

Introduction

China has always intrigued the entire world with mystery and mystique. Today, every country and scholar of repute have been trying to understand the strategy being followed by China. At best, all such efforts have been 'guesstimates' and nobody has been able to confidently say what China's strategy is and how it has evolved over a period of time. This article is an effort to trace the historical perspective of China's strategy and correlate it to the strategy that China is following today. It is also the aim of this article to deduce that there is a strong linkage between the two.

"Tian Xia" Syndrome

Though there has been no external threat in historic times, the people from the periphery nibbled at China constantly. China's periphery can be termed as the area bounded by the mountains, jungles and plateaus to the South, West and South West, Gobi Desert in the North and the Eastern Seaboard. Lack of external threat led to a culture of the Chinese emperor, who was considered a descendent from heaven (Tian Xia), making the decisions on all policies. In the present day context, this is substantiated by the fact that in the first three generations of communist China's leadership it was still a single leader who made the decisions.

In historic times, there was a power struggle between the emperor, his family members and senior military officers. In today's political scenario the power struggle occurs between various power groups like tuanpai (Communist Youth League) and taizi (princelings). Changes in state policy used to take place depending on which group was powerful and a similar process happens even today.

Confucianism

Confucianism has been the basis of governance for a long time in China. It is characterised by five constants (Wu Chang) and four virtues. The five constants are Ren (humane), Yi (Justice), Zhi (Knowledge), Xin (Integrity), and Li (Etiquette)¹. The four virtues are Zhong (Loyalty), Xiao (Filial Piety), Jie (Continence) and Yi (Righteousness)². China is amongst the earliest countries to adopt a selection system for government officials based on a written examination on Confucian Theory. These officials shaped the strategy to a great extent.

Song Neo Confucianism

Song Neo Confucianism envisaged a hierarchical structure in which everyone understood his place and performed his role in relation to others. China always preferred a Sino-centric order. Heavy dependence on international trade activities was seen as a threat to the Chinese culture and internal stability. Even though China has adopted capitalistic norms today, China still follows the hierarchical structure and covets the Sino-centric order. A revival of Confucianism as against Buddhism is visible.³ Therefore, the future strategies of China may be based on Confucian theory.

Strategic Behaviour

Increase in a nation's size, its soft power, economic status and armed forces might induce it to increase its influence and domination in its neighbourhood. Chinese states that were strong, always dominated their neighbours. In the present context also, some experts feel that China will dominate the periphery with consequences to the regional order.⁴ Five core features⁵ of Chinese security behaviour from the last thousand years are :-

- (a) Protect the Chinese heartland through border defence and control.
- (b) Periodic expansion and contraction of periphery control and regional boundaries due to variations in state capability and re-emergence of a unified state.
- (c) Frequent, yet limited use of force against external entities based on pragmatic calculations of relative power and effect.
- (d) Self reliance and non coercive security strategies to control or pacify the periphery when the state was relatively weak.
- (e) Strong susceptibility to the influence of domestic leadership politics.

When one sees the analysis that China follows today, there are striking similarities with the ones mentioned above. China is strengthening border defence and control to protect the heartland. Annexation of Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, unification of Hong Kong and Macau have contributed towards the expansion of boundaries. China's use of force against India, Vietnam and in South China Sea are examples of use of force against external entities based on pragmatic calculation. At present, China is not weak and therefore, non coercive strategies are not visible clearly. Examples of domestic leadership politics determining strategy are the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident and her recent behaviour in East and South China Seas.

The control over the periphery either by conquest or by appeasement was with a view to defend the heartland and to a lesser extent sea lanes of communication (SLOC).⁶ Therefore, security strategy of China has always been defensive. Conquest or control was the method adopted when the Chinese government was strong and appeasement to ensure symbolic deference when she was weak. Some experts feel that conquest or control will be used by a strong Chinese government in the present day context.⁷

China's war fighting was heavily dependent on infantry and mobile forces. The Mongols and Manchus were skilled in mobility due to their superior horsemanship and their ability to concentrate overwhelming forces at the

decisive location to overcome Chinese static defences. This has been the basic idea behind the war zone campaign doctrine conceived in the early 1990s by China.

Admiral Zheng He's expeditions in the 15th century to South East Asia, South Asia, Persian Gulf and East Africa for protecting China's maritime trade routes are folklore in China. The "Malacca Dilemma"⁸ will continue to dominate China's security strategies in her efforts to protect her SLOC and increasing her influence in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific.

Influence of religion or spiritualism was not well received by the Chinese rulers because religion was seen as a threat to the Confucian theory. These were either contained by force or a "Bamboo Curtain" was placed to keep the Chinese people ignorant. In recent times, China has banned the Falun Gong movement and restricted the practice of religion. There is a correlation to the increase and decrease of the periphery to two things, that is, the strength of the regime and the stage of the regime's period. The area of the periphery increased during the ascendancy and decreased during the waning periods.⁹ Examples of these are the Han, Tang, Ming and Qing dynasties. Today, with increase in Comprehensive National Power, China has increased her influence in Central Asian Republics, Mongolia, Korea, South East Asia, South Asia, West Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

When the regimes were on the decline, the Chinese heartland disintegrated into many feudal kingdoms. Examples of such a situation are North - South Division (420 - 598 AD), Five Dynasties and 10 Kingdoms Era (907-960 AD). Present day emphasis of China on regime security and protection is likely to have evolved from this syndrome. Ensuring the communist party's predominance in politics is also a manifestation of this concern.

The statecraft in China is influenced by three great scholars. They are Confucius, Mencius and Sun Zi. All the three men advocated contrasting styles. Confucius favoured force, Mencius, moral persuasion and Sun Zi, coercion. Sun Zi advised the Kings that a good military leader should win a war without fighting. Presently, China is concentrating on building her asymmetric warfare capabilities keeping in line with Sun Zi's strategy.

China will choose offensive strategy to cut down an opponent to size, when it is militarily strong and such a use of force results in minimum political and economic penalties.¹⁰ When extrapolated to the existing geopolitical situation, China is yet to become militarily strong, it is a growing economy with a number of contradictions and not yet a political heavy weight. If these incongruences are removed, then China may exert her military strength. China's use of force has a specific pattern. She has used force mainly to regain territories or to control the periphery. Though China has articulated a defence policy that is defensive in nature, she can justify any use of force as a principle of active defence.¹¹ This is an example of Confucian Strategy. Military incursions into periphery areas were followed by establishment of garrisons in those areas. New garrisons have been created in Tibet after the riots in March 2008. Most of the Chinese Regimes have not been able to subjugate their opponents because they did not understand the inner strengths of the latter.¹² Even today, Chinese feel that their systems are superior and if they work for them it should work for others too.

Chinese have also taken another lesson from their history. When they included cavalry into their forces, they could not sustain it as they had to purchase horses against those who raised their own horses. The desire to be indigenously self-sufficient for arms and equipment seems to have evolved out of this and also due to the erstwhile USSR's unilateral withdrawal of support in the early 1960s. When the nomads from the periphery of China faced defeat, they could retreat and return later after the Chinese forces had withdrawn, whereas the Chinese forces could not do so as they had to rely on fixed agricultural areas for their support.¹³ Mao Zedong's theory of drawing the enemy deep into his territory seems to have originated from such thinking.

Non Coercive Security Strategies

Non Coercive Security Strategies adopted by China are passive defence, policies of appeasement and co-optation, cessation of contact with outside world, assurances or maintenance of hierarchical, sino-centric diplomatic relations or the acceptance of more equal interactions using political balance, tactical alliance and manoeuvre.¹⁴ While a combination of all these aspects was used depending on the strength or weakness of the regime, sometimes the peripheral regions were set-off against one another.¹⁵ Supporting Pakistan against the wishes of India can be compared to this. In some cases, education in Chinese culture and marriages were used to secure the alliance of the rulers. Establishment of Chinese cultural centres in many countries in the present scenario bears resemblance to this technique.

China maintained a cordial relationship with countries by giving trade and cultural incentives.¹⁶ By projecting China as a benevolent and peaceful nation, China has been improving her relations with both ASEAN and some SAARC countries. The non-coercive strategy adopted by China has undergone a metamorphosis due to the changes in security threat, growth of other countries and the 'century of humiliation'. To overcome these changes, China is undergoing 'peaceful development'.¹⁷ In the Qing dynasty era, China relied on maintaining peace externally while she grew internally.¹⁸ Similar policy is being followed today. It is known as 'external calm and internal intensity'.

China had also been adopting a policy of ensuring that some vassal states do not maintain relations with countries opposed to her. China ensuring that no country maintains official relations with Taiwan is an example of this. This can also be seen in China's dollar diplomacy with countries in the Asia-Pacific and Africa to ensure that Taiwan is marginalised.¹⁹ In such cases, China offered protection or economic assistance. In the present day context, example of Pakistan-China relations also measure up to such scrutiny.

The modern era altered the application of China's non-coercive security strategy. When the western countries started invading China in the nineteenth century, she was just not satisfied with the kind of control she had over the periphery. The modern states proved superior to the Confucian state. This resulted in China tightening the hold on Chinese society and expanding the Chinese heartland. China felt that she is a victim of the aggression from her periphery. Later, the century of humiliation accentuated this feeling. Therefore, there is a powerful urge in the Chinese

psyche to undo what she perceives as the wrongs committed on her.²⁰ This has formed the basis for the reunification of the motherland. Examples are Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and Islands in the East and South China Seas. Moreover, this has resulted in China becoming extremely sensitive to existing or perceived external threats. Her reactions to India-USA relations, USA-ROK-Japan exercises, India-USA-Japan-Australia linkages can be attributed to this.

Weak-Strong Security Strategy

Even though the importance given to maintaining internal stability, control over the periphery and emergence as an important player in the international order remains, the developments in the last century as mentioned above have changed the outlook in foreign affairs and security policy of China. China needed to improve her organisational and administrative capabilities to gain dominance over the periphery. She also had to assimilate the concepts, organisation and modern practices to compete with the first world.²¹ In a classic example of 'weak-strong state security strategy' China adopted non-coercive methods to fend off aggression while she modernised her armed forces and gained direct control over Tibet, Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang.

Calculative Strategy

It is a strategy that has evolved from 'weak-strong state security strategy' and encompasses:-

- (a) A non-ideological, market led economic growth.
- (b) Maintain good international relations.
- (c) Deliberate restraint in the use of force.
- (d) An increasing stake in the international affairs.

China seems to be following this strategy presently. With the opening up of economy in 1978, a further change in the 'weak-strong state security' approach towards a highly calculative security strategy has been distinct. Resistance to use of excessive coercive force and the opposition to get involved with foreigners resulted in static border defences. This has led to a defensive orientation. While the jury is still out on the Air Defence Identification Zone issue, it may have been notified as a defensive measure against the air violations pertaining to Senkaku Islands.

Shi Strategy

Experts believe that China adopts Shi Strategy that has been followed for centuries by the players of "Go", a game which is in stark contrast to modern day Chess.²² As the game progresses, the number of pieces keep increasing on the board in "Go" and it is right opposite in the game of chess. Physical annihilation of opponent's forces is not the aim of winning in this game.²³ It is the relative positioning of own resources to gain maximum influence, that is the aim. Such a strategy is visible in China's international behaviour today. China gaining influence in South American countries, astride Panama Canal, countries that lay astride Gibraltar Straits, Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, Africa and Asia Pacific are examples of these.

Conclusion

There is a strong relationship between the security strategies followed by China in her chequered history and the ones being followed by her today. A combination of coercive and non-coercive policies is likely to be followed by China. China's Military Modernisation will continue to be at a fast pace and the PLA will acquire capabilities to pursue coercive strategies. China will strive to adapt some systems, capabilities and structures of developed countries. This will be in consonance with her aim of becoming a leading player on the world stage.

Endnotes

1. Runes, Dagobert D, "Dictionary of Philosophy", Kessinger Publishing, Philosophical Library, New York, pp338
2. Yu, Han, "Yuan Dao"
3. Kondapalli, Srikanth - response to questionnaire, 2014.
4. Kondapalli, Srikanth, and Jacob, Jabin - Response to Questionnaire, 2014.
5. Tellis, Ashley J, and Swaine, Michael D, "Interpreting China's Grand Strategy", Project Air Force, Rand, 2000, pp21.
6. Ibid pp 25
7. Jacob, Jabin and Kondapalli, Srikanth - Response to Questionnaire, 2014
8. Storey, Ian, "China's Malacca dilemma", China Brief, Volume 6 Issue 8, April 2006
9. Li, Nan, "The PLA's Evolving War Fighting Doctrine, Strategy and Tactics 1985-95: A Chinese Perspective, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997 and Godwin, Paul HB, "From Continent to Periphery: PLA Doctrine, Strategy and Capabilities Towards 2000", Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997.
10. Johnston, Alistair Ian, "China's Militarised Interstate Dispute Behaviour 1949-92, A First Cut at the Data", China Quarterly No 153, March 1998.
11. Li, Nan, "The PLA's Evolving Campaign Doctrine and Strategy"., Rand, 2006, pp 1-29, "www.rand.org"

12. Hsu, Immanuel CY, "The Rise of Modern China", Oxford University Press, New York, 1970, pp183-269,376-422
13. Barfield, Thomas J, "The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empire & China", Blackwell Publishers, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1989 pp 122
14. Sheperd, John Robert, "Statecraft and Political economy on the Taiwan Frontier, 1600 - 1800, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1993 pp 142-145
15. Tellis, Ashley J, and Swaine, Michael D, "Interpreting China's Grand Strategy", Project Air Force, Rand, 2000, pp 65.
16. O'Neill, Hugh B, "Companion to Chinese History", Facts on File Publications, New York, 1987, pp313
17. Wolters, OW, "The Fall of Srivijaya in Malay History", Lund Humphries Publications Ltd, London, 1970 pp 28-29,37-38,155
18. Hao, Yen-p'ing and Wang, Erh-min, "Changing Chinese Views of Western Relations,1840-95" in The Cambridge History of China, Vol 11, Part2, Cambridge University Press, London, 1980 pp 161-172
19. Hsu, Immanuel CY, "The Rise of Modern China", Oxford University Press, New York, 1970,pp 317-342.
20. O'Neill, Hugh B, "Companion to Chinese History", Facts on File Publications, New York, 1987, pp 145-146
21. Fairbank, John King, "China, A New History", Harvard university Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992 pp 167 - 173
22. Lai, David, "Learning from the Stones: A Go Approach to Mastering China's Strategic Concept "Shi", 2004, pp 1- 39, www.carlisle.army.mil
23. Kissinger, Henry, "On China", Penguin Books, 2011, pp23-25.

@Lieutenant General SL Narasimhan, AVSM, VSM was commissioned into the madras Regiment on 17 December 1977. After the command of a Corps in the Eastern Sector, he is currently posted as Commandant, Army War College, Mhow.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLIV, No. 597, July-September 2014.