

The China Dream, *Tianxia* and Belt and Road Initiative: '*Pax Sinica*' or Middle Power Coalition for Asia-Pacific?

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China, today sits on the cusp of a unique position amongst the comity of nations – feared by the small nations, yet needed for its financial muscle (that it has no compunctions in providing to gain long term 'strategic equity' in lieu of short term financial 'gains' for the ruling elites of these nations) while the developed countries are stuck proverbially between the 'Devil and the Deep Sea'. Having financed the economic rise of China through much of the last three decades, thereby converting China into their manufacturing hub, any economic counter to a 'Rising, Revanchist' China thus has its blowback on their own economies.

With the US in a 'strategic retrenchment', first under Obama and now the unpredictable Trump Presidency, the West is in a dilemma as the European Union does not have the heft to fill the rising vacuum in Asia.¹ Neither do the other middle powers of Asia, be it Japan, South Korea or India, on their own. Xi Jinping appears to view the coming decades as a 'strategic opportunity' for China to fill this vacuum and establish a '*Pax Sinica*'² in Asia – the fruition of phase one of the China Dream and the great rejuvenation of the nation.

This article analyses the China Dream within the Chinese view of *Tianxia*, and the role that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is likely to play in furthering China's domination and control on Asia – a modern version of '*Pax Sinica*' in Asia, thereby enhancing Xi Jinping's legacy. It looks at a 'Middle Powers Coalition' for the Asia-Pacific to provide stability and counter this cynical push by China for domination, and provide multi-polarity in Asia.

The China Dream

The term 'China or Chinese Dream' has ancient origins in Chinese literary and intellectual history and has had a revival of sorts in the

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West³. To name a recent few from the West, in 2008 architect Neville Mars, Adrian Hornsby and the Dynamic City Foundation published “The Chinese Dream – A Society Under Construction”⁴ and the 2010 book by author Helen H Wang *The Chinese Dream*.⁵ Both the books looked more at the society than the geo-political and geo-economic spheres that the term Chinese Dream now connotes⁶.

Just after becoming General Secretary of the Communist Party of China in late 2012, Xi announced what would become the hallmark of his administration. “The Chinese Dream”, he said, is “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” Xi’s Chinese Dream is described as achieving the “Two 100s”:-

- (a) The material goal of China becoming a “moderately well-off society” by 2021, the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party.
- (b) The modernisation goal of China becoming a fully developed nation by about 2049, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic.⁷

The Chinese scholars have spoken of overcoming 100 years of humiliation and the great renewal of the nation, alluding to the 18th Century ‘Opium Wars’ with the West that greatly debilitated the nation and the subsequent subjugation during the Japanese War in the 20th Century. It is universally agreed that a ‘Rising China’ flexing its muscles and appearing to be stridently revanchist, revisionist or revolutionist to its neighbours and the world at large, coupled with a growing perception of a ‘retreating West’ is leading to, what the many thinkers term as, ‘a Strategic Age of Uncertainties’.

Xi Jinping is the first Chinese leader who has not hesitated in using terms that the Chinese hardliners, have been proposing - ‘strong nation dream’ (*qiangzhongquomeng*),⁸ and the road to renewal or rejuvenation (*fuxingzhilu*), a factor that also underlines the rise of an aggressive Chinese posture under his leadership.

Michael Pillsbury, in his book ‘The Hundred Years Marathon’, opines that the marathon strategy that China’s leaders are pursuing today, and have been pursuing for decades, is largely a product

of lessons derived from the Warring States period by these Hawks. These have never been translated in English and are very popular and extensively studied in China.⁹ It is no small wonder that there is such a rise of jingoistic nationalism within the Chinese society.

Xi Jinping perceives the current flux in the global order as an opportunity for China to take the lead. This is a strategic foreign policy goal, almost officially announced by Xi in his statement that the PRC should establish "great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics,"¹⁰ while Deng's 24 character principle is being replaced by phrases such as "active and pressing on"¹¹ or "forging ahead."¹² It also serves as an effective tool for diverting attention from its internal instabilities.

The push currently is for gaining geopolitical space in Asia with 'Neighbourhood Diplomacy', which appears to be centred on commercial penetration through infrastructure projects and selling a short term 'economic dream' to the underprivileged nations on its periphery. Commercial penetration is the precursor to the 'strategic equity' squeezed out from these nations due to the debt trap caused by these unviable projects, thereby, gaining political, diplomatic and geopolitical space needed to achieve the China Dream of becoming a 'Great Power' by 2049 – a Unipolar Asia centred around China. This appears to be the Phase One of the China Dream – to be the sole Super Power of the World.

Tianxia

To achieve this Dream, China seems to be assiduously following the concept of '*Tianxia*', as articulated by the philosopher Zhao Tingyang in 2005¹³. The term '*Tianxia*' opens itself to different interpretations since Mandarin has no alphabets but characters and thus the meaning changes based on pronunciation and intonation. Thus, the word could be interpreted as – 'Under-Heaven' or 'Empire' or 'China', thereby implying a 'Unified Global System with China's superior characteristics on top'.¹⁴

Although Zhao does not clearly or logically lay out its elements, his views in his book, '*Investigations of the Bad World: Political Philosophy as the First Philosophy*', published in 2009 by China Renmin University Press, throws disconcerting light on the Chinese view of securing such a system, which transcends the nation-state. It builds on the ancient system of the vassal/tributary states

'kowtowing' to the 'Celestial Emperor' of China ' and paying tribute to be able to trade with it.

This new system has the two ideas - 'the Strategy of Common Imitation' and 'Confucian Improvement'. The strategy of common imitation is regarded in Game Theory as the key to the formation of a stable institution, since it is argued that a common imitation of the best strategy given by the leader and abided by the players will lead to a stable equilibrium.¹⁵ It implies that these small under-developed nations in the neighbourhood would perforce abide by the 'Strategy of Common Imitation', i.e. follow China's lead and abide by its decisions.

To foster understanding of Confucius, China has embarked on creating Confucius Institutes (CI) all over the world, since 2004, overseen by Hanban (officially the Office of Chinese Language Council International). As of 2014 it had 480 such institutes in dozens of countries in all continents,¹⁶ with the stated aim of establishing 1000 Confucius Institutes by 2020¹⁷.

While the West has been able to voice its concerns on this issue, the smaller nations on China's periphery do not have the same capacity. Funded and staffed entirely by China, these nations welcome the money and do not interfere in the alleged activities of these teachers. Many foreign scholars have characterised the CI programme as an exercise in soft power, expanding China's economic, cultural, and diplomatic reach through the promotion of Chinese language and culture, while others have suggested a possible role in intelligence collection. The soft power goals also include assuaging concerns of a "China threat" in the context of the country's increasingly powerful economy and military.¹⁸

China appears to be moving towards 'an integration of the Comprehensive National Power (CNP)' of the 'Neighbourhood' with itself, in a step by step approach – an umbilical connect that would not be easily disrupted, a reshaping of the regional economic and security architecture with 'Chinese Characteristics'. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) appears to be a part of this strategy. It would be a phased peripheral expansion, akin to '*salami slicing*' – a carefully crafted economic push that does not appear provocative, but the accumulated gain would radically alter the geo-economic and geo-commerce balance in its favour.

The Belt and Road Initiative

Much has been written and discussed on the poor economics and viability of this initiative. The BRI itself is not a new construct, but connecting the old, ongoing and some future projects under one narrative. According to a *People's Daily* commentary by Zhou Hanmin, the BRI is not only an effort to “tell the China story well and spread China’s message properly” but also an attempt to build up a “community of destiny” with nations, particularly those in the developing world. The commentator also noted that the BRI was intimately connected with President Xi’s Chinese Dream, one of whose key goals is that the country would emerge as a superpower by 2049, the centenary of the establishment of the People’s Republic of China.¹⁹ This further underlines the fears of a modern version of ‘Pax Sinica’, since economic viability seems to be the least concern for Xi Jinping as compared to China’s visualised geo-strategic gains in the ‘Neighbourhood’.

However, the smaller neighbours are now realising the pitfalls of doing such business with China. Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Cambodia in Asia and Venezuela in South America are facing a severe debt crisis with China. China provides loans with an interest rate of 6.3 per cent, while the interest rates on soft loans from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank are only 0.25–3 per cent,²⁰. Further the projects have no economic viability, thereby leading to a resource crunch in these small countries and the current debt crisis.

China has also made major economic inroads into Central Asia. It currently holds major stakes in Kazakhstan’s energy industry and Turkmenistan’s gas fields. While Russia continues to pump oil and gas out of these countries, China has diversified its interests by building power plants, refineries and transmission lines, in addition to gas and other infrastructure projects all over Central Asia to the detriment of Russian companies.²¹ The Central Asian markets are also flooded with cheap Chinese products, thereby, increasing their dependency on China. It is the Eurasian Economic Union that has held China back till now from sweeping away Russia from Central Asia, but the question is for how long?

While these peripheral smaller nations have resisted mortgaging their sovereignty to the Chinese geo-economic push

to establish the modern version of the '*Tianxia* System' – a new '*Pax Sinica*', the economic cost of such continued resistance would be prohibitive. The size of Chinese loans given/planned is more than 20-25 per cent of the GDP of these countries, which cannot be sustained by them, thus leading to a debt crisis. The 'Middle Powers' in Asia need to step forward and be a 'net security provider to maintain and sustain the CNP' of these and other countries in the Asia-Pacific.

***Pax Sinica* and Middle Power Coalition**

The term '*Pax Sinica*' has been used for the periods of Chinese hegemonic domination of East Asia during the periods that China was the dominant civilisation in the region, due to its political, economic, military and cultural power. Throughout most of its history, the 'Middle Kingdom', as China was known, was the regional hegemon in East Asia. It expressed its dominance in the region through a 'tribute' system that required regional states to acknowledge Chinese supremacy and accept their inferior status as 'vassals', which lasted till the Opium Wars of 1840s that resulted in 100 years of subjugation initially by the West and then by Japan.

The tribute system was the ultimate institution of regional order. It defined China's grand strategy, behaviour and its interaction with its neighbours. Asia today is witnessing a similar Chinese push for a '*Pax Sinica*', especially in East Asia, South East Asia, South Asia and Central Asia. Beijing seeks to achieve the following to be able to establish its *Pax Sinica*:-

- (a) Replace the United States as the primary power in Asia;
- (b) Weaken the US alliance system in Asia, and create new security architecture;
- (c) Undermine the confidence of Asian nations in US credibility, reliability, and staying power;
- (d) Use China's economic power to tie smaller Asian nations closer to its geopolitical policy preferences; and
- (e) Increase PRC military capability to strengthen deterrence against US military intervention in the region.²²

However, this process may hit a road block, as the smaller nations of the region are becoming aware of China's ulterior motives

and designs. This provides space for the 'Middle Powers' of the region – India, Japan, South Korea and Singapore to form a coalition of the like-minded. Such a coalition should provide an alternate geo-economic and geo-commerce model for the Asia-Pacific Region and facilitate economic activities, security, trade, intelligence exchanges, military capacity building, technology sharing, agenda setting for regional forums and coordinated diplomatic initiatives. It would be a truly 'win-win' situation for all countries of the Asia-Pacific region.

It should be a "South-South East-East Asia Forum" or a true Asia-Pacific Association. The reach to the Central Asian Region and beyond could be worked out in conjunction with the Eurasian Economic Union, thereafter.

It would lead to multi-polarity within Asia, act as a succor to the smaller nations and ensure that rule of international law, good governance, equality, transparency and economic prosperity for all is ensured within the region. Such an association would be able to ensure stability, peace and prosperity within the region. The foundation of the association or coalition should not be based just on countering any country's rise but for stability and prosperity, only then would it be self sustaining and long lasting.

Conclusion

The rise of China can be viewed from different angles of perspectives, and is divided into three schools of thought. The 'Confident School' that asserts that China's rise is inevitable and its ascendancy will challenge the US preponderance both regionally and globally. The 'Pessimist School' that argues China is facing both domestic challenges and external constraints which perhaps make it unlikely to compete with or replace the US in this. The 'Not-Yet/Uncertain School', positing that although China has immense potential to be a great power or 'a challenger' to the US, its willingness to take the leadership role as a great power is uncertain or seemingly falls short of expectations.²³

Xi Jinping sees the current geo-political flux as an opportunity for China to assert itself within Asia and occupy the vacuum due to US's strategic retrenchment. Towards that end, he has clubbed the existing infrastructure projects and added more under the much touted BRI – that started as the Silk Road Economic Belt in

Kazakhstan and the Maritime Silk Road in Indonesia, which were then clubbed as the One Belt One Road to finally being christened as the BRI.

It aims to gain geopolitical space in Asia centred on a phased commercial penetration through infrastructure projects and selling a short term 'economic dream' to the underprivileged nations on its periphery. Commercial penetration would be the precursor to the 'strategic equity', squeezed out from these nations due to the debt trap caused by these unviable projects, thereby gaining political, diplomatic and geopolitical space needed to achieve the China Dream of becoming a 'Great Power' by 2049 – a Unipolar Asia centred around China.

The penetration was supposed to be achieved by the BRI, a conglomeration of past, present and future infrastructure projects cobbled together – not considering economic viability but more to dump its excess capacity and labour, backed by financial muscle. However, the past seems to have come to haunt the Chinese. Having given loans to these small nations at market rates for unviable projects, the countries are facing debt crises and are not amenable to China's arm twisting as yet.

The Middle Powers of Asia must utilise this opportunity to form a 'Middle Power Coalition', an Asia-Pacific Association, to assist these small nations and ensure peace and stability within this region. The time is now for these Middle Powers of Asia to seize the initiative.

Endnotes

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