China's rise and power shifts in Asia

From the escalating maritime sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea to Sino-Indian border conflicts, there seems to be a dramatic transition from a USA-led interdependent security order into a disintegrating world, filled with antagonistic powers ready to challenge each other over geopolitical, ideological, social and economic matters. China today projects political, military and economic strength to rival the USA. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) are the landmark initiatives in its drive to shape the global economic architecture. Combining the transformative power of state-controlled market economy and the resilience of authoritarian rule, China adapts certain tenets of neo-liberal capitalism such as welcoming foreign investment, deregulating its labour market and building infrastructure, while maintaining tight control over government, military, public security and information. As a state-controlled economy employing gradualist reforms in a post-communist era, China’s one-party rule produces a durable type of autocracy, outlasting Soviet communism and makes itself a model of development for other developing nations to follow. Meanwhile, the failure of Washington to denuclearize North Korea and Iran destroyed the perception of the USA as being capable of controlling the global arms race. Detecting a shift in the balance of power in China’s favour, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Xi Jinping has advocated a new global order built on multilateralism.

This special issue brings together a team of researchers to investigate China’s rise to geopolitical dominance, as well as its diplomatic entanglements with the USA, India, Japan, North and South Koreas. In particular, it investigates China’s projection of its newfound power – soft, sharp, and smart – along its peripheries, and the strategic challenges that China poses to neighbouring states in the early twenty-first century. Many Western policy analysts are wondering whether a rising China is a “status quo” state or a revisionist state that attempts to challenge the existing world order. The lack of clarification from Beijing has prompted Washington to shift from a longstanding strategy of diplomatic engagement to that of geostategic containment to balance against China. This publication argues that General Secretary Xi Jinping initially launched the BRI to respond to the former US President Barack Obama’s policy of rebalancing Asia, and he has expanded these expansionary projects to counter President Donald Trump’s “America First” doctrine, thereby asserting Chinese influence abroad and tightening control against discontented populations at home. The ambitious vision of Xi Jinping to rejuvenate the Han Chinese civilization reveals a growing sense of confidence among Communist rulers to access energy resources, to reshape international institutions and norms and to compete with the USA. Even though China does not possess the infrastructure to be a First World state, it has the political will and material resources to lead the global South. The last few years, however, witnessed a deterioration of the diplomatic goodwill that China had built on its peripheries for decades.

This issue presents six studies that shed lights on the deteriorating relationship between China and the USA, and the escalating mountainous and maritime sovereignty disputes between China and neighbours. Over the past four years, the Trump administration departed from many long-standing diplomatic traditions and practices. Trump’s go-it-alone attitude granted Washington new autonomy to deal with competitive rivals unilaterally. From North Korea to the South China Sea maritime sovereignty disputes, Washington
strives to prevent Asia from drifting towards Chinese hegemony. Challenging China’s version of the Monroe Doctrine, especially its proclaimed dominion over international waterways, trade routes, islands, and maritime resources in the East and South China seas, the pressing task is for Washington to strike a regional balance of power through mutual defence agreements with allies. This dual strategy of engagement and containment aims to pressure Beijing, and to mobilize allies to support a security system led by Washington. Seen from this geopolitical perspective, John Calabrese identifies a series of compelling factors that have contributed to a qualitative change in the American perception of China as a serious security threat. While recognizing the important role that China plays in the American efforts to denuclearize North Korea, Tony Tai-Ting Liu explains that China’s elevation to a great power status has complicated the geopolitical landscape in Northeast Asia. A rising China has imposed its independent agendas that influenced the multilateral discussion of regional stability, the creation of an effective mechanism of conflict resolution, and the changing balance of power between the USA and North Korea.

However, the deadly military clashes that broke out in June 2020 in the mountainous region of Ladakh, where China and India share a disputed border, have fuelled the discourse of a “China threat,” intensifying an arms race between these two Asian continental powers. The long-term resolution of such territorial disputes over mountainous and river resources in the Himalayas has to go beyond a one-off bilateral treaty. According to Vinay Kaura, both China and India proclaim to have cordial relations, but more often than not, they see each other as strategic adversaries. If the growing alignment of interest among major democracies – India, Japan, the USA and Taiwan – is being perceived by China as a potential source for insecurity, the deepening Chinese-Pakistani strategic cooperation as well as China’s attempts to penetrate the Indian subcontinent has made India uncomfortable. Despite lingering suspicions and deadly border disputes, China and India still share an interest in promoting a more representative system of global governance. The hindrances to realizing a new paradigm for stable Indo-China relations are formidable. Nalanda Roy traces the expansion of China’s strategies of charm diplomacy towards neighbouring countries with overlapping maritime sovereignty claims across the South China Sea. The failure to mediate conflicts among rival claimants is likely to destabilize the security of major oceanic routes used by crude oil tankers from the Persian Gulf to East Asia, the global flow of goods between Asia and the world, and the exploration of offshore oil and gas reserves. As long as China bolsters its claims over disputed territories, it will accelerate regional tensions.

It is, in fact, on the economic front where China has effectively used trade and aid packages to gain diplomatic support. Exploring the weaponization of economic statecraft, He Li demonstrates that China’s economic aid has transformed the diplomatic relations with Asian neighbours. In particular, China has deliberately utilized its economic statecraft to serve its political aspirations in East Asia, and has combined material incentives with financial pressures to achieve diplomatic goals. Besides material resources, China has effectively mobilized the discourse of modern Chinese history, both real and imagined, to win the hearts and minds of its citizens. Carl Dery explores various intellectual and ideological tensions that arise from the state-initiated production and diffusion of the New Qing History Project in China. A closer look at the Chinese and international scholars’ receptions of this scholarly project underlines the recurrent tensions between global and Chinese national historical mind-sets. Focusing on some authoritative scholarly texts on the Qing History published in China between 2006 and 2018, Dery stresses that the New Qing History Project should be seen as a sign of China’s nationalist teleology, which is supposed to be a key historical justification to its rising schemes.
Three additional articles that discuss the efficacy of China’s power projection will be included in the next issue of this journal in early 2021. In a historical reflection, Joseph Tse-Hei Lee and Romi Jain review the evolution of China’s geopolitical strategy from the Maoist era (1949–1976) to the present. It examines the Chinese strategic thinking in four spatial settings: Eurasia, maritime Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and the wider Indo-Pacific region. The Chinese strategic concerns are comparable across these regions, but the ability to pursue security interests is contingent on many circumstantial factors in a multipolar world. Focusing on the knowledge sphere, Romi Jain advances the geointellect model to capture the modalities of China’s growing influence in global higher education and research across an array of regions, rendering significant conclusions on both challenges to and next moves of the Chinese leadership. Examples include shaping the architecture of educational governance, leading university alliances, strengthening discourse power, establishing research centres and university campuses overseas, and hosting foreign faculty, scholars, and students. China’s foreign policy, primarily the BRI, turns out to have a predominant role in pushing the agenda of intellectual dominance. Jain explains how the theoretical lens of geointellect, even though permeated by the meta-concept of soft power, is distinct, with mixed outcomes for China’s national power. Satish K. Kolluri and Joseph Tse-Hei Lee draw on the examples of Hong Kong’s years-long pro-democracy movement, Taiwan’s democratization, and India’s anti-China sentiments to discuss the growth of domestic and international discontents against China’s rise to ascension from an inter-Asian perspective. These hostilities suggest that an assertive China has trapped itself in a perpetual cycle of intensifying authoritarian rule at home and seeking expansionary outreach abroad. Such adventurism is bound to antagonize potential allies, jeopardizing the hope for inter-Asian solidarity and cooperation.

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