



# The Establishment of Pax Sinica



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## About the Occasional Paper

This Occasional Paper examines the evolving contours of China's rise and its implications for the emerging global order, conceptualised as the potential establishment of *Pax Sinica*. It analyses the strategic, institutional, economic, and geopolitical instruments through which China is expanding its influence across regions. The paper situates China's trajectory within a historical framework, drawing parallels with post-World War II power consolidation by the United States, while highlighting Beijing's distinct approach of working both within and alongside existing international systems. Through a detailed exploration of expansionism, soft power, human intelligence practices, and economic statecraft, the paper underscores the coherence and long-term orientation of China's grand strategy. It also assesses the implications of these developments for regional stability, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, and for global governance structures. It concludes by evaluating alternative pathways for China's ascent and the broader strategic consequences for the international system.



## Introduction

Over the past decade, few nations have reshaped the global geopolitical landscape as profoundly as the People's Republic of China (PRC). Emerging from decades of rapid economic expansion and political consolidation, China has transformed itself from a regional heavyweight into a global power whose presence is deeply felt across continents and oceans. Whether through construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea, the acquisition of agricultural land across Africa, or the leasing of strategically located ports in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, Beijing's footprint today extends well beyond its immediate neighbourhood. These moves are not isolated ventures but part of a broad, systematic strategy aimed at expanding Chinese influence, securing long-term national interests, and altering the balance of power in the international system. In the process, China has not hesitated to challenge established norms and institutions, as exemplified by its dismissal of adverse International Court of Justice rulings regarding its expansive claims in the Spratly Islands.

What becomes increasingly evident is that China's rise is neither accidental nor ad-hoc. Rather, it follows a structured playbook, one that bears

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striking resemblance to the United States' (US) grand strategy in the aftermath of the World War II (WWII). At the time, Washington leveraged its unrivalled economic and diplomatic clout to establish what came to be known as Pax Americana, an order grounded in 'Liberal Economic Principles' but ultimately designed to secure American primacy. The restructuring of the global governance architecture after 1945, from the dissolution of the League of Nations to the founding of the United Nations (UN), was central to this process. The UN, though ostensibly built on ideals of universal peace and cooperation, became a vehicle through which the new hegemon could maintain international stability on terms congruent with its own strategic interests.

China's trajectory in recent years mirrors this historical precedent in both method and ambition. Beijing's establishment of institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), reflects a conscious effort to build parallel structures to the US-led Bretton Woods system. In doing so, China seeks to craft frameworks that amplify its economic vision, promote its geopolitical aspirations, and dilute Western dominance in

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global institutions. Yet, unlike the US during its ascendancy, Beijing did not sideline existing global bodies; instead, it has pursued influence from within. China today heads several key UN agencies and remains deeply involved in a multitude of multilateral fora. Accompanying this institutional presence is a dramatic increase in Chinese financial contributions to the UN system, a calculated investment that translates directly into diplomatic leverage and narrative-setting power.

However, China's rise to prominence did not materialise overnight. It is rooted in the foundational strategy articulated by Deng Xiaoping's now famous dictum 'Hide your strength, bide your time'. While the dictum is often understood as an inward-focused policy of quiet development, China began engaging the world much earlier than the general consensus. Even in the 1990s, it had already expanded its participation in multilateral organisations, steadily embedding itself into the global order. By the early 2000s, particularly after its accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, Beijing adopted a more assertive profile. The US preoccupation with the 'War on Terror' opened an unexpected window for China to advance its interests without significant external resistance. Washington's withdrawal from certain

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international bodies, such as the UN Human Rights Council, further widened the diplomatic space that Beijing quickly occupied.

As China accumulated influence within these institutions, it transformed its presence into power. States dependent on Chinese economic assistance, trade, or investment increasingly aligned their votes with Beijing on contentious international resolutions. The pattern is clear: China's institutional activism is part of a larger project to shape global norms, safeguard its political priorities, and shield itself from criticism, particularly on issues such as Xinjiang, Tibet, and the South China Sea.

Yet institutional influence is just one of the dimensions of China's resurgence. Beijing's ambitions deeply rooted in to the realm of geography, identity, and historical memory. China has pursued an expansive territorial vision grounded in its interpretation of the 1912 Imperial Edict of Abdication, which grants modern China a supposed inheritance over vast regions once under the Qing Dynasty's control. Whether through the incorporation of Xinjiang and Tibet or its aggressive posture along the Indian frontier—including the 'Five Fingers Policy' that envisions territories such as Ladakh,

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Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Arunachal Pradesh as extensions of Tibet—Beijing’s actions reveal a strategic calculus that blends historical revanchism with its geopolitical imperatives.

Simultaneously, China deploys an intricate soft power strategy that complements its hard power advances. From providing military and humanitarian assistance in Southeast Asia to expanding Confucius Institutes and cultural diplomacy across continents, Beijing seeks to construct a favourable image of itself as a benevolent and indispensable global partner. Initiatives like ‘Panda Diplomacy’ and influence in the global entertainment industry, particularly Hollywood, illustrate the breadth of tools that China employs to shape perceptions abroad. Control over market access has given Beijing unprecedented sway over how China is portrayed, an influence it uses to shape global narratives on Taiwan, Tibet, and other sensitive issues.

Furthermore, China’s Human Intelligence (HUMINT) strategy stands apart from traditional espionage models. Instead of relying on a small cadre of trained agents, Beijing mobilises thousands of ordinary civilians—a method often described as the ‘Thousand Grains of Sand’ approach. This decentralised system provides plausible deniability while

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overwhelming foreign counterintelligence with sheer volume. High-profile cases, from Glenn Shriver to Katrina Leung, highlight its effectiveness and reach. As former Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Christopher Wray warned, nearly half of the FBI's counterintelligence cases today involve China, underscoring the scale and sophistication of Beijing's HUMINT operations.

Economically, China's rise rests on deep investments both at home and abroad. It has invested strategically in major European economies, leveraged debt diplomacy in developing nations, and poured enormous resources into future-defining technologies such as pharmaceuticals and semiconductors. Beijing understands that global leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century relies less on traditional military strength and more on economic resilience, technological capability, and supply chain dominance. Its domestic investments in chip manufacturing, biotechnology, and related industries reflect an acute awareness that technological self-reliance is essential to achieving what Chinese leaders describe as the 'Rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation'.<sup>1</sup>

Taken together, these developments signal that China's objective is not merely to establish regional dominance but reshaping of global power structures. What remains uncertain is the

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pathway Beijing intends to take: whether it seeks to establish itself as the uncontested power in the Indo-Pacific, as the US once did in the Western Hemisphere, or whether it aims to eliminate the American influence from the region altogether, creating a strategic environment where China is the uncontested arbiter of regional affairs.

However, the ideological conviction guiding China's ambition is undeniable. Rooted in the long-held belief of China being the 'Middle Kingdom'—the link between Heaven and Earth—Beijing's long-term aspiration is to achieve global leadership by 2049, the centenary of the founding of the PRC. The same, within the ambit of this occasional paper, has been referred to as the 'Establishment of Pax Sinica'. The word *Pax* taken from Latin, meaning 'Peace', has been used in the past, in conjunction with the dominant global power to denote a relative period of peace enforced by said power owing to its status of 'Superpower'. How China pursues this vision, and how the world responds to it, will define the most consequential geopolitical contest of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

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## **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 in the Philippines.<sup>2,3</sup> China finds itself following the modus operandi once used by the US in the period following the WWII to establish *Pax Americana*. The latter used its economic and diplomatic heft to ensure that its aspirations were fulfilled on a global scale.<sup>4</sup>

In the aftermath of the WWII, the League of Nations became redundant, owing to the complete failure of the organisation to avert global wars, its *raison d'être* (reason of existence). As the world came out of the horrors of the WWII, 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 the UN came into being. Although their

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stated goals differed, the new body effectively served the purpose of maintaining the position of the new hegemon, the US.<sup>5</sup>

In the recent years, China has also followed the same. The creation of the AIIB and the SCO is a carbon copy of the US's playbook. The primary driving force of these initiatives is to safeguard and amplify the goals and ambitions of Beijing. At the same time, the Communist Part of China (CPC) has not ignored the UN. Rather, it has been increasingly active in the forum. As of Dec 2022, China effectively heads four of the 15 principal agencies of the UN and is a member of another nine.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 in the 1970s, wherein the focus

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lay on increasing the size of the economy using sustainable development methods. The abandonment of Xiaoping's policy is, in media *zeitgeist* (spirit of the time), 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 multilateral organisations, up from 12 per cent in 1989.<sup>8</sup> And by the early noughties, it did the same quite openly. Over the last two decades, ever since it entered the World Trade Organization in 2001, China has set out to influence the global multilateral system. In 2002, it had established the SCO. The Americans recognised the threat of an emerging China. However, after 09/11, all the military and economic apparatus of the US was focused on the 'War on Terror', allowing China to further grow in the shadows.<sup>9</sup> 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"<sup>10</sup>, the US left the UN Human Rights Council, allowing China an even bigger influence in yet another UN body.

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Furthermore, Beijing benefits from such influence in international fora, heading several institutions under the

UN while having high-ranking representation in many others. Hence, other member countries of the UN diplomatically leverage their interests by voting in consonance with Beijing's wishes. For example, countries either abstaining or voting against the UN Draft Resolution A/HRC/51/L.6, regarding human rights violations in Xinjiang.<sup>11</sup>

## **Expansionism**

The expansionism enacted to further *Pax Sinica*<sup>12</sup> is rather colonial<sup>13</sup> in its approach. It must be noted that China, at present, has more territorial disputes than the number of its neighbours.<sup>14</sup> 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 to Map 1). The succeeding Republic of China and present-day communist variant under the CPC claims 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.

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**Map 1: Imperial Edict of Abdication of the Qing Emperor**

*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 CPC, has taken it upon himself to ‘Liberate’ the five fingers, fulfilling Mao’s dream. 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”.<sup>15</sup> The policy, on the surface, appears to be one aiming to bring back 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. The story does not stop at material gain. Further, if China is able to subsume the region under its control, its next target will be to establish 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, a 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 later emperors. However, modern annexations by the PRC are not merely a fulfilment of the Edict, but also help in maintaining strategic frontage

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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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>



**Map 2: China during Warring States Era (in Red)**

*Source: Scholastic*

## 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 CNY 130 mn worth of military assistance to the Philippines<sup>18</sup>, and COVID assistance to Indonesia during the initial days of the outbreak.<sup>19</sup> Further, its 'Loans' to Pakistan and Sri Lanka are among prime examples of aid and loans to nation states suffering internal setback. China has also been organising museum exhibits to celebrate the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the voyages of Zheng He, a Chinese admiral who sailed across SouthEast Asia, West Asia, and Africa. Beijing has been establishing Confucius Institutes<sup>20</sup> (Chinese language and culture schools) at leading Southeast Asian universities, expanding China Central Television's 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 also signed a memorandum of understanding for joint development of the Chinese language curricula in public secondary schools.<sup>21</sup> In 2013, in Kazakhstan, China's President Xi Jinping proposed a 10-year education plan for the SCO members, four of which are Central Asian nations. The proposition included 30,000

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government scholarships to study in China, in addition to 10,000 vacancies for Confucius Institute teachers and students.<sup>22</sup> Approximately one-third of Kazakhs studying in China are on Chinese government scholarships.<sup>23</sup> China has effectively usurped Russia as the preferred study destination of Central Asian Students.<sup>24</sup>

Beijing has also employed 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, diplomatic initiatives, and issuing favourable statements on issues like Tibet or Taiwan.<sup>25</sup> In 2019, following a renewed closeness with Russia, Beijing sent two pandas as a gesture of friendship.<sup>26</sup> 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 were sent to the US.<sup>27</sup>

**Beijing has also employed 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.**

The other dimensions of Chinese soft power are 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.<sup>28</sup> The *Black Panther* (2018), under the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) banner, premiered with a huge fanfare, being 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 film made its way to China, the poster showed Chadwick Boseman’s (the lead actor) face completely covered.<sup>29</sup> 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 queer characters, comments critical of China made by people involved in the film.<sup>30</sup> Another comic book movie, *Black Adam*, did not release in China because the film starred Pierce Brosnan, who had previously shared a picture with the Dalai Lama.<sup>31</sup> Because of its massive population and over USD 8 billion generated by the Chinese box office for Hollywood<sup>32</sup>—combined with the country’s non-democratic system, which allows authorities to ban films or studios without internal repercussions—China holds significant control over market access. Therefore, studios which do not want to lose revenue from China often end up complying with

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the diktats of Beijing, allowing the CPC a complete control over the depiction of China, its allies, and enemies in Hollywood's sphere of influence.

## **Human Intelligence**

Another important and rather similar but different aspect of Chinese soft power is the HUMINT operations which Beijing astutely conducts, perhaps better than any country in the world. The often-quoted maxim by Peter Drucker, widely regarded as the father of modern management—The best do not do different things; they do things differently—applies perfectly to Beijing's HUMINT operations. Where nations such as the US and Russia choose to use traditional methods of intelligence collection by utilising a small number of specialised agents, China, on the contrary, chooses to use a large number of ethnic Han Chinese to do the same. The approach is known as the 'Policy of a Thousand Grains of Sand' or citizen spying.

The policy is, perhaps, best described by Paul Moore, former China Analyst for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), who explains it thusly<sup>33</sup>:

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*“If a beach were a target, the Russians would send in a sub, frogmen would steal ashore in the dark of night, collect several buckets of sand, and take them back to Moscow. The US would send over satellites and produce reams of data. The Chinese would send in a thousand tourists, each assigned to collect a single grain of sand. When they returned, they would be asked to shake out their towels. And they would end up knowing more about the sand than anyone else”.*

In other words, Chinese choose to play the intelligence game differently than their counterparts.

Examples include Glen Shriver, who made repeated attempts to join the Central Intelligence Agency multiple times while being paid substantial sums for each effort. He was assisted by a woman using the name Amanda, who introduced him to individuals known as “Mr. Wu” and “Mr. Tang”, all of whom were agents of China’s Ministry of State Security.<sup>34</sup> In 2011, Russia’s Federal Security Service arrested a Chinese national, Tong Shengyong, whom they accused of trying to obtain documentation related to the S-300 surface-to-air missile system.<sup>35</sup>

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Perhaps the boldest Chinese infiltration of the US intelligence community occurred in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when a well-known Chinese American from Los Angeles, Katrina Leung, became associated with the FBI. Known for her extensive contacts within the then-Chinese government, Leung was later found to be a double agent who had honey-trapped two top counterintelligence agents. Her espionage career spanned a whopping 18 years beginning in 1984.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, Beijing was able to attain the design of the W-88 thermonuclear warhead used in the Trident weapons (submarine-launched ballistic missiles). The theft was conducted so smoothly that despite a four-year investigation that spanned 11 agencies and employed 3,000 agents, the perpetrators were never caught.<sup>37</sup>

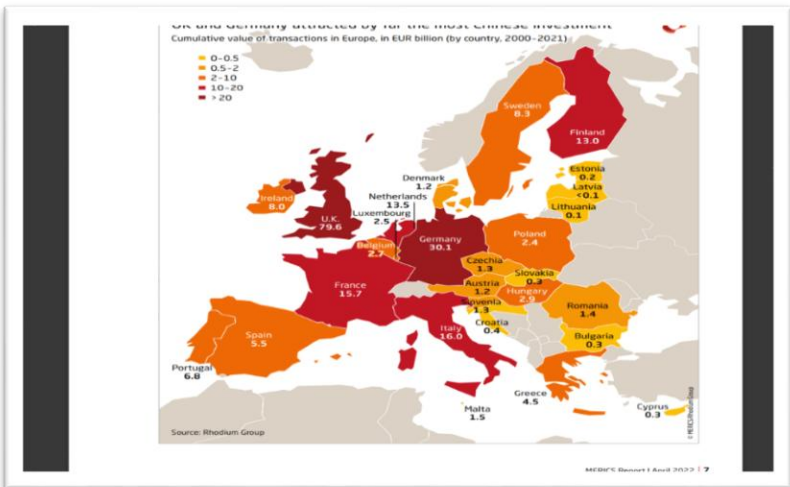
A question that arises in the course of monitoring the Chinese policy of a thousand grains is: Why use untrained or half-trained civilians that require more support than agents trained in espionage. The answer is two-fold and lies in its simplicity. Firstly, the approach provides plausible deniability to Beijing which very easily can claim that those caught in such activities are merely non-state actors, possibly on the payroll of

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some other nation; and secondly, it allows overwhelming the target nations' counterintelligence apparatus with a large number of incidents that demand attention (some of which could be just false alarms). This analysis is backed-up by the then-FBI Director Christopher Wray, who, in 2020, had stated that "Nearly half of the FBI's 5,000 active counterintelligence cases now relate to China" and that "Chinese spying and attempts to steal American technology are growing so fast that the FBI is opening a new China-related counterintelligence case roughly every 10 hours".<sup>38</sup>

### 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



**Map 3: Investments by China**

Source: Merics

powers. The United Kingdom (UK), Germany, France, and Italy have major investments by China.

There is a pattern to such investments, they enable China to create pockets of influence where its reach is limited. Beijing directs its investments toward struggling economies that are eager for a much-needed influx of capital, while ensuring it retains the leverage to set the terms of the deal. A near EUR 80 bn investment lies with the UK and it is on the brink of recession.<sup>39</sup> Other examples include the crisis that has befallen Sri Lanka<sup>40</sup> and led to the current condition of Pakistan.<sup>41</sup>

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, thus, it has been investing heavily in the technologies of the future; the chief among them being semiconductors and pharma. China understands that if it has to fulfil the dream of the Middle Kingdom, it must create a situation where the technologies of the future must become its domain. It has, thus, invested massive amounts of money in both industries.

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In the pharma sector, 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.<sup>42</sup> Pharmaceutical companies are drawn to China's market, particularly because of its aging population and the prevalence of chronic conditions, including those linked to smoking. At the same time, Beijing has invested more than CNY 800 bn in developing its domestic industry.<sup>43</sup> In the semiconductor industry, in Dec 2022, China announced an investment package worth CNY 1 tn (USD 143 bn)<sup>44</sup>, with another USD 7 bn in Apr 2023<sup>45</sup> to bolster the previous. Beijing's actions in the semiconductor industry have effectively brought it into a trade war with the US centred around semiconductors.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

If China has 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,

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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 previously used by the US to establish its 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’. They have openly stated the annexation of Taiwan as part of its ‘One China’ policy.<sup>47</sup> It clearly indicate 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

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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 the authors would suggest. However, the one sacrosanct fact that cannot be ignored is that China believes it is the inheritor of the world owing to the Middle Kingdom prophecy and aims to establish *Pax Sinica* and lead the world in terms of composite national strength and international influence by 2049, the year of the PRC's centenary.

## Endnotes

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