

CHINA'S ROLE IN EAST ASIA DURING POST-COLD WAR ERA: AN ANALYSIS FROM UNEVEN AND COMBINED DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

In the post-Maoist era, a new approach was introduced in China, which opened China's markets for foreign investments besides harvesting cordial relations, especially with its neighbours. It helped China emerge as a global power to such a level where the US regards China as a potential competitor. To protect its strategic interests in the East Asian region, the US has introduced a 'Pivot to Asia' policy posing a direct threat to China's trade passing through the South China Sea routes. China has already embarked upon an intercontinental connectivity initiative known as One Belt One Road to bypass the US presence in East Asia. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor is its flagship project which allows China to diversify its trade routes and decrease its dependence on the South China Sea. This paper, therefore, investigates China's behavioural change in East Asia, especially in the post-Cold War era, by applying the theory of Uneven and Combined Development presented by Leon Trotsky. It aims to understand the US policy of containment of China in East Asia and significance of Pakistan in the Chinese approach towards reducing external pressures.

Keywords: Uneven and Combined Development, East Asia, Cold War, OBOR, Pivot to Asia.

Introduction

China was considered a revisionist and an ideological state in East Asia, which had active animosity towards its neighbours and little economic engagement during the Mao Zedong era (1949-1976). China was blamed for supporting revolutionary groups in many East Asian countries to install socialist regimes. However, a momentous shift was witnessed in China's relation with its East Asian neighbours during the post-Maoist period from a revisionist to a constructive state. At present, China is economically well entrenched in East Asia as it has become the largest trading partner, fourth-largest investor, and fifth-largest economic donor of this region.¹ To mitigate the challenge of the growing economic and strategic influence of China in East Asia, the Obama administration introduced the 'Pivot to Asia' policy by massively increasing the US presence in the South China Sea. In this high competing environment, Pakistan's geostrategic position in the region has become vital for China

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to strengthen its economic footprints in the region and materialize its One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative through the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Against this backdrop, this paper analysis China's role in East Asia from the lens of Uneven and Combined Development theory, presented by a Russian Marxist scholar, Leon Trotsky. This theory explains the prospects of the Marxist revolution in the absence of an independent Russian bourgeoisie. It has become an emerging international relations theory, which diversifies the international relations domain mainly through the efforts made by Justin Rosenberg and his peers at Sussex University.² This paper, while discussing the decline of China before the European age of exploration to the century of humiliation, also assesses Maoist strategy to face the challenges posed by US capitalist development and its partnership in East Asia. Although the ideological model of development caused isolation for China, the post-Maoist liberal policy has extensive economic outreach in East Asia. Contrarily, the US 'Pivot to Asia' policy has created a highly competitive but strategically perilous environment that may cause a conflict in the region.

Uneven and Combined Development

The history of international relations suggests that states' behaviours remain the same because an anarchical international system reduces the choices of states to pursue their national interests.³ Kenneth Waltz, an American political scientist, is of the view that students of global politics find it difficult to consider their subject theoretically due to the lack of pure theories of international relations.⁴ International relations theories are extended versions of domestic political and sociological theories.⁵ Academics usually ignored 'international' in their societal theories. The distinction of national and international politics had been criticized by various scholars, but none was able to present a theory in which sociological and geopolitical aspects could be analysed together.⁶ However, Leon Trotsky can be regarded as the first theorist, who analysed the impact of 'international' on national societies.

Trotsky presented his theory Uneven and Combined Development in the context of Russia at the turn of the 20th century. The problem before Bolsheviks was speedy state-led industrialization, where a domestic industrial class was absent. Karl Marx explicitly suggested that a socialist revolution could not occur in absence of the national bourgeoisie class. Furthermore, he opined that industrialization would create similar relations regardless of geography and culture.⁷ In the absence of a national industrial class, Russian socialists were not optimistic about a socialist revolution in Russia. Trotsky became the first socialist scholar who suggested that revolution in Russia was possible even in the absence of domestic bourgeoisie. He opined that the course of human development had historically been uneven and interactive.⁸

Societal multiplicity has been a historical fact that makes regular societal interaction a steady phenomenon in global politics. It compels less developed states to rise equal to the challenge posed by advanced societies or be ready to be subjugated.

Trotsky called it the 'international' challenge of advanced societies as a whip of external necessity. Furthermore, contrary to Marx, Trotsky suggested that less developed societies did not require to complete all stages of the developmental process necessary for early developer societies; because late developers could use the privilege of historic backwardness in less time. Therefore, these different development experiences may create different social relations. Russia, which was facing the challenge from western industrial powers, used its privilege of historic backwardness and soon became an industrial power.⁹

The Uneven and Combined Development (UCD) has become a contemporary international relations concept mainly through the efforts of Justin Rosenberg. UCD in the 'international' context suggests that domestic and international domains of political science are mutually inclusive. Although Trotsky himself had not applied UCD in the general course of history as his primary focus was the Russian socialist revolution, contemporary theorists working in the international relations field are of the view that the idea of UCD can apply to the general course of history. Rosenberg opines that this 'international' realm has been ignored because international relations (as an academic subject) is still considered as a sub-branch of political science. No big idea has travelled from international relations to other academic fields, however, it has been accepted profusely by other social sciences, such as Sociology, Anthropology, and History. Therefore, it is time to recognize the true potential of international relations by exploring the concept of 'international' so that ideas may travel from international relations to other social sciences subjects.¹⁰

Industrial Revolution and China's Decline

China had been a global economic power from the 11th to 18th century. China was the largest trading partner of Africa, Europe, and South Asia to the Middle East. This global outreach enabled China to transport its inventions of paper, tools, printing, and firearms through its most advanced navigational system.¹¹ An English historical sociologist, John Hobson, opines that borrowing and assimilating Chinese ideas and technology made the industrial revolution possible in western Europe and its transformation from feudalism to capitalism.¹² China had been a peaceful power since its halcyon days; however, the industrial revolution provided unprecedented power to European empires as they colonized huge areas of the world. The extremely uneven developments of modernization made Europeans highly coercive as Britain fought wars for 52% of the time from 1688 to 1815.¹³

The uneven developments of modernization in Europe caused the whip of historic necessity on other societies. They had no other option than to modernize themselves according to ways Westerners do, or they would let their resources be usurped by European industrial powerhouses.¹⁴ Japan and China faced similar whips of external necessity, however, their strategies to deal with this whip were different. Japanese traditional socio-political and economic systems were not strong enough to face European barbarianism, therefore, they adopted western revolutionary values and

shed away their traditional style of governance.¹⁵ As a result, Japan became an Asian powerhouse and moved towards expansionism like its European counterparts.

On the other hand, China did not follow the western orientation of modernization and kept back to its cultural values and traditional Confucianism. As a result, it had to face civil wars, invasions, instability, implosion, and humiliation.¹⁶ China's plight during the century of humiliation can be manifested through some statistics. Angus Maddison states that Chinese per capita GDP in 1820 was US \$600, fell to US \$530 in 1870, and slightly increased to US \$552 in 1912, which was still low than what it was in 1820. Furthermore, it had fallen to US \$439 in 1950.¹⁷ Here, a question arises, why the period from 1850-1950 is regarded as a century of humiliation. Chinese economic strength weakened in the 1920s due to European ruthless economic policies and Japanese invasions, in which tens of millions of Chinese were slaughtered by the Japanese forces. Chinese economy deteriorated because of constant wars, plunder of resources, unequal treaties with western empires, and Japanese imperialistic approach towards China. Chinese masses regarded western powers besides the Chinese elite class responsible for the wretched state of China. Due to such public anger, a socialist Chinese group, called Red Army, stood against the persecution and defeated the US-backed Kuomintang and Japanese imperial army. Under the charismatic leadership of Mao Zedong, leader of the Red Army and Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), China regained its unity and strength.

Maoist Approach and Whip of External Necessity

CCP was the vanguard in the Chinese liberation movement, and its followers were of the view that capitalist powers would not miss any opportunity to install an anti-revolutionary government in Beijing because of their free-market agenda. Furthermore, China had to face the growing industrial influence of the US and other capitalist countries, including Japan. They had a feeling that the industrial base of Japan could enable it to become a regional power in East Asia. This whip of external necessity forced CCP to introduce a rigid system in China that would have a zero-tolerance policy for anti-revolutionary elements. UCD suggests that states devise their policies according to the challenges posed by 'international'. The USSR had already set an example by using its privilege of historic backwardness while responding to the whip of external necessity against Nazi Germany; therefore, Mao was inclined to set the Chinese socio-political system on the same lines.¹⁸

Mao was successful in cultivating Chinese national identity and introduced several reforms in the country, such as agricultural reforms, provision of credits and technical assistance to hundreds of millions of unprivileged citizens. He paid special attention to improving infrastructure by commencing massive construction projects of roads, bridges, airfields, canals, and railroads. He marginalized the power of landowners through land reforms and claimed much-needed psychological victory for the Chinese nation in the Korean War. In certain aspects, Maoist policies proved quite effective if compared with China during imperialism and under Nationalists. Mao

became a venerated figure in Chinese history. He is adored even in today's China, and his liking is even much more than Deng Xiaoping, who was the architect of contemporary China's rise.¹⁹

However, some of Mao's policies resulted in the worst conditions in China. An unprecedented modernization campaign, known as the Great Leap Forward, was launched in 1957 to transform the Chinese economy from agriculture to industrial. This campaign was one of the deadliest developmental campaigns in recent history, where millions of people lost their lives from 1958 to 1962. Similarly, a colossal drive was launched to eliminate capitalist and traditional cultural threats to the revolutionary regime in China. During this socio-political drive, cultural destruction, human rights violations, and millions of deaths were recorded. This endeavour is remembered as the Cultural Revolution in China that lasted from 1966 to 1976.²⁰

National and international domains of politics, as already discussed, are interrelated. Therefore, Chinese domestic socialist policy was bound to influence Chinese international relations in the region. East Asian states blamed China for influencing Maoist revolutions in the region by supporting various revolutionary groups.²¹ On the other hand, China had serious reservations towards regional states connecting with the US in East Asia. The Association of East Asian Nations (ASEAN), established in 1967, was taken as an anti-Chinese and anti-communist. Martin Jacques described Chinese and East Asian identities during the Maoist era as rivals or even enemies.²² There was a growing feeling among the Chinese elite that the Maoist approach could not assist China to face the challenge posed by 'international' and a new strategy was thought necessary. Subsequently, CCP reinvented itself quite remarkably to accept the challenge of 'international' in a new way under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping.

Deng Xiaoping's Approach and China-East Asia Relations

After the death of Mao, Deng Xiaoping became leader of the CCP and his reaction to the challenge of 'international' was quite different. Mao encouraged ideological, populist, and isolationist policies, whereas Deng made it clear that if China wanted to regain its past prestige, it would have to endorse the market system and forsake international revolutionary models. Deng was interested in understanding the secret of development made by other regional countries and did not have a fixed and rigid ideology. The successful experiences of Taiwan, Japan, and Singapore influenced China because they have geographical proximities and cultural similarities with China. Jacques calls Deng's policy as learning from 'outside inward rather than from within outward'.²³ China had abundant human resources; therefore, Deng thought that the export-oriented model of China be encouraged and attract foreign direct investment. The class appeal of Mao's era gave way to economic rationalism during the Deng Xiaoping era. The new economic policy was to open Chinese coastal areas for foreign investment and offered ideal conditions for investors. Resultantly, unprecedented investment was poured into China from regional countries and throughout the world.

Leon Trotsky suggests that being late in development is not a potential problem rather a privilege because late comers do not have to repeat developmental experiments and do not require much time to move towards industrialization and modernization. He noted that late developers enjoy the privilege of being late which he called the privilege of historic backwardness.²⁴ Barry Buzan and George Lawson endorsed Trotsky's argument as they expressed that the pace of latecomers or behind-time industrial countries like Germany and Japan was faster than their predecessors in development, such as Britain and the US.²⁵ Russia's pace of development and industrialization was even faster than the earlier industrialized states.²⁶ China used the same privilege of historic backwardness when moved towards massive transformation in its socio-political and economic systems during Deng's 'Open-Door Policy'. China's speed of transformation towards industrialization was even faster than Russia and other industrial powers of the recent past.

Goldman Sachs forecasted in 2007 that the size of US and Chinese economies would be the same till 2015. Moreover, it was predicted that the Chinese economy would stand as the number one economy in 2025. Furthermore, it was suggested that the Chinese economy would be of double size than the US economy in 2050.²⁷ Many analysts did not believe in such predictions regarding Chinese economic might in the future; however, the pace of Chinese economic progress suggested that the prediction made by Goldman Sachs was not baseless. The Chinese economy is considered the second largest in the world by nominal GDP. Chinese GDP has become 18-fold stronger since the adaptation of the 'Open-Door Policy' in the late 1970s. Similarly, in 2009, Germany was replaced by China as the largest exporter.²⁸ The Chinese economy is the largest globally in terms of manufacturing as well. On similar lines, China is the world's largest exporter of goods. Foreign direct investment worth \$ 800 billion has been poured in China since 1979, and China is responsible for 50% of the world's economic growth and trade. Chinese economic policy worked wonders with poverty alleviation as Lawrence H. Summers notes that the living standard of people doubled during the industrial revolution in Britain, however, the living standard of the Chinese population increased seven folds during the Chinese journey of modernization.²⁹

The 1977-Asian financial crisis, which played havoc with the global economies, was unable to cast a negative impact on the economy of China. When rich economies like the US, the UK, Italy, Japan, and France found it hard to cope with the crisis, the Chinese economy manifested healthy balance sheets.³⁰ Some time ago, the West had serious reservations regarding China's performance in the banking sector, however, in 2010, three out of five world's largest banks were owned by China. The World Bank suggested that more than 70% of poverty alleviation has been witnessed in China. The growing economic prowess of China can be gauged from the fact that the US offered China establishing the project of Great 2 (G2) because the US has realized that it cannot solve any global problem without Chinese help.³¹ Martin Jacques writes that economic openness revolutionized Chinese thinking and an economic fever engrossed China and millions of Chinese migrated from villages to cities in search of

better opportunities.³² China became the largest recipient of foreign direct investment in 2003,³³ and foreign companies were responsible for 60 percent of Chinese exports in 2004.³⁴ Similarly, the Chinese economy transformed from agriculture to industrial as the share of agriculture fell from 60 to 16 percent from 1952 to 2003.³⁵ China witnessed unprecedented economic growth because of its transformation from a centrally planned to a free-market economy during the last 40 years while using its privilege of historic backwardness. Currently, China is the world's second-largest economy, world's largest manufacturer and exporter, second-largest importer, world's largest consumer market, and largest trading partner of many countries.³⁶

To become the export-oriented powerhouse of East Asia, China would have to import raw materials and technical knowledge from neighbouring countries. This rationale of development helped China improving its relations with East Asian countries. Neo-realism draws a distinct line between national and international politics and suggests that both fields of politics are hardly interrelated. In the case of post-Maoist China, this does not seem relevant as China's relations with regional countries improved significantly, especially after the end of the Cold War. UCD views national and international politics as interrelated in a way that both fields cannot be separated.³⁷ The whip of external necessity forced China to transform its national approach towards the economy, which was bound to change China's foreign relations with East Asian countries.

The end of the Cold War proved auspicious for China-East Asia relations because they manifested a willingness to improve their relationship. China showed interest in regional institutions and this move towards regionalism was unprecedented in Chinese history, especially during Mao's era. Martin Jacques mentioned four reasons behind the belated but enthusiastic Chinese embrace of regionalism in the late 1990s. The first reason was the growing confidence of China in its economic performance due to Deng's 'Open-Door Policy'. Secondly, China was expected to join World Trade Organization, therefore, institutionalism was thought necessary for the export-led growth of China. Thirdly, China was confident that by embracing multilateralism in East Asia, it would not become subservient to Japan. The last reason was the experience of the 1977-Asian Financial Crisis that made China realized that era of isolationism had ended as economies had been highly integrated.³⁸

The multilateral approach made the Chinese economy highly integrated with East Asia and China set regionalism as its top priority. China introduced the 'Good Neighbour Policy', which proposed friendly relations with East Asian nations and became a key pillar of Chinese foreign policy. Xue Hanqin, the Chinese ambassador in ASEAN, vowed that China would support any initiative to improve regionalism in East Asia. Similarly, Chinese President Hu Jintao and Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan declared that the two powerhouses of East Asia would work together for community building and regional cooperation.³⁹ Furthermore, when China decided not to devalue its currency during the Asian Financial Crisis despite having a lot of pressure, the regional countries lauded this initiative. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir

Mohammad termed the Chinese decision laudable and said that China had shown very cooperative and responsible behaviour and its decision had saved the whole region from adverse effects.⁴⁰ The level of trade increased from \$ 800 million to \$ 105 billion during 1979-2004.⁴¹ The major countries in East Asia like Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, and Japan are running a significant trade surplus with China. The experience of the European Union suggests that economic integration is much easier than political integration. Inter-East Asian trade increased from 33.8 percent to 50 percent towards the start of the 21st century.⁴²

Martin Jacques believes that Chinese development is flowing over the borders of China and influencing almost every East Asian country. China transformed its approach because of the region, and the region has also been reconfigured by the rise of China. The agenda of East Asia is not set anywhere else than Beijing.⁴³ Zhang Yunling and Tan Shipping describe the Chinese approach as becoming a locomotive for the growth of East Asia as a regional market and provider of technology and investment.⁴⁴ This strategy has proved successful as China has become the most important regional market in East Asia; even for Japan, China became the largest export market in 2009.⁴⁵ Furthermore, China has become the key investor in East and South East Asia and is investing extensively in the infrastructure sector, such as roads, railways, and refineries. The regional strategy of China in East Asia is to participate extensively, open markets, offer assurance, nurture interdependence, and avoid confrontations.⁴⁶

US Policy of Containment and Significance of Pakistan for China

The US is diligently portraying China's economic rise as an existential threat to its strategic interests in East Asia, therefore, its presence in the South China Sea has substantially increased. John Mearsheimer is of the view that if the economic growth of China continues on the same patterns for at least twenty years, China will become a regional hegemon in East Asia which will be highly pernicious for the US.⁴⁷ He opines that historically when a major power attains a certain level of economic development, its economic power is bound to be manifested in aggressive foreign relations especially with its neighbours. Therefore, the Obama administration came forward with the 'Pivot to Asia' policy to counter China's growing influence in East Asia. The logic behind the 'Pivot to Asia' policy is like the rationale behind the US policy of containment of the Soviet Union during Cold War days.

Due to China's increasing economic capabilities and military power, the US has abandoned its policy of engagement with China.⁴⁸ The Obama administration had been asserting that the US is back in Asia by acceding to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. In the context of growing Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, US top officials declared that the US had national interests in safeguarding the freedom of navigation and flights in the region. In response to Chinese naval build-up, the US responded by consolidating its stance on Guam, increasing the sale of advanced weapons to Vietnam, and stationing its Combats Littoral Ship in Singapore. Out of its

fifty-three advanced submarines, the US deployed thirty-one in the Pacific region and strengthened its anti-submarine program. The Trump administration continued the policy of maximum pressure on China, and the Biden administration is also hard on China.

Chinese officials are cognizant of the fact that in case of major conflict between China and the US, the US will endeavour to stop China's trade in the South China Sea through its naval power. This scenario will be a macabre dream for China as China's model since Deng Xiaoping's 'Open-Door Policy' is entirely reliant on making China a regional and global trade hub. This whip of increased pressure induced by the US has forced China to look for alternative trade routes bypassing the South China Sea so that in a conflict situation, the US will not be able to halt Chinese regional and global trade. A well-anticipated strategy of China to cater to US naval presence in the South China Sea is the OBOR initiative. Through six corridors, OBOR aims to connect China with South Asia, the Middle East, West Asia, Central Asia, Russia, Africa, and Europe for a smooth flow of trade. CPEC, being the flagship project of this colossal and ambitious Chinese initiative, is a huge network of railways, roads, airports, special economic zones, industrial parks, and fibre optics.⁴⁹

CPEC is envisaged to expand the Karakoram Highway between China and Pakistan and construct a railway-road network from Gwadar to the Chinese western border. Through CPEC, China will have direct access to the Arabian Sea and can avoid trips to the Strait of Malacca in the presence of US naval forces. It is argued that CPEC will play a key role in the export-oriented economic model of China by providing it access to energy resources and raw materials in the Middle East and Africa. Furthermore, the connectivity provided by CPEC to China's less developed areas will play an important role in their economic uplift. Xinjiang has the potential to become a regional hub connecting China with the Eurasian Union, SAARC, and Iran through CPEC.⁵⁰ The economic benefits of CPEC will not be limited to Pakistan and China; the whole region will reap the benefits of this project through the development of infrastructure and transportation. Moreover, the economic impact of CPEC is bound to have advantages for academic and cultural links. The socioeconomic engagement under the auspices of CPEC will produce shared norms and cultural values minimizing the chances of conflict in the region.⁵¹

Central Asian states are looking for new ventures in South Asia and China. However, their land-locked geography is the main hurdle in materializing their dream of economic engagement with other countries. CPEC provides an exceptional opportunity for these states to have access to China and South Asia through Afghanistan. China has been a prominent investor in Central Asia since the mid-1990s. Chinese companies have played a major role in the construction of various development projects in Central Asia, such as highways, bridges, and telecommunication systems. Chinese multilateralism is not restricted to East Asia; it has corresponding footprints in Central Asia, West Asia, and the Middle East. To establish direct access to these countries, Pakistan is the most significant partner for

China. It not only shares the Chinese vision of OBOR but also helping China to reduce its trade impediments in the South China Sea with a heavy US naval presence.

Conclusion

There has been an argument that an ideological regime in China was hostile to East Asian countries because of political dissimilarities. The development model envisaged by Mao did face the challenge of 'international' as China was stuck with domestic and international problems. However, Deng Xiaoping significantly steered China's economy towards economic pragmatism as a whip of necessity. Although China could not considerably improve its relations with East Asian nations during the Cold War, in the post-Cold War era, a visible improvement was seen in its relations with East Asian countries besides significant domestic socio-economic development. The massive outreach of China challenged US strategic motives in the region and was considered a grave security threat to US interests; thus, the US adopted a containment policy against China. At present, a huge US naval presence in the South China Sea is alarming, and China has come forward with the OBOR initiative to develop alternative trading routes. CPEC, in this regard, provides China with direct access to the Indian Ocean. China is now holding a dominating position while investing extensively in socio-economic projects and infrastructure development of the region.

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