



## **China's 'Indian Ocean Strategy' under Xi Jinping's Regime: A Taiwanese Perspective**

**Speaker:** Dr. Chi-shin Chang

**Chair:** Prof. Alka Acharya, Director, Institute of Chinese Studies

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Dr. Chang's presentation was centered around one critical question: 'Is China different from other great powers?' This question was raised in the context of China's aspirations and activities in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The significance of the question, as viewed by the speaker, lies in the fact that the dominant Chinese discourse underlines the unique and peaceful nature of its rise while developments on many fronts suggest otherwise. He evaluated this question in the light of China's material and non-material advances in the IOR.

Dr. Chang outlined and acknowledged the phenomenal growth achieved by China in a very short time wherein, the country has been able to put up a good show on many economic fronts including GDP, per capita income, foreign exchange, and so on. He remarked that the fact that China's economy is well integrated with the global economy and the recent deceleration in its economy has had a marked impact on the rest of the world should neither be overestimated nor underestimated.

He observed that China's survival is dependent to a large extent on economic growth, which is why it is not surprising that it is taking various measures to gloss over or distract domestic and global attention away from the problems that its economy is undergoing. These measures include a renewed vigour in approaching its foreign policy and an urgency in forging foreign relations. The 'One Belt One Road' initiative may be viewed from such a prism.

Dr. Chang opined that China is no different when it comes to playing its part in the great power politics of the day. In his view, the fruits of China's growth had been expended towards increasing its defense expenditure and pointed to the double-digit growth of its defense budget over the past few years. During the length of his presentation, he reiterated his observation that China never reveals its real intentions. He took the example of the Liaoning aircraft carrier to

buttress his argument. He questioned Chinese exhortation of its lack of hegemonic intentions in the light of ever increasing military expenditure.

Dr. Chang moved on to the non-material aspects of Chinese actions and to be specific, the 'intentions' which the constructivists factor as one of the important variables in International Relations. The intentions of the leaders play a pivotal role in the trajectory that a country takes and President Xi Jinping, in the opinion of Dr. Chang, has big dreams for China. He wants to build a rich and powerful country that will restore China's traditional position of pre-eminence in Asia. The style of Xi Jinping is assertive, bordering on aggressive. This is evident from his cracking down heavily on corruption, his endeavours to obtain cutting edge weapons to showcase the Chinese military muscles, frequent military exercises with allies and building of artificial islands in the South China Sea. The increased confrontation with neighbours which is being observed in Xi's presidency also attested to the above in the opinion of the speaker.

Dr. Chang stated that China has announced its grand strategy and qualifies as a great power. This grand strategy further complicates the overseas economic, political, cultural and security interests in the wake of the rapid increase in Chinese presence in the IOR. The Chinese white paper advocates a strong role for the PLA Navy in the IOR. He also pointed to the AIIB, China's cooperation with certain key states (Pakistan, Afghanistan), high-speed rail and road connectivity and Chinese endeavours to carve out a new Asian security architecture as a part of a well calibrated grand strategy aimed at bringing back the traditional dominance of China in the continent. He once again cautioned about the Chinese attitude of not being explicit about their intentions. Chinese might come into the region with peaceful intentions and may try to take active measures to build peace and security in the light of its interests. The IOR occupies an inextricable part in the 'belt and road' initiative and hence, Chinese activities are bound to alarm the region. Dr. Chang predicted that China would be more assertive than earlier in the region and might try to prove its might there.

China's overtures to the littoral states in the form of economic aid are evident and its economic corridor with Pakistan has only served to increase tensions in the region. Dr. Chang pointed to the Chinese desire of access to IOR for sustainable economic growth and development and the need to portray a good image in the region. But he also urged the concerned powers to have a red line with reference to the extent of acceptable Chinese activities in the region. Because in his view, the recipients of Chinese munificence never really know what is in store for them and in order to know that one has to wait and watch.

## **Discussion**

A lively discussion ensued and helped clarify and bring convergence on various issues raised by Dr. Chang. A question was raised as to whether the speaker believed that all powers follow the same trajectory and become predatory as great powers by specifically taking the case of India. He answered in the affirmative and said that India's relations with its neighbours were a litmus

test of the same. He opined that irrespective of political systems, all powers that have the capacity follow the same trajectory. He also noted India's counterbalancing instincts that were apparent from its encouragement of Japan and USA to contribute to balance of power in the region.

One of the questions pertained to the issue of China's naval capabilities in the region and the resultant threat to India. Dr. Chang spoke gravely about Chinese intentions of strengthening their presence in the region. He again reiterated that Chinese gifts to the littorals be viewed with caution.

Questions on Chinese aspirations for domination and concept of Tianxia were raised. Dr. Chang's response was that the Chinese tend to project themselves as a humble and peaceful power and not a great power but at the same time, the Chinese military has its own set of ambitions. But he also pointed to Chinese history of non-intervention in other states to dismiss the concerns surrounding Tianxia.

An interesting query was raised regarding China's soft power credentials and the mismatch between its hard power capabilities and its soft power. The downsizing of PLA was also raised. Dr. Chang responded that the downsizing was superficial and structural and did not constitute a real change.

*Report prepared by Kush Kumar Gayasen, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies.*

### **About the Speaker**

Dr. Chi-shin Chang is an Assistant Research Fellow of the Center for Asia Policy, National Tsing Hua University (NTHU). He also serves as an adjunct Assistant Professor in the same university. He entered NTHU in 2012 and took charge of the education-oriented project of the University System of Taiwan, which is composed of four member universities, including National Yang-Ming University, National Central University, National Chiao Tung University and NTHU. Dr. Chang served as Research Fellow in Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (2003-2008). Prior to that, he was an Assistant Research Fellow at the Division of Strategic and International and in Taiwan Research Institute (1999-2003). Dr. Chang defended his PhD in 2011 which was titled 'International Security Institution's Intervention in Ethnic Conflict'. His areas of expertise include international security studies, international relations theories, conflict resolution, and Northeast Asia regional security studies. He has published several academic articles in different journals, including Review of Global Politics, Chang Gung Journal of Humanities and Social Science, Strategy and Security Analyses.

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