

China's Peaceful Rise or Assertive Turn? Evaluating Beijing's Indo-Pacific Strategy

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Abstract:

China's rapid rise is transforming the regional dynamics in the Indo-Pacific driven by its expanding economic footprint and increasing strategic assertiveness. While China claims that its rise is peaceful, many western scholars and policymakers interpret China's growing influence as assertive behavior that aims to challenge the rules-based international order. This study challenges the conventional binary between China's "peaceful rise" narrative and Western perceptions of hegemonic ambition by analyzing through the lens of English School of Thought. The research qualitative and analytical in nature, relying mainly on secondary sources. The research finds that China's strategy is deliberate synthesis of economic development and strategic assertiveness that reflects key assumptions of the English School. On one hand, China projects a peaceful image rooted in interdependence and shared norms through BRI and broader global economic integration. On the other hand, its security architecture reveals an assertive drive to safeguard interests and reshape regional hierarchies that aligns with the English School's notion of international society, where states operate within a network of shared norms and rules while pursuing self-interest. This dual-track approach makes China's rise both cooperative and competitive, challenging simplistic characterizations and underscoring the complexity of Beijing's Indo-Pacific engagement.

Keywords: China, Indo-Pacific, Pax-Sinica, international order, assertiveness, geopolitical change

INTRODUCTION

The most significant development in the 21st century is China's rise as a major power that has changed the landscape of world politics. Graham Allison in his book *Destined of War*, argues that "the world has never seen anything like the rapid, tectonic shift in the global balance of power created by the rise of China" (Allison 2017: 16). The Global South has welcomed this significant development; however, the Global North seems more apprehensive.

Over the span of two decades, China has emerged as a major global power which significantly polarized the international opinion. The Western Bloc criticizes China's rise as threat to the existing regional and global order neglecting the fact that except 100 years (1839-1949), which Chinese call

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as the "Century of Humiliation," China was the largest economy in the world alongside India. Henry Kissinger in his book *On China* said, "as late as 1820, China produced 30% of the Global GDP, an amount greater than the combined GDP of Europe and the US" (Kissinger 2012: 12).

In 1949, China under the leadership of Mao Zedong emerged from the turmoil of a long civil war, fueled by nationalistic and ideological fervor, determined to break free from poverty and the chains of servitude. After the demise of Chairman Mao in 1976, Deng Xiao Ping assumed the presidential office and brought fundamental reforms in the economic policy framework. The new Chinese leader shifted China away from a centralized economic system to a "new socialist market economy" with Chinese characteristics (Keo 2020: 35). From 1978 to 1999, China maintained the annual GDP in double figure. In 2001, China joined the WTO, marking a decisive step toward integrating with global political economy. Therefore, China experienced its most rapid economic expansion when it became the member of WTO. China's GDP grew from US\$1.2 trillion (S\$1.62 trillion) in 2000 to US\$11.1 trillion (S\$14.9 trillion) in 2015" (Mahbubani 2020: 36). According to 2023 World Bank data, the GDP of China grew by 5.3%, reaching around \$17.79 trillion (World Bank, 2023).

Over the past four decades, Beijing implemented various economic reforms that significantly reduced the development disparity between urban and rural areas which eventually led to substantial improvements in the population's living standards. Moreover, in order to increase Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), China established multiple "Special Economic Zones" in Xiamen, Shenzhen, Shantou and Zhuhai. These economic zones serve as key drivers of China's economy. Furthermore, Deng Xiaoping's initiative to send a huge number of students from China to study at Western universities played a vital role in accelerating China's overall modernization (Zeng, 2012).

From the beginning of 21st century, China emerged as the top destination for FDI across the Global South. In 2002, for the first time, China surpassed the USA to become largest recipient of foreign capital (Wu, 2004: 03). Simultaneously, China expanded foreign trade by growing its manufacturing sector. This has not only generated crucial foreign exchange but also facilitated technology transfer. Hence, trade remained a prominent factor behind Chinese economic development. Now, China stands as the largest trading country across the globe (Sun & Heshmati 2012: 35).

The reform trajectory initiated in 1978-79 has steadily progressed under successive Chinese leaders. Since assuming office in 2013, President Xi has further strengthened this trajectory. In his address at the 20th National Congress of Chinese Communist Party (CPC), he highlighted the significance of "breaking new ground" while urging the Chinese people to prepare for "high winds, choppy waters and even dangerous storms," referring to the unprecedented global changes occurring in the contemporary era (Zhao, 2023).

China followed a distinct path to modernization, aiming at national rejuvenation at its own pace. This approach is deeply rooted in China's cultural ethos and shaped by its unique national circumstances. From Beijing's lens, the Western model of governance do not align with China's national conditions. Similarly, China does not support the existing global governance model, which it considers unjust and biased or discriminatory. Hence, China aims to "build a global network of partnerships and foster a new type of international relations" (Jiechi 2015: 16).

Nevertheless, the Western world considers that Beijing's ultimate aim is to "wreck" the world order. Moreover, China's recent activities in the South China Sea are significantly challenging the

status quo. However, China claims that its rise is peaceful. President Xi, while addressing the 19th National Congress of the CPC, stated that “no matter what stage of development China reaches, it will never seek hegemony or have any aim to engage in expansionism.” Nonetheless, China seeks to protect its core interests by redefining the rules of international system (Yamaguchi 2016: 80).

Since 2013, China has launched several vibrant multilateral initiatives. The two key pillars of Beijing's grand strategy are the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Simultaneously, Beijing has modernized & enhanced its military capabilities and developed artificial islands to protect what it defines its core interests.

Therefore, China's rapid ascent as a major power has become one of the most contested developments in contemporary international politics. Some scholars argue that Beijing is increasingly adopting the behavioral patterns of a rising hegemon: assertive in its military posture, revisionist in its regional ambitions and disruptive to the existing Indo-Pacific order. However, China claims that its rise is peaceful, cooperative and grounded in respect for sovereignty. These competing narratives have polarized academic and policy debates obscuring the underlying dynamics that shape China's conduct. This study examines how China's 21st-century strategy reveals the nature of its rise and evaluates whether Beijing acts as a peaceful reformist power or an assertive order-challenger in the Indo-Pacific.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The rise of China has been a central topic for International Relations scholars and practitioners since the beginning of 21st century. John Mearsheimer argues that China's ascent represents an inevitable challenge to the existing US-led order. In “The Tragedy of Great Power Politics”, he maintains that rising powers seek regional hegemony and predicted an intensification of Sino-US rivalry and potential conflict (Mearsheimer, 2001). Aaron Friedberg also foresees strategic competition, contending that divergent political systems prevent the development of durable trust (Friedberg, 2011). However, Graham Allison's “Thucydides Trap” thesis predicts that historical patterns demonstrate rising–ruling power dynamics often lead to confrontations (Allison, 2017)

Henry Kissinger and David Shambaugh offer more moderated assessments. Kissinger argues that China's rise is historically conditioned and strategically cautious. Thus, it emphasizes on diplomatic coexistence rather than overt confrontation” (Kissinger, 2012). Shambaugh argues that China remains a “partial power,” powerful but constrained by domestic governance challenges (Shambaugh, 2013). Fareed Zakaria situates China's rise within a broader “post-American world,” arguing that diffusion of power rather than a hegemonic transition defines contemporary international politics (Zakaria, 2009). Kishore Mahbubani adopts an Asian realist-liberal hybrid view, arguing that China's rise is largely peaceful and rooted in economic integration rather than ideological expansion (Mahbubani, 2022). Layne, meanwhile, argues that US relative decline is structural rather than temporary that creates systemic space for China's influence; he views the end of unipolarity as inevitable and anticipates a transition toward a multipolar order (Layne, 2012).

Chinese scholars provide distinctively indigenous frameworks. Yan Xuetong advances a moral realist theory, arguing that leadership legitimacy and moral authority are not just material power, it shapes China's international influence (Yan, 2019). Qin Yaqing introduces relational theory portraying China as seeking order through relationships rather than rule-based liberal norms (Qin,

2018) Feng Zhang emphasizes China's dual identity, oscillating between traditional Tianxia-inspired ideas and pragmatic realpolitik (Zhang, 2011)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research employs a qualitative research approach and adopts a descriptive and analytical design. It seeks to evaluate China's Indo-Pacific strategy through the theoretical lens of English School of International relations. The research utilized document analysis as the primary method for data collection. Key government publications were identified and reviewed to extract relevant insights into the policy frameworks and strategic priorities. The major portion of the study relies on secondary sources including scholarly books, journal articles, newspaper articles and reports. Secondary data sources are selected based on their credibility, relevance and publication by established institutions or scholars. The study primarily focuses on the post-2008 era, a period marked by the intensification of strategic competition between the United States and China. The study employed thematic analysis to assess how China integrates economic and strategic tools to influence the Indo-Pacific and potentially shape a geopolitical landscape.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Beijing's strategy in the Indo-Pacific can be better analyzed through the lens of the English School. Hedley Bull in his book *"The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics"* defines an international system as emerging "when two or more states engage in enough interaction and influence each other's decisions to the extent that they function as parts of a larger whole" (1977: 9-10). In this view, the international system is primarily concerned with power politics among states, where state behaviors are shaped by the anarchic international system. While an international society is formed when a group of countries sharing similar values see themselves as bound by a shared set of rules and collaborate in shared institutions (Bull 1977: 13). Lastly, World society is viewed as a more foundational concept than international society because it places individuals, rather than states, at the center of the global community. It transcends the traditional state-centric framework by emphasizing the role of human beings, transnational actors and the broader global population as the core units shaping collective identities and interactions (Bull 1977: 21).

Within the International society, there are two main perspectives pluralism and solidarism. Pluralists focuses on the diversity of states and emphasizes the significance of respecting sovereignty and non-intervention. In a pluralist society, the priority is maintaining order and coexistence, even when states have different values and political systems (Bull 1977: 50-52). On the other hand, Solidarists believe that states and the international community should work towards a deeper cooperation based on shared norms, values and principles (Bull 1977: 74).

It is significant to note that the scholars of English school do not neglect the phenomenon of anarchy and violence in international relations. Martin Wight, in his most prominent article "Why is there no International Theory?" argues that domestic politics is often associated with the pursuit of the "good life," focusing on welfare, justice and social order within a state, whereas international politics primarily revolves around questions of power, security and survival in an anarchic global environment (Wight, 1995: 32). Hence, the English School of thought serves as a bridge between the Realist and Liberal paradigms. It acknowledges that each approach offers valuable insights into the nature of world politics. The realist perspective argues that states must ensure their own

security in an anarchic international system. It is significant, as it focuses on how adversaries try to outmaneuver, control and dominate one another. Nevertheless, the realist perspective only addresses a portion of the complexities of the world politics. According to the English School, the international system is not perpetually in a state of war, even though each state maintains a monopoly over the means of violence within its territory (Linklater, 2005: 85-87). In a nutshell, the English School of thought contends that the international political system possesses a greater degree of civility and order than what realists and neo-realists typically acknowledge, while still recognizing that force and violence remain inherent features of international relations.

Hence, English School of Thought bridges the gap between realism and idealism by offering a well-balanced understanding of world politics. It emphasizes the coexistence of states in an anarchic international system while recognizing the significance of shared norms, values and institutions that contribute to a degree of order and cooperation among states.

China's strategy in the Indo-Pacific aligns closely with the principles of the English School. Rather than pursuing dominance through military power, Beijing presents its rise as a "peaceful" endeavor aimed at fostering a "harmonious world" or a "community with a shared future." This narrative is reflected in China's active participation in multilateral frameworks such as ASEAN and its flagship project BRI, which emphasizes infrastructure development and regional economic connectivity. Moreover, one of the central tenets of the BRI is its framing as an inclusive and open pathway toward collective modernization and the realization of a global community of shared future.

China's policies in the Indo-Pacific also reflect the English School's concept of pluralism, which emphasizes respect for sovereignty and the coexistence of multiple political and economic systems. China advocates for a multipolar world order in which power is distributed more evenly among major powers and diverse governance models are recognized and respected. Hence, China's strategy can be seen not as an attempt to challenge the existing international order, but by shaping global norms and institutions to better reflect its interests and values.

GEOSTRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION FOR CHINA

Indo-Pacific region is a central strategic theater for the great power competition. The term "Indo-Pacific" has been used in US strategic discourse for about a decade. In the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), the Indo-Pacific term mentioned twelve times (National Security Strategy, 2017). In 2018, the US renamed its Pacific Command (PACOM) to the Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) (Garamone, 2018). However, Chinese leaders are reluctant to use Indo-Pacific term. No official document issued by China has yet used the term "Indo-Pacific." Chinese use the prevalent term "Asia-Pacific" (He & Li, 2020: 01). In the 2019 White Paper, "Asia-Pacific" was mentioned ten times. (China's National Defense in the New Era, 2019). China views the term "Indo-Pacific" as the US-led strategy to contain Beijing's peaceful rise. Nonetheless, the Indo-Pacific term is now frequently used in the scholarship and government publications. However, the region lies between Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean is immensely significant for China and its national Interests.

The Indo-Pacific region, particularly the South China Sea holds strategic significance for China and it is often regarded as jugular vein for China. Since the ancient times, this region has served as a hub for trade, cultural exchange and the projection of political power across neighboring countries. For centuries, it facilitated global trade through merchant fleets, ships, and vessels. Furthermore, the

South China Sea played a pivotal role as a transit route for naval fleets navigating between the Indian and Pacific Oceans that allows political access to Southeast Asia. Moreover, its strategic location has consistently made it a flash point of Beijing's growing influence. In the present era, the South China Sea has emerged as a central element of China's national interests and sovereignty because of its vital geostrategic and geo-economic importance. China claims nearly the entire SCS through its Nine-Dash line. The Philippines filed a case against China in the Permanent Court of arbitration. The court issued a ruling against China's claims. Nevertheless, China rejected the decision and enhanced military presence in the region.



(Source, Global Defense Insight, 2024)

The chain of islands in the SCS stretches from the Taiwan Strait in the northeast to the Strait of Malacca in the southwest. The region consists of numerous small islands that includes reefs, rocks, cays, sandbars, islets and atolls. Some of these are submerged during high tide, while others emerge during low tide. Moreover, these islands are categorized into six main groups: the Pratas Islands (Dongsha), the Spratly Islands (Nansha), the Paracel Islands (Xisha), the Macclesfield Bank (Zhongsha) and the Scarborough Shoal. However, among these islands, the Spratly and Paracel Islands hold the greatest strategic importance (Hayton, 2014)

Moreover, the South China Sea serves as a vital maritime corridor for the transportation of manufactured goods to Asia, Africa, Europe and other regions across the globe. This route is a key conduit for the much of maritime traffic that travels between East and West, traversing regions such as Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe. Annually, shipping lanes through the South China Sea facilitate the movement of goods valued at approximately \$5 trillion representing around 50% of the world's total merchant fleet tonnage and around 1/3 of the global maritime traffic. The Strait of Malacca alone accommodates 20% of international maritime trade and 60% of China's trade flow, demonstrates its paramount importance as a strategic sea line of communication (SLOC) for China (Denamiel & Brown, 2024).

In 2003, Chinese President Hu Jintao introduced the term "Malacca Dilemma" to characterize China's strategic vulnerability in the South China Sea, particularly its dependence on the Strait of Malacca for energy imports and trade routes. He expressed concern over China's limited alternatives and its exposure to potential naval blockades by noting that "certain powers have all along encroached on and tried to control navigation through the Malacca Strait." The phrase

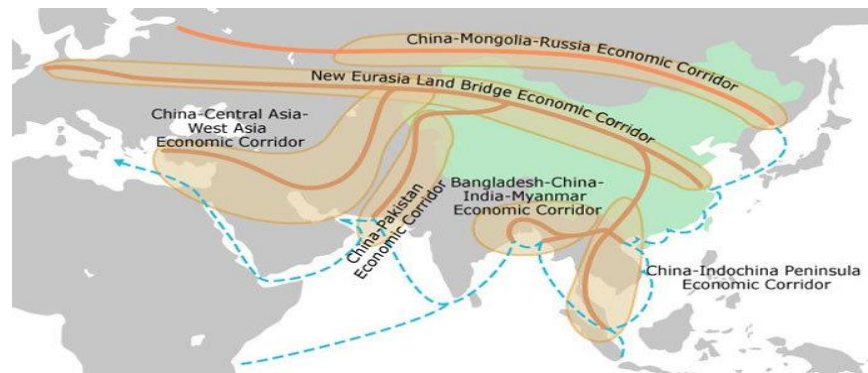
“certain powers” was widely interpreted as a reference to Washington and its dominant naval presence in the region (Paszak, 2021).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): China's Grand Strategy for the 21st Century

President Xi Jinping unveiled Beijing's grand strategy in 2013 during his official visit to Astana and Jakarta. The BRI has two main components, the overland Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road. Initially, it was referred to as the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) aims to enhance connectivity and economic cooperation across Asia, Europe and Africa. Nonetheless, in 2016, OBOR was changed to the BRI. The change was made to show a broader and more inclusive vision of this mega initiative to emphasize the significance of both land-based and maritime routes and to make the name more internationally appealing. The new name also better captured the goal of fostering global economic cooperation and connectivity across multiple regions (McBride et al., 2019).

BRI seeks to enhance China's global connectivity. China's aim behind this ambitious project stems from multiple factors that include dominating the geo-economics and the need to address its growing energy demands and to establish alternative trade routes, particularly to minimize its dependence on the Malacca strait which is a major challenge, often referred to as the "Malacca Dilemma."

Understanding the dynamics of BRI is essential, as it represents a comprehensive and systematic strategy that spans multiple sectors, industries and regions. BRI is a modern continuation and revival of ancient trade routes that once connected Chinese merchants with counterparts in Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe as early as the 7th century. These routes fell into disuse over time for various reasons. Today, the initiative is often referred to as the New Silk Road or the 21st Century Silk Road that symbolizes a return to China's golden age of prosperity during the Han Dynasty, a period known as Pax Sinica or "Chinese Peace." In this revival, the traditional caravans and camels of the past have been replaced by modern cranes and construction crews, signifying the transformation of ancient trade into a dynamic contemporary network (The Silk Road, 2014).



(Source: Banque de France, 2019)

According to the Perking University Professor Yang Baoyun, “similar to the ancient trade routes, the modern Maritime Silk Road will deliver concrete benefits to neighboring countries along its path and serve as a new engine of growth for the entire East Asian region”. Furthermore, Zhang illustrated that “successful implementation of connectivity projects within the region could significantly enhance the interconnection between countries, unlocking greater potential within the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area” (Zhang, 2013). The BRI comprises of six overland corridors that

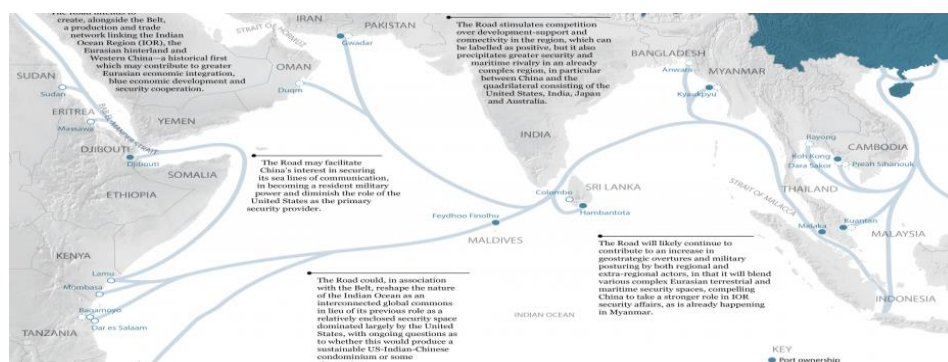
constitute “Belt” and three blue economic corridors that form the maritime “Road.” Therefore, considering the scope of the study, this paper only focusses on Maritime Silk Road.

The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR)

In 2013, President Xi unveiled initiatives to create new maritime trade infrastructure along the historic Marco Polo route, forming a modern Maritime Silk Road (MSR) that connects China with major economic hubs across the globe. The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) represents the maritime dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), encompassing potential investments of \$1.2 trillion in major infrastructure projects, primarily the development of ports. Within this massive and evolving framework, Chinese investment is particularly concentrated in the IOR, prompting concerns regarding the motivations for China's significant port investments whether they are primarily driven by economic objectives or strategic ambitions (Ghiassy et al., 2018).

The Indo-Pacific region serves as a vital hub of global commerce and is poised to grow even more in the near future. The world's ten busiest container ports are located either at the shores of the Pacific or Indian Oceans, which signifies region's centrality to global maritime trade. Additionally, more than 50% of the total maritime petroleum trade across the world passes through the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, since 1970, commercial shipping volumes have increased fourfold, with approximately 9.84 billion tons of goods transported annually. Moreover, exports from the Asian countries are projected to increase from 17% in 2010 to 28% by the end of 2030, which highlights the region's growing economic dynamism and strategic significance (Funaiole & Hillman, 2018).

China continuously claims that the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) aims to foster global integration and stimulate economic growth. However, some analysts remain skeptical of China's underlying intentions, particularly regarding its significant investment in strategic ports. In 2017, Chinese enterprises announced their plans to acquire or invest in nine overseas ports, five of which were located in the IOR. Critics of the MSR argues that, although economic factors may contribute, nonetheless, these investments are primarily driven by strategic motives. Central to this critique is the concern that China could eventually utilize MSR-linked ports to support military operations and advance its expanding security interests in the region (Funaiole & Hillman, 2018).



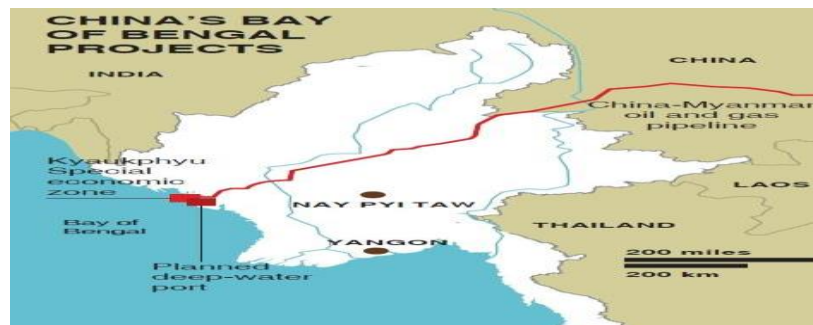
(Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2018)

Strategic Implications of the MSR

The various characteristics that contribute to a port's commercial viability also enhance its strategic importance. For instance, deep-sea ports are capable of handling larger commercial cargo ships while accommodating large military vessels, making them dual-purpose assets with both

economic and strategic significance. These concerns have focused on various port projects that include Kyaukpyu, Hambantota and Gwadar Port (Funairole & Hillman, 2018).

In the recent years, Chinese enterprises have made agreements with Myanmar to develop a \$7.3 billion deep-sea port at Kyaukpyu, alongside a \$2.7 billion industrial area within a nearby special economic zone. Kyaukpyu serves as the terminus for a \$1.5 billion oil pipeline and a parallel natural gas pipeline connecting Myanmar to Kunming, China (Poling, 2018). These initiatives highlight strategic efforts of China to minimize its reliance on energy imports passing through the vulnerable Malacca Strait. Moreover, a deep-sea port at Kyaukpyu could facilitate the economic development of China's inland provinces. Nevertheless, there are regional concerns particularly from India over the possibility of China utilizing the port for military purposes. Furthermore, Myanmar's primary apprehension lies in China's potential economic leverage through debt-financed projects, which could increase Myanmar's dependency on China (Poling, 2018). Similarly, both Hambantota and Gwadar Ports hold significant potential for strategic purposes.



(Source: Frontier Myanmar, 2017)

According to Matthew Funairole and Jonathan Hillman, the growing naval presence of China in the Indian Ocean is a natural phenomenon of a rising power that expand military operations to align with its global interests. China's economy is heavily dependent on the maritime trade routes that passes through the IOR, making its efforts to secure its strategic interests in this region unsurprising (Funairole & Hillman, 2018).

The military implications of China's activities in the Indian Ocean are very much clear. In the times of peace, these engagements are likely to enhance Beijing's regional influence by opening access to regional port facilities for refueling and resupplying naval vessels, supporting anti-piracy operations and fostering familiarity with other regional militaries. However, China's presence in the Indian Ocean could pose significant vulnerabilities. Safeguarding trade routes, military bases and naval assets in such a vast and strategically contested region may prove challenging, creating risks alongside opportunities (Funairole & Hillman, 2018). While the United States seeking to cut off China's "maritime silk road" (Yale, 2015) thereby limiting China's expansion to its continental "economic belt". Hence, both major powers are projecting their influence in maritime domain to secure their key strategic interests.

China's Ambitions behind BRI

China has both geopolitical and geo-economic motives behind this mega project. Western scholars view the BRI as a central component of China's increasingly assertive statecraft under the leadership of Xi Jinping. Nevertheless, for Beijing, the BRI serves as a countermeasure to the US

"Pivot to Asia" strategy, which actually led China to establish new trade routes, expand export markets, boost domestic income and to utilize its surplus industrial capacity. As noted by David Sacks, a Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) expert on Sino-US relations, "China has achieved considerable success in redrawing global trade networks in ways that place itself, rather than the United States or Europe at the center." (McBride et al., 2019).

China is also seeking to strengthen global economic ties to its historically underdeveloped western regions. Promoting economic growth in Xinjiang is key priority for China due to rising separatist movements. Moreover, China seeks to secure long-term energy supplies from Central Asia and the Middle East, particularly through routes that cannot be disrupted by the US military (McBride et al., 2019).

Military Strategy and Military Modernization

China's approach to military modernization and defense policy has been systematically articulated in the CPC Congress reports and successive Defense White Papers. These documents emphasize that China's military strategy is designed to ensure national sovereignty, territorial integrity and security, while simultaneously promoting the vision of a "peaceful rise." The discourse employed in the White Papers adopts a constructive tone that illustrates concepts such as "community with a shared future for mankind."

During the 19th CPC Congress, Chinese President reaffirmed that China's growth poses no threat to any country, stressing that Beijing harbors no ambitions for hegemony or territorial expansion. The leadership's stated objective is to ensure that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) achieves basic modernization by 2035 with an ultimate aim to transform it into a world-class military by the mid of 21st century.

The emphasis on maritime strength has been a consistent element of this strategic vision. In 2012, former President Hu Jintao at the 18th CPC Congress emphasized the importance of developing China into a "maritime power" to safeguard its maritime rights and interests, a vision subsequently reaffirmed by his successor, Xi Jinping. By 2018, Xi had emphasized to build a powerful navy. Subsequently, it was institutionalized in the 2019 Defense White Paper, which significantly addressed the imperative of developing a modern, capable naval force that able to conduct far-sea operations (Information Office of the State Council, 2019).

China's military modernization and the construction of artificial islands in the SCS serve both strategic and deterrent functions aimed at preventing external intervention, especially from the US, in its near seas. Furthermore, Beijing continues to prioritize the enhancement of counter-intervention and regional operational capabilities, with a focus on maintaining control over strategically significant maritime zones, notably the East China Sea and the South China Sea.

The modernization of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) represents a central pillar of this broader transformation. In 1996, China's surface fleet comprised of 57 destroyers and frigates, only three of which were equipped with short-range surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), leaving the rest highly vulnerable to modern anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs). At that time, nearly 75% of China's 80 attack submarines were outdated Soviet-era Romeo-class vessels. However, over the past few decades, the PLAN has undergone rapid and comprehensive modernization.

By 2015, the PLAN had surpassed the US Navy in terms of total fleet size, a trend that has continued in subsequent years (Du, 2023). Currently, China possesses the largest navy in the world that comprise of approximately 234 major warships, compared to the US Navy's 219. This figure includes all active-duty, manned Chinese vessels exceeding 1,000 metric tons and equipped with missiles or torpedoes, such as the 22 missile-armed corvettes recently integrated into the China Coast Guard. Notably, this total excludes roughly 80 smaller missile-equipped patrol craft operated by the PLAN.

By contrast, the often-cited 290-ship figure for the US Navy's battle force includes combat logistics and auxiliary vessels. Of these, approximately 126 belong to the US Navy's support fleet, including ships under the Military Sealift Command, whereas the PLAN operates around 167 such vessels (Nicholas et al., 2014).

The PLAN has achieved significant progress across multiple operational domains in recent years. By 2017, more than 70% of the PLAN's fleet was considered "modern," a remarkable increase from less than 50% recorded in 2010 (Du, 2023). This modernization drive has been accompanied by the development of larger and more sophisticated vessels capable of integrating advanced weapon systems and onboard technologies.

A key milestone in this progression was the induction of the Type 055 guided-missile cruiser in 2019, which represented a major leap in naval engineering. The vessel possesses a displacement 4,000–5,000 tons greater than the earlier Type 052D destroyer introduced in 2014. Equipped with 112 vertical launch system (VLS) cells, the Type 055 significantly enhances China's long-range air defense and fleet escort capabilities, enabling it to effectively support carrier strike groups and conduct sustained blue-water operations (Heginbotham et al., 2015: 179).

Beyond surface fleet expansion, China has made notable advances in unmanned and autonomous maritime systems i.e. Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUVs), Unmanned Surface Vehicles (USVs) and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) technologies designed to strengthen the PLAN's capacity for autonomous underwater exploration, surveillance, reconnaissance and anti-submarine warfare (Panneerselvam, 2023).

Development of Artificial Islands in the Indo-Pacific Region

China began to construct artificial islands in December 2013. These artificial islands are approximately 3,000 acres spread across seven coral reefs under its control in the Spratly Islands, situated in the southern region of the South China Sea. Furthermore, in order to construct these islands, Chinese dredgers collected and deposited sand and gravel onto the reefs. While much of the international attention on these activities has centered around issues of sovereignty, security and geopolitics, there has also been growing concern about the environmental impact. Leading marine scientists, the Philippine government and the Commander of the US INDOPACOM have all voiced alarm regarding the ecological consequences.

Although activities such as dredging, land reclamation and artificial island construction are not exclusive to China, the unprecedented scale and rapid implementation of these projects in the South China Sea particularly within the ecologically sensitive and biodiverse Spratly Islands have raised significant environmental and geopolitical concerns regarding China's conduct in the region. According to South China Morning Post, the three artificial islands, Yongshu (Fiery Cross Reef),

Meiji (Mischief Reef) and Zhubi (Subi Reef) are fully militarized with anti-aircraft and anti-ship missile system, fighter jets and laser and jamming equipment, forming a triangular defense position aimed at countering the US bases in the region (Chen, 2024).

Yongshu (Fiery Cross Reef)

Youngshu or Fiery Cross Reef is situated in the Spratly Islands. China initially took possession of this atoll in 1988 ("Fiery cross reef," 2022). In 2014, China began land reclamation in the area, transforming it into an artificial island covering 677 acres. By the end of 2014, around 200 Chinese troops were deployed on the atoll; however, this number likely increased substantially in 2015 with the arrival of additional support personnel for the newly built airbase, which features a 1.9-mile-long runway and an early-warning radar installation (Ana, 2014).



(Source: Asian Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2017)

According to the CSIS, Fiery Cross Reef is regarded as “the most advanced of China’s military installations” in the disputed South China Sea. The facility includes 12 reinforced shelters with retractable roofs designed to house mobile missile launchers, all of which have been completed (Heath, 2015). In addition, the base contains hangars capable of accommodating 24 fighter jets and four larger aircraft. Its runway is sufficiently long to support operations by the Chinese Xian H-6G bomber, that allows combat missions to be carried out within a 5,600-kilometer radius from the reclaimed reef ("Airpower in the South China Sea," 2019).

Meiji (Mischief Reef)

Mischief Reef is situated about 200 KM west of Palawan and is one of the largest reefs in the Spratly Islands. It spans approximately 22.8 KM long and consists of a series of shallow areas and submerged features. Mischief reef has become a flash point for territorial disputes due to its strategic location and the competing claims made by China, the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries (Ratcliffe, 2024).



(Source: Asian Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2020)

In 1995, China began constructing structures on Mischief Reef, claiming they served civilian purposes. The Philippine government protested this move, asserting that China was infringing on its territory. Despite this, PRC commenced land reclamation activities at Mischief Reef in the mid-2010s, converting the reef into an artificial island. By 2016, China had constructed a significant military outpost there, including facilities to support military operations. This includes a 3,000-meter runway, hangars for aircraft and hardened shelters for missile launchers. The base is capable of supporting various military assets to enhance China's power projection in the region. In addition, this artificial island serves as a key logistics hub for the PLAN and enables China to conduct operations throughout the South China Sea (Fox, 2021).

Zhubi (Subi Reef)

Zhubi, often known as Subi Reef is located approximately 30 nautical miles east of Mischief Reef and about 250 kilometers west of Palawan, Philippines. The reef forms part of a chain within the Spratly Islands. In the 1980s, the Philippines began to establish a presence on Subi Reef, but China also laid claim to it, asserting that it was historically part of its territory (Hernández et al., 2016).



(Source: Asian Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2017)

In 2014, China initiated significant land reclamation activities at Subi Reef, converting it into an artificial island. The construction was complete in 2016, the island was developed into a military outpost with extensive facilities that includes a 3,000-meter runway, hangars and military infrastructure designed to support various military operations. The Subi Reef has been equipped with radar systems, missile launchers and other military assets that aims to enhance PRC military presence throughout the South China Sea (China secretly build base on Subi reef, 2024).

From Rhetoric to Reality: Is China's Rise Peaceful?

China's strategy reflects a deliberate synthesis of both economic development and strategic assertiveness which reflects the key assumptions of the English School of International Relations. Rather than fitting neatly into binary categorizations of "peaceful rise" or "hegemonic ambition," China's approach blends normative engagement with calculated power projection which demonstrates that its ascent is simultaneously cooperative and coercive, depending on the strategic context. China's military modernization can be viewed as a natural outcome of an anarchic international system, whereas its economic initiatives reflects the peaceful coexistence based on shared future. China projects an image of a peaceful and constructive global actor. The BRI, AIIB,

extensive trade and investment partnerships illustrate how Beijing leverages economic incentives to strengthen international influence without overt military confrontation. These initiatives serve multiple purposes such as securing markets and resources, deepening interdependence and enhancing China's normative legitimacy as a responsible global power. This emphasis on economic engagement aligns with the English School's notion of international society, where states operate within a network of shared norms and rules while pursuing self-interest. From this perspective, China's rise could be interpreted as peaceful as it emphasizes development, mutual prosperity and institution-building.

Nevertheless, China's economic diplomacy is inseparable from its assertive strategic posture, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. Expansive maritime claims in the South China Sea, rapid military modernization, development of artificial islands and proactive defense of territorial sovereignty all indicate that China is prepared to assert power when economic influence alone is insufficient. These actions significantly challenge the existing regional hierarchies and signal to Washington that China intends to protect its interests and strategic space. This dual-track approach demonstrates that China's rise is not purely benign: it combines soft power with hard power by using coercive potential to complement economic initiatives. However, having the strong military in the anarchic system is essential for any major power to secure its interests.

Currently, China is integrating in geo-economics and claims minimal interest in the traditional geopolitics. However, several scholars portray China's maritime expansion as "Blue Dragon", "String of Pearls" strategy or "debt-trap diplomacy, arguing that China is expanding its influence in geopolitics by using economy as a tool. However, one thing is clear that behind this "Community of Shared Future" slogan, China criticizes the US-led international order which has created a significant gap among global north and global south. Beijing argues that, in the upcoming multipolar system, there will be shared prosperity across the globe. This also demonstrates Beijing's intent in Global Governance.

Furthermore, it is important for any major power to dominate in geopolitics in order to become the hegemon. Though China currently avoids any direct or indirect military confrontation and portrays its rise as peaceful, but there is possibility that in future, when China will accomplish its economic milestones i.e. the completion of BRI, it may challenge the status-quo to shift from Pax-Americana to Pax-Sinica, accompanied by new set of rules and norms governing the international arena.

CONCLUSION

China's rise as a major power and its launch of vibrant economic and security initiatives have reshaped the geopolitical dynamics in the 21st century. For nearly three decades after the cold war, the US enjoyed uncontested hegemony and led the world unilaterally. However, the rise of China is posing significant challenges to the US unilateral hegemonic status in international arena. The Sino-US strategic competition intensified when Obama administration launched "Pivot to Asia", a strategy explicitly designed to counterbalance China's growing influence. As a result, the Indo-Pacific region has emerged as the primary strategic theatre for 21st century great power politics. The United States declared its official Indo-Pacific strategies aiming to contain China and sustain "rules-based international order". However, on the other hand, there is no declared strategy by Beijing, only various assumptions by different scholars and policymakers. Although Information Council of People's Republic of China released official statements and White Papers to declare its

official stance, but there is no declared strategy related to Indo-Pacific. In fact, Chinese are generally reluctant to use Indo-Pacific as geopolitical term and prefer to use prevalent term Asia-Pacific, which it views as less politicized. Beijing Claims that its rise is peaceful while western scholars and officials portrays China's growing influence as assertive behavior which is threat to the established global order. However, after thoroughly analyzing China's economic and security actions in the Indo-Pacific, it can be concluded that Beijing strategy in the Indo-Pacific is deliberate synthesis of economic development and strategic assertiveness that reflects key assumptions of the English School. Beijing projects a peaceful image grounded in interdependence and shared prosperity through global economic integration that aligns with the English School's notion of international society, where states operate within a network of shared norms and rules while pursuing self-interest. Nevertheless, its military modernization, expansive maritime claims and artificial islands reveal an assertive posture aimed at safeguarding core interests and reshaping regional hierarchies. This dual-track approach blends soft power with coercive capabilities that makes China's ascent both cooperative and competitive. Although China currently claims that it has no interest to intervene in the geopolitics and avoids direct or indirect confrontation, however, the slogan of "Community of Shared Future" reveals underlying geopolitical ambitions aimed at introducing new set of rules and norms in global governance and promote a Pax-Sinica once its long-term economic objectives are fully achieved.

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