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## The Great Dragon Awakens: China Challenges American Hegemony

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by José Miguel Alonso Trabanco

Nowadays, most International Relations analysts acknowledge China's potential to achieve superpower status over the course of the next decades due to its impressive economic growth, which was triggered by Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms program (inspired by theorists like Friedrich List).

Chinese power has also increased considerably in military, geopolitical, trade and financial affairs. Some experts have even contemplated the possibility of China becoming the world's greatest power, overtaking the US. For instance, Goldman Sachs has predicted that China's GDP will surpass America's sometime circa 2050.

However, one must always bear in mind that if Beijing indeed succeeds in becoming the 'first among equals', it would not be the first time such event takes place. The 'Middle Kingdom' was already a mighty empire thousands of years before the US was even founded. Thus, China (both as a State and as a civilization) has flourished for centuries and has outlived the Roman, Persian, Arabian, Turkish, Mongol, and British empires, which is by no means an easy accomplishment.

Needless to say, Washington feels its position might be seriously threatened in the long run. The Project for a New American Century stipulates that the US must prevent any power(s) or coalition thereof (read China and Russia) from effectively challenging American power. Therefore, America's top policy makers are well aware that China is certainly a serious contender and, for that reason, have been implementing a strategy specifically designed to check Chinese mounting power. Below we will dissect and explore American efforts meant to curb China as well as Chinese countermoves.

The US plans toward China comprises the following components:

**Number one:** An updated version of classical containment which was an American strategy conceived by US geostrategist George Kennan during the early years of the Cold War to

limit the Soviet Union's power projection capabilities. This was clearly reflected in the creation of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), an alliance whose purpose was to keep "the Americans in, the Russians out, and the Germans down".

In order to achieve Great Power status, one must ensure regional security in one's neighboring areas. This can be done by attracting potential allies, establishing a patronage over weak States and by excluding hostile powers from one's own immediate periphery. The US Monroe Doctrine, formulated at a time when America was an emerging power, is an enlightening example because it expresses American determination to enthrone Washington's exclusive primacy in the American hemisphere.

In the present day, there is not a formal structure akin to an Asian version of NATO. Nevertheless, the US has been continuously seeking to establish military bases close to Chinese borders. Washington has established a meaningful military presence in Mindanao (the Philippines), Okinawa (Japan), the Korean Peninsula, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan (which is in fact NATO-occupied). Moreover, some of China's neighbors are staunch allies of the West: Japan, Australia, Taiwan and the Philippines. All of them have forged an important degree of military cooperation with Washington and have also purchased a great deal of American-made arms.

So far, Washington has not tried to encircle China's borders as aggressively and in the case of Russia (expansion of NATO, missile defense facilities in Eastern Europe and so on). This is not because America is somehow friendlier towards China but because Beijing's military capabilities are not as threatening as those of Moscow, whose military power and huge nuclear arsenal possess the ability to challenge the US in the case of war, to say the least.

Moreover, the American '*cordon sanitaire*' around China is far from being complete. Beijing has developed a strong partnership with Moscow through the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) which also encompasses Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan Kyrgyzstan. The SCO, curiously referred to as the 'Shanghai Pact' by former Chinese President Jiang Zemin, is not yet a full-fledged military alliance but it definitely has the potential to reach that point provided Sino-Russian strategic cooperation continues to thrive in the coming years. It is interesting to highlight that the US membership application was rejected by SCO members.

It would be a severe mistake to underestimate the SCO. If its level of strategic coordination deepens, the SCO's combined power would turn to be outright frightening for NATO. SCO member States (not including observers):

- Control a vast portion of the Eurasian landmass.
- Contain huge population centers.
- Command large armies equipped with state-of-the-art weaponry (ICBMs, fighter jets, satellites, strategic bombers and fleets of tanks).
- Possess massive reserves of natural resources (oil, gas, uranium, metals and fresh water).
- Own important industrial plants.
- Have accumulated some of the largest amounts of foreign currency reserves.
- Can convince other countries to join their organization as full members like India, Pakistan, Mongolia, Iran, Turkmenistan, Belarus, a post-Yushchenko Ukraine, Armenia, Syria, etc.

Not long ago, US forces were expelled by fellow SCO member Uzbekistan from the Karshi-Khanabde air base (a.k.a. K2), located in its territory. Tashkent strengthened its links with both Beijing and Moscow after a presumably US-masterminded 'Color Revolution' backfired and ultimately failed to produce regime change in that Central Asian republic.

China has also tried to court other neighboring States through an intensification of trade flows. For example, South Korea, although it still hosts a large number of American troops, has implemented a foreign policy carefully crafted not to irritate China. Seoul knows that Beijing, through its leverage and influence on Pyongyang, holds one of the most important keys to an eventual Korean reunification and that China is a force that can contribute to (geo)political stability and offer interesting business opportunities in East Asia.

The 'Middle Kingdom' has successfully attracted Myanmar as an ally. Myanmar (a.k.a. Burma) borders the Southern part of the Peoples' Republic of China and it contains important raw materials like natural gas, marble, gems, precious stones and exotic woods. Myanmar's government has sided with Asia's rising powers such as China, India and, to a lesser degree, Russia through closer trade, diplomatic and military relations. Beijing has plans to establish intelligence facilities in Myanmar's territory and, taking into account a growing Chinese military presence there, it is clear that China intends to intensify its alliance with Myanmar.

In 2007, the world witnessed the 'Saffron Revolution' (please note the term, where have we heard something similar before?), a series of protests led by Buddhist monks and political elements prone to adopt pro-Western positions. This unrest was most likely orchestrated by American intelligence personnel, eager to overthrow Myanmar's current government and replace it with pro-Western rulers. Myanmar's governmental forces, despite Western isolation and attempts to impose sanctions and backed by full Chinese and Russian support, ultimately prevailed.

This methodology is not new at all and it seems to be almost a carbon copy of other 'Color Revolutions' instigated in the post-Soviet space. However, the latest attempts to apply this recipe have failed in Belarus, Uzbekistan and Myanmar. It can also be added that some of the first governments which took over thanks to 'Color Revolutions' are already facing a considerable deal of trouble. For instance, Georgia was defeated by Russia when its government decided to invade South Ossetia; furthermore, Mikheil Saakashvili's impudence was further punished by Moscow's diplomatic recognition of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Plus, Ukraine (along with Georgia) was denied NATO Membership Action Plans because of old Europe's fear of irresponsibly antagonizing Moscow. Serbia has just signed a deal to increase energy cooperation with Russia's Gazprom.

**Number two:** The implicit threat of using American sea power to enforce a naval blockade against China to interrupt both its shipment of goods overseas as well as the flow of critical raw materials.

Chinese economic growth fuels an ever-increasing demand of energy and raw materials. However, domestic supplies are not enough to meet those needs. For example the People's Republic of China is currently the second largest importer of oil. Therefore, the aforementioned means that China's manufacturers must resort to foreign sources to provide the necessary resources for their production activities. Many of these foreign providers are located in areas far away from China's borders, namely the Middle East and Africa. That implies that a considerable part of Chinese critical supplies have to be seaborne.

Moreover, the Middle Kingdom's major industrial production centers are to be found in zones close to China's Pacific seaboard. Thus, the overwhelming majority of Chinese export products have to be transported by ship as well.

As far as the Chinese flow of imports and exports is concerned, it is significant to highlight the importance of the Malacca Strait, a tight waterway positioned between Peninsular Malaysia and the Indonesian island called Sumatra. Such shipping lane is indeed a chokepoint because, if the United States decided to enforce a naval blockade around it, the flow of Chinese imports and exports would suffer a lethal blow.

The US, much like its British predecessor, is the world's leading sea power and that, combined with all of the above, represents a serious strategic vulnerability to China who obviously does not want to depend on American goodwill to conduct its commercial exchange overseas.

The 'Middle Kingdom' is aware of this military gap between American forces and its own. Beijing also acknowledges that developing a competitive sea power is a task which demands a colossal sum of resources in terms of time, manpower, materials, R & D and money. Therefore, China knows that it will not have the ability to directly challenge American naval primacy in one generation or two. Yet, that does not mean that there are not powerful asymmetric equalizers that can be used to counter the US apparently unrivaled sea power.

Beijing's military doctrine is quite flexible and methodologically creative. If the 'Middle Kingdom' perceives an imminent military threat from America, it can make use of its foreign currency reserves (currently the largest in the world), which are denominated in US dollars, as a strategic weapon. If China decides to get rid of its dollars reserves, the consequences will be devastating for the US, perhaps triggering its economic, social, military and political collapse.

Some analysts dismiss this scenario as far-fetched; they argue that China would hesitate to unleash financial hell upon the US because Chinese exporters would also suffer considerably from the dollar's fall. Nevertheless, they seem to forget that, historically, States are indeed willing to sacrifice some of their meaningful economic interests when their very survival is at stake. One just needs to remember that Germany and Britain were important trading partners right before World War One broke out...

Furthermore, China has been studying American over-reliance on real-time information feed collected through spy satellites in order to wage war. Thus, the 'Middle Kingdom' has discovered that US ground, sea and air forces would be left almost blind if deprived of data provided by its satellite network. Not surprisingly, Beijing's military-industrial complex has been busy designing and testing a variety of anti-satellite weapons. In 2006 a Chinese land-based laser illuminated an American satellite. A year later, China destroyed one of its own weather satellites by using a modified version of ballistic missile technology.

The Chinese government has actively engaged in diplomatic talks in order to foster land-based oil and gas pipeline projects in order to secure its energy security and to diminish its dependence on seaborne supplies of oil. Beijing has succeeded in establishing an oil pipeline which provides China with both Russian and Kazakh petroleum. Likewise, the 'Middle Kingdom' plans to build pipelines connecting oil and/or gas producing-countries (like Iran, Myanmar and the Russian Far East) with Chinese territory.

It is worth mentioning that there have been many rumors in strategic circles concerning Chinese plans to open a military base in Iran and to set a naval outpost in Gwadar, Pakistan. It is way too early to confirm authoritatively whether these projects will indeed materialize. At least, one can confidently assert that the motivation is clear, i.e. to enhance Chinese power projection capabilities beyond its borders and to protect its uninterrupted energy supply.

**Number three:** Divide and rule, i.e. American efforts to dismantle Chinese territorial integrity and dissolve China's internal political uniformity. The US and the West know that China is a lot harder to balkanize than Serbia; nevertheless, they have used their intelligence agencies in order to create a persistent irritant that can distract Beijing and force it to divert its resources.

The People's Republic of China, like most other nation-States on Earth, is not a country which is ethnically or geographically homogenous. The 'Middle Kingdom'

is home to different ethnicities, cultures and religions.

China's largest ethnic group is the Han people. They comprise the majority of the country's population. Both China's Eastern seaboard (the area where the wealthiest cities are located) and its (more agricultural) heartland are inhabited by Han Chinese.

However, there are regions of the Chinese territory whose main population are not Han Chinese. The most important cases are the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region and the Tibet Autonomous Region.

Xinjiang-Uyghur, located in the Northwestern part of China, is strategically important because it borders Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Thus, this piece of land represents China's territorial contact with Central Asia. It is essential to indicate that this autonomous region contains large deposits of minerals and oil. Xinjiang-Uyghur is populated by people who profess the Islamic religion and who belong to the Turkic ethnicity, which is why this zone is also called 'Eastern Turkestan'.

Western intelligence agencies have predictably provided covert support for both Islamic and separatist forces inside Xinjiang-Uyghur. In fact, these forces have already demonstrated both their political willingness as well as their operational capability to carry out terrorist attacks.

On the other hand, Tibet is an issue Washington and Brussels have exploited in order to fracture Chinese internal unity. It is vital to take into consideration that even open source intelligence material confirm that the Dalai Lama himself was working undercover along the CIA in order to undermine Chinese control over Tibet during the early decades of the Cold War. One can only wonder if such collaboration continues today. Natural resources play an important part as well: Tibet might have some of the world's largest reserves of uranium. Moreover, this autonomous region is rich in gold, copper, drinking water and could even possess valuable deposits of both oil and gas.

In March 2008 a series of riots broke out all over Tibet and especially in its capital Lhasa. Beijing accused the 'Dalai Lama gang' of inciting unrest which was eventually restrained by Chinese law enforcement. The Dalai Lama's Western supporters took political advantage of this situation and launched a PR attack against China's government. Some Western leaders even threatened to boycott the Beijing Olympics. The somewhat naïve 'Free Tibet' crowds

even held protests in some Western capitals. During these events, it is critical to take into account that Moscow expressed a strong diplomatic and political support for Beijing.

The Han Chinese themselves are not immune to foreign geostrategists prone to balkanize their rivals. For example, the Falun Gong movement (described by some as a 'cult') has been outlawed by the Chinese government. In strategic circles, it has been argued that Beijing regards Falun Gong as a CIA front whose task is to provoke instability and induce turmoil in the Chinese mainland.

Moreover, China's rural population who live in the country's heartland can also become an attractive target to someone willing to spread political discontent because they have not yet caught up with the wealth and prosperity experienced by the coastal industrial cities.

## **Conclusion**

It seems that China is continuously advancing toward a greater role in the international system's distribution of power. The 'Middle Kingdom' is increasingly assertive in defending its interests. The West (North America plus Europe) along with its followers (Japan, Australia, et al.) are willing to counter China's rise. Nevertheless, Beijing is more determined than ever to recover its great power position and has forged strategic alliances (with Moscow and the Central Asian Republics) as well as partnerships in East Asia, the Middle East and elsewhere. Additionally, China and its allies have been perfecting a strategy to challenge Western plans to contain Eurasia's rising powers. We can therefore anticipate that such rivalry will intensify as the stakes become higher and higher.