

**Strategic Underpinnings of China's Foreign
Policy**

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Strategic Underpinnings of China's Foreign Policy*

What the strategic underpinnings of China's foreign policy are, depend on one's theory of the case. It depends on what foreign policy is considered to be, what weight is given to personality, perception, structures and other factors in making and determining foreign policy. A clarification at the outset: China, like all other powers, reacts to external stimuli as seen through the lens of its own national interest while seeking goals that it sets for itself. As China has gained power in the international system, its agency and capacity for independent action in the world have increased, dramatically in its immediate periphery and less so further away from its territory.

By this reckoning, one would expect the long-term goals of China's foreign policy to remain constant, namely - overturning all vestiges of the 'century of humiliation' and a return to what is perceived - wrongly - as a historical norm of China's global primacy. The means to achieve them, however, would vary with changes in the strategic environment.

To put it another way, one could expect China's foreign policy practice to change depending on its external situation and its growing power to create outcomes. And that is precisely what we see in China's foreign policy since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. China has been quick to adjust to changes in its external situation, allying first with the Soviet Union against the US, then with the Americans against the Soviets, and since 2008 striking out independently as its ability to create outcomes grew.

However, rather than look back in time let us consider the present and the future of China's foreign policy.

Opportunity and Motive

At the 19th Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in October 2017, General Secretary Xi Jinping described China's present situation:

'Currently conditions, both domestic and abroad, are undergoing complicated changes. Our country is in an important period of strategic opportunity in its development. The outlook is extremely bright; the challenges are also extremely grim.. [China has now] become a great power in the world... [and has played] an important role in the history of

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mankind...It is time for us to take center stage in the world and to make a greater contribution to humankind.'

These are strong statements of intent and confidence, addressed to audiences at home and abroad. Some commentators abroad have seen this as 'defining a new world order and restoring to Chinese culture its former esteem', as the New York Times put it. To my mind, however, the statements ought to be read with less certainty. President Xi's statement at the 19th Party Congress was a careful formulation which recognises the opportunity that the US retreat and China's economic success has created. At the same time, it also recognises dangers and speaks of 'grim' challenges.

There is no question that the present situation presents China with an opportunity. It faces no existential threat, its nuclear deterrent has been effective, separatism in Tibet and Xinjiang is controlled and is manageable, and the balance of power in its vicinity has not been more favourable for over two centuries. What Marxists call the international correlation of forces works for China. Its agency and role in international society have grown considerably as a result of its importance to the world economy as a source of growth, the vacation of space by the transactional US under President Donald Trump, its rapid accumulation of hard power over the last 30 years, and its increasing ability to project power. All of this makes this a moment of relative freedom and strength for China. The present balance and China's military buildup have enabled her to follow a more muscular policy in her immediate vicinity - the South China Sea and the East China Sea. This policy approach is also apparent in China's territorial and maritime disputes, and her order-building steps like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and new financial institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB).

To opportunity we must add motive. From China's point of view several elements of the actual situation around her remain unsatisfactory: reunification with Taiwan remains unfinished; the world's greatest armada is 12 nautical miles off her coast; relations with larger neighbours have deteriorated in the last decade; economic integration with the periphery can be improved; and the Western liberal alternative continues to exert domestic political, social and economic pressures. China is a revisionist power, seeking to change and adapt the present US-led order in its own favour, preferably peacefully, without endangering her economic stakes in the present structure of the world economy.

Around China, the US' effective withdrawal from maintaining order and balance in the Asia-Pacific, which began under the Obama administration, has accelerated under President Trump. The US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), its transactionalism in relations with allies like South Korea and Japan, its mono-focal emphasis on the North Korean nuclear weapons issue and its resultant reliance on China for resolving the crisis, and its retreat from the larger issues of

our time such as the world economy, environment and climate change, and energy, have created a vacuum that has left China with significant advantages in East and Southeast Asia.

China's Limitations

However, the extent of this effect should not be exaggerated, and neither are the changes even or the same in all fields. While China is willing and able to fill the economic vacuum, the military situation is more complex. China has certainly increased her military power, and possibly effectiveness, by increasing spending on the People's Liberation Army (PLA) by double digits for almost 30 years (since the Tiananmen Incident in 1989) and restructuring her armed forces into instruments of power projection based on the US model. However, other powers too, have risen in this period. The Asia-Pacific has seen the world's - and history's - greatest arms race over two decades, most of it in offensive weapons. The military balance in the Asia-Pacific does not reflect the economic preponderance that China now enjoys.

The net result is that while the power calculus in China's immediate periphery has improved in relative terms, China is still not militarily predominant.

For instance, China is not in a position to impose a Monroe Doctrine of its own even in the closed geography of the South China Sea. It lacks the military dominance (70-80 per cent of all naval assets) and the control of entire coastlines that the US and Japan (briefly) enjoyed when they were able to impose one. Nor is the military balance such that China can be confident of taking Taiwan unless there is internal chaos in Taiwan and it is virtually without a government. That may be the goal of the new Chinese approach to Taiwan - putting unrelenting pressure on the Tsai Ing-wen government, as opposed to its strategy of co-opting Taiwan economically and through kinship when Ma Ying-jeou's Kuomintang (KMT) was in power. What China does have, with her new A2/AD (anti-access/area denial) capabilities, is the ability to cause concern and to embarrass the US Navy in the seas near China and to prevent a recurrence of what occurred during the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis.

Military power is, in the short run, the cutting edge of change, and the military balance is a measure of immediate opportunity. But long-term outcomes depend on deeper underlying factors: demography, economy, technology, geography, internal politics, and diplomacy.

Besides these underlying factors, the efficacy of external policies also depends on political structures, which convert capability and intent into outcomes. In China's case, that 'power train' or transmission has been untested militarily since the disastrous 1979 war against Vietnam even as it has been changed and reformed continually since. While politically, the 'power train' has produced mixed outcomes for China in the last few years, economically, it has proved most

productive and efficient. Let us now consider the longer term, strategic drivers which are the real strategic underpinnings of China’s external policies: demography, economy, technology, geography, internal politics and diplomacy.

Demography

According to the UN, India will overtake China as the most populous country in the world around 2024, with a significantly younger population. India’s working age population will continue to grow till 2050, while Japan, China and western Europe age. By then, Japan’s median age is expected to stand at 53 years, China’s at nearly 50 years, and Western Europe’s at 47 years. The median age in India will be just 37 years. China is ageing fast, and by 2040 will have the same age structure as Japan has today, the ‘greyest’ of all the advanced economies.

This has more than economic consequences, such as the need to set up a welfare system and concentrate on health and pensions from now on. It also affects military preparedness for the world’s largest army and its capacity to recruit, which might explain the PLA stress on artificial intelligence (AI) and autonomous weapons systems. If history is a guide, older societies do not display the same intent and willingness to project power, to take risks, or to pay the price for primacy that younger ones do. We will have to see how this works out in China’s case. Besides, ageing societies see a slowdown in innovation and economic growth.

China’s demographics, therefore, suggest that it is working within a short window of relative opportunity and advantage, in historical terms. Hence, the haste in pursuing the BRI and other initiatives, with relatively limited attempts to consult or involve neighbours in the design of China’s order building steps.

Economy

The second long-term driver of China’s external policies is its economy. Clearly, economic power has shifted and is more widely held than before in the world. The preponderant change is the rise of China as the following chart shows.

Share of Global GDP (PPP)

	1980	2016
Advanced countries	64%	42%
Europe	30%	16.7%
China	2.3%	17.8%
India	3%	7.24%

Most of this, of course, is accounted for by China. In PPP terms, they are the world's largest and third-largest economies. China is a manufacturing and trading superpower, determines commodity markets and prices globally, and has accounted for about 25 per cent of the global GDP growth in recent years. India's and China's combined share of world GDP in 2016, of 17.67 per cent (in nominal terms) or 25.14 per cent (in PPP terms), is still well below their share of the world population of 37.5 per cent, but represents a significant economic force today. How the location of economic activity has shifted is apparent in the fact that of the world's total nominal GDP of US\$74.1 trillion, Asia accounts for 33.84 per cent, North America for 27.95 per cent and Europe for 21.37 per cent. The relative strength and opportunity that China's economic power gives it is considerable and it is today the main underpinning factor in its policies towards the periphery and further afield.

But the conditions that created China's economic miracle have already changed and are unlikely to return. The high tide of globalisation, of which China and India were among the greatest beneficiaries, has passed. The effects of the 2008 crisis in the world economy continue to linger, as is evident in a low-growth global economy, with countries reacting with increasing protectionism or mercantilism. The last few years have seen increasing on-shoring of the value chain by both China and the US, the two largest trading economies in the world. The globalised economy is fragmenting into regional trading blocs, and protectionist sentiment is on the rise in the US and Europe. China's slowdown and reduced Chinese demand, ageing demographics and declining productivity in advanced economies make it hard to identify future sources of global growth. A fundamental restructuring of the world economy is underway, with changes in the energy economy, digital manufacturing and AI, genetic engineering and biotechnology, to name just some prominent changes.

It was export-led growth that made possible China's miracle GDP growth spurt of over 10 per cent for three decades. As China's economy reverts to the mean, global trade has shrunk. Exports made either a negative or a neutral contribution to China's GDP growth in the last three years. China now faces the double task of restructuring its economy to rely on domestic demand and consumption and of restructuring its economic engagement with the world. And unlike Deng Xiaoping in 1978, Xi is not writing on a *tabula rasa* or blank slate.

The shift to domestic consumption as the main source of economic growth will not prevent China from remaining the world's greatest trading nation. It still needs to deal with the excess capacity created in the past and to ensure that jobs are preserved to avoid social unrest. What will change is the increasing degree to which China will seek to manage and shape the external environment.

As a result of the pattern of its economic success, China is more dependent on the outside world than she has ever been in history. China's resource endowment and need to import crude oil and gas mean that isolation is not an option for China. It will have to actively pursue resources, markets, technology and access, and its sensitivity to outsiders controlling any of its life-lines will only grow. The larger China's stakes, the more it has to lose. But while foreign trade and investment will be a necessity for China, its reaction to protectionism abroad and the end of the high tide of globalisation will be manifested in increasingly mercantilist behaviour that it now has the power to indulge in.

This explains several Chinese initiatives in the last few years such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); the acquisition of container terminals and ports across the globe in as many as 68 countries, on which it spent over US\$20 billion in 2017 alone; the establishment of Chinese military bases abroad, beginning with Djibouti; the reorganisation of the PLA for power projection and distant missions into theatre commands based on the American model; and the much more assertive political role that China has begun to display in her immediate periphery.

It also explains the more ambitious Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) that China is seeking, (now that the US has left the TPP), both as an instrument to further bind the region to itself and also as a means of raising the bar for hesitant partners like India.

What is less likely is that China will provide the global economic public goods that the US used to provide for the financial and trading system, which the Trump administration no longer seems willing to do. So far China has sought to use the US-run system while adding on parallel institutions wherever it felt the need.

The short point is that as a result of integration into the world economy over the last three decades, China, like other powers in the region, sees its future bound to the world and as needing to secure that future by the projection of power beyond its continental territories and coastal waters. In order to do so, China needs to shape the environment, and will attempt to do so in ways that will be regarded as destabilising by the established powers.

Technology

The same logic also applies to China's need for technology, not just for meeting present demand but also in avoiding being relegated again by technological revolutions, this time in energy, digital manufacturing, AI and ICT, and transportation. These are technologies that are still primarily Western intellectual property, even if Chinese and Indians in Western firms and universities play a

major role in their creation. The OECD estimates that over 76 per cent of R&D by the top 2,500 firms of the world is in the West. Today, even the iconic symbols of China's success like the sky-scrapers of the Pudong skyline have Western or Japanese elevators, electronics, cooling and heating systems and so on.

However, this will change and is already changing fast. We are likely to see China return to her historical role as a net provider of knowledge much sooner than the West expects. China's own history of great innovations during politically troubled times like during the Song dynasty or under the autocratic regimes of the Sui and Ming dynasties show that neither the nature nor structure of its politics has prevented China from leading global innovation in history. Those who argue that only an open, 'democratic' China will be able to innovate are wrong, ahistorical and ignore the tremendous effort that China is putting into cutting-edge technologies that it believes will determine its future.

We have seen the effort that China has put into renewable energy, given its own shortage of oil. A similar effort in water, in which much of the cutting-edge work in the US is being done on the west coast by Chinese-origin scientists, should also be of great interest to India. Energy and water are already significant drivers of China's foreign and security policies and will become even more important in the years to come.

Geography

These fundamental drivers - demography, economy and technology, push China into a more involved stance in the world, different from its historical self-image of a China sufficient unto itself and dealing with the world when it chose to on its own terms. But that does not mean that China will behave in the international system as previous Western hegemonies like Britain and the US did, even if the balance of power or power transition makes that possible. The reason for this is geography.

Unlike the US, China is in a crowded and confined neighbourhood, with 13 neighbours on land, many of whom she has a difficult relationship with, and its near seas are enclosed by island chains outside its control. China's power differential with her larger neighbours has varied over time, but she has never had the luxury of hegemonic power that the US has enjoyed for over a century in its own continent while being separated from the rest of the world by two of the world's greatest oceans. That is why China has historically been an inward-looking power, preoccupied with internal order, and regarding the outside world as a threat for most of its history. China's geography also means that preoccupations in her immediate neighbourhood have consumed much of China's energy and that

pacifying the periphery (or 'barbarian-handling') will remain a primary preoccupation for China.

China's geography also makes economics and technology all the more important to China to overcome the limitations that geography places on her reach. This is evident in her attempt to consolidate the Eurasian landmass through the BRI, leapfrogging over or reaching through her neighbours' to access raw materials, markets and global partners in Europe, Africa and elsewhere.

Internal Politics

Of course, the primary purpose of the regime in China like all other regimes is to retain power and ensure its own survival. Internally, ever since the 1989 Tiananmen killings, the Chinese state has explicitly prioritised 'stability above all else' (*wending yadao yiqie*, 稳定压倒一切). Order is the primary political value for China, as it has always been in history, and order results from the hierarchy. Yet, China has changed fundamentally in the last few decades. State-owned enterprises account for only 20 per cent of urban employment and about 30 per cent of GDP in China today. It is hard to see these percentages being reduced by the CPC in the near future without affecting single-party rule. Indeed, this shift has already made China's society and the economy less responsive to control by the leadership, as did the widespread creation of parallel economic empires and corruption in the last three decades. The campaign against corruption, which Xi Jinping described as a 'life and death struggle' for the CPC, has been used to restrict oligarchs and political opponents of the current leadership. It has already affected over one million party members, and is accompanied by a re-centralisation of economic, political, and financial power, and much tighter controls on foreign activity in China, whether by firms or the media, academia and NGOs.

The diminishing capacity of the state to deliver high economic growth or to determine social outcomes, to manage new domains like cyberspace or to set the political narrative has had a paradoxical effect, not just in China. In society after society since 2008, leaders have begun to promise more and more, presenting themselves as strong and capable of creating outcomes, claiming to be outsiders to the existing political establishment, and tapping into popular fears and xenophobia. In practice, they seek to centralise power, redefine globalisation to suit their own particular situations, and rely on nationalism, sometimes chauvinism, for their legitimacy.

Max Weber said that legitimacy comes from three sources: charisma, competence and the Church/religion/ideology. The new authoritarians rely on personal charisma for their legitimacy in politics. As a result, all these leaders also display extreme sensitivity to criticism. None are institution-builders since institutions

would limit or go against the personal nature of the power they seek to exercise. Since 2008, variations on this theme have been seen in a host of states including Japan, China, India, Turkey, and Russia. President Trump is only the latest example of the phenomenon of new authoritarian leaders.

Of course, they are not identical in their programmes. Both the Indian and the Chinese leaderships, heading the two greatest beneficiaries of the high tide of globalisation, support globalisation in a form which enables them to indulge their mercantilist instincts protecting domestic industry while accessing world markets and commodities for their own transformation. Their difficulties in finding an agreement on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership in the Asia-Pacific even while uniting in the WTO against protectionism in the developed world is proof of this. President Trump and others in the West, on the other hand, would rather de-globalise the world economy and are doing so where they can.

Where these leaders are all similar is in the centralisation of political power and the intrusive nature of the state apparatus that they are building. Given a choice between greater control and greater openness, they all choose control. Stability and control seem to be their domestic watchwords. Xi's anti-corruption campaign and controls on cyberspace, the media and academia resonate in Indian Prime Minister Modi's actions and controls in cyberspace, anti-corruption rhetoric, and the slogan of a 'Congress-free India'. Both are engaged in a common search for global influence, sometimes at a cost to relations with immediate neighbours and even uniting the region against them on certain issues. Their recent actions suggest a willingness to sacrifice some economic growth in the pursuit of political control and stability, and to increase their direct link with and popularity among the masses. The populist base is fiercely defended in every sphere, whether by internet trolls, fringe groups which now operate in the open with the official connivance, or by an obedient political party in the political and social space.

In China, the 19th Party Congress in October 2017 marked the overturning of several institutions and conventions that Deng Xiaoping had put in place after the Cultural Revolution and the fall of the Soviet Union to restrict the accumulation of personal power, thus preventing the emergence of another Mao Zedong-type figure or of another dismantler like Gorbachev. Whether the attempt to change Deng's arrangements will succeed is an open question.

How does this affect China's foreign policy? It does so in three ways. First, the capacity to negotiate, compromise, give and take, and bargain required of diplomacy is limited by the ultra-nationalist legitimacy these leaders assume. Second, foreign policy is used for domestic political purposes to a much greater extent, with foreign policy considerations playing second fiddle to how actions will play to a domestic audience. Third, the more internal pressure, the harder the

external line, and that dynamic seem to lead to the much more assertive China we have seen in recent years.

Diplomacy

On the diplomatic front much will depend on the choices that the Chinese leadership makes on questions of order in the Asia-Pacific and globally. In the Asia-Pacific, China faces a choice: whether to push for a China-centric order or to follow the natural grain of geography and revert to the historic state of a multipolar, open and inclusive system of multiverses which coexist. The latter would reflect the balance of power more faithfully, and has the hope of being a long-lasting construct which provokes the least reaction. The former risks overreach, and all its negative consequences.

Globally, there is a geopolitical decoupling or fragmentation of the world system underway. During the Cold War, Europe was central to global affairs, and all crises were linked or dealt within the framework of bipolar rivalry, only differing in the degree of interest of the superpowers. Today, a crisis in the Baltics, the Ukraine, and Crimea is important to Europe, the US and Russia, but is not a significant risk to the rest of the world including the emerging markets. Powers like India and China can sit quietly on Syria. A North Korean nuclear crisis, on the other hand, today affects all the major powers and affects the global balance and risk. The center of gravity of world geopolitics has shifted to the Asia-Pacific. Europe is now a regional sideshow having lost the geopolitical centrality it enjoyed in the Cold War. In effect, the East has been decoupled from the West, the Asia-Pacific from West Asia and Europe, and the Trump administration is trying to decouple the US from the world, (with what success remains to be seen).

The irony is that this localisation and fragmentation of politics and security within and between states has occurred when science, technology and globalisation have linked economic and social fates across regions and when all the new challenges (environment and energy, terrorism and radicalism, cyber security, among others) require cooperative solutions across national boundaries, regions and sectors.

The decoupling of politics and security goes against the economic integration that globalisation has brought about, and against China's attempt to consolidate the Eurasian landmass through its Belt and Road Initiative, and building of links with Russia and European countries. The more activist Chinese engagement, albeit primarily economic, was most recently visible in the '16 plus 1' Chinese initiative to bring together 16 east and central European countries from the Baltic to the Mediterranean. The exclusion of Russia and Germany from the meeting itself tells a tale. For such activism runs up against the Russian and German self-image of their role in the region that has been critical to their security throughout history.

Today, economic power is shared widely and, therefore, the world is a multipolar economy. In terms of military balance, on the other hand, the world is still primarily unipolar, with the US dominance, despite local variations in some sub-regions. And politically there is great confusion, because the political balance is at least as much about intent as capability, and today we are uncertain about the intent of the major powers in the world.

We are thus between the old world and the new, between two orders, heading for multipolarity. We are reverting to the historical norm, which is a set of multiverses, within which North America, eastern Asia, the Indian Ocean Region, Southeast Asia, and Europe live separate political and regional security lives, while they interact intensely with each other economically, technologically and in culture and innovation. This is paradoxical but possible and has been a familiar pattern through much of recorded history. Politics and security are local; economics, science and religion/culture/ideology are global. What that means for India, and its ability or inability to deal with the issues of the day requires a whole PhD thesis on its own.

Conclusion

From what has been discussed above it would seem that these fundamental drivers of China's policy will lead it to a changed pattern of Chinese behaviour in the near future. China's economics, technology and internal politics require her to be more actively engaged in shaping the world than ever before, in ways that will be different from previous powers like the US or Britain. At the same time, geography and demographics suggest that the scope for activism will be limited in both space and time. The risk is that this dichotomy between her needs and practical outcomes could result in a frustrated but powerful China and that could have unpredictable consequences. If this reckoning of the strategic underpinnings of Chinese foreign policy is correct, then it would be logical to expect more activism in China's approach to the world in short, five- to 10-year, term. But in the longer term, the basis for the activist assertion that the world has seen since 2012 may not operate to quite the same extent. Of course, what Harold MacMillan called 'events, dear boy, events' are more than likely to upend all political plans and forecasts.

Keywords: *foreign policy, diplomacy, military power, geostrategy, multipolarity, globalisation, United States, Taiwan, Asia-Pacific, domestic politics, Communist Party of China, demography, economy, technology*

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