

Is Pacific Asia Returning to Sinocentrism?

Written by Bard Nikolas Vik Steen

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BARD NIKOLAS VIK STEEN, SEP 14 2014

In 1863, the Tongzhi emperor of China dispatched a letter to the 16th President of the United States (US), Abraham Lincoln, informing him of China's good intentions:

[h]aving with reverence, received the commission from Heaven to rule the universe, we regard both the middle empire [China] and the outside countries as constituting one family, without any distinction (Kissinger, 2012, p. 22)

This Chinese claim to universal jurisdiction three years after having opium forced upon them by the British was so absurd to the American envoy in Beijing, that he sought a second opinion on the translation. He was informed that the letter, by Chinese standards, was a particularly modest document (Kissinger, 2012, p. 426). It took a long time for the Chinese to accept that China was no longer the 'Middle Kingdom'. For 200 years, world politics would be dominated by Britain, America and the Soviet Union, rendering talk of Sinocentrism redundant (Young, 2010, p. 14). That has changed.

This essay will show that Pacific Asia (PA) is making progress towards, but is unlikely to return to, a state of Sinocentrism. To do so, the essay will first define what is meant by 'Sinocentrism'. Thereafter, the development and character of Chinese influence in PA will be examined through the lens of Ian Hurd's three resources of power. Then, the findings of that evaluation, realist arguments, facts and the weakness of liberal and exceptionalist counterarguments will be used to show that despite China's current process of increasing its influence over the region, there are many factors pointing towards future US containment, and it is therefore unlikely that PA will return to Sinocentrism.

The term 'Sinocentrism' is used in a confusing array of ways (Forsby, 2011 & von Falkenhausen, 1999), but this question refers to what David Kang calls the '...traditional Sinocentric Asian Hierarchical order...' (Kang, 2007, p. 164). That order, often called the Chinese tributary system (1368 to 1841), was a hierarchical order with China as the hegemon (Kang, 2010, p. 591). Hence, 'Sinocentrism' will be understood throughout this essay as a Pacific Asian hierarchical order with China as the hegemon[1]. It is therefore necessary to examine recent developments in China's relative influence in the Pacific Asian region to determine whether PA is returning to Sinocentrism.

Ian Hurd provides a marriage between constructivist and rationalist measurements of social control. It is a useful tool for a comprehensive evaluation of Chinese power in PA. Hurd states that: 'Legitimacy, coercion, and self-interest constitute ideal-types for modes of social control, and each generates compliance with society's rules by a different mechanism (Hurd, 2007, p. 35)'. To simplify, when states have power what they have is the resources which make other states comply with their wishes: Legitimacy (obliging compliance/making other states want to comply), Coercion (compelling compliance/forcing states to comply) and Self-Interest (contracting compliance/making it in other states interest to comply). Consequently, to assess if PA is returning to Sinocentrism, we can look at whether China has increased its portion of these three resources relative to other states in the region. The character of Chinese power developments here illuminated will also be useful for the prediction made later in this essay.

First, China's power of compellence is growing with its steady increase of military expenditure (averaging 15 percent per year since the mid 90's (Feng, 2008, p. 40)) and its focus on military modernization (Feffer, 2009). China now spends more than regional rivals Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam combined (Marcus, 2014). Its growing

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military might is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that it has already started construction of a second aircraft carrier after having launched its first in 2012 (Phillips, 2014). Although China is strengthening its capacity for compellence, its 'hard power' is still trifling when compared to the might of the United States. As admitted by Robert Kaplan:

...the challenges posed by a rising China may seem slight, even non-existent... The United States deploys twenty four of the world's thirty- four aircraft carriers; the Chinese deploy none [today that number has increased to one] (Kaplan, 2005).

In terms of contract power, China is a heavyweight contender. It has become the world's second largest economy, is expected by the OECD to be the largest by 2016 (OECD, 2013, pp. 9-10) and Goldman Sachs estimates that it could be twice the size of the United States economy by 2050 (Wilson, 2007, pp. 8-9). Naturally, this has increased its contract power in PA enormously. States in the Asia Pacific region, especially, have become heavily dependent upon China for their prosperity. As emphasised by economists Gaulier, Lemoine and Ünal- Kesenci:

For East Asian countries, China has become a major partner, their first partner in the region. In 2003, for Japan, China was the second export market, behind the US, and its first supplier. For South-Korea, China was the first export market and its second supplier behind the US (Gaulier & Lemoine, 2007).

In addition, China is already the US's second biggest trade partner (Morrison, 2014). Great power resides in this extreme regional dependency on Chinese trade. The penalty for upsetting one of its greatest trade partners could be harsh.

As for China's power of obligation, it is not nearly as great as its contract power, nor as easily measured. Still, some believe 700 new Confucius Institutes since 2004 and increasingly assertive Chinese diplomacy indicate that it is making progress (Hartig, 2011, p. 53 & Medeiros, 2003). Conversely, the father of 'soft power' Joseph Nye, who in 2005 believed China's soft power was growing (Nye, 2005), recently criticized China's progress. Nye believes China has had, despite great effort, a very small return on its investment, pointing to a recent BBC poll showing that public perception of China is predominantly negative in the US, South Korea and Japan (Nye, 2012). Certainly, China has a long way to go if it wants to play in the same league as the US, who has tools as effective as Hollywood, the English language and liberally modelled international organisations pulling her way (Nye, 2005 & Jacques, 2009, p. 15).

From this three-pronged evaluation, it is clear that China's influence is increasing but that it is in imbalance. Its contract-power is already enormous, its power of compellence is weak compared to the U.S but increasing steadily, while its power of obligation is difficult to measure, but seems weak and increasing only slowly. However, imbalance is not in itself a guarantee against China rising until PA becomes Sinocentric. As Paul Kennedy argued, productive capacity is the primary driver of hegemony (Kennedy, 1988, pp. 472-80, 665-692). It is the economy that funds both the military and Hollywood, and if there is one thing China has, it is economic strength. Bearing this in mind while considering the slow recovery of the United States economy and its recent military cutbacks (Marcus, 2014), it seems PA is on a steady course towards Sinocentrism. That assertion, however, rests on the premise that China will be able to continue increasing its influence in PA until it reaches a state of Sinocentrism.

There are of course many aspects that could offset PA from becoming Sinocentric. Chinese economic collapse as predicted by Nobel laureate Paul Krugman (Krugman, 2013), political turmoil etc. Due to the scope of this essay, however, only international aspects will be considered.

As China will have to surpass the power of the current regional hegemon for PA to reach a state of Sinocentrism, a question arises: Will the United States allow it to do so? The greatest 'threat' to PA becoming Sinocentric is US-led containment. As Zhu Feng explains, Beijing's greatest security concern is how to avoid being encircled and contained by the US (*Feng, 2008, p. 38*). Realists like John Mearsheimer argue that the rise of China makes US containment of China inescapable (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 17-18). The reason for this is explained by A.F.K Organski, the father of power transition theory: 'An even distribution of political, economic, and military capabilities between contending groups of nations is likely to increase the probability of war (Organski & Kugler, 1980)'. As previously seen, despite having some way to go, China is making steady progress towards such a conflict generating

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power equilibrium.

Some believe that containment of China will not occur. David Kang believes that East Asian states are exceptional in that they are used to a powerful China and see more gain than threat in a rising China, while the United States, due to global responsibilities, will not make the region a top priority (Kang, 2007, pp. 196- 203). Kang's argument says nothing of the future however – the realist's true concern. According to Organski, the danger of conflict increases only when all three power resources between contending groups are approaching equilibrium. China has hitherto only developed one of these power resources to a standard comparable to the United States. In a future where China has ten aircraft carriers, not one, the contention that the United States won't make PA a top priority and that China's neighbours won't fear it, seems unlikely. Combined with recent developments, such as Singapore and Australia inviting the US to increase their military presence in PA (Shalal- Esa, 2011), Chuck Hagel announcing that 60 percent of US naval capacities will be allocated to PA by 2020 (which has already been done with US overseas air force capacities (Hagel, 2013)), and 2016 elections favourite, Hillary Clinton, declaring the region a top priority (Clinton, 2011), a large hole seems to have been blown in Kang's argument. Denny Roy's contention that states in the region are already engaging in low intensity balancing and hedging is far more descriptive of actual events (Roy, 2005).

The weakness of Chinese power of obligation does not help the deteriorating situation. China's inability to alleviate misperception about Chinese intentions increases the danger of the security dilemma triggering US containment (Herz, 1950, p. 157). A danger illustrated well by the large differences in Chinese and American perceptions displayed by Lieberthal and Jisi in their pamphlet addressing the issue (Lieberthal & Jisi, 2012). Some argue in line with Norman Angell's ideas (Angell, 1910), however, that despite the clear threat of containment, China's and the United States' enormous contract power over each other will force the two to peacefully coexist due to their economic interdependence (Friedberg, 2005, pp. 12-13). Still, the great powers did not care about the economic disadvantages of conflict in 1914. There is no reason to believe that this case will prove to be any different. China is at least as undemocratic as Germany in 1913 and can thus find no relief in the statistical safety of Kant and Doyle's Democratic Peace either (Kant, 1903, Doyle, 1983). All things considered, China seems doomed to containment by a vastly more powerful United States, a containment that might already be underway. Hence, it can be concluded that PA is unlikely to continue its progress towards Sinocentrism as such containment would seriously inhibit the continued advancement of Chinese influence.

This essay has shown that while Pacific Asia is progressing towards Sinocentrism, it is unlikely to return to such a state. It did so by first defining 'Sinocentrism' as a hierarchy with China on top of it. Then it examined the development and character of Chinese influence in PA through the lens of Ian Hurd's three resources of power. Finally, it used the findings in that evaluation, realist arguments, facts and a demonstration of the lack of convincing liberal and exceptionalist counterarguments, to show that despite China being in the process of increasing its influence over the region, there are too many factors pointing towards future US containment for it to be likely that PA will return to Sinocentrism.

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Is Pacific Asia Returning to Sinocentrism?

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Is Pacific Asia Returning to Sinocentrism?

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[1] Because of their importance to the region, this essay views the countries of the Pacific Rim as part of PA, as do regional international organisations (APEC, 2014).

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