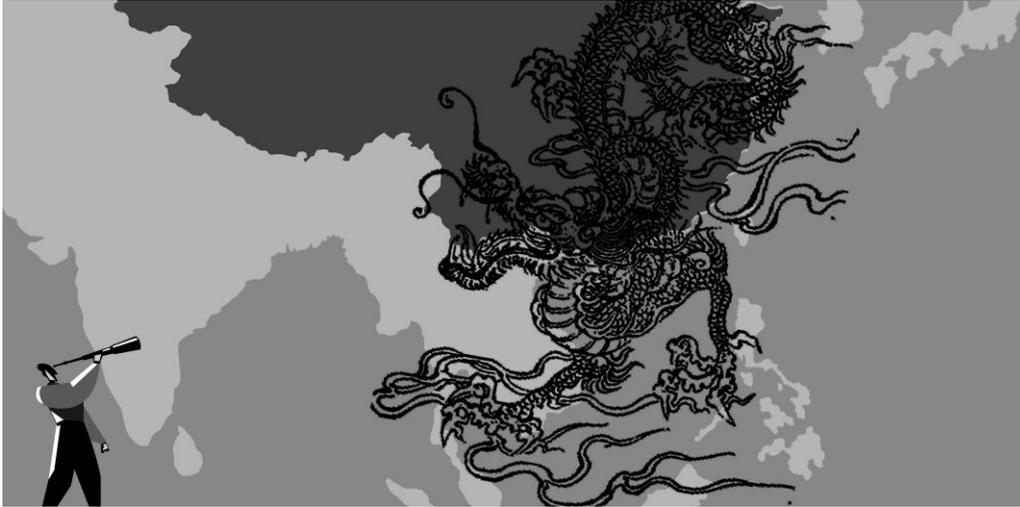


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China's geopolitical resurgence

Chinese history provides its rulers with no templates for dealing with other states as equals

With its inexorable economic rise, China is seeking to change the geopolitical order — witness its ongoing confrontations in the South China Sea and on India's northern frontier. Ever since the Middle Kingdom's humiliation after the Opium Wars and the "carving up of the Chinese melon", the Chinese have sought to attain wealth and power, preserve unity, prevent chaos, and enhance international dignity. These are the components of the "Chinese Dream". What do they imply for global order?

Among the plethora of books I have been reading on Chinese foreign policy for a forthcoming book on geopolitics after the global financial crisis, the best is by Edward Luttwak. *The Rise of China vs the Logic of Strategy* provides a framework to understand China's assertiveness. He argues that if an emerging power with a concurrent rise in its economic capacity, military strength and global influence continues to expand simultaneously in all three dimensions, and in particular uses military assertiveness to expand in the other two spheres, it will bring resistance and the formation of a countervailing coalition of other threatened independent states stemming its rise — in the extreme case through war, as in Germany and Japan's rise.

It seemed China had learnt these lessons, proclaiming its "peaceful rise". After their devastating military defeats, Germany and Japan adopted what Richard Rosecrance termed a "trading state strategy" (in *The Rise of the Trading State*), concentrating on economic expansion and attaining the global status that their arms had failed to achieve. With the issue of Taiwan having been diffused, by the *de facto* conversion of Taiwan into a virtual Chinese autonomous region *à la* Hong Kong, China's "peaceful rise" seemed not to be

mere rhetoric. But China's recent belligerence suggests the country is reverting to its ancient political habits of dealing with foreign "barbarians".

These habits, as in India and Europe, have been conditioned by geography. India's "Himalayan Maginot line" developed a false sense of security, and India "never developed a proper system of international relations". China, by contrast, constantly threatened by the nomads from the steppes, had to develop a tradition of diplomacy to deal "with the frontier states which continually threatened her security", as K M Panikkar explained in *Geographical Factors in Indian History*. But, Professor Luttwak notes, as the sole great power bordered by "sparsely populated high-altitude plateaus, deserts, semi-deserts, frigid steppes and tropical jungles" in which there were no comparable states for habitual interaction, the Chinese never needed to develop the political habits of interstate interaction between states that presume a formal equality, like the states system in Europe. Instead, the Chinese developed the Sino-centric tributary system of foreign relations, premised on the formal inequality of states: with the Chinese emperor at the centre, receiving deference through the tribute paid by lesser nations.

To deal with the military threats from the northern steppes, Professor Luttwak identifies three tools of "barbarian handling" that have echoes today. The first is "induced economic dependence". This was developed after 140 years of protracted warfare with the formidable mounted nomad warriors, the Xiongnu, by the Western Han (206 BC-9 AD). The self-sufficient Xiongnu were made dependent on Han-produced goods, which were first supplied free "as unrequited tribute", but were turned into "exchange for services rendered" as *de fac-*



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to vassals when the Han became stronger. This continues in China's foreign economic policy.

The second was indoctrination. The conflict with the Xiongnu led "from the equal treaty of 198 BC to the vassalage treaty of 51 BC", providing "the most hopeful precedent for Han dealings with powerful and violent states — evidently the role of the United States at present, in the CCP's world view". This leads to sequential rules of conduct. First, "initially, concede all that must be conceded to the superior power, to avoid damage and obtain whatever benefits or at least forbearance that can be had from it." Second, "entangle the ruler and ruling class of the superior power in webs of material dependence that reduce its original vitality and strength, while proffering equality in a privileged bipolarity that excludes every other power". (Compare China's current demand for a "G2".) "Finally, when the superior power has been weakened enough, withdraw all tokens of equality and impose subordination."

The third tool for managing "barbarians" was "bilateralism. There can only be two protagonists: the tamed barbarian bearing tribute and the benevolent emperor ready to reward his homage with valuable gifts... The one thing rigidly prohibited was any ganging-up, [so] the emperor would not receive them as a group; tributary rituals are inherently bilateral." This, as Professor Luttwak points out, has echoes in China's dealings with the other claimants in the maritime disputes in the South China Sea, and its preference for dealing with the riparian states of the two major rivers flowing from Tibet (the Brahmaputra and the Mekong) bilaterally.

Professor Luttwak questions the stubborn faith of the Chinese in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, given their strategic incompetence over the millennia — being regularly defeated by less numerous and advanced enemies from the steppes. The Tang, Liao, Jin, and Yuan dynasties were established by conquerors from the steppes, with the Han ruling for only a third of the last millennium. The last imperial dynasty, the Manchu, preserved its separate ethnic identity and its own language and script, and was not assimilated by the Han, as Chinese nationalists claim (see Pamela Crossley's *The Wobbling Pivot*). Responsible for establishing its contemporary borders, China under the Manchus was a conquered land, "with Manchu garrisons distributed in every Chinese province as occupation troops in effect... Yet today the Han routinely manifest proprietary feelings over non-Han lands conquered by the Manchu — by the same token, Indians could claim Sri Lanka because both were ruled by the British."

Also relying on Sun Tzu, Chinese officials believe that long-unresolved disputes with countries can be resolved "by deliberately provoking crises, to force negotiations that will settle the dispute". Witness the latest incursions into Ladakh, and the denial of a visa to an Indian IAS official from Arunachal Pradesh on the grounds he was from "South Tibet". Their recent military provocation in the South China Sea has only succeeded in creating a potential coalition against China by its neighbours.

The Han, also from their tributary past, "attribute superior cunning to themselves as compared to the non-Han world," writes Professor Luttwak, considering Americans, though strong and violent, "as especially naïve, but easily manipulated". This has been triumphantly confirmed for the Chinese, "as the Chinese watched with increasing incredulity the absence of any American attempt to impede [its] rise", instead contributing to its rapid economic growth, "without demanding anything resembling full reciprocity".

So how should the world deal with this rising and revanchist China? This is the subject of my next piece.