the recent events in Ukraine and the Crimea].

A second robust finding is that in both countries (and for most – if not all – aspects of assertiveness), factual assertiveness has increased more than rhetorical assertiveness. This means that both countries' acts speak louder than their words. Positive/neutral assertiveness continues to outweigh negative assertiveness for both countries. But factual types of assertiveness have increased quite robustly across all sources and methods.

In terms of military assertiveness all our datasets show a rising Chinese power that is increasingly asserting its military muscle. Russia presents a more mixed picture on this, although the Russian baseline remains significantly higher than the Chinese one.

The security implications of increased assertiveness are far-reaching. Over the past few decades direct conflict between great powers has largely disappeared. Great powers often quarreled amongst each other, but these disputes rarely led to direct bilateral confrontation. Tensions occurred (and continue to occur) in various domains: with Russia over issues such as the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan or Syria, and with China over Taiwan, Japan, the South China Sea, or North Korea. They also occurred over different functional issues such as currencies, free trade and protectionism, oil and gas, human rights, minerals, etc. But these various tensions were mitigated by some powerful countervailing trends, including shared interests (terrorism, economic interdependence, 'Chinamerica'), shared nuclear deterrence, the bartering and exchange of asymmetric interests ("these things matter more to them than to us") and various bargains/side payments. So, on balance, potential challengers seemed to have somehow felt inhibited to engage into too much brinkmanship.

Our findings do point to some broader trends (as well as concrete facts and events) that challenge that delicate balance. Last year both China and Russia have been willing to push their brinkmanship further than at any time since the end of the Cold War. Over the past few years increased levels of assertiveness (including military ones) may have increased the conflict and escalation potential for – once again – direct armed conflict. The danger of a *Cuban Missile Crisis*-type event may very well be increasing again, which could lead to unmanageable escalation.

One intrinsic danger of assertiveness lies in the informational fog that such cycles of inflammatory rhetoric can trigger. In this fog of assertiveness, it becomes ever harder to discern the hard facts and to put events in perspective. This greatly increases the contribution that evidence-based datasets can make to international security as they allow all observers (both the stakeholders themselves and the public at large) to maintain some perspective.

But beyond the rhetoric, there is also growing factual assertiveness on the part of both China and Russia. Assertiveness in the military realm is manifested not only in increased expenditures but also in various types of new arms races in particular domains, such as cyberspace. Such forms of factual assertiveness raise questions for Europe in general, and for smaller and medium-sized countries in particular. What can be done about precisely the type of great power assertiveness that European countries have tried to bridle in themselves for the past seventy years? Will these forms of assertiveness remain contained and eventually blow over or will they become the new normal? Does this mean that Europe has to start beefing up its more traditional 'power' resources to secure its seat at the 'Great Power' table? Or should European countries start (re)building ties with China and Russia and can we play a special role in putting things in perspective thereby letting cooler heads prevail? And if so, what would be required for that?

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ASSESSING ASSERTIONS OF ASSERTIVENESS: THE CHINESE AND RUSSIAN CASES

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1 Preface

The events – still unfolding as these words are written – that shook up Ukraine, Europe and the world in the first months of 2014, came as a shock to most Western policymakers. They were not exactly a bolt out of the blue. Russia’s relationship with the West had been deteriorating for quite some time. But the 2014 Crimean Blitzanschluss suggests a readiness by one of the nuclear great powers to take risks that many in the West would have thought implausible just a short while ago. Similar surprise is also often voiced over China’s increased willingness to assert its interests in the international arena. International relations experts often use the term ‘brinkmanship’ for this type of behavior: the practice of pushing dangerous events to the brink¹ (hence the name) of disaster in order to achieve the most advantageous outcome.

This study sets out to take a closer and more systematic look at the phenomenon of great power assertiveness. It starts out by exploring why great powers matter so much in international relations and what assertiveness actually is. It then goes on to examine the available evidence for two great powers that have been making headlines with what some see as unprecedented assertiveness: China and Russia (see Box – Why only China and Russia?). All too often, such claims remain restricted to anecdotal skirmishes. Scholars who claim that a certain country has become more assertive will adduce a number of events that they claim support their case. Scholars who disagree with the claim will then counter by offering different hand-picked events or alternative explanations for the mentioned ones. But all of this evidence is typically limited in time (which makes it hard to assess whether alleged ‘new’ trends are genuinely new or just a return to a historical norm) and scope (e.g., it often only includes confirming

evidence, and excludes disconfirming evidence like non-assertive evidence that may balance out the assertive evidence, or the 'counter-evidence' of facts that one might have expected to happen if countries were really assertive, but that did not²). We therefore made an – to the best of our knowledge unprecedented – effort to draw upon a larger and more diverse evidence-base in order to ascertain whether China and Russia have in fact become more assertive. The greater part of this paper will be devoted to the factual and rhetorical evidence. The paper will conclude with some security implications.

Why only China and Russia?

This is not a self-evident choice. Our research has shown that the US is far more associated with assertiveness in the scholarly literature than, for instance, either China or Russia (Figure 1). We suspect that an analysis of the global media or other indicators would produce a similar finding.

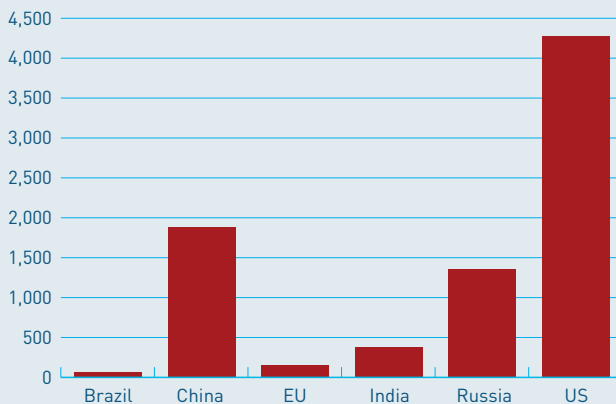


FIGURE 2.1: GREAT POWER ASSERTIVENESS (ACADEMIC SEARCH RESULTS)

However, given the scope of this project, HCSS, in close consultation with the three Ministries that commissioned this research, decided to confine this analysis to China and Russia. There can be no doubt about these two countries' current importance to the international system. They are the world's largest countries in terms of land area. Both have historically been participants in Great Power wars, especially Russia, which has been involved in fewer wars than France, England or Austro-Hungary, but in far more than countries like Germany or Sweden.

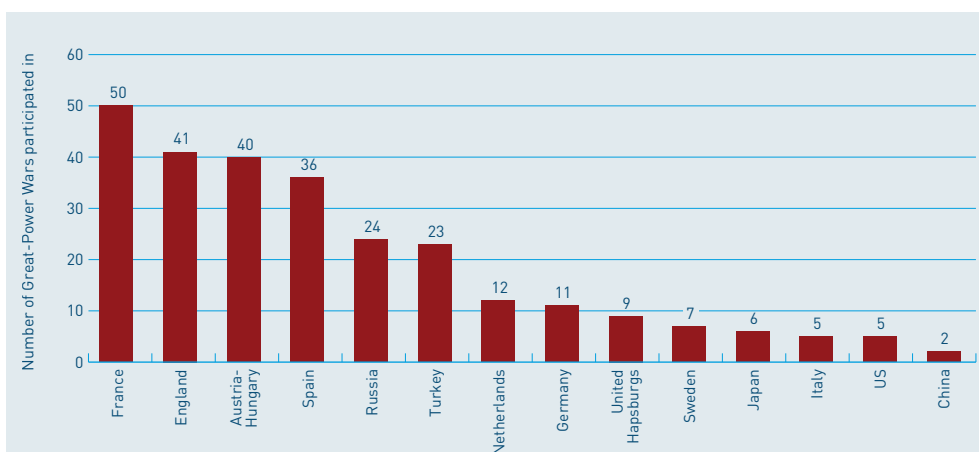


FIGURE 2.2: GREAT POWER PARTICIPATION IN GREAT POWER WAR 1495-2014³

Both are members of the UN Security Council, and both are nuclear powers. Both appear increasingly willing to challenge the United States – also in military terms – as illustrated by a few recent high-profile cases. These include Russia’s talk in 2013 about dispatching fighter detachments to Belarus, Iskander short-range missiles to Kaliningrad, or more military forces to the Arctic⁴ as well as arguably quite bold actions in 2013 such as dispatching a military naval warship off the coast of Scotland, running the largest-scale military field-exercise since a long time with its Belarusian ally (Zapad-2013), flying bombers over NATO (including Dutch) airspace and even simulating an aerial attack on Southern Sweden, etc. On China’s side, such cases include, for example, the Chinese declaration of an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, the incorporation of the South China Sea in passport maps of China, the dispatching of their new aircraft carrier Liaoning further afield to Hainan island (leading to a near-collision with a US warship), and the test of a hypersonic missile capable of evading American missile defenses.⁵

2 Why Great Powers Matter More

Great powers still have a quality of their own.⁶ Power, especially military power, is not distributed equally among all states, as shown in Figure 3 (the size of the rectangles represents how much money countries spent on defense in 2012. (Expenditure is in constant 2011 US dollar).



FIGURE 2.3 TREEMAP OF WORLD MILITARY EXPENDITURES 2012⁷

Figure 2.3 clearly shows how unevenly military power is distributed in the world today – a statistic that has not changed since the end of the Cold War. HCSS has computed an indicator that is sometimes used to express inequality in economic data like income distribution (the Gini-coefficient), but that we applied to the global distribution of military expenditures. This statistic shows the military Gini-coefficient hovering around the .9 mark since the end of the Cold War,⁸ i.e., very close to ‘1’ which would mean total inequality (one power spending 100% and other countries nothing).

But whereas global military inequality has not changed, the distribution between the great powers certainly has. We can see this in more detail in Figure 2.4, which represents – based on the same data as Figure 2.3 – the shares of global military spending accounted for by China and Russia,⁹ the two major powers this report will focus on. It also adds the United States and the European Union for comparison.¹⁰

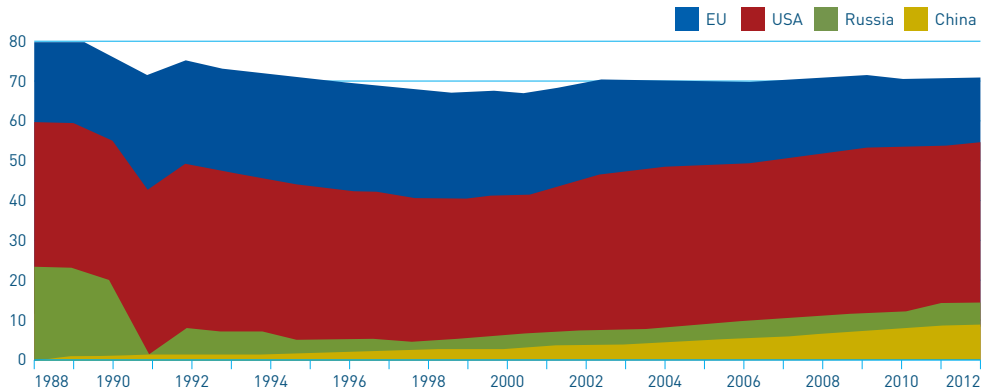


FIGURE 2.4: SHARE (%) OF GLOBAL MILITARY SPENDING IN CHINA, USSR/RUSSIA, THE US AND THE EU BETWEEN 1988 AND 2012¹¹

We note that the US share has hovered quite consistently around 35-40% throughout the entire selected period. The share of USSR/Russia went down dramatically from 24% to 2% towards the end of the Yeltsin-period (1999).¹² It has since then crawled back to 5%. The biggest change is in the Chinese (going from under 1% in 1988 to 10% in 2012 – a tenfold increase) and EU figures (declining steadily from 36% in 1989 – then on par with the US – to 16% in 2012).

Not only do great powers possess disproportional power – as illustrated here in military terms – they also wield it disproportionately. The historical record shows that they tend to participate more in militarized conflict,¹³ to impose more economic sanctions,¹⁴ to possess more nuclear weapons,¹⁵ to form more military alliances¹⁶ and to mediate¹⁷ or intervene¹⁸ more in civil and international conflicts. A recent paper summarizes scholars' findings on this issue: "Overall, major powers are more active internationally, engaging in more foreign policy behaviors that influence the behavior of other states and the way in which the international system functions."¹⁹

And yet, despite this evidence that the world is, to paraphrase the singer James Brown, not just a 'man's world', but a 'great powers' world', the world has not witnessed a single great power war since the end of the Korean War. Historically, great powers have engaged in war with each other at regular intervals – often with enormously deleterious consequences in economic and human terms.

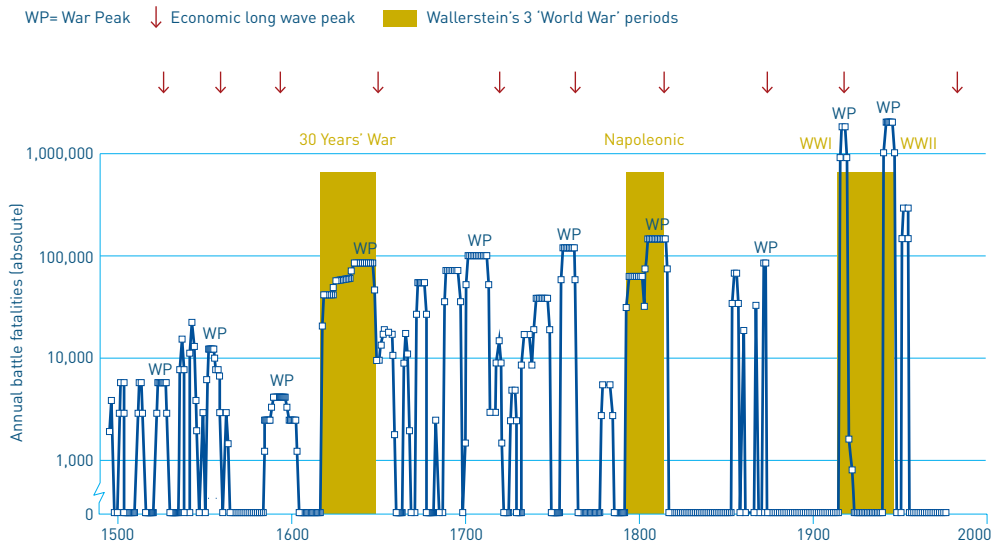


FIGURE 2.5: GREAT POWER WAR SEVERITY, 1495-1975²⁰

The world came close to yet another great power conflagration on a number of occasions during the Cold War. But – whether due to the nuclear condition or to other reasons – it always managed to avoid any overt collisions escalating into anything resembling the two world wars or any great power wars before that. The Korean War (1950-1953) was the last time that two or more great powers directly faced each other in a sustained armed conflict.²¹ So great power war in that sense appears to mirror the decline in the overall amount of violence in the world that has been documented by Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker and others.²²

But what does this trend bode for the future? Some scholars extrapolate a bright future. John Mueller’s view is that major war has become “subrationally unthinkable,” that is, something that “never percolates into [states’] consciousness” as a possible option.²³ Mueller maintained in *Retreat from Doomsday* that World War I “was a watershed event,” which undermined the image of war as “glorious, manly, and beneficial.”²⁴ Since then, war has gradually come to be viewed with “ridicule rather than fear” in the developed world.²⁵ Christopher Fettweis argues vigorously in *Dangerous Times?* that the future will be “free of major war” and will also see a “decrease in balancing behavior, proliferation, and overall levels of conflict across the world.”²⁶ He urges theorists and policymakers to grasp the implications of a “golden age of peace and security.”²⁷

Others remain gloomier. Richard Rosecrance points out that “since 1500 there have been thirteen cases of one Great Power approaching or passing a hegemonic leader in economic or military terms. Of these, all but three ended in major war.”²⁸ Nassim Taleb, the now famous author of *The Black Swan* (2007), argues that Pinker’s statistical trends do not exclude the possibility of a one-off catastrophic conflagration.²⁹ ‘Realist’ scholars like Colin Gray even talk about the possibility of ‘another bloody century’.³⁰

There is no debate about the fact that great power war has been of enormous importance in the past. With respect to the future, there is no such consensus. Joshua Goldstein recently conceded in a piece written for the National Intelligence Council’s latest major foresight study *Global Trends 2030*: “[i]n my opinion we just do not understand war and international relations well enough to predict anything twenty years into the future.”³¹ A fair way to sum up the debate, may be to say that many authors seem to agree that the likelihood of great power war may have diminished, but that its future re-occurrence cannot just be assumed away. If it is true that great power assertiveness has increased – as much anecdotal evidence seems to suggest – and that the world has thus come closer to a possible abrupt break in the Long Peace, then policymakers in all countries, great and small, should take heed.

3 What is Assertiveness?

In Other Disciplines

Assertiveness is a term that became popular in the 1970s, especially in the fields of psychology and of communication.

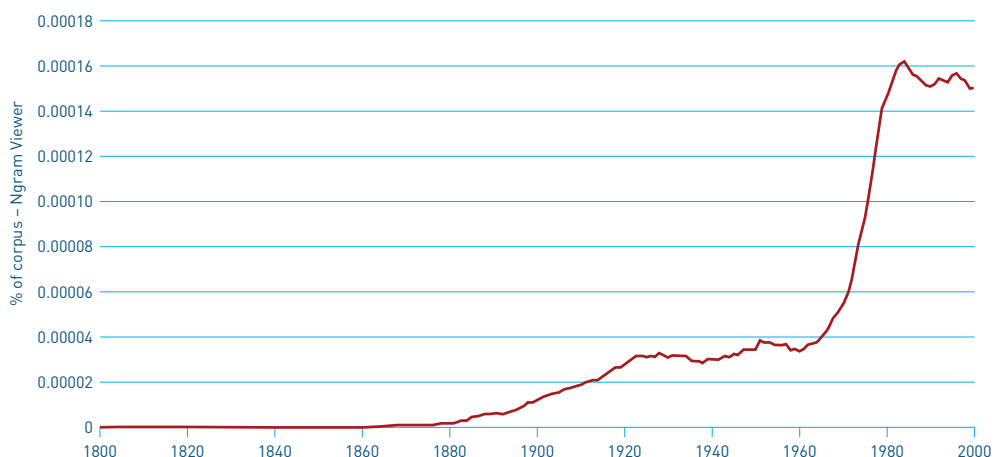


FIGURE 2.6: OCCURRENCE OF THE WORD ‘ASSERTIVENESS’ IN GOOGLE BOOK CORPORA³²

It is typically positioned between ‘passive’ and ‘aggressive’ behavior or communication. Behavioral psychologists, for instance, talk about four major personality/communication types: **aggressive**, in which an actor infringes upon the rights of others; **passive**, in which a person essentially allows others to violate his/her own rights; **assertive**, in which an actor respects both his/her own rights and those of others; and also **passive-aggressive**, in which someone is essentially being aggressive but in a passive or indirect way (e.g., someone may be angry but not act in an overtly aggressive way by yelling or hitting, but still signaling displeasure by sulking or slamming a door). We take away two important points from this: 1) that there is both a **communicative (rhetorical)** side to assertiveness and an **attitudinal (factual)** side; and 2) that assertiveness is not the same as aggressiveness, and that it can have both a positive and a negative association (see Figure 2.7).



FIGURE 2.7: DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ASSERTIVE, PASSIVE AND AGGRESSIVE

In International Relations

In international relations, the concept has not been the subject of much in-depth scholarly inquiry, although it has been used discursively – and much more so in the ‘applied’ than in the theoretical literature. And in the more applied policy debates it can be found back in both a **positive** sense of constructive activism (e.g., “Germany is not pulling its weight in international affairs and should become more assertive”) and in a **negative** sense (“China is behaving increasingly assertively”). The term does appear to be used more frequently in the negative sense.

The one explicit attempt at providing a formal definition that we were able to identify in the literature was by Harvard China-scholar Alastair Iain Johnston, who described assertiveness as a “form of assertive diplomacy that explicitly threatens to impose costs on another actor that are clearly higher than before” e.g., “if you sell weapons to Taiwan, we will harm you in much more costly ways than before”; or “if you let the Dalai Lama visit, the costs for you will be substantially greater than before.”³³ Whereas we instinctively agree with the main elements of this definition (i.e., that it deals with

the interactions between countries, that there is an element of threat, and that there also has to be some escalation in that threat), there are two elements that we feel less comfortable about. The first one is the definition's sole focus on 'costs'. Some forms of verbal assertiveness – “we are 'better' (/‘more Christian’, /‘less aggressive’/, etc.) than others;” for instance – may not really impose costs on other countries, but may still be perceived as (and represent) assertiveness. Secondly, we miss a reference to 'power', which we feel plays an important role in international assertiveness.

Our own definition of assertiveness is therefore based on **power** instead of on costs. We differentiate between different aspects of 'national' power: the power a country intrinsically possesses (however one wishes to define that), the power it is willing and able to manifest through concrete actions (factual), the power it professes rhetorically and the power that is perceived by other countries (see Figure 2.8).



FIGURE 2.8: DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF POWER

It is clear that these different aspects of power are to a large degree distinct from one another. A country can have significant 'latent' power that it could actualize but may decide not to. The case of Germany's international stance in security affairs might once again serve as an example. Other countries may try to project far more international power than they actually possess, arguably as in the case of North Korea. And the perception of a country's power by third countries can vary widely – sometimes even entirely unrelated to any of the other three aspects of power.

Therefore, we define 'assertiveness' as an increase in any of the three aspects of power to the right of Figure 2.8: in power projection, power assertions or in the perception of these first two by others. The two middle ones – the power a country

projects and the power it professes – we define as ‘objective’ assertiveness, as in those cases where a country demonstrably changes its behavior or rhetoric. And the way in which any action or rhetoric (even if it has not changed) is perceived by third countries, we define as ‘subjective’ assertiveness.

This study differentiates between two types of assertiveness: ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’. We define ‘objective’ assertiveness as any increase in at least one of the following two aspects of ‘power’: the power an actor manifests through its actions (factual assertiveness) and the power it rhetorically claims to possess (rhetorical assertiveness). Under ‘subjective assertiveness’ we understand situations where an actor is perceived by others – whether or not based on objectively observable realities – to have increased its either factual or rhetorical assertiveness.

In this report, we focus our attention on the two middle ‘objective’ pillars as shown in Figure 2.8: the rhetorical and the factual types of assertiveness. We recognize that this excludes an important dimension of assertiveness, which like so many other things, lies very much in the eye of the beholder. But as previously mentioned, one of the main goals for this report was to develop ways to get a better evidentiary grip on the phenomenon of assertiveness, which is why we decided to start with those elements that at least some evidence can be found for.

4 Research Design

The ambition of this study is to extend both the scope (beyond anecdotal cherry-picking) and the time coverage (looking back more than just a few months or years) of the evidence base that can be used to assess countries’ assertiveness. In order to analyze both the rhetorical and the behavioral dimensions of China’s and Russia’s alleged assertiveness, we used different sources, methods and tools. These will be briefly introduced.³⁴

For the analysis of the **rhetorical side of assertiveness**, we used three main tools:

- The first one is **GDEL**, the open-source Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone that was first released in 2013. It covers millions of full-text newspaper articles published since 1979 and applies various coding and natural language processing tools to them in order to automatically extract events (almost half a

billion categorized events, with 120.000 being added daily), actors, geographical locations and 'tone' (negative/positive). For example, if an article contains the line "Sudanese students and police fought in the Egyptian capital" it codes the event as "SUDEDU fought COP". Next, the system finds the nearest mention of a city or locality in the text – in this case Cairo – and adds its latitude and longitude to the event data. One of the important coding distinctions GDELT provides is between 'verbal' and 'material' instances of either cooperation or conflict. The HCSS team thus was able to identify the codes that could be classified as 'assertive' and to examine those events that involved China and Russia and were coded as evidence for rhetorical assertiveness.³⁵

- The second one is the **HCSS Off-Base**³⁶ which contains all webpages of the official websites of (so far only) the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of 7 important powers, including China and Russia. These websites represent one of the most authoritative (and in our opinion underexplored) sources for foreign policy analysis, as they reflect how countries want to present their foreign policy positions to the rest of the world. The HCSS team also applied a number of mostly open-source software tools to extract the main topics from those websites and to zoom in on those N-grams (single words or combinations of 2 or 3 words) that are associated with 'assertiveness'. We first identified 'baskets' of expressions (e.g., "China demands") that seemed to clearly zoom in on those countries' own assertiveness (and not that of others) and then identified all N-grams that co-occurred within two sentences of the occurrence of any part of that basket (i.e., in two sentences before and after the sentence in which the term "China demands" occurs).
- We also scanned all **scholarly articles** contained in EBSCO,³⁷ the world's largest electronic collection, and published in 2013, in search for any pieces of evidence that were adduced by scholars to prove (or disprove) allegations of assertiveness, be they rhetorical or factual. Academic English-language articles were selected with similar search queries for both China and Russia and were then examined manually by HCSS analysts.

For the **factual evidence**, HCSS also used a different mix of three approaches:

- We used the **GDELТ-events** (see above) involving China and Russia and having been coded in GDELТ as ‘material’.
- Like we did for the analysis of rhetorical assertiveness, we also scanned the relevant **scholarly articles** of the past year in search for the concrete events that were used to illustrate assertions (or denials) of assertiveness; and finally
- We also collected some **numerical data** that could be used as proxies to reflect the two countries’ assertiveness in the diplomatic, informational, military and economic domains.

Since much use was made of (manual and automated) coding, we developed a consistent coding scheme based on three elements:

- whether an event was positive/neutral or negative (its tone);
- whether it was rhetorical or factual (its level); and
- whether it was of a diplomatic, economic or military nature (its type or category).

POSITIVE / NEUTRAL			NEGATIVE				
Levels of Assertiveness	Type of assertiveness		Grand Category	Levels of Assertiveness	Type of assertiveness		Grand Category
1	Rhetorical	Positive/ Neutral	Diplomatic	-1	Rhetorical	Negative	Diplomatic
2			Economic	-2			Economic
3			Military	-3			Military
4	Factual	Positive/ Neutral	Diplomatic	-4	Factual	Negative	Diplomatic
5			Economic	-5			Economic
6			Military	-6			Military

FIGURE 2.9: ASSERTIVENESS CODING SCHEME

The list of GDELT codes and how they were recoded for this project are available upon request. But to give a few examples:

- “Threaten to reduce or break relations” was coded as a rhetorical (“threaten”) negative (“reduce or break relations”) diplomatic (as it did not – necessarily – imply specific economic or military action);
- “Demand military cooperation” was coded as rhetorical (“demand”) negative (“demand”) military (“military cooperation”);
- “Express intent to settle dispute” was coded as rhetorical (“express”) positive or neutral (“settle dispute”) diplomatic (no specific economic or military connotation); and
- “Provide military aid” as positive/neutral (“provide aid”) military (“military aid”) factual (“concrete action”).

The next section will present the findings of those different research streams.

5 Main Findings

The main findings of our analysis will be presented based on the sources and methods that were used. We will start with the events (GDELT/recoding), will then move to the official websites (Off-Base/N-gram analysis); then to the scholarly literature (academic journals/traditional expert analysis) and then finally to some numerical data (various data sources/statistics). A synoptic overview of all findings can be found in the first part of the conclusions.

What Do the (Automatically Extracted) Events Tell Us? GDELT

China

Overall Trends

GDELT data for China show a steady rise by about 50% in total Chinese assertiveness since 1980, with the highest peak in 1984, markedly less oscillation (and so more consistency in assertiveness) since about 2000, and then again a marked upturn since 2003. When we focus on the more recent period, most peaks have occurred between 2007 and 2012.³⁸ Around 2007 and 2008, we observe a number of peaks that could be explained by China’s increased assertiveness with the growing financial and economic crisis that hit the West, but also by military events such as the anti-satellite missile test on January 11th, 2007, and diplomatic events, such as China’s bilateral economic pressure exerted on North Korea. In early 2007, China also sent a number of Chinese military engineers to Darfur in a move that triggered much Western attention (see

Figure 2.10 showing the types of assertiveness; there is a similar military peak in January that same year).

Overall assertiveness continued to rise between 2009 and 2013, with somewhat weaker but more frequent peaks. This occurred particularly in late 2009 (e.g., the number of Vietnamese fishing vessels apprehended by China increased in the Paracel Islands) and in the first months of 2010. For instance, China issued a statement in January to remind the world of its “indisputable sovereignty over the islands of the South China Sea and the adjacent waters”³⁹

The assertiveness figure remains high throughout 2012-2013, the years in which China brought an aircraft carrier into the navy, allowed anti-Japanese protests in Chinese cities, and took a strong stance on the territorial claims of its neighbors: Taiwan, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam.

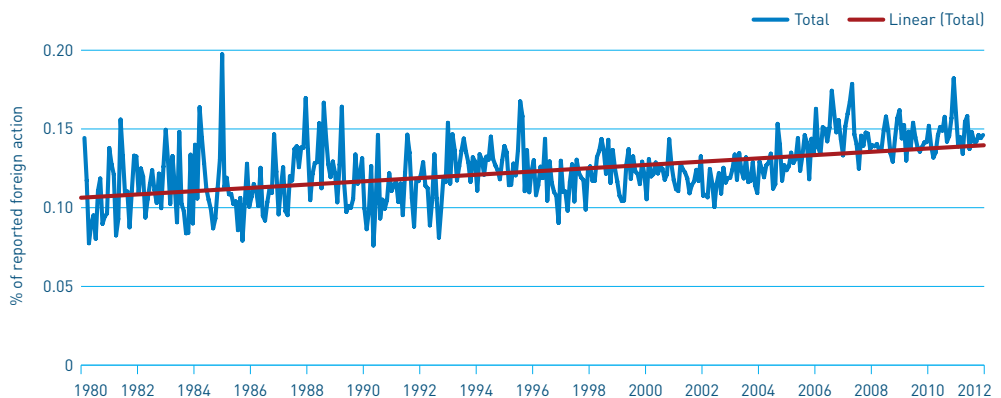


FIGURE 2.10: TOTAL CHINESE ASSERTIVENESS IN % OF REPORTED TOTAL FOR FOREIGN ACTION, 01/1980 – 08/2013. ‘TOTAL’ EQUALS BOTH RHETORIC AND FACTUAL EVENTS. ‘LINEAR’ IS THE TRENDLINE.⁴⁰

Different Types

Looking at the three different categories of assertiveness, namely diplomatic, economic, and military (as shown in Figure 2.11 below), and for the purpose of this study and a more detailed picture, zooming in on the last ten years, we observe that since 2003 China’s assertiveness has been mostly of the diplomatic type. But all three types of assertiveness are rising, with the economic one most rapidly and the military one less so.

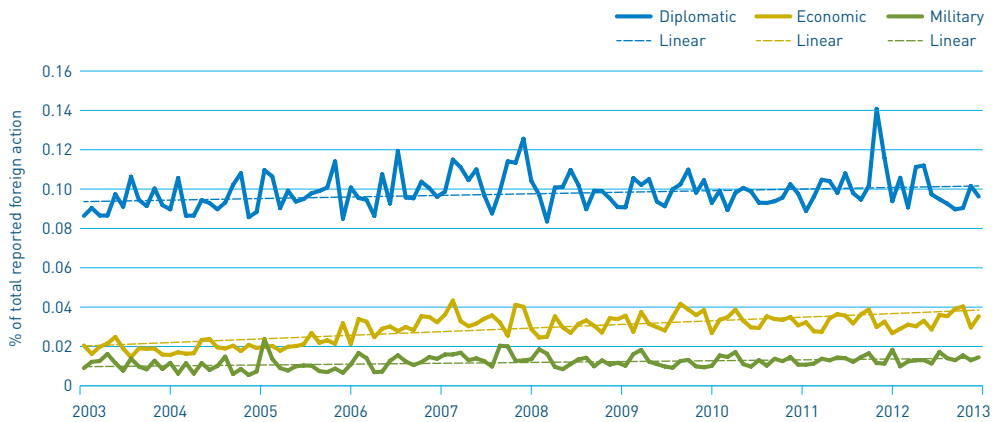


FIGURE 2.11: TYPES OF CHINESE ASSERTIVENESS IN % OF REPORTED TOTAL FOR FOREIGN ACTION, 09/2003 – 08/2013

The **'diplomatic type' of assertiveness** started at a much higher level than the other two and kept rising over time, with many peaks each year from 2006 onwards. Excluding the hike in January 2012, some stabilization can be observed since 2008. Two important peaks are identified around August 2007 and May 2008. They can be associated with a rising activism of China in asserting territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Both economic and military assertiveness have increased more strongly over time than the diplomatic type, but they have not fully caught up. Data for **economic assertiveness** reveal a steep increase between 2006 and 2008 (with a peak in May and September 2008 at the heart of the economic crisis), before first stabilizing somewhat and then increasing again ever since. Another spike appears in 2010, as China overtakes Japan as the world's second biggest economy.

These tensions correspond to the period where new **'military' peaks** occurred – throughout 2008, as well as around September 2009, September 2010 and May 2012.

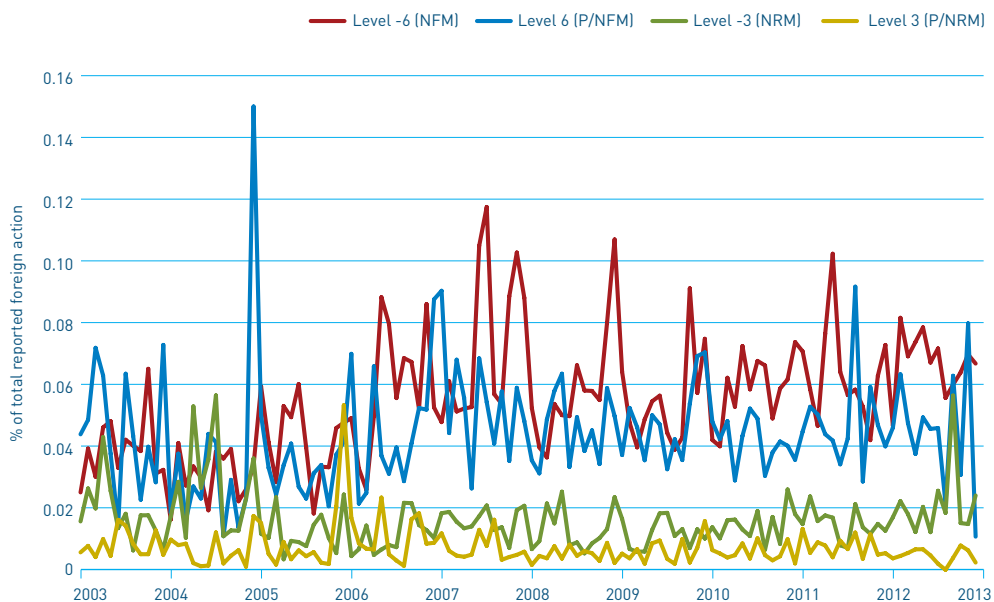


FIGURE 2.12: LEVELS AND TONES OF CHINESE MILITARY ASSERTIVENESS IN % OF REPORTED TOTAL FOR FOREIGN ACTION, 09/2003 – 08/2013. P/NRM: POSITIVE OR NEUTRAL RHETORICAL MILITARY ASSERTIVENESS; P/NFM: POSITIVE OR NEUTRAL FACTUAL MILITARY ASSERTIVENESS; NRM: NEGATIVE RHETORICAL MILITARY ASSERTIVENESS; NFM: NEGATIVE FACTUAL MILITARY ASSERTIVENESS

Military Assertiveness: Levels and Trends

Across China’s levels of military assertiveness, there is a **growing gap between factual (red and blue) and rhetorical (green and taupe) military assertiveness**. This suggests an increasing discrepancy between what is being said and what is being done in reality: even if China may not talk the talk, it does seem to be walking the walk of military assertiveness. If we zoom in on the **positive or neutral** military assertiveness, we see that the factual subtype (blue) scores much higher than the rhetorical one (the taupe – virtually consistently the lowest). The same is true for the **negative subtypes**, where the factual (red – currently the highest) type is also consistently higher than the rhetorical one (green). The most striking finding here is the steep increase (almost doubling) in actual negative military behavior, which certainly appears to confirm the many claims that have recently been made in this regard.

Positive, neutral, or negative **factual types (red and blue)** of military assertiveness are generally more observed than the rhetorical types. The positive/neutral factual

(blue) type strongly peaks in the second half of 2005, around August and September – during the first Sino-Russian military exercise Peace Mission 2005, and the visit of US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. The **negative (factual) military events (red)** tend to dominate all other trends. However, its peaks are frequent and quite high in terms of score. They occurred particularly in early 2007, around February and March 2008, in the second half of 2009 (July and August), the second half of 2010 (June to August), and the first few months of 2012.

Russia

Overall Trends

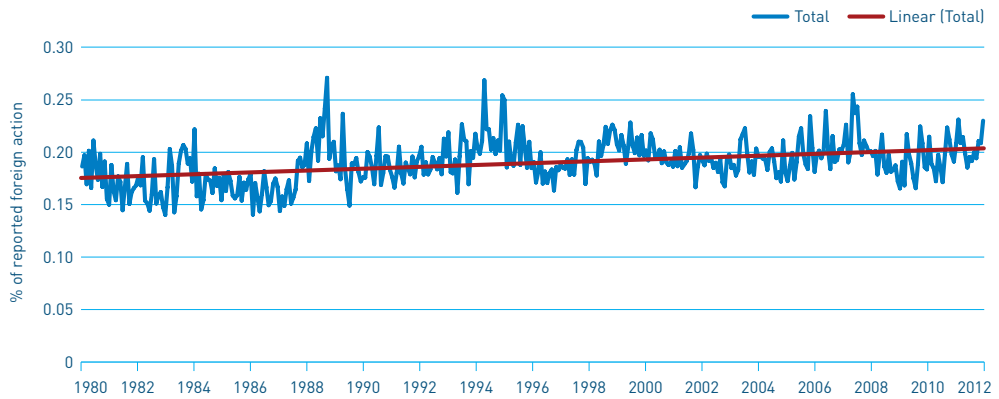


FIGURE 2.13: TOTAL RUSSIAN ASSERTIVENESS IN % OF REPORTED TOTAL FOR FOREIGN ACTION, 01/1980 – 08/2013

Since 1980, Russian assertiveness has been steadily rising (though less than Chinese) by about 20% – and it is at a higher level today than it was in the late Soviet period under Gorbachev. This rise, however, is much less pronounced than in the Chinese case, with even a period of overall stabilization and slight decline from the end of the 1990s until 2005/6 (late Yeltsin, early Putin years). Since 2005 we once again observe more oscillation with a few peaks.

The highest peak occurred in 1989, which can be easily explained by the events that marked the fall of the USSR and the end of the Cold War. The data suggest that there had been more frequent peaks and more irregular oscillations over the years during which Yeltsin was in power (1991-2000) than after that. This is indeed a sober reminder of the often tense relations between Russia and the West even during the Yeltsin years, which is all too often portrayed in overly rosy terms. The two main peaks we

see in this period occurred in September 1994 and August 1995, corresponding to the first Chechen War and the continued Russian military offensive.

The last years of the Yeltsin period were characterized by a somewhat declining assertiveness, which only regained – but did not really exceed – its previous level under President Putin’s first two terms in office. President Medvedev’s term started with the biggest spike during the war against Georgia in August 2008, but then declined to late-Yeltsin levels. Since President Putin’s return to power in 2012, we once again see a marked increase (but we point out that our data stopped in August 2013 and that many of the data points that are used in the press and the specialized literature today postdate this period).

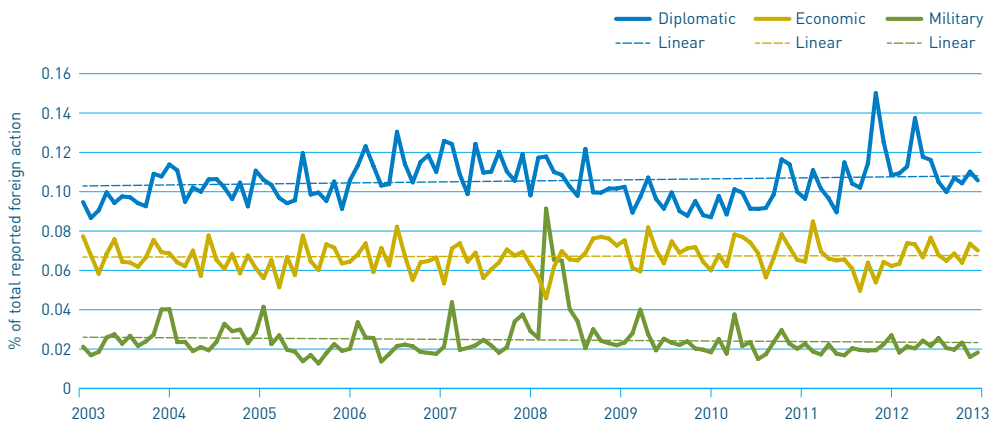


FIGURE 2.14: TYPES OF RUSSIAN ASSERTIVENESS IN % OF REPORTED TOTAL FOR FOREIGN ACTION, 09/2003 – 08/2013

When we then zoom in onto the different types of assertiveness, the Russian data appear to show a more balanced distribution than the Chinese. Although the overall pecking order (first diplomatic, then economic, then military) remains identical, the gaps between them are different. The **‘diplomatic type’** is the one that experiences the strongest increase over time. The **‘economic type’** rises as well, particularly between September 2008 and August 2011, though this increase remains modest and less pronounced compared to the diplomatic rise. Economic peaks are only arising significantly in January 2007, in the second half of 2009, and in August 2011. And interestingly enough, the **‘military type’** is the least important one and has been slightly decreasing since 2003.

The first two Putin administrations (2000-2008) are marked by an increase in the overall assertiveness, which remains limited, but had been standing out by the number of peaks and a greater intensity in terms of oscillation since January 2006.

The years 2007 and 2008 witnessed a new increase in Russia's overall assertiveness, particularly in January 2007 (the Russia-Belarus energy dispute), September 2007 (the expedition to the Arctic, the ambush of Russian troops in Chechnya, etc.), and August 2008, which corresponds to an impressive 'military' peak too (the Russo-Georgian war). Interestingly, there is a strong peak as Medvedev takes over the Presidency in May 2008 (overall), which coincides with the highest 'military' peaks as well. These 'military episodes' occurred in August 2008 (as mentioned), July 2009 (the Sino-Russian exercise Peace Mission 2009 and the launch of Russia's new submarine-launched ballistic missile), and in the second half of 2010 (the publication of the Russian Military and Defense Doctrine).

After a rather steep decline through 2010, a new rise in overall assertiveness can be identified. This rise further accelerates after Putin once more assumed office as President in 2012. Interestingly enough, the 'military type' of assertiveness follows a downward trend from 2009 until August 2013.

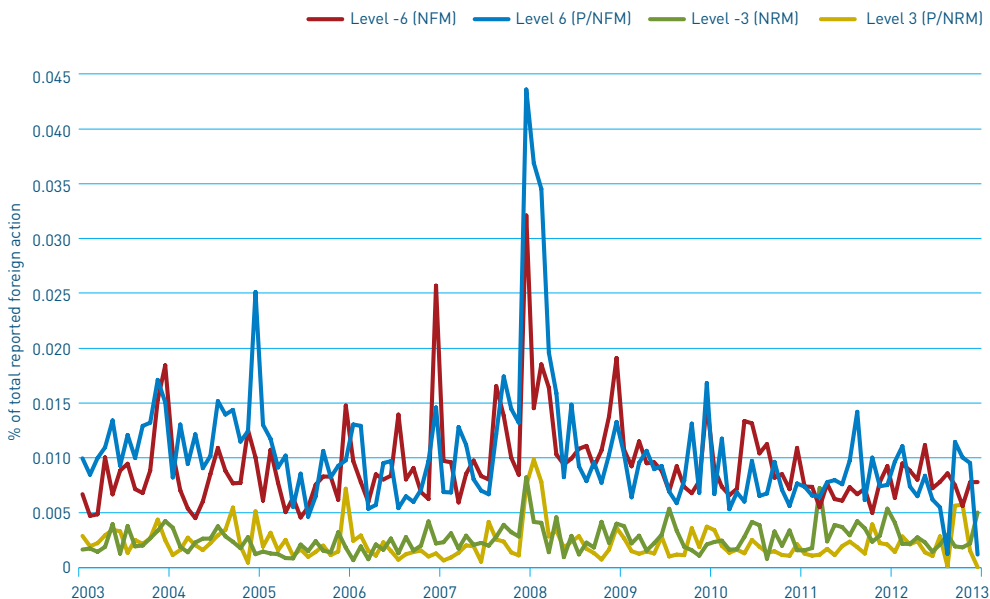


FIGURE 2.15: LEVELS AND TONES OF RUSSIAN MILITARY ASSERTIVENESS IN % OF REPORTED TOTAL FOR FOREIGN ACTION, 09/2003 – 08/2013

Military Assertiveness: Levels and Trends

Similarly to the Chinese dataset, GDELT identified fewer Russian **rhetorical** military assertive events than it did **factual** ones. Russia too seems to talk softer than it acts (even if the discrepancy is smaller than in the Chinese case and is also declining). **Factual military assertiveness** (red and blue) is however much more pronounced across the entire period, with a slightly more marked presence of the positive/neutral type (blue) overall, although its decline is larger than the small increase in negative factual assertiveness (red). Both tend to experience peaks simultaneously: around September 2004, September 2006, September 2007, September 2008, September 2009, and September 2010. On some occasions, the negative factual assertiveness was stronger than the positive/neutral one (in 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009 and 2010). But contrary to the Chinese case, there is little to suggest an overall dominance of positive/neutral rhetoric over the negative one, or vice-versa.

Cross-Country Comparison

A first important observation is that the overall levels for Russia's assertiveness remain higher than the Chinese ones. In 1990, Russia started at about twice the level of China's assertiveness. In the decades since then, China has been closing that gap – especially in the past 5 years. But it still remains below Russia.

Both countries' assertiveness is mostly expressed in the diplomatic arena, where their figures are very close to each other. In the economic arena, Russia appears to be a lot more assertive than China, although China saw a bigger increase – especially in the 2006-2007 period. Militarily speaking, Russia again scores somewhat higher than China, but that gap seemed to be almost closed by August 2013. Zooming in on the military assertiveness, the results reveal that China is more inclined to factual and negative attitudes than Russia is.

When we look specifically at the events that were coded as military assertiveness and their breakdown in positive/neutral vs. positive and factual vs rhetorical, we note that both China's and Russia's actions seem to speak louder than their words – a gap that is bigger for China (and growing) than it is for Russia (where it is declining).

What Do the Official Websites Tell Us? Off-Base and N-grams

The second dataset we turn to is an official one. In our analysis of GDELT-data, we already pointed out that both countries tend to speak more softly than they behave. But that was based on an automated analysis of what was said about those countries in newspaper articles. We also wanted to find out – and construct a similarly

comprehensive database of – what these countries themselves say about this. Unfortunately there are no equivalents to GDELT for this. As we briefly described above, HCSS therefore decided to create the HCSS ‘Off-Base’, a database containing all text-based webpages of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of 7 great powers, including China and Russia. In this section we will just zoom in on all occurrences of a basket of terms that can be said to convey a sense of that country’s assertiveness. We will examine which other terms also occur around those assertiveness-related terms on these web-pages. To the extent possible, we use the same coding conventions as we did for GDELT. As with GDELT, this is pioneering work. As such, it remains subject to a number of important caveats that are described in more detail in our supporting material⁴¹. But HCSS strongly feels that the field of foreign and security policy analysis is in dire need of more systematic datasets. We therefore use any opportunity to push the boundaries of our possibilities. It is in this spirit that we constructed this new dataset and present this preliminary analysis.

China: Professing Positive Assertiveness... Except in its ‘Near Abroad’

In order to be able to zoom in on all instances of China’s possible assertiveness (as opposed to Chinese claims about other countries’ assertiveness), we used the following ‘basket’ of expressions: “China assert”⁴² OR “China want” OR “China need” OR “China claim” OR “China reaffirm” OR “China provoke” OR China “defamation”

The results suggest that China seems to position itself as a great power by promoting its own aspirations for a peaceful rise, and denouncing assertiveness and assertive behaviors of others – especially those threatening its interests. On its website, China portrays itself as a great power that is increasingly asserting its national *grandeur*. This assertiveness is most firmly (and increasingly) expressed in matters of territorial sovereignty and tends to be voiced at the regional level (Southeast Asia and East Asia, including Japan). Our findings suggest that the international economic and political spheres – more so than the military sphere – are deemed increasingly important in the making and promotion of China as a great power.

All key words that were analyzed have significantly gained in importance in recent years (particularly since 2007-8) in terms of normalized frequency of occurrence.

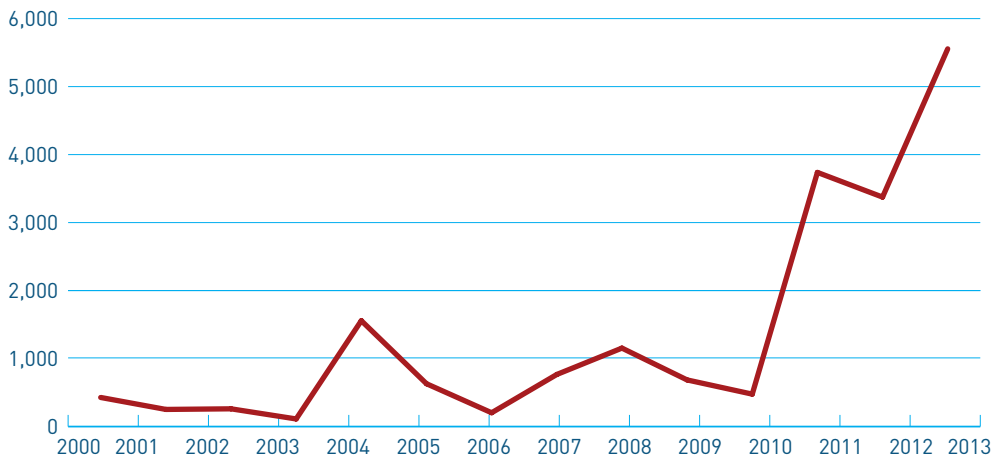


FIGURE 2.16: TOTAL ANNUAL FREQUENCY IN NUMBER OF HITS FOR ALL KEY WORDS GENERATED BY THE QUERY FOR CHINESE OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS. NUMBER OF DOCUMENTS MATCHED: 146. TOTAL NUMBER OF DOCUMENTS IN ENGLISH: 11587

'China' is by far (656 times) the most frequently used term that is associated with our 'assertiveness' basket, 'Developing' (233), 'cooperation' (185)⁴³ closely follow, as well as 'peacefully' (89). The website suggests that it is through **peaceful development and cooperation** that China envisages its growth and its rise as a great world power. Therefore, China's verbal strategy appears more inclusive and non-confrontational, seeking external cooperation. Some elements indicate a rather friendly, positive tone which has remained constant over time, further confirmed by the presence of 'efforts' (38) or 'peacefully developing' (32), 'respect' (30), 'positive' (22), 'understanding' (21), 'pacific' and 'sincere' (11), 'China seeks harmony', 'prosperous', etc. A good example is found in the focus on 'Syria' – showing China's interest in the region and its issues, as well as its desire to play a significant role by suggesting that the Syrian conflict requires the world's main powers to take a stance: 'concern Syria', 'interests Syrian people', 'solution Syrian'. This shows the intention of China to appear as involved, but in a peaceful way. In addition, China does not see itself as the world's single key player as it recognizes the **importance of 'mutually beneficial'** and 'international/trilateral cooperation'.

The frequency of verbs such as 'wanted' (43) or 'China wanted' (40), 'stated' (41), 'reaffirmed' (30) connotes **a rather confident rhetoric** in China's discourse. This confidence also remained consistent over time, which tends to indicate that the Chinese confidence may not be as recent as many 'Western' scholars claim.

The emergence of many terms belonging to the **economic domain** such as ‘company’ and ‘investment’, next to ‘promotion’ (‘investment promotion’) and ‘establishment’ (‘establishment company investment’), suggests that one way for China to grow and assert itself as a world power is to spread its companies’ presence and business. This ‘economic’ theme clearly has not always occupied the central stage as an instrument of Chinese assertiveness, as many relevant key words only appear in recent years, which coincides with our GDELT findings (peaking for economic assertiveness in 2008).

‘Sovereignty’ (19), ‘territorial’ (18), ‘sovereignty territorial’ (13), ‘sovereignty territorial integration’ (11), ‘independence sovereignty territorial’ (6) – these words are connected to the **importance of territorial sovereignty** as a major cause to defend – and increasingly so given the ongoing territorial disputes. It is not a surprise to see ‘Japan’ is a rather frequently used term (20), alone or next to ‘Diaoyu’ or ‘provocation’, as well as the presence of ‘Taiwan’ and ‘Taiwan inseparable’.

References to the military are quite rare, and are not among the most frequently mentioned terms. Interesting ones include ‘military build-up’, or ‘bilateral military relationship’. ‘Arms’/‘arms control’, and ‘weapons’ seldom appear, but they are often coupled with – respectively – ‘disarmament’ and ‘convention’, ‘nuclear’, thereby reinforcing this perception of a rather peaceful discourse or a concern for the use of such weapons.

Russia’s Steadily Growing and Pragmatic Assertiveness, Focused on (/against) the West

For Russia, there is no clear definition, translation or contextual use of ‘assertiveness’ in the selected documents.⁴⁴ After careful investigation, we used the following ‘basket’ of expressions: “утверждает OR требует OR нуждается OR хочет OR продвигает OR провоцирует OR предлагает” [‘state’, ‘demand’, ‘need’, ‘want’, ‘push’, ‘provoke’, ‘suggest’].

Our analysis suggests that Russia’s assertiveness is mostly expressed towards the West rather than other great powers like China, mostly towards states but also within international organizations – specifically the UN – and mostly with the objective of defending security and economic interests.

The general overview of the N-grams that are associated with these terms reveals a steady growth of assertive-related matches in the Russian foreign policy discourse (Figure 2.17).

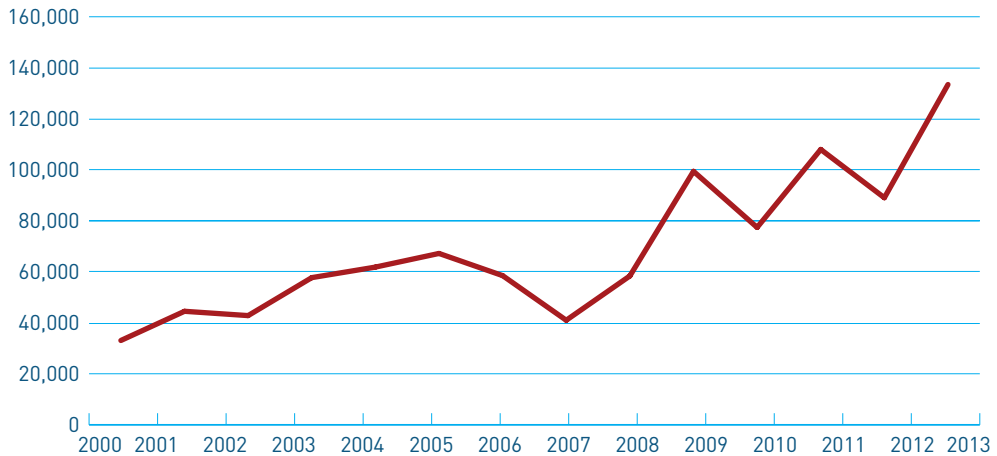


FIGURE 2.17: TOTAL ANNUAL FREQUENCY IN NUMBER OF HITS FOR ALL KEY WORDS GENERATED BY THE QUERY FOR RUSSIAN OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS. NUMBER OF DOCUMENTS MATCHED: 3999. TOTAL NUMBER OF DOCUMENTS: 17914

'Russia' tops the chart by far. Mentions of 'Russia' itself (and 'Russian government') remain quite evenly distributed throughout all years. The players and powers of interest to Russia and involved in the international arena particularly include countries and states. The West scores the highest, before Asia and Africa: 'USA' – 785, 'European' – 692, 'Europe' – 613, 'EU' – 491; 'CIS' (Commonwealth of Independent States, surrounding Russia). It is worth noting that the US still prevails in this context and that Russia's assertiveness appears to be more targeted at the world's sole remaining superpower than at anybody else (including Europe or China). Yet since 2007 we also observe a sharp increase in the importance of the EU in this 'game of power'. Africa scores quite low in frequency overall, and although it seemed to have gained the attention of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2007 to 2011, its frequency declined ever since. China, India and the Asia Pacific score low, perhaps suggesting that Russia was never keen on asserting policy objectives in these regions.

Such 'state actors' are followed by large **international or regional organizations**, including the UN, whose mechanisms allow enough space for assertive maneuvering and are very much used by Russia for this purpose; the OSCE, as Russia's dominating security interests are focused on security; and much less frequently, the BRICS.

The **geographical focus** of Russian foreign policy is mostly regional, slightly increasing over time. One piece of evidence is that 'region' (1410) and 'regional' (1203) score much higher than 'world' (731) and 'global' (729). This may nuance the idea that Russia would have ambitions for global domination.

There are frequent mentions of areas in which Russia tends to express assertiveness, and most have increased over time. The **'security'** sphere remains the core area where Russian foreign policy displays the most assertive features. It indeed scores first ('security' – 2755; 'terrorism' – 916; 'threat' – 828; 'nuclear' – 781; 'military' – 774; 'weapons' – 647); followed by an **economic theme** ('economic' – 1574, 'financial' – 743, 'economy' 669) and a 'legal' domain (790).

Finally, the results highlight a definite **cooperative undercurrent** – in line with the positive assertiveness in coding. Unsurprisingly, official texts suggest that Russia is playing according to international rules ('cooperation' – 2071, 'negotiate' – 1487, 'agreements' – 1347, 'peace' – 1107), rather than emphasizing conflict ('fight' – 958, 'conflict' – 605; 'responsibility' – 516, 'against' – 496, 'demand' – 489). Yet there is no clear prevalence of a particular cooperation mode over time, and little to suggest that there have been significant shifts in this respect. This may indicate that Russia's assertiveness is implemented both through calls for cooperation and accusations, through a balanced mix of 'peace' and 'fight'. One cannot state that Russia is either cooperation-oriented, or aggressively positioned within the international arena. Russian diplomacy seems to pragmatically mix wording in official documents according to specific circumstances.

Cross-Country Comparison

Over the last ten years, both China and Russia have increasingly emphasized the importance of a global focus, where they feel their voice can and should be heard and which they want to use as part of their identity as global powers. It may very well be that the important finding here is not so much assertiveness *per se*, but the area in which it is expressed. And this area has expanded. Russia focuses particularly on **the UN** as an important instrument. China shows its interest for the rest of the world by emphasizing concepts of **cooperation in a broad range of domains** (from cultural to diplomatic and economic). Russia appears to show fewer global ambitions than China which also considers different channels to increase or maintain its influence. Concretely, while China looks at **other major countries**, regions (Europe) or continents (Africa), Russia has greater expectations of **international organizations**.

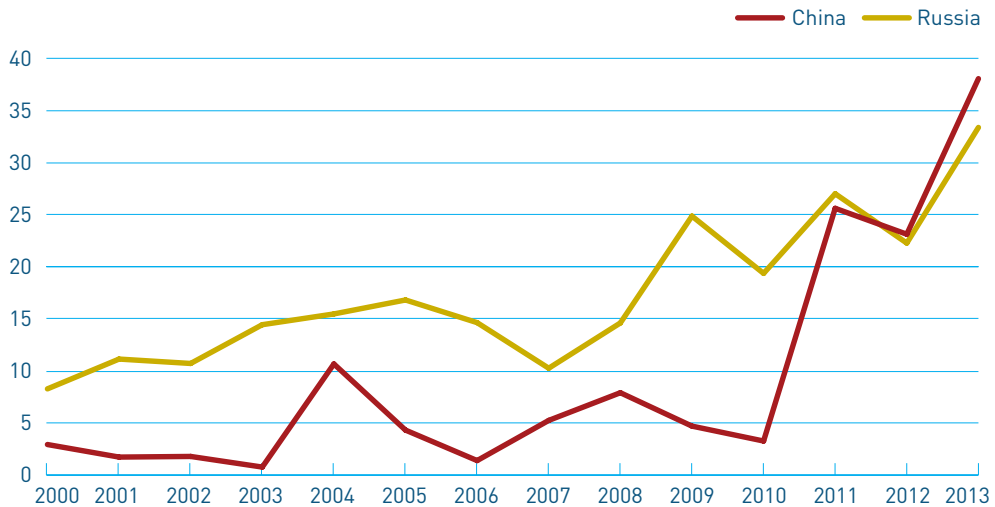


FIGURE 2.18: NORMALIZED FREQUENCIES OF THE NUMBER OF HITS FOR ALL KEY WORDS GENERATED BY THE QUERY FOR RUSSIAN AND CHINESE OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS, OVER TIME.

The economic domain (and to a lesser extent, the legal domain) seems to be a predominant arena in which both powers express their concerns and ambitions (even if these are ambitions for cooperation) and where they stress their interests. Yet each country also has a particular topic of interest on which they do not hesitate to assert their views or condemn the attitudes of others. For Russia, this would be matters of **hard security**, such as terrorism and nuclear security. As for China, this ‘hard’ security aspect is far less dominant; rather, there is a particularly strong rhetoric about the defense of sovereignty – that is, its own **territorial sovereignty** *vis-à-vis* the ongoing disputes with Japan, and the situation with Taiwan.

Both countries’ rhetoric is not negative. This reflects official foreign policy discourses, which naturally tend to express views in a diplomatic way, and communicate national priorities for cooperation over conflict. But Russia’s foreign policy seems more assertive by nature than that of China, due to the difference in the tone employed. China uses a **non-confrontational, friendly, pacific** rhetoric (insofar as its territorial sovereignty is not the heart of the matter), uniformly across the official statements. Russia is **more nuanced**, verbalizing its positions in a more neutral way, at times administrative but sometimes also ambivalent, if not ambiguous. It is indeed difficult to clearly identify assertiveness across Russian documents through an explicit rhetoric. There seems to be a balance between an invitation for peace and cooperation,

on the one hand, and a need to show that Russia stands firm regarding certain occasions – not necessarily depending on the issue at stake, as is the case with Chinese territorial disputes, but rather on the circumstances – on the other.

What Does the Scholarly Literature Tell Us? EBSCO

After the media and the official websites, we also wanted to survey the evidence for assertiveness that is adduced by experts in the scholarly literature. Contrary to the media (GDELT; where we analyzed millions of newspaper articles) or the websites (HCSS Off-Base, also containing tens of thousands of text documents), in this case the sources that were published in the past year and contained the words ‘China’ or ‘Russia’ within five words of terms like ‘assertiveness’ or ‘aggressiveness’ were far more manageable (tens). These were therefore analyzed manually. Across the articles, several findings can be highlighted for both the rhetorical and the factual Chinese and Russian types of assertiveness, as well as their respective tones, i.e., either positive/neutral, or negative.

This review included EBSCO’s articles, in English, thereby producing a ‘Western’ perspective. To balance this vision, we added the work of our Chinese and Russian analysts, who looked at how Chinese and Russian scholars, in their languages, interpret the so-called assertiveness of their respective nations.

China

Statistics

Figure 2.19 shows that across the literature selected for China, we found more evidence for factual than rhetorical assertiveness. This differs, for instance, from the results of GDELT-data which suggested that words were more widely used than acts.

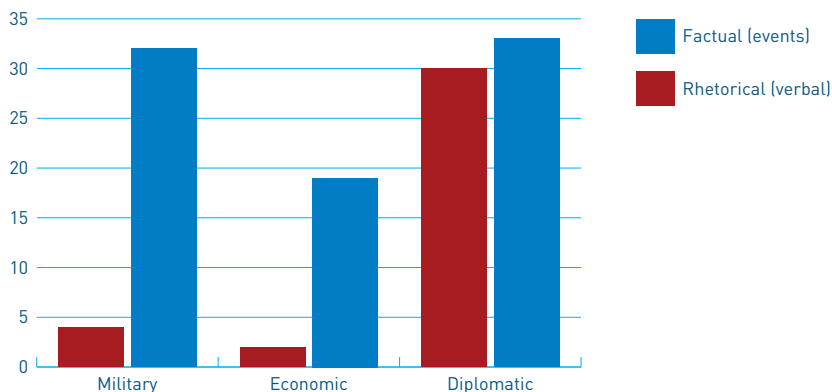


FIGURE 2.19: NUMBER OF RHETORICAL OR FACTUAL SIGNALS OF ASSERTIVENESS FOR CHINA, BY TYPE (MILITARY, ECONOMIC, DIPLOMATIC)

However, similarly to GDELT-trends, diplomacy is the most common way through which rhetorical assertiveness transpires, by far, and it can be mainly associated with a positive or neutral level than a negative one. We found no evidence of negative military assertiveness, nor did we of positive/neutral economic assertiveness.

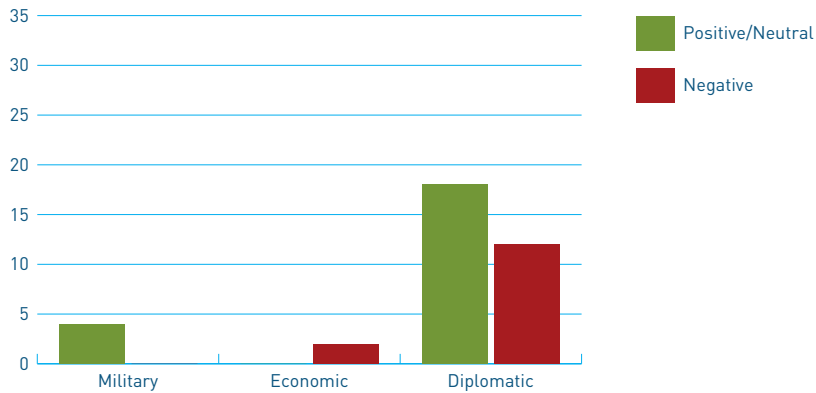


FIGURE 2.20: NUMBER OF POSITIVE/NEUTRAL OR NEGATIVE RHETORICAL SIGNALS OF ASSERTIVENESS FOR CHINA, BY TYPE (MILITARY, ECONOMIC, DIPLOMATIC)

The factual assertiveness seems more balanced across all three categories, although here again, diplomatic assertiveness dominates, followed by the military category. Factual assertiveness tends to be more positive or neutral than the rhetoric, especially in the diplomatic and economic fields.

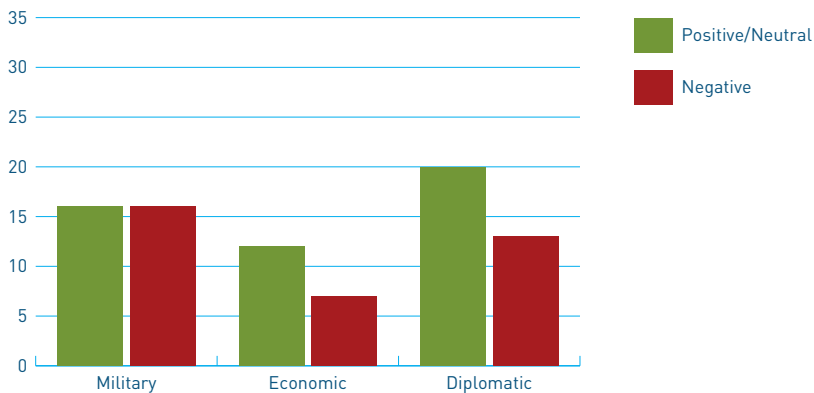


FIGURE 2.21: NUMBER OF POSITIVE/NEUTRAL OR NEGATIVE FACTUAL SIGNALS OF ASSERTIVENESS FOR CHINA, BY TYPE (MILITARY, ECONOMIC, DIPLOMATIC)

Military

Rhetorical Evidence

Our literature review identified four occasions on which China manifested a **positive or neutral** military assertiveness. Such rhetoric has become more obvious since 2008. China **expresses its objectives and intentions more clearly over time**, e.g., with Xi Jinping's declarations in December 2012 that by 2049 China will become the chief military power in the Asia-Pacific region.⁴⁵ China also **establishes strategies, such as the one outlined** in 2008 Beijing's defense White Paper, which stressed the need for Chinese navy to be able to perform operations worldwide.⁴⁶

Factual Evidence

Regarding the military factual assertiveness (as shown in Figure 2.21), Chinese attitudes tend to be equally positive/neutral and negative.

Several authors have identified many cases of **military incidents** between China and other parties, particularly since 2009. For instance, a scuffle with Vietnamese fishing boats near Hainan Island in 2005,⁴⁷ or the sinking of a fishing boat in the Spratly Islands by a Chinese naval patrol boat (one casualty of the boat's crew members) in 2007.⁴⁸ In the spring of 2011, "Chinese patrol ships harassed Vietnamese seismic survey boats in disputed waters."⁴⁹

Positive/neutral military events can be identified as 'neutral' examples of assertiveness rather than 'positive' ones. China **led military cooperation initiatives**, for instance in 2008 with the "deployment of warships to conduct counter piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden,"⁵⁰ or earlier on, with Ethiopia since 2005 in "military training, exchange of military technologies, and peacekeeping mission, among others."⁵¹ But China has also been flexing muscles since, e.g., by increasing the supply of air and maritime patrols in the area of Diaoyu/Senkaku in 2012.⁵² Besides, such events include many instances of **military build-up**: development of modern weaponry and military capabilities (including in power projection),⁵³ expansion of China's "arsenal of warheads, the building of new nuclear-armed submarines, and development of next-generation, road-mobile ICBMs with multiple independently re-entry vehicle warheads."⁵⁴ And such examples of military build-up **have only been growing** over time, at a fast pace. In 2002, China was reported "to have 350 short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) deployed opposite Taiwan" and 1,000-1,200 in 2011, "along with hundreds of new longer range missiles targeting US and allied bases throughout Asia."⁵⁵ Another indicator of China's growing military assertiveness is the **rise of its military expenditure**. As Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe put it:

“China increased its military spending 30-fold” over the last decades.⁵⁶ Defense spending has even more than doubled between 2006 and 2013.⁵⁷ China **progressively expanded its defense industry**, too. China had already significantly increased its supply of arms to Africa between 1996 and 2003,⁵⁸ and had become the continent’s second biggest supplier of arms. And in 2012, China had become the 5th largest defense exporter.⁵⁹

Economic

Rhetorical Evidence

Two pieces of evidence for economic rhetoric were identified across the literature. They are both **recent** and **negative**, concern **resources**, although indirectly, and China’s territorial sovereignty. The first one is related to the denial of resources. In 2007, China requested “oil and gas firms to stop their exploration-oriented activities with Vietnamese partners in the SCC, while threatening these companies with unspecified consequences for their business dealings with China.”⁶⁰ The other occasion was about resource exploration. In 2012, China announced plans to drill oil in disputed waters in the South China Sea.⁶¹

Factual Evidence

Negative economic events, associated mainly with **resources** and the **cyber domain**, are only identified in recent years. Authors tend to recall that China is conducting an aggressive search to breach public and private computer systems, and the “theft of confidential business information and proprietary technologies through cyber intrusions.”⁶² Yet economic disputes in which Chinese assertiveness is clearly manifested concern resources, especially in its neighborhood.⁶³ Almost logically, they seem related to maritime, territorial disputes, touching upon one of China’s most crucial interests – its sovereignty and its will to defend it at all costs. Resource or sea denials are regularly identified in **recent years**. For example in 2009, with the “imposition of unilateral fishing bans in the South China Sea”;⁶⁴ in September 2010, with an embargo blocking exports of rare-earth minerals to Japan (after an incident in which Japan arrested the captain of a trawler who collided with a Japanese patrol boat near the Senkaku islands⁶⁵).

Still, factual examples of **positive or neutral economic assertiveness** were more frequent. Our results show that over time, China has **increasingly** shown positive signs in its attitude towards the rest of the world regarding economic **cooperation**: the agreement to increase direct trade and transportation between China and Taiwan in November 2008,⁶⁶ with the US-China bilateral forum for Strategic and Economic

Dialogue in April 2009.⁶⁷ In addition, the revision of the Foreign Trade Law was implemented in 2004 to comply with the commitment to the World Trade Organization, and expand China's economic opening to the rest of the world.⁶⁸ However, we note that Sino-African relations and the economic involvement of China in Africa are **less recent** than commonly thought. In the 1990s, Sino-African trade increased by 700%; in 2000, China cancelled \$1.2 billion of African debt and \$750 million in 2003.⁶⁹

Diplomacy

Rhetorical Evidence

Cheng (2013) emphasizes aspects of a **positive rhetoric** which would have been **rising steadily over time** in Chinese diplomacy. He reminds us that in 2002 former President Jiang Zemin elaborated on China's "periphery diplomacy" i.e., "do good to neighboring countries and treat them as partners". This suggests an objective to strengthen **political cooperation** at the regional level. In the following years, there is **growing evidence of a will to develop economic cooperation**. In 2003, Premier Wen Jiabao addressed the ASEAN Commerce and Investment Summit by enunciating the principle of "maintaining good relations with China's neighboring countries, offering them security and prosperity". At the 17th Party Congress in 2007, "Hu Jintao had declared that China would "implement a free trade area strategy, strengthen bilateral and multilateral economic and trade cooperation".

There are however limits to economic cooperation, especially when China's **territorial sovereignty** is at stake: one cooperation agreement with Japan had failed due to the escalation of confrontation over the claim of Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.⁷⁰ Several authors such as Johnston or MacLeod refer to such assertiveness, particularly regarding maritime and territorial claims, as 'revisionist'.⁷¹ These claims have **intensified in recent years**. For instance, Yang Jiechi (China's foreign minister) had stressed in March 2013 that the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands are China's inherent territory.⁷²

There are elements suggesting that lately China's concerns over sovereignty no longer even solely include their own borders. This is quite clear from reading through recent declarations of Chinese officials mentioning the Arctic's sovereignty (in 2009 and 2010).⁷³

China **demands change**, not least to reform the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea regarding free navigation through the Arctic sea-lanes.⁷⁴ In the 1990s, this was already perceptible, even in fundamental debates or themes. For instance, Vice

Premier Qian Qichen had expressed in 1996 the intent to change the security concept to establish the basis of a new international order.⁷⁵

China **verbally accuses, protests or defends its interests**. Authors noticed such attitudes throughout 2010 and vis-à-vis the US, with Chinese “angry reactions to US arms sales to Taiwan in January”, or to the visit of the Dalai Lama to the US.⁷⁶ Johnston (2013) emphasizes that China still **overtly exerts pressures** on governments of North Korea and Sudan.⁷⁷ In April 2012, China accused Japan of “nationalization of sacred Chinese land”, after Tokyo’s governor Shintaro Ishihara announced the plans to purchase three of Senkaku’s private islands.⁷⁸

Another field in which such level and tone of assertiveness is expressed, is the **cyber domain**. The official rhetoric of China in 2013 has been to **deny responsibility** for cyber espionage, or to assert that China would be a victim of cyber attacks itself.⁷⁹

Factual Evidence

Events in diplomacy reflecting China’s assertiveness have been **mostly positive or neutral**. According to Glasser (2013), China traditionally uses the military as a secret political weapon in diplomatic relations (Clausewitz). It indeed primarily focuses on many of the **different levels of cooperation**.

As previously mentioned, economic cooperation has recently emerged as one of the many diplomatic instruments used by China.⁸⁰ **Cultural projection** is at the heart of China’s diplomatic assertiveness. Since 2004, the country has sought to promote or even spread its culture and language, thus cultivating its soft power. China started the Confucius Institute project: by 2012, there were 400 institutes in over 50 countries.⁸¹

Diplomatic cooperation finds many other positive or neutral illustrations, with **China’s increasingly active and visible attitude** in regional forums aimed at strengthening its influence and cultivating its soft power.⁸² China made several significant steps in this direction over the last decade. In 2001, China **voted in favor** of four UN Security Council resolutions dealing with Afghanistan and global counterterrorism efforts.⁸³ 2013 saw the formation of a US-China cyber security working group, and it was also the year China signed the UN Disarmament and International Security Committee.⁸⁴ China also **started to engage in negotiations**, even when sensitive issues were involved: in 2009, China agreed with the US to talk with representatives of the Dalai Lama, attended the US-hosted Nuclear Security Summit in April 2010, and supported the UN Security Council resolution 1929, which imposed tougher sanctions on the Iranian regime in 2010.⁸⁵

At the same time, there have been significant events that can be assessed as reflecting a 'negative' type of diplomatic assertiveness. 2009 saw China adopting an assertive posture at the Copenhagen Conference on climate change, reflected in the "rudeness of Chinese diplomats toward President Barack Obama."⁸⁶ When the delegation returned to China it was criticized for its poor performance.⁸⁷ This is a commonly used example that demonstrates China's **diplomatic, yet strongly assertive** behavior. In addition, China used its status to **veto**, sometimes jointly with Russia, several UN Security Council resolutions: in 2007 against the Burmese military junta in Myanmar; against in 2008 against sanctions against the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe; in October 2011 against a European-sponsored resolution threatening the Syrian regime with economic sanctions "if it did not immediately halt its military crackdown against its civilian"; and in 2012 against British-sponsored resolution to impose economic sanction against Syrian government for failing to carry out a peace plan.⁸⁸

And here again, **territorial claims** appear as one of the most common recourse of China in asserting its positions diplomatically, and have been voiced increasingly in recent years. In 2007, China declared Sansha to be "an integral part of the province of Hainan."⁸⁹ Tensions with the Philippines and Vietnam followed Chinese claims over the entire South China Sea in 2011 and 2012.⁹⁰ Authors often refer to the recent tensions with Japan over Chinese claims of the Senkaku Islands,⁹¹ as a dispute which "nearly caused a war."⁹²

Perspectives in the Chinese Language Domain

Generally, examples or evidence used by Chinese scholars are similar to those commonly found in the 'Western' literature. There are some precise factual elements that seem to fully support the 'Western' perception of a new form of Chinese assertiveness – if not enhanced assertive behaviors. But one difference lies in the justification of these positions by Chinese authors: which claim that they are not meant as a threat and that they are driven by the objective of maintaining national stability.

With respect to the rhetoric, Chinese authors emphasize key objectives or 'core interests'. One is the importance of safeguarding China's sovereignty and territorial integrity; another is the continuity of China's economic growth and social development (confirming the aforementioned economic focus); a third one is the survival of China's political system and national security – which was reflected in the results of the literature review by e.g., the vetoes to UN Security Council resolutions, the demands

for change, etc. Authors emphasize that as a rising power, China logically *had* to transform its policy. These 'core interests' were launched in 2009, which explains the shift observed in China's attitude since that year.⁹³ But while this new direction is frequently interpreted as 'assertive', in the Chinese perspective it is nothing but a strategy for China **to signal and communicate** its private information to the outside world **for future cooperation**. The purpose of clearly making the world aware of its core interests is to draw a red line that other states should not to cross.⁹⁴

China's increased assertiveness can be characterized as 'non-confrontational',⁹⁵ which means that at the strategic level China will not pursue confrontation with other regional actors. However, authors expect that China's territorial policy will become stronger and even characterized by a more stubborn stance along with its increased power. The main reason, however, would be a concern for domestic legitimacy: a lax attitude of Chinese leaders would likely face prohibitively high domestic audience costs.⁹⁶

Looking at factual evidence, authors posit that China's self-confidence has grown in several domains through its military and economic progress.

According to Chinese scholars, a **stronger stance and new found confidence** have been reflected in **several major recent events**: Copenhagen in 2009; the recognition of South China Sea as one of China's core national (territorial) interests in 2010. The increasing mobilization of armed forces and build-up of military might, as well as the use of vetoes, are acknowledged by Chinese authors.⁹⁷ These examples were also identified by the selection of 'Western' articles.

China is **increasingly voicing sovereignty concerns**,⁹⁸ getting involved in territorial disputes in the Korean Peninsula and the South and East China sea,⁹⁹ imposing blockades (e.g., through a heavy-handed response to American arms sales to Taiwan¹⁰⁰), and even providing military protection. While in 1998 China had only verbally expressed concerns over the anti-Chinese riots backed by some high-ranking military officials in Indonesia, it now confidently sends navy ships and air force planes to evacuate entrapped overseas Chinese from the war zone.¹⁰¹

But Chinese scholars insist that **China does not have any new territorial ambitions**. What China wants to accomplish is to recover lost territories, such as Taiwan, and to secure its sovereignty control over its own territories, such as Tibet. They emphasize that Chinese leaders have been trying to allay apprehensions of other global players.¹⁰²

At the Boao Forum President Hu pledged that China ought to resolve its territorial disputes with neighboring countries through peaceful means to build a ‘harmonious Asia’. In a similar vein, Premier Wen emphasized a willingness to improve engagement and cooperation with neighboring countries during his trips to Malaysia and Indonesia. China’s peaceful rise strategy is not just rooted in China’s peace-loving culture, as the Chinese government claims. It is also a **rational strategy** to bargain for a low-cost **deal with others, and for them to accept China’s ascent**.¹⁰³

Russia

Statistics

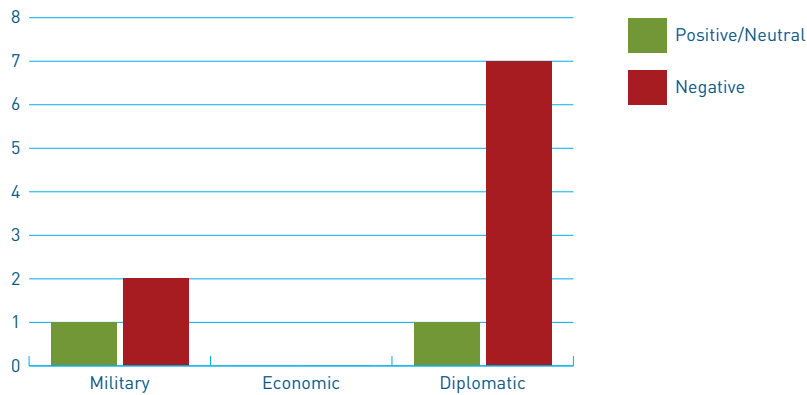


FIGURE 2.22: NUMBER OF POSITIVE/NEUTRAL OR NEGATIVE FACTUAL SIGNALS OF ASSERTIVENESS FOR RUSSIA, BY TYPE (MILITARY, ECONOMIC, DIPLOMATIC)

To sum up, no factual economic events nor rhetoric assertiveness were registered. Most factual evidence is negative, and mainly manifests through diplomatic channels rather than military means.

Military: Factual Evidence

Military build-up is one way for Russia to assert its position, for example with the acquisition of Mistral-class ships from France in 2011.¹⁰⁴ A stronger military assertiveness is reflected in **several sporadic** occasions, from the Soviet Union’s increase of its military presence and build-up in East Asia in the 1970s,¹⁰⁵ to recent **military attacks** i.e., the invasion of Georgia in 2008.¹⁰⁶

Diplomacy: Factual Evidence

Most examples of diplomatic assertiveness found for Russia are assessed as **negative**, according to our coding scheme. Many are caused by **veto**s on UN resolutions e.g. in 1999 against military action in Yugoslavia; in 2003 against military action in Iraq,¹⁰⁷ and, jointly with China, in 2012 against military action in Syria (the different occasions were mentioned in the previous section). This has always been a way for Russia to express assertive positions as a great power: between 1945 and 2013 the USSR (then Russia) cast nearly half (128) of all the vetoes in the UN's 68-year history.

Perspectives in the Russian Language Domain

The word 'assertiveness' is rarely (if at all) used by Russia as far as foreign policy matters are concerned. There is also no translation, or even contextual translation, which can be expressed with a word or a phrase. In the Russian language, it usually reflects individual behavioral characteristics. There is some Russian academic literature that investigates major global actors' assertiveness, but it is quite scant.

Kireeva analyzes the reasons behind the emergence of great powers. According to this author, this was the reaction to the "inability of the US, as a global leader, to meet international challenges and threats in different parts of the world." As a result, self-confident, autonomous, and active players emerged, and the importance of relations at the regional level (as compared to bilateral and global) increased in international relations. Summarizing Kireeva's point, the role of great powers in their respective regions is becoming ever more important.¹⁰⁸

Blank characterizes Russian foreign policy as quite assertive, by particularly looking at Latin America. In 2008 Russia tried to become an influential regional actor by establishing bilateral ties and making trade deals. After a few years, the destabilizing effect of Russia's way of doing business (e.g., selling weapons to Venezuela) became obvious to other regional players. Blank suggests an official explanation for such policy – Medvedev's theses about expanding markets while fighting economic hardship – but posits that Russian foreign policy in Latin America is rather reflected by geopolitical acts against the US. The economic dimension is present, but is not the main driver of Russian foreign policy's strategic orientation.¹⁰⁹

According to Kireeva, each great power has its ways of implementing assertive measures in its *geographical* region, while Blank suggests an understanding of region as a "region of interests".

Assertiveness is mostly a subject found across official doctrines in foreign policy. Judging by the tone and substance of the Russian core principles of foreign policy¹¹⁰, and by the article “Russia in the Changing World” written by Vladimir Putin, the head of the Russian government at the time,¹¹¹ one can more easily associate both rhetorical and factual Russian attitudes with assertive features: clear, assured, demanding, permanent, value and interest-driven. The word ‘aggression’ itself is often avoided, which does not however imply that such statements have a fully peaceful and cooperative nature.

In Putin’s article, ensuring security comes first, followed by the promotion of economic interests, while the ‘humanitarian sphere’ is placed towards the end. The article avoids aggression-related topics, unless one looks at it from another angle, and it is full of elements connoting assertiveness. As Putin claimed, it is impossible to achieve global security without Russia.

Putin stressed that NATO actions undermine trust and threaten future global cooperation, and accuses NGOs of destabilizing the situation in countries using ‘soft power’ instruments.

The **rise of China**, however, is verbally assessed quite positively by the Russian leader, who sees it as bringing “enormous potential for business cooperation”. He also calls for continuing political cooperation in the international arena, as both countries share a common vision of the future world system. He verbally expresses intentions to cooperate economically with emerging continents (Asia, Latin America and Africa), and emphasizes Russia’s interest in a strong **European Union** and its powerful cooperation potential”.

But Russia also considers **US** stereotypes of Russia to be the cause of unsuccessful Russian-American relations, and Putin refutes accusations that Russia has poor human rights record and that it has crossed all existing boundaries.

Cross-Country Comparison

Our selection of articles **yielded a richer diversity of results for China** than for Russia. In 2013, the academic field may have been focusing more on the existence of a Chinese assertiveness. It is still possible to deduct some similarities between both countries’ behaviors, particularly with respect to ‘negative’ diplomatic assertiveness. Both China and Russia resort mostly to **diplomatic tools**, either with the verb or through actions. Both make use of vetoes to mark their positions and manifest their

opposition to the international community's preferences. Instances of Russia's military assertiveness seem to occur sporadically, and compared to China there is little to suggest (at least based on this literature review) that it has become more vociferous in the last few years. Chinese types of assertiveness are well-balanced across the different categories – military (from build-up to incidents), economic (from cooperation efforts to resource blockades) and, primarily, diplomatic ones (from cultural diplomacy, an involvement in institutions and the demand for change, to the denial of responsibility and vetoes).

What Do (Some) Statistical Indicators Tell Us? GeoRisQ

The third and final piece of evidence that HCSS looked at in order to establish whether the claims of increased assertiveness can be backed up by different types of evidence, are some quantitative datasets. For this, we were able to draw upon the existing HCSS GeoRisQ database, which contains various datasets that are relevant to international security. Based on our literature review in search of the main data points that are often cited to illustrate China's and Russia's assertive attitudes, a number of indicators were selected to capture the extent of Chinese and Russian assertiveness. These include the four most frequently covered domains of assertiveness: diplomatic, economic, military and informational. For each of these domains, we selected some 'proxies' that are intended to capture some of the key dynamics at work in them. This collection of indicators is of course not exhaustive, but it does attempt to paint a picture that is illustrative of what is going on.

Military Indicators

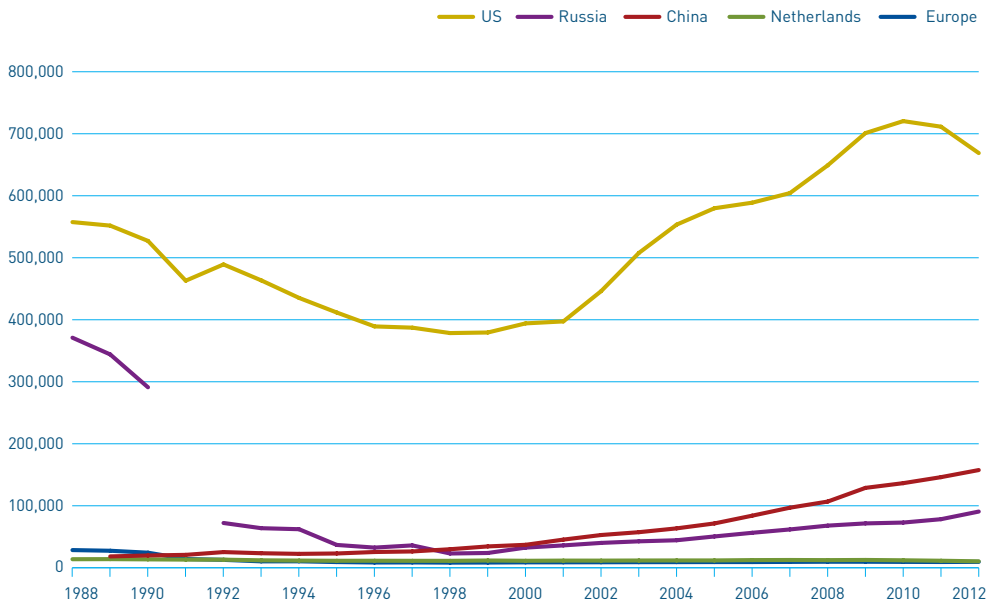


FIGURE 2.23: MILITARY EXPENDITURES IN CHINA AND RUSSIA (CONSTANT 2010 MILLION US\$; 1998-2012). SOURCE: SIPRI¹¹²

China is far behind the US in terms of military expenditure, which puts the increasing Chinese military assertiveness identified in the literature review in some perspective. But its military budget has been steadily expanding since the end of the 1990s. This has also triggered an increasingly visible arms race in East Asia which was not the subject of this study, but which is clearly borne out by the data¹¹³ and by a number of authoritative studies.¹¹⁴

Russia exhibits a similar trend, although its expenditure and growth in it are lagging behind China's. Also, because Russia is adjacent by a stable and fairly strong alliance (NATO/EU) along its Western borders and by an increasingly potent but not northward-looking China on its Southern border, it means that the destabilizing ripple effects beyond its borders have so far remained relatively modest.

It is interesting to look at **military expenditure as a percentage of GDP**. This indicator reflects the nation's willingness to spend on defense and security and its ability to defend itself and gain hard power.

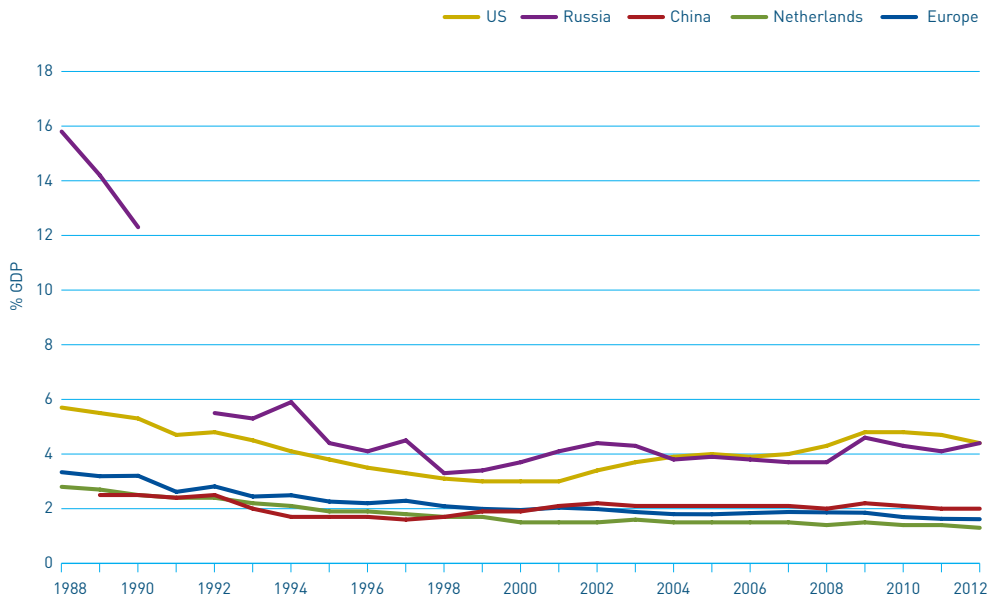


FIGURE 2.24: MILITARY EXPENDITURES AS % OF GDP IN CHINA, RUSSIA, THE US, EUROPE, AND THE NETHERLANDS (1988-2012). SOURCE: SIPRI¹¹⁵

If we zoom in on the proportion of GDP that countries are willing to invest in defense (Figure 2.24), we see that since the end of the Cold War Russia has consistently spent about the same amount as the US has (since 2003, around 4% and up to 4.5%). For all the talk about China’s increased military assertiveness, we see that since 2000 China’s defense share has actually remained stable, around 2%. But whereas the piece of the pie has not changed much, the difference with Figure 2.23 is explained by the fact that the pie has grown significantly thanks to China’s unrivalled growth rates.

Information Indicators: Cyber Attacks

Everybody recognizes the growing importance of the information sphere for international relations and international security – both in a positive and a negative sense. Unfortunately – and much of this has to do with the very ‘new’ and elusive character of information – we do not yet have good datasets to measure the ‘power’ of various countries in this area. We therefore suggest to treat Figure 2.25 with caution. Whereas this is the most frequently used dataset for the country of origin of cyber attacks in 2013, it has to be recognized that this is based on the geo-location of the observed ip-address, and thus is of limited usefulness in determining the actual

provenance. Still, despite all of these caveats, this dataset indicates that China appears to be extremely assertive in this domain as well.

	COUNTRY	Q3 '13 % TRAFFIC	Q2 '13 %
1	China	35,0%	33,0%
2	Indonesia	20,0%	38,0%
3	United States	11,0%	6,9%
4	Taiwan	5,2%	2,5%
5	Russia	2,6%	1,7%
6	Brazil	2,1%	1,4%
7	India	1,9%	2,0%
8	Romania	1,7%	1,0%
9	South Korea	1,2%	0,9%
10	Venezuela	1,1%	0,6%
:	Other	17,0%	11,0%

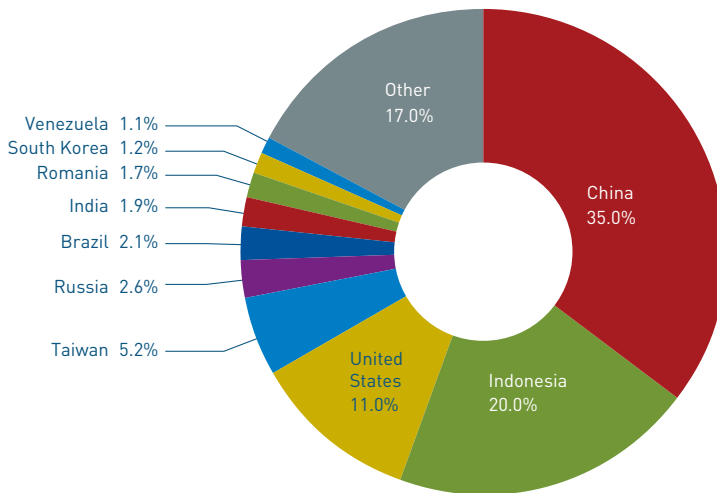


FIGURE 2.25: CYBER ATTACK TRAFFIC, PER COUNTRY OF ORIGIN (BY SOURCE IP ADDRESS, NOT ATTRIBUTION) IN 2013¹¹⁶

Economic Indicators

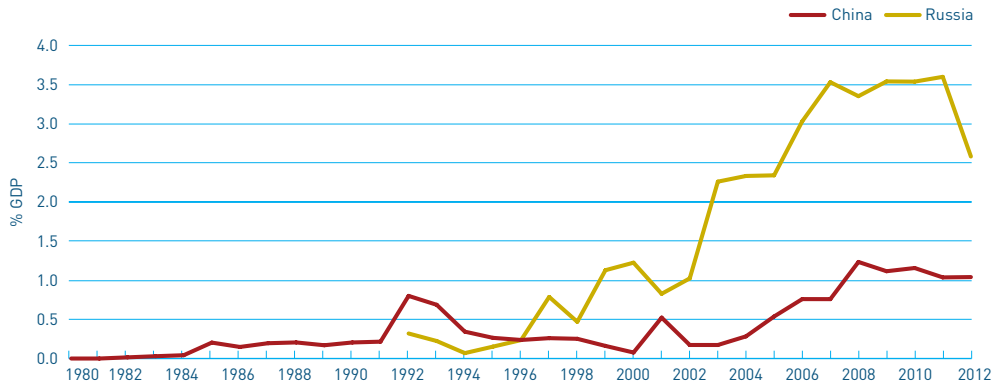


FIGURE 2.26: NET FDI OUTFLOWS IN CHINA AND RUSSIA (1980-2012), IN % GDP. SOURCE: UNITED NATIONS¹¹⁷

Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) reflect each country's ability to aggregate investments from abroad, and its capacity to invest from its own economy to the rest of the world, thereby adding to its power base. Figure 2.26 provides some indication of the 'net' investment flows for China and Russia. We note that both China and – even to a larger extent – Russia have been very assertive investors abroad – confirming the assertiveness hypothesis as defined in this [study](#) .

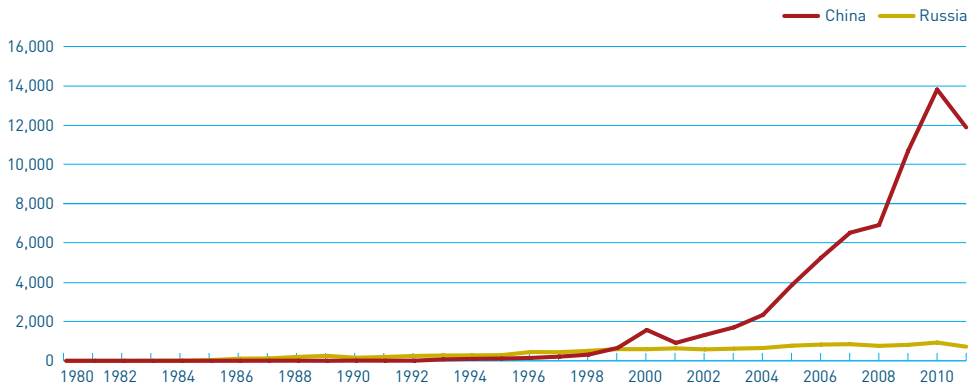


FIGURE 2.27: PATENT APPLICATION FILES - CHINA AND RUSSIA (1980-2011) FILED UNDER THE PATENT CO-OPERATION TREATY (PCT). SOURCE: OECD¹¹⁸

Whereas FDI flows say something about the relative financial 'power' of a country (which – as in the case of Russia – may also be related to its natural resource

endowments), they do not say much about the innovative forces behind it. As a rough indicator of the latter, Figure 2.27 shows the number of patents that have been filed. What is striking is that whereas Russia has performed poorly, China has not only become the world's main manufacturing hub, but also an impressive innovation powerhouse.

Diplomatic Indicators

Vetoes to UN Security Council resolutions

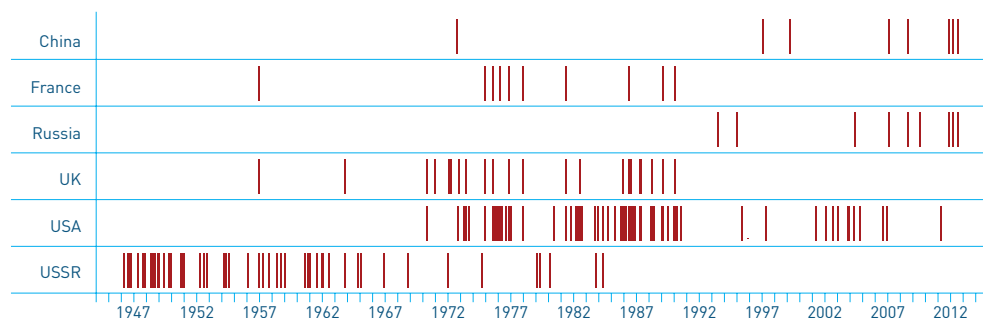


FIGURE 2.28: VETOES IN THE UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL

Figure 2.28 indicates an increasing diplomatic assertiveness of these two countries in the UN Security Council, as expressed in the amount of vetoes they have issued. We notice that the US has been active throughout this period (and that the European permanent members have been significantly less so), but that China and Russia have been wielding this instantiation of diplomatic power significantly more in the past decade.

6 Conclusions & Security Implications

This paper is about assertiveness, defined broadly as either a rhetorical or behavioral increase in the way a country asserts its power in the international system. It is not about China-Western, Russia-Western or China-Russian relations. It is not about the Chinese and Russian military build-ups and their implications for those regions or for the world. Nor is it about the deeper motivations for this increased assertiveness and how those could be addressed – whether by China itself or by outsiders. All of these are areas of investigation that can and should be further explored. But the aim of this study, one of HCSS' four contributions to the 2013-2014 Dutch 'Strategic Monitor', was to take a closer evidence-based look at various allegations of increased great power assertiveness by two of the world's current great powers: China and Russia.

We could also have looked at other great powers that have displayed assertiveness over these past decades – in some cases arguably even more than the two powers that are the subject of this chapter. But we focused on these two cases because they are widely seen as real or potential challengers to the current balance of great powers.

We have put a lot of emphasis on exploring various data sources and tools, both qualitative and quantitative, text-based and numbers-based, old and new. This is in line with what one expects of a ‘strategic monitor’: to provide for some systematic and replicable method to keep tracking whatever phenomena one is interested in. And great power brinkmanship is certainly one of those phenomena we should be concerned about. Great powers matter disproportionately in international relations, and so monitoring their behavior accurately and dispassionately is critically important for any attempt to ‘monitor’ the international security landscape. The debate about assertiveness currently draws primarily on anecdotal and recent tidbits. Our ambition was to use existing and develop some new data sources and analytical methods that could put this debate on a broader and firmer evidentiary foundation. We see this as a necessary first step that may provide a useful point of departure for more detailed explorations of the ‘how’s’ and ‘why’s’.

In this study’s concluding section, we summarize the main substantive findings of this effort and try to tease out some possible security implications.

Main Take-Aways

We find that claims of increased Chinese and Russian assertiveness can be backed-up remarkably well by the evidence. Our study produced some fairly robust findings that are summarized for both countries in the following table.

These tables present the aggregated findings for the different categories, types, tones and levels of assertiveness for both countries across the different sources. The values in the cells (and the associated color-coding) correspond to our definition of assertiveness as an increase in either rhetorical or factual assertiveness. A dark red cell thus represents a significant increase in that type of assertiveness (for that source/method), and a dark green cell – a significant decrease.¹¹⁹ When we just glance at those color codes for both countries, we immediately notice that there is a remarkably robust consensus across the different datasets about a couple of important findings.

		CHINA								
		Positive/neutral				Negative				Overall
		Overall	Diplomatic P/NRD	Economic P/NRE	Military P/NRM	Overall	Diplomatic NRD	Economic NRE	Military NRM	
Rhetorical	GDEL	-1	-2	1	-1	2	2	0	-1	1
	Scholarly	2,5	3	n/a	2	2	3	1	n/a	2,5
	OffBase	2,5	3	3	1	1	1	0	1	
		Overall	Diplomatic P/NFD	Economic P/NFE	Military P/NFM	Overall	Diplomatic NFD	Economic NFE	Military NFM	Overall
Factual	GDEL	2	1	3	1	1	1	1	2	3
	Scholarly	3	3	2	3	3	2	2	3	3
	Datasets		n/a	3	2		2	n/a	n/a	
		Overall	Diplomatic	Economic	Military	Overall	Diplomatic	Economic	Military	Overall
Overall	GDEL	1	-2	3	1	3	2	1	3	2
	Scholarly	2,5	3	2	2,5	2,5	2,5	1,5	3	2,5
	Overall	1,75	0,5	2,5	1,75	2,75	2,25	1,25	3	2,25

FIGURE 2.29: COMPARISON OF FINDINGS BY TYPE OF ASSERTIVENESS (RHETORICAL, FACTUAL) – CHINA. CODES: BIG INCREASE: 3; MEDIUM INCREASE: 2; SMALL INCREASE: 1; STATUS QUO: 0; SMALL DECREASE: -1; MEDIUM DECREASE: -2; BIG DECREASE: -3

		RUSSIA								
		Positive/neutral				Negative				Overall
		Overall	Diplomatic P/NRD	Economic P/NRE	Military P/NRM	Overall	Diplomatic NRD	Economic NRE	Military NRM	
Rhetorical	GDEL	-1	-2	-2	0	1	2	1	1	0
	Scholarly	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
	OffBase		2	1	2	0	0	0	0	
		Overall	Diplomatic P/NFD	Economic P/NFE	Military P/NFM	Overall	Diplomatic NFD	Economic NFE	Military NFM	Overall
Factual	GDEL	0	0	1	-2	1	2	0	-1	1
	Scholarly	0,5	0	n/a	1	1	1	n/a	1	1
	Datasets		n/a	2	2		1	n/a	n/a	
		Overall	Diplomatic	Economic	Military	Overall	Diplomatic	Economic	Military	Overall
Overall	GDEL	-1	-2	1	-1	2	2	1	0	1
	Scholarly	0,5	0	n/a	1	1	1	n/a	1	1
	Overall	-0,25	-1	1	0	1,5	1,5	1	0,5	1

FIGURE 2.30: COMPARISON OF FINDINGS – RUSSIA. CODES: BIG INCREASE: 3; MEDIUM INCREASE: 2; SMALL INCREASE: 1; STATUS QUO: 0; SMALL DECREASE: -1; MEDIUM DECREASE: -2; BIG DECREASE: -3

The first major finding is that **both powers have displayed increasing amounts of assertiveness** over the past decade, with **Chinese assertiveness increasing noticeably more than the Russian one**. We have already noted that this increase is relative to a baseline that is still significantly higher for Russia than for China. But this finding may still come as somewhat of a surprise to many European observers who still are primarily focused on Russia. Over the past decade, China appears to have ratcheted up both its rhetorical and its factual assertiveness significantly more than Russia has.

A second robust finding is that in both countries (and for most – if not all – types), **factual assertiveness has increased more than rhetorical assertiveness**. We can take some comfort from the finding that **positive/neutral assertiveness still outweighs negative assertiveness** for both countries. But – on a potentially more sobering note – we also have to point out that the **factual types of assertiveness have increased quite robustly**. If we look at the table with Chinese assertiveness, we see a lot of dark red across the factual ‘band’ – especially in the economic realm, but also in the other ones and in the overall one. In Russia, we see less red (and even – surprisingly – some green), but even in this case which started out with already quite high levels of assertiveness, we still see additional increases in some cases.

If we then zoom in on the military types of assertiveness – and especially the (arguably most dangerous) factual ones, we also notice **a lot of red in the China table – and more ‘negative’ red than ‘positive or neutral’ red**. The jury is clearly still out as to whether China, which is still far behind the other great powers (including Europe) on many indicators of military power, will ultimately decide to convert its impressive economic ascendancy in military terms. But all of these datasets show **a rising Chinese power that is increasingly asserting its military muscle. Russia presents a more mixed picture** on this score, although we already emphasized that **the Russian baseline remains significantly higher** than the Chinese one, and that the data we collected stop around mid-2013 and therefore ‘missed’ some of the more recent indications of assertiveness such as the \$700 billion rearmament plan or recent events in Ukraine and the Crimea.

It is extremely hard to claim full ‘objectivity’ in double-checking the anecdotal evidence about China’s or Russia’s alleged increased assertiveness that is so abundant in the popular press. But we went to unusual lengths to reconstruct both the ‘bigger picture’ over time and across countries, as well as the more specific details (which type of assertiveness, in which substantive areas, in which geographical areas, etc.). We

collected very different datasets: the largest currently publicly available set of media reports, the largest currently publicly available collection of official statements, the expert literature written on this topic in the past year, and some carefully selected datasets. Our team included Chinese and Russian analysts. We used both traditional and a few more cutting-edge analytical tools. And the picture that emerges from this unprecedented attempt to assess these assertions is one that is distinctly discomfiting. The final section of this paper will try to spell some security implications that may result from this discomfort.

Security Implications

Over these past few decades, direct conflict between great powers has largely disappeared from our radar screens. We always knew these great powers continued to matter disproportionately (UNSC P5, G20, etc.) and that they often quarrel amongst each other. But these disputes rarely involved direct bilateral confrontation. Tensions occurred (and continue to occur) **'elsewhere'**: with Russia over issues such as Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan or Syria, and with China over Taiwan, Japan, the South China Sea, or North Korea. They also occurred **over different non-military functional issues** such as currencies, free trade and protectionism, oil and gas, human rights, minerals, etc. To be sure, these are serious issues in their own right, but they are not necessarily ones that trigger direct armed conflict. Especially since these various tensions were, and continue to be, mitigated by some powerful countervailing trends, such as shared interests (terrorism, economic interdependence, 'Chinamerica'), mutual nuclear deterrence, asymmetric salience ("these 'other' things matters more to them than to us"), various bargains/side payments, etc. So the sentiment was, and to a large extent remains, that on balance, all potential challengers felt and continue to feel sufficiently inhibited to engage into too much brinkmanship.

It is important to stress that we see no evidence across our various datasets that this balance has crossed some definitive tipping point. Changes appear to be more linear than exponential. And yet these data do point to some broader trends (as well as concrete facts and events) that challenge that delicate intra-great-power balance. In 2013, both China and Russia have been willing to push their brinkmanship further than at any time since the end of the Cold War. Over these past few years, as our broad attempt to 'ascertain' observable levels of assertiveness has revealed, different types of increased assertiveness (including military ones) may have increased the conflict and escalation potential for – once again – direct armed conflict between great powers. The danger of a 'Cuban Missile crisis'-type event may very well be increasing again (and we note that that crisis did not lead to great power conflict either, although by all

accounts it did come dangerously close¹²⁰) not because of any conscious desire to trigger one (as indeed does not appear to have been the case in the Cuban Missile crisis), but because of miscalculation and unmanageable escalation.

One intrinsic danger of assertiveness lies in the informational fog that such spirals of inflammatory rhetoric can generate. In this fog of assertiveness, it becomes ever harder to discern the hard 'facts' and to put events in their proper perspective. This, in our view, makes attempts such as the ones initiated in this paper to carefully construct evidence-based datasets that allow all observers (both the stakeholders themselves and the public at large) to maintain some perspective all the more important. This study attempted to do that for a discrete time period (1980-August 2013). But the data sources we used (including GDELT and the HCSS Off-Base) are available on a constant basis. We therefore submit that developing a dedicated persistent (near-real-time) monitor for great power assertiveness might be a useful contribution for both policymakers and the broader public.

This study has also recorded quite a bit of evidence of growing not just rhetorical, but also factual assertiveness on the part of both China and Russia – including in the military realm (increased expenditures, various types of 'new arms races'). This raises questions about what this means for Europe in general, and for its smaller and medium-sized countries in particular. Can we just assume as an act of faith that such tensions will remain contained, or will blow over, or that there is really nothing we can do about precisely the type of great power assertiveness that larger West-European countries have tried to bridle in themselves for the past seventy years? Should we start rebuilding a more robust military portfolio to guarantee that Europe's voice remains heard in the global concert of powers? Or should we start (re)building ties with countries like China and Russia? Can smaller- and medium-sized countries, who have such a disproportionate stake in a macro-stable security environment, play a special role in 'letting cooler heads prevail' and in 'putting things in perspective', and if so, what would be required for that?

What does increased intra-great-power brinkmanship mean for our alliances – for their composition and their nature? On the one hand, these new tensions suggest that close and capable alliances of like-minded nations become more important than ever for security and prosperity. But on the other hand, such selective alliances also imply increasing dangers of entanglement in parts of the world that Europe may feel are beyond its comfort zone. Should this comfort zone then be stretched, or should such entanglements be avoided at all costs? Either way it seems certain that these new

dynamics pose additional challenges for military establishments, including in Europe, who already have a hard time rebalancing their defense and security portfolios within lower defense budgets even without worrying too much about entanglements in possible renewed great power conflict. Various major weapon acquisition programs, for instance, appear under a very different light when looked at from the point of view of potential great-power conflict rather than from the point of view of stabilization operations.

Equally important for 'price-takers' (instead of price-makers) in the international security arena: how do we deal with a future in which escalating assertiveness leads to an even greater paralysis of an already extremely minimalist and fragile system of global (security) governance? Not to speak of the political economic consequences of a return to a 19th century European balance of power at a truly global level – and this, in a period where the world is just starting to crawl back from a painful and prolonged socio-economic crisis. Could these dangers possibly even provide more incentives for exploring new-style multipolar management mechanisms?

For the time being, the 'long peace' soldiers on. Its actual dynamics – and its (presumed) robustness – continue to be poorly understood. We observe many profound, observable and seemingly incontrovertible trends that suggest brighter skies in the future security forecast.¹²¹ These trends are often ignored by the traditional security communities. But at the same time, this study – just like the other contributions to this year's HCSS Strategic Monitor – also sees a number of darker clouds on the horizon. One of the major challenges for defense (and foreign policy) planners is to find the proper balance between Cassandra's Scylla and Pollyanna's Charybdis. The security community has lost much credibility because of its constant Cassandra-like insistence on all the things that could go wrong and its underappreciation of all the things that were demonstrably going 'right' – also in the security field. Many other foresight communities – like the technological one – may have gone too far towards the Pollyanna extreme.

We have gone to great lengths – and continues to strive to – maintain some balance between these two extremes. We are now alternating between a year in which we try to present the HCSS Strategic Monitor 'big picture' (including the many strongly positive security trends) and a year in which we selectively – in close coordination with our government customers – select a number of potential game-changers for a more in-depth analysis. We continue to feel that defense and security planners should take both into account. The trends described in this study are perceptible. They require

serious attention. But we strongly caution against the temptation to focus too much on them alone. It is only through a more dispassionate, impartial assessment that we are likely to strike the right balance. We trust that evidence-based analysis can and will contribute to that balance.

ENDNOTES

ASSESSING ASSERTIONS OF ASSERTIVENESS: THE CHINESE AND RUSSIAN CASES

- 1 The English word 'Brink' (also known in Danish and Dutch) derives from the Proto-Indo-European root *bhren-, meaning "project, edge".
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- 7 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook 2013: Armaments, Disarmaments and International Security*, 2013.

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- 9 This includes the figures for the USSR and then for the Russian Federation.
- 10 For this calculation, the data for the EU anachronistically represent the military expenditures of all current EU member states.
- 11 Since we only wanted to illustrate the broad trends in relative military expenditures across some key players over time, the Russia dataset includes available data for the Soviet Union, and the EU figures include data for all current 28 EU member states, even for the period when they were not yet members of the EU.
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