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Why China's Aggressive Strategy in the South China Sea Was a Mistake

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**WHY CHINA'S AGGRESSIVE STRATEGY
IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA WAS A MISTAKE**

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WHY CHINA'S AGGRESSIVE STRATEGY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA WAS A MISTAKE

Introduction

According to Machiavelli “your rise to power works better if you conceal it from everyone else.”¹ It is therefore difficult to understand why China has decided to embrace an aggressive strategy in the South China Sea and essentially “bit off their nose in spite of their face.” Until 2009 the Chinese Communist Party had embraced the Machiavelli mantra, and they followed it in the tone set by Deng Xiaoping of “hide your light and bide your time.”² China is no longer doing this. China has changed its policy towards the South China Sea, between their aggressive island building campaign, the militarization of their fishing fleets, and their behaviour in regional and international forums. They have done this for several reasons mainly for overcoming alleged historical shame; for taking control of scarce resources that China needs in a strategic body of water; and because they have enough power to do so. However, by pursuing such an aggressive policy they have endangered their likelihood of succeeding in achieving their goals. They have caused the United States to refocus their military strategy and “pivot” towards Asia; their aggressive tactics have pushed other countries in the region to build stronger ties with the United States and other western allies; and by potentially harming or restricting their global economic growth, they have endangered the economic prosperity of a country which is already vulnerable to internal sustainment pressures. China’s aggressive tactics may be aimed at other

¹ Bruno Macaes, *Belt and Road: A Chinese World order* (London: Hurst & Company, 2020), 32.

² Ian Forsyth, “Old Game Plan, New Game: China’s Grand Strategy in the South China Sea,” in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 98.

regional players in an attempt to be the regional power in the South China Sea, but in the long run the country that has the most to lose from their newly adopted strategy is China.

How China has Become More Aggressive

China's decision to exponentially build up islands, intensify their maritime presence in the South China Sea, and be more transparent about their disdain for international rules is believed to have manifested between 2009 and 2014.³ Since that time China significantly built up seven artificial islands capable of acting as military bases supporting harbours, airstrips, radar facilities, desalinization plants, and over 1000 buildings.⁴ This infrastructure expansion has enabled the Chinese maritime militia to extend their area of operations and they have intensified their aggressive tactics throughout the region. Additionally, China has also become more outspoken and aggressive regarding regulations governing the South China Sea, either disregarding them, actively working to undermine their effectiveness, or making up their own.

Island occupation, infrastructure building, and territorial claim disagreements in the South China Sea are not new regional issues and they have been ongoing for decades, however in 2014 China commenced extensive sea reclamation projects at Cuarteron, Fiery Cross, Gaven, Hughes, Johnson, Mischief, and Subi Reefs.⁵ By 2020 the three most developed islands in the Spratly's: Fiery Cross, Mischief, and Subi Reefs, all had extensive military infrastructure including runways, buildings, harbours, radar domes, and missile silos.⁶ In August 2020, in a

³ Anders Corr, *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 14.

⁴ Rachel A. Winston and Ishika Sachdeva, *Raging Waters in the South China Sea: What the Battle for Supremacy Means for Southeast Asia* (Irvine: Lizard Publishing, 2020), 104.

⁵ Sean R. Liedman, "The Evolution of U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea: Tacking with Regional Strategic Winds," in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 156.

⁶ Winston and Sachdeva, *Raging Waters in the South China Sea...*, 197.

demonstration of future deterrent capability of the islands, China launched three medium range anti-ship ballistic missiles from China in the direction of the Paracel Islands.⁷ Notwithstanding their deterrent potential, the islands are also capable of being re-supply/refuel bases for air force, navy, and maritime militia assets. To date this has enabled the maritime militia to be able to assemble on mass in other countries exclusive economic zones far from mainland China, such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, or even as far south as Indonesia.

The maritime militia are mobile extension of China's sovereignty claims. In April 2021 China deployed as many as 200 ships inside the exclusive economic zone of the Philippines near Whitsun Reef, and subsequently refused to leave.⁸ In 2020 Chinese military militia vessels were responsible for sinking both a Filipino, and Vietnamese fishing vessel operating in their respective countries exclusive economic zone's.⁹ And damaging another regional relationship using the maritime militia, in 2019 China sent dozens of fishing vessels well into Indonesia's exclusive economic zone close to North Natuna Island.¹⁰ The maritime militia is not only utilized to enforce fishing rights claims, but they have also been used to protect Chinese oil drilling platforms while they explore the sea bed in another country's exclusive economic zone (*Hai Yang Shi You* drilling off Vietnam in 2014¹¹) or harass oil exploration/exploitation vessels employed by other nations working within their own exclusive economic zone's (Malaysia, the

⁷ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁸ AlJazeera, "US, Philippines discuss Chinese 'swarming' in South China Sea," last modified 1 April 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/1/us-philippines-discuss-chinese-swarming-in-south-china-sea>

⁹ Winston and Sachdeva, *Raging Waters in the South China Sea...*, 126.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹¹ James E. Fanell, "China's Maritime Sovereignty Campaign: Scarborough Shoal, the "New Spratly Islands," and Beyond," in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 109.

Philippines, and Vietnam, Spring 2020).¹² China is not the only country operating in the South China Sea who employs protection, swarming or occupying tactics by a maritime security type force, however the aggression, scale, willingness to encroach on other nations exclusive economic zone's, and the frequency of these incidents makes China stand out amongst their neighbours. Echoed by their aggressive at sea tactics, in the political forum, China has also embraced a regional political strategy which highlights China's disregard for the need for compromise with, or respect other nations.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been pursuing the objective of enacting a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea for many years however, significant obstacles to this objective are: China's 'undisputable sovereignty' claim over the whole of the South China Sea,¹³ and China's insistence on resolving geographic disagreements bilaterally.¹⁴ Additionally China is seen as untrustworthy due to their disregard for agreements they are signatories in, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).¹⁵ And despite the Permanent Court of Arbitration of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea rejecting China's nine dash line sovereignty claims, China refused to accept the ruling.¹⁶ China also refuted the overlapping country claims in the South China Sea rejecting all other countries

¹² Winston and Sachdeva, *Raging Waters in the South China Sea...*, 119.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁴ Leszek Buszynski, "ASEAN, Grand Strategy, and the South China Sea: Between China and the United States," in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 124.

¹⁵ Winston and Sachdeva, *Raging Waters in the South China Sea...*, 143.

¹⁶ Tongfi Kim, "U.S. Rebalancing Strategy and Disputes in the South China Sea: A Legacy for America's Pacific Century," in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 178.

needs or rights by submitting the following claim to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf in 2009:

China has indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters, and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof (see attached map [map was of the nine-dash line]).¹⁷

All of China's actions and rhetoric regarding the South China Sea has been in accordance with the 'New China Rules,' a strategy employed to ensure that Chinese interests are respected and enforced as the primary concern in international dealings.¹⁸ However, all of these aggressive strategies and acts beg the question, with China as the strongest economic and military presence in the South China Sea why was this aggression necessary? What is China trying to achieve?

Why China has Become More Aggressive

Why China is choosing to embrace a more aggressive policy in the South China Sea can be attributed to three factors coming together at the same time. First is the materialization of the Chinese Communist Party's decades long national education strategy; second, to exert control over the strategic, and resource filled waterway; and third because they can.

Overcoming the 'century of humiliation,'¹⁹ became a very pronounced narrative pushed by the Chinese Communist Party following the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989.²⁰ The party embarked on a significant effort to re-focus and re-educate the population using a specific lens on how to view Chinese history. The narrative was pushed through new school textbooks;

¹⁷ Liedman, "The Evolution of U.S. Strategy in the South China Sea...", 155.

¹⁸ Michael R. Auslin, *Asia's New Geopolitics: Essays on Reshaping the Indo-Pacific* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2020), 30.

¹⁹ Gideon Rachman, *Easternization: Asia's Rise and Americas Decline: From Obama to Trump and Beyond* (New York: The Random House Group Ltd, 2016), 57.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

museums;²¹ national holidays;²² and television programming (such as recalling Chinese historical heroes like Admiral Zheng He, who sailed the South China Sea over 600 years ago).²³ The campaign emphasised the historical vulnerability of China, and teachers like Milton Nong Ye from Jinan University continue to mold the national perspective of the country with the narrative that:

You cannot overestimate the impact of the Opium Wars. We learned then that the international world order is unfair. China is not safe and has been invaded many times. The way to protect ourselves is to build a great wall of the sea, and you do that with big ships and strong islands.²⁴

Therefore, this is the narrative that the current working class of Chinese citizens 40 and under, have been taught; understanding the strategic value of the South China Sea to China, and their perceived ownership over it.

The strategic importance of the South China Sea is undeniable for world trade, however for China access to it is integral for their future. China fully understands its strategic vulnerability to the point where they are willing to spend billions of dollars on the Belt in Road initiative to give China alternate trading routes.²⁵ The economy of China is dependant on international trade such as oil and consumer goods²⁶ with 2/3 of China's maritime trade, and 80% of China's oil imports passing through the South China Sea.²⁷ In 2013 China became the

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Auslin, *Asia's New Geopolitics...*, 129.

²³ Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, and the Clash of Nations* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 153.

²⁴ Humphrey Hawksley, *Asian Waters: The Struggle over the Indo-Pacific and the Challenge to American Power* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2018), 20.

²⁵ Macaes, *Belt and Road...*, 21.

²⁶ Bill Hayton, "Why China Built Its New Islands: From Abstract Claim to Concrete Assets," in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 55.

²⁷ Yergin, *The New Map...*, 138.

world's largest net importer of oil and they have been a net importer of food since 2007.²⁸ Notwithstanding the importance of trade, the natural resources in the South China Sea are important to China's present and future. China wants to capitalize on the oil and mineral potential under the sea,²⁹ however China needs the fish stocks as a source of food. Chinese citizens consume about 90 pounds of seafood per capita, per year,³⁰ and approximately 3.7 million people are employed in the fishing industry.³¹ The indispensable nature of the South China Sea to China's wellbeing is why China wants absolute control over the area, however the stimulus for their aggressive strategy to gain that control is their belief and understanding of their own power; essentially, they are pursuing an aggressive strategy because they believe they can.

Regarding the South China Sea, China has disregarded UNCLOS; international rulings, their neighbours' rights and needs; and global condemnation because they believe, and want others to believe, that they are powerful enough to do so.³² The islands of the South China Sea have always been important to China³³ however China had followed the policy of Deng Xiaoping of "hide your light and bide your time,"³⁴ until necessity, and military and economic capability enabled them to strive to take control. As of 2021 the Chinese Navy had the largest naval fleet in the world with 335 ships, compared to America's 293.³⁵ The Chinese island bases in the South China Sea extended fighter aircraft and bomber range to encompass the entire area,

²⁸ Hayton, "Why China Built Its New Islands...", 55.

²⁹ Winston and Sachdeva, *Raging Waters in the South China Sea...*, 118.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

³² *Ibid.*, 41.

³³ Yergin, *The New Map...*, 140.

³⁴ Forsyth, "Old Game Plan, New Game...", 98.

³⁵ Jon Harper, "Eagle vs Dragon: How the U.S. and Chinese Navies Stack Up," last modified 3 September 2020, <https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2020/3/9/eagle-vs-dragon-how-the-us-and-chinese-navies-stack-up>

and the island radar stations allow China almost total regional air surveillance oversight.³⁶ Economically, most of the regional players are dependant on (or at least heavily influenced by) Chinese economic relationships, and they do not individually have the maritime assets to challenge their powerful neighbour.³⁷ China has also endeavoured to inhibit the effectiveness of ASEAN to rally as a collective counter balance to China's regional dominance.³⁸ With the radar, aircraft and missile platforms on the islands, and limited regional opposition resources, it would be reasonable for China to assume that they had the ability to both achieve regional dominance, and convince others of their desired status as undisputable regional hegemon. However, the devil is in the details, and China is not as invincible as these facts may imply. China is trying to achieve hegemonic regional control through aggressive strategic manoeuvres, however this approach may be both creating capability vulnerabilities, and exposing existing, previously hidden ones. Therefore, pursuing regional dominance in this way is starting to look like a significant strategic mistake for China.

What makes this Strategy a Mistake

The world has awoken to China's regional ambitions, and this is not advantageous for China. The United States has fully executed President Obama's "pivot" towards Asia.³⁹ Many of China's neighbours have embraced increased American, and other western ally involvement in the region. And these increased partnerships have led to unifying regional relationships that work increasingly to limit Chinese hegemonic regional status, which could in turn threaten the Chinese

³⁶ Michael Peck, "This Map Explains How Chinese Bombers And Missiles Control The South China Sea," last modified 20 August 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelpeck/2020/08/20/this-map-shows-how-chinese-bombers-and-missiles-control-the-south-china-sea/?sh=4edcf90f21e9>

³⁷ Auslin, *Asia's New Geopolitics...*, 37.

³⁸ Buszynski, "ASEAN, Grand Strategy, and the South China Sea...", 125.

³⁹ Yergin, *The New Map...*, 181.

Communist Party's domestic supremacy. To date, an aggressive regional dominance policy is increasingly reducing China's ability to achieve their objectives in the South China Sea.

Timing is key, in the words of a senior Pentagon official "if I was a Chinese strategist, the only thing I would regret is that I did not keep the United States asleep for longer."⁴⁰ America woke up too soon, and China was not in a secure position of regional dominance when that happened. Despite America's muted initial response to Chinese island construction, now Chinese aggressive acts in the South China Sea are met with an immediate American response. Following the Chinese launch of ballistic missiles in August 2020, America blacklisted two dozen Chinese state-owned companies which had links to the building and/or supplying of materials for China's South China Sea bases.⁴¹ Subsequent to China passing legislation in January 2021 that endorsed the Chinese coastguard to use "all necessary means" to remove threats from "foreign" vessels, and destroy structures built on reefs by other nations in the South China Sea;⁴² the United States executed a freedom of navigation patrol through the Chinese controlled section of the Paracel Islands, and deployed two American carrier strike groups (*Theodore Roosevelt* and *Nimitz*) to the South China Sea for a joint exercise.⁴³ Trailing that exercise, in the spring of 2021, after 200 Chinese maritime militia vessels amassed at Whitsun Reef within the Philippine's exclusive economic zone and refused to leave; America deployed a

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁴¹ AlJazeera, "US says China's South China Sea missile launches threat to peace," last modified 28 August 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/28/us-says-chinas-south-china-sea-missile-launches-threat-to-peace>.

⁴² AlJazeera, "US stresses South China Sea support amid China 'pressure'," last modified 28 January 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/28/us-backs-philippines-against-chinas-maritime-pressure>.

⁴³ AlJazeera, "Two US carrier groups conduct exercises in South China Sea," last modified 9 February 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/9/two-us-carrier-groups-conduct-exercises-in-south-china>.

naval strike group, and re-directed an amphibious assault ship with an amphibious transport dock ship to the region.⁴⁴ From these actions it is evident that America is no longer ignoring Chinese aggressive actions in the area, and they are responding with firm actions, and those actions have been welcomed by many of China's neighbours.

China's behaviour and America's subsequent response has led to repaired, renewed, or strengthened relations between several regional players around the South China Sea and western allies. China's increased aggressiveness towards Vietnam led to the country reaching out to the United States,⁴⁵ and consequently repairing relations between the two, ending the Vietnam trade embargo.⁴⁶ Vietnam was able to receive a \$18 million loan from the US for coast guard vessels, F-16 and Orion aircraft; and they were able to obtain other military deals with the United Kingdom, France, India, and Japan.⁴⁷ After China endeavoured to exploit resources inside the Philippine's exclusive economic zone on numerous occasions, despite President Duterte's anti-America and pro-China stance;⁴⁸ in February 2021 President Duterte admitted to the need for American presence in the area stating: "the exigency of the moment requires [the U.S] presence here."⁴⁹ Additionally the Philippines simultaneously worked with India to purchase the BrahMos cruise missile, a deterrent territorial defence weapon, the first of its kind, deterrent capability for the Philippines.⁵⁰ After China deployed dozens of maritime militia vessels well within

⁴⁴ AlJazeera, "China drills in disputed South China Sea as US naval patrol grows," last modified 9 April 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/9/china-drills-in-disputed-south-china-sea-as-us-bolsters>.

⁴⁵ Winston and Sachdeva, *Raging Waters in the South China Sea...*, 126.

⁴⁶ Hawksley, *Asian Waters: The Struggle over the Indo-Pacific...*, 86.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Derek Grossman, "China Has Lost the Philippines Despite Duterte's Best Efforts," last modified 6 May 2021, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/05/china-has-lost-the-philippines-despite-dutertes-best.html>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Indonesia's exclusive economic zone in December 2019, Indonesia worked with Japan to strengthen their defence capabilities.⁵¹ In March 2021 the two countries endorsed a pact authorising the transfer of Japanese defence equipment and technology to Indonesia, and expressed intentions to participate in joint activities in the South China Sea, from military exercises, to island development.⁵² Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia have all stood up to China in the past, however in the past they tried to deal with China in a bilateral way, and in accordance with how China wanted to handle the exchange. The difference now is an acceptance of the reality of what the 'New China Rules' means for them, and the necessity for change. China is not a benevolent regional leader, China is a real threat to their sovereignty, and they are willing to seek outside help. This behavioural change by China's neighbours is not good for China. Though China is currently the dominant regional power; Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan envelop the South China Sea, and unified with western powers backing, they have significant strategic, geographic, and economic potential. Notwithstanding this fact, the Chinese Communist Party has destroyed their ability to compromise, capitulate, or concede to any territorial disputes in the area. Due to their education campaign and domestic policies the party can not afford to lose face with their civilian population. They have managed to put themselves in the position where they can not afford to back down, yet they can not afford a war.

China's domestic situation if more tenuous than the propaganda arm of the Chinese Communist Party would lead the country, and the world to believe. China has several border

⁵¹ Winston and Sachdeva, *Raging Waters in the South China Sea...*, 162.

⁵² Mari Yamaguchi, "Japan, Indonesia sign arms transfer pact amid China concerns," last modified 30 March 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2021/03/30/japan-indonesia-sign-arms-transfer-pact-amid-china-concerns/>.

areas which are actively in dispute (the South China Sea, East China Sea, Bhutan, Kashmir and Taiwan)⁵³, and there are several regions where the party is actively suppressing the population (Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xingjian).⁵⁴ Due to decades of enforcement of the one-child-policy, the general population of China is aging rapidly, with a reduced size work force to support the aging population, while the birth rate continues to decline due to ingrained one-child-policy lifestyles and economic concerns.⁵⁵ The Chinese authorities are concerned about safeguarding control over the population installing over 100 million surveillance cameras inside the country, introducing a “social credit” system as a way to keep citizens in line, and obliging all businesses or social organizations that have more than three persons, to have a party cell.⁵⁶ Despite maintaining perceived economic growth for the past decade the Chinese economy is in a tenuous state; in 2019 China had three times the amount of money in circulation than America, but made \$4 trillion less in gross domestic product.⁵⁷ Foreign investment is permitted and continues to increase in China, however those funds have not been authorised to leave the country since 2015,⁵⁸ which is an indicator that China can not afford to tolerate its removal. Lastly due to China’s aggressive, unilateral acts in South China Sea; against international regulations, orders, and with America publicly declaring the island building illegal in July 2020;⁵⁹ China is more

⁵³ Auslin, *Asia’s New Geopolitics...*, 36.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵⁵ Lily Kuo, “Can China recover from its disastrous one-child policy?” last modified 2 March 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/02/china-population-control-two-child-policy>.

⁵⁶ Auslin, *Asia’s New Geopolitics...*, 46.

⁵⁷ Brigadier General Robert Spalding, *Stealth War: How China took over while America Slept* (Penguin Random House LLC, 2019), 55.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁹ BBC News, “South China Sea dispute: China’s pursuit of resources ‘unlawful,’ says US,” last modified 14 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53397673>.

likely to face international economic sanctions in the future.⁶⁰ This combination of factors indicates that China's domestic situation is more fragile than party propaganda would lead the world, and their population, to believe. Essentially with a tenuous domestic situation; and working against a block of neighbours who are increasingly unified and backed by American, and other westernized powers; China's cracks and weaknesses are becoming more evident, their adversaries have taken notice, and it is all to China's detriment.

Conclusion

China has sought an aggressive hegemonic seeking strategy in the South China Sea to take what they want, when they want it, and make no apologies. It is the opposite strategy to Deng Xiaoping's strategy of "hide your light and bide your time,"⁶¹ and it has not been a successful strategy with China essentially "biting off their nose in spite of their face." China embarked on an aggressive strategy of island building and militarization, they incorporated the fishing industry into an arm of their maritime dominance strategy, and they have completely disregarded the needs of their regional neighbours and allies. China's justification for regional dominance based on their understanding of history, and need for precious resources in a strategic waterway may be very understandable, however by pursuing the strategy in an increasingly aggressive way, just because they believe that they have the perceived military and economic might to do so, was a mistake. China's greatest adversary, the United States, woke up to China's regional intentions and has become much more active in the South China Sea region; past American adversaries have begun to embrace American and other middle powers involvement in the area due to the need for South China Sea nations to protect their sovereignty against a

⁶⁰ Forsyth, "Old Game Plan, New Game...", 95.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

recognized Chinese threat; and domestically China is not strong enough to endure global isolation. Due to China's posturing, aggressive tactics, and military and economic assets, they may appear as though they are an invincible regional powerhouse residing over the South China Sea, however the illusion of their regional dominance and power over the area is tenuous. One is not strong unless they have the ability to withstand great force and pressure; without powerful friends, regional submission, global acceptance, and global independence, China can not do that. They have pursued their goal of South China Sea control in such a way that their goals are unlikely to be realized, the regional dominance that they seek will elude them, and in the long run the party will have a lot of explaining to do to the general population of China.

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