

# **Beyond the Asia-Pacific: China's Next Geo-Strategic 'Stepping Stone'**

Written by Strobe Driver

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China in recent times has begun to drastically alter its role in the Asia-Pacific (A-P) region, from that of being a docile observer for many decades to being a more forthright regional actor. Within this paradigm the People's Republic of China (PRC) government has tasked itself with redefining and altering its historic status quo—historically succumbing to the implicit and explicit demands of the West—and is now also moving beyond the A-P. The current situation within the A-P is that China is mounting a very robust challenge within the region and this state of affairs is reflected in recent actions. The PRC definitively asserting its rights (perceived or actual) in its littoral or 'green water'[1] zone—the Sea of Japan, Yellow Sea, East China Sea, South China Sea and the Philippine Sea. However, before addressing why and how China is moving beyond the A-P it is necessary to place the dynamic of how its current role in the A-P developed and how it has offered China confidence to move beyond this region. Whilst China's move into South Asia[2]—to be precise Afghanistan and Pakistan—has been somewhat rapid (and possibly has caught the West by surprise) it has nevertheless, been premised on a much more agile and determined foreign policy, further reflecting a new and unwavering China. Nevertheless, it is safe to argue that the confidence China has gained in the A-P region has enabled its most recent move to take place. Underpinning this latest move is a sign that China is on a pathway of incrementally operating a more 'hard' power/militaristic approach than what has gone before. In attempting to comprehend this change of action it is necessary to observe the geo-political driving forces behind the move; and the geo-strategic underpinnings of why it has decided to move in a new direction.

### **Beyond the Asia-Pacific: China and South Asia**

Underpinning China's latest move is what was once an imagined scenario of staking a geo-strategic presence in the world is now becoming a reality. To wit, China has become more sophisticated and cosmopolitan; is assured of its power-trajectory; and is becoming more and more cognizant with unifying its geo-strategic and geo-political powers per se. The latest move toward South Asia shows it is now willing *and* able to pursue its policies through the prism of a military or quasi-military presence. This is different from its previous passive expansion into Africa and Oceania. China's previous expansion was largely premised on its fiscal capabilities: foreign aid; purchasing land; and offering loans. The engagement that China is having with the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan, whilst resting on the premise of it being a definitive statement about its power-projection abilities, over the past decade, China has been much more tenacious within the A-P region. Chinese engagement with the governments of Vietnam and the Philippines, has been much more collision-oriented and has in recent times caused all three countries to utilize 'brinkmanship'[3] as a form of rheostat. China currently exercises its military leverage through the People's Liberation Army Air Force and/or the People's Liberation Army Navy, and through the use of quasi-military assets, such as the China Coast Guard. China's reinvigoration, now with an incremental and systemic usage of hard power, poses a question: what is relevant in China's history which has encouraged such a strong foreign policy stance which it is willing to back with military force?

### **China and the West**

Whilst it is true China was a feudal country for many centuries, it nevertheless has a long and strong history of domestic cum regional successes. China's emperors have been dedicated to developing their society—from which a

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sophisticated and learned culture developed. This is ensconced in an exceptional example of progress: the Song dynasty (960–1126). The Song dynasty marked 'China out as the most literate and numerate society in the world ... with Europe lagging far behind.'<sup>[4]</sup> Furthermore, China would continue to progress throughout the Song dynasty and into the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), via the gaining of geographic territory using direct force and passively through exploration—Zheng He's Indian Ocean expeditions. To be sure, Chinese culture would, in general, thrive during these two dynasties and in relative terms China was much like Europe during this time with their elite, in the case of China its emperors, seeking to retain their grasp on power. It would be the Qing dynasty that would finally unite the country albeit through a different method of governance, the 'tributary system', and not through the more formal cum legal avenues Europe pursued. Paradoxically, for all of its power over its domestic reign and the region it would be the Qing dynasty that would finally be subjugated by and to, the objectives and needs of Western European powers over time. For all of its culture and sophistication, China, during the Qing dynasty, would not have enough control to exclude the West. Eventually China would succumb to the demands of Western Imperialism and within this body-politic be usurped by the European-*Westphalian* system.<sup>[5]</sup> The continuous influence and penetration of the West into China would incrementally and then exponentially grow, and in doing so subsequently diminish China's ability to exert a strong political stance in both its domestic, and international political arenas.

## The Subjugation of China

The Treaty of Nanking (1842)

ceded to Britain the island of Hong Kong and opened four ports, in addition to Canton to foreign trade ... and a supplementary trade treaty was signed in 1843, fixed a schedule on tariffs and imports ... which was produced in later Chinese treaties with the United States (July, 1844), and France (October, 1844) ... [which] deprived China of the right to fix her own tariff levels at a time when an increase in the revenue from Customs duties was most needed by the Chinese government.<sup>[6]</sup>

This type of economic bias by, and for, the benefit of the West would increase and become an ongoing fiscal burden for the Chinese, and eventually retard any chance of systemic economic and political recovery. Moreover, the impact of the West, during the late nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century would result in China being reduced to 'an object of international relations to be discussed and dispensed with by foreign powers.'<sup>[7]</sup> This state of affairs would be further exacerbated by China's diplomatic isolation at the 1921-22 Washington Naval Conference,<sup>[8]</sup> with the favouring of Japan during the Conference by the United States of America (US), France and Great Britain.<sup>[9]</sup> At this time, China would be reduced to a semi-colonial 'possession.' One which lacked political unity, developed resources, and strength at home which resulted in a lack of the necessary status abroad to play an independent role in world politics.<sup>[10]</sup> China, due in part to its own domestic incongruities and the international inertia imposed on it by the West from 1912 through to 1949, would be incapable of sophisticated and cosmopolitan responses to Western impositions. This state of affairs however would not remain. After the end of World War Two (WWII), and the beginning of the 'Mao-era' (1949-1976),<sup>[11]</sup> China would finally achieve unity and have an, albeit limited, international presence. The most powerful attributes of the West through the prism of demarcated borders, fiscal, geographic, military and political conventions would force China to politically conform to the West overall.<sup>[12]</sup> This state of affairs too, however, would not remain.

## Copying the Past: China Begins to Rise

China would begin to reinvigorate its status and slowly but surely move beyond the subjugation of the Qing dynasty and emerge from its 'Century of Humiliation'<sup>[13]</sup> that had been forced upon it by Western nation-states; and their regional neighbour, Japan. Notwithstanding, the political solidity of Mao-era China's large-scale internal struggles would also essentially end with the death of Mao. A new age would come to the fore—the Deng Xiaoping era (1976 – 1997). During this time, and with the gradual implementation of the 'Four Modernizations' of industry, agriculture, defense, and science and technology<sup>[14]</sup> a new China would emerge and would continue to develop through a pragmatic and disciplined industrial, economic, agricultural and political tutelage.<sup>[15]</sup> As an 'emerging' nation-state China would begin to exercise its newfound status cum confidence and as a newly-powerful nation-state's are wont to do, it would move toward proactively shaping its own polity rather than reacting to external influences; and begin to

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exert a stronger presence in the international political arena. The West had already embarked upon this trajectory, and to be sure so had Japan through its regional power-stakes after the Japan-Russo War (1904-1905). In no particular order the expansion of nation-states as they gain power is borne out in the following examples: Japan's (first) invasion of Manchuria and occupation of Korea;[16] the Kingdom of the Netherlands' occupation of the East Indies in 1948 under the guise of 'police actions;[17] the US' 'frantic grab for colonies, taking over Hawaii, Midway Island, Guam, Samoa ... and getting the Philippines in the late-nineteenth century';[18] and the British Crown establishing rule over India in 1858.[19]

All are examples of nation-states exercising their will as their influence grows; and as their power increases. Moreover, this type of intervention is not exclusive to communism and is present numerous in political blocs, from the monarchies of Britain, Portugal and Spain, the Republic of France and the (post-WWII) liberal-democracy of the US. And it is with this understanding that as geo-strategic and geo-political power grows, so too does the need for addressing past geo-political injustices; and of shoring up present and future geo-strategic proclivities. China is essentially following the same trajectory as Japan, the (then) Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the US in the post-WWII era and Britain circa-1750 through to 1939. China, as a rising power, is exhibiting the same tendencies as others that have gone before. What is the modus operandi that the PRC government is adopting?

## China Continues to Expand

China's expansionist policies are underpinned by the same pattern that Britain displayed during its Industrial Revolution and the US exercised in the post-WWII era: a combination of growing naval power and a vibrant domestic economy.[20] Whilst it is true China has decided to take a somewhat different path than Britain and the US did in the nascent stages of their power, which largely consisted of outright 'occupation,'[21] and when this was not possible a combination of accommodation, inducement and coercion,[22] increasing displays of military force by China have come to the fore in their recent operations. However, whilst China may share the same patterns of utilizing force in order to solve its aspirational intent it has not (as yet), applied any specific Western-style doctrines to its interventions. This is particularly true of its previous more passive interventions. Of importance here is what are the principles underlying previous interventions and what has triggered a change. Previously the PRC government portended:

it is wrong to impose political and economic conditionality in exchange for aid and that countries should be free to choose their own [political] direction. Moreover, this is consonant with the Chinese respect for sovereignty, a principle they regard as inviolable and which is directly related to their own historical experience during the aforementioned 'century of humiliation'.[23]

This is in part, due to the fact that China has not invaded any lands it does not consider to be part of its 'Middle Kingdom' and the 'land under Heaven (*tianxia*)'[24] mandate; and moreover any waters it does not consider to traditionally have rights over it also has not applied military pressure to. Hence, in laying claim to the South China Sea islands—the so-called 'Iron Triangle,' encompassing the Paracel Islands in the north down to the Spratly Island in the south and the Scarborough shoals in the east[25]— China believes it is acting within its rights. The US and its allies in the A-P region have essentially rejected China's claims under the pretext of 'freedom-of-navigation,' however China has largely ignored the rebuttal and continues to occupy and build upon its traditional claims in the region. Herein is the iconoclastic change in China's approach to its claims in the A-P. Furthermore, it is safe to argue that concomitant to its claims China also believes it has been a victim of imposed directives and will have no more of Western powers dictating its geo-strategic policies. There is also a recognition by China that the West's aggrandisement of democratic liberties and values is not seen to have integrity: the ongoing and shameful occupation of Diego Garcia[26] by the US, and the non-negotiable occupation by Britain of the disputed Falkland Islands/Islands Malvinas are two examples that severely undermine Western commitment to its ideals.

China's expansion into the A-P region and the successful application of proactive tactics which have amounted to an overall strategy of gaining a solid presence in the A-P, it can be safely argued, has given China the confidence to be an overt actor in South Asia—Afghanistan and Pakistan to be precise. The way in which China has accomplished this and the way in which it has gone about executing this recent regional geo-strategic move will now be addressed.

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## South Asia: China's Next Geo-Strategic 'Footprint'

Part of the reasoning behind the decision to move into South Asia's geo-strategic and geo-political arenas is in the first instance to create a 'knock-on' effect of other countries observing that China is now a proactive and assertive actor; and to show that it is willing and able to intrude on areas that have in recent times had strong input from the West in the second. Thus, as China grows it will become more opportunistic in opening economic and military agreements, and this will establish a higher international profile for China and reinforce its geo-strategic agenda. This is already in place with the promise of military support to Afghanistan which has a beneficial dyad for China: the possibility of greater stability in the northwest of China—through the auspices of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region—and also with the positive initiatives associated with the China-Afghanistan Silk Road Economic Belt.[27] China has also put effort into Pakistan, with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor which offers China a 12,000 kilometre reduction in distance for its energy imports from the Middle East.[28] This has resulted in direct boots-on-the-ground involvement and though it consists of a largely protective and guarding role it nevertheless sends a definitive signal that China will not step back from a more deliberate presence in the South Asia region. However, the current deals China has made deeply encroach on the established military footprint the West has developed through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization—including the US and its allies—in Afghanistan; the ongoing military pursuit (via Unmanned Aerial Vehicles) of terrorists in Pakistan; the support of the (previous) Pakistani Musharraf government; and the auspices of the 'War on Terror.' All bear out the consistency of recent incursions by the West into South Asia.

Notwithstanding the multi-faceted political elements of the intrusion of China into the South Asia region the ultimate signal that China is no longer at the behest of the West in its geo-strategic policies. The geo-strategic wait-and-see approach of whether a move should be made and whether it is one that will impact Asian-Western relations is simply no longer tenable. China's recent actions constitute a direct rebuttal of the political conditioning that has been imposed on it by the West. China has moved on from this paradigm and Afghanistan and Pakistan is a form of this new politics writ large.

## Conclusion

A country that is on the cusp of being a newfound global power begins to extend its influence for a multitude of reasons and seeks to achieve what it once would have considered 'unobtainable' objectives. With its move into South Asia, China is rapidly and exponentially becoming a direct and indirect force to be reckoned with. The era of the US retaining its complete and absolute control over its post-WWII gains in the A-P and its major influence in South Asia is coming to an end. South Asia is now expanding its regional presence, and it has the military and political wherewithal to exacerbate and encourage 'the end of the Vasco da Gama era.' [29]

The PRC government's movement into South Asia should be viewed as a quasi-unilateral stance, one that comprises a signal that China is not answerable to the West and its definitions of what the terms of 'acceptable' expansion are. The PRC government will continue to exercise its 'rights' and will without doubt, in the future, use direct force if necessary, in order to stake their claims, as it has done proactively in the building of airstrips on neighbouring atolls. At this point in time, China, in relative terms, is operating unilaterally in only two regions and this for the West is 'manageable.' The dangers for the West will incrementally and then exponentially increase when China utilizes a more multilateral approach toward its territorial ambitions. The prospect of obtaining direct allies—such as Indonesia in the A-P and Afghanistan and Pakistan in South Asia—is what will fundamentally and catastrophically change the geo-strategic landscape for the West. There is no reason to believe China will not approach its ambitions in a multilateral way in the future, as this is what the West has embarked upon for decades, and moreover, the PRC government has learned from this approach. Much to the chagrin of the West, China will not turn back to its subservient past and will inevitably adopt a trajectory of increasing pressures on the West as its ambitions increase.

## Notes

[1] Paul Pryce. 'The Brazilian Navy: Green Water or Blue.' *Center for Maritime Security*. 25 Jan, 2015 Green-water navies ... focusing mainly on securing a country's littorals [although do retain an] ability to venture out into deeper

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waters.' However, a 'blue water navy' consists of having a navy which is able to venture into open ocean and/or the high seas and according to Kirtz is able to defend against 'open ocean naval threats...and [is consistent with] gaining command of the sea.' See: James Kirtz. 'Introduction.' *Naval Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Operations. Stability from the sea*. Edited by James Wirtz and Jeffrey Larsen. Oxon: Routledge, 2009, 1.

[2] South Asia consists of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. See: 'South Asia: Countries.' *The World Bank*.

[3] According to Gochman 'brinkmanship' becomes part of political manoeuvrings when, 'decision makers perceive a dramatic impending shift in the balance of power in favour of an adversary and/or a substantial internal challenge to their own political position at home.' See: *The Process Of War. Advancing the Scientific Study of War*. Edited by Stuart Bremer and Thomas Cusack. Australia: Gordon and Breach, 1995, 97.

[3] There are common features in what Calhoun describes as the 'rhetoric of nations' and though they do not completely define what a nation comprise, they include boundaries of territory, indivisibility, sovereignty, legitimacy, participation in collective affairs, direct membership, culture, temporal depth, common characteristics and special histories. See: Craig Calhoun. *Nationalism*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997, 4 -5.

[4] Martin Jacques. *When China Rules the World. The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*. London: Penguin, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed, 2009, 89.

[5] The Treaty of Westphalia (1648) set in place the (Western) accepted legal parameters of sovereignty, however it was driven by what the elites of Europe deemed necessary for their co-existence. One of the most pertinent aspects of the Treaty is: '[T]he world consists of, and is divided into, sovereign territorial states that recognize no superior authority; the processes of law-making, settlement of disputes and law enforcement are largely in the hands of individual states; [and] international law is oriented to the establishment of minimal rules of coexistence.' See: Roger King and Gavin Kendall. *The State, Democracy and Globalization*. Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2004, 34.

[6] Michael Edwards. *The West in Asia 1850 – 1914*. London: B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1967, 114.

[7] Kuo-kang Shao. *Zhou Enlai and the Foundations of Chinese Foreign Policy*. Houndsmills: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1988, 40.

[8] *Zhou Enlai and the Foundations of Chinese Foreign Policy*, 27.

[9] See: 'Four Power Treaty' Dictionary of American History. *Encyclopedia.com*, The Gale Group, 2003.

[10] *Zhou Enlai and the Foundations of Chinese Foreign Policy*, 41-42.

[11] See: 'China under Mao 1949-1976.'

[12] For a comprehensive analysis of this state-of-affairs see: *When China Rules the World*, 297-308.

[13] *When China Rules the World*, 303 – 308.

[14] Katherine Keyser. 'Three Chinese Leaders. Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping.' *Asia for Educators*. 2009

[15] Ezra Vogel. 'The Transformation of China.' *Tvo, The Agenda*. 2013.

[16] Edwin Hoyt. *Japan's War. The Great Pacific Conflict 1853 – 1952*. London: Hutchinson, 1986, 26.

[17] Gerda Hendriks. "'Not a colonial war': Dutch film propaganda in the fight against Indonesia, 1945 – 49.'

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*Colonial Insurgency and Mass Violence. The Dutch Empire in Indonesia.* Edited by Bart Luttikhuis and A. Dirk Moses. London: Routledge, 2014, 202.

[18] *Japan's War*, 30.

[19] Chandrika Kaul. 'From Empire to Independence: The British Raj in India 1858 – 1947.' British Broadcasting Corporation, *History*, 2013.

[20] Norrie MacQueen. *Colonialism*. Harlow: PearsonLongman, 2007, 15.

[21] Occupation' according to Benvenisti is 'the effective control of a power ... over a territory to which that power has no sovereign title, without the volition of the sovereign of that territory.' See: Eyal Benvenisti. *The International Law of Occupation*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993, 4.

[22] Accommodation 'attempts to satisfy the nationalist demands of the population by incorporating elements of that population in the governance of the occupied territory.' Inducement, 'provides resources to the occupied population in an effort to buy acquiescence.' Coercion is 'the use or threatened use of military force to defeat any elements of the population that resist or threaten to resist an occupation.' See: David Edelstein. *Occupational Hazards. Success and Failure in Military Occupations*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008, 49-53.

[23] *When China Rules the World*, 303 – 308.

[24] *When China Rules the World*, 303.

[25] Matthew Carney. 'China's secret maritime militia: Fishermen the forward guard in South China Sea dispute.' 9 May, 2016. *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*.

[26] See: David Vine. *Island of Shame. The Secret History of the U.S. Military Base on Diego Garcia*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009.

[27] See: Shannon Tiezzi. 'What's Behind China's Offer of Military Aid to Afghanistan?' *The Diplomat*. 11 Mar, 2016.

[28] Sudhi Sen. 'Chinese Troops Will Be Positioned in Pakistan: Security Agencies Tell Government.' *The Diplomat*. 13 Mar, 2016.

[29] See: Coral Bell. 'The end of the Vasco da Gama era. The Next Landscape of World Politics.' *Lowy Institute*. Paper 21, 2007.

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### About the author:

**Strobe Driver** completed a PhD in War Studies in 2010 and since then has been writing on War, Conflict, Terrorism and Asia-Pacific Security. During 2018 he was awarded a year-long Taiwan, ROC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Fellowship to write an independent analysis of Taiwan – China relations with a focus on when and whether a conflict would break out. The analysis is entitled 'Asia-Pacific and Cross-Strait Machinations: Challenges for Taiwan in the Nascent Phase of Pax-Sino.' All other writings by Strobe can be found on his blog.