

stars insights: 9 January 2018

## Thunder Rolling from the East: China's Rise Beyond its Borders

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China's rise continues to rattle the existing world order. Ever since Beijing has taken on a bigger stance in geopolitics (e.g. with the One Belt and One Road initiative (OBOR) or through broader engagement in multilateralism), China's growing influence is noticeable in almost every part of the world. The Chinese leadership is fond to propagate the bright vision of a peaceful and glorious future for its people and the whole world at every opportunity. Yet, one easily tends to overlook China's troublesome past regarding territorial disputes and regional conflicts. But that could be a fatal mistake, as history matters more than ever these days.

"The Real Trouble will Come with the 'Wake,'" was the title of a cartoon in the American satirical magazine *Puck* in 1900. It shows the Chinese dragon kept at bay by the Russian bear, the British lion and others who fought about their piece of the pie in the Middle Kingdom. Seventy years later, the French scholar and politician Alain Peyrefitte wrote his book *When China Wakes Up, the World Will Tremble* (1973). Almost another half century have passed since that warning, and both views have proved to be farsighted.

### Complexities and Open Borders

Whoever wants to understand the origins of China's rise (President Xi Jinping prefers the term "rejuvenation" which means restoring China – as the dominant Asian power – to its rightful place at the center of the civilized world) should have a look at China's periphery and immediate neighborhood. More than any other countries except Russia, China currently shares international borders with 14 sovereign states, many of whom troubled by authoritarian rule or political instability. Its roughly 22,000-kilometer-long land border is the longest in the world. Besides, China's coastline is 18,000 kilometers long. If those figures are not enough to suggest the complexities involved, we should consider other relevant issues.

Certainly, camels and horses are no longer brought to China from Mongolia; nor are ginseng from Korea or fur from Russia imported as much as in imperial times. And the steam-engine trains of the *Chemins de Fer de L'Indo-Chine et du Yunnan* definitely no longer make regularly scheduled runs from the port city of Haiphong through the tropical jungle to Kunming. But despite DHL cargo airliners, high-speed railway lines that span continents and large-scale infrastructure projects across Asia, the geography of the past is still valuable in helping us understand current trends, simmering conflicts and possible wars. "Ghosts of yesteryear" are summoned on certain memory maps, for instance by cultural concepts that shaped the making of China over the centuries and still live on in one or another facet of current Chinese foreign policy.

Since the late 1980s, China has gradually reopened its borders to the outside world, at least where the Chinese leadership deems it advantageous to do so. During a good part of the Maoist era, when the country was locked in rigid isolation, most land-border crossings were officially closed. Nowadays, China proclaims a policy of cooperation with

neighboring countries and beyond as a basis for mutual trust, common benefit and worldwide peace, whether through OBOR, the Kunming–Singapore Railway network or the \$400 billion gas deal with Russia. In classical Chinese thought, the state resembles a large family, whereby family members live in a house that is limited in size and protected by walls. The door serves as an official entrance to the outside world, controlled and guarded by the head of the family. The Great Wall was an embodiment of this idea. Since the opening of the country, China has proudly begun to build dozens of gateways along its border in order to resume a controlled import and export policy. These gateways are usually designed to be impressive, with grand, even pretentious, architecture, as if to remind outsiders that China is still the center of the universe.

### **Strategic Goals**

To analyze conflicts or even to dig up skeletons buried in the cellar is bitter medicine to heal the wounds of the past. In recent years, the speed of China's rise to global prominence has been breathtaking, and much has been lost in the process, mostly unintentionally, but sometimes on purpose. The cultural diversity in China's border areas is enormous, and its relationships with its neighbors vary greatly. But in a globalized world where everything has to be better, faster and more efficient, diverse viewpoints sometimes become a hindrance. Official Chinese historiography often silences voices that Beijing finds inconvenient, whether from the past or the present.

Given the complex circumstances of China's phenomenal rise, it is almost impossible to predict the future of its relations with neighbors. On the one hand, since the founding of PRC, there seem to have been few consistent values in its policies toward its neighbors. China's policies have mostly been determined by different strategic goals in different periods: shaping national identity, safeguarding territorial integrity, pursuing economic growth and creating a favorable international climate for China's expanding influence. On the other hand, each of China's neighbors has its own history and experiences with the rising global power. Whereas relationships with some countries seem to have improved greatly in the last few years (as with Russia), and others have at least been stabilized at a possibly optimal level for both nations (as with India), still others could easily sour if global political trends shift in an unexpected direction (as with North Korea).

### **A Maze of Relationships**

Almost no other country in the world has such a complex maze of relationships with its neighbors. More than a few of those neighbors are either unstable or not quite at ease with their larger neighbor. While Russia does not currently pose a major threat to China, North Korea, threatening its neighbors and the US with nuclear weapons, is a client-state-turned-nightmare for Beijing. Reoccurring border standoffs and a considerable degree of mistrust still haunts the relationship between China and India, despite official support for cooperation and open borders. The maritime disputes on the South China Sea are also a latent time bomb for China's relations with Vietnam and countries, including the US, Japan and Australia, that consider Beijing's military build-up on disputed islands an affront. And in the future, the *stan* countries of Central Asia that border the sensitive Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region will have numerous issues to resolve with China, issues that will possibly be exacerbated by rising Islamic extremism.

One of the main reasons that China wants to avoid border conflicts is the fear that such events may be followed by domestic unrest. Thus we expect that, while it will occasionally resort to confrontational tactics, China will nevertheless do its best to avoid military conflicts with its neighbors. However, we cannot predict which political events will ultimately find a place in the annals of history and which will be remembered only as

footnotes. What we are certain of is that countries like Vietnam, Myanmar and Mongolia will continue to receive media coverage, and that China, as their powerful neighbor, will play a role in those stories. Whether the issue is the Greater Mekong Subregion, OBOR or the Greater Tumen Initiative, China's increasing influence will be followed closely by critical observers worldwide. Tensions will most likely grow, as these mega-projects are meant to not only build a harmonious climate between nations and peoples, but also further the acquisition and exploitation of natural resources that China desperately needs in order to continue its economic growth, Beijing's golden cure for domestic stability.

Despite China's enormous investment into the future of world politics, echoes from the past will keep on haunting the region. Beijing, as any other authoritarian rule, produces its own historical narratives according to its needs. However, words from the past, such as Nehru's "There appears to me to be a basic problem of a strong and united Chinese State, expansive and pushing out in various directions" or Solzhenitsyn's "War with China is bound to cost us sixty million souls at the very best" cannot be extinguished and will stay in western libraries. In times of propaganda and fake news, it is often more helpful to resort to old-fashioned sources of knowledge.

We believe that China's rise as a new great power will probably be less peaceful than its leadership proclaims and hopes. This is not necessarily because China seeks further territorial expansion (as in the South China Sea), but because China and its neighbors pose certain challenges for each other—challenges that are likely to dominate the region for an indefinite period of time.

The authors of this article have written several books on China and will publish an unusual photo-text book in May 2018: China at its Limits: An Empire's Rise beyond its Borders.

See: <https://www.kerberverlag.com/en/china-at-its-limits.html>

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