

# The Emerging Fault Lines within China



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The year 2020 will be remembered for the world grappling with Covid-19, one of the worst pandemics in history. As nations are trying hard to contain the spread of the deadly virus, there is one country that seems to be more interested in opening new areas of disputes with its neighbours than being an ally in addressing the situation which spread due to its mishandling the virus spread in the initial stages. That country is none other than the People's Republic of China (PRC) which is in an open confrontation with India as well as has boundary disputes with 17<sup>1</sup> other nations. The current actions of China may be in contravention to the accepted practices of international relations but a careful reading of the nation's history would however reveal that the very being of China is based on its notion of world supremacy. So, at a time when China is grappling with multiple challenges, China's supreme leader Xi Jinping seems to have taken inspiration from the nation's historical roots to hide the many fault lines that are emerging within the country and divert attention from issues that are threatening to alter its sense of being at the focal point of the world order. As China embarks on a path which the other powers are finding it difficult to comprehend, it bodes well for the country to remember the lessons from its own history. Whenever the ruling dispensation has turned to absolute authoritarianism and has tried to erase the country's civilisational values, it has never ended well for those in power.

### **Decoding China's history**

China's political history starts from 2100 B.C. with the emergence of Xia dynasty. Though China was ruled by multiple dynasties and monarchies, it is important to take a relook at some of the dynasties which have left a lasting impact on the collective Chinese psyche. The ideas and values those dynasties have propounded are still adopted by the ruling elite in China time and again to give a sense of legitimacy to many of their autocratic decisions.

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<sup>1</sup>China has border dispute is with 18 countries, *Asia News*

The Xia dynasty is the first dynasty that finds mention in Chinese historiography. This was followed by the Zhou dynasty which first propagated the concept of ‘Mandate of Heaven’ that in a way paved the monarchs to have absolute power. This concept is prevalent to this date with the rulers camouflaging it in various terms to establish their absolute control over the people.

Along with the idea of the ‘Mandate of Heaven’, the Zhou dynasty applied the doctrine of Legalism which has its origins in classical Chinese philosophy to implement many of the authoritarian measures. Legalism propounded that human beings are more inclined to do wrong than right because they are motivated entirely by self-interest and require strict laws to control their impulses<sup>2</sup>. In the later years, when the ruling dynasty’s excesses were criticized during peacetime, the same philosophy was used to brutally silence the opposing voices which included burning of libraries and killing of scholars.

Once the rule of this dynasty came to an end, China saw a turbulent phase with warring factions and the country being divided into six kingdoms. China was reunited after King Zheng of Qin proclaimed himself the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty. He also conquered the Yue tribes in Guangxi, Guangdong, and Vietnam. His years in power laid the basic tenets of China’s polity. By deriving his power from the vast amount of territories under his control, he established the importance of territorial control in China becoming a world power.

The country again saw widespread civil war at the end of which the Han dynasty assumed power and ruled China from 226 B.C to 220 B.C. Known for its aggressive military campaigns, this dynasty expanded the empire’s territory to include areas as far as Central Asia, Mongolia, South Korea, and Yunnan, and the recovery of Guangdong and northern Vietnam from Nanyue. They established the Silk Road and became one of the biggest

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<sup>2</sup> Ancient History Encyclopaedia

economic powers of the ancient world. Culturally, their adoption of Confucianism paved the way for China craving a unique identity for itself in the world order.

The end of Han dynasty was followed by the rise and fall of many dynasties including the Mongol conquest which led to the establishment of the Yuan dynasty. Founded in 1271 under Kublai Khan, the Yuan dynasty conquered the whole of China by 1279. In 1368, the Chinese under the Ming dynasty overthrew the Mongols and built the Great Wall of China to ward off any future attacks. The main reason why this rule could not last was the inability of the Mongol rulers who hailed from a military background to identify with the Chinese civilian institutions. The widespread ethnic discrimination against the Han Chinese and poor economic policies led to rising discontent among the population<sup>3</sup>.

This dynasty was overthrown in 1368 by a peasant, Zhu Yuanzhang who founded the Ming dynasty and proclaimed himself as the Hongwu Emperor. The rule of Ming dynasty marked a landmark period in Chinese history where it exerted its influence much beyond its borders and truly embarked on the path to establish world supremacy especially under the Yongle emperor and his admiral Zheng He.

Acting on the instructions of the Yongle emperor, Zheng He undertook voyages throughout the Indian Ocean and reached as far as East Africa. The envoys of the nations that Zheng He visited were invited to China in an attempt to establish the supremacy of the Ming dynasty. Between 1405 and 1433, Zheng He had travelled to more than 30 countries. It is interesting to note that despite having all the factors in his favour including manpower and technology, Zheng He's fleet could not make any major discoveries. Each time he returned from a voyage, he invited foreign envoys to visit China. The fifth time he returned, envoys from as many as 17 countries came to China with his

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<sup>3</sup> China, Encyclopaedia Britannica

fleet, probably making the intent clear that China was only interested in forging ties with other nations. Rulers of Korea, Mongolia, East Turkistan, Myanmar, Siam, and Nam Viet regularly acknowledged Ming over lordship, and at times tribute was received from as far away as Japan, Java and Sumatra, Sri Lanka and South India, the East African coast, the Persian Gulf region, and Samarkand. The Ming Empire undoubtedly restored China's power and prestige in the global order<sup>4</sup>.

This was also a period when the economy of China flourished with increasing trade and it had also developed one of the strongest navies in the world which included four-masted ships displacing 1500 tons. A standing army of 1 million troops was created. The Grand Canal was expanded which gave a boost to domestic trade.

The influence of Chinese culture remained strong during this period and it was perhaps the golden age of China's political history. Many books were printed during this period and the imperial palace in Beijing's Forbidden City was renovated to become one of biggest attractions of China. Its interventions in the Japanese invasions of Korea which ended with the Japanese forces withdrawing from Korea established its position as a regional hegemon.

The emperor's position was further solidified but was also more authoritarian and autocratic. But with the death of the emperor, the dynasty could not adapt itself to the changes in society and that soon led to its decline. The voyages were discontinued and Chinese ships were barred from sailing abroad. With depleting resources, it lost control of its empire which led the tribal chieftain Nurhaci breaking away from Ming's rule and establishing the Qing dynasty.

With the conquest of the Ming dynasty by the Qing dynasty, China saw its last imperial dynasty. It ruled China from 1622 to 1912 and doubled the territory controlled by the Ming. By the

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<sup>4</sup> Gavin Menzies, 1421: The year China discovered the world (Bantam)

end of Qianlong Emperor's reign in 1796, the Qing empire ruled one third of the world's population and had the largest economy in the world<sup>5</sup>.

But the decades of conquests in which as many as 25 million lives were lost led to economic recession. The centralised autocracy also caused social and economic stagnation. The expansionist empire which conquered Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang cracked down on all opposing voices and exerted complete ideological control over its population<sup>6</sup>.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the opposition to the empire began to grow and soon western imperialism took over and in the Opium Wars between Britain and France, China was forced to sign the 1842 Treaty of Nanking, considered the first of the Unequal Treaties. According to the terms of this, China had to cede Hong Kong to the British, allow foreign nationals into the country and was also forced to pay compensation. The treaty also allowed the import of opium. The increasing use of opium in China started leading to the degeneration of Chinese culture. It was around this time that the Taiping Rebellion (1851-64) took place in China between the Qing dynasty and the theocratic Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. The goal of the Taiping was to upend the moral and social order of China. Though this was rebellion was put down, it came with heavy economic and social costs<sup>7</sup>.

This was followed by the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 which resulted in Taiwan being ceded to Japan and China had also lost control over the Korean Peninsula. The considerable loss of influence over territory soon gave rise to internal unrest which resulted in the Boxer Rebellion targeting foreigners, the White Lotus Rebellion against the Qing dynasty and the Dungan Revolt. Tens of millions of people were killed during this period.

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<sup>5</sup> Chinaknowledge.de

<sup>6</sup>The Fall of China's Qing Dynasty in 1911–1912, *ThoughtCo*

<sup>7</sup>China, Five thousand years of History and Civilization. City University of Hong Kong Press. 2007.



Finally, the Xinhai Revolution of 1911–12 brought about the end of Qing rule and established the Republic of China.

### **The start of the Communist movement**

It was in on 1 January 1912 that Republic of China (ROC) was formally established by Sun Yat-sen of the Kuomintang (the KMT or Nationalist Party). He was proclaimed as the provincial president but a former Qing general Yuan Shikai was later given the presidency. In 1915, he proclaimed himself as the Emperor of China but was forced to re-establish the republic when faced with widespread opposition. After his death in 1916, China was once again fragmented. During this period, China was ruled by shifting coalitions of competing provincial military leaders. This led to discontent among the intelligentsia and the New Culture Movement was launched.

Then in 1919, the May Fourth Movement was launched to protest the unequal terms that the Treaty of Versailles imposed on China following World War I. It quickly became a nationwide movement and China refused to sign the Treaty. In the 1920, Sun Yat-sen once again made efforts to unite the fragmented nation. After his death in 1925, Chiang Kai-shek, the then Principal of the Republic of China Military Academy took over and once again reunited the country with his effective military and political strategies now known as the Northern Expedition. This time also saw the emergence of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) which was fighting against KMT. However, the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) forced an alliance between these two warring groups to fight against the atrocities of the Japanese Army. After the end of the World War and the defeat of Japan, Taiwan was returned to Chinese control. But the unrest between the two groups continued and it resulted in a civil war which ultimately led to the establishment of People's Republic of China (PRC) on 21 September 1949 under Communist Party of China (CPC) Chairman Mao Zedong. KMT had to retreat offshore and was left only with Taiwan, Hainan,

and their surrounding islands. In 1950, the PLA took control of Hainan from the ROC annexed Tibet.

Soon afterwards, under the leadership of Chairman Mao, the communist regime by giving attention to the oppressed classes was able to consolidate its popularity. The PRC during Mao's time was guided by five-year plans and various campaigns. It executed around two million landlords to ensure that the peasants got their rights. Measures like the Great Leap Forward, an ambition reform project which was meant to bring about socio-economic development resulted in an estimated 15 to 35 million deaths between 1958 and 1961, mostly from starvation. This was followed by the launch of the greatly controversial Cultural Revolution which was the result of power struggles within the Party and was meant to counter the rising influence of Soviet Union. This campaign which continued even after the death of Mao in 1976 dented the image of China in the international arena.

After Mao's death, a power struggle followed which ended with Deng Xiaoping assuming power in 1978 and putting an end to the turbulent era with the arrest of the Gang of Four who were held responsible for the excess committed. He instituted the "BoluanFanzheng" program which gradually dismantled the Maoist policies associated with the Cultural Revolution and restored peace in the country.

Deng Xiaoping's rule stood out for the significant economic reforms he ushered in. During this period, China moved from a planned economy to a mixed economy. He became the Paramount Leader of China from 1978 to 1992. After 1978, Maoism had ceased to exist in China as an ideological and social force<sup>8</sup>. It was replaced by economic development and in the years that followed, CPC has also drawn its legitimacy from the economics gains that the country has had. With Xi assuming

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<sup>8</sup>Kerry Brown; Una Aleksandra Berzina-Cerenkova, 'Ideology in the Era of Xi Jinping,' *Journal of Chinese Political Science*

power, the nuanced nature in which the communist ideology was till then spoken about after Mao underwent a change and CPC once again began centring around a personality. He has effectively dismantled the collective decision-making process that was put in place by Deng Xiaoping and continued till the term of Hu Jintao. He has gone back to history and classical Chinese thinking to once again assert China's key position in the world.

Deng was instrumental in governmental control over citizens' personal lives and incentivising agricultural production and other business activities which eventually led to the emergence of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”. During the Deng Xiaoping era, China's GDP grew to more than 10 trillion US dollars, twice that of Japan's and close to that of the United States.

But as years went by, corruption became a major issue and in 1989, the violent suppression of student protests in Tiananmen Square protesting against corruption and demanding greater democratic rights brought sanctions against the Chinese government from various countries. Jiang Zemin, Li Peng and Zhu Rongji led the nation in the 1990s. Under their administration, China's economic performance pulled an estimated 150 million peasants out of poverty and sustained an average annual gross domestic product growth rate of 11.2%. The country maintained its high rate of economic growth under Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao's leadership in the 2000s<sup>9</sup>. However, the growth also severely impacted the country's resources and environment and caused major social displacement.

In 2012, a new era of Chinese politics was ushered in with the appointment of Xi Jinping as the country's president. He instituted a huge anti-corruption campaign and has since his election, consolidated power in a way that was not seen since the

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<sup>9</sup>China's Average Economic Growth in 90s Ranked 1st in World, *People's Daily*.

time of Mao. In 2013, he initiated the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global infrastructure investment project that aims to reclaim China's lost glory in the world order.

### **Fault lines within China**

As China went about consolidating its power, there were many fault lines that emerged. The first was the issue of Taiwan. The mention of Taiwan can be first found in Chinese history records in 239 A.D when China sent an expeditionary force to explore the island. After being in Dutch control for a few years, Taiwan was ruled by the Qing dynasty from 1683 to 1895. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Taiwan had a significant number of migrants from China and even today their descendants constitute the largest population group. As stated earlier, in 1895, after the First Sino-Japanese War, the Qing government had to cede Taiwan to Japan. After World War II and the surrender of Japan, the control of Taiwan went to ROC.

The present-day problem started when KMT under the leadership of Chiang had to retreat from mainland China following its defeat in the civil war. He decided to establish his government in the Taiwan province with the support of foreign powers and dominated the politics of Taiwan for many years with his authoritarian policies. Once Chiang's son Ching-kuo took over, he sought to free Taiwan from the years of dictatorship and facilitated the ushering in of democracy. This led to the 2000 election of the island's first non-KMT president, Chen Shui-bian.

Relations between China and Taiwan started improving in the 1980s when China put forward the formula known as "one country, two systems" Taiwan would be given significant autonomy in lieu of accepting Chinese reunification. Taiwan rejected this offer but in 1991, it proclaimed that the war with PRC was over. China continued to insist that the ROC

government is illegitimate and prevented any government-to-government contact.

In 2004 when Taiwan re-elected Chen Shui-bian as the president who openly called for independence, China passed the anti-secession law the following year which stated that China had the right to use "non-peaceful means" against Taiwan if it tried to secede from China. After this, China stepped up international pressure threatening countries as well as companies that wanted to do business with China that a failure to recognise One China policy would mean a permanent severing of ties. China was never acknowledged that Taiwan has its own constitution, democratically-elected leaders and an armed force consisting of around 300,000 active troops.

In 2004, the Chinese government issued a white paper<sup>10</sup> emphasising the One China principle and how Taiwan remains an inalienable part of China. It categorically stated that on 1 October 1949, PRC had replaced ROC and had become the only legal government of the whole of China. It emphasised that Taiwan remains a "local authority in Chinese territory". This went against Deng Xiaoping's initiative of peaceful reunification and the principle of 'one country, two systems.' It took the form of One China principle that went on to become the cornerstone of China's foreign policy. Such a policy has also led to the diplomatic isolation of Taiwan and its diplomatic status remain ambiguous with only 14 member states of the United Nations and Holy See recognising its existence.

The next burning issue that China has been facing is that of Hong Kong's which falls under the special administrative region (SAR). Hong Kong was ruled by Britain as a colony till 1997 after which it was returned to China. From that day on like Taiwan, it was governed under the "one country, two systems" arrangement which gives it greater autonomy than the other

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<sup>10</sup> White Paper--The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue, The Taiwan Affairs Office and The Information Office of the State Council

Chinese provinces. It has its own judiciary and a separate legal system from mainland China which ensures freedom of speech and assembly.

From June 2020, Hong Kong has been facing protests against China predominantly led by students which has also been getting a lot of international attention. It started when a bill was introduced in April 2020 which allowed for the extradition of criminal suspects to mainland China under certain circumstances. This was seen as an attempt to silence dissidents especially activists and journalists and also undermine the judicial independence of Hong Kong.

Though the bill was finally withdrawn in September, Hong Kong continued to experience even more violent protests. A standoff between police and students which barricaded the campus of Hong Kong's Polytechnic University became the most defining moment of the protests. What started as a protest against a bill transformed into a call for democracy. Later that month, local council elections were held saw a landslide victory for the pro-democracy movement, with 17 of the 18 councils now controlled by pro-democracy councillors. China reacted to this result adversely with Xi stating that any attempt to divide China will end in "bodies smashed and bones ground to powder". What compounds this situation is that the Basic Law from which Hong Kong derives its autonomy will expire in 2047 after which its status remains unclear.

The other regions threatening China's status quo are Tibet and Xinjiang. China gained control of Tibet in the 1950s when it annexed the Tibetan Autonomous Region. The region saw a massive uprising in 1959 which was crushed by the Chinese troops. Their spiritual and political leader The Dalai Lama fled to India and was granted asylum. This also marks the beginning of the tensions between India and China. When it comes to Xinjiang which is the largest province in China, Mao annexed it in 1949 to prevent Russia from taking over.

In recent times, China has tightened its control over Xinjiang and Tibet in the face of rising dissent and demand of separatism. By terming the harsh policies as “stability maintenance,” it has virtually cut off these two areas from the outside world. There have been reports<sup>11</sup> that China is allegedly pushing Tibetans and Muslims in Xinjiang into military-style labour camps. According to a study by Jamestown Foundation, Washington D.C the labour transfer policy mandates that “pastoralists and farmers are to be subjected to centralized ‘military-style’ vocational training, which aims to reform “backward thinking” and includes training in ‘work discipline,’ law, and the Chinese language.” This is in all probability a targeted attack that interferes with the life of Tibetans and forces them to turn away from their nomadic living and inculcate a culture of materialism in them which would eventually take the focus away from freedom.

The situation in Xinjiang is far worse as what is happening there is state sponsored ethnic cleansing of minorities. In a way it was Mao’s assertion that “ethnicity and religion are two terrible things” which sealed the fate of the country’s Muslims. China has instituted ‘political education centres’ which are in effect concentration camps where it is estimated that 1.8 million Uyghur Muslims are incarcerated. What is worrying is that Xi Jinping has called his policies in Xinjiang “totally correct”<sup>12</sup> indicating that his dual strategy of political indoctrination and state-driven demographic change will achieve his goal of establishing a common ‘national identity.’

The next in the list is Mongolia which may emerge as a problem for China in the coming years due to its own oppressive policies. During the Qing dynasty’s rule, Mongolia was forced to submit to its rule. So, with the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, Mongolia under the BogdKhaan declared independence as he

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<sup>11</sup> ‘After Xinjiang, China Pushing Tibetans Into Forced Labour, Re-Education Camps,’ *Eurasian Times*

<sup>12</sup> Chris Buckley, “Brushing Off Criticism, China’s Xi Calls Policies in Xinjiang ‘Totally Correct’,” *The New York Times*

considered that the contract had become invalid. But ROC under Yuan Shikai did not agree with this and considered Mongolia to be part of Chinese territory. In 1919, after the October Revolution in Russia, Chinese troops occupied Mongolia and there was war at the northern border. Eventually, Russian troops defeated the Chinese forces with Mongol support in 1921 and marched into Mongolia. Russia supported the formation of a Communist government and army in Mongolia and the country once again declared independence on 11 July 1921. Later with the Japanese invasion of China, no efforts were made to re-establish Chinese control over Mongolia and following the end of World War II as well after the Chinese civil war, China formally recognised Mongolia's independent status.

Following this China has signed several agreement agreements with Mongolia and trade relations between these countries have been growing at a steady pace with China becoming the biggest trading partner of Mongolia. The country is also part of China's BRI. However, Mongolia even to this date remains suspicious of China's intentions. It believes that China wants to claim its territory and the outpouring of Chinese population is seen as an effective move by China to gain ideological control of its population. China has also been successful in making Mongolia economically dependent on it that there is a threat of it becoming a client state once again<sup>13</sup>.

China has also been pushing Mongolia to become a full member of Shanghai Cooperation Organization that would explicitly make Mongolia an ally of China and close its doors to form independent relations with the Western powers. In the last few years, the US has tried to counter this move and encouraged Mongolia to be part of the league of democracies like Japan and Taiwan which can provide resistance to China. This has deeply upset the Chinese government and any resistance from a state

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<sup>13</sup> James Crabtree, 'Mongolia needs allies to withstand China's looming threat,' *Nikkei Asian Review*



where it considers it has a historical right to can have far bigger repercussions for the ruling government on the domestic front.

Perhaps the only region that China does not seem to have a problem with is Macau<sup>14</sup>, a former Portuguese colony, which was handed back to China in 1999. Like Hong Kong, this was also promised a high level of autonomy for 50 years under the "one country, two systems" constitutional principle.

### **Sinocentrism**

A close observation would reveal that a common factor connecting most of the successful dynasties or regimes in China was their innate belief in China's ability to be at the centre of the world. The idea of Sinocentrism has dominated China at all times. It can be argued that from the very beginning China was always a civilizational state and had never fit into the western model of a nation-state. Though for the last hundred years, China has been making increasing attempts to project itself as a nation-state, it has only led to internal conflicts becoming more evident. And every time China has faced internal disturbances, it has always resorted to territorial expansion and pandered to a heightened sense of nationalism.

The trend was first observed during the tenure of King Zheng of Qin dynasty where relatively peaceful periods saw an increase in opposing voices against the emperor's autocratic policies. In order to quell the dissent and solidify his position, he always embarked on territorial expansion which would undoubtedly plunge the country into chaos. However, this strategy could not sustain the empire for long. The autocratic policies of the emperor led to widespread rebellion because of which the Qin dynasty perished with the death of the emperor just fifteen years after assuming power. This descending of the nation into chaos

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<sup>14</sup>Christina Zhou, 'Why Macau hasn't been swept up by Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests,' *ABC News*

is the pattern that Xi seems to be following when faced with increasing opposition to him exercising absolute control over China.

A deeper understanding of where exactly the regime in China came to be identified with such power would reveal the foundation for absolute monarchy was in fact laid by the Zhou dynasty that preceded the Qin dynasty. It was the first dynasty to bring about the distinction known as ‘Hua-Yi’ distinction or the Sino-barbarian dichotomy which stemmed from the notion that China was the most advanced civilization in the world. Nations and people falling outside this were considered ‘barbarians’ or ‘uncivilized’. Such a belief gave rise to the idea of Sinocentricism where it considered nations like Japan, Korea, the Ryukyu Kingdom, and Vietnam as its vassals and forced them into tributary relationships under which they were obliged to offer tributes to the Emperor of China. The tributary system followed has its origins in the Confucian principles which had forced its neighbouring states to acknowledge the country’s predominant role in East Asia. The communist period had also taken some of the ideas from the Confucian era to give their regime a sense of legitimacy.

It was also from the Zhou dynasty that Chinese emperors had started claiming that they had gained the ‘Mandate of Heaven’ and were the legitimate rulers of the entire world. They always made it a point to address all other heads of states as kings which made the subordination of other powers clear. This was especially true for Ming dynasty when the tributary system had reached its zenith under the Yongle emperor. It not only had neighbouring nations like Korea, Japan, the Ryukyu Kingdom, Vietnam, Thailand, Champa, and Java as vassal states but also extended its reach as far as Sulu, Malacca, and Sri Lanka. Instances have been recorded where he his admiral Zheng He intervened in a civil war in Java and established a new king there and had captured the hostile king of Sri Lanka and took him prisoner to China. The Yongle emperor also intervened in Nam Viet by sending an expeditionary force which eventually

annexed the area into the Ming domain as a province in 1407 and occupied for around 20 years.

Even though the Ming dynasty stands out for its expansionist policies, it is needs to be noted that the Hongwu emperor who laid a strong foundation for the Ming empire believed in an unaggressive approach. Even though he threatened the Japanese with punitive actions when they encroached on the Chinese coasts, all he did was to build a strong fortress and strengthen the coastal defence fleets. He also refused to intervene in the dynastic upheavals in Nam Viet and Korea. But with the Yongle emperor, China adopted a much more aggressive stance which eventually led to the empire's decline. The underlying fact here is that China has always enjoyed world supremacy when it forged its aggressive stance in favour of a more peaceful approach towards its neighbours. The core of Chinese civilization lies in respecting the shared civilizational values of its neighbours.

When the Ming dynasty and the present-day policies of XiJinping are compared, an interesting similarity can be drawn between the tributary relationship and the present-day Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Trade and economic growth remained at the core of both these initiatives. In the tributary relationship, once the countries accepted China's suzerainty, they were allowed to trade in previously demarcated areas where prices were set in accordance to Chinese prices. The envoys of these nations were also permitted to come to China to pay tribute to the emperor and in return they were given gifts and trading privileges. This is much like the BRI where the economic is aspect is projected while the underlying goal remains subjugation of the nations who have partnered in the schemes thereby eventually establishing Chinese supremacy. Xi also seems to have taken lessons from the Ming dynasty and focussed on expanding China's naval power. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, China's ship building programme has outpaced the US and the country has been spending money on technologies like the artificial intelligence,

hypersonics, and robotics which could give it a clear advantage during warfare.

During the Communist era too, the concept of Sinocentricism, the only difference was that it had taken the form of aggressive nationalism. It can be argued that Chinese nationalism had an important role to play in Communists winning the civil war. When the new form of nationalism emerged at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was consensus among the ruling elite in China that Western colonialism and the weakness of Qing Dynasty were reasons for the humiliation that China faced. Sun YatSen had identified this and based his campaign on Chinese nationalism. In the years that Chiang was in power, he sought to have a powerful centralised government because of which he alienated the working class and also many other interest groups. The communists very well understood the internal dissensions and using the cover of Chinese nationalism, they gave hope to peasants and other groups that they stand for inclusive governance and will fight against all the authoritarian measures imposed by Chiang. Along with this, it also worked in their favour that their military strategy was far superior to that of Chiang's.

Mao also understood the importance of catering to the nationalist sentiments very early on and launched campaigns like the Great Leap Forward, the Socialist Education Movement, the People's and the Cultural Revolution with the aim of reinvigorating the pride the Chinese have always had in their nation. But Mao in his quest to revive the culture of China through Cultural Revolution ended up eroding the values of the Chinese society, the concept of Sinocentricism started fading away and economic development became the focus of the subsequent governments in power. But under Xi Jinping, the country has once again gone back to its assertive roots and both explicitly and implicitly stated that its ambition is to retrace its imperial past.

This became evident in 2013<sup>15</sup> when the China News Service, the country's second largest state-run media outlet published an article in its Chinese language service titled 'Six wars China is sure to fight in the coming 50 years' which gave an insight into the rhetoric that was being pushed in China. According to the article which indicated that China was not looking at a peaceful rise, there were six wars that China had to fight in the coming 50 years to re-establish its supremacy. They are:

The 1<sup>st</sup> War: Unification of Taiwan (Year 2020 to 2025)  
 The 2<sup>nd</sup> War: "Reconquest" of Spratly Islands (Year 2025 to 2030)  
 The 3<sup>rd</sup> War: "Reconquest" of Southern Tibet (Year 2035 to 2040)  
 The 4<sup>th</sup> War: "Reconquest" of Diaoyu Island [Senkaku] and Ryukyu Islands (Year 2040 to 2045)  
 The 5<sup>th</sup> War: Unification of Outer Mongolia (Year 2045 to 2050)  
 The 6<sup>th</sup> War: Taking back of lands lost to Russia (Year 2055 to 2060)

China's actions have made it clear that it has for all practical purposes abandoned the concept of pax sinica or periods of peace. Perhaps as a precursor to the wars that China may have the intention of fighting, it has already extended its territorial claims extends to the entirety of Paracel and Spratly Islands, the Scarborough Reef, the Senkaku /Diaoyu Islands which involves Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines, Taiwan and Japan. China has been escalating the issue of territorial expansion in a controlled manner with all nations including India. The country has gone to the extent of declaring air defence identification zones which includes the disputed territories and has been on a rampage to disturb the status quo at the borders.

In addition to this, China is using BRI as a potent tool to subjugate the poorer nations. By investing these countries and ensnaring them in debt traps, it has created an economic dependency that would help China gain political and military

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<sup>15</sup> Translation published in Indian Defence Review

control over these nations. But such a situation also means that there is growing social and national resistance to China in these countries. For a nation that has always been uncomfortable about any protest movements, it comes as no surprise that China is not equipped to handle the emerging situation in many of these nations.

### **The imprint of Mao in the Xi Jinping era**

Chinese Communist Party general secretary Xi Jinping has ruled since 2012 marking the beginning of a new era in Chinese politics. Hailing from the princeling faction<sup>16</sup> in Chinese politics which is a term used to denote the descendants of the communist leaders who had held powerful and influential positions in the party. Xi's father Xi Zhongxun was a veteran communist who was purged multiple times during Mao's rule. Due to this reason, political observers within and outside China expected Xi to be a leader who will take forward the collective spirit of the party that his predecessors had followed. But he proved every calculation wrong and placed himself in the league of China's most powerful leaders. When he took over there was no mention of Marx or Mao in his speech implying that he was looking at a new era in Chinese politics where he is sure to rise above the party.

From the very beginning, his focus was on China reclaiming its place in history. In a rejuvenation speech that he delivered soon after his appointment at a historical exhibition within China's National Museum, in Beijing he reminded the audience of China's "century of humiliation" from the Opium Wars to the fall of the last Qing emperor in 1911. He conveyed that a new dawn awaits the country and called for the "great renewal of the Chinese nation." He articulated the concept of Chinese dream where he made it clear that it was a new idea that he was putting forth, but was only talking about reclaiming its rightful place in the world order, politically as well as culturally<sup>17</sup>. Xi has been

<sup>16</sup> Who are China's princelings? *The Diplomat*

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Blumenthal, 'The Unpredictable Rise of China,' *The Atlantic*

going about achieving this goal in a systematic and planned manner. Even in his very first speech, he tried to distance himself from the legacy that Mao Zedong left behind for the party, his policies have often reflected that of Mao.

Despite being a princeling, Xi did not have a smooth rise to power. Even before he could assume power, he was forced to battle factionalism. During 2012, one of the most popular leaders of CPC Bo Xilai, made an independent bid for leadership. Though the party quickly removed him and tried him and his wife for corruption and murder, it exposed the deep divisions and rampant corruption within the party. Xi responded to this incident by launching brutal anti-corruption campaign that later became a tool to purge all his opponents within the party, reflecting Mao Zedong's policy of silencing his critics. His anticorruption campaign has ousted 182,000 officials from every sector of society in 2013 and according to University of Pennsylvania political scientist Wang Yuhua, roughly half of the 50 or so most senior officials caught in the anticorruption drive have ties to Xi Jinping's most well-known political opponent, Zhou Yongkang, a former Politburo Standing Committee member and head of public security who himself has been detained for corruption<sup>18</sup>.

Within two years, Xi's administration purged about 60 ministerial, provincial and senior military-level leaders on corruption charges, including ten members of the newly-formed 18th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CPC). In 2013 alone the authorities handled 172,000 corruption cases and investigated 182,000 officials — the highest annual number of cases in 30 years<sup>19</sup>. This helped him gain complete control of the party cadres as it became a strong political tool to crush opposition.

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<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Economy, 'The Foreign Policy Essay: The Fault Lines in China's New Empire,' *Lawfare*

<sup>19</sup> Cheng Li, 'China's Domestic Dynamics: Implications for India and the United States,' *Brookings*

Both Mao and Xi created new organisations to further consolidate their power. Like Mao had formed the power Cultural Revolution Group (CRG) to exercise absolute control, Xi appointed himself the Chairman of two new superagencies in 2013 to strengthen his position. The first was the CNSC (Central National Security Council) which gives Xi the authority over all the security forces in China and the other was the CLGCDR (Central Leading Group on Comprehensively Deepening Reforms) which is tasked with reforming the economy, and also pertains to the culture. He has since then taken control of all the major institutions. Altogether, Xi occupies a total of 11 top posts in the country's most powerful leadership bodies.

It has also been observed that Xi has succeeded in taking back China to the era of personality cult in politics that was forgotten after Mao's death. During the mid-1960's the cult of Mao and the idea of 'Maoism' had spread across the world. Mao played a major role in marketing his name to a global audience and ensuring that his name would go down in the annals of history. Even when the failures of the Great Leap Forward were becoming increasingly apparent and peasants were dying from famine, China gave arms, money and food to other countries.

Mao's fame reached new heights when in 1959 Lin Biao became Minister of Defence. Lin published the little red book of Mao's quotes which legitimised "Mao Zedong Thought, a term that was coined in 1943. Along with this came various songs that idolized Mao and he attained the same status that the rulers in imperial China were accorded. The Mao Zedong thought was also propagated in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) which led to the identification of Maoism with nationalism in China. From then on, PLA became Mao's strongest support base from his biggest adversary. The end result of such an extensive campaign was that nobody in China could go against Mao without risking to be seen as acting against the interest of the nation.

Understanding the importance that the personality cult had played in Chinese politics, Xi also embarked on a similar path.



He had some of his speeches published in a book titled *The Governance of China* and to cater to the younger generation, he had launched an app called the “Little Red App” which contains his quotes. Songs have come out in his praise and he has gone to the extent of issuing a directive to authorities to include lectures about his speeches in the school curricula.

Like Mao, PLA also remains Xi’s major source of support. Since a large number of princelings are in the PLA, Xi is able to execute many of his authoritarian policies even without any domestic or international support. His position as CMC chairman also helps him keep a tight rein over the functioning of the armed forces. It is also interesting to note that when it comes to decision making, Xi’s approach has remained unpredictable like that of Mao.

Another striking similarity between both Mao and Xi is the role that their wives have played in their rise. Jiang Ching—Mao’s fourth wife was an important figure during the Cultural Revolution who controlled the propaganda and helped purged all opposing voices. In Xi’s case, his wife Peng Liyuan who is a well-known folk singer was responsible for acting as a bridge between Xi and the Shanghai faction – a powerful group run by former President Jiang Zemin.

The most important similarity between Mao and Xi is their key attribute in consolidating power by using a crisis situation. For Mao that crisis was the Vietnam War. For Xi Jinping it has been corruption and territorial expansion. As argued by Lensing, Mao had used the Vietnam issue to defeat his rivals and strengthen his role. When China got embroiled in the Vietnam issue, the country had already come to a standstill due to the shutting down of schools, slowing of production and the frequent upheavals as a result of Cultural Revolution. But Mao by diverting the attention of the population to the nationalist rhetoric ensured that people fell in line with his ideologies and he also eventually used the situation to consolidate his position. During this phase, Mao

termed those who opposed him as "counter revolutionaries" and they were either put to jail or killed.

Ever since Xi came to power, he has been taking recourse to a similar heightened sense of nationalism, possibly to fill the ideological vacuum left by Mao<sup>20</sup>. He has used the territorial component as a tool to intimidate other nations and to also make Chinese believe that their nation will be restored to its lost glory. By claiming sovereignty over nearly all of the South China Sea, Xi has made it clear that China wants monopoly over both trade and military. In fact, China has been treating the entire South China Sea as part of its territory by building various military structures, oil drilling platforms and encouraging its citizens to explore all the routes blatantly disregarding the rights of other nations as well as international statutes.

The term 'spiritual civilisation' appeared during the post Mao discursion and was aimed at rediscovering Chinese culture. It was extensively used by Deng Xiaoping to help China look beyond the disasters brought about by the Cultural Revolution and cement the country's base in socialism. But in Xi era, this concept underwent a sea change and is being used to give legitimacy to the one-party rule and China's expansionist policies. By using it along with words like the China Dream, Xi has in all respects put his stamp on the concept. He has made it into a powerful propaganda tool to make people believe in his abilities to restore the Chinese civilisation.

At the core of Xi's China Dream lies a sense of megalomania where he sees himself at the helm of a global power which is at the top of the world order much like Mao. His BRI initiative where all the major countries of the world are connected to China is an attempt at reinstating some of the lost glory that China had during the reign of the Ming dynasty. He has been

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<sup>20</sup>Rousset Pierre, 'Chinese ambitions - An imperialism in formation,' *Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières*

trying to project the centrality of China through political, military, economic and soft power.

### Understanding the Xi era

Factionalism in Chinese politics has become one of the biggest threats challenging Xi's authority. Currently there are three different factions in Chinese politics - the princeling faction led by President Xi Jinping, CYL faction (Communist Youth League) led by Premier Li Keqiang and the Shanghai clique led by former President Jiang Zemin. When Xi took over, there were questions raised by Yang, a Politburo member serving at that time as Party Secretary of Guangdong on whether CPC had earned its right to rule. It indicated that problems were emerging within the party and it is perhaps because of this that Xi went back to China's roots and tried to place himself in the role of a ruler who had a divine right to rule over China and would help China regain all that it had lost in the past centuries.

In a speech that Xi delivered at the Central Party School on January 5, 2013, he tried to draw a parallel with the Qing dynasty by quoting a poem by the calligrapher and writer Zheng Xie encouraging the party cadre to believe in the path that China has chosen for itself.

In extension of this philosophy, Xi in February 2015 announced the 'Four Comprehensives' (or 'Four Pronged Strategy') which was termed as 'unprecedented and strategic leap forward' by the state-run Global Times. The components of the strategy included:

1. Comprehensively build a moderately prosperous society
2. Comprehensively deepen reform
3. Comprehensively govern the nation according to law
4. Comprehensively strictly govern the Party.

It was clear that Xi would factionalism as an existential threat to his rule and used corruption as a tool to eliminate many of his adversaries. Further he introduced the Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese characteristics for a New Era, commonly

abbreviated as Xi Jinping Thought, which ensured that he will have complete authority in setting the policy direction of China. It was first officially mentioned at the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. The same session was incorporated it into Constitution of CPC and on 11 March 2018, at the First Session of the Thirteenth National People's Congress, the preamble of the Constitution was also amended to mention Xi Jinping Thought which outlines 14 main principles. This honour was previously accorded only to Mao. What was odd about this session was that it did not mention a successor to Xi, who under the current rules should step down in 2022 and it also did not outline a plan for the economy indicating a shift in approach<sup>21</sup>. It indicated that in the years to come, Xi's personal will broaden and deepen in the Chinese political system.

In the Xi Jinping thought, points 12 and 13 are of particular importance to understand the stretch of Xi's ambitions. The points state that:

12. Promoting the one country, two systems system for Hong Kong and Macau with a future of "complete national reunification" and to follow the One-China policy and 1992 Consensus for Taiwan.

13. Establish a common destiny between Chinese people and other people around the world with a "peaceful international environment".

Xi by pushing his 14 principles has made it evident that territorial expansion will remain at the focal point of his rule. By deliberately ignoring the mention of economic development and by proclaiming himself as the 'supreme leader' by abolishing term limits in 2018, he has ensured that the legacy of his two immediate predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao have been effectively erased from China's political history. Through his BRI which has been formalised in the party's constitution, he has in no uncertain terms stated that only he is equipped to lead the

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<sup>21</sup> Krishnadev Calamur, 'China's Xi Jinping Era,' *The Atlantic*

country into the next stage of global power struggle. It has also been established that nobody can question Xi for any of his policy decisions<sup>22</sup>. His power remains unchecked.

### Unrest in China

If the recent actions of China are viewed from the prism of history, it is evident that China's aggressive posture has a lot to do with disturbances within the country. It may very well be the case that China has been creating troubles outside to divert attention for its internal problems like facing massive job loss, protests due to corona virus pandemic and other economic situations<sup>23</sup>. There are growing voices that are speaking against the Chinese government in the way it has mismanaged the Covid-19 pandemic and how people who tried to bring the seriousness of the situation to everyone's notice were threatened<sup>24</sup>.

Xi assumed power at a time when the years of economic progress had widened the rural-urban divide, especially between inland and coastal regions and also increased the gap between the rich and the poor. Due to this, the allegiance to the party ideology was waning and this in turn threatened Xi's position as the country's leader<sup>25</sup>.

In early 2013, when Xi ordered a public crackdown on corruption, activists began organising protests in multiple cities demanding that officials should disclose their public assets. This paved the way for the New Citizens Movement which advocated civic participation in political life. But by March, the police started arresting these protestors and sentenced them to long

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<sup>22</sup>Why Ladakh standoff could be part of Xi agenda to divert attention from China's local issues, *The Print*

<sup>23</sup>Palki Sharma, 'China creates tension at the border to mask domestic troubles,' *WION*

<sup>24</sup>Prabhash K Dutta, 'Did Xi Jinping create tension in Ladakh to mask domestic troubles, strengthen grip on Hong Kong?' *India Today*

<sup>25</sup>Abdullah Dahana; Kelly Rosalin, 'Challenges against Xi Jinping: an ASEAN Perspective,' *Journal of ASEAN Studies*

years in prison. It was ironical that while on one hand, Xi promised to reform the governance system, on the other hand he gave a clear message that citizens cannot be part of any political process and decision making in China will always remain a top-down affair.

He went a step ahead and institutionalised such authoritarian control by strengthening the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and placing disciplinary cells throughout the party's national and regional organs. The party also appointed a commission that ranks above the Supreme People's Court and oversees the conduct of the more than 90 million CPC members, as well as managers of state-owned enterprises and a range of institutions. In 2015, Xi enacted the National Security Law which brought under its ambit from the coastal zones to internet to space to address what he termed "the worst security environment China has ever faced."

In another surprising move, the CPC also enacted the "State Council Notice Concerning Issuance of the Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System." Using Artificial Intelligence and other high security tools, this scheme has created a database of all citizens and has graded them based on their loyalty to the CPC. Everything from school admissions to jobs and banking are decided by how people fare in this list.

The state surveillance that has come with such absolute authoritarianism means that there is no space for civil society. Xi has also taken control of internet to bar all political participation. A study of 1.6 million Weibo users of Telegraph revealed a staggering fact – i.e. there has been a 70-percent drop in posts on Weibo between March 2012 and December 2013 due to state censorship.

Xi's policies have been creating divisions within the party and there is widespread discontent domestically. Leaders like Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao who tried their best to disconnect China with its imperial past and put it on a path of reforms have warned that a continuation of Xi's policies especially the anti-corruption

drive may greatly undermine the authority of CPC. What also needs to be taken into account is that after he anointed himself as the “supreme leader”, the dissenters both within and outside the party have grown. This holds true even for PLA where an announcement made by him in 2016 that the PLA would be cut by 300,000 troops to 2 million by 2017 had attracted widespread opposition.

Much beyond the political struggles that Xi is facing, his greatest challenge lies in the economic front. The model of consumption-based growth may no longer be working for China as the unemployment rate increases and the global economy is in doldrums. The erosion of the Chinese economic model that was based on ‘institutional authoritarianism’ has posed a huge challenge to China. The country is losing out on its competitive advantage in the global market and with the Covid-19 pandemic altering the needs of the economy in a significant manner, China may find it increasingly difficult to carve out a place for itself in the new world order. In a scenario like this, it is highly unlikely that China will be able to open up its economy further as market-based reforms also require political openness. It is quite surprising that with a population of 1.4 billion people, China is not catering to its own market and has its eyes set on increasing consumer demand in other countries, indicating that Xi’s ambitious of global domination may be at the cost of his own people.

According to a report by Reuters<sup>26</sup>, China’s debt is more than 250 per cent of its GDP. More worrisome is that fact that its corporate debt has touched \$17.8 trillion in 2016, or 166 percent of the country’s GDP. Though the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) has in its report claimed that China’s gross domestic product has recorded a rise of 4.9 per cent in the Covid-19 recovery period after the record 6.8 per cent plunge in the first quarter during the COVID-19 lockdown, there are doubts that have been raised.

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<sup>26</sup> China’s debt problem, Reuters, 2016

According to data analysed by CNBC, the rate of consumption in China has remained slow with retail sales contracting 7.2 percent in the first nine months of 2020 from a year ago. Moreover, an estimated 291 million migrant workers who constitute roughly 36 per cent of the workforce were forced to return to their homes in rural areas during the first phase of lockdown<sup>27</sup>. In March, China's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) had recorded that the number of migrant workers in cities had dwindled 56% to just 129 million. Such sudden drop in migrant worker levels indicates rising unemployment in that strata. So, in effect, the growth figures have to be seen in the context of increased state spending and industrial production and not as the yardstick for measuring economic welfare.

According to another report by to NBS, unemployment for March stood at 5.9 per cent, not far from the 5.2 per cent it had registered in December, before the Covid-19 outbreak began. In the intervening months, 460,000 businesses declared bankruptcy. Officially, unemployment spiked in February at 6.2 per cent, and then declined in March. In April, it again rose to 6 per cent.<sup>28</sup> But this system of calculating has its flaws. In China, unemployment is now gauged by a monthly survey of urban residents which does not include, rural unemployment. The exclusion has happened primarily due to China's socialist system in which all rural residents were allocated government-owned land to till and were recorded as employed by the state. The second problem with this calculation is that it misrepresents China's huge migrant worker population as many experts believe that they are either undercounted or completely exempted.

It is estimated that around 50-130 million have either lost their jobs or have been furloughed. Though the government has not released any official data on the unemployment rates, it has massively raised the unemployment allowance fund from around

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<sup>27</sup>Michael Lelyveld, 'China's Economic Growth Claims Raise Data Doubts,' *Radio Free Asia*

<sup>28</sup>Eamon Barrett, 'The mystery of China's unemployment rate,' *Fortune*



\$27-28 billion to over \$82 billion. Chinese workers have also been protesting over wages. China Labour Bulletin, a Hong Kong-based NGO monitoring workers and labourers' issues in China, there were around 50 protests by migrants during the lockdown.

There are also reports suggesting that the post Covid-19 economic recovery in China is only happening in limited parts of the country<sup>29</sup>. The aging population of China has also made it difficult for Xi to draft an ambitious reform plan at the time when the country is affected by a pandemic that has rendered many of the senior workforce jobless. According to an independent survey by the China Beige Book, the consumers aren't yet convinced that the pandemic is under control and the long-anticipated growth of the service industry has also been stalled. Making matters worse for China are the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration on imports of clothing, hair products and technological goods from the Xinjiang region in response to the news of the presence of forced labour camps being reported by foreign media outlets. This has meant that China's policy of erasing the ethnic differences by forcing them into a culture of materialism will not work for the region and there will be repercussions to the human rights violations committed by China to bring about homogeneity in its culture.

Another factor that is overlooked is the country's rising bad loans and increasing debts especially due to its ambitious projects like BRI. This in effect means that China's economy is heavily dependent on the international markets as well as domestic credit for survival and any fluctuation in the global financial system is bound to affect it adversely<sup>30</sup>. Now with most of the deals becoming unprofitable, the large geopolitical payoffs seem to be a farfetched dream and it needs to be seen if China

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<sup>29</sup> Evelyn Cheng, 'Not all of China is recovering from the economic hit from coronavirus at the same rate, survey finds,' *CNBC*

<sup>30</sup> A. V. Vinogradov, 'Political challenges for China at the beginning of the 21st century,' *Sravnitel'naâ Politika*

can succeed in its ambitious goal of linking Asia and Europe. It also looks highly unlikely that China will be able to look beyond the existing west dominated institutions and seal its place in an emerging world order. It is precisely due to this reason that China has been resorting to multiple territorial claims as it is finding it difficult to position itself in an ascending position in a world greatly altered by the Covid-19 pandemic. The economic indicators of China are unfortunately pointing in the wrong direction.

The people's protest in Hong Kong was an eye opener for Xi as it demonstrated that China's supremacy could easily be threatened. China's fear of people's movement<sup>31</sup> manifested in its recent criticism of the George Floyd protests in US. Prior to this, China has been thwarting all attempts at collective action. In 2016, researchers Lu Yuyu and Li Tingyu were arrested for chronicling protests. They had recorded nearly 30,000 events in the year preceding their arrest. Their ratio found that demonstrations were led by workers and peasants who were protesting against labour rights violations and rampant corruption by local officials. The issue becomes significant when the fact that around 560 million of the population are either rural residents or migrant workers is taken into account. They have been protesting against the dismal conditions that they are forced to work in for ensuring that China gets an advantage in the global labour market. The issue has become worse after Xi Jinping has consolidated the party's power and has focussed on 'stability maintenance.' Moreover, refusing to acknowledge Taiwan during the Covid-19 crisis and putting pressure on the WHO has led to China's diplomatic isolation.

In July 2018, Xi again demonstrated his fear of social movements when he ordered a severe crackdown against workers at the Jasic Technology factory in Shenzhen who wanted to form a grassroots union at the company. What worried

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<sup>31</sup> Kevin Slaten, "China Ridicules U.S. Protests Out of Fear of Its Own People," *Foreign Policy*

Xi even more was that this movement had garnered the attention of students across the country and for him, this would have meant the probability of another Tiananmen square incident taking place.

Women's rights have also suffered in China. In 2015, five leading feminists were detained for 37 days because they wanted to hand out pamphlets to make people aware about sexual harassment on public transport. It had also shut down several social media accounts of those who raised voices in support of the #MeToo campaign.

The sustained political crackdowns are also leading to the emigration of a number of talented Chinese. According to Hurun Report, almost two-thirds of Chinese with assets of \$1.6 million or more have emigrated or seek to emigrate pointing towards a massive brain drain. In addition to the scuttling of civil rights, appropriation of people's land in the name of 'development' has become the reason for rising discontent. The tight political control and media censorship has antagonised the country's intellectuals which point towards a possibility of increasing protests that will gain the attention of the global community – a scenario that China would want to avoid at all costs.

### **The India-China issue**

On 15 June 2020 Indian Army lost the commanding officers and 19 soldiers in violent clashes with the PLA personnel at the Galwan valley, in eastern Ladakh on the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The last time there was death during military clashes between the two nations was in 1975. The two sides last fired bullets at each other in the Sikkim sector in 1967.

As can be seen, China under Xi Jinping is a power that is unpredictable. India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's strong belief in post-colonial Asian solidarity<sup>32</sup> had left India with a belligerent neighbour who has scant regard for

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<sup>32</sup>C. Uday Bhaskar, 'From 1962 to 2020, India's China error,' *Hindustan Times*

international laws and previously agreed peace measures. The aggressive military stance coupled with the constant undermining of India's strategic interests point towards China looking at a larger game plan.

Cai Xia, a former professor at the elite Central Party School who was expelled from the Communist Party of China (CPC) after a recording of her remarks criticising President Xi Jinping has stated that the border clash between India and China was a result of the Chinese leadership "thinking of ways to divert the attention of the Chinese public". She said the emphasis on wanting "to consolidate his own position and authority" had led to "provoking conflict" with other countries, including India.<sup>33</sup>

But this may be a too simplistic view to take. Xi may very well be keeping the India-China border issue on the boil to quell unrest within his party as well as PLA<sup>34</sup>. But the rapid troop deployment in the Tibetan plateau and the way China has influenced a nation like Nepal to start a geopolitical battle with India with regard to India's sovereignty over the Lipulekh–Kalapani region in Uttarakhand<sup>35</sup> point to China playing a tactical game with India.

The attack on the Galwan border was in all probability predetermined. On the sidelines of meeting of China's parliament, Xi told the PLA to prepare for war. This public announcement was unusual as countries would usually take care not to alert the enemies. It was also interesting to note that in an article<sup>36</sup> that appeared in the Global Times, the blame for the Galwan Valley

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<sup>33</sup> Ananth Krishnan, 'China's leadership provoking conflict with India as diversion, says former Communist Party school professor Cai Xia,' *The Hindu*

<sup>34</sup> P Stobdan, 'Doklam: China's Anxieties and Domestic Dissidents May Have a Role,' *The Quint*

<sup>35</sup> N. C. Bipindra, 'India failure to exploit China fault lines has come to haunt it,' *Defence Capital*

<sup>36</sup> Liu Zongyi, 'Domestic politics, nationalism misguide India's China policy,' *Global Times*

clash was squarely put on India's "domestic political struggles." China has since then been working on an agenda where India is seen as a reactionary force.

Underlying this sudden push is the argument that the Galwan clash was a message to India which is now seen as an ally of the US that China will not be deterred by any counter alliances. Former diplomat Kanwal Sibal<sup>37</sup> had expressed a similar strain of thought and argued that China's aggressive stance may more be result of the US policy with its inability to push China back in the South China Sea than India's.

What has also come to light after the interaction between the external affairs ministers Jaishankar and Wang Yi is the contrasting thought process that is at work in defining the India-China relationship. Perhaps deriving inspiration from Kautilya's Arthashastra and Sun Tzu's The Art of War, the intentions of both the sides became clear in the meeting that took place. All warfare, according to Sun Tzu is based on deception, and deceiving the opponent. While Kautilya on the other hand, has emphasised the significance of both power and morality. Sun Tzu sought to defeat or subdue the enemy without fighting and considered to attacking the enemy's strategy as the best option. Xi Jinping seems to have imbibed these maxims and what Wang Yi did was to take a cue from history and employ the same tactic<sup>38</sup>.

The clash with India can also be seen as part of a larger pattern of Chinese foreign policy. There has been a marked shift in China's foreign policy after it tried to grapple with the backlash that it has been receiving domestically as well as internationally because of the way it has handled the Covid-19 crisis. In addition to the Galwan valley clash, the tensions with US have been rising, a greater number of naval incidents have been reported in

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<sup>37</sup> China is elephant in the room as a result of US policy, not India's: Kanwal Sibal, *Mint* (Interview by Elizabeth Roche)

<sup>38</sup> M.K. Narayanan, 'Interpreting the India-China conversations,' *The Hindu*

the South China Sea and the situation in Hong Kong saw some tense moments. As argued by Stanly Johny<sup>39</sup>, China may be trying to establish its hegemony through the salami slice strategy where all these issues are pieces that would help the country reach its end goal. To keep China's influence in check, India should evolve a national security strategy and forge good ties with its neighbouring nations.

Another reason why China is escalating tensions with other nations may be to create a psychological impact within its population by exaggerating its strengths and projecting itself as a power with far superior capabilities than it possesses. For a country that has always given importance to ultra-nationalism every time it was faced with a crisis, this seems to be a natural step for it to take. But a fact that Xi Jinping may well have to keep in mind if he wants to achieve his China Dream is that whenever a ruler has tried to hide behind the garb of territorial expansion to hide his policy failures, it has often resulted in a regime change. History is witness to this.

### **The way forward for China**

There are many fault lines in China which may prove to be an existential threat if not addressed in time. Xi Jinping may be the most powerful leader that China has seen after Mao but the stagnating economy and the rising discontent within CPC with respect to the silencing of dissenting voices makes it highly unlikely that he will be able to achieve the 'China dream' that he has been propounding for so long. While the ancient concept of Sinocentrism had shared values at its core, powerful emperors especially in the Ming dynasty and Qing dynasty as well as Mao and Xi have redefined to bring the element of authoritarianism that has never gone in favour of the ruling elite and has led to internal rebellions and leadership change. Xi also made sure that the principles of the Hu era which was based on development of 'person as the core' and has aided in China's peaceful growth

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<sup>39</sup> Stanly Johny, 'Why China is being aggressive along the LAC,' *The Hindu*

was replaced with his idea of China Dream which remains vague and is seen manifesting only in the various conflicts that China is engaged in to show its strength. The 30-year roadmap that he has laid out as a part of his China Dream is already confronted with growing inequalities in Chinese society and ecological problems that is aggravating the already existing economic crisis in the lower strata.

In addition to this, a greater number of cracks have started showing on the domestic front. The increasingly surveillance of citizens in China and the violations of the rights of minorities especially in Tibet and Xinjiang are leading to protests against Xi's rule. His constant emphasis on 'adhering to the correct direction' even when he talks to artists may very well scuttle the growth of Chinese soft power which will prove detrimental to the way people perceive China. It may happen that Xi's China Dream may never materialise the way he has envisioned.

With Xi doing away with the institutional reforms ushered in by Deng and in his quest to inscribe his name in the annals of history, he may have done more harm to the future of China than any other leader by destabilising the country's polity as well as economy. Due to the aggressive military stance of China, countries like US, Japan, India, Australia, Vietnam etc. are grouping together to form a strong counter to China which will make it difficult for China to establish its global supremacy.

Unlike the previous leaders, Xi has always embraced the idea of China's geopolitical centrality and has projected CPC not as a political unit but as a force that had earned the natural right to rule China. This goes against the foreign policy doctrine of Deng which was based on the principle, "hide your strength and bide your time" aimed at portraying China as a peaceful power. But now, as seen in the aggressive actions taken by the Xi in the South China Sea and beyond, Beijing has been increasingly asserting its military and economic strength. This spirit became further embodied in the 'wolf warrior diplomacy' which emerged in 2017 and is characterized by Chinese diplomats' use

of confrontational rhetoric and an increased willingness to rebuff criticism of China and court controversy in interviews and on social media to intimidate those who are opposing the country.

By instituting a rule of fear and by pandering to aggressive nationalism, Xi has eroded the values and principles that have remained the backbone of Chinese civilisation. Such an aggressive approach to foreign policy and diplomacy is sure to force many countries to take legal recourse against China. The U.S. state of Missouri has indicated that it will be suing China for the huge economic losses suffered by the state in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak.

Xi needs to keep in mind that the last dynasty of China fell due to imperial overstretch, factional wars, Muslim uprising and worsening economy among various others factors. The last years of the Qing dynasty have an eerie similarity to what China is facing at present and if Xi decides to continue on the path that he has chosen, the future of China may be in peril.