

Essay

The China Dream: Divergence of Direction and Destination

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“A phenomenon noticeable throughout history regardless of place or period is the pursuit by governments of policies contrary to their own interests”

–Anonymous.

At a ceremony in Beijing on 25 February 2021, President Xi Jinping proclaimed ‘complete victory’ in eradicating poverty by lifting 100 million people from below the \$1.69 daily income line. Obviously, an inspired Communist Party of China (CPC) Regime led by Xi Jinping wants to continue to press-on with bringing ‘common prosperity’ to all of China. The problem is that in fulfilment of that goal, the Regime seems to have opted to mar it by undermining the stability and progress of its regional cohabitants. Indeed, China’s Regime will not, cannot, call halt its economic development agenda. Territorial expansion and consolidation of a vice-like grip over the neighbouring economies through widespread economical-infrastructure activities are the enablers of that agenda - military intimidation is intrinsic.

Only a consolidated disapproval from the affected nations might appeal to the CPC Regime to leave its neighbours alone.

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The Party's Talisman

In a steady course of the event-time continuum, the Communist Party promoted Xi Jinping to the most powerful position in the Party hierarchy, and by implication, installed him as the nation's constitutional supremo in 2012-13. With that elevation, Xi, the new President of the People's Republic of China (PRC), General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), assumed the roles and responsibilities of, to borrow a Mao-era phrase, 'the great helmsman' in China's destination to global power. The helmsman's objective was set on indemnifying, according to a tight timeline, China's ingrained perception of her 'historically ordained centrality' in the affairs of the world.

From the subsequent events of China's extending economic stranglehold and deploying hard military power to secure its time-bound objective, it is evident that the ruling consortium under President Xi Jinping's leadership so far has been delivering on its mission.

An Agenda Ingrained

It was in the early-1980s when China's ruling hierarchy appreciated that Russia (USSR) was no more capable of posing any threat. That allowed them to energise their long-nurtured agenda which called for 'recovery' of all such territories which might have been, at any time in the past, been under any form of Chinese control, even influence. China's communist leadership's aspiration was, and is, meant to garner popular legitimacy for the Regime. By the early 2000s, with the maturing of the 'four modernisations', the CPC found itself reaching a stage when the dream of reclaiming 'lost' territories could be put into concrete action.

The Xi Jinping Regime's agenda is shaped by such objectives as: One, *unification of Taiwan*; and two, 'recovery' of what is sensed to be the *'Middle Kingdom's lost territories'*. In the 2010s, bolstering its campaign to seize regional *technical-industrial-economic hegemony* was formally added as the third objective. Needless to state, each of the three objectives is underwritten by *the backing of formidable military power*. Thus, having set a course for the fulfilment of its self-inflating agenda, the Regime is hurtling towards its ultimate objective – that is, *consolidation of the Regime's credibility*, and its formidability, and by implication, its perpetuation over a supplicant population that appears reconciled, resigned to its fate.

Agenda Gone Critical

Since 2010, China's neighbours have found themselves at the rough end of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) formidable stick. Territorial violations, in mounting strength, frequency, extent and depth, against nations that share land and maritime borders with China have become endemic. Forcible usurpation and occupation of arbitrarily claimed land and sea features proceed at an alarming pace, while the murmur of protests from the intimidated victims are nonchalantly dismissed as frivolous 'trouble making'. Open or implied warnings to reconcile to the Chinese Regime's line of thinking follow.

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Equally disconcerting has been China's cast of technical and economic enticements which have pulled independent nations into vortices of sovereignty compromises. The drag is so strong that the ensnared regimes are unable to back-off even when upcoming consequences of worrisome nature are realised. Thus, driven by aggressive political-economic persuasions, China's economic colonisation across foreign lands continues, much to the chagrin of the domestic and neighbourhood observers. Long-term consequences of surrendering economic independence to a powerful, autocratic regime that displays no qualm about repudiating internationally established norms, for independent nationhood and regional stability have become palpable.

As President Xi Jinping's leadership proved his mettle in stomping along the Party-line while inspiring the rise of national power and prosperity, the Party's all-powerful Zhongnanhai circle exalted him to the status of the 'core leader' of the nation's destiny. To maintain the momentum, the Party Constitution was thereafter moderated to allow President Xi Jinping an unspecified long reign at the nation's driving seat.

Obviously, China's aggressive march to attain Asian, even global, dominance will remain relentless.

Swoop to Regional Dominance

The Xi Regime has pushed China's call to 'peaceful rise' into many internationally

worrisome concerns. Whereas forcible encroachments and infrastructural build-up continue in sea and land over which China cannot, by any logic, claim ownership, debt-traps to ensnare vulnerable neighbourhood regimes into vicious economic enslavement are laid. Then there is the hobgoblin of 'wolf diplomacy' at work to justify China's untenable impositions. On the domestic front, the citizenry is being pushed back to 'gulag' days by a sweep of imperious legislations and dictatorial promulgations. Call it a hegemon, don or bully, Xi Regime's swoop is in full manifestation.

The PRC's unilateral inflictions have riled almost every other stakeholder of the region's common possessions. China thus stands universally - barring a few - distrusted in the comity of nations. Its reckless conduct that has led to the rise of China-averse imprint, seeds a doubt if the 'core leader' leads a strategically blinkered ruling clique. Perhaps that is an overstatement, but that kind of self-demonising war-dance on display from an ancient, mature and civilised society does raise that doubt. Hard-core communist fixation with persistent 're-education', wherein targeted nations are to be conditioned overtime to reconcile to China's eventual assumption of their territories and economic systems, could be another motive behind the recent spurt in China's arrogating actions.

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Obduracy of Egocentric Wants

Domineering over neighbourhood territories is not a recent ambition among China's current ruling clique, but a natural manifestation of an ingrained hegemonic culture that overarches the Chinese political system. In that culture, the domineering agenda is dynamic, and with each objective secured, the focus must turn to the next one in line. But once roused, nationalist pomposity is liable to go 'critical' and uncontrollable among a tutored, self-gratifying citizenry's imagination. That, in turn, leads to a situation wherein the leadership gets pushed to compromise with populist jingoism. Rational decision-making is then swept out, and the Regime, to stay in power, finds no option but to drag the nation to avoidable conflicts and its consequent destabilisation.

The CPC seems to be approaching that stage. China's current territorial and politico-economic expansionism could be but interim steps towards more profound hegemonic

objectives in some form or the other. Hapless victims of China's roll of expansionist agenda may not foresee any relief forthcoming soon.

But isn't there some divergence between the Regime's objectives and the methods it adopts to seek those? Push, shove and badgering do not bring stability and progress – neither to the persecutor nor the persecuted. The incumbent leadership, after all that China has gone through in the past, should know well the inexorable consequences of growing angst among a tormented lot, foreign or domestic.

Attributions of Global Power

History tells that the status of global power is not reached by rough riding over ordinary co-habitants of the globe. It is secured by the display of ethical and inclusive conduct towards the global community - shouldering responsibilities, opening opportunities and acts of peer-empathy. In that context, there may be no instance of the PRC bringing any succour to any among the beleaguered nations. Rather, it has created problems for most of its neighbours - South Korea, Indonesia, Mongolia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Taiwan, Tibet, Japan, and India being its prominent targets at one time or the other. That is, discounting those nations who remain reticent in fear of China's spiteful wrath.

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Conversely, the CPC Regime's repudiation of many key international norms and belligerent acts against sovereign interests of less muscular stakeholders of regional commons belies its fib of 'peaceful rise'. As past precedence indicates, at some stage in time, consternation against unilateralism of assertions and arbitrary usurpations of an arrogant power drives the distressed parties into a coalescence of common interests. They are left with no option but to gather up in calling a halt to persistent intimidation and aggression.

Indeed, the destination of 'Chinese Dream' cannot be reached by trampling along an opposite direction and lashing at those stakeholders who do not make way.

Universal Rejection of China's Aggressive Conduct

As rising reactions against the Chinese Regime's oppressive policies indicate, that process of coalescence of common interests has already begun. Some examples are notable.

Territorial Issues : There is universal abhorrence of PRC's habit of eying territories beyond its borders. The PRC has laid spurious, self-invented territorial claims against all its 23 neighbours and its assertive 'settlement' of 12 out of 14 land border disputes are reconciled with a pinch of salt. Its ongoing territorial claims against nine of its maritime and two of the land neighbours have found little support at the international level. Besides, there is rising opposition to China's forcible intrusions and occupation of South China Sea, Indian and Bhutanese territories. Disconcert simmers among some other victims.

Rallying to Taiwan's Cause : The 'United States (US)-Taiwan Relations Act', with the 'People of Taiwan', and its 'six assurances' are the bedrock of Taiwan's national security. In April 2010, President George Bush made it clear that the "US was obliged to help Taiwan defend itself if attacked by the PRC". In recent years, some countries, including India, have displayed solidarity with Taiwan's cause. Presently, besides providing the latest military hardware, the US has enacted a 'Taiwan Travel Act-2018', much to the PRC's chagrin.

Issues in the China Seas : The PRC incessantly interferes with the South China Sea and, to some extent, the East China Sea littoral states' rightful commercial and exploratory activities. The obvious purpose is to control the navigable waters, monopolise sea-bed resources and grab island territories through military intimidation. Recently, in February 2021, it has enacted a new Coast Guard Law that is invasive against the littoral commons. Of late, instances of rebuff from the so far reticent littorals – particularly Vietnam, Japan and the Philippines – against the PRC's maritime belligerence are on the rise. In another effort to rein-in China's bullying in the China Seas, ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have engaged China in negotiating a 'Code of Conduct', though the latter's obduracy has stalled the process for two decades.

The Philippines' Cause : The PRC frequently violates the Filipino maritime boundary. It has flouted the International Court of Arbitration's verdict that went in favour of the Philippines. Recently, it swarmed the Filipino Whitsun reef with 220 militia boats. While the Philippines' interests are buttressed by its 'Mutual Defence Treaty-1951' with the US, the inactive US-Philippines 'Visiting Forces Agreement-1999' is being considered for revival to counter China's growing show of force.

Maritime Navigation and Open Skies : China's unilateral, untenable claims against freedom of international navigation across the China Seas and the skies above have been firmly rejected by the global community. A group of US-led stake-holding countries – UK, France, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, India - have been frequently conducting 'Freedom of Navigation Operations' (FNOPS) to establish the universal right to free passage. The declaration of China's 'Air Defence Identification Zone' (ADIZ) too increasingly stands ignored. Recently, the Regime has enacted a new 'Coast Guard Law' which infringes against the rights of fellow neighbourhood littorals. That too has invited widespread consternation.

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Trade and Technology : After applying restrictions upon China's manipulation of trade and technological relations, the US has gone ahead to enact a 'Strategic Competition Act' in April 2021. The objective is to prevent China from abusing and exploiting American liberality only to undermine US interests.

European Concern : In a significant departure from their policy of overlooking, for economic interests, the PRC's pugnacious behaviour, the European Union (EU) has imposed sanctions on some of its culpable executives. Retaliation has spiralled to vitiate mutual trade and freeze the China-EU agreement on commerce and investment. In April 2021, the EU castigated the Chinese Regime rather bluntly, marking it for 'endangering peace' in the South China Sea and asking it to abide by the International Tribunal's award against its illegal claims over the neighbourhood islands. Further, the EU has decided to adopt a new policy to 'step-up its influence' to counter China's attempts to dominate the Indo-Pacific region.

The Quadrilateral Initiative(QUAD) : The CPC Regime's rumbustious behaviour has revived the long-stagnant Indo-Pacific strategic partnership. The so far dormant QUAD-2007, a strategic partnership among the US, Japan, India and Australia, now stands resuscitated, with French participation in QUAD-plus. As this partnership gains weight through political-economic dialogues as well as conduct of joint military exercises, similar partnerships and military exercises among the Indo-Pacific community in bilateral and multilateral mode are also regularly set-off.

Water Hegemony : Alarm over the PRC's manipulation of water flow to South-Southeast Asian nations is rising. Having occupied Asia's primary source of the seven Tibet river waters, the PRC rejects the lower riparian states' rights of water security, treating natural river water assets as its private ownership and arbitrary consumption. That attitude could be a future source of conflict.

The CPC's Internal Repression

Contrary to the changed world of individual freedom and human rights, the CPC continues wreaking internal repressions to keep itself in power. The Xi Jinping Regime's strangulation of Mongolian, Tibetan and Uyghur ethnicities and sinicisation of their cultures and customs, religion, language, even attire, need no elaboration. Debarring of Tibetan language from schools and the call to 'sinicise Tibetan Buddhism', imposition of Mandarin language in Inner Mongolia, confinement of Uyghurs to indoctrination and labour camps, repudiation of formal obligations regarding the autonomy of Hong Kong's administration, the nation-wide denial of human rights, and intimidation of media through the new National Security Law-2020 or by other arm-twisting methods, are the examples of that penchant. Widespread condemnation from the global community has not been able to dent the CPC's macabre resolve.

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Some highlights of international level opposition to the CPC's suppression of human rights are representative.

Tibet: The PRC has retracted from the 17 Point Agreement by which, in 1951, it had guaranteed Tibet's autonomy. Subsequently, to cushion its detente with the PRC in 1979, the US has enacted a dozen or so laws and resolutions to nurture the Tibetan way of life. Following up, the US has also promulgated its 'Tibetan Policy Act-2002'. Recently, it has intensified efforts to protect Tibetan interests by appointing a 'Special Coordinator to promote substantive dialogue' over the issue and promulgated its 'Tibet Policy and Support Act-2020'. Going further, it has sanctioned China's dishonest scheme to appoint the next Dalai Lama and has asked for opening its Consulate in Lhasa. India continues to provide a secure home to the large Tibetan community in exile and the Dalai lama.

Xinjiang: The US and the United Kingdom (UK) have formally condemned the Chinese Regime's oppression of the Uyghurs as 'a policy of genocide and crimes against humanity'. A German initiative has led to similar condemnations from the UK, Dutch and Canadian Parliaments. Condemnation has also come from 39 members of the United Nations (UN) (though 45 nations have also endorsed China's oppression!). Besides, a ban has been imposed on many of China's culpable officials, while Australia has banned the import of Xinjiang products. However, the silence of Islamic nations against atrocities against their fraternity remains deafening; for them money and strategic interests clearly matter more.

Hong Kong: The CPC Regime has demonstrated its insulation from political scruples by retracting from China's treaty obligations with the former British colony's administration. Contrary to its promise of fostering 'one country, two systems' at least till 2047, it has clamped down on Hong Kong's political autonomy as well as its media and citizenry's democratic rights. In practice, China's punitive behaviour on the ground goes even beyond the provisions of its new 'National Security Law-2020'. As stated, China's treatment of Hong Kong has drawn widespread condemnation in the US, UK and Europe, but that has not brought any restraint on her abrasive conduct.

Zeal of Autocracy: Social unrest is rising in China against the Party-Police State treating its people like herds bonded to long-outdated hard-core communist decrees. The omnipresent CPC Cells' vice-like grip over every institution, organisation, society, religion, custom, business, education, sports, industry, etc., are already known. In April 2021, the Regime has further tightened that grip through the issuance of a new decree for the religious leaders to 'support the Communist Party'. The Party has also assumed 'direct control' over colleges and universities in order to exercise 'comprehensive leadership over teaching, scientific research and administration'. Consolidation of President Xi Jinping's 'socialism with Chinese characteristics in a new era' and 'patriotic dedication' are the stated purpose. China's intellectuals are an anguished lot.

Sign of the Time

The history of expanding empires displays a somewhat common pattern. Territorial, cross-culture expansion beyond a range causes the sinews of central control to stretch, whereas people's yearning for autonomy from central autocracy gathers momentum. In the regional arena, opposition to the propensity for destabilising a placid socio-political order builds-up to the eventual formation of a coalition of distraught

stakeholders. Coalescence of political, cultural and geographic barriers thus shape-up to halt, sometimes even reverse, any expansionist spread.

That such coalition of the modest could disavow even the avarice of a giant power, is a historical fact. Dissolution of political constructs in the erstwhile USSR, Yugoslavia, Levant, Anatolia, etc., are some examples. There are serious flaws in the Chinese Regime's vision if it fails to see the sign of the time.

The Finale

For the second time after 1962, the PRC has managed to alienate the goodwill and trust of a key neighbour, its well-wisher and friend, nearly one-seventh of humanity and a potentially endowed partner in global politics and commerce -- India. It has sponsored violence to destabilise most of its neighbours – Indonesia, India, Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar being some key examples. It has proliferated nuclear weaponisation and stolen designs and intellectual properties from advanced countries. It has used its techno-economic leverages to exploit nations in want and used force to violate foreign territories. By offensive military posturing, it has vitiated relations with the Republic of China (ROC), Vietnam and Japan. Blowing political decorum to the winds, it has jumped at every fracture to cosy-up with globally designated and sanctioned rogue regimes just to wrest favours for political-economic aggrandisement. It has retracted from its commitment to 'one country two systems' in Hong Kong. Conversely, it has relied at various times on such irresponsible regimes for its company as North Korea, Pol Pot's Cambodia, many of the African despots and Pakistan, and has soft-played their vicious acts of genocide and terrorism.

The scale of military expenditure and build-up of military capability indicates the CPC Regime's strategic aspirations.

In the domestic arena, its methods of building a prosperous China have wrought immense distress, destruction and death upon its people, scars of which persist. Similarly, its methods of 'integrating' the peripheral territories and native cultures have been draconian in their extremes. In informed perception, even the global explosion of the Covid-19 pandemic has been attributed to China.

Further, the scale of military expenditure and build-up of military capability indicates the CPC Regime's strategic aspirations. According to the latest SIPRI analysis,

China's military spending has risen by 76 per cent in the 2011–20 period, to \$252 billion.¹ Even if the PRC must possess strong military power to be a global leader, the question arises as to why must it build-up such a gigantic military machine unless it is to force its way to its long planned usurpations - territorial and economic - against nations who do not submit. China's military build-up has triggered increased military spending in the region - quoted as India (\$72.9 billion), Japan (\$49.1 billion), South Korea (\$45.7 billion) and Australia (\$27.5 billion).²

It is obvious that the all-powerful CPC-led PRC Regime believes in rough-riding its way through and conducting its affairs with the backing of brute force. Indeed, hawkish elements in the CPC are unlikely to leave their quarry alone. The Regime will not de-escalate, nor will it share its claimed strategic and economic space with any other contending power. Dominance, not equality, is its sole choice. More intrusions and muscle flexing accompanied by coarse threats and stern 'warnings' should be expected in the coming days. At an opportune moment, the Chinese Regime could decide to 'no longer tolerate intransigence' from its quarries, and find 'no option' but to, deploy its standard lie: 'counter- attack in self-defence' to chastise the 'troublemaker'. Conflict with the US and its allies would be intrinsic to that objective.³

Here is a perplexing case of what could be a globally esteemed power disorienting itself to opt for a route that runs in the opposite direction to its stated destination: peaceful realisation of the 'Chinese Dream'.

Laws of Nature's Balance

Humanity does not rest bound by what it despises. It is therefore a matter of time when resistance against China's economic exploitation, industrial malpractices and political duplicities would consolidate strong enough to chastise the Regime to mend its ways should it wish to last, which it obviously does. Presently, mounting refutation of China's military overreach, further flared by convergence of global angst against its Covid-19 complicity, might convince the Regime to defray, for the time being, its idea of usurpation of claimed territories. That offers the victim nations some time to organise themselves.

Historically, Chinese empires have always been toppled or unhinged by internal uprisings. Presently, there is the simmering of internal disquiet building up within the

Chinese society and even some of its political factions who await opportunities to redeem against the charges of 'corruption and Party indiscipline'. This simmer is capped by Xi Jinping Regime's ruthless autocratic enforcements. But that could burst out at some stage.

The Regime's 'Chinese Dream' therefore begins on a wrong foot when it attempts to trample its way through. Alternately, realisation may dawn over the Chinese communist Regime's observable afflictions, that the key to global as well as domestic power is not just the possession of hard military power; it is in being seen as a by and large benevolent, trustworthy, and a free, democratic society.

Calling a Halt to Arrogation

Political wisdom tells that beyond a point, the tormented are liable to join-up in protecting their collective interests. Thus, diplomatic, economic and military – and possibly domestic-resistance from the distressed could catalyse a halt to China's imperialistic designs. Hopefully, therefore, subjects of the PRC's arbitrary appropriations, current and future, would close ranks to impress the CPC to desist. But for that wisdom, will and organisation to manifest, the affected parties need to overcome China's machinations of 'divide and upstage' and its insistence on shady 'bilateral settlements' – unencumbered exploitation in unequal terms.

Nations affected by China's war-dance have little option but to shed the temptation for fence sitting while picking up the crumbs of short-term gains. For their good, they have to come together and display unacceptance of the Regimes destabilising ways in favour of a peaceful, equitable and egalitarian rise. Hopefully then, a great nation, an inheritor of hoary *Wisdom* and international standing could realize, much to all round relief, what it preaches: its 'peaceful rise'.

All that is a long shot. Xi Regime's currently designated target, India, will have to proceed, to quote Rabindranath Tagore, in '*Ekla Chalo Re*' (pioneer along) mode. As they say, 'others will join the caravan'. That, however, is another narrative.

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