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Empires Old, New, Reincarnated and Imaginary: Economic Build-ups in Eurasia, China and Russia in Afghanistan Naval Build-ups in the South China Sea Region – Their Forecasted Outcomes

Abstract

Maritime friction among powers, great and small, has escalated in the “Near Seas” region, including East China, Yellow, and South China Seas, largely because China has militarized that region by constructing artificial islands, and then fortifying them. United States warships repeatedly have conducted “Freedom of Navigation Operations” (FOPs) in the region, as have British, Indian, and Japanese warships, with France joining that list in early 2021 also. At the same time, China’s “Belt and Road Initiative” streams economically across Eurasia, with rising debt. This paper will address the objectives of China, the West, and neighbouring Asian countries in terms of increasing, decreasing, or replacing tensions in the region, as “empires” old, new, reincarnated and imaginary converge to participate in this fray. Inevitably, risk prevails, opportunities do also, as once-proud empires such as Britain, France, Russia, and Japan join in to confound if not deter China in its transparent effort as a rising power to control shipping and land transportation in this strategic but fragile corridor that connects Europe and the Middle East with Asia, vital to transporting raw materials, particularly energy, Eastward, and finished products, especially electronics and solar panels, Westward. Crucial issues emerging at a critical time require immediate but careful rethinking of Asia in world politics. Although a pandemic has altered and delayed the course of trade in 2020 and 2021, this may be both blessing and curse, a blessing in the sense that emerging power houses in Asia as well as Oceania have endeavoured to commit

more resources toward augmenting the traditional Western powers, motivating them to become stronger Allies of the West. On the other hand, a curse, to the extent the opportunity for conflict increases as it has unfolded in Afghanistan over the summer of 2021. Perhaps this will inspire a rapprochement with China and instil in China a realistic expectation of achieving economic growth in moderation over a gradual time in contrast to a growth spurt in the short term that would lead to conflict and set China back much as Japanese aggression before 1945 led to warfare ending in Japan's defeat and Allied victory. A desired outcome such as this may be unlikely, however, given China's reported inroads into Afghanistan, rising threats to Taiwan.

Keywords: *Maritime policy, China, Russia, Afghanistan, South China Sea*

1. Introduction

Pandemic became the watchword of the year 2020, the Coronavirus began late in 2019 in China then spread elsewhere globally before receding at least tentatively in 2021, largely on account of competitive vaccines that may or may not remain effective for very long against emerging variants that have reduced efficacy from 91 to 66% over eight months (Fowlkes, Gaglani, Groover, These, Tyner, Ellingson, 2021; Lee, B., 2021). This might have harkened greater worldwide cooperation among nations, but unfortunately it signalled heightened tensions. Maritime friction among powers great and small escalated in the region of the "Near Seas" including the East China, Yellow, and South China Seas, largely because China militarised that region by constructing artificial islands then fortifying them in a transparent effort to assert the global leadership role it craves but lacks currently. United States warships repeatedly have sailed through the region, conducting "Freedom of Navigation Operations" (FONOPs), as have British, Indian, and Japanese warships, with France joining that list in early 2021 also. While China is complaining about Allied FONOPs, China itself is deploying 3,000 tonne sand dredging ships as close to Taiwan waters as possible, with 3,987 expulsions in 2020, more than six times as many as the 600 expulsions in 2019 (Lee, Y.N., 2021), apparently to harass Taiwan. Immediately following the fall of Afghanistan, China sent an "ominous warning" to Taiwan, advising the United States would not protect Taiwan should China invade (O'Donnell, 2021). This author fears the sand dredging ships could turn into a fleet of "Trojan Horses" to conceal then deploy assault troops in

a Normandy Beach-style amphibious invasion of Taiwan, possibly at the same time dredging sand and silt to alter the Strait of Taiwan, reducing depth in places to facilitate an amphibious invasion on the ocean surface, confound Allied submarine manoeuvrability, increasing depth elsewhere to enhance Chinese submarine manoeuvrability. Is this part of China's "wolf warrior" diplomacy in its quest to become the "empire" it is not, alienating one country after another, jeopardizing China's world trade image in the process, as hypothesised (Lee, Y.N., 2021)?

This chapter will address the objectives of China, the West, and neighbouring Asian countries in terms of increasing, decreasing, or replacing tensions in the region, as "empires" old, new, reincarnated and imaginary converge to participate in this fray. Britain, France, Russia, and Japan are "old" Empires and India was a part of the British Empire, with Britain persevering at present. France, China, and Russia hope to reincarnate their empires lost to history, and the United States of America has been forming what one may term a "new" empire, although most Americans deny that nomenclature, with American withdrawal from Afghanistan pointing (hopefully inaccurately) to a collapsing American empire (Ackerman, 2021). On the other hand, China is at best an *ersatz* "empire," lacking global support required for that role and in fact, facing diminishing instead of accelerating global cohesion for its "China Dream" as it calls that vision (Whyte, 2021). Imaginary is the word that comes to mind in assessing China's imperial role in the 21st century's third decade, with China, as some have observed, being a "paper dragon" (Frum, 2021).

Inevitably, risk prevails, but opportunities do also, as once-proud empires such as Britain, France, Russia, and Japan join in to confound if not deter China in its transparent effort as a rising power to control shipping in that strategic but fragile corridor that connects Asia with Africa for raw materials including the energy required for Chinese manufacturing, connecting Europe through the Middle East Suez Canal with Asia, vital to transporting finished products such as electronics and solar panels Westward. Part of the current problem originated from the West's ineffectual reconstruction of Asia following World War II, as Spector characterised in *The Ruins of Empire* (2007). Over the past half-decade, at least but probably longer, China has declined in its effort to stay afloat as the "Factory to the World," with many international investors relocating to India, the ASEAN Bloc, and elsewhere when Chinese labour cost structure and regulations escalated sharply. It seems that China endeavours to be "Shipper to the World" by controlling international commerce as it moves

in both directions from the Suez Canal to most of Asia, then back, from Japan, Korea, and Taiwan as well as from Mainland China itself. In fact, by expanding Chinese military and naval bases across the Indian Ocean, China appears to be making an effort to “cancel” India, to even change the Indian Ocean into a “West China Sea” by itself, although it does not hold any territory abutting that important waterway, unlike India after which that Ocean is named rightfully. In fact, China’s behaviour in 2021 is rather similar to that of Japan 80 years earlier: In his speech as prime minister of Japan, delivered to The Assembly of Greater East-Asiatic Nations at Tokyo on 5 November 1943 (“Tokyo Summit”), General Hideki Tojo called for “world peace” but stated Japan’s determination to establish what would become known pompously as the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” (GEACPS), intended to unite all Asian nations together, then to divide them from the West (Bix, 2001). In the 1940s, Japan struggled to fabricate itself as the world’s dominant empire. It failed, now China is bent on the same objective that will fail also.

Crucial issues emerging at a critical time require immediate but careful rethinking of security strategies, alliances, trading partners, trade routes. Included among these issues will be the role to be played by countries of South and Southeast Asia together with East Asia and Eurasia in world politics. Although a pandemic has altered or delayed the course of trade in 2020 and 2021, this may be both a blessing and a curse, in the sense that emerging power houses in Asia as well as Oceania have endeavoured to commit more resources toward augmenting the traditional Western powers, enabling them to become stronger Allies of the West and among themselves. Perhaps this will inspire a *rapprochement* with China and instill in China a realistic expectation of achieving economic growth in moderation over a gradual time period by productive example of outreach and influence, instead of abruptly by force of arms. Care should be taken not to underestimate what is known as the “Gerasimov Doctrine,” a tool of the Russian Federation predicated upon a 2013 speech by Marshal Valery Gerasimov, chief of the Russian Federation general staff, in which he encouraged a foreign policy of cyber warfare, psychological operations, and denial and deception campaigns, activities that evolved from a Soviet military concept known as *maskirovka* that embraced physical denial and deception in military operations (Bartles, 2016).

None other than confirmed Leftist M.I.T. Professor Noam Chomsky has conceded that China does pose a threat to the West, Western Allies, and China’s neighbours:

China does confront U.S. power – in the South China Sea, not the Atlantic or Pacific. There is an economic challenge as well. In some areas, China is a world leader, notably renewable energy, where it is far ahead of other countries in both scale and quality. It is also the world's manufacturing base, though profits go mostly elsewhere, to managers like Taiwan's Foxconn or investors in Apple, which is increasingly reliant on intellectual property rights – the exorbitant patent rights that are a core part of the highly protectionist "free trade" agreements (Douliery, 2021).

Whether China's confrontation of Western, not merely American, power is limited to "Near Seas" and absent in the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans is debatable, probably tenuous. Certainly, China exerts a huge presence in the Indian Ocean that is indistinguishable from the Pacific, except in name, with China's purpose in the Indian Ocean being to secure its African supply chain management and to ensure that India does not outmanoeuvre China in Asia or Europe. In fact, in the 21st century, India may be China's primary target as China asserts its return to "empire" across Asia, appears to be coupling with Pakistan, motivating India to turn to Europe, particularly France, for modern fighter aircraft (Brimelow, 2021d), evidencing an emergence of new empires reincarnated from older ones.

Countries, sometimes acting through trading blocks such as the European Community, articulate then implement strategies intended to advance their own geopolitical interests globally (Wilezol, 2021), in regions, at "opposite borders" or next-door neighbours (Boesche, 2003, p. 18).¹ This becomes and remains true whether nations pursue neoliberal or neo-real strategies, meaning whether they strive for cooperation or prepare for conflict. They may do both, and profess to follow one path, actually pursue another. Little doubt exists but that neo-real strategies have replaced neoliberal strategies in the aftermath of the Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic, both in the context of relations with adversaries and of relations with allies or states sought after to become allies, whether they ever will be. An example has been the changing posture of Pakistan as it has come to rethink the range of economic preferences such as tax concessions it has extended to China in exchange for the latter's construction of highways, railways, ports, power plants, related infrastructure (Anderlini, Sender & Bokhar, 2018; Hussain, 2019). Mistrust of China, meaning current

1 "Doctrine of Opposite Borders" also is known as the Mandala Doctrine included in The *Arthasāstra*, a Sanskrit treatise from the 3rd century B.C.E. by Chanakya, also known as Kau ilya or Vishnugupta, an Indian teacher, philosopher, economist, jurist and royal advisor to the Emperor Chandragupta Maurya (r. 321–297 B.C.E.). R. Boesche (2003), Kautilya's Arthasāstra on War and Diplomacy in Ancient India, *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 67, No. 1, pp. 9–37 at p. 18, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/40432>

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership, is at the root, compounded from 2020 by China's calculated delay in reporting the Coronavirus outbreak before it became a global pandemic, making China less than reliable as a supplier of products. With the United States exiting Afghanistan abruptly, China is moving into that state, bypassing Pakistan, poised to collect more American military technology inexplicably left behind unguarded, much as China did in the former Yugoslavia that prompted President William J. ("Bill") Clinton to bomb the Chinese embassy in Belgrade on 07 May 1999, to destroy stealth technology China had collected from wreckage of a United States F-117 Nighthawk stealth bomber on a United Nations peacekeeping mission shot down by Serbia on China's payroll days earlier (Greenfield, 2021). That is the reason Chinese military want access to the USD 60 billion in military infrastructure the United States left behind, including Black Hawk helicopters, 600,000 rifles, secret night vision goggles (Brown, 2021). Former President Trump has urged the United States to recapture that materiel or recapture it by bombing (Deese, 2021). He is entirely correct. Western countries cannot contribute to the rise of totalitarian empires in Asia. None of that excuses the NATO pullout from Afghanistan or the internal division between United States and its "special" ally United Kingdom over which country delayed departure the longest (Quinn, 2021), two legitimate empires wrestling to save face, not surprising when the British Parliament voted to censure both their own Prime Minister Boris Johnson and American President Joe Biden over the debacle in Afghanistan (James & Piper, 2021).

Unreliability of China has been made worse by emerging evidence that China lied about the actual cause(s) of the COVID pandemic that appears to have originated in a Wuhan laboratory (Piplani, Singh, Winkler, Petrovsky, 2021) as documented *Scientific Reports*, a prestigious *Nature* journal publication of which was delayed inordinately, apparently in response to pressure from Chinese authorities, according to an investigation by *The Wall Street Journal* (Hinshaw, Page & McKay, 2021). That China is seen as a less than reliable partner is evident in Eurasia, among Eurasian states themselves, between "Great Powers" and Eurasian states, between and among "Great Powers" themselves, forming what has been labeled "the New Great Game in Central Asia" (Caruso, 2020). At once, players have remained constant and changed, sometimes changing only cosmetically. In the 19th century, the original "Great Game" was between the British Empire and Imperial Russia, 1856–1907 (Hopkirk, 1992; Sergeev, 2013; Morrison, 2021). In the 21st century, currently, the Russian Federation

has returned, this time joined by China as its “Frenemy” (erstwhile friend, potential enemy), the European Community with the United Kingdom in the lead arguably, the United States *visibly* in the background, plus Japan, India, Turkey, with Iran and Saudi Arabia *invisibly* in the background. Turkey is eyeing an opportunity to recreate a Caliphate across the Middle East and Eurasia, itself nominating a Caliph spiritually plus a Sultan temporally. Both Japan and India consider China to be an existential threat, requiring them to delay, ultimately defeat, China’s advances into Eurasia alongside with what China labels as its “Belt and Road” or “New Silk Road” that is anything but smooth. Russian Federation leaders consider themselves to be the rightful successors to the Soviet Union, entitling them to preclude any other powers from controlling the Eurasian “supercontinent.” Fundamentally, United States interests conflict with those of this cast of countries: America prefers Eurasia to be comprised of autonomous, economically prosperous, sovereign nation states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (“C5”), each to be governed as democratically as possible (Bureau of South & Central Asian Affairs, 2020), however undemocratically that may be in practice, predicated upon each country’s long experience with authoritarian rulers, culminating with the Soviet Union until it collapsed.

Flashpoints involving Chinese expansion across parts of Asia, Eurasia and South Asia have varied, remaining calm predominantly with periodic flareups, most recently in Afghanistan. Frequently, disputes arise along the oceanic waterways of Southeast Asia, in part at least because of so many conflicting territorial claims to the maritime region by at least six sovereign states: Brunei, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Vietnam as Figure 1 below reflects, with China exerting the lion’s (dragon’s?) share of those claims encompassing 90% of the area, although its recognized territorial waterways abutting its land territory are the furthest away. Late in 2019, the British Royal Navy deployed ships to join the United States Seventh Fleet forces in the region, including the amphibious transport dock assault ship H.M.S. *Albion* and guided missile cruiser H.M.S. *Argyle*, prompting rebukes from China’s communist party officials. Early in his administration, U.S. President Joe Biden confirmed through “core government officials” that “the U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty applies to the South China Sea” (Chen, 2021), eliminating doubt China may have harbored on that.

Afghanistan is the pivotal point where East and West collided before the collapse of the Soviet Union, it became the site of Western conflict with

China in 2021. Rather evidently, countries worldwide have overly relied upon the United States, Afghanistan included, although policy enunciated directly and indirectly by both Democratic and Republican leaders in America has been warning countries such as Afghanistan to become more self-reliant. In a March 2021 article, *Time* Magazine said that the way to solve conflict in Afghanistan is with “The Quad” Alliance, meaning the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with Australia, India, Japan, United States, although as *Time* reported “The Quad” is different from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO): the “Quad in reality bears no resemblance to NATO,” it is “ambiguous” (Chowdhury, 2021a). *Time* warned that the administration of President Joe Biden has “abandoned Afghanistan” (Chowdhury, 2021b). It is not entirely quite that simple. That Afghanistan became over-run by the Taliban is the fault of Afghanistan, primarily with its series of corrupt leaders who reportedly began to sell out their country to the Taliban once the Doha Agreement was signed early in 2020 (Weber, 2021). Suppose there is blame shared by United States officials, same as for the COVID-19 pandemic. In that case, it is with American intelligence agencies that failed to detect the problem at its inception and thereafter, or, if they detected it, with policy makers who failed to take decisive action. It has been alleged that President Biden downplayed the pace of a Taliban takeover, when intelligence officials warned it would be fast (Crane, 2021). Problems festered, then those problems worsened. Corruption in Afghanistan is documented to contribute to the country’s high poverty rate (Costa, 2019), among the world’s highest. Corrupt officials have taken salaries owed to “ghost soldiers,” demoralizing their military’s will to fight, with the Afghan army selling Western material to the Taliban (Shoaib, 2021). The inability of countries to manage their affairs is a quiet invitation for external nations searching to build empires to transform them into neo-colonies.

Former Soviet President Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev’s assessment of the Taliban’s “victory” in Afghanistan does bear truth in hindsight: the American campaign was a “failed enterprise from the start” (Snodgrass, 2021). However, the Soviet Union went into Afghanistan before the West, although before Gorbachev’s leadership. That was a perfect example of the clash of two empires. That the Soviets withdrew was not because they gave up on Afghanistan or on their own quest for empire: they ran out of steam and will. An interesting viewpoint is that China’s “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) redefines our perception of influence, away from convention state or territory, toward configuration by “corridor” leading

to “connectivity” and, ultimately, toward “reconfiguration of political space” (Mayer & Zhang, 2020), but that avoids recognition of territory across which corridors extend, and the fact that territories have been politicised by the state(s) that control them. Then, the question arises, is “reconfiguration of political space” a synonym for empire? Another question is whether a corridor including China’s OBOR is an enterprise doomed to failure from its inception if, in retrospect, Western efforts to develop Afghanistan were as futile as President Gorbachev contends?

Feckless European “Allies” have no standing to gripe that NATO wasted its time with its two decades or longer presence in Afghanistan, German officials from Angela Merkel’s camp labeling it “NATO’s ‘biggest debacle’” (Afghanistan takeover, 2021), when as NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg argued Germany consistently failed to meet its financial obligations to NATO (Suciu, 2021). If any countries wasted time in Afghanistan, it would be the United Kingdom, United States, Poland, countries that expended vast resources to prevent Taliban takeover, seemingly in vain. Chinese opportunism is evident from the Chinese media “ominous warning” to Taiwan to not rely upon the United States to defend it (O’Donnell, 2021), when no comparison is proper between Afghanistan and Taiwan in relation to the security of the United States or the West. Taiwan is situated strategically between Mainland China and Japan, along the Taiwan Strait leading to the “Near Seas” where shipping between Asia and Europe can be bottlenecked by China, and Taiwan is the Republic of China that possesses some legal right to retake Mainland China given the right conditions in the future. Afghanistan has none of those qualifications, that comparison is inapposite. Also, China assumed facts not in evidence by forecasting *ex cathedra* that, upon Mainland invasion, “the island’s defense will collapse in hours” (Evans, 2021) when, in fact, Taiwan is more heavily defended than Afghanistan. Besides, Afghanistan was overrun by competitive internal insurgents including the Taliban and ISIS-K, entirely absent in Taiwan.

Alternative courses of action remained open in Afghanistan in August 2021, with Taliban forces converged around Kabul in open formation, an option being to eliminate them with drone or conventional air strikes when they were sitting targets. Exercising that option would have reduced likelihood of terror strikes elsewhere, although to be sure that option would be unlikely to improve the governance of Afghanistan: United States forces have not been able to construct new governance in Iraq, for example, and this would be harder to accomplish in Afghanistan once Afghan President

Ashraf Ghani and other leaders fled the country when the Taliban advanced, as they were reported to have done with a helicopter loaded with cash, according to Russian Embassy observers (“Afghan President,” 2021), eradicating leadership credibility. Chinese and Iranian leadership has been significant in tearing Afghanistan apart, as forecasted (Mustafa, Ahmed & Junaid, 2020), although in ways different from what one might have expected, at least from China: each provided covert assistance to the Taliban, really proving they are not Russian Federation allies, only Eurasian disrupters. To presume the Taliban will stabilise Afghanistan is a folly, documented by their treatment of women historically, depriving them of basic human rights including the right to work, to education, to leave home without a male escort (“The Taliban & Afghan Women,” n.d.). Be it remembered that the Islamic “State” of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (or of Iraq and the Levant [ISIL]) was defeated largely by armies of Kurdish females fighting to form their own Kurdish state, against Turkish soldiers who are less motivated to fight, lacking commitment to a cause for which to fight (“Commander of all-female Kurdish unit,” 2021). It will be likely that Afghan women will rise up to defeat the Taliban even without support from the West, or with covert aid therefrom. That stands to happen in East Turkmenistan (Xinjiang), Iran, and elsewhere where gender suppression exists, possibly even in Mainland China itself. United Nations Secretary General António Manuel de Oliveira Guterres, Jr, G.C.C, G.C.L., urged the Security Council to take action to stop the creation of an “Islamic Emirate” in Afghanistan, obtaining a unanimous vote of 15:0 in the Security Council opposing creation of that form of governance, hostile to women’s and girls’ rights (U.N. Chief Urges Taliban Restraint, 2021). Separately, it is reported the Secretary General expressed hopes the “Troika” would achieve Taliban restraint when China, Pakistan, and the United States planned to meet on 11 August 2021 (Roy, 2021). Russian Federation Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated in consultation with United States Secretary of State Anthony Blinken that the Russian Federation is concerned with Afghanistan stability plus law and order, obviously essential to Russia with countries that were provinces of the former Soviet Union bordering Afghanistan: Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Stability of Eurasia is essential to Russia. Destabilisation of Afghanistan, although in South Asia, could signal destabilisation of Eurasia then of the Russian Federation itself. Regardless of nomenclature such as “Eurasia,” these countries are part of the same region. In fact, Russian leaders may even conclude that the United States allowed the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in order to destabilise that

country first, Eurasia next, then the Russian Federation eventually. If in fact that plan was part of a strategy, more likely it would have been concocted by China or Iran than by European powers or the United States.

Although the Biden administration has endeavoured to draw France, Germany, United Kingdom back into the equation, some European observers have characterized the goal the Americans and the Chinese share is “dominance” (McGregor, 2021). Rather evidently, dominance is the Chinese objective across the maritime routes of Southeast Asia and across the land routes of Eurasia. From U.S. President (Thomas) Woodrow Wilson’s “14 Points” articulated early in the 20th century, the United States has denied any territorial enlargement objectives. At the same time, America has unequivocally urged global Freedom of the Seas, notwithstanding international politics (Cheever, 1984). At the Group of 7 (“G7”) meeting held on 12 June 2021, President Biden and G7 Leaders announced their launch of what they labelled a “Build Back Better World Partnership” shortened to the acronyms “B3W” as competition to China’s BRI (President Biden, 2021). Arguably, one shortfall of the G7 is the absence of participation by the Russian Federation, and one pitfall of its B3W is the apparent absence of participation by the Russian Federation. Much depends upon the objectives and purposes of the B3W, as China has articulated: will it complement or compete with China’s OBOR? (Abdollahpour, 2021). If it becomes complementary, both B3W and BRI will contribute to the developing territories they serve. If they become staunch competitors, each may destroy the others and the developing countries hosting them in the process. Said differently, do they represent two different “empires” or can their goals converge?

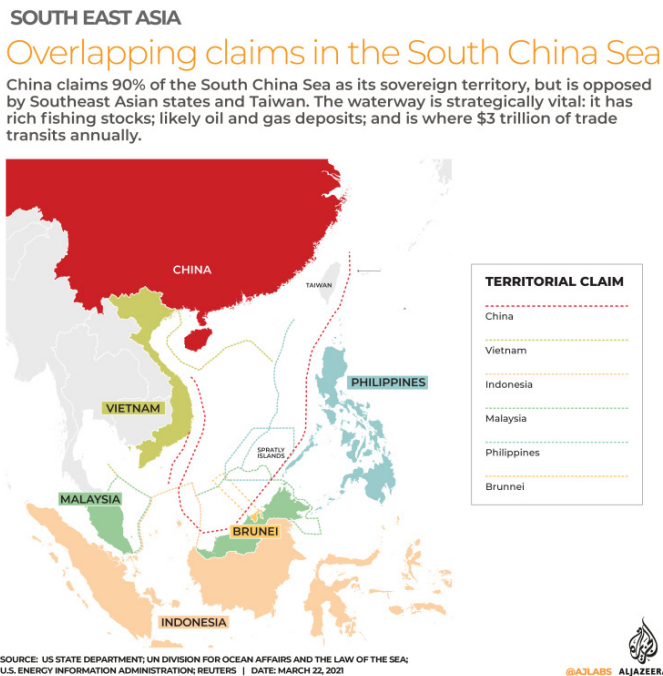
2. Research Questions

This chapter addresses several Research Questions in relation to capabilities and objectives of countries involved in behaviour of international “gamesmanship” that include the following: 1) Do countries that once were or were a part of a dissolved empire seek to rebuild that alliance of states?; 2) Do countries that experience rising economic prosperity seek to turn that prosperity into “empires” by exercising control over other nations?; 3) Do countries that happen to have international corridors on land or sea tend to succumb to the temptation of blocking other countries from crossing those territories?; 4) What will be the likely outcome of “empires” building by countries that lack the resources to maintain an empire?

3. Conflation of Land and Maritime BRI

Issues related to China’s maritime BRI overlap issues related to the Overland BRI, in several respects, both internal Strengths and Weaknesses and external Opportunities and Threats. In this context, internal Strengths and Weaknesses relate to China and its BRI partner states, whereas external Opportunities and Threats pertain to the impact on BRI that foreign states and alliances may exert positively or negatively on BRI, China itself, other BRI participating states. China’s BRI has Strengths in terms of its “connectivity” across territorial boundaries, its primary Weakness is debt. Opportunities abound and include economic development, faster transportation of goods between Asia and Europe, whereas Threats include intervention by foreign governments fearful of China building an “empire” as well as of neighbouring countries jealously torpedoing the BRI.

Figure 1. Claims in the South China Sea



Source: Philippines protests China’s ‘illegal’ South China Sea presence (2021), *Aljazeera.com*, 29 May, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/29/philippines-protests-chinas-illegal-south-china-sea-presence>. This posture was restated as recently as 2015 with the United States Asia-Pacific National Security Strategy (U.S. Department of Defense, 2015). It is as solid as the Rock of Gibraltar.

4. Internal Strengths and Weaknesses

China's BRI has some Strengths, most notably in that participating nations receive infrastructure, largely in railways and highways, sometimes in seaports and factories. Another Strength is the movement of manufactured goods from Asia to Europe, much more than from Europe to Asia. Debt is the Weakness, pure and simple, and that debt burgeons as time elapses, becoming difficult for indebted nations to service, impossible to repay completely. As a consequence, countries overly indebted to China become or feel compelled to transfer ownership of their sovereign infrastructure to Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), compromising independence, possibly also security, relinquishing valuable national assets. Sooner or later, this will cause the fall of the governments that compromised sovereignty of their states, leading to domestic instability, much as has happened already in Afghanistan. Countries through which BRI passes will come to recognise neo-colonialisation once they notice that any "value added" from the BRI is shared by shippers and receivers of products in Asia and Europe respectively, because little manufacturing or consumption is taking place in BRI host nations across Eurasia.

Figure 2. Planned Areas of Infrastructure Construction



Source: R. Karimpour (2021), *Maritime Polar Silk Way, The Motorways of the Sea*.
<https://www.onthemosway.eu/maritime-polar-silk-way/?cn-reloaded=1>

5. External Opportunities and Threats

Leaders of the Group of 7 (“G7”) Countries announced at Carbis Bay, Cornwall on 12 June 2021 their proposal known as “Build Back Better World: “An Affirmative Initiative for Meeting the Tremendous Infrastructure Needs of Low- and Middle-Income Countries” as competition for China’s BRI. This BBBW or “B3W” proposal is touted as being:

- Values-Driven
- Good Governance and Strong Standards
- Climate-Friendly
- Strong Strategic Partnerships
- Mobilize Private Capital Through Development Finance
- Enhancing the Impact of Multilateral Public Finance (Abdollahpour, 2021).

By utilising private capital through developmental finance, the G7 in 2021 seems to be paralleling “Dollar Diplomacy” of the years 1909–1913 during the American Presidential Administration of William Howard Taft, although Taft’s “Dollar Diplomacy” focused heavily on Latin America (Scholes & Scholes, 1970). It is workable, effectively mustering private investment in partnership with governmental foreign economic policies. It does foster at least the impression of an American or of a European “empire,” depending upon what exactly investors will expect to be their rightful Return On Investment (ROI). Chinese and Russian academics have voiced opinion the American withdrawal from Afghanistan will enable the West to re-direct funding away from that futile effort and toward better uses including the B3W plan, with China facing problems including a hoard of refugees from next-door Afghanistan, coupled with drugs and terror they may bring into China (Trofimov & Page, 2021). The flip side of the coin is that China’s expansion into South Asia may be its hedge against the “Malacca Dilemma” or China’s networked security architecture used to alleviate its fear the West may choke import of energy supplies as they pass through the Near Seas, particularly the Strait of Malacca near Singapore, one justification for its militarisation of that maritime region (Mudunuri, 2020).

6. Conclusions

Empires old and new, reincarnated or imaginary, struggle at the beginning of the 21st century's third decade as collectively they plot to tear each other apart, themselves in the process. Beginning in Soviet times, Russia and the West fought to subdue Afghanistan, then lost. China's BRI or OBOR is extending across South Asia and Eurasia, only to be checked by the West's new B3W that itself faces a precarious future with the United Kingdom and United States dividing, each playing the blame game. Russian Federation interests are jeopardised more by China's entry into Afghanistan than by NATO's presence.

The answers the Research Questions looks therefore as follows: 1) Do countries that once were or were a part of a dissolved empire seek to rebuild that alliance of states? Some do; 2) Do countries that experience rising economic prosperity seek to turn that prosperity into "empires" by exercising control over other nations? Some do, with the Russian Federation being one example; 3) Do countries that happen to have international corridors on land or sea tend to succumb to the temptation of blocking other countries from crossing those territories? Some do, with the People's Republic of China being one example; 4) What will be the likely outcome of "empire" building by countries that lack the resources to maintain an empire? Inevitably, their effort to gain global status will fail, and in the process their domestic economies will suffer decline.

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