

## **China's Foreign Policy Behaviour: Understanding through the Lens of Geopsychology**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines China's foreign policy and diplomacy within the theoretical framework of geopsychology, which may be defined as the geography-embedded prism of a people's attitudinal and behavioural patterns toward others, rooted in past experiences, historical processes, cultural constructs and societal structures. The article seeks to illuminate those key components that have potentially gone into framing China's geopsychology over the past centuries and its impact on Beijing's foreign policy behaviour. Paradoxically enough, China on the one hand talks of anti-hegemonism but it practices hegemonism while dealing with its own neighbours and peripheries on the other. There are several examples that show China's bellicose postures in affirming its position as an unchallenged regional hegemon, while being psychologically unprepared to tolerate intervention by extra-regional powers, for instance, in the South China and the East China Sea. Fired by nationalism and the historical ambition to rule the roost, China is determined to become a regional hegemon regardless of US attempts to encircle it through the balancing coalitions. Also, China is firm to change the rules of the game in pursuit of advancing and calcifying its core national interests. So far as America is concerned, China has blueprints in place to counter US bullying tactics.

**Keywords:** *geopsychology, behavioural patterns, ruling elites, Middle Kingdom syndrome, nationalism, strategic culture, cultural pride, tianxia system, hegemony*

### **1. Introduction**

China's spectacular rise as an economic and military power during the past couple of decades has been primarily driven by its nationalistic determination and political ambition to play an assertive and influential role in shaping the contours of the international system. It is all set to compete with America for

power and dominance as a global actor, perhaps “to push the United States out of the Indo-Pacific and rival it on the global stage.”<sup>1</sup> Under President Xi Jinping’s leadership, for instance, China has marched ahead by launching the most ambitious and gargantuan project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or with setting up of new institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the New Development Bank under its aegis, though under the BRICS banner. These initiatives are in sync with fulfilling the China Dream of national rejuvenation. Similarly, China is vigorously modernizing its “offensive” military systems in order to secure for it a world-class status by 2050.<sup>2</sup>

Realistically enough, the domestic politics and China’s internal security concerns are singularly important in shaping and articulating its perception of the world order, characterized by the “complex interdependence.”<sup>3</sup> Against this background, the article attempts to examine China’s foreign policy and diplomacy through the perspective of geopsychology. The latter may be defined as a geography-embedded prism of a people’s attitudinal and behavioural patterns toward others, rooted in past experiences, historical processes, cultural constructs and societal structures. Accordingly, the article seeks to illuminate the key components that have gone into framing China’s geopsychology over the past centuries as well as influencing its foreign policy behaviour. At the outset, it fleshes out below the geopsychology theory,<sup>4</sup> albeit in brief, in order to connect it with China’s approach to deal with major powers.

## **2. Geopsychology Theory (GT)**

German scholar Willy Hellpach used the term “geopsyche” in his groundbreaking work.<sup>5</sup> Trained essentially as a physician and environmental psychologist, he spelt out the effects of natural objects like earth, the moon and the sun on humans and the social environment. However, he did not treat geopsychology in a comprehensive and scientific manner. Nor did he contemplate applying it to international relations. Similarly, Ronald W. Scholtz, a mathematician and psychologist, explored how human perception is influenced by environmental conditions. Scholtz and Hellpach studied “colors and shape of landscapes” that affect human behaviour, whereas in international politics human actions transcend national boundaries and fall in political, economic, cultural and social domains. In this context, geopsychology is constitutive of a mental state and behavioural patterns of ruling leaders and authoritarian regimes, including masses, of a specific region or the nation. In other words, geopsychology carries an imprint of their shared perceptions, prejudices, nationalism, religion, ethnicity and historical experiences.

Broadly speaking, geopsychology reflects the social and cultural environment in a given geographical region. In other words, there is interconnected-

ness between environments and the mass psyche. Moreover, the perceptive frame of each society differs from region to region, or country to country, depending on societal structures and cultural upbringing of the masses and ruling or non-state actors who internalize “the norms and value orientations” held by the community or local group living in a “socializing environment”.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of significance, geopsychology is a policy compass or a lighthouse in the voyages of foreign policy. It sets out to filling the “knowledge gap” in the Western-dominated mainstream international relations (IR) theories that have largely neglected the role of historical experiences, societal and cultural values, and belief systems of Asian societies and regional actors in shaping their foreign policy behaviour. This is particularly true of South Asia, the Middle East, and Northeast Asia. In fact, geopsychology has remained an “estranged sibling” as a branch of IR, which in no terms is devoid of psychology per se. In this context, Joshua Kertzer and Dustin Tingley of Harvard University spot a significant transformation of political psychology (PS) in IR. They have identified the key research areas of growth in PS – “the surge of interest in emotions and hot cognition, the rise of more psychologically informed theories of public opinion in IR, a nascent research program [effects of IR on individuals] [dubbed as] ‘the first image reversed’, and neurobiological and evolutionary work.”<sup>7</sup> However, political psychology is inadequate to diagnose the complexity of geopsychology of state and non-state actors.

IR theorists are deeply divided over the validity and reliability of IR paradigms. Perhaps, they have been unable to offer concise, clear and convincing explanations as to why the policy behaviour of national and international elites cannot be studied scientifically. For instance, Kenneth Waltz argues that states are not only concerned with preserving their share of power but also with expanding and consolidating it with an intent to replace the existing power structure, whether dominated by a single or multiple powers. However, “neorealism, like classical realism, cannot adequately account for changes in world politics.... They contend that neorealism ignores both the historical process during which identities and interests are formed, and the diverse methodological possibilities.”<sup>8</sup> Realism assumes that states “think and act in terms of interest defined as power.” It is a general statement on the psychology of states. Geopsychology assigns primacy to national and regional peculiarities – for instance, Chinese characteristics in the case of China.<sup>9</sup> It does not deny that states act to enhance power but affirms that their psychologies dictate the extent and approach of their power pursuit. The geopsychology theory (GT) aims to study, explain and analyze the behaviour of non-state and authoritarian state actors who are capable of exerting influence on the global and regional order.

The GT is a set of myriad correlates such as geography, history, nationalism, cultural values, religious orientation, faith and belief systems that shape

perceptions, outlook, and approaches of ruling leaders and non-state actors toward global and regional politics. For instance, historical narratives are an emerging instrument of a “social memory” which helps understand the psyche of national elites or authoritarian regimes, in particular. Pertinently, psycho-cultural perceptions, formed in the process of nation-state building, tend to influence the psyche of people living within national boundaries. It is important to note that not only are people’s cultural affinities channelized into generating mass hysteria but also wars are idealized, hostilities are institutionalized, and ethno-religious conflicts are legitimized. This is how metaphysical concerns of culture are gradually transformed into “modern hate”, and historical rivalry is projected as a political necessity to outmanoeuvre the opponent.

### **3. Relevance of Geopsychology Theory**

Geopsychology has remained a neglected field in international relations (IR). Partly, it was attributed to the primacy of geopolitics during the Cold War era when IR theorists were more interested in studying alliances because of the latter’s influence on the balance of power. They emphasized on the “structural conditions within which states act rather than the characteristics of individual countries – their domestic political institutions, for example.”<sup>10</sup> Probably, they were too preoccupied with research on militarized inter-state disputes to ponder over the efficacy of geopsychology as a mode of crisis management at global and regional levels. Moreover, Western scholars were more attentive to studying the UN and Bretton Woods institutions that primarily served the hegemon’s military and security interest in power maximization rather than supporting a moral state<sup>11</sup> in the bipolar politics.

It was by accident that the IR discipline underwent a radical transformation with the tragic occurrence of 9/11. IR scholars, engaged in ideological, military and security studies, have now onerous responsibility to comprehend the new typology of threats stemming from violent non-state and authoritarian actors who can potentially impact the trajectory of global and regional security architecture in today’s interdependent world order. Henry Kissinger, who belongs to the realist school of thought, agrees that the traditional concept of balance of power can no longer define “perils” or “possibilities.”<sup>12</sup> In his perception, old international patterns are crumbling and old solutions are no longer feasible due to the impact of technology and communication, making people aware of what is happening in the world. Given this, GT is an attempt to bridge the existing knowledge gaps in IR theories by illuminating distinctive characteristics of a region in terms of geography, history, ethnicity, religion, culture (“culturally particular and exclusive”), and worldviews of its national elites and individual actors. It potently analyzes the fundamental

causes of conflicts, violence and wars in the current world order as well as acts as a guidepost to mitigating the intensity of interacting myriad conflicts. Its relevance can be briefly spelt out as follows.

First, mainstream IR paradigms such as realism, neorealism, neoliberalism and constructivism have been unable to offer plausible reasons about the root causes of non-traditional security threats such as separatist movements, civil wars, religious radicalism and ethno-religious conflicts across the world. On the contrary, GT aids understanding how the determining forces of nationalism, culture and historical grievances shape policy approaches and strategies of authoritarian regimes while dealing with the so-called superpower hegemony in light of the fact that the days of hegemony are over in an interdependent world order.

Second, GT is useful in understanding foreign policy and diplomatic behaviour of authoritarian regimes, such as those in China and North Korea, given the infeasibility of the rational choice model in their decision making processes. Third, structural realism, neo-liberalism and constructivism have been unable to diagnose and elaborate on how the behaviour of violent non-state actors at times is more threatening and more challenging than that of state actors.

#### **4. Components of China's Geopsychology**

The geopsychology of China's ruling elites and masses, undergirding the country's foreign policy behaviour and practices, has been formed of the experience of national humiliation, the Middle Kingdom syndrome, cultural pride, nationalism, strategic culture and the anti-hegemony discourse.<sup>13</sup>

##### ***4.1. The Sting of Humiliation***

China's geopsychology is primarily rooted in its historical experiences, notably the humiliation<sup>14</sup> it had suffered at the hands of imperialists and Western powers in the 19th and until mid-20th centuries when it was established as the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949. Slighted by the ignominy of "unequal treaties," Chinese leaderships have harboured the perception of victimization by alien powers right from the Opium Wars (1839-42) – a profound psychological setback to Qing emperors – through numerous European invasions over China to the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1945.<sup>15</sup> In this context, Kerry Brown observes:

For much of the modern era, Chinese lost out in the battle for modernity. The era from 1839 onwards was so disastrous in this respect that it had come to be referred to in more recent historiography as the 'century of humiliation.' The wounds from this history and the sense of victimhood it gave have been

profound on the modern Chinese national psyche. This at least explains the particular shrillness of contemporary Chinese nationalism – it is built on narratives around finally righting this history and the injustice that many Chinese people see in it.<sup>16</sup>

Zheng Wang, professor in the School of Diplomacy and International Relations at Seton Hall University, New Jersey, comments that the national disgrace provided “the all-consuming fire needed for China to rise like a phoenix from the ashes and overcome the West on its quest for glory.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Chinese leadership harnesses it as a historical narrative, branding the spectacle of national resistance and triumph as a source of shared esteem. For instance, President Xi Jinping’s speech at the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of war victory in September 2015 was a well-calculated strategy to revive and sustain the mass memory of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. Xi stated, “Today is a day that will forever be etched in the memory of people all over the world. Seventy years ago today, the Chinese people, having fought tenaciously for 14 years, won the great victory of their War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, marking the full victory of the World Anti-Fascist War. On that day, the world was once again blessed by the sunshine of peace.”<sup>18</sup> He further added:

The victory of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression is the first complete victory won by China in its resistance against foreign aggression in modern times. This great triumph crushed the plot of the Japanese militarists to colonize and enslave China and put an end to China’s national humiliation of suffering successive defeats at the hands of foreign aggressors in modern times. This great triumph re-established China as a major country in the world and won the Chinese people respect of all peace-loving people around the world. This great triumph opened up bright prospects for the great renewal of the Chinese nation and set our ancient country on a new journey after gaining rebirth.<sup>19</sup>

The statements above clearly mirror the Chinese leadership’s mindset, soaked in the historical layers of dishonour, defiance, and triumph, contributing to the formation of China’s geopsychology toward the outside world, especially the past aggressors like Japan whom China perceives as its geopolitical rival in East and Southeast Asia. The anti-Japanese sentiments permeate the Chinese society to this day. The Beijing leadership is also concerned about the Japan-US geostrategic collaboration for restricting China’s influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Thomas J. Christensen also supports this view, writing that “historical legacies and ethnic hatred exacerbate the security dilemma in Sino-Japanese relations.”<sup>20</sup> However, “China’s historically rooted and visceral distrust of Japan”<sup>21</sup> has resulted in spawning of irritants in their relationship. China is very much sensitive about Japan’s past aggression.

Christensen further elaborates, “Japan’s refusal to respond satisfactorily to Chinese requests that Tokyo recognize and apologize for its imperial past – for example, by revising history textbooks in the public schools – has helped to preserve China’s natural aversion to Japan.”<sup>22</sup>

At this critical juncture, the Xi regime is determined to appease the domestic constituency by giving it the “China’s superpower” promise, an imperative for dealing with new geopolitical predicaments in the Indo-Pacific region. For this, President Xi has been exhorting the Chinese citizenry that they keep the bitter memories alive about how shabbily they were treated by aggressive powers such as Japan. He stressed, “No matter how much stronger it may become, China will never seek hegemony or expansion. It will never inflict its past suffering on any other nation. The Chinese people are resolved to pursue friendly relations with all other countries, uphold the outcomes of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War, and make greater contribution to mankind.”<sup>23</sup> This rhetoric entails a political message to masses that China was capable of reestablishing itself as a great nation to ensure a hegemony-free world order.<sup>24</sup>

#### **4.2. The Middle Kingdom Syndrome**

In the distant past, Shi Jie (1005-45) defined the *Middle Kingdom* majestically, “Heaven is above, earth is below, and that in between heaven and earth is called China [zhongguo]. Those on the peripheries are the foreign [si yi]. The foreign belong to the outer [wai] whilst China belongs to the inner [nei]. Heaven and earth thus make it possible to differentiate the outer from the inner.”<sup>25</sup> What gave rise to this lofty perception? Robert Gamer explains that for most of its history, Chinese leaders had little contact or interaction with regions outside of China’s western borders, with the isolation fueling their belief in being situated in the “‘Middle Kingdom’ in the universe.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Samuel King explains, “China is guarded on the west by almost endless deserts, on the southwest by the Himalayan range, and on the east by vast oceans. Admired but often attacked by the ‘barbarians’ of the semiarid plateau lands on the north and west, and cut off from the other centers of civilization by oceans, deserts, and mountains, China gradually developed a unique sense of its place under heaven.”<sup>27</sup> However, to this day, the Chinese leaders’ psyche appears tenaciously imbued with the “Middle Kingdom” mentality. First, though caught up between the domestic constraints on economic development and the increasing integration with the global economic order, China’s worldview is essentially based on Chinese characteristics.<sup>28</sup> It is fired by the self-image that China is bound to play a critical role in shaping the global architecture rather than playing second fiddle to any power whatsoever. Second, China’s geopsychology of perceiving its role in the world politics

is determined, among other factors, by its history which has substantially influenced the Chinese thought process and behavioural pattern on war and peace. In China's worldview, the "territorial sovereign mode" of world order was imposed on it by the West and Japan.<sup>29</sup> In effect, China asserts that its concept of sovereignty cannot be properly understood through Western lenses or concepts.

Indeed, the past has been very important for China to interpret the world order through a blend of tradition and modernity.<sup>30</sup> From the traditional viewpoint, Tianxia, as a system of governance, is still relevant to understand the current worldview. Chinese scholar Zhao Ting Yang "argues that although Tianxia is a broader and more complex concept, encompassing natural, social and political elements, the Western understanding of the world is essentially 'thin' (danbo)."<sup>31</sup> The Tianxian system places emphasis on order, hierarchy and stability and is "represented as an inward-looking system of values and governance that look to Confucianism and the emperor as the highest authority in running the internal order."<sup>32</sup>

But, however, Tianxia's mythological and spiritual values that Heaven grants the "exclusive right of rule" to the emperor are divorced from the realities of today's interdependent world order. Not a single Sinologist in the West has ever advanced the convincing logic as to why Tianxia is so relevant in the highly complex interdependent international system. How could Tianxia's underlying concepts and injunctions be applied to the fragile concept of sovereignty? One cannot argue over the stability of the given political order in China but the real motivation of the Chinese leadership behind fostering Tianxia and Confucianism is to legitimize the one-party rule to ensure political stability, people's welfare, and social harmony. Meissner comments, "Confucianism served a dual function for authorities in the 1990s. Its 'authoritarian' aspects helped contribute to 'socialist, spiritual civilization' and social cohesion while it offered a cultural antidote to the threat of Westernization."<sup>33</sup> Paradoxically, China has been employing the concept of state sovereignty as an expedient political weapon to oppose any intervention by great powers in its internal and external affairs.

### **4.3. Cultural Pride**

A noted Chinese scholar Qin Yaqing highlights the significance of culture for a foreign policy, arguing that it constitutes "shared values, which go beyond ideological divisions and the calculation of interest. Culture matters because histories matter, practices matter, and discourses matter. Culture plays an important role in human life, in the way of thinking, and therefore in policymaking."<sup>34</sup> China as a nation is considered especially proud and vocal of its cultural heritage and civilizational values. For them, culture is



an integral part of their day-to-day life and social interaction, which has calcified among them as a strong sense of cultural pride. In this context, Elena Barabantseva writes that China's priority is to "protect the national culture [which has been] transformed into the active promotion of Chinese culture around the world. As for the thesis that China's world order has been relatively stable, its images of the world and its role in it are subject to constant negotiation and dispute at different levels. The very fashion whereby China attempts to protect and promote its culture blurs the distinctions between traditional and universal elements, and fusing and blending them. Through these practices, China's visions of the world and engagement with it are constructed, contested, and negotiated."<sup>35</sup>

Zheng Wang of Seton Hall University, New Jersey, links Chinese cultural pride to the Tianxia system. He writes, "Ancient Chinese believed that their Central Kingdom was the center of high culture and superior morality. More importantly, under the tianxia system, outsiders could be culturally absorbed and become Chinese by adopting Chinese culture and customs."<sup>36</sup> Wang adds that the notion of "equal states" was repugnant to the tianxia system that posited China as "the only true civilization, its cultural superiority unchallenged."<sup>37</sup> The vestiges of the belief in cultural superiority emanate from the perception of Chinese emperors who not only regarded China as the "centre of world civilizations"<sup>38</sup> but also considered foreign emissaries as "barbarians". Remarkably, in his speech at the UNESCO Headquarters in March 2014, President Xi said, "Having gone through over 5,000 years of vicissitudes, the Chinese civilization has always kept to its original root. As the unique cultural identity of the Chinese nation, it contains our most profound cultural pursuits and provides us with abundant nourishment for existence and development."<sup>39</sup>

Not surprisingly, Henry Kissinger, an avid student of Chinese history and astute practitioner of the US policy toward China, recommended that Americans exercise prudence, caution while hedging and engaging China. He advised American policy makers to avoid exhibiting their superiority, arguing that China would never tolerate the US hegemony. At the same time, Kissinger expressed his serious concern about the negative fallout of China's heroic and "assertive national culture" on the world order. Philip Bowring also sounds a similar note in his op-ed column "Beware an angry China" in the *New York Times*, April 13, 2008. He writes that the "China-bashing" would only "increase nationalism in China."<sup>40</sup> In effect, China's cultural aversions to aliens produce negativism about the West. Chinese people and political leaders believe that this attitude can be diluted, to some degree, provided foreign powers accord full respect to and demonstrate admiration for their culture and civilization.<sup>41</sup>

#### **4.4. Nationalism**

Chinese nationalism has been a cementing force for the Communist Party of China (CCP) with an objective to gain legitimacy for the monolithic structure of the party. Also, the CCP has viewed Japanese imperialism as a convenient weapon to “feed” Chinese citizens “a steady diet of patriotic, anti-Japanese media programming designed to glorify the CCP’s role in World War II.”<sup>42</sup> The pervading sense of nationalism has driven Chinese people to fight against imperialists and invaders.<sup>43</sup> For example, the Opium Wars catalyzed the development of nationalism in China. Bill Hillman explains that the imperialist “aggressions and unequal treaties that followed inspired China’s first nationalists to challenge the Dragon Throne in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Versailles decision of 1919 that granted Japan Germany’s former concessionary rights in Shandong sparked the May Fourth demonstrations [May 1919] that today’s Chinese claim as the birth of the modern Chinese nation. In the 1930s and 1940s, Japanese aggressions, beginning with the Manchurian Incident of 1931, excited the nationalism of both communists and nationalists.”<sup>44</sup>

If one traces the nationalist discourse in the historical context, Sun Yat-sen, a revolutionary nationalist leader, gave a “passionate call” for united action in liberating the country from imperial forces.<sup>45</sup> His successors, especially Mao Tse-tung, carried forward the unfinished nationalist revolution by instilling patriotism and loyalty into the mass psyche. Mao was adept in channelling the organizational power of nationalism for stemming external threats to China’s Communist state. Glorifying the virtues of the Han, Mao wrote that “[the] Chinese nation is known throughout the world not only for its industriousness and stamina, but also for its ardent love of freedom and its rich revolutionary traditions. The history of the Han people ... demonstrates that Chinese never submit to tyrannical rule but invariably use revolutionary means to overthrow or change it ... thus the Chinese nation has a glorious revolutionary tradition and splendid historical heritage.”<sup>46</sup> At the same time, Mao perceived “all of China’s nationalities ... as collective victims of imperialism and equal in their striving to shake off foreign oppression.”<sup>47</sup>

Chinese scholars opine that Chinese leaders favour the “resurgence of nationalism” for various reasons, including the use of Marxist, Maoist and Dengist paradigms to legitimize the one-party rule. Liu and Smith are of the view that in the age of economic globalization, nationalism has been blended with marketization. They write, “For, while nationalism has contributed to China’s success in economic reform, these successes are [sic] in turn have lubricated the emergence of a type of nationalism that has promoted China’s international status. China is recognized today as a ‘rising economic and military power’ with, importantly, a set of historically accumulated grievances

against the West. These grievances are “a profound sense of ‘humiliation’ the people had suffered in the past.”<sup>48</sup> Yong Deng subscribes to the view that Chinese foreign policy is highly influenced by its sense of national identity, “a hyper-nationalist, hardcore-realpolitik.”<sup>49</sup> Along these lines, Hu, Chan and Zha note that “China can be thought of as a ‘hyper-nationalistic state’ in its quest for territorial greatness and a ‘Greater China.’”<sup>50</sup>

Basically, the academic and political discourse involves two main categories of Chinese nationalism – cultural nationalism and modern/new nationalism. In common parlance, Chinese nationalism has been interpreted as a “reactive nationalism” to international events or incidents rather than a “domestic political manipulation.”<sup>51</sup> The political discourse on China’s new nationalism<sup>52</sup> ensued in the post-Cold War era with a view to understanding nationalism’s impact on China’s foreign policy. Undeniably, China emerged as a major beneficiary from the ashes of the Soviet Union in the US-led unipolar world. Naturally, the “conflict propensity” of Chinese nationalism, stirred by cultural nationalism, propelled its leadership to pursue more aggressive and assertive foreign policy and diplomacy. This implied that China perceived the United States as its main adversary that hindered its role in shaping the world order. Yongnian Zheng argues in this context that “what the [Chinese] leadership wants is not to overthrow the existing system, but the recognition of Chinese power and its rightful place in the world system by other major world powers.”<sup>53</sup> From this perspective, the article argues that Chinese nationalism has been amalgamated into the geopolitical thought, categorized as “geopolitik nationalism.”<sup>54</sup> It means that geopolitical nationalism is an offshoot of China’s assertive behaviour to take a strong position against the United States – its principal competitor and political rival.

It is also believed that China’s assertive nationalism is a response to popular nationalism that supports taking a “confrontational position” against the West on complex issues such as maritime territorial disputes.<sup>55</sup> On his part, Feng Zhang provides a balanced perspective on the nature of Chinese nationalism: “Although assertive nationalism does not yet seem to command the mainstream opinion in China today, it nevertheless grows more vocal and vociferous with the rise of Chinese power. Although it does not have the xenophobic quality of extreme nationalism, nor does it show the restraint and moderation of defensive realism and liberalism. What it asserts, in essence, is that China should actively prepare for struggle and conflict with other states, especially against Western hegemony.”<sup>56</sup>

The past history has of course contributed to the rise of the Han-centric nationalism in China, whereas China’s modern nationalism has been fuelled by international events and accidents, involving the question of China’s sovereignty. Interestingly, Chinese nationalism is quite often manipulated by CCP leaders to project as if Western powers hold China in low esteem. For

instance, if the United States does not treat China on an equal footing, the latter might turn more aggressive, more xenophobic, and “more nationalistic.” Echoing this view, Chinese scholars consider Chinese nationalism as simply “a reaction to external pressure.”<sup>57</sup> They believe that nationalism fosters the national dignity abroad. The underlying logic is that China’s national dignity epitomizes the respect for individual dignity. This reasoning is deeply ingrained in the psyche of Chinese people, their leadership, their academia and intellectuals. This is how China’s foreign and security policies are formulated, shaped and articulated while dealing with the outside world. For example, Chinese leaders have been quick to respond to the international incidents impinging on China, whether it was the NATO’s bombing of Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in May 1999, or China’s inability to clinch the Olympic bid in 1992, or the US intervention in the South China Sea. Indeed, China’s reaction to the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy is one of the classic examples of Chinese nationalism. It is reported that “Chinese movie theatres banned American films and radio stations refused to play American music in protest.”<sup>58</sup>

Moreover, the adamant Chinese government succeeded in securing a public apology from President Bill Clinton who assured that the Chinese side would be reported on the outcome of investigation into the incident. Perhaps, no other country would have taken up such incidents to the logical conclusion by invoking its nationalistic fervour. The NATO bombing was described as a version of “new gun boat diplomacy” rather than a humanitarian enterprise to save the Bosnian Muslims against the barbarity of the Yugoslav Serbs, a majority ethnicity in Belgrade. But the Chinese reaction, according to scholars, suggests that “a more cultural form of nationalism has actually been entrenched in top-level policy making.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, the bombing incident fuelled China’s assertive nationalism and “informs us that for China, the choice between nationalism and globalism is not a zero-sum exercise rather, neither should come at the expense of the other.”<sup>60</sup>

Another striking example pertains to China’s sovereignty concerns over the South China Sea issue. China not only resents American intervention in the South China Sea but also refuses to comply with the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration, delivered in July 2016. Its defiance is rooted in the Chinese leadership’s strategy to pamper to the popular nationalism that supports efficacious and strong rejoined to the misadventurism of United States and other Western powers. The citizenry also exhorts/calls upon the government to embrace a “muscular” foreign policy in order to safeguard the national honour.<sup>61</sup> A compelling reason for US policy makers to showcase the “China threat” theory in public domain is to constrict China’s expanding foothold in the Asia-Pacific region and elsewhere. It may be recalled that China’s containment was a major plank of the US policy throughout the Cold

War. Even today, the label has changed but the content remains the same. The new nomenclature is engaging China in global affairs so that it fits in the rule-based liberal international order, respecting human rights and freedom of navigation in the ocean politics. Undeniably, it is well nigh impossible to contain a militarily and economically strong and powerful China. Nevertheless, China is psychologically poised to challenge the US supremacy in global politics. This is manifest from Beijing's overt or covert challenge to Washington on the South China Sea issue, apparent from its deploying of the PLA Navy warships and showcasing air power to meet any threat emanating from US B-52 bomber flights over the region. Virtually, they came closer to a direct confrontation in the region.<sup>62</sup>

The point I wish to hammer out is that China's anti-West and the anti-US geopsychology got further hardened on account of numerous strategic encounters with the United States in the historical process whether it was the US spy plane's bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade or the US castigation of the Tiananmen tragedy in which thousands of Chinese students were killed while staging demonstrations for democracy. In fact, Henry Kissinger had forewarned American administrations, "A prudent American leadership should balance the risks of stocking Chinese nationalism against the gains from short-term pressures."<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Susan Shirk, a close inside watcher of Chinese affairs, is of the view that America should lavish respect on China. She observes, "After a century of sitting on the sidelines, the Chinese leaders and public crave respect and approval from the world community, especially from the United States."<sup>64</sup>

#### ***4.5. Strategic Culture***

China's strategic culture has evolved over hundreds of years ranging from Confucianism to Mao's military thought. Its perception toward and approach to use of force has been mainly guided by Mao's palm theory according to which China would regain its lost territories either through negotiation or by the use of force as the last resort. China's military strategic theory was carried forward by Hu Jintao and the current leadership under Xi Jinping, perhaps with a greater vigour and determination.

China's War against India and Vietnam are the examples of China's military strategic culture – a mix of pessimism and aggressiveness. If one peeps into the history, China's Great Wall appears to be a symbol of its pacifist approach, reflecting the primacy of "defensive realism" for protection against alien and nomadic attacks. But how far does the Great Wall theory reinforce China's peaceful intentions? May be in those days China, while bordering with dozens of countries, had taken all precautionary measures to safeguard its borders against any imminent or potential threats from its

neighbours. But the reality behind the “magnificent fortification” is still a figment of imagination.<sup>65</sup> Or, are there two “two faces of strategic culture”? Realistically enough, China’s bellicosity on the South China Sea issue is a counterpoise to its claim to be a peaceful nation that observes the norms and principles of multilateral organizations such as the UN.

In fact, the roots of force and might are traceable to Chinese history. Feng Zhang of Australian National University questions the “myth of Confucian pacifism” in “imperial Chinese foreign policy behaviour” by referring to historians’ contention that “Chinese history ‘has in fact been at least as violent as Europe’s’, a total of 3131 wars having taken place from the first Qin dynasty to the last Qing dynasty, an average of almost 1.5 wars each year.”<sup>66</sup> Victoria Hui corroborates this position, “War, not Confucian ideals, explains how China expanded from the Yellow River valley in the Warring States era to the continental empire in the Qing dynasty.”<sup>67</sup> Zhang contends that Confucianism “never renounced force as a legitimate instrument of statecraft for waging ‘appropriate wars’ in the form of punitive expedition.... In the *Analects*, Confucius himself endorsed Guan Zhong’s aggressive and militaristic foreign policy by virtue of its having saved the Chinese from foreign subjugation.”<sup>68</sup>

Undoubtedly, the two faces of China’s strategic culture compound and complicate the problem of discerning China’s real motives. That is why, Japan and the United States, in particular, do not subscribe to China’s peaceful intentions.<sup>69</sup> Ostensibly, China’s strategic culture, rooted in the doctrine of “offensive realism,” suggests that the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is fundamentally trained to be on the twenty-four hour alert with the capability to undertake a strategic offensive against its identifiable foes. Further, the PLA receives training in testing the adversary’s morale and stamina.

India has experienced this strategy: Chinese forces deploy provocative tactics, although with the prior approval of their top political leadership, by encroaching upon its territory to assess whether its reaction is that of resistance or tolerance. It might be recalled that upon his India visit in September 2014, President Xi Jinping received a warm welcome by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his home state of Gujarat. Also, Modi and Jinping enjoyed the ride on the traditional swing on the banks of Sabarmati River in Ahmadabad. But at this opportune time, the PLA, which is under President Xi’s direct command and control, summoned the courage to infiltrate into Indian borders and it stayed in Indian territory for three weeks. The military standoff between India and China could have snowballed into a major conflict were it not for Xi’s personal intervention at the eleventh hour. But what does this incident show? Could the military infiltration take place without Xi’s blessings? If we recall, China had launched an unprovoked aggression against

India in 1962, a classic case of China's "offensive realism" or a symbol of its offensive strategic culture.<sup>70</sup> Without understanding China's strategic culture, rooted in its "historical and cultural factors, India, including the United States, cannot make "an impassionate assessment of China's goals and intentions."<sup>71</sup>

#### **4.6. Anti-Hegemony Plank in China's Foreign Policy**

The anti-hegemony stance is quite frequently refurbished in Chinese foreign policy discourse.<sup>72</sup> A dispassionate analysis of China's foreign policy behaviour reveals a vitriolic and aggressive propaganda against the dictates of the world hegemon – the United States – and other principal rivals. This is especially in view of China's phenomenal national strength in economic and military domains. On numerous occasions, President Xi Jinping's speeches and statements have lent credence to this observation. For instance, Jinping stated in June 2014, "Any attempt to monopolize international affairs will not succeed."<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, in December 2018 *AP News*, while citing Jinping, wrote, "No one is in a position to dictate to the Chinese people what should or should not be done.... We will resolutely reform what can and needs to be reformed, and we will resolutely uphold what cannot and does not need to be changed."<sup>74</sup> In effect, the following developments are conspicuous indicators of China's anti-hegemony stance.

First, in response to President Trump's imposition of heavy duties on Chinese goods, China retaliated with a similar measure against American goods and also took up the matter to the WTO, complaining about the US's breach of WTO's trade norms and regulations. China's tit-for-tat diplomacy on the trade issue triggered the Cold War with the United States, reflecting Beijing's psychology of zero-tolerance on bullying tactics. It is further felt from the pungent smell in the editorial of Chinese Communist Party's journal *Qishi*, June 16, 2019. It writes: "China will not be afraid of any threats or pressure the United States is making that may escalate economic and trade frictions. China has no choice, nor escape route, and will just have to fight it out till the end.... No one, no force should underestimate and belittle the steel will of the Chinese people and its strength and tenacity to fight a war."<sup>75</sup>

Second, China's meteoric rise as a "global hegemon" has whipped up its aspirations to dominate the global trade and investment portfolio. The one trillion-dollar Belt and Road (BRI) project smacks of China's imperial designs to establish its hegemony in Asia, thereby subverting the US supremacy that has been entrenched since the end of the Second World War in August 1945. It envisages China's "continental connectivity" with the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, Europe and Africa, and it is animated by a vision bigger than that of the US Marshall Plan that was confined to rebuilding Europe's

war-ravaged economies. Even the US-led multilateralism at the World Bank and the IMF has been weakened with the China-led New Development Bank (NDB) established in 2014, with its headquarters in Shanghai, under Xi Jinping's leadership. This move is perceived as Xi's double-edged weapon to create alternative institutions of economic aid and support for poor developing nations as well as to undercut the US-led economic world order. Hence, with its rise, China has signalled that the United States is no longer an unchallenged economic hegemon.

Third, in the multilateral institutions like the UN and the WTO, the United States stands to lose its leverage over its past allies and strategic partners in the Asia-Pacific region. For example, the US experienced a monumental defeat at the UN General Assembly on the issue of President Trump's recognition to Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia – traditionally US allies – were among the 128 member-states that approved the resolution “asking nations not to locate diplomatic missions in Jerusalem.” Only nine states supported Trump's decision, with two of them being the US and Israel, and the other seven states, with a population of less than 10 million, being dependent on US aid. Also, at the 11th WTO Ministerial Conference in Buenos Aires in December 2017, the US was marginalized when it failed to include new issues, that is, e-governance, trade facilitation and gender equality in the agenda. Moreover, at the insistence of developing nations, especially India and China, not even a formal declaration was issued.

## **5. Conclusion**

GT captures China's foreign policy behaviour based on Chinese characteristics.<sup>76</sup> Its past history, Middle Kingdom mentality and strategic culture<sup>77</sup> have gone into shaping and articulating Chinese leadership's perceptions and approaches to international relations. For example, still alive in Chinese minds are memories of the humiliation they endured at the hands of alien powers – British and Japanese. Their bitter experience continues to prod them into suspecting colonial powers as China's enemies.<sup>78</sup> As such, Chinese foreign policy is at least theoretically structured on opposing power politics and hegemony,<sup>79</sup> though ironically it might defy the rule-based international order as manifest from its exclusive claim over the South China Sea. There are several examples that show China's bellicose postures in affirming its position as an unchallenged regional hegemon, while being psychologically unprepared to tolerate intervention by extra-regional powers, for instance, in the South China and the East China Sea.

Further, the current leadership under President Xi Jinping is fuelling anti-Japan sentiments among the masses by presiding over a national military



parade in 2017. GT argues that Sino-Japan relations can be improved provided Japan is prepared to address China's sensitivity over hurting its national pride and honour through symbolic gestures in the form of tendering apology. Following the latter's refusal to tender apology, China's anti-Japan sentiment is likely to harden.

Similarly, the phenomenon of competitive hegemonism has ensued between the United States and China with the end of entrenched, unchallenged hegemony of a single power. It is not unnatural. Change is the law of nature. None of the Empires, including the mightiest ones, could permanently retain the pinnacle of power. At the same time, China's policy behaviour smacks of narcissism that mirrors its perception of the world through its narrow political prism that obfuscates the reality that the existing power structure determines international relations. Fired by the nationalism and historical ambition to rule the roost, China is determined to become a regional hegemon regardless of US attempts to encircle it through the balancing coalitions. Also, China is firm and committed to change the rules of the game in pursuit of advancing and calcifying its core national interests.

Foreign decision-makers must be knowledgeable about and sensitive to the cultural and social values of China in order to avoid confrontation with China on global and regional issues as well as to sharpen their bargaining chip or negotiating capacity vis-à-vis China. In other words, undesirable mistakes and inadvertent aberrations can be averted with the core understanding of China's cultural, social and civilizational values. In effect, the East Asian region's geopsychology is crucial in understanding why regional actors protest against and reject the norms and values, which are incompatible with theirs.

It is relevant to make a special mention of India in order to understand China's regional geopsychology. It is a well-known fact that India is the United States' confirmed strategic partner to restrict China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region. India had also supported former president Obama's Asia pivot or rebalance policy. As such, China is deeply suspicious of India's declared policy of strengthening New Delhi's relations with Beijing. Moreover, China's regional geopsychology vis-à-vis India is determined by the latter's double standards in its foreign policy behaviour. Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his public speeches eulogizes India's defence and security partnership with the United States. But while in China, he talks of the shared civilizational values and champions a united and cooperative India-China centric Asia minus the United States. China understands this duplicity in India's foreign policy and diplomacy. This is one of the reasons that China's strategic encirclement of India in South Asia through aid diplomacy has weaned smaller nations of South Asia, including Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, away from Indian influence.

## Notes

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42. Thomas J. Christensen, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
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  45. See David Ernest Apter and Tony Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).
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