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IS CHINA PURSUING A ‘REGIONAL’ HEGEMONY? STRATEGIC SOURCES OF CHINA’S ASSERTIVE-CUM-BENEVOLENT BEHAVIOUR

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Abstract

Purpose of the study: Besides analyzing multilateral fora and their importance for China’s ‘Asia Dream,’ this study elaborates on the strategic sources of China’s behavior in the Asia-Pacific and beyond and the strategic initiatives that it has taken to preserve and expand its influence.

Methodology: This is a qualitative explanatory case study. The research is conducted using an embedded case study in which phenomena under investigation are analyzed at the individual, state, and system levels. Primary data in the form of speeches (mostly of President Xi Jinping) and white papers issued by the Chinese government are used.

Main Findings: China’s contemporary behavior has not only made its foreign policy vital for the pursuance of its interests but has also been gauged by the regional states with a mix of skepticism and opportunism. On the one hand, China’s assertiveness is perceived as a threat by the regional and some extra-regional states, forcing them to pursue balancing and/or hedging strategies. On the other, they have capitalized upon Chinese-led multilateral initiatives to strengthen themselves by bringing their economies in alignment with that of China. The study deliberates the historical traditions of Tianxia and Neo-Confucianism and their impact on contemporary Chinese strategic thinking. The study finds that China’s strategic behavior under President Xi Jinping has metamorphosed into an admix of assertiveness and benevolence carefully crafted to pursue its core interests – an aspiring benevolent ‘regional’ hegemon.

Applications of this study: The study is useful for the students, scholars, and policy practitioners of International Relations and Area Studies, specifically those involved with China and the Asia Pacific.

Novelty/Originality of this study: China has been accused of pursuing hegemonistic designs in the region and beyond. This study dissects this discourse while seeing whether those who are generating the discourse are benefitting from China’s overtures or not.

Keywords: *China’s Asia Dream, Chinese Exceptionalism, China’s Assertiveness and Benevolence, Tianxia, Neo-Confucianism, China’s Rise, Factory Asia, Asia Pacific.*

INTRODUCTION

Once operating at the periphery of international politics, China has now become a major player having power and ‘will’ to influence the international system and shape the regional order. While China had maintained a low profile in its external affairs in the previous regimes, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, it entered a new era of foreign policy activism. It has tried to assume the leadership role of the adjoining regions through discursive and practical initiatives. President Xi’s strategic thinking revolves around the China Dream; a revitalization strategy for China to acquire a profound status in the region and beyond. China’s goals and power in the international system are directly linked to its strategic position and role in the Asia-Pacific. It is partly because its core interests as well as vulnerabilities lie in the region. Strategic wisdom provides that any rising power that wishes to acquire world power status needs to establish its influence in the immediate region. China has embarked upon a grand strategy in the region to establish its significance and achieve its interests.

China’s regional and international ambitious designs coincided with the rise of President Trump in the United States. Trump was the best thing that has ever happened to China in recent decades (Mirza, 2017). Trump’s America First policy resulted in its retreat from the international fora – a lifetime opportunity that China had been waiting for. China exploited the situation and expanded its influence in the Asia Pacific and beyond. China, thus, has already made inroads in the regional and international community of the nations. Compared to the American and Western investments which are having attached strings, China usually does not demand political or economic restructuring of the recipient state. This remains a big tool for achieving success for China.

Chinese position in the region has not only made its foreign policy behavior and conduct vital for its direction but also has consequences for the regional states. This paper analyses the structural sources of Chinese behavior, specifically in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. The study also deliberates China’s objectives and multilateral initiatives to pursue the ever-expanding interests under the leadership of President Xi Jinping. It also dissects the historical traditions that guide the strategic behavior of contemporary China.

HYPOTHESIS

The study hypothesizes that China’s strategic behavior under President Xi Jinping has metamorphosed into an admix of

assertiveness and benevolence carefully crafted to pursue its core interests – an aspiring benevolent ‘regional’ hegemon. It also is proposed that the aspirations are not regional in nature. China is trying to challenge – through the sources and means discussed in this paper – the contours of the systemic order. It is trying at the moment to demand a ‘fair say’ in the management of the international system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

China’s Interests and Objectives

China has become an active player in the international system that has established significant influence in the Asia-Pacific. This new Chinese position is considered vital for the peace and development of the region and beyond. China’s leadership decided to capitalize on the structural changes transpiring at the regional level such as significant growth in the power potential of China, the relative decline of other great powers especially the United States, and regional powers’ cautious willingness to collaborate with China over several. China’s declared objectives remain the rejuvenation of the nation, countering the influence of the other great powers, pursuing its core interests, and obtaining global status ([Lijun, 2006](#)).

While previous regimes adopted cautious regional strategies to achieve these objectives, President Xi’s administration has pursued a proactive foreign policy. It is believed that this new activism on the diplomatic front and emphatical pursuance of its core interests has made the foreign policy behavior more assertive specifically towards the regions surrounding China. China is aggressively pursuing its geo-economic and geo-strategic interests and has portrayed a more profound resolve to defend its core interests.

On the other hand, the United States and its allies in the Asia Pacific – Japan, India, and Australia – have established QUAD to counter the increasing influence of China ([Sarkar, 2020](#)). In these circumstances, China has to preserve its vital position and address the challenges posed by the regional strategic environment. It has to deal with the competing interests and influence of various regional and international stakeholders. Although chances of escalation of the existing conflicts at the bilateral level between China and other regional states are minimal, ([Johnson et al., 2014](#)), yet the divergences of interests and concerns of the regional and extra-regional players have the potential to bring the confrontation upfront ([Yang & Liu, 2012](#)). Structural sources of the competition between major powers, especially maritime competition in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, can pose grave challenges to the Chinese foreign policy goals ([Dutta, 1998](#)) and its geopolitical and geo-strategic interests.

In the Asia-Pacific and beyond, China’s pragmatic behavior can be segregated into two variants: collaborative ventures in the shape of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Conference on Interaction & Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on the one hand ([Yeo, 2019](#)), and maritime assertiveness on the other. Its behavior can be regarded as pragmatic-realist. On the one hand, its regional policy is considered benevolent, and on the other hand, assertiveness is witnessed in the areas where Chinese national core interests are at stake. While Chinese leaders have perceived the strategic opportunity to expand their interests and influence in the region, they have also realized that their behavior is restrained by regional and international actors and factors. In this scenario, Chinese assertive behavior might cause other powers to counter its expanding power and influence and challenge its goals established under the slogan of ‘rejuvenation of the nation’ ([Kallio, 2015](#)). In response, though China has adopted a policy of engaging various states in a network of multilateral fora yet the intra-regional and extra-regional polarization of the states has shown signs of deep friction ([Glaser & Viers, 2016](#)).

Benevolent Hegemony

The hegemon of the system may be characterized as a state that has the largest concentration of material capacities ([Brooks, 2012](#)). These materials’ capabilities may be categorized into economic and military domains. Great powers trying to establish and promote their hegemony through military means are considered predatory hegemonies while the ones pursuing hegemony through soft means can be considered benevolent hegemonies. Benevolent hegemonies pursue enticement strategies to attract other states to its offered systems. The United States historically has behaved both as a predatory as well as benevolent hegemony. Neoconservatives – specifically during the Bush administration – have been professing that the United States remains a ‘benevolent hegemon’ in the international system ([Dorrien, 2004](#)). It has effectively utilized its ideas – most important being democracy promotion and universal moral principles – to shape the international system in a manner that it remains the unchallenged leader of the ‘free’ world ([Mirza, 2013, 2017, 2018](#)). The interesting part of this ideational structure remains that it was the French revolution and its ideals of ‘liberty, equality, fraternity’ ([Censer, 2001](#)) which provided the bedrock of this world order. French revolutionary war expanded these ideals through most of Europe, and ultimately the world. The United States after acquiring the most predominant position – economically – in the international system during the 1880s started expanding in the international system. Woodrow Wilson’s ‘Fourteen Points’ ([Wilson, 1918](#)) and FD Roosevelt’s ‘Four Freedoms’ ([Roosevelt, 1941](#)) further strengthened the foundations of the world order – now the US-dominated one in the post-Second World War and specifically in the post-Cold War era. Based on these foundations, the United States claimed to be a benevolent hegemon in the international system. But the scholars like Ikenberry claimed that the United States – specifically during the Bush administration – pursued an ‘imperial grand strategy’ based upon unilateralism, exclusionism, and militarism ([Ikenberry,](#)

2002; Mirza, 2017, 2018). Trump's presidency strengthened this version of the story by pursuing policies based upon isolationism and protectionism – something that remained antithetical to the foundations of the American-dominated world order. China is following a similar path by offering ideational structures based upon Neo-Confucianism and Tianxia system – coupled with the economic tools – as alternatives to the US-dominated world order. It is done at the system level but first is trying to establish the benevolent hegemony at the regional level – a combination of assertive and benevolent behavior at the same time.

METHODOLOGY

The research is conducted using a qualitative embedded case study. The phenomena under discussion involve the role of Chinese leadership, especially President Xi Jinping, whose perceptions of the self and the world influence China's contemporary behavior. China's assertive behavior has created skepticism among the regional and extra-regional states which are either trying to the bandwagon, hedge or balance its ever-expanding influence. Thus, an embedded case study is best suited for this research which deals with the phenomena lying at the individual, state, and systemic levels. For brevity Xi Jinping's speeches are consulted which provides an understanding of Chinese strategic thinking. As the phenomena involve Chinese behavior, so most of the secondary sources consulted are by Chinese authors. Besides where necessary Western and other authors are also consulted for the conduct of research.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

FOREIGN POLICY PROACTIVISM UNDER PRESIDENT XI JINPING

Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China entered a new era of foreign policy activism. It has been trying to take the role of leadership of the region and beyond, by embarking on various geo-economic and strategic initiatives. After coming to power President Xi has pronounced a new role for China in the world, especially in the Asia-Pacific and the global South. Chinese leadership believes that it has the capacity and capability to contribute to world peace, development, and stability. In his speech at the National Security Seminar, he vowed for the first time in the last three decades, that “China should take the lead in shaping the new world order and safeguarding international security” (Huang, 2017). This approach by President Xi is regarded as a new turn in Chinese behavior since the Deng era which formally ended its strategy of remaining in the periphery and taking limited initiatives in the management of the regional and international systems. Official media and Chinese analysts portrayed President Xi's proclamation as the new way forward for a stagnated world order. Xinhua by paraphrasing Xi's speech notes “the overall trend of world multi-polarization, economic globalization and democratization of international relations remain unchanged. We should guide the international community to jointly build a more just and reasonable new world order” (Jinping, 2017).

The objective of rejuvenation of the nation can only be achieved by the democratization of international relations through which China can have a rightful place in the structure of the international system. The discursive analysis of the speeches of Chinese leadership provides a clear indication that China considers itself to be ready to assist and even lead the world. It was in direct contrast to the ‘America First Policy’ (Macdonald, 2018) of President Trump. Chinese think that the United States' image and role have permanently been tarnished under President Trump. The world may never forget the coercive behavior that the United States adopted during the Trump administration vis-à-vis allies and foes alike. China in such a situation adopted a proactive in regional and international affairs. President Xi meaningfully reiterated that “the Western-dominated world order is near its end as Western countries are showing less willingness and ability to interfere in global affairs” (Jinping, 2017). China, thus, started several initiatives in the political, economic, and security realms of the Asia-Pacific region specifically.

China Dream is the new robust construct that portrays its ambitious foreign policy agenda under President Xi Jinping. It provides a new vision and direction for China's regional and global role (Jinping, 2015b). For the realization of the China Dream President Xi notes, “we have put forward two centenary goals ... to complete the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects ... and to build China into a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious, and achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation by the middle of the century” (Jinping, 2015b). These goals are meant to make China stable and prosperous at the domestic level and respected and influential at the regional and international levels. In his speech at the Central Conference on Foreign Affairs in November 2014, President Xi notes, “we must stand firmly for peace, development, cooperation and win-win outcomes, give overall consideration to domestic development and international situations, and adopt a holistic approach to development and security ... We must devote ourselves to safeguarding China's sovereignty, security and development interests, foster an international environment that is friendly to our peaceful development, and take advantage of this important period of strategic opportunity for China” (Jinping, 2015a).

China has made the Asia Dream a priority and a step forward towards the China Dream and has adopted policies and strategies combining soft and hard variants of power to achieve the goals. New discourses, new institutions, and ambitious projects have been launched to materialize the dream. Through these initiatives, China intends to tie the regional states into an integrated, comprehensive, and collective web of economic, political, and security apparatus. Its regional initiatives are designed to create a Sino-centric regional order where there is no threat to its core interests.

CHINA'S RISE: A CHALLENGE TO THE EXISTING STATUS QUO

China has become the second largest economy, the largest trading power, and the largest production base in the world. It has emerged as the Factory Asia (Canals, 2014). Because of its ever-expanding economic rise and production base, it has established close coordination with the regional and extra-regional states. In parallel, it has embarked upon the strategy of military modernization. It has reformed its military structure and upgraded maritime security forces. China claims that its efforts intend to address domestic stability and defense against external aggression. Other major powers, on the other hand, viewed its rise with skepticism. Western commentators opine that China will challenge the geopolitical status quo of the world (Mearsheimer, 2014). Ikenberry considers that China's new predominant position and ambitious agenda of reformation of the international system will create new challenges for the existing norms and roles of the major powers in its (Ikenberry, 2008). China has started playing a vital role in global governance and created new multilateral platforms and mechanisms that have posed a challenge to the post-Cold war structure of the world order. It has taken the role of the promoter of multilateralism and globalization, the concepts that are in line with contemporary China's geo-economic and geo-strategic interests. In the Asia-Pacific specifically, China has endeavored to take a leading role in the socio-economic development and security areas to offset or balance the influence of other major powers. Roy has gone to the length of claiming that a new regional hegemon is in the making (Roy, 2003).

While China's rise is considered a threat to the existing status quo, its development discourse, on the other hand, portrays a benign picture of China. It assures the region and the world that its power and active role are peaceful and not targeted against any other state or group of states. Its policy discourse and conduct are based on the notion and practice of peaceful development, development together, and inclusive mechanisms of governance (Ferchen, 2016). It has acted upon a policy of cooperation and collaboration with other regional states to ensure their developmental gains, in reciprocity demanding them to respect Chinese core interests – its sovereign rights over the territorial and maritime claims in the South and the East China Sea, and adherence to its One China Policy on Taiwan issue. This is the base of its great rejuvenation of the nation (Sørensen, 2015). Though there are no such well-defined grand designs, pragmatically it has pursued the goal of obtaining a vital leadership role and influence in the region (F. Zhang, 2013).

PHILOSOPHICAL SOURCES OF CHINESE EXCEPTIONALISM

Its leadership thinks that the time has arrived for the revitalization and fulfillment of China's dream. China's newfound position in the international system has created an exceptional moment. Various Chinese authors believe that this great position has made Chinese power and position irreversible and an opportunity to make its mark on regional and international politics. This position has been hailed as natural to China which has come out of the issues that caused the Chinese downfall during the century of humiliation (Kent, 2013). China's expanding influence along-with the emerging regional opportunities like the relative decline of the US influence is helping China realize its ultimate goal of obtaining global status (Lijun, 2006). This Exceptional moment has also put the responsibility on China to assist the region and beyond in the development process, and minimize the restraints put by the existing international economic and political system, as are viewed by it and other states. The Chinese leadership has declared its mission to change this exploitative and conflict-ridden system into a peaceful, just, and orderly one for a harmonious society of the nations (Lai, 2011). Zhang opined similarly that China has been trying to uphold and promote new value systems and acts, shared with the international community for a more peaceful and prosperous community of nations (Lai, 2011). New norms of harmony, peace, shared prosperity, and benevolent leadership is derived from Chinese historical knowledge, practices, and experiences. These are based upon three main concepts: Neo-Confucianism, and Tianxia. Tianxia is about: "politics based upon the idea of the universally accepted system and political institutions, which benefit all nations, and not one ... The world ought to be the starting point for political thinking, and not the state as provided by Western thought ... It is not the individual that is considered as the foundation of society, but it is the family ... The cardinal principle of Tianxia is the inclusion of all, and exclusion of no one (L. Zhang, 2013) ... it is important to achieve a world for all people, where there is no foreign or alien. Thus, Tianxia imagines a system without hegemony" (Tingyang, 2018). Neo-Confucianism, on the other hand, deals with the "Chinese world order centered on domination by China, a system somewhat similar to benign hegemony, without any major thought of sovereign or territorially bounded nation-states. It offered a hierarchical system based on superiority, which was embedded in traditions of morals and ethics. The concept of order in China was constructed around the narrative of benevolence: for the protection and benefits of its followers, and promotion of peace (Tingyang, 2018, 2019; F. Zhang, 2010) ... [Confucian tradition is based upon] the ethical behavior on behalf of both – state and society. ... Family formed the most significant unit of society, thus only an ethical society can produce an ethical ruler ... The revival of Confucian thought has started a debate in China about the possible Chinese world view which oscillates between Radical Confucianism, which wants to take Chinese society to its ancient roots, and Neo-Confucianism, according to which Chinese Culture has all elements of modernity. Thus, it needs noting to import from outside" (Zhao, 2015).

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES: COLLABORATIVE VENTURES AND MULTILATERAL ENGAGEMENT

Following the dictates of the historical philosophical traditions of Tianxia and Confucianism, China has adopted multilateral cooperative ventures as means to win the confidence of the regional states. At the same time, it also utilized

coercive tactics to secure its core interests. China's collaborative practices with its neighbors – such as free-trade agreements, economic and financial cooperation, and enhanced diplomatic and cultural relations – helped it navigate peacefully through the region. In parallel, it has also endeavored for strategic cooperation and emphasized on the need to resolve security issues. At the same time, China continued building its bases in the disputed waters. China's strategic behavior, during President Xi's era, is based on strength. It has adopted a new outlook that is striving for achievement and has relinquished laying low in its dealings with the region. Foreign policy initiatives under the Xi Jinping regime have marked a new era of diplomatic activism and a priority to the region in enhancing Chinese influence and attaining a predominant position in the world.

Belt and Road Initiative

The landmark Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) symbolizes new activism and external outreach. BRI as a discursive strategy is considered a part of the new Chinese multilateral approach, based on the connotations of enhanced connectivity to achieve a win-win situation and common development, not only for Asia but also for other parts of the world such as Europe and Africa. It is also claimed to be a game-changer for China as well as the region, besides its implications for the economic and trade order and developmental trends. It is also projected by China as a plan for building a community of common destiny. Five basic components “policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure and facilities, financial integration, and closer people-to-people ties” are considered the soul of the BRI (Li, 2020).

BRI is comprised of two variants of infrastructure and trade connectivity projects: Silk Road Belt and Maritime Silk Road. These are designed to establish integrated and collaborative infrastructure and developmental cooperation through land and maritime routes linking Asian, African, and European partners (Huaxia, 2019). BRI project comprised six segments: Eurasian corridor, China-Mongolia-Russia corridor, China-Myanmar-Bangladesh Corridor, China-Pakistan corridor, China Central Asia-West Asia corridor, and China-Indochina Peninsula Corridor (Farwa & Siddiq, 2017). The project and its related initiatives cover 30% GDP of the world and 65% of the world population field.

The rationale behind BRI is economic and strategic in nature. In the economic sphere, China feels it necessary to pursue economic growth and find overseas markets for its domestic manufacturing demands. This initiative is aimed at trading and utilizing the items of overproduction through infrastructure projects with the partners. It is expected that it will manage the challenge of over-production while winning partners involved in the BRI project. Besides the need for energy to meet the ever-expanding industrial consumption has convinced Chinese leadership to diversify its energy sources and trade routes. China has invested heavily in pipelines and routes for the safer and uninterrupted supply of energy products from various regions of the world. BRI has played a vital role in connecting the regional states with China. This has given China significant leverage over regional politics and economics. To fund the projects under the BRI, China has established Silk Road Fund, AIIB, and BRICS bank. Another view remains that it is a Chinese strategy to enhance the external outreach of its public and private enterprises to compete and conquer markets through the state's support (Li, 2020). In the backdrop of economic slowdown, new economic initiatives were needed to boost China's national economy, and BRI as a multilateral initiative could be a suitable instrument in the age of ever-expanding regionalism and global economic interdependence to advance Chinese overseas economic interests.

Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank

To materialize the Chinese grand project of BRI, China established the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB). This financial institution is the very first of its kind in Asia without the share or role of the United States. It is hailed as a China-led Asian institution based on the Chinese discourse on South-South development. Where it has become a choice for the Asian partner states to benefit from the initiatives and cater to their financial needs, it has also given China a multilateral leadership role. The institution was not established for an altruistic reason but rather a result of a strategic choice for China to address its shortcomings. China has a limited say and shares in Western-dominated financial institutions such as World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Asian Development Bank (ADB) as compared to its rivals, the US, Japan, and India. It has also been wary of the US hegemonic role in these institutions (Li, 2020). Some analysts believe that through such institutions China has tried to weaken the US-led world order (Li, 2020).

China has this realization that its goals cannot be materialized without the enhanced pace of the development of the region. Thus, it encourages the regional and extra-regional states of interest to pace up their development by benefitting from its financial support and making BRI a success. Some partner states' economies are weak and are unable to catch up with the pace of Chinese initiatives hence need extra financial resources that can be provided through AIIB. It has also filled the gap created by the incapacity or unwillingness of the world financial institutions to fund the developmental needs of the developing states. An ADB report provides that Asia requires \$1.7 trillion investment annually in infrastructure and development projects till 2030 to maintain its growth momentum and to meet the challenges of eradicating poverty (Ikenberry & Lim, 2017). In this context, China's financial institutions are not only fulfilling domestic Chinese economic needs but also creating an atmosphere conducive enough for the shared development of the region and beyond.

Flexing the Muscles: New Security Concept and Maritime Assertiveness

China under President Xi Jinping perceives the regional environment in Asia-Pacific as threatening because of the military presence of extra-regional forces such as the United States. The US is regarded as the adversary that seemingly has a policy of containing China through military build-up in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. It also maintains strategic alliances with regional states like Japan, the Philippines, and India, and maintains close ties with Taiwan. The US's heavy maritime presence and military alliances with China's neighbors are perceived as a threat to China's core interests and an obstacle in the way of its regional ambitions. Its close strategic collaboration with Taiwan specifically – whom China considers as its part – is a direct threat to China's core interests. In this regard, it has, were adopted the policy of re-assurances, and flexed military muscle to materialize the Asian dream.

President Xi Jinping has proposed a 'New Security Concept' aimed at the creation of Asian security architecture led by indigenous Asians without external interference. It also emphasized on the need to lay the new security architecture on mutual trust and benefit, equality, and cooperation ([ADB, 2017](#)). Since the start of his second term, President Xi profoundly emphasized this idea. At the SCO forum in 2018, he reiterated that "we have forged a constructive partnership featuring non-alliance, non-confrontation, and not targeting any third party" ([Baviera, 2016](#)). This new security conception is now an integral part of China's regional policy that is outlined in its white papers published in 2016 and 2017 on the matter of security cooperation in Asia-Pacific. In those papers, China emphasized the need to restructure the security architecture and that Asian security must be handled by Asians only. It can only be attained through dialogue and cooperation between the regional states without external interference. In February 2019, Jiechi reiterated the Chinese full commitment and support to the new security dialogue among the Asia-Pacific states and the change in security vision and architecture according to the new geo-political realities of the region ([Jiechi, 2019](#); [Jinping, 2018](#)).

Reclaiming Land, Construction, and Militarization of Islands and Reefs

In a bid to fulfill its grand project of national revival, China has embarked upon reclaiming its land and maritime territories, which it believes, lost during the 'Century of Humiliation.' China's claim to the South China Sea is contested by various regional states. Though China adheres to the principle of resolving the issues through negotiations, it has started occupying maritime territories unilaterally. It has also started militarizing the islands under its control to establish a chain of defense, to deter any aggression from outside. A new strategy of maritime activism, military build-up, and construction of military bases on the newly constructed islands is regarded as a new dynamism under Xi Jinping. This activism is adopted to establish its regional domination and to protect its national core interests.

China actively started a well-designed project of reclaiming existing and constructing new artificial islands, reefs, and other land features in the South China Sea, especially in the Spratly and Paracel Islands in 2014 ([Jiechi, 2019](#)). It has established naval and technological assets and missile systems on these islands. Collectively, it has also been engaged in the enlargement of the dry land, building sea walls, airfields, radar towers, air bases, and ship docks on these islands ([Lee, 2015](#)). These constructions are part of China's new maritime strategy through which large ships and aircraft carriers can be docked in case of a need. It is also possible after the creation of these facilities that these islands can help China establish an air identification zone in the South China Sea ([Lee, 2015](#); [Turcsányi, 2018](#)).

China has also established strategically important installations at the center of the South China Sea on the Fiery Cross Reef. It is built for naval power projections. An airstrip and a ship harbor have been constructed to deter any threat from adversaries, and a place from where China can conduct naval patrolling and surveillance activities of the deep waters and protect its trade routes. Where these measures are taken to monitor and guard trade activities, these have also given China a strategic advantage over other actors in the South China Sea ([Lee, 2015](#); [Turcsányi, 2018](#)). These assertive measures have aroused concern and criticism from the neighbors and the US who alleged that these aggressive designs have challenged the stability of the region.

CONCLUSION

China's exceptional growth in power potential along with its new dynamism of leadership has made it more assertive and influential in the Asia-Pacific and beyond. Its recent maneuvering under President Xi Jinping has prompted strategic initiatives to make it capable of competing with any major power in the world, specifically at the regional level. It claims that its initiatives endeavor to create new regional and international order conducive to common and shared development. Moreover, in its regional approach, Chinese leadership intends to play a leading role in the socio-economic development of the greater neighborhood. In this regard, it has adopted a mixed strategy to realize its 'Asia Dream' of acquiring a prominent position in the region. Admixing the development goals with its security interests remains the biggest achievement of the Xi administration. Through this approach, China wants to achieve economic development, promote a soft image, and ensure the security of its core interests. Its new role in the region is the result of its historical experiences based upon a historical order that was led by ancient China during its glorious period – the Tianxia and Neo-Confucianism.

China's strategy revolves around its new principles of regional policy i.e., ensuring socio-economic development through multilateral initiatives, modernizing, and developing military capabilities to deter any threat, and maintaining

domestic legitimacy. Chinese-led discourses revolving around protecting and promoting its interests are the theoretical acumen behind its strategic initiatives, such as BRI, AIIB, and military build-up and assertiveness in the region. Multilateral collaboration with the regional states for socio-economic development – when they adhere to the Chinese core interests like ‘One China Policy,’ non-interference in domestic issues like Tibet, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang, and claims in the South and the East China Sea – is the new *modus operandi* of Chinese regional strategy.

China under Xi Jinping has made it clear that it is not going to accept the dictations of the US-dominated world order and is offering something that is based upon the ideational structures which are indigenous to China – Neo-Confucianism and Tianxia Systems. It is pursuing assertiveness in the regional and international system while at the same time offering incentives in the form of economic opportunities to the regional and extra-regional states. China's strategic behavior under President Xi Jinping, thus, has metamorphosed into an admix of assertiveness and benevolence carefully crafted to pursue its core interests – an aspiring benevolent ‘regional’ hegemon. China is trying to challenge – through the sources and means discussed in this paper – the contours of the systemic order.

LIMITATIONS AND STUDY FORWARD

The study assesses China's benevolent and assertive behavior in the region. This study can be applied to other regions even at the systemic level to see that whether China is pursuing the same behavior everywhere.

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AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

The three authors sat together and conducted this study. This study is the joint and collaborative effort of all three authors. Specific tasks cannot be assigned because everything was done together.

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