China seems to conduct its foreign policy in accordance with its own understanding of international law and the use of American experts in its international litigation.

When China announced its intent in 1984 to extend its recognition of the International Court of Justice, Zhou Enlai, who was then premier of China, said: “...I declare that China will respect and follow the decisions of the International Court of Justice and other international organizations and seems committed to these purposes...”

Today, China continues to stress the need for an active role in the UN and most other international organizations. In its 1997 White Paper on the Foreign Policy of the People’s Republic of China, Beijing says that China will “...promote the strengthening and development of international organizations and the reform of the UN, and work for the maintenance of international peace and security...”

China’s efforts are as realistic as they are insubstantial. At the Vienna Conference on the Law of the Sea in 1982, Zhou Enlai had told the international community that China would seek to strengthen international organizations. At the time, China had argued that the law of the sea was a matter of “internal affairs” and should not be dealt with at the international level. Zhou’s words are heard but not followed by China.

There are few areas in which China has demonstrated more keenness in its understanding of international law than the island disputes in the South China Sea. China is not only well represented in the International Court of Justice; she has also directed a number of studies on the law of the sea. She has also made specific claims to virtually all the continental shelves around China’s coastline.

With its sovereignty, national security, and the number of people living in poverty all at stake, China has been committed to what it considers its exclusive economic zone. For years now, China has repeatedly pointed out that it is following international law and norms. It has also stated that it is simply trying to settle this dispute through separate means, in accordance with at least its own understandings of international law.

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