

China ascendant and a new balance of power in Asia

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Though we have heard of stupid haste in war, cleverness has never been seen associated with long delays **Sun Tzu**, *The Art of War*

Confucius still holds sway over Chinese thinking. My first exposure to this fact was during the address of the Chinese ambassador in 1990 to what was then called the National Defence College. He implied that China would return to its old glory, but that time was of no significance. Today, his words appear to foretell the not-too-distant future.

Since 1995, I have taken every opportunity to visit as much of China as possible. Each visit has been increasingly fascinating. I get the feeling that it is a country waiting to become the giant it once was and the Chinese seem to believe that day is soon at hand.

What is particularly fascinating about the Chinese character is a combination of free thought and controlled discipline among the masses – a trait peculiar to them. Martin Jacques, makes a similar assertion in his book *When China Rules the World*: “There is still a widespread view in the West that China will eventually conform, by a process of natural and inevitable development, to the Western paradigm. This is wishful thinking.”

By concentrating on similarities, rather than recognising difference, the western world, “excludes everything ... that makes China what it is”.

Jacques argues that China’s alternative development model will end the West’s economic, political and cultural dominance. China differs from the West in its understanding of the state (a “civilisation state”, not a “nation state”), its regional relationships (a “tribute system”), and a particular attitude towards race and ethnicity. China’s size, its ancient and consistent polity, and the fact that it will still be a developing country even after its GDP is the largest in the world are other elements that Jacques claims make China different.

China is the third largest country in the world and the fastest growing economy. It has the largest standing military, and an estimated 500 nuclear warheads to attach to its intercontinental ballistic missiles.

That said, China is still not considered capable of projecting its military power overseas due to its lack of naval power. However, that may change as its strategic development plan calls for 80 per cent of the military budget to be invested in its navy through 2030.

Economically, it has overtaken Japan as the largest direct investor in the US. Coupled with its foreign exchange reserves of \$2.1 trillion, of which \$1.6 trillion are in US securities, it is almost single-handedly responsible for sustaining a debt-ridden US economy.

With the imminent departure of US forces from Afghanistan, China's influence will grow in South and Central Asia, although its ultimate desire, to rule the world, may still be some time away. In preparation for the US departure, China has been investing in Afghanistan's mineral industry for the last three years.

While many Pakistani analysts are concerned about India's presence in Afghanistan, I am not. Afghans are not naive. If the Afghan chapters of the Taliban retain some goodwill towards Pakistan, as they have demonstrated recently, they are unlikely to allow India to continue its anti-Pakistan activities from their territories.

India may retain its influence in the non-Pashtun areas in northern Afghanistan, and it is likely that India will quit Pashtun-dominated areas of Afghanistan when the US departs. Meanwhile the Afghan Pashtun almost certainly will seek enhanced co-operation with Pakistan and China. But the Indian presence in northern Afghanistan, which has a small link with it, will be of some concern to China.

In the meantime, a feasibility study to connect Urumqi in China with Havelian in Pakistan along the Karakoram highway has been completed. The project is expected to be completed by 2020. Urumqi is already linked to Almaty (the former capital of Kazakhstan) by train and Pakistan plans to connect Havelian directly to Gwadar, the site of a future deep sea port.

Once this project is completed, the resources of Central Asia as well as the developing Chinese province of Xinkiang will have a much shorter rail and road link to port in Gwadar. What is more, China has been assured by the Pakistan government that it can have a permanent naval presence in Gwadar. This is unlikely to happen before 2030, but when it does, it is likely to radically shift the balance of power in China's favour. Not only will it have a naval presence at the mouth of the Arabian Gulf, from whence most of the world's oil flows, it will also strategically hem in India from two directions.

I don't think that China will be ready to "rule the world" by then, but it is inching closer to it. The Chinese people have been quietly working towards a return to the glory days of the Chinese empire. This no longer seems to be just a dream. It is, however, still some distance from becoming a reality.

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