

# War with China: Ascending Powers, Expansionism and the Use-of-Force

Written by Strobe Driver

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There has been some increasing consternation in recent times amongst commentators that the 'rise of China' is mirroring the machinations and complexities of Germany before World War One (WWI)—the era of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Monk points to Germany's sense of being hemmed in by the Triple Entente (England, France and Russia) and of Germany's population 'seeing the world from their own government's point of view,'[1] or in simpler terms not questioning their decision-making elite, as being significant contributing factors that would bring about the 'total war'[2] of 1914-1918. Moreover, several decades prior to going to war, Germany was an ascendant European power. However it was in the decade prior to WWI that Germany had managed, via a decade of rapid industrialization to form a naval force that was second only to Britain. More importantly the massive industrial undertaking of building a navy according to the established powers of Britain, Russia, Japan and France suddenly found Germany 'meddling everywhere'.

Based on the abovementioned history of ascendant powers, Germany befits the archetype of what an ascendant power is wont to do: begin to assert authority in a more robust way; be more proactive and reactive in its geo-strategic and geo-political positioning; and demand that their 'place' in the world be re-assessed. Prior to Germany's ascendance: Portugal, Spain, France and Britain, to name only a few had embarked upon this trajectory and the strategy and tactic that were overwhelmingly used consisted of 'coercion,' which is summed up as:

[T]he use or threatened use of military force to defeat any elements of the population that resist or threaten to resist an occupation ... Coercion in occupations can take the form of either explicit actual violence, or latent violence that deters violent opposition to occupation.[3]

Observing recent events, China is on the trajectory of Germany prior to World War Two (WWII) as it feels hemmed in by the United States of America (US) and its Asia-Pacific allies—Australia and Japan to be precise. Whether the pre-WWI scenario will apply in the same or a similar manner can now be assessed through a prism of what other powerful nation-states have undertaken in their power-stakes.

### Japan as a Regional Power

To be certain power-stakes reside within a country's capabilities and whilst Germany had European ambitions, Japan developed regional ambitions in its quest for power. For instance the rise of Japan was through the policies of the Meiji era (1868 – 1890), and the subsequent defeat of Russia; and two invasions of China.[4] Within this process there were also societal changes such as the abolishment of feudalism and the embracing of structural changes which were

The enthusiastic [selective] adoption of new Western technologies [which] caused an explosion of industrial productivity and diversification. A national military and universal conscription were established. Compulsory public education was introduced both to teach the skills needed for the new nation and to inculcate values of citizenship in all Japanese.[5]

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Japan, in the Meiji era established a nascent dominance over its regional neighbours[6] and Imperial Japan (1890 – 1945) would follow what had been established. Imperial Japan's trajectory would consist of winning a war against Russia (1904 – 1905) in order to curtail Russia's expansionist policies in Far East Asia, a war with China (1894 -1895) over control of Korea, gain a colony (Formosa/Taiwan) in 1902 and finally, annex Korea in 1910. All incidences reflect a pathway of becoming a major regional power. Imperial Japan would continue its ambitions with a second invasion of China in 1937[7] and extend its geo-strategic ambitions through war and colonisation backed by astounding growth until its total defeat in 1945—at the end of the Pacific phase of WWII.

Therefore, Japan also befits the model of those that had gone before. Japan was *circa*-1894 to 1945, simply one more powerful nation-state claiming control of regions—East Asia, South East Asia, through to Oceania in that order. This was accomplished through the prism of violent (realism-driven) expansionism; strong domestic nationalism; and the desire to maintain the regional status gained in the Japan-Russo War. A move to understanding the aim of global power can now be addressed.

## Britain as a Global Power

Driven by nationalism, mercantilism, and science and technology—such as the development of capital ships, cannon, shot and portable firearms—and by having 'increasingly sophisticated administrative and tax systems'[8] which could support long conflicts numerous European nations would develop expansionist policies. The primary focus of these powers was to establish a military presence in order to ensure an immediate and ongoing resource base; and enforce navigation rights. Britain would excel in the aforementioned gaining of territories. By 1860, its territory covered nearly a quarter of the Earth's surface.[9] To observe the extent of Britain's global ambition and to also understand the intent which the British government would use force against the populations is to note 'military actions played an increasingly larger role in [the] British imperial experience.'[10] Emphasising this factor is to observe the following conflicts that were undertaken in order to ensure an empire was sustained: the Second Burma War (1852 – 3), Indian Uprising (1857 – 8), the Ambeyla Expedition (1863), Third Maori War (1863 – 72), the Abyssinian Expedition (1867 – 8), the Zulu War (1879), Second Afghan War (1878 – 80), First Boer War (1880 – 81), action in Egypt and the Sudan (1882 – 99), action on the Indian frontiers (1883 – 97), Third Ashanti War (1895 – 96), and the South African (Boer) War (1899 – 1902).[11]

The above emphasises what a determined global actor does in order to hold on to empire and status. The British Empire's power-base extended over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At every opportunity it was extended and defended and was replete with a high degree of nationalism amongst the British domestic populace. In the post-WWII era, the US would embark upon a similar trajectory.

## The United States of America as a Global Power

The US has a long history of expansionism which in many ways corresponds to the British. In the mid-twentieth century the US began to position for global power through the prism of what was achieved in its total victories in the Pacific theatre of WWII; and its joint victories in Europe as an Allied power. Victory in the Pacific notwithstanding, the US has been involved in numerous conflicts over time in its effort to become a powerful international actor and has used military strength on numerous occasions. In July 1853, Commodore Perry of the United States Navy with a squadron of support ships sailed into Tokyo Harbour and 'forced Japan to enter into trade with the United States and demanded a treaty permitting trade and the opening of Japanese ports to U.S. merchant ships.' In 1894 – 1898, the US 'stage-managed' a coup d'état against Queen Lili'oukalani of Hawaii and annexed her islands; and in 1903 fomented a revolution in the isthmus of Panama to separate it from Columbia in order to acquire territory needed for the Panama Canal.[12] The US would then be involved in the following conflicts: Cuba, (1898 – 1902), Philippines (1898 – 1941), China (1900), Panama (1903 – 1936), Cuba (1906 – 1909), Nicaragua, (1909 – 1933), and Mexico (1914). [13] Just prior to the twenty-first century the US would be involved in a further 86 conflicts[14] with the view to establishing a solid geo-strategic world presence.

As the US and its use-of-force on other sovereign nation-states remained strong and vibrant it pursued its policy objectives through the prism of '*pax*.'[15] Whilst not having been able to achieve the chronological achievement of

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the British in their approximately 150 years' domination, the fact remains the US is a very robust international actor. With this in mind, China entering the Asia-Pacific region in a much more dynamic way can now be addressed.

## **Pax-Sino: China Embraces the Historic 'Use-of- Force'**

The rise of a nation is through a multitude of happenings which consist of but are not limited to, industrialisation, mechanization, nationalism, patriotism, robust tax collection and science and technology. Within the development of these societal and industrial components a nation-state tends to develop and then harness a strong military and what Tilly describes as 'attendant infrastructures.'<sup>[16]</sup> These 'structures' range from personnel discipline through to sophisticated equipment and the ability to apply use-of-force. A more robust military for a nation-state invariably leads to more overt geo-strategic demands—Japan, Britain, France and the US in the aforementioned. China, with its attendant structures is now setting out to redefine its geo-strategic 'place' with more focussed geo-strategic objectives. The 'nine-digit line' being paramount to its forward-focussed foreign policy planning. The nine-digit line encompasses the Paracel Islands, extends as far south as James Shoal (near the coast of Malaysia), proceeds north to near the coast of the Philippines and ends as far north as the Luzon Strait, off the coast of Taiwan. To be sure, the significance of the nine-digit line is not an aggrandizement of oceanic territory per se.

The abovementioned 'line' however, is more a statement of future intent and in turn, the end result of a long slow process that began in 1991 and is important therefore, to be given a perspective. One of the major driving forces for the People's Republic of China (PRC) at this time stemmed from a belief that the Chinese people had been stripped of their identity by European powers in the nineteenth century<sup>[17]</sup>. The PRC government through the focussed planning during the Deng Xiaoping era (1978 – 1994) began the process of expansion in earnest and a nascent 'blue-water' (ocean-going) navy began to be formed; and over time China's military spending increased exponentially. Therefore, the PRC during the mid-1990s began a focussed strategic policy of developing a military capacity to deter and deny, rather than assault and defeat, US carrier battle fleets in the Western Pacific, and this was combined with the diplomatic aim of pushing the US out of its dominant and established role in East Asia and Southeast Asia since 1945.<sup>[18]</sup>

The necessity of a more robust China in geo-strategic terms therefore befits the model of power projection—one which demands a more solid expression of hard power. The recent development of the Cuarteron Reef in the South China Sea being a strong example of hard power. Underpinning the overt moves into the Asia-Pacific (A-P) region and of threatening the established US primacy in the Western Pacific also fits the historical model of 'rising powers with narratives of past humiliations tend to view the status quo with ambiguity and justify the use of power politics, to right these perceived wrongs.'<sup>[19]</sup> China is definitively and assertively following the path of those that have gone before—Japan, the US, France and Britain.

## **Conclusion**

In recent times the PRC has been exerting its perceived and/or actual rights by establishing a more robust A-P presence. To date China has not stepped back from its projection of hard power and although it has not reacted to freedom-of-navigation 'interventions' by the US and its allies, it has nonetheless continued implementing a robust plan of expansion—mainly through the prism of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). The usage of an ocean going navy is a tried and true method of expansion and China has embarked upon what has become colloquially known as the 'string of pearls'<sup>[20]</sup> in order to achieve its regional ambitions. Ports in Myanmar and Pakistan being of particular importance in their oceanic connectivity and moreover the recent swing of the Philippines toward China is a direct display of China's influence in the A-P; and its steady pursuit of invoking geo-strategic change in the region.<sup>[21]</sup>

The uptake of the PRC in harnessing Chinese 'security' through the prism of maximising national interest, economic prosperity, security and maritime superiority<sup>[22]</sup> announces that the PRC and the Chinese populace are embarking upon what has gone before in terms of attempting to reshape the status quo. As has been stated, Japan, Britain and the US have all embarked upon what China is attempting. With regard to Germany, nationalism played a growing part in their ambitions culminating in 1939 with the invasion of Poland. Japan's pivotal exercise in expansionism

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would result in the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor. Both powers at the time saw direct force as a necessity in coming to terms with their 'rivals.'

Thus, China has not stepped back from the domestic security policies attributed of the Deng era per se and has recently reinforced its ambitions by ignoring the Permanent Court of Arbitration's (PAC) ruling that China has no specific rights in the South China Sea maritime disputes. China dismissed the ruling as nothing more than 'a piece of paper' further surmising that tribunal's such as the PAC are only for small powers and Great powers—especially members of the United Nations Security Council Permanent Five—do not have to acquiesce to such rulings.

The power projection that China is applying to East and Southeast Asia is one of being incremental as the PRC builds upon its domestic elements of nationalism and economic stability, whilst at the same time exercising geo-strategic and geo-political strength through the prism of an ocean-going naval force. Concomitant to the military aspects of power projection, China has dismissed US insistences for a halt to land reclamation[23] which also reflects the confidences that other powers have expressed prior times. Therefore it is fair to argue a significant focus of the PRC is to embrace what Imperialist nations accomplished prior to China's newfound and/or reinvigorated power per se and the fact that what China has already accomplished is 'fundamentally challenging Asia's strategic order,'[24] is within the remit of those that have gone before. China has learned strategies and tactics of Western Imperial powers as well as Japan's. The issue for a safer A-P is whether how the West and Japan in particular deal with the inevitable rise of China as once a nation-state grasps its expansionist trajectory there is no turning back, within this construct the PRC show no sign of slowing as each ambitious component of *pax-Sino* is dealt with.

Conflict and then war come about due to a deliberate kinetic military attack taking place, a more focussed pro-active stance takes place by the emerging power and the most powerful actor launches a 'pre-emptive defence attack,'[25] due to a perceived or actual security threat. Therefore, and based on history there is no reason to believe that military conflict through a 'limited (regional) war'[26] will depend upon whether there is a de-escalation of any initial kinetic power projection—that is an exchange of live munitions—or whether it is escalated.

Currently and due to the inherent and continuing tensions, what is certain is that a military collision will take place. Gaining regional and then global power is a costly business. The US in the post-WWII era, Britain in the mid-seventeenth through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, France before that and Spain prior to France were committed to their power and utilized numerous strategies and tactics to ensure their power remained constant. All offer an insight into the strategies of expansionism. Thus, the regional imperialism that China is displaying demands that the use-of-force be an inherent and omnipresent part of a powerful country's geo-strategic expansionism and mix, and this is usually met with the current actor—in this case the US—being increasingly unwilling to secede any lessening of its power-base. Therefore it must be said that China to a large extent is mimicking pre-WWI Germany. It must also be stated however, that its geo-strategic policies are being exacerbated by constant US refusals for the Western Pacific to be a multilateral oceanic zone. Whether the US is able to rely on all of its allies in the post-WWII world and whether China is able to maintain and increase its allies to form a greater and more potent fighting power-bloc in the A-P remains to be seen. The current state-of-affairs however, suggests that a war will happen as China exponentially increases its expansionism; and the US incrementally reverts to being a revisionist power. Or in a more focussed way, China is exhibiting a pre-WWI German paradigm and this is due to numerous imposing security forces in the A-P region.

## Notes

[1] Paul Monk. 'China's parallel with Germany before WWI.' *The Age*. FairfaxMedia: Melbourne, 21 Aug, 2014, 20.

[2] 'Total war' is a multi-faceted and complex happening however it is summed up succinctly by Vasquez as, 'Total wars involve a high mobilization of society ... Because total wars take on the characteristics of a fight for survival, they tend to mobilize resources and means to wage battle with few restraints ... The goals in total wars are much more open-ended and often expand as the war progresses. .' See: John Vasquez. *The War Puzzle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

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[3] David Edelstein. *Occupational Hazards. Success and Failure in Military Occupations.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008, 49-53.

[4] The 'Meiji Era' is also referred to as the 'Meiji Restoration.'

[5] 'Japan's Modern History: An outline of the Period.' Columbia University. [http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/timelines/japan\\_modern\\_timeline.htm](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/timelines/japan_modern_timeline.htm)

[6] Imperialism, according to Butlin is 'the projection of power across large spaces, to include other states whatever the means: colonies, mercenaries, gunboats, missiles, client elites, proxy states, multilateral institutions, multinational alliances.' See: Robin Butlin. *Geographies of Empire.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 6.

[7] 'In 1937 skirmishing between Japanese and Chinese troops on the frontier led to what became known as the Marco Polo Bridge Incident. This fighting sparked a full-blown conflict, the Second Sino-Japanese War.' See: 'Sino – Japanese War.' <http://www.history.co.uk/study-topics/history-of-ww2/sino-japanese-war>

[8] *Geographies of Empire*, 39.

[9] *Geographies of Empire*, 49.

[10] *Geographies of Empire*, 54.

[11] *Geographies of Empire*, 54.

[12] Chalmers Johnson. *The Sorrows of Empire.* New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004, 42.

[13] Mark Peceny. *Democracy at the Point of Bayonets.* Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1999, 16.

[14] For a full list of conflicts see: *Democracy at the Point of Bayonets*, 16.

[15] According to *Dictionary.com* 'Pax' comprises 'a period of general peace, especially one in which there is one dominant nation.' See: *Dictionary.com*. <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/pax?s=t>

[16] Charles Tilly. 'Reflections on the History of European State-making.' *The Formation of Nation States in Western Europe.* Edited by Charles Tilly. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975, 33.

[17] Martin Jaques. *When China Rules the World. The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order.* London: Penguin Books, 2009, 306 – 307.

[18] Paul Monk. 'China, America and the danger to world order.' *Quadrant.* May, 2012.

[19] John Hemmings. 'The Potential For China – US Discord in the South China Sea.' *RUSI Journal.* April/May, 2011, Vol 156, 90.

[20] For a succinct assessment of China's force projection see: Larry Wortzel. 'Enter the Dragon.' *The Journal of International Security Affairs*, Fall/Winter, 2013, 19 – 21.

[21] Lindsay Murdiooch. 'It's time to say goodbye to US.' *The Age.* FairfaxMedia: Melbourne, 21 Oct, 2016, 13.

[22] Zhou Enlai debated Chinese foreign policy in the post-WWII era. Enlai's belief in the direction China should be directed is complex and multi-faceted, however he did consider Britain's foreign policy to be pragmatic and focussed. See: Kuo-kang Shao. *Zhou Enlai and the Foundations of Chinese Foreign Policy.* Houndsmills: MacMillan Press, 1993, 30 – 40.

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[23] David Lynch and David Roe. 'US demands halt to China islands.' *The Age*. Melbourne: FairfaxMedia, 29 May, 2015, 2015, 8.

[24] Hugh White. *The China Choice. Why America should share power*. Collingwood: Black Ink, 2012, 68.

[25] Pre-emptive force is when a state defends 'against violence that is imminent but not actual; they can fire the first shots if they know themselves about to be attacked.' See: Michael Walzer. *Just and unjust Wars*. New York: Basic Books, 2006, 74.

[26] 'Limited war' as with 'total war' is a complex and multi-faced happening. Lewis sums up limited war in a very succinct manner: 'Modern limited war was an *artificial* creation caused by the development of nuclear weapons ... Modern limited war required a nation-state to place *artificial restraints* in the conduct of war to preclude it from escalating into more total war ... Artificial limited war required nations to place limitations on the objectives sought; weapons and manpower employed; the time, terrain, and geographic area of hostilities; and the emotions, passions, and energy, and intellect committed by a nation.' See: Adrian Lewis. *The American Culture of War. The History of U.S. Military Force from World War II to Operation Iraqi Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 2007, 203. Emphasis in original.

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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.