

Is China Expansionist?

By Kishore Mahbubani¹

The Chinese soldier who pushed the Indian Colonel Santosh Babu (who tragically died) and thereby triggered the violent clash between Chinese and Indian soldiers in mid-June 2020 should be court-martialed. Both sides suffered casualties, the worst since 1975. This one push by one Chinese soldier has set back China-India relations severely, undermining all the good work that had been done over several years by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Premier Wen Jiabao, as well as by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping. Equally importantly, it has reinforced a growing belief, especially in the western world, that as China's economy becomes stronger and stronger, China will abandon its "peaceful rise" and behave as a militarily expansionist power. This could well happen. It would be naive to believe otherwise. However, a deep study of Chinese history and culture would also show that the continuation of a peaceful rise is equally plausible.

One key point needs to be emphasised at the outset. As China becomes more and more powerful, it will flex its muscles and use them more. This is normal great power behaviour. Indeed, the term "benevolent great power" is an oxymoron. No great power is altruistic. All great powers will pursue their national interests. So will China. However, while the goals of all great powers are similar, the methods might differ. China has become and will become more assertive. Yet it need not become more aggressive. These two words "assertive" and "aggressive" are often confused with each other. A study of the great power behaviour of America and China will illustrate the differences.

Graham Allison has wisely warned his fellow Americans to be careful in what they wish for China. He writes, "Americans enjoy lecturing Chinese to be 'more like us.' Perhaps they should be more careful what they wish for. Historically how have emerging hegemony behaved? To be more specific, how did Washington act just over a century ago when Theodore Roosevelt led the U.S. into what he was supremely confident would be an American century? [. . .] In the decade that followed his arrival in Washington, the U.S. declared war on Spain, expelling it from the Western Hemisphere and acquiring Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines; threatened Germany and Britain with war unless they agreed to settle the disputes on American terms; supported an insurrection in Colombia to create a new country, Panama, in order to build a canal; and declared itself the

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policeman of the Western Hemisphere, asserting the right to intervene whenever and wherever it judged necessary—a right it exercised nine times in the seven years of Roosevelt’s presidency alone.”²

If America’s behavior during its period of emergence as a great power conforms to the historical norm, China’s behaviour so far, defies the norm. Of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (who represent the great powers), only one has not fought a war in forty years; China. Indeed, China has not even fired a bullet across its borders since a naval skirmish with Vietnam in 1989. The recent fighting between Chinese and Indian soldiers was brutal and savage. However, both sides adhered to their agreement not to use their firearms. Article VI of this agreement, signed in 1996, states, “Neither side shall open fire, cause bio-degradation, use hazardous chemicals, conduct blast operations or hunt with guns or explosives within two kilometers from the line of actual control.”³ The strategic discipline shown by Chinese and Indian soldiers is commendable.

In contrast to China, in the last three decades, America has fought a war or been involved in military actions every year. The Congressional Research Service, an independent body, produced a study entitled, “Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798–2018.” In theory, there should have been a reduction in American interventions after the Cold War ended in 1989. This study demonstrates that in the 190 years preceding the end of the Cold War, American troops were deployed a total of 216 times, or 1.1 times per year on average. However, in the twenty-five years after the end of the Cold war, America increased its military interventions sharply and used its armed forces 152 times, or 6.1 times per year.⁴

John Mearsheimer has described what happened in his book, *The Great Delusion*. He writes, “With the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States emerged as by far the most powerful country

on the planet. Unsurprisingly, the Clinton administration embraced liberal hegemony from the start, and the policy remained firmly intact through the Bush and Obama administrations. Not surprisingly, the United States has been involved in numerous wars during this period and has failed to achieve meaningful success in almost all of those conflicts.”⁵ Stephen Walt adds, “U.S. military action has led directly or indirectly to the deaths of 250,000 Muslims over the past three decades (and that is a low-end estimate, not counting the deaths resulting from the sanctions against Iraq in the 1990s).”⁶

The big question here therefore is thus; why has China refrained from using its military in recent decades? What are the deeper roots of this pattern of behavior. Henry Kissinger has explained well why the Chinese avoid military options. He says, “[The] foundations [of China’s distinctive military theory] were laid during a period of upheaval, when ruthless struggles between rival kingdoms decimated China’s population. Reacting to this slaughter (and seeking to emerge victorious from it), Chinese thinkers developed strategic thought that placed a premium on victory through psychological advantage and preached the avoidance of direct conflict.”⁷ Kissinger has accurately distilled the essence of the advice given by China’s master strategist Sun Tzu, who once said; “All warfare is based on deception. . . . Pretend inferiority and encourage his arrogance. . . . For to win one hundred victories is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”⁸

If China were to try to make a case that it is inherently not a militaristic power, it would have many strong arguments to deploy. The first argument is historical. If Chinese civilization is inherently militaristic, this militaristic streak, especially the desire to conquer and subjugate other territories, would have surfaced long ago. Over the past two thousand years, China has often been the single strongest civilization in the Eurasian

landmass. If China was inherently militaristic, it would have and should have conquered territories overseas, as the European powers did. Future historians will, for example, marvel at the fact that even though Australia is geographically close to China, it was physically occupied and conquered by far more distant British forces. Indeed, had James Cook sailed directly, it would have taken him at least ninety days to reach Australia's Botany Bay, having departed from Plymouth Dockyard in August of 1768; counterfactually, were he instead to have sailed from China, he would have found himself ashore in Australia in just under thirty days.

This Chinese reluctance to conquer Australia and other overseas territories is not because China always lacked a navy. Before the Portuguese and

Spanish began the ruthless European policies of colonizing the world in the sixteenth century, the Chinese had by far the strongest navy in the world. At the start of the fifteenth century, nearly a hundred years before Christopher Columbus tried to find a route to the so-called Spice Islands, China sent out seven naval expeditions, under the remarkable leadership of Admiral Zheng He, a legendary Chinese figure. He traveled as far as Africa on ships that were far larger in size than the Portuguese or Spanish vessels: "The stars of the Chinese fleet were the treasure ships—sweeping junks, several stories high, up to 122 meters long and 50 meters wide. In fact they were about four times bigger than the 'Santa Maria,' the ship Columbus sailed to America on behalf of the Spanish crown."



Zheng He's fleet (Bruno Zaffani via Flickr)

Along the way, he did get into military battles. For example, in his voyages between 1409 and 1411, he “captured King Alagak-Konara (亞烈苦奈兒) of Ceylon and chose Yapanaina (耶巴乃那) to be the king instead,” and in his voyages between 1413 and 1415, he “captured Sekandar, (蘇幹刺) king of Sumatra (Atcheg) and then installed a new king.”⁹

Yet, quite remarkably, China did not conquer or occupy any overseas or distant territories. Singapore’s former foreign minister George Yeo remarked that, “throughout Chinese history, the Chinese have been averse to sending military forces far away. . . . In the 8th century, at the peak of China’s development during the Tang Dynasty, they had an army near the Fergana Valley in Central Asia, when the Abbasids were moving eastwards. They clashed. In the famous battle of Talas, the Abbasids defeated the Tang army, and the Chinese never crossed the Tianshan Mountains again in their history.”¹⁰

The relatively peaceful streak of the Han Chinese people is brought out when their behavior is compared with some of their neighbors. One of the most powerful and terrifying imperialist expansions in human history was carried out by China’s immediate neighbors in the North, the Mongols. Led by the brutal and dynamic Genghis Khan, these relatively small Mongolian tribes (far smaller in population than the Chinese people) conquered not just China but almost all of Asia, becoming, in the 13th century, the only East Asian force to threaten an invasion of Europe. Yet the more powerful Chinese empire never emulated this conquering example of its neighbors.

The Mongols conquered and ruled China itself for over a century. In an article for the Asia Society, Jean Johnson writes that, “Genghis Khan moved his troops into the quasi-Chinese Chin-ruled north China in 1211, and in 1215 they destroyed the capital city. His son Ogodei conquered all of North China by 1234 and ruled it from 1229 to 1241.

Genghis Khan’s grandson, Kublai Khan, defeated the Chinese Southern Song in 1279, and for the first time all of China was under foreign rule. In 1271 Kublai Khan named his dynasty Yuan which means ‘origin of the universe.’ The Yuan dynasty in China lasted from 1279 to 1368.”¹¹ As a result, there was massive cross-fertilization between Mongolian and Chinese culture. In this process, the Mongols could have transferred their militaristic culture into the software of Chinese civilization. Instead, the opposite happened. The Chinese progressively civilized their Mongol rulers, and while Kublai Khan fought wars with China’s neighbors, he made no effort to conquer the world like his grandfather Genghis Khan tried to do.

What was the powerful anti-military DNA of Chinese civilization that eventually infected Mongol rulers? It probably goes back to Confucius. The Chinese have long had a saying that “just as good iron is not transformed into a nail; a good man is not made into a soldier.” At several points in the Analects, Confucius cautions against people who only have the strength of soldiers. In one dialogue, Zilu said, “Does the junzi [君子] prize valor?” The Master said, “The junzi gives righteousness the topmost place. If a junzi had valor but not righteousness, he would create chaos. If a small person has valor and not righteousness, he becomes a bandit.” In another dialogue, Zilu said, “Master, if you were put in charge of the three army divisions, then whom would you wish to have with you?” The Master said, “Those who fight tigers with their bare hands, wade across rivers, and are willing to die without regret—I would not want their company. I would certainly want those who approach affairs with fearful caution and who like to lay careful plans for success.”¹²

In contrast to American culture, where there is a strong built-in reverence for the man in uniform, Chinese culture has revered scholars more than soldiers, even though there are military figures

who are celebrated in folklore and literature for their patriotism and loyalty. Overall, there is an even greater reverence for the man who is skilled in both, encapsulated in the idea of 文武双全 (wén wǔ shuāng quán), that is, someone who is both a fine scholar and soldier.

Still all these arguments from history will not convince many who believe that China's recent behavior has demonstrated that it has a militaristic streak, and also lies about its military intentions and actions. For example, it is widely believed that Xi Jinping reneged on his promise not to militarize the South China Sea islands. In December 2016, the *Wall Street Journal* reported, "For a man who stood at the White House in September 2015 and promised not to militarize the South China Sea, Xi Jinping is sure doing a lot of militarizing."¹³ In two articles for the *Washington Post*, John Pomfret wrote that, "China routinely makes commitments that it does not keep. Just remember Xi's 2015 promise to then-President Barack Obama not to militarize the islands it created in the South China Sea,"¹⁴ and again that Xi "broke his promises to President Barack Obama not to militarize the seven Chinese-made islands in the South China Sea."¹⁵ The *Economist* was perhaps the most forthright in its accusation of Xi's broken promise, declaring in April 2018, "Less than three years ago, Xi Jinping stood with Barack Obama in the Rose Garden at the White House and lied through his teeth. [. . .] China absolutely did not, Mr. Xi purred, 'intend to pursue militarisation' on its islands."¹⁶

If Xi had indeed made such a promise and reneged, it would only go to confirm a widespread belief in the West that China has become aggressive and expansionist. It would also confirm a belief that the Chinese are being perfidious and deceptive when they claim that China will rise peacefully. So what is true?

Few Americans can claim to know China as well as Ambassador Stapleton Roy. Born in China,

a fluent Mandarin speaker, Roy also served as the American ambassador to China from 1991 to 1995 and has stayed exceptionally well informed on U.S.-China relations. He explained what happened: In a joint press conference with President Obama on September 25, 2015, Xi Jinping had proposed a more reasonable approach on the South China Sea. Xi had supported full and effective implementation of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, signed by China and all ten ASEAN members; had called for early conclusion of the China-ASEAN consultations on a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea; and had added that China had no intention of militarizing the Spratlys, where it had engaged in massive reclamation work on the reefs and shoals it occupied. Roy said that Obama missed an opportunity to capitalize on this reasonable proposal. Instead, the U.S. Navy stepped up its naval patrols. China responded by proceeding with militarization. In short, Xi did not renege on a promise. His offer was effectively spurned by the U.S. Navy.

While there is no question that China has restrained itself from militarily "aggressive" behaviour, it is also clear that China has become more "assertive" as it emerges as a new great power, using non-military means to project its power. When Norway conferred the Nobel Peace Prize to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo in 2010, Norway was put in diplomatic cold storage. Ties were cut. When the Australian Prime Minister called for an independent inquiry into the causes of COVID-19 in April 2020, China froze the imports of Australian barley. The use of economic means to pressure smaller countries is normal great power behaviour. The United States cut off World Bank loans to poor Ethiopia when it made the mistake of repaying high-interest loans to American banks. France punishes its former colonies in Africa when they fail to heed the wisdom of Paris.

It's also true that Chinese diplomacy has become assertive with the younger "wolf warrior"

diplomats issuing sharper statements and rebuttals. This has triggered a backlash. Yet, they are only shooting off sharp words, not bullets. As the old English proverb says, “sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never break me.” A world where pointed words replace bullets is a safer world.

Like other great powers, China is selective when it comes to conforming to international law. It respects the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea but walked away from the decision of the Law of the Sea Tribunal on the South China Sea. The United States also walked away from the World Court in 1986 when it decreed that the U.S. support for the Sandinistas in Nicaragua violated international law, including “not to use force against another State,” “not to intervene in its affairs,” “not to violate its sovereignty,” and “not to interrupt peaceful maritime commerce.”¹⁷ The U.S. Ambassador to the UN then called the court a “semi-legal, semi-judicial, semi-political body, which nations sometimes accept and sometimes don’t.”¹⁸

There is one area where China takes a fierce stand: It will not brook any interference in its internal affairs. Hence, it will reject all foreign criticisms of its treatment of Uighurs or Hong Kong. So far, China has restrained its military responses to Hong Kong, unlike Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India, who reacted to personal appeals from President John F. Kennedy and Prime Minister Harold MacMillan by invading Goa. On the Uighurs, China’s position is technically correct under international law. The British government used a similar argument when the UN tried to investigate British crimes in Northern Ireland. The then British Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart, told the UN that this would amount to interference in the internal affairs of the UK. This also explains why not a single Islamic state supported the western countries when they wrote a letter to the UN criticizing China’s treatment of the Uighurs. The record shows that only the West, which represents 12 percent of the world’s population, has been critical

of China’s internal behaviour. The remaining 88 percent have not joined this western crusade.

To explain the continued western suspicions of China, let me add a slightly provocative but historically accurate note. There is one deep-seated reason for the strong suspicions that western minds have about China. There has been buried deep in the unconscious of the western psyche an inchoate but real fear of the “yellow peril.” Since it is buried deep in the unconscious, it seldom surfaces. When senior American policymakers make their decisions on China, they can say with all sincerity that they are driven by rational, not emotional, considerations. Yet, to an external observer, it is manifestly clear that America’s reactions to China’s rise are influenced by deep emotional reactions, too. Just as individual human beings have difficulty unearthing the unconscious motives that drive our behavior, countries and civilizations also have difficulty unearthing their unconscious impulses.

It is a fact that the yellow peril has lain buried in western civilization for centuries. Napoleon famously alluded to it when he said, “Let China sleep; when she awakes she will shake the world.” Why did Napoleon refer to China and not to India, an equally large and populous civilization? Because no hordes of Indians had threatened or ravaged European capitals. By contrast, hordes of Mongols, a “yellow race,” had appeared at Europe’s doorstep in the thirteenth century. As Noreen Giffney recounts, “in 1235, Mongol armies invaded Eastern Europe and the Rus’ principalities between 1236 and 1242. [. . .] The Mongol onslaught was followed by a swift and mysterious withdrawal to the surprise and relief of westerners.”¹⁹

The latent fear of the yellow peril surfaces from time to time in literature and art. As a child living in a British colony, I read the popular Fu Manchu novels. They left a deep impression on me. Subconsciously, I began to believe that the personification of evil in human society came in the form of a

slant-eyed yellow man devoid of moral scruples. If I, as a non-westerner, could internalize this ethnic caricature, I suspect that these subconscious fears have also affected the reactions of American policymakers to the rise of China.

The strong anti-China mood that has swept through Washington, DC, may in part be the result of rational dissatisfaction with some of China's policies, probably as a result of the fear of China's unfamiliar culture, but also in part from deeper emotional undercurrents. As the former U.S. ambassador Chas Freeman has observed, "in their views of China, many Americans now appear subconsciously to have combined images of the insidious Dr. Fu Manchu, Japan's unnerving 1980s challenge to U.S. industrial and financial primacy, and a sense of existential

threat analogous to the Sino-phobia that inspired the Anti-Coolie and Chinese Exclusion Acts."²⁰

Given the psychological reality of this yellow peril undercurrent, American people need to question how much their reactions to China's rise result from hard-headed rational analysis and how much is a result of deep discomfort with the success of a non-Caucasian civilization. We may never know the real answer, as these struggles between reason and emotion are playing out in subconscious terrains. Still, we should thank Kiron Skinner, a former Director of Policy Planning in the State Department of the Trump Administration, for alluding to the fact that such subconscious dimensions are at play here. As she said in her testimony before Congress, "It's the first time that we will have a great power



A large temporary monument in Tiananmen Square marking the 90th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party. (Haha169 via Wikimedia Commons)

competitor that is not Caucasian.” The time has come for an honest discussion of the “yellow peril” dimension in U.S.-China relations. The best way to deal with our subconscious fears is to surface them and deal with them.

China’s re-emergence as a great power should not have come as a surprise. From the years 1 to 1820, the two largest economies were always those of China and India. Their return to great power status was perfectly natural. However, the speed of China’s return has been unnatural. Its speed of return is off the charts. In 1980, its economy, in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms was one-tenth the size of America. By 2014, it had become larger.

As its economy grew, so too did its defense budget. China today is a much stronger military power. The balance of power vis-à-vis America has shifted drastically. It has also spent its defense budget relatively wisely. China is focused on using the strategies adopted by a weaker military power engaged in asymmetric warfare. China spends its budget on sophisticated land-based missiles that could make U.S. aircraft carrier battle groups utterly ineffective. An aircraft carrier may cost \$13 billion to build. China’s DF-26 ballistic missile, which the Chinese media claims is capable of sinking an aircraft carrier, costs a few hundred thousand dollars. New technology is also helping China to defend itself against aircraft carriers. Professor Timothy Colton of Harvard University told me that aircraft carriers become “sitting ducks” when they face the threat of hypersonic missiles, which are maneuverable and fly at tremendous speed, at varying altitudes.

The discomfort about China’s reemergence as a major military power is perfectly understandable. China has clearly emerged as a more formidable military competitor. However, the long history of China suggests that China will be very careful about using its military capabilities. The recent tragic episode on the China-India border would have only reinforced the Chinese belief that the use of military force

as a first option is unwise. The real competition between America and China will be in the economic and social fields. The main reason why America successfully defeated the mighty Soviet Union without fighting a war with it is that the American economy outperformed the Soviet economy. The threat by President Ronald Reagan to outspend the Soviet Union in military expenditures eventually convinced Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev to sue for peace. Could the same happen between America and China? Or could the opposite happen? Most projections show that within a decade or two, China will have a larger economy in nominal market terms. Should America change its strategy when it becomes the number two economy in the world? Or should it do so beforehand? Equally, should it heed this famous advice of President Dwight Eisenhower? As he told the American Society of Newspaper Editors, “every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.”²¹

There is absolutely no doubt that China will emerge as a formidable geopolitical competitor of the United States. It would be wise to plan for this outcome. Yet, as George Kennan wisely advised at the beginning of the titanic contest against the Soviet Union, the outcome of the contest would not be determined by the competition in the military realm. Instead, he said that the outcome would be determined by the ability of America to “create among the peoples of the world generally the impression of a country which knows what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problems of its internal life and with the responsibilities of a world power, and what has a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own among the major ideological currents of the time.”²²

Kennan’s emphasis on “spiritual vitality” is even more relevant in the ongoing geopolitical contest with China. It is this dimension that will determine the outcome of the contest against China, not the

military dimension. Since China has the world's oldest civilisation, the only civilisation to have recovered from four major shocks in its history, it would be a serious mistake for an American policy-maker to underestimate the strength and resilience of Chinese civilisation in the peaceful contest that will take place between the two powers. PRISM

Endnotes

¹ Kishore Mahbubani, is the author of the book, *Has China Won?* (Public Affairs, 2020). This essay contains excerpts from *Has China Won?*

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