

China's Resurgence : An Insight*

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“Anyone who is able to prevent violence and remove harm from the people so that men's lives are protected, who can reward good and punish the evil and thus avoid the disaster – such a man may be called the emperor”.

Cu Chi Tang Quan - Chinese Classic, Eleventh Century
(The Central Mirror for the Aid of Government)

Background

The rise of China as a global power after a brief hiatus of almost 150 years is a phenomenon the world is following with considerable interest. The trend is expected to continue through the better part of this century. In a quest to restore its position as the “Central Country”, (Chong Guo) China has pragmatically, adopted, discarded and modified prevalent principles and fundamentals with the singular focus of increasing its influence, power and strategic space. Ex President Mr Jiang Zemin in ‘China's Declaration of the 21st Century’ stated, “PRC should first turn itself into a powerful country, if it intends to make a greater contribution to both progress of mankind and world peace”.

Till early 20th Century, it was a monarchy, with its attendant feudal trappings. For two thousand years, as late as the 19th Century, China had the largest economy in the world¹. Seen in that backdrop, many analysts now term China's rise, more of “Resurgence”. To understand China's transformation, it is pertinent to have an insight into China's past. Numerous personalities and prime events have proved to be the turning points in China's ascent.

Historical Perspective

The seeds of China's rise were sown during the “Century of Humiliation”, a period from the First Opium War (1839-1842) till the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Till the era of Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), China was a seafaring nation with vast reach. Qing dynasty, however, banned foreign trade until China was forced to open up by the European colonial powers. Neglect of its naval power, combined with a continental inward-biased mindset, were the main reasons for China's derailment from the path of progress and evolution.

The defeat in the First Opium War was followed closely by what the Chinese remember as “unequal treaties” with the French, Russians and the Japanese. The “Second Opium War” (1857 - 1860) culminated in the razing down of the Summer Palace. Wars with the French and the Japanese in 1885 and 1895, destroyed Chinese influence in Vietnam and Korea respectively. The treaty of Shimonoseki was draconian; implying independence for Korea, secession of Taiwan, the Pescadores Island, the Haidong Peninsula, besides millions of dollars in idemnity².

The obvious weakness of the Qing Empire led to collapse of Imperial China and establishment of the Republic, under Dr Sun Yat Sen in 1911. The regional warlords set up parallel power centres in the provinces. This period of great chaos called da luan in Chinese, caused great difficulties to the masses. The Chinese believe that they lost their position of primacy and suffered immense indignity because of their own weakness – their obsession with control. Their determination to redeem their lost position as a key global leader arises from this perception.

Process of Resurgence

The ‘People's Republic of China’ was formally established on 01 October 1949. Through the Mao era, the Chinese establishment continued to experiment with various measures to achieve self-sufficiency. To this end, events such as the “Great Leap Forward” (Da Yue Jin) from 1958-60, the “Hundred Flowers Movement”, and the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” from 1966 till almost Mao's demise in 1976 were undertaken. Each of these had unpleasant and negative impact of tearing up an already beleaguered society further, and creating intense social disorder. Through the years of the Great Leap Forward, it is estimated that over 30 million people perished due to starvation and disease. However, Mao's era was not without accomplishments. It was during this period, that China gained identity as a communist state under one party rule. The periphery of the country which includes Tibet, Xianjing and Inner Mongolia was consolidated. A number of positive reforms were undertaken to elevate position of women in the society, control of population besides the literacy drive.

As per the Chinese, their nation's rise as a growing power has fructified due to the configuration of a “benign security and external environment”. The shaping of the external environment in favourable terms was made possible through a series of deliberate steps that China undertook. It re-established relations with the USA after the 1972-73 Joint Declaration. PRC made a deliberate effort to settle the borders with twelve neighbours, leaving only India and Bhutan where boundary disputes still persist. China has specifically focused on improving its relations with its neighbours in a concerted fashion.

Strategic Assessment by Deng Xiao ping

Deng Xiaoping, who survived the second purge during Cultural Revolution, re-emerged as a de-facto leader after Mao's death in 1976. Deng explained that one important reason for China's backwardness was its “closed door policy”. An important landmark was the strategic assessment by Deng Xiaoping. After his famous tour of the Southern Provinces in 1985, Deng proclaimed his assessment of the international scene, stating that China no longer was under threat of a general or nuclear war. He repudiated Cultural Revolution and began the process of reforms toward his version of “Socialist Market Economy” ³. He sought to shift the focus away from a war-fearing

mindset, to one that concentrated on improving the economic situation. His 24-character guidelines for national development enshrined the importance of realpolitik and pragmatism in the affairs of the Chinese state, a singular shift from the “ideology based Mao-era”. The operative words in the celebrated guidelines of Deng Xiaoping were :-

“Calmly deal with situation, stand firm,
never to take the initiative and bide one’s time”.

Orchestration of the Peaceful Rise

With the wisdom of hindsight, the orchestration of the process followed a clear articulation of China’s version of “glasnost” and “perestroika”, called “kaifang” and “gaige” respectively, or “gaige kaifang” as a composite. While economic reforms were to be undertaken expeditiously, in the political arena, status quo was to be maintained. Therefore, towards orchestration of Peaceful Rise, Chinese leadership came to a firm conclusion that the most important task of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was to ensure economic development. Every other facet of national power would be a natural fallout of such development. Deng Xiaoping is famously reported to have said “the colour of the cat is immaterial as long as it catches mice” and “to be rich is glorious”. There was officially declared policy support for the “Four Modernisations”, which, in given order of priority were, Agriculture, Industry, Science and Technology, and National Defence.

Economic Initiatives

China was one of the poorest countries in the world in the 1950’s. Even in 1975, its per capita income was the lowest⁴. Under the Soviet style central planning, collective agriculture and isolation from world economy, Chinese economy still managed to grow at a respectable six percent⁵. The impact of China on the world economy is well illustrated by the fact that its conscious integration with the major global economies makes her unassailable at the moment. Some of the salient initiatives undertaken by Chinese to boost its economy were: -

- (a) Economic decision-making process was decentralised to the provinces and even to municipalities so as to ease demands on the investor and make the FDI more attractive.
- (b) Prolonged negotiations were undertaken before China acceded to the terms of the WTO as a “developing country”. The average tariffs dropped from fifty six per cent in 1982 to eleven per cent in 2003. It’s volume of trade increased twenty five times between 1978 and 2001⁶.
- (c) All pressures were resisted to review the country exchange rates. PRC has retained a degree of control over the currency, the yuan (Ren min bi).

Comprehensive National Power

The concept of Comprehensive National Power (CNP) is an original Chinese political concept with no roots in either contemporary or past Western political theory. It refers to the organic whole, the totality of potential possessed by a sovereign state. As per the CNP theory, the power of a nation is composed both of hard power and soft power by assigning quantitative indices to these, whereby the overall power of a state can be quantified. The foundation of state’s CNP is its economic strength, military providing the benign security environment. Science and technology has been identified as a precursor for innovation. Going by the assessments of the China’s Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the top ten countries in the world in terms of their CNP are as shown:-

Comprehensive National Power (CNP) Ratings (%)

The US	90.62	China	59.10@
The UK	65.04	Japan	57.84
Russia	63.03	Canada	57.09
France	62.00	South Korea	53.20
Germany	61.93	India	50.43

@ As per the Chinese thinkers, the main difference in the CNP between China and the USA is in terms of military potential.

Security Dimensions

Due to globalisation, there is an ‘internalisation of China’s domestic security’ and ‘domestication of international security’⁷. Envisioned from this perspective, today China does not face any direct external threat. However, China’s threats from within are attributable to domestic and social contradictions. People who have become used to the “egalitarian distribution system”, have a deep rooted mindset that “unequal distribution is a bigger problem than scarcity”. China remains internally fragile plagued by imbalances, which are enumerated in the succeeding paras.

Internal Imbalances. Internal stability today is the most critical component of China’s national security paradigm. The salient internal imbalances of China are:-

- (a) **Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region.** Xinjiang region has been one of the major flash-points. Over the years, Uighurs and other Muslims have continued to nurse their grievances against issues like re-settlement of Han Chinese in Xinjiang, restrictions on the mosque building activities and population control measures. By reviving their historical linkages to Central Asian Republics on the basis of religious identities, Muslim unrest in Xinjiang has revived. In the wake of Beijing Olympics, two major terrorists related incidents took place in Xinjiang claiming around 20 lives.
- (b) **Tibet.** While Tibet’s ties with India involved cultural and commercial interactions, the interface with China was primarily of military and administrative nature. Dalai Lama’s asylum in India and Sino -

Indian War in 1962 made China highly skeptical of India's intentions in Tibet. While Tibet has been largely peaceful, but for the monks initiated unrest in early 2008, it has a very strong political voice in Dalai Lama.

- (c) **Taiwan.** In 1949, as a sequel to the successful communist revolution, Kuo Min Tang leadership set-up itself in Taiwan. President Richard Nixon's visit to China, in 1972, paved the way for normalisation of relations between the two countries. Thereafter, Taiwan no longer enjoyed formal recognition as a sovereign state by any major nation. In 1984, Deng Xiao-Ping spoke of "one country, two systems," implying greater flexibility towards reunification with motherland, an issue which remains high on Beijing's political agenda.
- (d) **Uneven Regional Development - East vis-a-vis West.** The inter-provincial economic gap in China has been growing at a rather fast pace. Western China remains land-locked and shares borders with countries that are unstable. Deng Xiaoping's "get rich fast" policy resulted in faster growth of China's coastal belt. Of the FDI actually invested in China, its Western Region has received only three per cent of it. China has taken a series of measures to rectify the imbalances by giving impetus to the development of Western region to bridge the East - West divide.
- (e) **Floating Population and Migration.** China today has changed into a highly mobile society, which has been partly forced by the inherent requirements of a rapidly growing industrial economy. This floating population, estimated around 150 million, while in a way integrates China's deprived sections also exposes them to rapid development. Measures have been put in place to regulate the movement and employment of migrants.
- (f) **Environmental Challenges.** China currently has an "enormous environmental footprint" with regards to polluted air and water. The major challenge to China's drive toward modernisation is environmental degradation and its related problems. Five of the world's most polluted cities are in China. Problem of acid rain is getting worse and total farmland has declined by 20 per cent. Environmental degradation in China is also contributing to mass internal migration.
- (g) **Growing Energy Demand.** China's most serious challenge in the 21st Century is that of securing enough energy resources. With large reserves, China is predominantly dependent on coal as the primary source of energy. This has raised serious environmental concerns internationally.
- (h) **Demographic Clock.** China has an ageing population which can impede its growth after 2025. While the numbers of people over sixty years in 2000 were 123 million, this number is expected to swell to 350 millions by 2030. By 2065, fifty four per cent of the population will be over sixty. Unless the Government modifies its current one child policy, the ageing population will be a major constraint. As per Barry Naughton "China will grow old before it has had the opportunity to grow richer"⁸.

Nuances of New Military Doctrine

In late 1990s, the PLA perceived that in future conflicts, it was likely to face an adversary technologically far superior to it. Hence the emphasis was to overcome its technological disadvantage. The "Two Transformations" (liangge zhuanbian), it then initiated, sought to make the Chinese Armed Forces undergo metamorphoses; first "from an Army preparing to fight local wars under ordinary conditions to an Army preparing to fight and win Local Wars under Modern High-Tech conditions", and second "to transform the Armed Forces from one based on quantity to one based on quality.

PLA's grand strategy is based on a key assumption that economic prosperity and stability will afford China greater international influence and diplomatic leverage as well as robust modern military. The PRC aims to develop a force to fight and win 'local wars under conditions of informationisation'. It is based on joint operations and logistics under informationised condition with strategic mobility inbuilt. The key facets of this doctrine are the - information warfare, network centrality, jointness, hi-tech force multipliers and "ideal man-machine matrix". Jointness in Chinese Defence structure is inbuilt right from the macro level. The Central Military Commission (CMC), the highest military decision making body, is composed of the PLA hierarchy, and headed by the President. Further, all wings of PLA function under the Chief of General Staff (CGS). Confucian ideal of winning a war before actually getting into it still remains valid.

Defence Modernisation - Salient Facets.

China in its quest for modernisation has laid down some informal timelines for achieving the goals. The aim is to lay "a solid foundation" by 2010, make "major progress" by 2020 to make capable of winning informationised wars and emerge as a modern force by 2050. The PLA appears to be aware that the bulk of its rank and file is still at the pre-mechanized stage, and needs to rapidly transform itself. China's military modernisation strategy is apparently based on the "PLA's simultaneous transformation", through mechanization and informationisation. Whereas mechanization provides the foundation, informationisation acts as the driving force. Salient facets of PLA modernisation are enumerated below:-

- (a) **PLA Navy (PLAN).** It is on the top priority for modernisation. Naval modernisation is envisioned in three stages. The First Stage is from 2000 to 2010, when the PLAN aims to develop capabilities to deal with the possible situations in Taiwan Strait and in South China Sea. The Second Stage is spread over 2010 to 2020, when the PLAN seeks capabilities to project power to the first island chain i.e. the Japanese islands of Kyushu and Ryukyu, the Philippines and Borneo. The Third Stage is from 2020 to 2050, during which the PLAN power projection is sought to be further expanded.
- (b) **PLA Air Force (PLAAF).** Next in the modernisation is the PLAAF. Presently, mission of the PLAAF is to cope with local contingencies. The 'Central Military Commission' has laid down that the PLAAF should have "quick reaction, integrated combat-in-depth capabilities." To this end, China is in the process of acquiring AWACS from Israel and in-flight IL 78 refuellers from Russia. Obsolete fighter aircrafts are being replaced with the induction of SU 30s from Russia and indigenous production of J 17s.

- (c) Strategic Forces. China currently maintains a minimal intercontinental nuclear deterrence, employing land-based ballistic missiles (ICBMs). The future capabilities envisage upgradation to “limited deterrence capability”. To this end, DF 31 (8000 km) is likely to be operationalised in the near future. DF 41 (12000 km) is under development. DF 15 and DF 21 SRBMs are replacing the older generation.
- (d) Land Forces. Restructuring of light infantry units is compatible with the PLA’s doctrinal emphasis of ‘manpower over machinery’ and manoeuvrability. Mechanization is the key element of transformational modernisation. For high-altitude operations, the PLA has been moving towards the Russian concept of Reconnaissance Combat Operations (RCO). Elite units are now being converted into mobile units.
- (e) Rapid Reaction Force (RRF). PLA’s conceptualisation of “rapid reaction” capability emphasises adaptation to warfare scenarios and developing quick responses to varying battlefield contingencies. Salient facets of PLA’s rapid reaction concept are training, speed, strength and effectiveness. China is in the process of developing competitive, high-technology-based rapid reaction forces (RRF) (kuaisu fanying budui) to cope with future small-scale, intense local military operations. Besides a fully operational Airborne Corps, another Air Borne Corps HQ is under raising. The development of the RRFs can also be linked to the PRC’s changing threat perceptions, especially vis-à-vis the Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, Tibet, and Xinjiang.

Information Operations (IW). Chinese view IW as an asymmetric tool that will enable them to overcome their relative inferiority in military hardware. In Chinese thinking, IW presents a level playing field for projecting power and prevailing upon the adversaries in future conflicts. Chinese also call their pursuit of IW as “Acupuncture Warfare” which entails “paralysing the enemy by attacking the weak links in his command, control, communications and information, as if hitting his acupuncture point in kung fu combat”.

HRD and Training Aspects. Alongside modernisation, the strategic project for “Talented People” aims to develop commanding officers with the skills needed to lead “informationised wars,” staff officers with operational planning expertise and experience, scientists/technical with specialist skills and a cadre of NCOs with subject domain expertise in the employment of complex weaponry. Besides, the PLA has ensured young combat officers’ corps. The age profile of commanding officers is early thirties and divisional commanders is early forties. The officer corps is better educated and technologically proficient.

Implications

China’s rise has generated multi-dimensional impact. The implications have both internal and external connotations. Internally the resurgence has enthused Chinese people and instilled a new sense of nationalism and pride. Influenced by the West, the Chinese are constantly seeking a better quality of life. This has also resulted in the masses becoming apolitical and trying to cash on the opportunities provided by the booming economy. In an effort to ensure sustained economic growth, the Chinese have established contacts even with remote regions of the globe. These efforts have been principally aimed to ensure energy supplies and resources, deemed vital for development, besides providing security to its investments.

The international community has taken note of the arrival of the “new kid on the block”, and has taken steps to accommodate and respond to the Chinese emergence as a new power. Various measures are being taken by the Western powers to simultaneously contain and engage China in the strategic field, described as “conengagement” by Western analysts. Russia has sought to use the Chinese against the West and vice versa in an effort to regain its own past position in the world order.

As far India is concerned, Chinese influence far outweighs that of ours both at regional and global levels. PRC is clearly way ahead in terms of GNP, per capita and trade volumes. This is likely to remain so for the next two or three decades. That notwithstanding, both India & China will continue to grow with their respective strengths and weaknesses. India needs to address this issue pragmatically and take appropriate steps to set right the imbalance. Going by the Chinese saying, “seek truth from facts”, India’s approach should be based on long term perspective, keeping in view its national interests. Therefore, India’s strategy towards China has to be holistic, multi-dimensional and farsighted. China respects strength i.e. li. Hence India ought to shed all ideological baggage and concentrate on building her CNP to comparable levels. India must capitalise on the overwhelming soft power assets, while continuing to engage China. There is a need to develop multilateral mechanisms to be able to raise issues of mutual concerns. Contentious border issue needs to be settled on equal terms. However, the real test of cooperation between India and China would be in the fields of economic and energy cooperation in Central and SE Asia. In the long run, India and China ought to narrow their differences and expand areas of cooperation, as good relations are in our best mutual interest.

As per the Chinese, accretion of resources (military, economic, technological), does not make a great power. It is the capacity of a nation’s political leadership to think big and bold. Chinese leadership has a proven legacy in this regard. China’s emergence as a global player is a stark reality today. How it’s leadership employs this capability, though an uncertainty, would have immense impact on the emerging shapes and contours of the new world order.

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