

## Understanding China

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The rapid rise of China in the last decade has evoked both admiration as well as consternation. Admiration is underlined by its ability to achieve double digit growth on a continuing basis, its massive strides in infrastructural development, its attempts at smooth transition from a communist system of government to controlled democracy, its rapid progress towards modernisation of its armed forces and its management of the geopolitical environment both at the regional as well as the global level. At the same time consternation is evoked because of the shroud of secrecy and uncertainty connected with the bamboo curtain, because of an inconsistency in its covert and overt approaches, attempts at domination of its neighbourhood by direct and indirect means and because of the possibility of use of its tremendous economic clout to the detriment of other nations round the globe. Uncertainty of its line of action on various international & global issues leaves countries in the region with a sense of apprehension. Therefore, does all this make China into somewhat of an enigma? While some of us may answer this question in the affirmative, to the discerning observer there is a 'method in the madness', a well conceived and well thought out design in most of China's actions. Like in acupuncture, the use of pressure points helps relieve pain from a seemingly unconnected part of the body, there is a subtle (and at times not so subtle) use of indirect means to achieve desired results, thus, the use of an economic bear hug with the US is expected to yield advantages at the geopolitical and strategic level. Likewise, bolstering Pakistan militarily not only enables it to gain overland access to Indian Ocean and vital middle east energy resources, it results in a grateful Pakistan continuing its intensely confrontational stance towards India thereby also acting as a proxy for China. Or a somewhat indifferent approach to North Korean or Iranian intransigence on the nuclear question earns their support while at the same time portraying China as a strong independent pole in the current world order. Or a stiff attitude towards all those countries who have hosted or accorded diplomatic courtesies to the Dalai Lama. Use of its tremendous economic resources to achieve desired strategic results is also a part of the overall design. Thus, infusion of massive aid to smaller countries in the Indian Ocean region has enabled China to get a foothold in these countries. Whether at the regional or the global level, a consistent assertiveness indicates a growing realisation of its own importance. While it is prepared to wait and bide time till its gross national power has comprehensively grown in all the contributory desired spheres, it is increasingly confronted with the fact that because of economic meltdown and negligible growth in a number of countries in the West, its relative growth stands hastened. Therefore, it is expected to emerge at the global level way ahead of the 2030 dateline that it had set for itself in the past. The strong possibility that the emerging world order may also incorporate the Chinese perspective which may be substantially different from that propounded by the US led West so far, cannot be ruled out.

It would also be discerned that there is a consistency in the Chinese approach both at the regional and the global level which is unequivocally dictated by the Chinese national interest. Thus, while China may align with India at Kyoto or Copenhagen or Cancun, it may not be willing to support India's entry into the United Nations Security Council. Likewise, while it has its claims to various South China Sea islands, it has avoided use of force to capture them in view of the necessity of maintaining cordial relations with other claimants. It strongly feels it has time and resources on its side whereby these would gradually fall into its lap strengthening its doctrine of achieving objectives by means other than war. One of the aims of series of military exercises carried out in 2009 was to convey a message to countries like India and Vietnam with whom its borders are not fully settled. Its assertion that South China Sea is part of its sphere of influence and therefore not open to others was highlighted when it opposed the US - South Korean naval exercises in that area recently. Its reluctance to devalue Yuan is another instance of its attempt to protect its national interest at any cost.

Recent expose of Wikileaks has highlighted the reinforced Chinese assertiveness in all spheres which has most countries worried. The other aspect which has emerged is that covert Chinese actions may be at variance with what it may be proclaiming overtly. Official sanction of cyber attacks against networks of other countries and against Google recently are some examples. While it is accepted that the very nature of covert operations underlines the necessity of duplicity, the frequency and speed at which it is happening causes alarm and consternation all round.

Therefore, in such a setting what should be the response both at the regional and the global level? There cannot be any readymade answers to this question and nor should they be attempted. However, there is a need to continuously engage China at various fora both at the economic as well as the geopolitical level. This would enable removal of some of the misperceptions and apprehensions at the regional level.

It would also allow for a better understanding of each others national interests. Where differences exist, a dialogue would help in narrowing them down. Secondly, developing a common approach to issues bedevilling the region like sea piracy, drug trafficking, terrorism, asymmetric warfare, low level insurgencies, role of the diasporas etc would lead to a better understanding of the intent and commitment of China and other nations of the region. Since Asia today is literally the centre of gravity of the globe, involvement of the USA and the West would be a pre-requisite in such an exercise.

The fact is, that there is ample space and scope for China and other countries of the region to grow economically unhindered needs to be understood by all. While there would be a degree of competitiveness in such a scenario, it need not necessarily lead to confrontation. Finally, from a national security perspective, it is important that the countries of the region either independently or collectively develop means to protect their core national interests, if a threat is perceived.

This necessity gets accentuated in view of the rapid strides towards modernisation of the PLA. It of course may lead to the spectre of an arms race in the region but that is attributable to an action-reaction syndrome. If the Chinese, who understand the language of force very well, were to cap their military spending, there would be a suitable matching response both at the regional and global level. But that is only in the realm of imagination, since a growing China aspiring to be a world power would like to enhance its comprehensive national power in all spheres, including military, which is a very vital component of the national power.

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