

International Conference

“From Hu-Wen to Xi-Li Administration:

China’s Leadership Transition and Its Domestic and International Implications”

jointly organized by



**Institute of China Studies
UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA**

and



12-13 September 2013

**Venue: Auditorium, Research Management and Innovation Complex,
University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia**

China's Emerging Hi-Politics in East Asia

Lt General (Rtd) Dr Mohd Aminul Karim,
Senior Research Fellow, Asia-Europe Institute,
University of Malaya, Malaysia.

China's Emerging High-Politics in East Asia

Dr. Mohd Aminul Karim¹

Abstract:

Aim of this paper is to highlight the high-politics being practised by China in East Asia, ostensibly as a kind of fait accompli, and upshot of national aspirations. This is almost an inexorable consequence mainly due to presence of issues that are likely to trigger conflict, may be even a limited war. Issues range from flashpoints to economic interdependence, and leadership. Hegemonic transition, replacing hegemonic stability, may be at work. The paper concludes with the likely ramifications that may spawn.

¹ Lt General (R) Dr. Mohd Aminul Karim is the Senior Research Fellow at the Asia-Europe Institute, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He can be reached at; mdaminulkarim1967@gmail.com . The paper presented at the International Conference "From HU-Wen to Xi-Li Administration: China's Leadership Transition and Its Domestic and International Implications", jointly organized by the Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya, and East Asian Studies, National University of Singapore during 12-13 September 2013.

Introduction and Variables :

To start with, Asia-Pacific geopolitical setting may be put in context. Economic and geopolitical centre of gravity of the world is tilting towards the Asia-Pacific. Four of the largest economies of the world are now located in the Asia-Pacific. The challenge that these robust and emerging economies face today is the scarcity of energy. Asia's energy consumption is likely to double by 2030, with China itself accounting for half of it. China is already the world's second largest oil importer, after the U.S., importing around 5.5 million barrels per day (BPD). This is likely to increase in the days to come. China is frantically looking for energy both in East Asia and beyond. This makes "the South China Sea the ever more central guarantor of the region's economic strength".² South China Sea is one of the emerging flashpoints where seemingly high-politics is galore. China has greatly modernized its navy in response to meet the challenges of the United States, which has launched the Pivot to Asia or Rebalancing in the Asia-Pacific. This is, in fact, the United States' declaration that reflects its resolve to maintain its primacy in the Asian order by using all elements of its national power. Its military is repositioned and revitalized to ensure uninterrupted freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea, along with others in East Asia, that falls along its vital Sea Lines of Communication. Trailing this trend are smaller powers especially the Philippines, and Vietnam who are rearming to meet the challenges emanating from China.

High politics is likely to hover surrounding the South China Sea on which China is unlikely to budge substantially from its claims. China is unlikely to back down in the face of the United States' determination. China's defense modernization is likely to continue with full vigor thus raising the potential of high politics in the western Pacific. Similar is the status of China in respect of Taiwan, and the East China Sea. China is bidding its time in respect of Taiwan by applying both carrot and stick policy. For the time being it is trying economic collaboration or integration with Taiwan. Such process may take fifty years, as a case in point; but China would never give up its claim both *de jure and de facto* in respect of Taiwan. China

² Robert D. Kaplan, "The South China Sea Is the Future of Conflict—21st Century's Defining Battleground is going to be on Water", *Foreign Policy*, September/ October, 2011.

is continually revamping its military machine to confront the military machines of the United States, Japan, and Taiwan combined. Shambaugh concludes China is five to ten years away from mounting an all-out conventional assault, enforce a naval blockade, and prevent an American intervention.³ China is emotionally involved with Taiwan; even it means one nation, two systems. Integrating Taiwan with the mainland China, like that of Hong Kong and Macau, is the vital national interests of China. In achieving such objective, China is prepared to stretch itself to any length including highest stream of high politics. Soft-power is also being applied as indicated.

On East China Sea China is again likely to go to any length to deal with Japan's supposedly nationalization of the Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands. Again the energy issue may be relevant here, apart from sovereignty issue. Presently the militaries of both Japan and China are generally poised to control the Islands. In January 2013, Chinese warships were reported to have "locked on" to a Japanese helicopter and destroyer in separate incidents. Any wrong move from either party may bring about unintended consequences. As there is a defence treaty between the United States and Japan that obligates the United States to provide security in the entire Asia-Pacific region, matters tend to get more complicated. The United States may have to provide military assistance to Japan in case there is show-down centring Senkaku/ Diaoyu Islands. As a matter of fact the United States has already made its stance clear to provide such assistance of Japan in case of an exigency.

It is the nationalism coupled with geopolitics that propels China to go to any length. Same is true for Japan. The aim of the paper is to study the emerging high-politics and its ramifications which China has to grapple with in East Asia in the foreseeable future. China's high-politics is manifested in its six strategic goals, as observed by Brzezinski, three of which are relevant here. First, China wants to reduce its potential geographical encirclement due to the US strategic links with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines, and vulnerability of its oil passage through the Strait of Malacca, reaching to the Indian Ocean. Second, to establish itself in a favoured position—in the form of free trade zone with Japan and South Korea -in an emerging East Asian community, and with ASEAN while containing major role by the United States. Third, resolve the remaining unsettled legacy of Taiwan with "one China, two

³ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global-The Partial Power*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013): p.280.

systems”.⁴ In evaluating each of these goals it is becoming crystal clear that China has to resort to high-politics. Notwithstanding such high-politics, soft-politics is also a necessity, or else the grand strategic goals cannot be achieved in letter and spirit.

Apart from the flashpoints, there is again a huge economic interdependence between the nations of the Asia-Pacific. Economic interdependence between China and the United States is glaring to the extent that one tends to call it Mutually Assured Economic Destruction. ‘Greater is the volume of trade and investment between the two countries, more groups on both sides will have greater incentive to avoid war’.⁵ Lu and Xia, referring to liberal scholars, reinforce such thesis, “the interdependence between China and the United States will deter both sides from engaging in conflict.” However, the authors, referring to the realist scholars, also contend, “China-U.S. economic interdependence will help China gain more economic interests and will lead to growing belligerence between the two countries.”⁶ Both the United States and China are competing with each other in the economic fields. There is every possibility China will overtake the place of the largest economy in the world. According to current forecast, China, mainly because of its large population size, “will surpass the United States in the total economic size sometime in the twenty-first century; the Carnegie Endowment puts the date around 2030”.⁷

Having outlined so, the core of the matter is two *hegemons* are operating in East Asia namely China and the United States. Both are regional *hegemons*, as Mearshimear concludes ‘stopping power of water makes the United States a regional *hegemon*’. He further concludes even in this highly technological age, it is difficult for any power to project substantial power across all seas and oceans.⁸ More so, the United States is already overstretched or may be, to some extent, exhausted. Post-Vietnam phobia might have once again overtaken the Americans. Thus said, Yang, referring to Goldstein, concludes , ‘ under a hegemonic strategy

⁴ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Strategic Visions- America and the Crisis of Global Power*, (New York: Basic Books 2012): pp.172-173.

⁵ Aaron L. Friedberg, “The Future of U.S.-China Relations- Is Conflict Inevitable?” *International Security* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2005): pp.7-45.

⁶ Chunlong Lu and Min Xia, “The Interdependence between China and the United States: A Two- Level Analysis”, *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 22, no.3 (2010): pp. 321-339.

⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski, op.ed., p.56.

⁸ Martin A. Smith, *Power in the Changing Global Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012): p. 39.

China would strive to maximize its power relative to all rivals by diverting as much national wealth as possible from civilian economic needs to military modernisation, and by attempting to exploit its power advantages wherever possible.⁹ Hegemonic stability is being replaced by hegemonic transition which is ominous. Thus said, Mahbubani makes no bone in highlighting China's penchant for geopolitical calculations, "China does careful global geopolitical calculations in which it tries to objectively analyse its geopolitical assets and liabilities. It then works out a long-term plan to enhance its assets and minimise its liabilities. Each time a new problem surfaces, China looks for advantage in it..."¹⁰

Alongside eyeing at the flashpoints and economic perspective, China seemingly is gradually working to replace the Cold-War paradigm of uni-polarity with multi-polarity. This objective is triggering China to increase its comprehensive national power (CNP), somewhat similar to the United States' Rebalancing strategy, which encapsulates military modernisation as well. As CNP keeps on growing China is likely to slide more towards multi-polarity. The United States, on the other hand, is going strong with the alliance-building ostensibly to contain a rising power such as China. Japan, as an appendage, and India, as part of strategic partnership, also come to the calculus. Buzan concludes bipolarity is going to persist in East Asia, since no other country can match China or Japan. And the Asian super complex, with India included, would remain tri-polar in the foreseeable future.¹¹ Even Australia is out to be an overt strategic partner of the United States. There are even alignments—regular military drills are conducted—players being Japan, India, Australia, and Singapore and others, purportedly to contain China. The United States' Pivot to Asia or Rebalancing strategy aims to marshal resources in the Pacific Ocean in coordination and collaboration of its allies. The U.S. policy looks for both bilateral and multilateral arrangements. This is a great challenge that China has to confront.

In case the United States gets involved militarily in Taiwan, as Dobbins argues, "its goal would be to prevent Chinese coercion or conquest of Taiwan and to limit, to the extent possible, the damage inflicted on Taiwan's military, economy, and society." For South China

⁹ Jian Yang, "China in the South Pacific", *The Pacific Review* 22, no.2 (2009):pp. 139-158.

¹⁰ Kishore Mahbubani, "Smart Power, Chinese Style," *The American Interest*, (March/April 2008), <http://www.mahbubani.net/articles%20by%20dean/smart%20power.pdf>.

¹¹ Barry Buzan, "Security Architecture in Asia: the Interplay of Regional and Global Levels", *The Pacific Review* 16, no.2 (2003): pp.143-173.

Sea the “US objectives could range from enforcing freedom of navigation against a Chinese effort to control maritime activities in the South China Sea, to helping the Philippines defend itself against an air and maritime attack, to supporting Vietnam...”¹² Given such compulsions China’s military modernisation, which took momentum especially after the Gulf Wars, is being revitalised to meet the emerging challenges in the Asia-Pacific. All such developments are indicative of emerging high-politics from both sides.

Ramifications:

Modernisation drives clearly indicate China is getting militarily stronger; this time there is a paradigm shift towards quality. This is substantiated by Mahbubani who is emphatic in mentioning China’s overall rise, “within five years (China) is set to become the world’s largest economy in purchasing power parity terms....(it is) the world’s largest foreign reserves, the world’s largest industrial base,.....the world’s largest output of science and technology graduates, to name a few.”¹³ All such prospective indicators are likely to contribute to China’s military modernisation. Thus said, China keeps on growing stronger militarily, it may not outright flex its muscle at this point in time. Nonetheless China would ostensibly continue to strive to elbow out others in the western Pacific and in its periphery. It would tend to be more assertive, some call it “non-confrontational assertiveness”. Mingjiang and Hongzhou conclude, “China’s regional security policy continues to be what can be described as non-confrontational assertiveness. This gives credence to the view that tensions and disputes will likely persist in the East Asian Seas at least for the next few years.”¹⁴ Even its non-confrontational posture is seemingly undergoing paradigm shift towards some kind of aggressiveness due mainly to the United States’ declared policy of Pivot to Asia or Rebalancing. The United States plans to distribute its naval capabilities between the Atlantic and Pacific theatres by 2020, from a 50-50 split to 60-40 split (favouring the Pacific).¹⁵ It is looking for more as many allies and friends as possible. It is seemingly creating a wedge between the ASEAN countries over the South China Sea and on economic issues.

¹² James Dobbins, “War with China”, *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 54, no.4 (2012): pp.7-24.

¹³ Kishore Mahbubani, “Is China’s Slowdown Just Western Wishful Thinking?” *Financial Times A-List*, October 11, 2012.

¹⁴ Li Mingjiang, and Zhang Hongzhou, “Restructuring China’s Law Enforcement: Impact on Regional Security”, *RSIS Commentaries*, April 1, 2013.

¹⁵ Evan Resnick, “The Perils of Containing China”, *RSIS Commentaries*, April 19, 2013.

China's insecurities would continue to spiral as it is hemmed in on almost all sides by "a constellation of U.S. allies, friends, and strategic commitments". But when China feels –it has, in fact , already started feeling-- it has enough power it would graduate itself to "offensive grand strategy (and) be more assertive in regional and global affairs, expand political and economic interests abroad and dictate the boundaries of acceptable state."¹⁶ This is then going to vindicate the proposition that there is going to be no let-up in the drive for ascendancy or leadership in the foreseeable future, thus giving rise to the probability of hegemonic war breaking out, as hegemonic transition is at work here. This is linked up with China-Japan and Japan- United States relations as well.

China is concerned about the New Defence Guidelines, between Japan and the United States, which extend the jurisdiction of the Japan-U.S. Treaty. There is, therefore, an extension of Japanese objectives that may place it head-on to Chinese counter-measures. The revised 1978 Defence Guidelines "vivified the (Self-Defence Forces) SDF's ...mandate to provide military assistance to the U.S. military and expanded the scope of such cooperation from the Fareast to the Asia-Pacific."¹⁷ As part of extension Taiwan, South China Sea, and East China Sea may, therefore, come within its ambit in case of an exigency. In such an exigency, it is but natural for Japan to take side of the United States at the cost of the Chinese. Such posturing gives rise to the possibility of more concrete polarisations in the days to come. China's military modernisation has to cater for these prospective expanded objectives and frontiers as well. However, China is cautious not to overstretch itself as the United States often does. The United States has to re-think of further overstretching once it is withdrawing from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Again such an obligation also draws our attention to the South China Sea where hard politics, as already highlighted, seems taking an upward swing. In case of the South China Sea, both Vietnam and the Philippines have come in military collaboration with the United States to confront China. Again China has been successful in driving a wedge between smaller countries of ASEAN, thus putting at risks its (ASEAN) credibility to reach an amicable resolution to the South China Sea disputes. While China prefers solving the disputes

¹⁶ Benjamin Ho Tze Ern, "The Rising Chorus of Chinese Exceptionalism" *RSIS Working Paper no. 256*, April 15, 2013.

¹⁷Bhubinder Singh, and Philips Shetler-Jones, "Japan's Re-conceptualization of National Security", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 11, no.3 (2011): pp.491-530.

on one-on-one basis, the United States prefers ASEAN's centrality. Even China tends not to recognize ASEAN as an entity when it comes to the South China Sea. Such polarisations raise the spectre of more tensed situation that is likely to create more fertile grounds for military confrontation. "China's military modernisation, undertaken for whatever reasons, creates perceptions that China is interested in power projection and not a peaceful rise after all." This has snowball effect on the Asia-Pacific militaries to upgrade their military capabilities to "counterbalance China's rise".¹⁸

As cases in point, the countries such as Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia have increased their arms imports by 84 percent, 146 percent, and 722 percent respectively since 2000. Vietnam spent US \$ 2 billion on six *Kilo*-class submarines and US \$ 1 billion on fighter jets (including 24 advanced Su-30 MKs).¹⁹ The Philippine Navy is contemplating procuring submarines as a deterrent, keeping China as a potential threat in the South China Sea. Although China's modernisation is substantial, other smaller countries would continue to trail China in upgrading their military machine as well. These powers are likely to get emboldened by the geopolitical objectives being pursued by the United States. The resultant impact is China's further military expansion, however, also bolstered by the United States, which gives rise to huge arms race in the region. A larger chunk of national budget of the involved countries is likely to be diverted to the defence needs in the days to come.

Having deduced so as the military preparations and modernisation continue, sabre rattling would also continue but overt military confrontation is likely a remote possibility in the foreseeable future. There exists Mutually Assured Economic Destruction similar to Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) in the nuclear field. Even other powers in East Asia such as Japan, South Korea going for nuclear weapons- North Korea is already a nuclear power- is a possibility, thus giving rise to prospective MAD in East Asia. China will go for further refinement and sophistication of its nuclear deterrent because Northeast Asia is turning out to be a nuclearized zone. The United States' preponderance in nuclear arsenal is already

¹⁸ Sean Chen, and John Feffer, "China's Military Spending: Soft Rise or Hard Threat?" *Asian Perspective* 33, no.4 (2009): pp.47- 67.

¹⁹Robert D. Kaplan, "The South China Sea Is the Future of Conflict—21st Century's Defining Battleground is going to be on Water", *Foreign Policy*, September/ October, 2011.

bothering China. China has to, therefore, move to solid-fuelled, road-mobile ICBMs, which are also likely MIRVed. All these are the stark manifestation of hard-politics.

Concluding Remarks:

Restraint-regime is expected to work in this otherwise volatile geopolitical region at least in the foreseeable future. Along with that China needs to be directed more towards community-building, regionalization, and socialization. China needs to become a more responsible and committed member of the international organizations, and international society at large. China is slowly getting intimately involved in the international diplomacy. This is one of the effective means to keep China's hard politics under control. But the fact of the matter is China cannot be swayed away from its vital national interests in its backyard in East Asia which propels it to play hard politics in its letter and spirit. That is fait accompli, and consequence of geo-politics and leadership race. Inter-hegemonic race is a universal and historical phenomenon. That could be true to any rising, aspiring, sensitive, and, to some extent, conservative power such as China.