

Is China the New Hegemon of East Asia?

Written by Jonathan Pugh

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JONATHAN PUGH, OCT 8 2017

China had been the dominant power in East Asia for centuries before the arrival of Western imperialism in the nineteenth century. Now, after nearly 30 years of spectacular economic growth, China is once again poised to re-take its place as the regional hegemon. This essay will argue that China, despite its aspirations for renewed dominance in East Asia, is not yet currently in a position to challenge the United States' military pre-eminence in the Western Pacific. Using the objective epistemology of neo-realism and the theoretical tools of offensive realism, this essay will also examine why China wants to be the dominant regional power. This desire for hegemony has led to its overly aggressive actions in the East and South China Seas, as well as a growth in Chinese nationalism, which has led to some regional countries rejuvenating their ties with Washington. This has made it likely that there will be an attempt to form a balancing coalition, to contain Beijing's bid for regional dominance. Nevertheless, it will be acknowledged that the seemingly unstoppable growth in the Chinese economy, in conjunction with its increased defence spending, could prove an irresistible force in the long-term. This could lead to a situation where a majority of regional actors give into economic necessity, as well as military reality, and accept Chinese primacy within East Asia.

One prominent definition of hegemony is the neo-Gramscian idea of hegemony being based on consent, meaning the acceptance of the ideas of the hegemon by leading social forces within a given State.^[i] However, for the purposes of this essay the term "hegemon" will be used as the offensive realist John Mearsheimer clearly defines it:

A hegemon is a country that is so powerful that it dominates all the other states. In other words, no other state has the military wherewithal to put up a serious fight against it. In essence, a hegemon is the only great power in the system.^[ii]

According to the theory of offensive realism, it is natural for a great power like China to seek regional hegemony, a position that the United States currently holds in the Western Hemisphere.^[iii] In an anarchical international system, with no overriding authority to turn to, survival is the primary aim as states can never be sure of the intentions of other actors.^[iv] Thus, in a self-help world, China is made more secure by the more economic and military power it gains. Getting to the position of being a regional hegemon with no peer competitors in its own backyard would give it the ability to alter the "balance of power" in other regions of the world.^[v]

But neorealism, alternately called "defensive realism", differs from offensive realism in this respect. Neorealist Kenneth Waltz argues that, "Excessive strength may prompt other states to increase their arms and pool their efforts."^[vi] According to this view, states may form a "balancing coalition" in order to prevent the rise of a dominant power.^[vii] This would make it rational for China not to antagonize its neighbours by building up such a predominance of power that they, together with the United States, form an alliance against it. However, offensive realists argue that regional hegemony is the only sure way of maintaining survival. Therefore, state actors should be on a constant look out for opportune moments to maximise their power.^[viii] Arguably, it is the loss of regional hegemony by China in the mid-nineteenth century and the subsequent "century of humiliation", which perfectly illustrates this point.

For over two thousand years China and the Sinic civilization were the dominant political and cultural force within East Asia. Their hegemony over the region was demonstrated by the institutionalised "tribute system", whereupon foreign nations acknowledged their inferior status compared to the superior Chinese.^[ix] One of the ways they did this was by sending embassy missions to the Chinese Emperor. These missions carried with them expensive gifts and included

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elaborate procedures of subservience to the Emperor, which had to be conducted by foreign ambassadors in order for trade relations to commence.[x] David Kang argues, that as long as this system was in place it prevented interstate wars from breaking out and even restrained Chinese behaviour towards its weaker neighbours.[xi] But this idea of a peaceful regional system under Chinese hegemony is somewhat negated by the estimate that Chinese states fought 3,756 wars from 770 BC to 1912 AD, averaging about 1.4 wars per year.[xii] The tribute system was still an international order that was anarchical in nature, but with a hierarchical arrangement that had China as the predominant power.[xiii] Yuan-Kang Wang argues that:

China, by virtue of its overwhelming power and resources, developed a set of rules and institutions to govern interactions between itself and other political actors. China conducted foreign relations on its own terms.[xiv]

This, arguably, could explain why East Asia was “peaceful” under Chinese dominance; it was not so much consensual as submissive in the face of a powerful hegemon.

In neorealist terms it was China’s overwhelming predominance of power that ensured the peace, as no combination of regional actors could balance against it. Nonetheless, in areas where they were at military disadvantage, as for example against the nomadic tribes to their north, who had an excellent tactical knowledge of cavalry warfare, conflict was not avoided because the nomads refused to accept Chinese superiority.[xv] The psychological problem the tribute system may have caused was that China perceived itself so dominant, that it got complacent about its own regional primacy. Thus, when Western imperialism arrived in East Asia in the nineteenth century, it was too inward looking to be able to meet the challenge of the West’s technological superiority.[xvi] How much it had fallen behind was demonstrated by China’s humiliation and defeat by Britain in the First Opium War (1840-1842).[xvii] This was followed, in the subsequent decades, by the “opening up” of China by the Europeans and Americans in a series of so-called “unequal treaties”. [xviii] However, perhaps the most important lesson the Chinese learnt about the need to accumulate as much power as possible, was the humiliating occupation inflicted upon them by the Japanese Empire after the “Marco Polo Bridge incident” in 1937.[xix]

The strong feelings that the Japanese occupation still brings to the fore in China, was demonstrated by the anti-Japanese rioting in 2005. This took place after Tokyo introduced a school textbook that whitewashed Japanese war crimes committed in China.[xx] Nationalism is on the rise in China in parallel to its re-emergence as a regional and world power.[xxi] It is now the tool used to legitimise the rule of the Chinese Communist Party, [xxii] although, until the 2000s China still appeared to be abiding by Deng Xiaoping strategy for facilitating China’s rise: “Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership.” [xxiii]

But China is now a much stronger power than three decades ago and by 2010, thanks to Deng’s 1978 economic reforms, China was the world’s second largest economy.[xxiv] The achievement in economic growth has been tremendous, in 1979 China’s GDP was only ten per cent of Japan’s.[xxv] Today its GDP is two and half times larger.[xxvi]

Some Chinese intellectuals, like Tingyang Zhao, have called for a new Chinese inspired hierarchical international order called “All-under-Heaven”, or Tianxia.[xxvii] Zhao claims, that it may be better able to solve the world’s conflicts than the United Nations currently can and could help to create a peaceful world utopia.[xxviii] More likely though, as William A. Callahan convincingly argues, Tianxia is nothing less than “a new hegemony that reproduces China’s hierarchical empire for the twenty-first century”. [xxix] Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly a desire within China to change the Western dominated international order.[xxx] The perceived weakening of the United States after the 2008 financial crisis made China more confident about asserting its own perceived interests in East Asia.[xxxi] In the early 2000s though, Beijing was much more conciliatory to its neighbours; moreover, when it joined ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2003, it seemed to be accepting a world of multilateral institutions under American dominance.[xxxii] But as China has got more powerful, it developed an increasingly aggressive stance towards its neighbours, which is in line with offensive realism theory. As it gains more power, as well as global interests, it is likely to want to dominate its own region in order to ensure its own security, beginning by attempting to settle territorial disputes on terms of its own choosing.[xxxiii]

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The three main disputes China has are with Japan in the East China Sea, and with the Philippines and Vietnam in the South China Sea. Sino-Japanese relations, as previously mentioned, have been the most bitter and contentious for various historical reasons. As early as 2004, China was officially listed as a security threat by the Japanese government.[xxxiv] China adamantly opposes Tokyo's claim to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands claiming that they were only given to Japan after the 1894-95 Sino-Japanese war and should have been handed back to China after the Second World War.[xxxv] Claims of oil reserves in the area vary from 60-100 million barrels by the U.S. Energy Information Agency, to over 100 billion barrels by the Chinese government.[xxxvi] Nationalism has also been an equally important factor in the dispute, with each side not willing to show any weakness.[xxxvii] However, China's unwillingness to push its claim outside the constraints of international law, shows a respect for Japan's military strength and a wariness of Tokyo's close alliance with the United States.[xxxviii] It is an example of how China is not yet powerful enough to be the hegemonic power in East Asia. In the South China Sea, though, against the much weaker Philippines and the non-aligned Vietnam, China has been willing to push the narrative of its own self-declared historical primacy in the region.

The 2012 Scarborough Shoal stand-off is a case-in-point. On April 10th that year, the Filipino Navy's flagship, the *BRP Gregorio Del Pilar*, attempted to apprehend three Chinese fishing vessels at the Scarborough Shoal. Soon after though, two Chinese surveillance ships appeared at the scene and prevented the arrest of the fishermen. The Philippines tried to defuse the situation by replacing their ship with a smaller coast guard vessel, but instead of responding in kind the Chinese deployed a heavily armed patrol boat.[xxxix] The economic leverage China now had in the region was shown by the response of many Filipino legislators and businessmen; they warned the government not to provoke the Chinese in case it damaged trade relations between the two countries. The Chinese reaction was to place Filipino fruit under quarantine, potentially risking the jobs of 200,000 workers within the banana industry, and to limit flights to the Philippines on alleged "safety grounds".[xl] Some Chinese newspapers even called for the government to engage the Philippines in a small-scale war, in order to resolve the matter once and for all.[xli]

Over two years later, in May 2014, China deployed a large oil exploration platform inside Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), accompanied by warships and coastguard vessels. Any Vietnamese ships that attempted to enter the vicinity were rammed, or attacked with high-pressure water cannons.[xlii] Although the Chinese eventually withdrew the oilrig, Hanoi is now trying to balance against it with other regional powers and is purchasing from Russia six diesel attack submarines, as well as a large quantity of anti-ship missiles.[xliii] The Philippines on the other hand, has decided to renew its old alliance with the United States.[xliv] The U.S. is the key country in any attempt to form a balancing coalition to contain Chinese power. Almost a watershed moment in the last 40 years of U.S-Sino relations was the Taiwan Straits crisis in 1996. Beijing attempted to intimidate the Taiwanese electorate away from voting for a pro-independence political party by conducting a series of military exercises across the Straits. In response, Washington deployed two aircraft carriers to the area, which led to the Chinese backing down.[xlv]

Since the mid-1990s, China has undertaken a well-funded program of military modernization. It is an attempt to counter potential American force projection inside the disputed waters of the first island chain.[xlvi] Denying U.S. naval forces freedom of movement in the East and South China Seas is vital, as Yves-Heng Lim notes: "China's ability to keep the US Navy away from East Asian waters constitutes a necessary and almost sufficient condition for a Chinese bid for regional hegemony."[xlvii]

Many nationalist academics now acknowledge that China committed a historic mistake by ignoring the oceans, and that the lack of preparation for naval warfare ultimately led to the humiliations of the nineteenth century.[xlviii] This strength of feeling was shown at a conference at Peking University in 2007, where a majority of the military officers, government analysts, and scholars in attendance supported the construction of a large navy with aircraft carriers.[xlix] However, it is not an easy task to build and man a blue water fleet; it could take the Peoples Liberation Army Navy several decades to achieve parity with the United States Navy.

The Chinese military is building up the capability to deter American operations within East Asia. Their deterrence strategy could make use of a military tactic called "area-denial"; it includes the extensive use of anti-air and anti-ship missiles. It could cause a high attrition rate for U.S. aircraft in any conflict inside the first island chain, which would push the USN away from the Chinese mainland, hampering operational flexibility.[l] For the time being, though, any

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bid for regional hegemony is going to be curtailed by a number of Chinese disadvantages. China, in terms of military technology, is still many years behind the Americans and still relies on Russia for most of its high end military equipment, including engines for its fighter aircraft.[li] The nuclear submarines that it is now constructing are roughly in line with early Cold War technology and not comparable to anything in the USN's current inventory.[lii] On the other hand, the U.S. does have its own disadvantages. Although economic warfare would probably work better against present-day globally integrated China than it did in the Cold War against the autarkic Soviet Union, it might, as Robert J Art notes:

hurt the United States badly in ways that economic warfare against the Soviet Union never could. In short, the United States and China are in a mutually assured relationship economically: each can retaliate against economic warfare waged by the other.[liii]

Any high-handed actions by Washington could also push some of its East Asian allies into Beijing's arms.

The strength of China's economic influence should not be underestimated. There are now 80 countries in the world that have China as their biggest trading partner. Trade with China is vital for the prosperity of the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Given the size of the still growing Chinese middle class, it is obvious that ASEAN needs the Chinese market more than China needs theirs.[liv] By 2018 China will have the world's largest economy by GDP.[lv] It is only natural that Beijing will want to dominate its own immediate neighbourhood, because in a world without a central authority only the states that maximise their power can, as offensive realism holds, guarantee their own survival.[lvi] China may need regional hegemony to guarantee its access to the world fossil fuel reserves. By the 2030's it is projected that it will need to import 80 per cent its oil supplies, with most of this coming from the Persian Gulf and through the Straits of Malacca.[lvii] This will, arguably, drive them to be even more assertive in claiming primacy in the South China Sea. Moreover, if China's current economic growth continues for the next couple of decades and its military spending follows on a parallel trajectory, it may be hard for regional actors to resist its power. Therefore, if the United States and its regional allies fail to create an effective balancing coalition, it could gain dominance by default. China could feasibly achieve regional hegemony, if only because of its sheer economic size and accompanied military prowess may prove to be unassailable.

China had been the hegemonic power in East Asia for centuries before the Europeans and Americans opened the region up for commerce in the nineteenth century. Now, after the success of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, China is once again a player in the region and on the world stage. According to offensive realism theory, it is likely that Beijing will make a bid for regional hegemony. Its behaviour in the East and South China Seas, as well as its military build-up and the rise of nationalism in China itself, make it appear that the process has already started. However, China does not yet have the military capabilities to challenge the United States in a direct confrontation. If Washington can create an effective balancing coalition, Chinese power will be contained. It is not yet a regional hegemon, but if its power continues to grow both economically and militarily, it may prove too much of an irresistible force to contain. Regional actors may have no choice but to accommodate Beijing for the sake of their own economic survival and for want of capability to counter it militarily.

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