

China's Middle Kingdom Dream

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Abstract

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, it has been busy working assiduously towards establishing its primacy in world affairs. Its actions, apparently benign in the beginning, have become increasingly aggressive over the years. Beijing has systematically improved its own economic footprint while investing heavily in other countries, and at the same time, has increased its territorial expanse. A deeper look into the Chinese actions point to a more complex strategic outlook, aimed at ensuring China's dominion at the global level. For years, the establishment of Pax Sinica¹ has been seen as the endgame of Beijing's efforts. However, China itself, chooses to call Chinese primacy as the fulfilment of the dream of the Middle Kingdom. And as such China has been working towards making the dream a reality. This article focuses on the steps taken by China for the fulfilment of the same, namely, the institutional measures, expansionism enacted, the soft power and economy built up to fuel its rise to the status of superpower.

Introduction

The Second World War served as the turning point for the fate of the global order. The United States (US) emerged as the paramount sovereign state, displacing the United Kingdom (UK) as the dominant power in the western world. For the next 46 years, till the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) were the predominant powers leading the Western and Eastern blocs respectively. After the

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Soviet collapse, the US effectively was the sole dominating power in the world. Beyond which, the global aim of the US was the continuance of *Pax-Americana*, whereas earlier it was the power contestation with the USSR. The challenge to the US hegemony, finally, came from China. Blessed with a vast store of resources owing to its massive territory and a population of more than a billion to exploit the natural gifts at its disposal.

China's expansionist policies, supported by its economic might, have helped it in both leading and dominating regional institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). China has become increasingly assertive in its global dealings. For India, much has been made of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which is both a military as well as an economic threat.²

However, the scope of the BRI extends far beyond Indian interests and territory. The six-corridor BRI³ is ambitious in its scope and, with it, Beijing hopes to make itself the centre of gravity of the world. In order to fulfil the prophecy of *Zhongguo*, or the 'Middle Kingdom', as imperial China described itself, to be the 'civilised' centre of the world, and the link between heaven and earth.⁴ The efforts of China, since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) snatched power from the Kuomintang (1949), have been for the fulfilment of the dream of the Middle Kingdom. Between its aggressive land grab measures⁵, massive economy (2nd largest in the world) and its chequebook diplomacy, Beijing has managed to put itself in contention with Washington in terms of its global outreach. China is, as the US puts it in their National Defence Strategy, 'A Pacing Challenge'⁶ to the American hegemony and the world order. For fulfilling the aspiration of the Middle Kingdom, Beijing has enacted a four-pronged approach.

Institutional Measures

China in the past decade has been the busiest global power. It has been building new islands in the South China Sea to increase its maritime borders; capturing vast tracts of agricultural land in Africa to feed its near 1.5 bn strong population; and building ports on 99-year leases in countries like Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh. At the same time, it has even disregarded the rulings of the International Court of Justice when it ruled against Beijing's claim on the Spratly Islands lying in the Philippines.^{7,8} China finds itself following the *modus operandi* once used by the US in the

period following the Second World War to establish *Pax Americana*. The latter used its economic and diplomatic heft to ensure that its wants were fulfilled on a global scale.⁹

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the League of Nations became redundant. Owing to complete failure of the organisation to avert global wars, its *raison d'être*. As the world came out of the horrors of the Second World War, especially with the advent of the atomic bomb, a need for establishing a new world order governed by universal laws and treaties was felt. The West led by the US, disbanded the League of Nations (dominated by Britain), overhauled its framework and hence, the United Nations (UN) came into being. Although their stated goals differed, the new body effectively served the purpose of maintaining the position of the new hegemon, the US.¹⁰

In the recent years, China has literally followed the same. The creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the SCO is a carbon copy of the US' playbook. The primary driving force of these initiatives is to safeguard and amplify the goals and ambitions of Beijing. At the same time, the CCP has not ignored the UN. Rather it has been increasingly active in the forum. As of Dec 2022, China effectively heads 4 of the 15 principal agencies of the UN and is a member of another 9.¹¹ But, China's presence alone does not guarantee its influence. Since China is well aware of this hard truth, it backs up its presence in the international fora through its economic might. Between 2010 and 2019, the Chinese contribution to the UN rose from USD 190 mn to USD 1.6 bn, an increase of 346 per cent.¹² The money enables China to expand its influence, which in turn fuels the expansion of its economy.

The Chinese global and intellectual expansion effectively began far earlier than most give it credit for. In fact, Deng Xiaoping's now famous dictum: 'Hide your strength, bide your time' was effectively the state policy back in 1970s. Wherein the focus lay on increasing the size of the economy using sustainable development methods. The abandonment of Xiaoping's policy is, in media zeitgeist, is usually credited to around 2010. However, China began expanding its influence in the late 90s, though surreptitiously. By 1997, China was a member of 20 per cent of multilateral organisations, up from 12 per cent in 1989.¹³ And by

the early noughties, it did the same quite openly. Over the last two decades, ever since it entered the World Trade Organisation in 2001, China has set out to influence the global multilateral system. In 2002, it had established the SCO and the Americans had recognised the threat of an emerging China. However, after 9/11 all the military and economic apparatus of the US was focused on the 'War on Terror', allowing China to further grow in the shadows.¹⁴ While the War was brought to an unsuspecting Washington's doorstep, in other instances, the US ceded influence wilfully. In 2018, citing "Unending hostility towards Israel"¹⁵ the US left the UN Human Rights Council, allowing China an even bigger influence in yet another UN body.

Furthermore, Beijing benefits from such influence in international fora, heading the various institutions of the UN and having high ranking representatives in others allows it to do so. Hence, other countries in the UN diplomatically leverage their interests by voting in consonance with Beijing's wishes. Which results in, for example, countries either abstaining or voting against the UN Draft Resolution A/HRC/51/L.6, regarding human rights violations in Xinjiang.¹⁶

Expansionism

The expansionism enacted to further *Pax-Sinica*¹⁷ is rather colonial¹⁸ in its approach. China, at present, has more territorial disputes than the number of its neighbours.¹⁹ The Xinjiang Province, Inner Mongolia (southern half of Mongolia) among others, are territories that find themselves mentioned in the Imperial Edict of Abdication of the Qing Emperor (1912) (refer Map 1). The succeeding Republic of China and present-day communist variant under the CCP claim direct inheritance of the lands under the Qing Dynasty. The Edict provides the basis and roadmap of the expansionism affected by China. According to the Edict the territories of China Proper, Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet are all a part of the Chinese state. The latter four, at different time periods, have been annexed by China in the previous century.



Map 1 : (Image Source @ NewsX)

On the Indian front, China has the 'Five Fingers Policy' which states that: Tibet is the right arm of China with five fingers, namely, Ladakh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. Xi Jinping, the President of the CCP, has taken it upon himself to 'liberate' the Five Fingers, fulfilling the Policy dreamt of by Mao. Out of the five, two are sovereign nations bordering India, the other three are integral parts of India. As part of Xi's 'China Dream', he wants to achieve the 'rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation' that includes recovery of those Chinese territories which were lost through (as China claims) 'unequal treaties imposed by the imperial or hostile foreign powers'. He termed it as the "Greatest dream of the Chinese nation in the modern history".²⁰ The policy, on the surface, appears to be one aiming to bring back the China which existed at the time of its greatest geographical expanse. However, on a deeper look, one can see the strategic game which China is playing in the region. An annexation of the 'Five Fingers' provides China an undue influence in Northeast India. Allowing it to exploit the resource rich region for its uses. But the story does not stop at material gain. If China is able to subsume the region under its

control, its next target will be establishing complete control over the entire Northeast India. The region allows it unfettered access to the Indo Pacific from two fronts, effectively creating a stranglehold on the region, and further south, direct access to the Malacca Strait (separating Singapore and Malaysia).

In Map 2, the region in red is the extent of the Chinese land during the Warring States Era (475-221 BC) before it was unified by the Qin dynasty (221 BC). The other regions were annexed by the later emperors. However, modern annexations by the People's Republic of China (PRC) are not merely a fulfilment of the Edict but also help in maintaining strategic frontage and depth. Much like Russia, majority population and industry of China is limited to a small area out of a vast landmass. Namely, the successor region of the Warring States Era (in red).²¹ Annexation plays not only an important role in the economy but also creates other opportunities. For example, the deserts of Xinjiang Province serve as a weapon testing site.²²



Map 2 : (Image source @ Scholastic.com)

Soft Power

One often overlooked aspect of Chinese global policy is the soft power projection which it employs, especially, in the Indo-Pacific. In 2022 Beijing provided 130 mn Yuan worth of military assistance to the Philippines,²³ and COVID assistance to Indonesia during the initial days of the outbreak²⁴. Further, its 'loans' to Pakistan and Sri Lanka are among examples of aid and loans to nation states suffering internal setback. China has also been organising museum exhibits to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the voyages of Zheng He, a Chinese admiral who sailed across Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Beijing has been establishing Confucius Institutes²⁵ (Chinese language and culture schools) at leading Southeast Asian universities, expanding China Central Television's (CCTV) international broadcasting and increasing the provision of Chinese language teachers to the region. In Cambodia, Beijing has been more proactive, and the two countries have signed a Memorandum of Understanding for joint development of the Chinese language curricula in public secondary schools.²⁶ In 2013, in Kazakhstan, China's President Xi Jinping proposed a ten-year education plan for SCO members, four of which are Central Asian nations. The proposition was for 30,000 government scholarships to study in China, in addition to 10,000 vacancies for Confucius Institute teachers and students.²⁷ Approximately one-third of the Kazakhs studying in China are on Chinese government scholarships.²⁸ China has effectively usurped Russia as the preferred study destination of Central Asian Students.²⁹

There is also the 'Panda Diplomacy' wherein Giant Pandas (a symbol of peace and prosperity in China) are sent as gifts to nations with which it wishes to create stronger diplomatic ties. Giant Pandas have been a symbol of China's soft diplomacy for decades. Beijing, has, on many occasions loaned out the pandas to countries with which they are signing major trade deals, signing diplomatic initiatives and favourable statements on issues like Tibet or Taiwan.³⁰ In 2019, following a renewed closeness with Russia, Beijing sent two pandas as a gesture of friendship.³¹ On the contrary, in Nov 2023, following a few years of global contestation on trade and territory, China refused to renew the contracts for the Pandas which had been sent to the US.³²

The other side of Chinese soft power is the control it wields over the studios in Hollywood. In the year 2021, American actor, John Cena, had to render an unequivocal apology to the Chinese people for calling Taiwan a country.³³ The Black Panther (2018) movie, under the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) banner, premiered with huge fanfare as it was hailed as a progressive move in the US because it starred a black character in a lead role in a comic book movie- a first for the MCU. However, when the same film made its way to China, the poster showed Chadwick Boseman's (the lead actor) face completely covered.³⁴ The movie's sequel (in 2022) was the first MCU release in the country in over three years, industry sources state that it was due to the depiction of LGBTQ characters, comments critical of China by people involved in the films.³⁵ Another comic book movie, Black Adam, did not release in China because (as The Hollywood Reporter stated) the film starred Pierce Brosnan who had previously shared a picture with the Dalai Lama.³⁶ Owing to its massive population and a revenue of more than USD 8 bn from the China Box office for Hollywood³⁷ coupled with China not being a democracy, meaning it can ban any movie or studio as it wishes without any internal repercussions. Therefore, studios, not willing to lose Chinese money, are compliant with the diktats of Beijing. Allowing the CCP complete control over the depiction of China, its allies and enemies in Hollywood's sphere of influence.

Economy

China also uses its economic power to leverage diplomatic heft. Over the years, China has invested heavily in countries, both major and minor economic powers. The UK, Germany, France and Italy (Two of the Permanent 5 of UN Security Council) have major investments by the Chinese (see Map 3 below).

There is a pattern to such investments by the Chinese. Its investments enable it to create pockets of influence where its reach is limited. And it ensures that the investments go to economies which are faltering due to them being receptive to a much-needed infusion of money while guaranteeing Beijing can dictate the terms of the transaction. A near EUR 80 bn investment lies with the UK and it is on the brink of recession.³⁸ Other examples include the crisis that has befallen Sri Lanka³⁹ and the condition of Pakistan.⁴⁰



Map 3 : (Image source @ Merics.org)

While China has been investing heavily in other countries, it recognises that its strength lies in its economy and not its military which has not fought a full-fledged war since the Sino-Vietnamese War (1979). And, as such, has been investing heavily in the technologies of the future. Chief among them being semiconductors and pharma. China understands, if it has to fulfil the dream of the Middle Kingdom, it must create a situation where the technologies of the future must become the domain of China. And have infused massive amounts of money in both industries. In the pharma department, China has been inviting foreign companies to invest in the multibillion-dollar industry. AstraZeneca, in Jun 2023, has invested USD 600 mn in the market despite the concerns of the US due to China's investment into the American biotech sector.⁴¹ Drugmakers are tempted by the Chinese market due to its ageing population suffering from chronic problems such as smoking related maladies. Furthermore, Beijing has put forth more than 800 bn Yuan into its own industry.⁴²

In the semiconductor industry, in Dec 2022, announced an investment package worth 1 tn Yuan (USD 143 bn)⁴³ and another USD 7 bn in Apr 2023⁴⁴ to bolster the previous investment. Beijing's actions in the semiconductor industry have effectively brought it into a trade war centred around semiconductors with the US.⁴⁵

Conclusion

If China is to achieve true superpower status, then it could take two routes. The first, by establishing itself as the dominant regional power. Just as the US once did. The second, is to create for itself a region in its vicinity bereft of any American influence. To any rational person the two approaches may not seem mutually exclusive. However, there is a difference. The first approach focuses on building primacy in the region whereas the other makes the expulsion of American influence from the area its primary objective.

Conventional wisdom would dictate the use of the first approach, just as Washington might assume. As it is the approach it once took to establishing the sole hegemony. However, such a mindset opens itself up to the greatest weakness of monitoring geopolitical trends— the projection of one's ideals on another. Something which has been the Achilles heel of the US in the past, Afghanistan and Iraq stand out.

China seems to be going for the second option- evicting American influence from the region. It recognises that it cannot become a true hegemon when the US has allies like South Korea, Japan and Vietnam in its backyard. Chinese officials, in the recent past, have advocated for 'Asia for Asians'. It has openly stated the annexation of Taiwan as part of its One China Policy.⁴⁶ All clear indications that China wants a region without any meddling on part of the Americans. The unsaid policy, at the time is clear, cauterise every ounce of the US from the Indo-Pacific and fill the ensuing void using Chinese military, diplomatic and economic influence that has been built up in the shadows.

The rest shall be evident in the coming days, whether there is a shift in the policy of China with regards to the first approach or the second. Perhaps an amalgamation of the two, as this writer would suggest. However, the one sacrosanct fact that cannot be ignored is— China believes it is the inheritor of the world owing to the Middle Kingdom Prophecy and as such aims to lead the world in terms of composite national strength and international influence by 2049, the year of the PRC's centenary.

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