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The Zheng He Bequest

by

Vice Admiral (retd.) Vijay Shankar

"...while our sails loftily unfurled, like clouds day and night, continued their course as if we were treading a public thoroughfare."¹

A Historical Perspective

Between 1405 and 1433 CE the Ming emperors of China commissioned a series of seven naval expeditions into the Indian Ocean in order to impose imperial control over these waters and to awe the littorals of the South East Asia and the Indian Ocean of their techno military prowess. Resistance to the grand scheme of the emerging 15th century super power was met by the sword. Zheng He the eunuch admiral in court was made in charge of a grand fleet the likes of which had never been conceived before. Typically the fleet for each of the seven splendid voyages, included large treasure ships of a displacement unheard of in medieval times (400 feet in length, warships, troop transport, equine ships and a host of other support units totaling near 300 vessels (no armada was ever to match such force levels, either in terms of numbers or tonnage, till well into the 20th century.)

Through diplomacy, trade, coercion and the iron fist, Zheng irresistibly exacted tribute and capital from the suzerains of the countries he visited. In addition he ruthlessly suppressed the pirates of the South East Asian straits bringing to an end a long and anarchic period in these waters; he forcibly populated the Malaca region with Chinese (Muslims), the larger impact of which is felt to this very day; he waged a land war against the Kingdom of Kotte in Sri Lanka for trading rights; fought a campaign in Muscat, Aden and Mogadishu; and established fortified trading posts and cultural centers in Champa (Vietnam), Java, Siam, Cochin, Calicut ,Hormuz, Muscat, Dhofar, Aden, Jeddah , Zeila

¹ From tablet erected by Zheng He, at Changli, Fujian

,Mogadishu and the Maldives. He brought back to China, some voluntarily and at times forcibly, thirty envoys to the Ming court.²

Deng's 24 Character Strategy

Contemporary Chinese leadership have neither articulated nor publicly declared an all encompassing "grand strategy". However in the early nineties late Premier Deng Xiaoping came as close to enunciating a coherent policy as any of China's leadership could. In a series of succinct yet subjective directive principles which has come to be known as the '24 Character (Chinese) Strategy', he sought to provide a rudder to China's security strategem. There were five major canons to this declaration. These may be summarized as follows:-

- (a) Seek opportunities in and cope with changing geo-political conditions.
- (b) Consolidate economic and military power.
- (c) Build capabilities to provide future options.
- (d) Maintain a strategic orientation which neither lays claim to global leadership nor makes overt provocation or makes exhibition of power.
- (e) Realization of the country's ambitions (of the middle kingdom) will come through the process of consolidation and enhancing 'Comprehensive National Power'.

Comprehensive National Power

Chinese leadership do not view their security strategy as an ends-methods-means debate. Rather, strategy is seen as a co-relation of Comprehensive National Power(CNP).In this context Sun Tzu's axiom of "Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril" is their lodestone.³

CNP is a concept by which China's standing in relation to other nations or a grouping of nations is measured. Considerations which incorporate internally oriented indicators of power such as economic indices, ethnic fractures or integration, state of education and cultural influences amongst others are factored, while externally oriented indicators such as the nation's conventional war fighting capability, nuclear arsenal, territorial conformity, diplomatic influence, prestige and will etc. are the primary impulses to measure hard power. The linkages between these two internal and external orientations are apparent, that is, a weakness or a fracture in internal orientation may well be seen by the leadership as an invitation for external action. This is a key understanding which would appear to be the prime mover of action by the Central Communist Party (CCP).

² The Times Concise Atlas of World History pp 58-9 and Huan Ma " The Overall Survey of The Ocean Shores " written in 1416 in the Chinese language.

³ Ma Cheng-Kun PLA news analysis "China's security strategy" number 8 April 2008. Institute of PLA research, FHK College, NDU, Taiwan .Sun Tzu. " The Art of War" ,Griffith Samuel B. pp. 84-31, Oxford University Press 1971

Strategic Points of Reference

China has looked at survival of its regime and the perpetuation of the CCP as central to its grand strategy. Sustained economic growth, a low profile implementation plan without losing sight of its “middle Kingdom” ambition are as mentioned earlier amongst the pillars that hold up the strategy. Maintaining domestic stability sovereignty and territorial integrity despite the numerous disputes that exist are objectives that may never be cleared other than favorably from their agenda. Specific designs and structures to implement plans are however not at all apparent.

It is easy to say that regime survival and perpetuation of the party shapes the strategic point of reference, however what stands in contradiction to such a simplistic view is the pace of reforms, the larger effects of globalization and the inability to control the trajectory of technology; after all the most dangerous period is when an authoritarian rule chooses to reform; China would appear to have run this gauntlet with admirable verve and visible success. Consolidation of the Chinese global position is predicated on our ability to maintain levels of economic growth that would catapult her to the leaders of the first world and this growth depends entirely upon uninterrupted availability of resources and enlarging access to markets. In this area it must be noted China has made giant strides globally to enhance and protect bilateral and multilateral relationships. She has in the process cast aside age old prejudices and traditional barriers. This has resulted in the development of complex interests with many countries particularly so in Africa and Latin America.

The thirst for resources has become the most significant factor that shapes her strategic posture. Energy security is an area which has challenged the strategic creativity of Chinese planners. China currently imports over 60% of its oil requirements, around 7 million barrels per day, vast majority of which comes through the Malacca or the Lombok Straits. By 2015 it is expected that China’s oil consumption will rise to 12 million barrels per day. She has diversified to the extent of tapping every global resource that is currently available from the oil fields of Siberia, Venezuela, Nigeria, Angola and the Middle East. In addition transportation methods have also been diversified with an increasing dependence on pipelines. She has, in the mean time enhanced her strategic petroleum reserves to near 500 million barrels which translates to a reserve of 80 days of net oil imports approximately. China’s concern over its energy security moulds its military policy as well as force structures. Her 2006 defence white paper placed before the CCP defines PLA’s primary task as upholding national security and unity and ensuring the interest of national development. It is explicit in underscoring “security issues related to energy resources finance, information and international sea lines of communication are mounting.”⁴ The PLA is in the middle of a transformation from a Maoist military i.e. a revolutionary army based on structures and led for prolonged wars of attrition, to one capable of fighting and winning short and sharp conflicts in distant

⁴ Annual report to Congress USDOD, “Military Power of the PRC 2008 issued by the office of the Secy. of Defence p. 12

areas by air, sea and land through precision, mobility and high technology. How all this translates to force planning, doctrines and resource allocation, is what we are witnessing today.

A Broad Brush Appraisal of China's Military Strategy

Chinese strategists have, as mentioned earlier, undertaken a transformatory exercise to reconstitute into a military, capable of undertaking operations in distant areas of interest in a short, sharp and technology driven conflicts. Its military modernization is to develop adequate capabilities to guarantee economic development at a pace which would bring it among the first rank nations. While active defense is at the heart of their strategy, in a rather contradictory set of guidelines, China has placed before itself, the objective of resolving 'disputes' to bring about an end state favourable to Beijing, at the same time, ensuring that extra regional powers do not gain access to the economic jugular that plough the oceans which drive her quest for power status. The primary instruments for this endeavour are access denial capabilities, the "assassin's mace"⁵ and soft power.

The Maritime Domain

At this juncture in our narrative it would be of interest to examine a model of how control and regulation of the sea lines of communication by another super power from a different era. The British Empire was critically dependant on trade, her colonies, stabilizing lines of communication and most importantly suppression of the competition (whenever and wherever they arose) for sustenance and growth of their imperial designs. To this end for control and regulation of the maritime domain particularly in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea regions she established a regulating network of bases, listening posts and radio stations in area. They ranged from Hong Kong in the Far East to Singapore, Port Blair, Colombo, Bombay, Male, Mauritius, Gan and Cape Town to the West. These bases not only served to provide havens for the Royal Navy but also provided Command, Control, Surveillance and Intelligence facilities.

In as much as China's territorial integrity is concerned, she has settled 11 disputes with 6 of its neighbours. Notwithstanding, she continues to have disputes with India along shared borders; with Japan in the East China Sea and with a clutch of South East Asian neighbours in the South China Sea. Of interest to this paper are the disputes relating to the maritime zones and ownership in the potentially rich hydrocarbon deposits of upto 100 billion barrels of oil and 7 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in the East China Sea which has remained an abiding source of friction with Japan and Korea. In the South China Sea her claims of exclusive ownership over the Spratly, Paracel and Zongsha

⁵ Ma Cheng-Kun, *ibid* pp. 146-150. The assassin's mace program is a part of China's asymmetric war fighting strategy to develop capabilities designed to give a technologically inferior military advantages to overwhelm a technologically superior adversary. Their ASAT program, strategic hacking teams and cyber warfare, submarine programs are all a sub-set of the assassin's mace.

groups of islands have been hotly disputed by Taiwan, Brunei, Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia. Despite the unresolved nature of these claims China has, unilaterally announced the setting up of the Sansha city under the Hainan province to emphasize sovereignty and incontrovertible jurisdiction over these islands and the contiguous waterways.

Across the Taiwan straits there is a fast changing situation apparent. The strategic dilemma faced by Taiwan would appear to be, to reconcile the growing power of China with the economic dynamics that has been set into motion by Taiwanese investments in the mainland in terms of man, material, finances and intellect. In addition there is that emotive need for recognition faced with the mainland's unconditional constitutional demand for unification. The abiding anxiety is will an arrogant China use its power to further isolate Taiwan or will it display another facet of its soft power by looking for an accommodation outside its constitution. On China's part while it has opened the mainland through access and economic inducement, it has remained uncompromising on the matter of unification on its terms.

As deliberated earlier, an increasingly Sea Power minded China is hardly going to throw itself into direct competition with the US navy in the Pacific. It would much rather restrain itself to access denial in the first and second island chains (see map) as far as the United States is concerned, while it would in time, structure its forces to a Control role when pitched against the littorals. China's strategic direction lies further south westward for it must see the South China Sea as a natural adjunct to the Indian Ocean through which flows her economic life blood. It is here that China has noted the confluence of geo politics and resource politics which she considers as a fundamental of contemporary international system. It is also here that her planners perceive China's Achilles Heel to be. In the Chinese lexicon Sea Power is defined as the power that would realize equal "sea rights."⁶ Understanding that the international system at sea is in reality an anarchic system, this would obviously mean to imply a calibrated application of force, should interests at sea be challenged.

The geographic salients of the area in question, present a curious belly of oceanic expanse, which narrows at the point of origin of critical SLOCs and narrows again at its point of exit into the South China Sea. Bulk of these lines of communication, round the Cape of Good Hope, the Gulf of Aden and Dondra Head on the southern coast of Sri Lanka before funneling through the 6 degree channel into the straits of Malacca or routing via the Lombok or Sunda straits. These lines account for, near, 80% of the world's energy traffic and close to 60% of global commodities. They are also the highways that carry technology and the intellect that created our globalised world. The shores of these water bodies are home to more than half of mankind. These lands have been the cradle of most civilizations and have provided sanctuary to most of the world's greatest religions and refuge, to provide continuity to both the Indic and the Sinic civilizations. Historically these waters and lands have seen the world's largest migrations, splendid conquests, prolific trade and commerce and has been the source of epoch changing knowledge. It would now appear that an encore is in the making.

⁶ Zhang Wenmu, "Sea Power and China's strategic choices," *China Security*, Summer 2006.

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In the fifteenth century Zheng He's treasure fleets set sail into the Indian Ocean to exercise imperial control over these waters, to awe the littorals with the state of their civilization and technological prowess and to suppress forces inimical to their grand designs. In order to do this Zheng's fleet was provided with power both of a soft and hard nature, which he deployed and used with skill and diplomacy obtaining tribute and acknowledgment from the sovereigns that he established contact with, through persuasion, lavish inducements and the sword. He developed fortified trading posts and exacted havens for his ships in the vital ports of the day across the region.

Today we note with some trepidation the emergence of China from out of its, largely, defensive maritime perimeters as defined by the first and second island chain strategies into the Indian Ocean region as a major stakeholder. To this end it has through diplomacy and economic inducements established bases in Sittwe, Hambantota, Gwadar and Marao in the Maldives. The geographic and strategic significance of these posts were apparent in the past and are equally vital today whether for purposes of control, regulating, providing havens or assuring security to their energy lines. Sittwe and Gwadar also provide the front end for piping energy into China. These long term strategic investments by China maybe seen as the coming of the 'Third Island Chain'.

Chinese ship building programs including the aircraft carrier program, SSN program, provide for a future power projection capability that go beyond the Second Island Chain. Potential expeditionary forces as exemplified by three airborne divisions, two amphibious infantry divisions, two marine brigades, seven special operations groups and one regimental size reconnaissance element in the second artillery (nuclear forces) are all symptomatic of a growing capability to surveil, identify, track and target military movements deep into the Indian Ocean. China's space activities have significant implications not just for anti-access/area denial but are keys to conduct of operations in the distant seas. In addition to the naval ship building programs, China operates a vibrant, globally competitive, commercial ship building industry, which is the third largest in the world. She has shown considerable adaptive capabilities and the necessary flexibility to surge production as indicated by a growth in submarine and amphibious ship production. The inheritors of the Zheng He legacy are indeed at hand.

Conclusion

There is undoubtedly considerable gap between China's ambitions of realizing great power status and her current capabilities, so too the seriousness of internal stresses and inequities, the hazards that further deep penetration reforms may pose to the social fabric

of the nation and the dangers of strategic miscalculations; there is no denying the will of the CCP and the relentless nature of their pursuit to global leadership. There remain however four crucial determinants which will dictate the course of China's ambitions in the Indian Ocean region. These are:

- (a) What form reconciliation of the Taiwan imbroglio will take and with what finesse China will resolve her South China Sea territorial disputes. If either are conflictual it will have far reaching negative impact on their ambitions in the Indian Ocean region.
- (b) Energy security is greatly influenced by global markets, technological innovations and is sensitive to geo political turbulences in the oil producing regions. A slowdown in economic growth will prove a serious dampener to long term designs.
- (c) The coming 'Third Island Chain' covering the Indian Ocean region is hardly suggestive of a cooperative approach to security. Such unilateral strategies will invariably give rise to friction between the main stakeholders which may result in actions that are unfavourable for growth .
- (d) Internal stresses and the growing economic gap in society are fissures that are not easily bridged, particularly if current growth rates are to be maintained. Pace of reforms and its penetration may all add up to turbulences in the core.

Chinese leadership had in the early nineties given guidance to their security strategies through the instrument of the '24 Character strategy' and have allocated resources to pursue a military transformation from Mass to Mobility and Precision. Force structuring would not only be capable of securing the Second Island Chain but would look to projecting power in a broader regional sense and for global objectives. However this is subject to the determinants listed above. In any event the absence of a true sea control capability and its continued presence through the deployment of carrier groups in areas of interest is unlikely to be a reality for the next two decades. The absence of moves to establish cooperative stabilizing structures in areas where the stakeholders are many hold the portents for friction. Given such a delicate situation Admiral Zheng He would have in all probabilities opted for a solution marked by mutuality and accommodation.



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The Admiral retired on 30 September 2009, after nearly 45 years in uniform. He is today settled with his wife in the Nilgiris and passes down his operational and strategic experience through articles and participation in seminars that deal with his primary areas of expertise. He has contributed to various professional journals and continues to support his Alma Mater in Kochi through his writings. He has

lectured at the Staff College, Higher Command College, the United Services Institute and the National Maritime Foundation. He is a member of the adjunct faculty of the National Institute of Advanced Studies and has tenanted the Admiral Katari Chair of Excellence at the United Services Institute. Internationally, his participation in the Track II Ottawa Dialogue, the Bellagio Carnegie Endowment discussions, the Indo-Sino-Pak trilateral dialogue, Chaophraya Dialogue and the papers he has presented there seek to provide a new paradigm for nuclear security on the sub-continent.