

China & Asia's Changing Geopolitics*

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China's Trajectory

There is a disruption in the distribution of power in the world today. The world as a whole is multipolar economically, unipolar militarily if tending away from that, and politically confused. But while the US is still the only power capable of projecting force around the world and the world is unipolar militarily, the situation in Asia is evolving rapidly. China has changed the balance of power in her near seas and Asia is different from the world as a whole. Much will depend in Asia on how China develops and chooses to use her power.

It seems to be generally accepted that China will not become what the West/Europe was (with military, technological and ideological dominance), or the US (a global hegemon) or Great Britain (an offshore balancer). Will her tradition, in the form of the Tributary system or *Tianxia*, drive her? It is unlikely that it will. China's present needs and positions are unique, even in her own long history. China is economically dependent on the world but powerful at the same time. This is an unprecedented combination — it was not witnessed in the Han when she had to 'buy' off the Xiongnu, or the Song when she was in a

world of equals, or in the high Qing when she was powerful but not dependent on the external world.

China is today attempting a double transition: to becoming a maritime power after being a continental power for all of her history, and to becoming an externally engaged and driven power. Can she manage this? There is no precedent in her history. Several factors could work against success: the demands of one-party rule; her crowded geography; and her demography. By 2040 China will have the same age distribution among her population as today's Japan, the greyest of all the advanced economies.

In the foreseeable future we will see a China that is technologically dominant in some critical advanced fields. China will revert to her historical role as the greatest producer and provider of knowledge in human history — a role that, incidentally was independent of her domestic politics or international position. The Song, though among the most internally weak and externally challenged of China's major dynasties, did the most in terms of innovation and invention and in spreading its use. China

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will also be domestically preoccupied, but with an expeditionary capability that could be used with circumspection. She will continue to play masterfully in the space between maintaining the status quo and war to further her interests as she has done so well since 2008.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) shows China's greatest strength, her ability to learn and to adjust policy pragmatically. By the 2nd BRI Forum she appears to have learnt the dangers of overextension, and adjusted her projects and practices accordingly. In any case there is no one hard model of the BRI and it will keep evolving. As for the response to BRI, if you think it will fail, never interrupt someone when they are making a mistake. If you think it will succeed, use it for your own interests. Whether it succeeds or not, its connectivity and infrastructure projects will change the Asian geopolitical environment markedly.

Discussion abroad of China's trajectory proves the power of the Chinese narrative — we all take today's China for granted, and increasingly discussion of China is a discussion of Xi Jinping, which marks the extent of his political victory and the political utility to China of controlling the narrative. We should broaden our gaze of China from a single leader to institutions like the Party and social and economic change.

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A Bipolar World or Asia?

Will the world be bipolar, as several Chinese scholars like Yan Xuetong now take for granted? This seems less likely than a multipolar world. Much will depend on China's trajectory. An Asia where China is predominant is certainly a distinct possibility. But, does China have the power to behave as a regional hegemon in Asia? Asia is crowded with regional and established powers whom China must either accommodate or contend with, while simultaneously dealing with the US

globally. Today she does not have the preponderance of power that would enable her to be a regional hegemon. For the power differential to reach proportions that enable Chinese hegemony, many things would have to fall into place, and several other countries would have to fail spectacularly.

What about decoupling or bifurcation in the global order and economy between China and the US? This would not be anything other than suicidal for Chinese and US prosperity is dependent on the health of the other. They are truly co-dependent. A more likely outcome of our present confusions is a world of multiple orders. This is already visible and Indians are comfortable with multiple identities. The globalisation eras (Mongols in the 13th century, pre-WWI Europe-led 19th century, and US led pre-2008) were historical exceptions.

There is often mention of an Asian, or Indo-Pacific cooperative security architecture. Do we really want Europe's past to be Asia's future with 400 year of war ending in world wars that destroyed Europe's power and dominance. We, and International Relations (IR), need to stop thinking in categories and terms that are completely irrelevant to us in Asia. IR as it stands is the product of a particular time and place i.e. the late 19th and early 20th century Europe. The question is really what has kept the peace in Asia in the last three decades — decades when by traditional IR standards we should have been at each other's throats. This was when the most disruptive and rapid shifts in the balance of power occurred in Asia due to the rise of India, China and others; when Asia saw the world and history's greatest arms race ever, most of it in offensive weapons like submarines and missiles; when technology, missiles and submarines erased the borders between subregions; and when Asia developed a continuous belt of weapons of mass destruction from the Mediterranean to the Pacific, from Israel to North Korea. And yet we kept the peace.

What has kept the peace in Asia in the dangerous decades of this great disruption? Not the balance of power which has no invisible hand or automatic mechanism to produce a

new equilibrium, and whose quest led Europe to so much grief. Logic leads one to say that it was probably the balance of terror, the good sense that prosperity was more important than status or revenge, and an acceptance of hierarchy or inequality as a fact of life, at the individual, regional and global level. ASEAN, India and China were quick to adjust to the unipolar moment after 1991 and to change their policies. All that changed again in 2008, with the world economic crisis and the subsequent coming to power of new authoritarians, first in Asia and then elsewhere from 2012 onwards. Today, the peace of Asia is threatened; of the three things that kept the peace despite all the odds only the balance of terror still operates.

Therefore, it is difficult to see how an architecture or cooperative security arrangement can solve our problem, keep the peace in Asia, or substitute for good sense and acceptance of the reality of asymmetry and hierarchy in life — as opposed to the Westphalian myth that all states are created equal in the Western image, which they are not. What Asian states could do is to mitigate some of the tactical and other consequences of rapid changes in the security environment, but the political roots of conflict and insecurity which are ultimately in the minds of men would not be addressed.

So where is Asia headed? Not for single-power hegemony or a bipolar China-US system or condominium. History tells us that unipolar systems are short lived, and that bipolar systems are inherently unstable, ending in four out of five cases in conflict, (as in Chin-Chu, Athens-Sparta, Rome-Parthia, Song-Liao and US-Soviet Union cases). Multipolar systems, like the Indian subcontinent after the Guptas and 19th century Concert of Europe, are relatively long-lived and successful in keeping the peace. The best and most likely way forward is for Asia to return to its historical norm of multiverses. Traditionally the Far East, the Indian Ocean region and West Asia each exchanged and traded ideas, goods, technologies and religion, but were not part of each other's domestic political or security calculus. This is not the universe — Heaven, Son of Heaven, earth all in one line — of traditional Chinese thought. If we look around

us in Asia what we see is not decoupling or even bifurcation but the creation of multiple orders. There are already two internets — one cannot use iPhone apps in China; three models of internet governance between the US, Russia-China and Europe; and new standards in telecom, construction etc, some of them spread by BRI. This world of multiple orders is not necessarily an impossible world. We have lived with different electric voltages for years, both 110v and 220v, and don't even think when we plug in our chargers around the world, since technology has given us a way of coping.

We are in a technologically besotted age. We exaggerate the effects on politics and interstate relations of technology. Every new technology, and there have been several over time since stone tools, has been used by man for the same three purposes: to control others, to wage war, or to improve his economic lot. We have learnt to live with the awful side effects and disruption that all technologies brought, and never managed to regulate or devise a regime that successfully managed a new technology and all the possible uses that human ingenuity finds for it. The same will happen with all the wonders of 5G, 6G, digital manufacturing, etc.

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And India?

Ideally, we should position India so that we have better relations with both the US and China than they have with each other. Our choice is between those in India who see conflict with China as inevitable, (and whose policies will make it so), and those who think that we too can play the space between the status quo and war/conflict, as China has done for three decades, to further our interests and manage our relationship with China. In my view, India's choice should be the latter, since we are not inevitably heading for a China dominated world or for conflict with China.

We need a much more granular view of security dilemmas and of China's relationships

and behaviour in the subcontinent and Indian Ocean. This will drive India-China relations and Indian strategy. The BRI in our neighbourhood is a real concern and other neighbours will use our differences with China to balance and play us off against each other.

Most importantly, we have to continue transforming India. We should not export our own confusions on identity, citizenship etc. No external existential threat to India exists today, and we should not create one. The difficulty is that politicians, diplomats and public want a *mantra* or formula. “Non alignment”, “genuine non-alignment” and “strategic autonomy” were all attempts to describe the same policy stance

by governments that didn't want to admit or own their predecessors' words or actions. Today's world demands constant adjustment and pragmatic recalibration of policy. The balance of power is not automatic. There is no invisible hand at work restoring equilibrium or stability to the system. Nor is it a sufficient condition for peace. Besides, India does not want stasis, we need change. It needs work to create the favourable balance of power, or, as the Marxists used to say, conjunction of forces, which works for India's transformation. ■

The views expressed here are those of the author and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies.

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