

ASCENDENCY OF CHINA AND CHANGING GLOBAL GEOPOLITICS: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Prior to the advent of modern capitalism, China was a leading trading nation and the world's technological power. The decline of pre-modern China was directly linked to the Western colonial conquest of the East and the imposition of new global trade patterns linked with the 'Modern World System'. The infiltration into the Chinese economy remained one of the key motives of British imperialism in the 18th century. The establishment of the Peoples' Republic of China in 1949 marked a definite rupture of her dependency relationship with the global world system. The dynamic economic growth of China with market-economy reforms after 1978 was made possible due to the economic and social reforms set in motion since 1949. The continuous progress witnessed by China from the 1980s has made her a global power at the beginning of the new Millennium. Parallel to the ascendancy of China as a global power, a steady shift in her global role and her strategic thinking was visible. In the post-Cold War global context, the United States, as the sole superpower, was compelled to take serious note of the rise of China as an emerging global power. President Obama's cautious approach could not deter Chinese political and economic advances at the expense of US interests. The escalation of trade war between China and U.S. under the Trump administration resulted in the imposing of tariffs on each other's trading goods and services. The key front in the geo-political rivalry between China and the United States is the disruptive technologies. The significance of digital geopolitics and technology war between China and the United States must be viewed in the context of the evolving Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). By the time of the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, the fronts of geo-political competition between the United States and China are more or less defined. Are these powers entangled in a Thucydides' Trap' in which a rising power challenges a ruling one? The peace and stability of the emerging post-COVID-19 world order would depend not only on the reactions of the established global power but also on that of the rest of the world to the rise of China and how China manages these key challenges and other responses.

Keywords: China's Ascendancy, Geopolitics, Global Rivalry

INTRODUCTION

The ascendancy of China to a great power status is perhaps the most striking feature of the changed distribution of economic and political power in global politics at the dawn of the 21st century. By placing the ascendancy of China in a broad historical

and political context, this paper analyses the new interaction of China as a global power in rapidly changing post-Cold War global politics. As a point of departure to the understanding of the fall and rise of China, the paper traces the role of China in the pre-modern global system. The collapse of centrality of China in the pre-modern world systems is a direct consequence of the establishment of the modern world system and accompanied colonialism. Hence, the paper traces the evolution of the modern world system and the relegation of China to its periphery. Finally, it traces the rupture of dependency relationship after the Chinese Revolution in 1949 and subsequent resurgence of China as an emerging global power and its implications for changing global geo-politics.

CHINA IN THE PRE-MODERN GLOBAL ORDER

In order to trace the political and historical significance of the ascendancy of China since 1949, it is necessary to place it against the backdrop of the colonial domination of China in the 19th and the early 20th centuries. In a round table discussion at the Yale University in 2018 on 'China 2049 - New Era or New Threat', Aleh Tsyvinski observed that China's rise as a global economic power can be viewed as "China returning to its historical position following the 'century of humiliation' – a period between 1839 and 1949 when the country was subjected to interventions and invasion by Western powers and Japan" (Cummings, 2018). Before becoming prey to Western colonial machinations, China was a commercial and technological powerhouse. The downward trajectory of historical development was gradually reversed after the establishment of the Peoples Republic of China in 1949.

The Middle Kingdom was a world power and a global center of civilization well before the era of modern Capitalism. Prior to the arrival of the modern world system, there were three cultural zones in Asia, each of which functioned as its own world – the Chinese character zone in East Asia, the Nagari script zone in South Asia and the Arab alphabet zone in West Asia. Each zone functioned on socio-cultural and political dynamics of its own and interacted with each other through a number of modes. This broad civilizational connectivity and dialogue between the three zones in Asia gave credentials to the construct of the 'Orient'. In the flourishing long distance trade between Asia and Europe before the rise of the West, Asia enjoyed a huge trade surplus. In their path-breaking studies K. N. Chaudhary and Janet Abu-Lughod traced (Chaudhary, 1985; Abu-Lughod, 1991) how India, China and West Asia accumulated huge trade surplus vis-à-vis Europe. Based mostly on its low cost cotton textile production and export, India had a massive balance of trade surplus with Europe and some with West Asia. Consequently, India accumulated massive amounts of silver and some gold from the West. However, West Asia had a balance of trade surplus with Europe. West Asia covered its balance

of trade deficits with South, Southeast and East Asia with the re-export of bullion derived from its balance of trade surplus with Europe. China had a balance of trade surplus with everybody based on its unrivalled manufacturing efficiency and export of silks and porcelain and other ceramics (Chaudhary, 1985). China was not only the leading trading nation but also a world technological power between 1100-1800. As John Hobson (2006) pointed out, its innovations in the production of paper, book printing, firearms and tools made it a manufacturing powerhouse during this period. Seven centuries before the Britain's textile revolution in the 18th century, China was the world's leader in technical innovation in manufacturing textile (Petras, 2012).

COLONIAL INFILTRATION AND THE DECLINE OF CHINA

The decline of pre-modern China was directly linked to the colonial conquest of the East by Western colonial powers and the imposition of new global trade patterns linked with the 'Modern World System' (MWS). In the process of establishing MWS, the age-old long-distance Eurasian trade was remodeled to serve the interests of rising 'nation states' in Western Europe and imposed unequal trade by employing military force and intimidation. At first, Western colonial powers acquired and monopolised the Indian Ocean seaborne trade and attempted to divert land-based intercontinental trade to oceanic routes. Subsequently, they infiltrated into Asian economies through the instruments of colonial domination.

The infiltration into the Chinese economy remained one of the key motives of British imperialism in the 18th century. There was great demand for Chinese tea, silk and porcelain in the British market, but there was no demand for British goods in the self-sufficient Chinese society. The British did not have the required silver to trade with China. In order to resolve the problem of payment, the East India Company, the vessel of British imperialism of the day, practiced a system of barter based on Indian opium. Consequently, the sheer increase in opium addicts in China became a serious social issue. When China attempted to address this menace by banning opium in the port city of Canton, Britain reacted with military force and declared war against China – resulting in the First Opium War in 1839. After military victory, the British forced China to enter the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 in which Hong Kong was ceded and trading rights in the port cities of Canton and Shanghai were snatched, in addition to a large indemnity to the British. After the British, other Western colonial powers also followed suit and demanded similar privileges through the Treaty of Wangxia by the United States in July and the Treaty of Huangpu by France in October 1844.

When the Second Opium War broke out in 1856, the Western Colonial powers were ready to impose their authority on China more forcefully. In 1860 British-French joint forces invaded Beijing, driving the reigning Chinese emperor out of the capital (Pletcher, 2019). The vandalism of the famous Summer Palace by British troops in October 1860 was just another example of Colonial looting.

After 1860, the disintegration of the Chinese state was accelerated on the face of continuous Western imperial pressure, despite some attempts to reform. The growing antipathy of the Chinese people against the Western and the Japanese intervention in China was manifested in the Boxer Uprising in 1900. A joint international force that included American troops subdued the uprising and China was forced to pay more than US\$300 million in reparations under the Boxer Protocol in 1901 (History, 2009). As a result of continuous political turmoil, the Qing Dynasty lost much of its influence in the provinces by 1911 and local warlords came forward to fill the political vacuum. In this context, republic political ideology gained currency among some sections of Chinese educated middle class. The ideological basis for the republican movement was the 'Three Principles of the People' presented by Sun Yat-sen, i.e., nationalism, democracy, and socialism. The Xinhai Revolution of 1911 resulted in overthrowing the Qing Dynasty and establishing a Republic of China on February 12, 1912. Sun Yat-sen set up a provisional government in Nanjing with the support of Yuan Shikai, the Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Army, who took over the capital and forced the emperor to abdicate the throne. The uneasy alliance between Yuan Shikai and Sun Yat-sen was short lived. The establishment of the Republic of China in 1912 neither brought political stability nor ended the Western colonial domination. Instead, it ushered in a new phase of political turmoil, conflict among warring warlords and military occupation of imperial powers. Along with Western Colonial powers, Japan also entered the colonial prey in China in the 20th century. The Versailles Peace Treaty after the First World War recognised the Japanese claims to former German rights in the Shandong peninsula of China.

In the first half of the 20th century, Japan entered China more ferociously by invading Manchuria in 1931 and installing a puppet government in 1932. The Japanese launched major attacks on Beijing, Shanghai and Nanking in 1937. The atrocities committed by the invading Japanese army in and around Nanjing during a six-week period in December 1937 and January 1938, known as the Nanjing Massacre, were an infamous manifestation of the cruelty of Japanese colonialism in China. By the time of the outbreak of World War II, Japan was occupying much of the eastern part of China.

THE CHINESE REVOLUTION AND RUPTURE OF THE DEPENDENCY RELATIONSHIP

The establishment of the Peoples' Republic of China in 1949 following the victory of the Chinese Communist Revolution marked a definite rupture of its dependency relationship with the global world system to which China was forcefully integrated during the preceding century. After years of national humiliation, the Chinese people recovered their pride and national dignity in 1949. The modern Chinese state took its present character and shape as a result of the Chinese Communist revolution. The new state was established on a set ideology, which was the basis for its institutional apparatus and the organisation of human and physical base. It is this state that works as the motor of social and economic reforms and the engine of growth. It abolished the extraterritorial privileges, which were snatched by Western powers in the past and put to end the unequal trade pattern with the global centers of the world system. The economic and social reforms, launched after 1949, paved the way for the gradual ascendancy of modern China. The agrarian reforms changed the old forms of relations of agrarian production as well as production forces, providing lands, infrastructure and technical assistance to hundreds of millions of landless peasants. The state investment and public enterprise helped to develop infrastructure such as road networks, canals and bridges that laid down the base of industrial production and modern economy. As James Petras (2018) noted, "China's sustained growth in its manufacturing sector was a result of highly concentrated public investments, high profits, technological innovations and a protected domestic market". The dynamic economic growth of China with market-economy reforms after 1978 was made possible due to the economic and social reforms set in motion since 1949. The four modernisations launched systematically after 1978 has a long history, going back to Mao days. During the years of the 'Great Leap Forward', Mao Zedong urged that modernisation of industry, agriculture, science and technology was to be completed in 1972. Once again in January 1963, Zhou Enlai referred to four modernizations, comprising agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology and urged professionals in the sciences to realise them. As such, economic modernisation after 1978 was not a sudden departure from the past. It must not be forgotten that the sustained growth in the manufacturing sector with pro-market reforms was a result of highly concentrated public investments, technological innovations and dynamic export strategy where Chinese state played a key role.

One of the key objectives of China's foreign policy in the 1950s and the 1960s was building solidarity with the 'new states' in the Afro-Asian world. Within the limited openings China had at the time in international politics, China identified itself with the anti-colonial struggles in the context of decolonisation, offering them moral and political support. At the Asia-African Conference held in Bandung in 1955, Zhou

Enlai called for increased cooperation between the countries of Asia and Africa. The modus operandi of Zhou Enlai at Bandung earned him much recognition among the delegates. In the 1960s and 1970s, China was in the forefront of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). However, by the end of 1970s, the ideological factor in international affairs receded in the changed national and global context. The new turn in its foreign policy that was propelled by economic considerations of rapid economic transformation and growth and a restructured global role became apparent after 1978.

ASCENDENCY OF CHINA AS A GLOBAL POWER

The continuous progress witnessed by China in many spheres from 1980s and resultant spectacular GDP growth has made it a global power at the beginning of the new Millennium, with powerful trading, financial and investment networks covering the entire world. China's entry into the World Trade Organisation in 2001 helped it cement its status as the world's factory and largest trader. China has surpassed the United States as the number one destination for foreign investment and the exporter of information technology products in 2018. Accordingly, China is the world's third-largest trading power.

Parallel to the ascendancy of China as a global power, a steady shift in its global role and its strategic thinking as to its maritime domains has also taken place. In 2004, President Hu Jintao articulated the 'new historic mission' for the PLAN, underscoring the mission of the Navy in providing strategic support to maintain China's national interests. Consequent to redefining the role of the PLAN, naval modernisation progressed rapidly covering all aspects of naval missions. *The '2010 Ocean Development Report'*, the first comprehensive document on China's maritime activities published by the State Oceanic Administration of China, indicated that enhancing maritime power is China's historic task for the 21st century. The report specifically mentions 'protecting' authority over 'relevant waters', developing the maritime economy, and strengthening ocean and land management (MacDonald, 2013, p.10).

The port construction projects undertaken by China in the Indian Ocean littoral is perhaps the most talked about aspect of the Chinese Naval Diplomacy. When China faced the issue of reinvesting the capital generated by external trade surplus, it turned to her traditional allies in the Indian Ocean region and used its capital strength to lure them to embark on port construction projects with Chinese loans.

The new global leadership role that China came forward to play is manifested in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure

Investment Bank (AIIB). In October 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled the two components of the infrastructure project under the One Belt-One Road: the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road at the informal leadership meeting of Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). It was rephrased as the 'Belt and Road Initiative' in 2016. The declared objectives of BRI are mainly three-fold: (1) find a way for global economic growth in the post-financial crisis era, (2) realise global rebalancing and (3) create a new model for regional cooperation in the 21st century. It is very pertinent to quote Wang Yiwei (2016, p.16) to highlight the Chinese perception on BRI: "The Belt and Road Initiative shoulders the responsibility of realizing the Chinese Dream. After the Chinese dream of realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation was proposed, a viable path and a road map were needed. The Belt and Road Initiative has undertaken this task of great significance."

Simultaneously, China initiated the establishment of an International Financial Institution, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). *The Economist* (2014) observed that "China's decision to fund a new multilateral bank rather than give more to existing ones reflects its exasperation with the glacial pace of global economic governance reform. The same motivation lies behind the New Development Bank established by the BRICS".

The foreign policy direction of China under President Xi Jinping is determined by the political, economic and strategic requirements of China as ascending global power. The convergence of domestic and global compulsions is manifested in the three main components of the present Chinese foreign policy: i) the socialism with Chinese characteristics; ii) the community of shared future for mankind; and iii) the Belt and Road initiative. According to Xi Jinping, "socialism with Chinese characteristic consists of a path, theory and system. The 18th National Congress expounded on the scientific meaning of the path, theory and system of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and the relationships between the three. All three serve the great cause of building Chinese socialism" (Xi, 2014, p.9). After the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2019, Xinhua reported that "[T]he world is now undergoing profound changes unseen in a century. Building a community with a shared future for mankind, which was proposed by China, is a grand trend. It is also the right choice to ensure the harmonious co-existence of countries in the Asia-Pacific region as well as around the whole world" (Commentary, 2019). Furthermore, China admitted that globalisation is an irreversible process and China is on the correct side of history. Hence, China wanted to promote inclusive globalisation. The BRI is presented as a proposal for a new world order.

The metamorphosis of China into a global power coincided with the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). It must be remembered that the technological advances

brought forward by the earlier industrial revolutions contributed to establishing the technological and economic supremacy of the West over the 'rest'. In highlighting the political implications of the Industrial Revolution, Marx once said: "The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls" (Marx, 1965, p.53). The mercantile capital, industrial capital and corporate capital that propelled the First, Second and Third Industrial Revolutions were mainly West-based. On all these occasions, China became a dire casualty of the industrial take off of the West. When it comes to the 4IR, China does not want to see the repetition of the same history. Therefore, China is determined not to be left behind from this epochal historical development. Identified as 'disruptive technologies', this new generation of emerging technologies are presently having a profound impact on the way people live, work, do business and communicate with each other. China released its 'New Generation Plan' in 2017, outlining its strategy to create a technological infrastructure capable of leading 4IR by 2030. Unlike earlier occasions, China is better positioned today to proceed with 4IR as an emerging global power.

CHANGING GLOBAL GEOPOLITICS AND CHINA-US RELATIONS

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States became the sole superpower in global politics. The voluntary dissolution of the Soviet Union that resulted in ending the Cold War was interpreted as an ideological victory for Liberal Democracy and the 'end of history', claiming that the 'great competition of the 20th century' between Democracy and Socialism was over. Consequently, the hegemony of the United States as the single superpower became a fixture in the post-Cold War world order. However, the United States was compelled to take serious note of the meteoric rise of China as an emerging global power. In October 2000, the Bill Clinton administration signed the U.S.-China Relations Act, granting China permanent trade relations status with the United States, paving the way for it to join the World Trade Organization. By recognising Beijing as an emerging power, US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick initiated strategic dialogue with China in 2005. Nevertheless, China has also been viewed as an emerging challenge to the geopolitical hegemony of the United States. The Summer Olympics in Beijing in 2008, the high-profile military parade in 2009, and the Shanghai World Expo in 2010 heralded that a revisionist global power was on the way. As China's speedy advances in manufacturing output, power generation and real GDP growth sent shock waves to the US powerhouses, responding to the ascendancy of China has become a major US foreign policy concern.

The Obama administration pursued a cautious policy in containing the strategic and economic implications of rising China. In November 2009, US President Barack

Obama became the first US President to visit China during the first year in office. At the beginning of his administration, US-China relations were progressing on a positive note and President Obama stated, “The relationship between the United States and China is the most important bilateral relationship of the 21st century” (Lee, 2016). The US approach towards China under the Obama Administration was manifested in the foreign policy framework presented as the ‘return to the Asia-Pacific’. This was then rephrased as a ‘strategic pivot’ and later strategic ‘re-balancing’. The US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton first presented this policy line at the ASEAN Regional Forum held in Hanoi in July 2010. In her essay to the *Foreign Policy* journal, Hillary Clinton identified the new approach as the ‘pivot towards Asia’, emphasising the role of trade and enhanced security commitment to the Asia Pacific region, ostensibly to balance China’s emergence with an alliance network. As a main tool of ‘strategic re-balance’, in November 2015, President Obama presented the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a set of new terms for trade and business investments linking the United States and 11 other Pacific Rim nations excluding China. The Obama Administration wanted to base its strategy of rebalancing the Asia Pacific on four pillars: i) the deployment of 60% of its navy and air force in the Asia-Pacific region, ii) the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that excluded China, iii) the ‘smart power diplomacy’, taking advantage of China’s disputes with its neighbours to drive a wedge among them and iv), continuing US contact with China. The US came forward to back ASEAN countries that were worried about China’s advances in and claims to the South China Sea. At the same time, the Obama administration wanted to be engaged with China to push it to maintain sanctions on Iran and to control greenhouse gases in setting the stage for the Paris Agreement on climate change.

President Obama’s cautious approach could not deter the Chinese political and economic advances, which the US believed to have taken place at the expense of their interests. China recovered swiftly after the Global Financial crisis (2007-2008) while US and other powers were still reeling from the setback. The general perception of US policymakers was that China was relentlessly pursuing its strategic interests with scant concern for rule-based international order. They argued that, when the US was preoccupied with its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as being in the thick of a domestic economic recession, China came forward to occupy the space opened by the relative decline of US power. There is a long list of accusations on the part of the United States against China, including discriminatory trade barriers, forced technology transfer, government-sponsored cyber-enabled economic espionage, militarisation of outposts in the South China Sea and suppression of human rights and religious freedom in the country. In turn, China was of the view that the United States pursues a policy of containment against China and resuscitates Cold War politics to deny China its legitimate economic and strategic interests as a global player. The budding US-China Cold War entered into

a new phase with five Chinese hackers indicted for theft of trade technology from several U.S. companies in 2014. In retaliation China ended cooperation with the China-US Cyber security-working group (U.S. Relations with China 1949 -2020, n.d.). By the end of the Obama administration, the trust deficit between the United States and China was fast widening.

TRADE WAR BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA

The economic and strategic implications of the ascendancy of China for the United States figured large in the 2016 US presidential election campaign. Donald Trump asserted that the primary cause for the loss of American manufacturing jobs and intellectual property is the past US-China trade trajectory. In order to 'make America great again' and to bring back manufacturing jobs from China to America, he further promised to slash the US trade deficit with China, through taxes while instituting more trade cases against China. Deviating from longstanding US bipartisan consensus on China policy, soon after Donald Trump assumed office, the Obama administration's TPP was discarded. All in all, President Trump adopted an increasingly zero-sum, unilateralist and 'America first' approach that paved the way for an open trade war between the United States and China.

President Trump initially hoped to strike a deal with China to reduce the US-China trade gap. Within just three months of assuming office, President Trump had a face-to-face talk with Chinese President Xi Jinping on 6th April 2017 at Mar-a-Largo, Palm Beach Florida. As a first step, both leaders agreed to a 100-day action plan to resolve trade differences, aimed at reducing the US trade deficit with China and boosting US exports to China. Within a month, China agreed to slightly open its economy to U.S. firms and services in exchange for U.S. recognition of China's BRI and greater Chinese access to bilateral trade. (Reuters, 2017). However, it did not resolve as the US insisted on more concessions and Beijing rebuffed American pressure. The 100-day action plan lapsed in July 2017, without making a breakthrough in the trade tension. The Trump administration later declared that the agreement was dead and the trade war escalated. The Trump administration was confident that as long as the US economy was doing well, they could win the trade war with China and force China to change its behaviour. As Simon Lester pointed out, this confidence was unfounded due to three reasons. First, "while so far as China has focused on equivalent tariff retaliation, it can retaliate with more than just tariffs. China could retaliate US companies operating in China in a variety of ways" (Lester, 2018, p.55). Second, "the US tariffs hurt Americans as much as they hurt Chinese producers" (Lester, 2018, p.55). Third, as much as the Trump administration would like China to back down, politically speaking, it would be very difficult for China to do so. Public demand for unilateral concession from

China, which would make China look weak if it agreed to them, are difficult to accept (Lester, 2018, p.55).

After abandoning the TPP, the US lacked any credible multi-lateral trade response to counter China's economic influence in resurgent Asia. The Trump administration counted on bilateral talks with countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam instead of multilateral trade deals such as the TPP.

It has been estimated that the trade war with China would cost the US economy US\$ 316 billion by the end of 2020. China also felt economic strain as a result of the trade war. In October 2018, the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund warned that America's trade war with China could cost the global economy around US\$ 700 billion by 2020 – a loss equivalent to the size of Switzerland's entire economy (*New York Times*, 2019).

US-CHINA TECHNOLOGY COMPETITION

A key factor in US global hegemony, military supremacy and economic strength is its lead and domination in hi-tech industrial sectors. During the first phase of the digital revolution, US tech giants such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, and Google came forward to define the outcome. Along with its economic and technological advances, Chinese state-backed tech giants such as Alibaba, Baidu and Tencent also entered the scene with the progressing of the digital revolution. In this context, as Darren Lim writes, technology became a prominent vector in US-China relations for two reasons: first, "China's spectacular economic rise has positioned Chinese industry to be a major player in the invention and utilization of new technologies, the master of which will influence dynamics of great power politics for decades"; second, "the deep level of existing interdependence between the US and China leaves both sides vulnerable to strategic manoeuvring by the other, such that competitive dynamics of move and counter move could persist for a lengthy period of time" (Lim, 2019, p.9). Beijing interprets the US trade sanctions as an attempt to use its technological pre-eminence to block Chinese advances. As a result, China is making concerted attempts to reduce its dependency on US information technology.

The significance of digital geopolitics and technology war between China and the United States must be viewed in the context of the evolving Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). The new generation of 'disruptive technologies' is on the cusp of a paradigm shift in the global industrial rubric in the 21st Century and the hierarchy of nations will depend on their ability to deploy emerging disruptive technologies in the coming decades. As Robert Manning pointed out, "the convergence and

synergy of artificial intelligence and Big Data, robotics, biotech, 3D printing, advance manufacturing, new materials, the Internet of Things, nano-engineering and nano-manufacturing all merge the digital with the physical economy. The second era of digital revolution will be substantially more transformational than the rise of the Internet and app economy that started in the 1990s.” (2019, p.14).

With the emergence of digital economy, Big Data and the Internet of Things became a critical factor in social and economic life. Exponential growth of global data flow from 2005 to 2014 highlighted the importance of new technologies in handling Big Data. In 2015, Beijing embarked on a ‘Made in China 2025’ plan to realise its aim of high-tech manufacturing. As a result, China’s investments have grown rapidly in the field of disruptive technologies after 2015. At present, the US IT giants, namely Google, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft maintain the dominance in digital Big Data. The rise of state-backed Chinese IT firms is considered a severe challenge to US dominance in the sphere of digital Big Data.

The advent of 5G technology and the US-China competition to build 5G infrastructure further accentuated the US-China rivalry. Both powers believe that those who rule the 5G technology rules the world because 5G will support next-generation digital applications that permit ultra-fast, low-latency and high-throughput communications with first-mover advantage. In line with the ‘Made in China 2025’ plan, Huawei and ZTE are in the forefront of acquiring new technologies and building 5G network infrastructures. In August 2018, the Trump Administration banned the US government use of Huawei and ZTE technology as part of the Defense Authorization Act, accusing China of stealing US technology and espionage and labelling these Chinese tech giants as potential threats to national security. Nine months after US blacklisting and restricting access to American technology, Huawei developed its own alternative to Android and Apple controlled iOS. Chinese policymakers interpret US efforts to prevent the flow of critical technologies on the operations of Huawei and other Chinese companies as part of a strategy of containment designed to slow China’s rise as a science and technology power (Segal, 2019, p.1).

The race to acquire advanced Artificial Intelligence (AI) is another key front in the on-going technology war between China and the United States. After Google developed a machine-learning system in March 2016 that uses algorithms and reinforcement learning to train on massive data sets and predict outcomes, the Obama administration released a national strategy consisting of three reports on preparing for a future with AI. In July 2017, President Xi Jinping unveiled China’s ‘New Generation Plan’, outlining its strategy to become a global leader in the field of AI by 2030. It recognises that “the exclusive control of a technology has the potential to open up a ‘first-mover-advantage’, which allows a Nation to make, and

consolidate, gains before competitors can catch up (Pecotic. 2019, p.1). A number of National Engineering Laboratories have been established and academic, military and commercial research efforts are channelled towards the same goal of acquiring technological superiority. In 2017, Baidu established its own laboratory “devoted to brain-inspired intelligence technology, which aims to simulate the exact function of the brain. The hope is to achieve human-level AI through imitation” (Pecotic. 2019, p.1). In this context, by using open-source computing software, Alibaba is determined to develop its own data centre chips. Chinese chipset startups, Cambricon Technologies, Horizon Robotics and Suiyuan Technology entered the market with required funding (Rayome, 2020). On February 11th, 2018, President Trump signed Executive Order 13859 announcing the US AI Initiative. Following that, American Artificial Intelligence Initiative: Year One Annual Report, prepared by the Office of Science and Technology of the White House, was presented in February 2020. The Report stated:

The United States is the global leader in AI research, development, and adoption. Continued American leadership in AI will ensure that the United States reaps the benefits of these advancements in a manner consistent with our Nation’s values, policies, and priorities. Maintaining American leadership in AI requires a multipronged strategy to drive advancement and adoption of AI while also upholding civil rights, civil liberties, privacy, and other American values, and protecting our technology advantage (White House, 2020, p.1).

However, the US Administration did not provide any new funding to support measures outlined in the AI Initiative. Similarly, as the escalating China-US trade war hurt the investor confidence in China, investment in AI in China also dropped in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic exploded at this juncture.

CHINA IN POST-COVID-19 WORLD ORDER

By the time of the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in January 2020, the post-Cold War global politics was in flux and the fronts of geopolitical competition between the United States and China were more or less defined. The true impact of the global pandemic on global geo-politics is yet to be seen. Henry Kissinger (2020), in his article to *Wall Street Journal* titled ‘The Coronavirus Pandemic Will Forever Alter the World Order’, writes that “We live in an epochal period. The historic challenge for leaders is to manage the crisis while building the future. Failure could set the world on fire”.

The first COVID-19 patient was found in Wuhan city in Hubei Province in December 2019, within a few days it became a provincial viral epidemic and within a month

a national epidemic. The Chinese government mobilised all the possible state structures to pursue a vigorous policy to contain the spread of the pandemic and took effective steps to strictly lockdown more than 56 million people. The Chinese Communist Party and the state structures played a leading role in controlling the pandemic. The total of infected people in China up to September 2020 is 89,987, while the reported death toll was 4,728 (Coronavirus Resource Center, 2020).

China's manufacturing capacity declined unprecedentedly during the COVID-19 period and its impact on China's global supply chains was substantial. During the pandemic, China employed some of its AI and Big Data tools in arresting the virus, which included contact tracing, and diagnostic tool and drones to enforce social distancing (Reyome, 2020). China's economic standstill in the first quarter of 2020 and travel restrictions that prevented Chinese workers from returning to BRI work sites have delayed Chinese infrastructure projects abroad. But Beijing's main concern is the damage the disruption of China's global supply chains would cause to its economic growth.

By the time China successfully came out of the pandemic, COVID-19 was still in full swing in the West, particularly the United States. Due to the lax attitude of US administration, the pandemic engulfed many parts of the United States at a monsoon speed. The impact of the pandemic in the United States is unprecedented and it has brought deep havoc to every aspect of social, economic, and political life.

In the face of the common challenge posed by the pandemic, it was expected that the first and the second largest economies of the world would collaborate with each other to arrest the global spread of the virus and save the world from the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. This did not happen due to the security dilemma syndrome of both powers, emanating from their geo-political considerations. At the beginning of the pandemic, President Trump labelled it a 'Chinese virus'. As Paul Haenle (2020, p.1) pointed out, "Beijing's lack of transparency about the true extent of the outbreak, due to political imperatives and economic concerns, fueled suspicion from the outset". Even after the outbreak of the global pandemic, the US administration under President Trump seems to be counting on tariff and sanctions rather than building a broad coalition to counter China's economic influence and mobilising multilateral institutions to check alleged Chinese malpractices. In March 2020, the US administration closed its borders to travellers from many EU countries including Italy in the wake of the rising tide of the pandemic in Europe. During the same month, Beijing announced that it was sending medical teams and supplies to Italy. The geopolitical symbolism of these moves reflected the wind of change in global politics. It manifested China's readiness to emerge from the global crisis with a renewed status to shoulder responsibilities as a global player. In early July 2020, the Trump Administration pulled the US out of the World Health

Organisation (WHO), claiming that the WHO is in need of reform and it is heavily influenced by China. Later, “the Trump Administration has said it will not work with an international cooperative effort to develop and distribute a COVID-19 vaccine because it does not want to be constrained by multi-lateral groups like the World Health Organization” (*Island*, 2020).

The early recovery of China from the pandemic while its adversaries are still grappling with the crisis should not be a reason for China to be complacent. China could not return to the pre-pandemic manufacturing levels due to a number of factors of which China has little control over. The US tariffs and embargo also affect Chinese economic activities worldwide. In August 2020, the Trump administration blacklisted 24 Chinese companies for helping China build islands in the South China Sea. “The newly listed firms, including the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) and the China Electronics Technology Group Corporation, are big contractors in the Belt and Road initiative, which engage in building bridges, dams and digital infrastructure around the world” (*Washington Post*, 2020). The China Communications Construction Company also undertakes the US\$ 1.4 billion Colombo Port City project. It is reported that construction work on the Colombo Port City will continue unaffected despite the US blacklisting of Chinese construction companies.

The pandemic is not over and it is still flaming, hence, its future direction is uncertain. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global geopolitics should be viewed in conjunction with the changes brought forward by the disruptive technologies associated with 4IR. In the short run, there can be a high degree of uncertainty and volatility. In his written interview with *Global Times*, Michael D. Swain observed:

It is possible that the virus might stimulate greater levels of Sino-US cooperation in some respects, in particular regarding preparations for future pandemics and other transnational security threats, both at the national and subnational levels. But I don't think the COVID-19 virus will fundamentally change the course of US-China relations toward deeper levels of competition overall. This competition is deeply rooted in the structural power shift underway between a rising China and a US that remains wedded to the idea that it must retain some level of predominance in many areas, as well as in the ideological rivalry between the two countries (Swain, 2020).

THE “THUCYDIDES TRAP” AND FUTURE SCENARIOS

The fundamental geopolitical concern in the present context is whether the US China geopolitical rivalry would lead to an all-out military confrontation. In the rapidly changing global geopolitical context, are China and the United States heading towards a war? Graham T. Allison, former Director of the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, argued that both states are trapped in a deadly pattern of structural stress that results when a rising power challenges a ruling one – ‘Thucydides’ Trap’. According to Allison,

The defining question about global order for this generation is whether China and the United States can escape the Thucydides’s Trap. The Greek historian’s metaphor reminds us of the dangers when a rising power rivals a ruling power—as Athens challenged Sparta in ancient Greece, or as Germany did Britain a century ago (Allison, 2015).

He pointed out that these conditions have occurred sixteen times over the past 500 years. War broke out in twelve of them. He further argued:

The rise of a 5,000-year-old civilization with 1.3 billion people is not a problem to be fixed. It is a condition—a chronic condition that will have to be managed over a generation. Success will require not just a new slogan, more frequent summits of presidents, and additional meetings of departmental working groups. Managing this relationship without war will demand sustained attention, week by week, at the highest level in both countries (Allison, 2015).

The Chinese view in this regard is quite different. During the visit to the US in 2015, Chinese president Xi Jinping said: “there is no such thing as the so-called “Thucydides’ Trap” in the world. But should major countries time and again make strategic miscalculations, they might create such traps for themselves” (As quoted in Gautam, 2018). He further emphasised the need to foster a new model of great power relations based on mutual cooperation, respect and dialogue between the US and China (Gautam, 2018). If we do not consider the changed historical contexts when we draw historical parallels, we tend to arrive at erroneous predictions. International connectivity and multiple levels of cross-border collaboration are so intense that there are many dynamics working against going for all-out war. It must be noted that probabilities presented on the basis of historical evidence are conditioned by a variety of contemporary variables. Athens and Sparta in the 5th century were not nuclear weapon states and did not possess the capabilities of ‘Mutually Assured Destruction’ (MAD).

CONCLUSION

The rise of China to a global power status has so far been peaceful. China asserts that the ideology behind BRI is the Ancient Silk Road, which did not lead to any plunder or aggressive territorial expansion. Is China pursuing the same path for global leadership? It is important to note, however, that the nature of aggression and territorial acquisition has also changed in the present context. In the past, any attempt to shift existing distribution of global power resulted in wars and periods of political tension, 'the Thucydides Trap'. It is not mandatory to repeat history. What would be the response of the rest of the world to the rise of China? In the past, the rise of the 'West' signified the fall of the 'Rest'. Now, the rise of the 'Rest' does not necessarily mean fall of the West. The peace and stability of the emerging post-COVID-19 world order depends not only on the reactions of the established global power but also on that of the rest of the world to the rise of China and how China manages these key challenges and other responses.

After 71 years of the establishment of the PRC, China today stands on a crucial historic juncture in its post-colonial history. The future direction of China depends on three critical factors: (1) the role of the Chinese state, (2) the role of the economically powerful 'new rich' that emerged with the economic liberalisation process and (3) how China handles the issue of democracy. The fundamental concern related to the ascendancy of China is whether it ushers in a new world system based on a community with a shared future for mankind, marking the end of the world order that came into being with the economic, political and ideological supremacy of the West or whether China would displace the West by establishing its own dominance in the world. History will answer this question.

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