

# China - The Western Shift

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## Introduction

Historically China has been always focused on its eastern seaboard. The Opium Wars, commencing in 1839, forced the Chinese to open up to outside influences, besides ceding Hong Kong to Britain. The Japanese belligerence in the yesteryears, a breakaway Taiwan, the Korean War and the subsequent US military presence in South Korea had kept the Chinese preoccupied with the east. The vast swathes of the sparsely populated and non-Han west were a peripheral issue, whose fortunes were yet to be intertwined with Beijing. However, in the last two decades of the post Cold War era, China has carefully analyzed the geo-political shifts and has thereafter embarked on an ambitious programme of an accelerated military build-up and development of its western regions. This shift in Chinese focus towards its west was not sudden. The Gulf War I in 1991 was a *blitzkrieg* military campaign by the US. Apart from Saddam's Republican Guards, it also put the Chinese in 'shock and awe' with the demonstration of its vastly superior military power. Soon, the US military interventions in former Yugoslavia on humanitarian grounds in the mid-1990s rattled China fearing that the same principles could be used by US for military interventions in Tibet and Xinjiang.<sup>1</sup> Later, the ease with which Afghan Taliban was subjugated in 2002 by awesome use of American military power in China's immediate neighbourhood further reinforced China's fears for its western periphery.

The US was meanwhile cosying up with an emerging India and opening up a series of bases on the Chinese periphery in the west, using the Afghanistan campaign as a pretext. It roped in Tajikistan as well as Uzbekistan, which from its Kandabad air base at Karshi offered invaluable assistance to American forces till 2005. Kyrgyzstan had also permitted a US military base since 2001 at Manas, near the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek. China is much concerned that its Central Asian neighbours are inching closer to America or Russia. This projection of the American power into the center of the Eurasian land has been viewed as contradictory to the long-term Chinese strategic and energy interests. Thus, the compulsions of an aspiring superpower China to protect its interests on its western periphery, subdue remnants of Tibetan and Uyghur resistance and project its economic and military might towards west and south has propelled China to convert these once forbidden lands into another upcoming Chinese provinces with gleaming highways and superfast trains. This article endeavours to place this western shift as part of a well formulated Chinese strategy based on modernization, economic interests and their response to the changing geo-political realities of the region.

## Quieter East and Demanding West

### General

It is a well-stated Chinese position that Taiwan and Tibet are its core-interests. As regards Taiwan, it is now getting quiet on the eastern front with a pragmatic leadership in Taiwan. The US too is playing up. In October 2008, the Republicans gave a reduced arms sales package to Taiwan, approving only a package worth approximately US \$ 6.46 billion out of the total package of US \$12 billion which was under active consideration. While things seem to be looking up for China in the east, all is not well on its western front. Islamic fundamentalism threatens to sweep in to Xinjiang from Pakistan and Afghanistan, close ally Pakistan is slipping into chaos while Tibet remains an open question despite heavy Chinese security presence. Three of China's largest provinces - Tibet, Xinjiang and Qinghai - constitute about 37 per cent of the total area but have only two per cent of the population. Among these, Tibet secures China's southern border and provides access to South Asia while Xinjiang does likewise for Central Asia and Russia. The rim, thus, provides protection to the Chinese heartland. Tibet also provides China access to the Arabian Sea through Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan occupied Kashmir.<sup>3</sup> China has often reiterated that its concepts of warfare and capability upgradation go well beyond meeting the present challenges. This implies that China's military capabilities shall continue to grow unabated even as the Taiwan issue thaws and that the Chinese national security strategy is set to be focused to look beyond Taiwan<sup>4</sup>, now clearly westwards.

### Taiwan

Evidently, relations are beginning to look up between Beijing and Taipei. Since the inauguration of President Ma Ying-jeou in May 2008 in Taiwan, regular cross-strait negotiations have been resumed, and People's Republic of China (PRC) and Republic of China (ROC) have signed 12 agreements covering food safety, cross-strait air transport, sea transport and postal service. This has led to the commencement of daily passenger charter flights across the Taiwan Straits. President Ying-jeou has made many efforts to improve cross-Straits relations, and this is being reciprocated by the mainland.<sup>5</sup> Many argue that Taiwan is actually a stateless economic mode, so central to the global economy that almost no electronic instrument is lacking a Taiwanese component. A disruption in its economy - whether due to war or economic calamity - would be disastrous for everyone equally, including China. Taiwan is the largest foreign investor in the mainland's factories and enterprises, far greater than the US, the EU or Japan, and thus the occasional cross-strait sabre rattling must not be given undue importance. As in 2010, Taiwan's cumulative investment in China from 1991-2009 was US \$ 82.7 billion while estimated number of investment projects in China by Taiwan investors were 80,393.<sup>6</sup> Taiwan's economy is highly dependent on the mainland, with Taiwanese companies having invested more than US \$ 100 billion there since the late 1980s, and around one million Taiwanese business people living there. These economic links, integration between the mainland and Taiwan and an already healthy presence in the Chinese economy, create a deterrent to conflict, allowing China to focus on its neglected western borders.

The US policy on Taiwan has also undergone a marked shift. Apart from deeply intertwined economies, the USA also require Chinese support on issues like Iran, Afghanistan and North Korea. Not surprisingly, the F-16C/Ds were not part of the October 2008 US arms package to Taiwan. Further, it only agreed to sell only three of the six requested PAC-III anti missile batteries to Taiwan and declined to act on either the request for a design study on submarines or the procurement of some transport helicopters.<sup>7</sup> In reality, it is said that Washington protects Taiwan as much for its microchips as for its military dignity, but in private opposes Taiwanese independence, hoping that a grand bargain can

be reached whereby Taiwan promises not to secede and China de-escalates. This has enabled China to reassess its long term military deployments and cover the hitherto neglected areas in the west of the country.

## **Improving Sino-Japan Relations**

There has been a recent thaw in the frosty Sino-Japan relations and the political leadership of Japan has adopted a pacifist attitude towards China. The new government of Japan is now sidestepping a century of brutal conflict to flirt with China, especially in regional trade groups like ASEAN + 3. In December 2009, 143 members of Japan's parliament and 500 other people, led by Ichiro Ozawa, the new ruling party chief, flew in five planes for a special visit to China. A history of hostility seemed to disappear at a warm meeting with President Hu Jintao, who agreed to get himself photographed, one at a time, with each guest.<sup>8</sup> In 2008, China-Japan trade grew to US \$ 266.4 billion, a rise of 12.5 per cent on 2007, making China Japan's top two-way trade partner.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, China was the biggest destination for Japanese exports in 2009. It is said that for Tokyo, a healthy alliance with the US is insurance against a future Chinese threat; good relations with China are a hedge against an unreliable US ally.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, a confrontation, in spite of many unsettled issues, is unlikely.

## **China's Central Asian Interests**

The Central Asian states are the new players in the heart of Asia which China seeks to influence. China is concerned that the Central Asian Republics, particularly Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are getting closer to the US and intends to counter that with significant military presence and infrastructure upgradation on the Tibetan plateau and Xinjiang. In fact, Central Asia is the new chess board between the US and China. The US perceives the Central Asian states from the perspective energy resources, countering fundamentalism and containing Russia and China. On the other hand, the Chinese strategists in Beijing realise the strategic importance of the Central Asian states and its surrounding area, particularly their role in the world's supply of energy.<sup>11</sup> China also considers the Central Asian states in context of Eurasia wherein the future of political and economic cooperation in the whole Eurasian continent would be seriously affected by any turbulence there, adversely affecting Chinese economy. China has 3000 km long borders with three Central Asian countries - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Most of the border issues with these republics were skilfully settled by the Chinese government by late nineties.<sup>12</sup> Thereafter, there has been significant cooperation in the defence spheres and the five countries had signed an Agreement on Mutual Reductions of Military Forces in the Border Regions in Moscow in April 1997. China is aware that these states will rely upon their natural resources for invigorating their economies and that the speed of restructuring in other economic sectors will remain slow. China, therefore, is focussing on creating transport infrastructure and investing in building light industry either in Central Asian states or in western China to produce consumer good for the Central Asian markets. China needs to ensure that the economic development of its western part is connected not only with Central Asia but also with overall economic development in Eurasia.<sup>13</sup>

## **Shanghai Cooperation Organization**

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), virtually led by China, is primarily centred on its member nations' Central Asian security-related concerns. Here, China is an ally of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and thus needs to give due attention towards its western neighbours. The SCO has ties to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), an overlapping military cooperation agreement between Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. In October 2007, the CSTO and the SCO signed a Memorandum of Understanding, laying the foundations for military cooperation between the two organizations. This SCO-CSTO agreement involves the creation of a full-fledged military alliance between China, Russia and the member states of SCO/CSTO. It is worth noting that the SCTO and the SCO had held joint military exercises in 2006, which coincided with Iran's military exercises.<sup>14</sup>

## **Iran**

China has economic ties as well as a far-reaching bilateral military cooperation agreement with Iran. Iran also has an observer member status within the SCO since 2005. According to Neil King Jr. Reports, a tip from the US intelligence agencies in 2009 led Singaporean customs authorities recovering large quantities of a chemical compound used to make solid fuel for ballistic missiles. The intended recipient was Shahid Bagheri Industrial Group which is responsible for Iran's efforts to develop long-range missiles.<sup>15</sup> Presently, China is (supposedly) strategically encircled by South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, Vietnam, India and Russia. Large numbers of American forces are based in Afghanistan, Central Asia and Iraq. Israel is a solid US ally while several Arab states are *de facto* US protectorates. This explains the strategic basis of China's relationship with Iran, the only autonomous oil producer in the Persian Gulf. A nuclear but independent Iran is in China's strategic interest compared to a non-nuclear Iran under US domination. This also explains China's "delay and weaken" strategy with regard to UN sanctions on Iran.<sup>16</sup> The western provinces of Tibet and Xinjiang are only possible land routes to Iran.

## **The Look West Rationale**

### **The Historical Perspective**

Millennia of Chinese history have been a virtually continuous struggle to unite under a single order. Its self-feeding mix of despotism and patriotism has retained a strong sense of anti-western feeling as it seeks to overcome the humiliating extra territorial concessions imposed by the British during the mid-nineteenth century Opium Wars and the additional resentment of German colonies being handed over to Japan in the post-World War I Versailles Treaty. China has an astonishingly long border of more than 10,000 miles which needs to be defended against local and distant threats. During the imperial era, raids by nomadic tribes had threatened the Chinese periphery. In the early modern era, the periphery was threatened by great imperialist powers, including Russia, Germany, Great Britain, and France. Since World War II, militarily strong and industrialised states - Russia, Japan, India and the US - have posed new security challenges on the Chinese periphery. This key consideration to defend its periphery has shaped China's basic approach

to political and military security throughout its long history.

According to a RAND study **18** by Michael D. Swaine and Ashley J. Tellis, the security strategies employed by various Chinese regimes converge into an overall “Grand Strategy” that strives for three interrelated objectives. Firstly, to control the periphery and ward off threats to the ruling regime; secondly, to preserve domestic order and well-being in the face of different forms of social strife; and thirdly to attain or maintain geo-political influence as a major state. However, today things are only half-way home and China is not as united as it seems. Dividing China into four quadrants, the south-east region contains 60 per cent of China’s wealth due to economic roles of Hong Kong, Shanghai and Taiwan and is almost equal in development with the US and the EU. The northeast quadrant, including Beijing, has been lifted solidly out of the Third World through rapid industrialisation and impressive infrastructure development. China’s two western quadrants – including provinces of Tibet and Xinjiang - are still a vast Third-World realm of natural resources and a peasantry of seven hundred million feeding the empire. These quadrants of China, as well as its diaspora of fifty-five million people, constitute the four Chinas merging into one massive second-world superpower.**19** Therefore, if China has to attain a true superpower status, its western regions cannot remain isolated and underdeveloped.

### **The Civilization Angle**

Samuel P Huntington in his famous book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* has divided the world into various civilizations and has concluded that the core state of respective civilization, for security reasons may attempt to incorporate or dominate some peoples of other civilizations, who, in turn attempt to resist or to escape such control.**20** China has historically conceived itself as encompassing a “Sinitic Zone” including Korea, Vietnam, the Liu Chiu Islands, and at times Japan; and “Inner Asian Zone” of non-Chinese Manchus, Mongols, Uighurs, Turks, and Tibetans, who had to be controlled for security reasons; and then an “Outer Zone” of barbarians, who were nevertheless “expected to pay tribute and acknowledge China’s superiority.”**21** Contemporary Sinitic civilization is becoming structured in a similar fashion; the central core of Han China, outlying provinces that are part of China but possess considerable autonomy, provinces legally part of China but heavily populated by non-Chinese people from other civilizations (Tibet and Xinjiang) and Chinese societies that are or are likely to become part of Beijing-centred China on defined conditions (Hong Kong and Taiwan). In the post Cold-War era, China has redefined its role in world affairs. It has set two goals: to become the champion of Chinese culture, the core state civilizational magnet towards which all other Chinese communities would reorient themselves, and to ensure its historical position, which it lost in the nineteenth century, as the hegemonic power in East Asia. Therefore, China attempting to incorporate Tibetans and Uyghurs into the Sinitic civilization and Chinese investments in infrastructure in these areas are a reflection of the same.

### **The ‘New’ Great Game**

Today’s ‘New’ Great Game in Central Asia and Afghanistan is between expanding and contracting empires. According to Ahmed Rashid, in his famous book *Taliban, The Story of Afghan Warlords*, as a weakened Russia attempts to keep a grip on what it still views as its frontiers in Central Asia and control the flow of Caspian oil through pipelines that traverse Russia, the US is thrusting itself into the region on the back of proposed oil pipelines which would bypass Russia. Iran, Turkey and Pakistan are building their own communication links with the region and want to be the preferred route of choice for future pipelines heading east, west or south. Amongst all this, China wants to secure stability for its restive Xinjiang region populated by the same Muslim ethnic groups that inhabit Central Asia, secure the necessary energy to fuel its rapid economic growth and expand its political influence in a critical border region **22**. Thus, it is prudent for China to now look westwards and develop extensive communication links in Tibet and Xinjiang.

### **Western Development Campaign**

The restive provinces of Tibet and Xinjiang provide China with access to western Eurasia. They are both weak links in the Chinese polity, and susceptible to manipulation by China’s “enemies”. China is particularly wary of ethnic unrest, especially after the Serbian province of Kosovo declared independence in 2008 with the backing of most Western governments. Indeed, Beijing perceives Tibet and Xinjiang as potential ‘Kosovos’ on its own territory, and will do all it can to suppress rebellion there.**23** Therefore, it was no surprise that to ensure long-term “stability” the Chinese leaders launched the Great Western Development Campaign in June 1999. Jiang Zemin explicitly said that the campaign “has major significance for the future prosperity of the country and the [Party’s] long reign and perennial stability”.**24** Chinese strategists see the campaign as a means to consolidate its control over Tibet and other strategically important regions.

### **Energy and Resource Security**

Beijing’s primary economic objective of investment in Tibet and Xingjian is to exploit their rich natural resources. The Tibetan Plateau abounds in mineral resources. In the central and western areas of Tibet, Chinese experts have estimated mineral reserves worth US \$ 81.3 billion, and the Chinese government is investing US \$ 1.25 billion in prospecting and developing these resources.**25** China has already started constructing pipelines to transport oil and natural gas to energy-thirsty East China in collaboration with western companies. The Sichuan-based Chengdu Mineral Research Institute claims Sinopec is considering building a gas pipeline in Tibet to connect to the 4,000-km West-East pipeline linking reserves in Xinjiang region to big cities like Shanghai on the country’s eastern seaboard.**26** In 2009, China also built the 1,833 km long Central Asia-China gas pipeline for supplying natural gas from Central Asia to China.**27** China in the 21st Century is driven by an insatiable demand for energy and natural resources. Massive infrastructure development and significant military deployment will invariably precede energy exploitation.

### **Power Projection**

In 1996, when PLA was hectoring Taiwan with missile tests, President Clinton ordered two aircraft-carrier strike groups

into the region, one of them headed by the provocatively named *USS Independence*. China had to back down.<sup>28</sup> Today, China has moved beyond such threats. In the past decade, China, flush with money from its trade surplus with the US, had embarked upon a lavish military build-up. In Pentagon, the US military commanders are concerned, wondering why China needs a strategic military force with global reach when it claims the build-up is just to help invade Taiwan, 100 miles from the Chinese mainland, or to guard sea lanes already guarded by the US Navy.<sup>29</sup> But, progress is a mechanical necessity for China's leaders, who are keenly aware of previous eras of superlative glory. The Chinese leadership believes that infrastructure development is a basic prerequisite for theatre development, and for encouraging the Han population to settle in sparsely populated Tibet and Xingjian, leading to Sinocisation. Once Tibet is completely linked-up and interfaced with existing links like the Karakoram Highway, China gets strategic access to the Arabian Sea and the Gulf region. The Karakoram highway also links Islamabad with Kashgar which is linked by rail to Urumqi and China's northern railway network. Therefore, operating on interior lines of communication, China can improve her force-projection capabilities in this region.<sup>30</sup>

## The Missile Game

The new deployment sites / bases for the DF-21 missiles on the Tibetan plateau have increased the power projection capability of China in Central Asia which was earlier a Russian domain with some US influence. In fact, the issue of DF-21 missile sites merits closer examination. These missiles are located at the Delingha site in Haixi Mongol and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai, which is about 2,000 km from New Delhi and are under the command of 812 Brigade of the SAC.<sup>31</sup> From Delingha, with a range of 2,150 kilometers the DF-21s would not be able to reach any US bases, but they would be able to hold at risk all of northern India.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, DF-21s would be within range of three main Russian ICBM fields on the other side of Mongolia: the SS-25 fields near Novosibirsk and Irkutsk, the SS-18 field near Uzhet, and a Backfire bomber base at Belaya. Whereas targeting New Delhi could be considered normal for a non-alert retaliatory posture like China's, targeting Russian ICBM fields and air bases would be a step further in the direction of a counterforce posture.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

In the initial decades since the founding of the PRC in 1949, coastal China raced ahead and left western China stagnated. Later, once the economy of coastal China acquired a self-sustaining momentum, policy-makers under President Hu Jintao subsequently turned their attention towards western China. From the massive infrastructure investments and related developments in Tibet and Xinjiang, it is evident that China intends to now pursue its strategic interests on its western borders. Lucian Pye<sup>34</sup>, the eminent scholar has stated that China has always been "a civilization pretending to be a nation". Having otherwise been the region's dominant empire, there is no trepidation about embarking on that path again because for China, it is simply back to the future. The growth of Chinese military power since the 1990s – precipitated initially by a desire to protect its interests in Taiwan but now driven by the necessity of fielding a competent military commensurate with its rising status – may increasingly put at risk elements of the security system that traditionally ensured stability in Asia.<sup>35</sup> Once this military necessity matched with internal security, energy and economic interests – the ongoing transformation of once remote Tibet and Xinjiang into another Chinese economic, energy and military powerhouse – was an inevitability. In fact, Tibet and Xinjiang are the new expansion spaces or *lebensraum* for the Han majority as well as the new windows through which China seeks to lead the post-western world by showcasing its military might. The Dragon is decidedly turning West. More likely, it is eying the West to devour resources than to spit fire.

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*Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, Vol. CXLI, No. 585, July-September 2011.