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China and Bangladesh: New Strategic Partners¹

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Bangladesh and China are today 'all weather' strategic partners. The process, however, evolved at its own pace and took some time. This development, of course, is owed to the perceived national self interest of both countries. But it has also been aided by a certain consistency in the way China relates to the world.

Introduction

Some years ago, two Western writers Nicholas Christof and Sheryl Wu Dunn made a prediction in a book on the contemporary world. It was that the shifting centre of the world would eventually settle in Asia.³ Since then a view is burgeoning that America is in 'elegant decline'.⁴ In the 'post-American period', the great story, as Fareed Zakaria has powerfully argued, is 'the rise of the rest'.⁵ The expression 'the rest' of course, requires sharper definition, but there is no

¹ This Conference Paper formed the basis of a presentation by Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury at the workshop on 'China and South Asia', organised by the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and the Colombo-based Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS), in Colombo on 5 and 6 December 2016.

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³ See *Thunder from the East: Portrait of a Rising Asia* (Vantage, 2001)

⁴ Robert D. Kaplan, 'America's Elegant Decline', (*Atlantic*: November 2007 issue)

⁵ *The Post-American World: And the Rise of the Rest*, (Penguin Books, June 2009)

doubt that what is meant is 'Asia'. It would be a safe assumption that the trend is towards the belief that Asia is to be the 'New Rome' to America's 'Classical Greece'.

Many Asians naturally hope so. It imparts them a sense of pride that they have for long longed-for. To them this phenomenon of Asia's 'Re-emergence' – for that is what it is – makes up for having lost out on the fillip to global civilization provided by the Western world through the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the French and Industrial Revolutions. For this some Asian intellectuals blame the period of colonial domination, but others believe the responsibility lies upon their shoulders, as the colonial period formed but a small, though significant, part of Asia's history. The fact remained that for a long time, Asian intellect, which through much of world history had made great contributions to civilization's advance, had ceased to stimulate the world with fresh or great ideas. The Asian mind fell into a stupor. The Western colonial domination was perhaps more its effect than its cause.

Asia experienced its regeneration by the turn of the century and millennia. Suddenly there was an efflorescence of a new Asia, as if it were, in all its varied aspects. A burst of activities helped Asia leap-frog many stages of development and progress. 'Asia' itself, one must recall was a European, or rather Greek construct or concept, but now a consciousness of being 'Asian' began to take root. There were dizzying economic successes, those earlier of Japan, being followed by the East Asian tigers – Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. Thereafter the focus of progress spread to the South East, with the once sleeping dragon, China, opening up its economy, taking a leap into modernity, and transforming itself into a power in many ways comparable to America's. Today the Asian spirit is buoyant. There is a harkening back to the glorious past. There is talk of the Asian century being upon us.

But how do the Asian entities relate to one another? This essay is purported to be the study of one such relationship: of China, with Bangladesh in South Asia. It is an examination of a relationship largely through the prism of Bangladeshi lenses by a Bangladeshi analyst, reflecting a Bangladeshi perception of Chinese behaviour and China's relationship with Bangladesh. The article is ultimately expected to enhance a greater global understanding of the moods and behaviour-pattern of the Chinese dragon on a wider global matrix.

Basis of China's External Behaviour

In terms of methodology, the Chinese tend to reach out into the past to shape contemporary thinking. Take for instance the idea of 'yin' and 'yang', in other words, the male and female forces. To the Chinese, everything in the world has two seemingly opposing elements. The quality of our lives and the well-being of the world depend on bringing such opposing tendencies into balance with one another; 'Yin' by the moon, and 'yang' by the sun. To keep the heavens running smoothly the Emperor in ancient China had the task of maintaining the harmonious balance between the sun and the moon. With the Emperor eventually disappearing, the function devolved on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) representing the Chinese people, who, as Mao Zedong famously said in 1949, had (now) "stood up".

But as we know, through fundamental laws of physics, contradictions, in absolute equilibrium, impede movement, and thereby also progress. It is, therefore, necessary to have the balance tilted in a positive way. Enter Friedrich Hegel. The Hegelian dialectical progression via thesis, anti-thesis, and synthesis provides the kinetic energy needed to break this inertia and causes the forward propulsion to take place within this paradigm; just like the kite, which rises against the wind. This brought Marxism or 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' into line with the Chinese value system in support of the Revolution. The ensuing behaviour pattern eschewed any form of stridency. For instance, contrary to expectations, China did not intervene in the wars in South Asia in either 1965 or 1971. Hence also the disinclination to use the expression 'peaceful rise' and the preference instead for the phrase 'peaceful development' to describe its current burgeoning influence.

But driven by necessity, force has to be used to restore order, or in defence of 'core interests'. In regard to this, the Chinese are in consonance with the Hobbesian sense that order is a *sine qua non* for civilisation. But even an orderly society can produce waves. A great helmsman, in Chinese view, must guide the boat of society or State, by using the waves. Hence the need for the Emperor, or Sun Yat Sen, or Mao Zedong, or Deng Xiaoping, or, as now, Xi Jinping. This is roughly the theoretical matrix which forms the basis on which China's strategic goals are framed. These can be seen as five-fold.

First, the preservation of the CCP regime despite remarkable changes in the governance principles. It is noteworthy that even in strictly professional documents like the Defence White Papers, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) unequivocally pledges its allegiance to the Party. Second, prosperity, mainly economic, that helps prop up the regime: Because with changes in

the Communist ideology in China the CCP's *raison d'être* becomes tied to performance. Third, power, generally in the international arena, in both the 'hard' and 'soft' versions. Hence the building up of military capabilities in pursuit of 'hard' power, and the setting up of Confucian Institutes in pursuit of 'soft' power. Fourth, a peaceful global, regional and domestic environment to sustain its reforms and meeting challenges posed by the modernisation policies. This calls for a foreign policy that, even while asserting itself, China is reluctant to undermine the current international security and financial architecture, preferring to operate within them than outside them. Finally, championing multi-polarity and challenging the hegemony of the sole 'hyper power', the United States (US), yet maintaining strong linkages, unlike what was the case between the Soviet Union and the US during the Cold War.⁶

There are four contradictions that condition the manner in which China pursues these strategies. First, self- image of a big power versus existing poverty in swathes of the country. Second, open-door incentives versus sovereignty concerns, which causes it to reject interference. Third principles versus pragmatism, which makes for strong rhetoric but restrained action. Finally, market socialism versus Leninist communist economy: There is competition with the US but also deep structural and financial investment/interdependence, valued at approximately US\$ 3.9 trillion (This is a new version of MAD theory in action. Originally it was defined in terms of 'Mutually Assured Destruction' in the nuclear weapon stand-off between the US and the former Soviet Union. Now, between China and the US the ramifications are economic).

The Chinese like to express themselves in metaphors and maxims. Deng Xiaoping's famous adage was "hide your capabilities and bide your time". He was also strong on pragmatism when he said, "it does not matter whether the cat is black or white as long as it catches mice". So, go to the market place. But there are no friends in the market place, only self-sustaining business interests, so nurture your allies the best you can.

The current leader Mr Xi Jinping has launched a new *mantra*, the 'China Dream' or *Zhunguo Meng* in Mandarin. It comprises mainly three elements. One, a new kind of big-power relationship with the US, one of equality: it is not the 'my way or the highway' kind, but one that implies "you go your way and I will go mine, together or separately, but in peace'. Two, a 'win –win' relationship with partners and interlocutors, whether they be competitors like

⁶ For insights into China's strategic goals, see: Thacik Jr., John J.; 'China's Peaceful Rise at Stake in Power Struggle', *Asian Times* 8 September 2004. Wang, Fei-Ling, 'Preservation, Prosperity and Power: What Motivates China's Foreign Policy', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol 14, No 45, pp669-694. Bhattacharya, Abanti, 'China's Foreign Policy Challenges and Evolving Strategy', *Strategic Analysis*, Vol.30, No.1, Jan-Mar 2006, pp182-2004.

India, or strategic allies like Pakistan, a country so key to his 'One Belt, One Road' initiative, which is also an essential part of China's 'west-ward march' in quest of resources. This also involves a massive US\$ 45 billion worth of infrastructural investment along the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. The Chinese argue that this aims at community development and totally irrelevant to any territorial dispute (Kashmir between India and Pakistan) in which China takes sides for instance, in favour of Pakistan). Three, stimulating the local demand to boost the economy, on the backdrop of a stable growth. The GDP may have slowed to 7% from double digit figures, but this 'new normal' is now factored into China's plans and policies.

To achieve domestic stability, the CCP follows the policy of 'Four Comprehensives'. This was unveiled in February 2015, in the Annual Policy at the National People's Congress and the People's Political Consultative Conference.⁷ This involves a four-pronged strategy, which comprises the following: first, to comprehensively build a moderately prosperous society; second, to comprehensively deepen reform; third to comprehensively govern according to law; and finally, to comprehensively and strictly govern the party.

Consistency in Chinese Behaviour

There appears to be a consistency in the way China behaves with the outside world. Through its inexorable 'rise' in contemporary times, it has been making nuanced adjustments of its tactical postures within the parameters of the broad and abiding strategic goals analysed earlier. The policy framework was initially laid down by Mao. He had analysed the globe as being divided into three worlds: The first comprising the then two Superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union. The second consisted of the countries of Europe, Canada and Japan. The rest including China belonged to the third world. He identified the 'first world' as 'the source of all instability'. Later, Deng Xiaoping declared that China would join the 'oppressed' (third world) against the 'oppressors' (first and second worlds). Mao had also observed that China had no troops outside its borders and no intention of fighting anybody unless its borders were attacked.⁸ However, the statements of Chinese leaders can be very subtle and open to interpretations.

⁷ *Wall Street Journal*, 25 February 2015

⁸ Cited in Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, (New York : Simon & Schuster, 1994), p.725

Given the facts that the current Chinese defence budget is the second largest in the world,⁹ that China's navy is the fastest growing arm of the military capable of rapidly deploying forces overseas, and that the country has missiles with the capacity to hit any targets anywhere in the world, it is not necessary for China to station troops abroad.¹⁰ Also it is unclear if the definition of 'territory' now includes its burgeoning 'interests' in such places as Africa, Central Asia and also Latin America. There are some obvious red lines, however, mainly related to the protection of "core" interests. Tibet, declaration of independence by Taiwan, East and South China Seas territorial waters, to name some, as also the protection of land boundaries. The 1962 War with India and the conflict on the Ussuri River with the former Soviet Union are related to the last item.

However when the threat to its 'core' interests is not palpable, China is chary of taking a position that could lead to a military conflict. An oft-cited example is China's role in the war between India and Pakistan in 1971 over Bangladesh. At that time China did not actually militarise its strong verbal support to its staunchest ally, Pakistan. Indeed Chinese diplomacy managed to portray its stand against Bangladesh's emergence in terms of its theoretical opposition, to what it called "the singing in a duet of Soviet social imperialism, and Indian expansionism".¹¹ But eventually when China accepted and recognised Bangladesh, it quickly raised its relationship to the level of "an all-weather friend", almost the same as Pakistan, thus gaining an additional partner in South Asia.

Initial Position on Bangladesh

The Bangladeshi leadership, led by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, immediately seemed to intellectually understand China's position, conditioned by its adverse relations with India and the Soviet Union. They adopted the tactic of refraining from giving umbrage to China by publicly criticising its actions. The softening of Beijing's position began with the mutual recognition of Pakistan and Bangladesh in February 1974. In June the same year when the Bangladesh application to join the United Nations was approved by the Security Council, the

⁹ The official figure for 2016 places it as US \$147 billion. The unofficial numbers, according to *Jane's Defence Forecasts*, are much higher, exceeding US \$239 billion. In either case it comes after the US, whose expenditures are approximately US\$ 576 billion

¹⁰ However China is said to be about to deploy "a few thousand troops" at its first ever overseas military base in Djibouti, referring to the project in such low key terms as 'logistical facilities for naval rest and resupply'. The US and Japan also have bases. This decision is seen as a policy shift for the normally inward-looking China. China will also raise the number of its UN peacekeepers to 8000. (*Financial Times*, 31 March 2016)

¹¹ *New York Times*, 26 August 1971

Chinese delegate there expressed gratification at the settlement of the issue between Bangladesh and Pakistan,¹² who from then on, began to be cultivated simultaneously by Beijing.

Deepening Relationship

When Bangladesh and India were in a dispute over the construction of the Farakka barrage by India upstream on the Ganges river, Vice Premier Li Hsien-nien declared that ‘China firmly supports the government and people of Bangladesh in their just struggle to safeguard national independence and state sovereignty and resist foreign interference’¹³, akin to the remarks usually made to support Pakistan. Bilateral relations steadily progressed during the leadership in Bangladesh in the late-1970s, 1980s and 1990s of General Ziaur Rahman, General Hussain Muhammed Ershad, Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wazed. By mid-1980s, Bangladesh had become a major procurer of Chinese military hardware. In 2002 a major Defence Agreement was signed. In 2005, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, during a visit to Dhaka, signed nine agreements, and both countries declared 2005 as “Bangladesh-China Friendship year”.¹⁴

China, at times, played a constructive role in the resolution of Bangladesh’s regional conflicts. In November 2008, when Myanmar placed an oil-drilling rig within the territorial waters claimed by Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal, the author, then Foreign Minister in the Caretaker Government in Bangladesh, in office between 2007 and 2009, requested Beijing’s help to secure the withdrawal of the rig. This was done through Beijing communicating with both sides, and the Foreign office spokesman issued a statement: “we hope the countries will settle (the dispute) through equal and friendly negotiations and maintain a stable bilateral relationship. As their friend, China will contribute in an appropriate manner.”¹⁵

Bilateral economic relations also developed at a remarkable pace. The Chinese made extra effort to redress the imbalance in trade figures. In 2006 when total trade amounted to US\$ 3.19 billion, and Bangladesh exports were worth only US\$ 98.8 million, China granted tariff-free

¹² Keesing’s Contemporary Archives,(8-14 July 1974), p. 26610

¹³ *Bangladesh* , Vol 2, No 4 (Dhaka, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting , 15 January , 1977), p.5

¹⁴ *Hindu*, 9 April, 2005.

¹⁵ ‘Maritime Security: The Case of Bangladesh’, Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies, *Issue Brief*, No 4, January 2009.

access to 84 Bangladeshi commodities to help offset the gap.¹⁶ Infrastructural projects, like ‘Friendship bridges’ spanned rivers, and the Convention Centre was a major feature of Dhaka’s landscape. So by now it was clear that Chinese postures towards Bangladesh shifted from opposition to support, adjusting to the broader strategy, apart from the benefits accruing from good political and economic connections, denying influence in the region of its ‘perceived major adversaries’, changing over time from the then Soviet Union to India as also the US.

Starting from the post-Khaleda Zia period, and with the caretaker Government in 2007, Bangladesh had grown close to India. The Hasina and Awami League government signed the historic Land Boundary Agreement with India, denied access to Indian insurgents from the north-east, and facilitated transit, which India sorely needed. Relations between Beijing and Dhaka were fraught with more complexity than the one between Beijing and Islamabad. Nevertheless, China had friends in every powerful segment in the Bangladeshi system: the military, the bureaucracy, the political parties and pressure groups, the intelligentsia and the media, and the civil society. Proximity to China had become akin to ‘motherhood’. None appeared to oppose it. Into such a situation in October 2016, Xi Jinping, soon destined to be the “core leader” of China,¹⁷ visited Bangladesh, the first Chinese Presidential visit to Dhaka since that of Li Xiannian in 1986.

Contemporary Partnership

The visit was touted, with reason, as a grand success. 27 deals were signed including agreements, memoranda of understanding and loan documents. These amounted to a massive US\$ 21.5 billion. The agreements were across a large span of economic activities, as well as governance-maritime cooperation, joint feasibility study of a free trade area, new Internet Communications Technology framework, counter-terrorism collaboration, information sharing, tackling climate change, rail links, power and energy. Many came under the purview of the ‘One Road, One-Belt’ initiative.

But the Chinese did not walk away with the Chittagong deep-sea project, obviously because it would bring discomfiture to India and along with it to the US (though the US influence on the

¹⁶ Details from *People’s Daily*, 23 July 2007.

¹⁷ At the sixth plenary meeting of the CCP Central Committee in October 2016, Xi Jinping was elevated to this position. Though not defined in the Party’s Constitution it puts him at a higher level than any other leader. The concept was introduced by Deng Xiaoping in 1989 when he anointed Jiang Zemin as such, putting his successor at the same level as Mao and himself. Notably, Xi’s predecessor Hu Jintao was not declared a ‘core leader’. Liu Zhifeng, *China Daily*, cited in *Straits Times*, 5 November 2016.

Hasina government appears otherwise unremarkable). Analysts believe that the Chinese would be willing to go along with the idea of a Consortium that could include India, Japan and the others. To them it would be the best of a bad bargain, and the Chinese know how to convert any bargain eventually into a good bargain.

Defence is an area in which bilateral cooperation is burgeoning. In 2002 China and Bangladesh signed a Defence Cooperation Agreement. Since then China has become the largest source of procurement for the Bangladesh armed forces. The hardware purchased include tanks for the Army, fighter jets for the Air Force and frigates and missile boats for the Navy. Two submarines are also in the shopping list and are expected to be delivered over the next couple of years. This is meant to, in Sheikh Hasina's words, re-configure the Bangladesh Navy into a "three dimensional force". In 2014, in the presence of the visiting Vice Chairman of the Military Commission of the CCP, General Xiu Qiliang, four bilateral military agreements were signed. Under these the Chinese military committed itself to support the Bangladeshi forces with training and equipment. Also, the Chinese undertook to set up a language laboratory at the Bangladesh University of Professionals, run by the armed forces. There have since been several exchanges of military visits at high levels. Cooperation is planned in the areas of anti-piracy, UN peace-keeping, and disaster management. Recently a navy fleet arrived in Chittagong and participated in a military drill with the Bangladeshi navy.

At this time, Bangladesh's trade with China is about 26.5 % of its total global figure. This is the highest with any other State. At this rate the total bilateral trade would be around US\$ 18 billion by 2021, at Bangladesh's 50th birth anniversary. There is of course a huge imbalance but the amount of Chinese investments are likely to offset this.¹⁸

The widening and deepening of military relations between Dhaka and Beijing could naturally be expected to raise some concerns in New Delhi. This would be somewhat unfounded for a variety of reasons. First, the armed forces are undeniably an important element in the Bangladeshi governance system. Troops need weapons, and China is a willing, affordable and familiar source. It is incumbent upon all Bangladeshi governments to keep the forces equipped and national defence needs satisfied. Second, apart from India, Bangladesh has another neighbour, more comparable and less affable, that is, Myanmar. The issue of Rohingya refugees (both sides have now agreed to call them 'Rakhine Muslims') divides them deeply. This ethnic group, given the adverse circumstances it confronts in Myanmar, runs the risk of

¹⁸ The figures are taken from Dhaka *Courier* (Vol 23 Issue 14, 14 October), p. 6

being radicalized. This is not the only inflammatory issue between the two countries. In 2008, they nearly came to blows over maritime boundaries, and China played a positive role in calming the situation. Bangladesh would require a modicum of military preparedness with regard to these issues, and China would be best-placed to assist. The Bangladeshi Army takes what is generally perceived as a modicum of pride in serving as a major peacekeeper on behalf of the UN. Both hardware and training are essential requirements for this purpose, for both of which China appears to be an appropriate source.

For Bangladesh and Sheikh Hasina, rolling out the red carpet for Xi Jinping had its rewards. First, it was of a huge benefit in sheer material terms. Bangladesh is well on the way to becoming a ‘middle income’ country and needed the mega-loans for its essential mega projects. Only China was in a position to satisfy those requirements. Second, the visit gave the ordinary Bangladeshi a sense of psychological satisfaction that the importance of his country was being recognized, not just by India as had been the case to date, but also by a power that is now seen to rival the United States. Third, for Hasina herself it was a great political and morale booster. Her relations with Washington had been somewhat frosty since the 2013 elections, and the recent visit of Secretary of State John Kerry to Dhaka provided no balm. In domestic political terms, being already close to Modi, and now to a global leader of the stature of Xi Jinping widened her support base, which would come handy in the next general elections (she was able to dispel a received wisdom that China was closer to her rival Begum Zia and her Bangladesh Nationalist Party). Indeed, she declared that “China as a trusted partner is realizing our dreams too”.¹⁹ Xi himself elevated the level of bilateral relations from a ‘closer comprehensive partnership of cooperation’ to ‘strategic partnership of cooperation’.²⁰

Regional Ramifications

The visit of Xi to Dhaka brought certain features of regional politics to the fore. First, China is very much a major power in the region, and is in the process of deepening its interest in South Asia. Its influence in the region is by no means confined to Pakistan, though Pakistan continues to be the most key ally. China’s footprint may be growing larger elsewhere as well, such as in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Second, should SAARC disintegrate, or give way to other sub-regional organizations, it is possible that weaker South Asian countries might want China

¹⁹ Bdnews24.com. 12 October 2016.

²⁰ For a comprehensive study of the visit, see, Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury: ‘Xi Jinping in Dhaka: Implications for South Asian Politics’, ISAS Insight No. 355 (Singapore, 18 October 2016); <http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg>.

in it in order to moderate India's overwhelming predominance. Finally there were possibilities that could be taken advantage of, whereby China and India, because of sheer economic interests, could find it rewarding to cooperate between themselves, with Bangladesh also as a partner. There could be several such mega-projects, including the construction of the much-needed sea-port in the Chittagong area.

Bangladesh could perhaps play a role in using its linkages with China and India for the benefit of all three countries. Both the Asian giants could actually profit from collaborating, in third countries such as Bangladesh or any other South Asian State, in bringing some of the mega-projects of the region to fruition. That would most certainly be in consonance with what has been described in Chinese as well as in the regional parlance as a 'win-win situation'.

China's Behaviour on Wider Matrix

The above examination could be helpful in an attempt to chart China's wider global behaviour pattern. The task is at no time easy, but the attempt can be worthwhile. Two Singapore-based analysts, extremely knowledgeable about China, have stated: "It is not just the static complexity, but the dynamic changes and rapid transformations that make the task of analysing and interpreting the developments in China a real challenge".²¹

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the strategic decline of Europe on the international scene, now sharpened by possible BREXIT, the principal protagonists remain the United States and China. The Harvard historian Niall Ferguson coined the word "Chimerica" to describe the duo, and Professor Zbigniew Brzezinski floated the concept of the "Group of Two"²² (though neither country favours this). During the 2008-9 global financial crisis, China's ability to absorb the shocks continued to grow, and the World Bank correctly forecast that China would be the first country in the region to experience a 'rebound'.²³ Indeed, Goldman Sachs has predicted that by 2041, China would overtake the US as the world's largest economy.²⁴ However, the double digit growth has now reduced to around 7%, which seems to be the new normal, yet the fundamentals remain strong. The Columbia University economist

²¹ Wang Gungwu and John Wong (eds.), *Interpreting China's Developments* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2007), p. xv

²² Jonathan Eyal, "United States-China team just part of wider league", *Straits Times*, 8 July 2009.

²³ 'Crisis-Focus: A Leg up for China', *Beijing Review*, 15 April 2009

²⁴ Dominic Wilson & Roopa Purushothaman, 'Dreaming with BRIC: The Path to 2050', Goldman Sachs, Global Economic Paper No 99, October 2003.

Jeffrey Sachs described China as the “most successful development story in world history”.²⁵ China’s desire to play an active role in the world economy is demonstrated by its setting up the Asian Infrastructural Investment Bank, which also underscores its desire to act within the existing international economic architecture, than to supplant it.

The United States leadership had noted the rising influence of China, and the need to engage it, even some years ago. However it is difficult to predict the course of action under the watch of President-elect Donald Trump. He is anti-trade and protectionist, and sees China as having a negative effect on the American economy. But elected candidates, whatever their campaign rhetoric, do change their policies once in office. His Republican Party will also control the Congress. So there is an element of unpredictability here. Xi sent Trump a warm greeting immediately upon his election and vowed to work together, stressing the principles of “non-conflict, non-confrontation, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation”.²⁶ There is a perceptible disinclination in the American ethos to continue active interventionism, as was evident during the campaign. The tendency towards isolationism is growing, which could translate into a larger global footprint for China.

There have been some apprehensions among Western analysts of a ‘string of pearls policy’, whereby China would aggressively expand global influence by forging a linkage of ports and bases from the South China Sea (a major portion of which China claims as having fallen within its territorial waters as designated by the ‘nine-dash line’) through the Straits of Malacca, across the Indian Ocean and to the Arabian Gulf.²⁷ China denies this. Indeed, some observers point to the fact that China has sought to bring India into the Kunming Initiative aiming to improve communications, trade and investment links between Bangladesh, Myanmar, China and India.²⁸

How does China see its own ‘rise’? While China no longer sees itself as the ‘Middle Kingdom’ as in the past, its ‘rise’ in contemporary times has been inexorable. The Chinese have always claimed it was ‘peaceful’. Indeed there had been an internal debate within the Chinese system in the early 21st century as to whether the concept of ‘peaceful rise’ or *heping jueqi* should form a major policy doctrine. Ultimately, by late 2004, it was decided to settle in favour of the much-

²⁵ Quoted in Fareed Zakaria, *The Post American World*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), p. 89.

²⁶ ‘What leaders are saying’, *Straits Times*, 10 November 2016, p.A6

²⁷ For instance, see Christopher J. Pehrson, *String of Pearls: Meeting the Challenge of China’s Rising Power across the Littoral*, Strategic Studies Institute, United States War College.

²⁸ See Jing-dong Yuan, ‘The Dragon and the Elephant: Chinese-Indian Relations in the 21st Century’, *Washington Quarterly*, Summer, 2007.

less ambitious-sounding ‘peaceful development’.²⁹ Of course, Xi Jinping has set China on a course more aligned to its growing importance. This tendency could get a boost in 2017 if Xi is able to have like-minded leaders elected to key positions during the Communist Party Congress.³⁰

Andre Gunder Frank had once stated that the only thing to fear about a rising China is the American reaction to it. That was back in 2005. Nothing much has changed. China appears to take a mature view of this as it quietly moves to position itself pivotally in the globe as well as in key regions such as South Asia. The moods of the Chinese dragon, even at times seemingly shifting, conform to a method that reflects a consistency. There is a process of evolution within the Chinese revolution. Mao’s radicalism, Deng’s pragmatism, Hu’s harmonization and Xi’s ‘China Dream’ followed a pattern within the larger framework of the Revolution that has led to China’s reawakening. China’s external behaviour resembles a river that meanders, albeit at times with sharp bends, but does not suddenly change course. Time, not necessarily of the essence in this case, is on its side. No wonder that once asked about the impact on history of the French Revolution of 1789, Zhou En-lai was reported to have remarked “It is too soon to tell!”

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²⁹ Fei-Ling Wang, ‘Preservation, Prosperity and Power’, What Motivates China’s Foreign Policy’, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol.14, No. 45, pp.669-694.

³⁰ The Communist Party Congress in 2017 will replace five of the seven current members of the Politburo Standing Committee, the top leadership body. It will also shuffle 60% of the 376-seat Central Committee, which includes Ministers, chiefs of industry, and senior military officers. *Wall Street Journal*, 8 November 2016.