

# Xi Jinping and China's Role in the Asian and Global Order

by Kerry Brown

Since becoming Party Secretary and Country President over 2012 into 2013, Xi Jinping has continued to promote an assertive, confident Chinese attitude towards the region. On the South and East China Sea, the Xi leadership has been bullish, responding with irritation when the Philippines took the maritime border issues to the International Court of Arbitration and secured a largely positive judgment in their favor in 2016. With Japan, Xi has been equally hard-line, not yet visiting the country, as of December 2016, despite having been to over forty other foreign places since early 2013.

At the Bo'ao Forum in 2015, China's key foreign policy gathering for government and officials across the region, the theme was one of a "common Asian Destiny." And yet it is unclear precisely what this destiny is, despite the more vocal expression of China's foreign policy goals that has been given under Xi, nor, for that matter, whether this destiny is shared much by neighbouring countries.<sup>1</sup> With the Trump presidency, the uncertainty has only increased, simply because some of his remarks during the campaign implied that the U.S. would scale back its security role in the region and walk away from the Obama approach of "rebalancing," something which had been extremely unpopular in Beijing.

For all the claims of how different China under Xi is in terms of its ambitions and the ways it expresses its aims internally and to the outside world, there are also lots of continuities. Just as it did under all of his predecessors since Jiang, China continues for instance to intimately connect the achievement of domestic goals with its relations with the outside world. After almost four decades of reform and opening up, China is now an intrinsically global power, even with its domestic challenges. Its environmental issues, economic goals, and political stability, for the simple reason that the country is so populous, large, and integrated into global goods, finance, services, and supply chains, are global issues. A policy failure in any of these areas would reach deep into the external world. And the first place that these would have an impact would be the region in which China is located—Asia.

What can we determine about China's strategic intent towards the region in which it exists? This question is best answered by looking at the concepts of historic destiny and China's rejuvenation which Xi partially inherited from his predecessors but has now made into his own orientating idea. For China, the future is mapped out in two centennial goals. The first, in 2021, marks the hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the Communist Party. The second, more remote one in 2049 marks

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the hundredth anniversary of the existence of the People's Republic of China. Both of these structure the short to long-term narrative of country development and the Party's key role in that under Xi. Needless to say, without the Party, the country's dream, another term that Xi has been keen to use, would not be realisable. The two are therefore vigorously associated with each other as though one entity.<sup>2</sup>

As Chinese growth falls, this poses a question of legitimacy for a Party State which, since the 1980s, has staked much of its right to rule and have a monopoly on power on its ability to preside over a system producing double-digit raw growth. Now in 2016 growth is down to 6.5 percent, and likely to continue to fall. The Party State under Xi, therefore, is seeking new sources of legitimacy. The stronger language on national destiny and the rejuvenation of the idea of China being a "strong," "rich" country is a natural place to look. The more assertive tone of Xi's language about China in the world and about China's rightful place at the center of at least the region, if not the wider world, is therefore, in this context, unsurprising. Domestically, it makes perfect sense.

Nor is Xi practicing something that is a radical break with the past. In many ways, his position is an intensification of language used by his immediate predecessor, Hu Jintao, about China being on a "historic mission." It also ties into the narratives so persistently promoted by the Party over the last three decades to address the "century of humiliation" ushered in by the first Opium War in 1839, and embracing what the Chinese in official discourse call the "unequal treaties" with colonial powers like the UK and France, and then the catastrophe of the Second World War. Since the 1990s, a series of patriotic campaigns and patriotic education movements have built up this new sense of indignation amongst the public, exploding from time to time in large public demonstrations, particularly against the Japanese. Events like the handback of Hong Kong in 1997 have, more positively for the Chinese Party state, only reinforced the sense that China's modern moment of emergence, unity and resurrection from the ashes of destruction and pain is close to hand. This history is reinforced by the immense material success of the Chinese economy after the great financial crisis afflicted much of the rest of the world from 2008. On most fronts, China under Xi therefore feels vindicated—it did not succumb to pressure after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, but maintained faith in the resilience of a one party system. As of 2016, that faith seems to have paid off.<sup>3</sup>

In 2012, one of the first acts that Xi did publicly with his new Politburo Standing Committee was to visit the National Museum of China and muse on the "great renewal of the Chinese nation." "The Chinese people have never given in, have struggled ceaselessly, and have finally taken hold of their own destiny and started the great process of building the nation," Xi stated while touring the exhibitions, according to the official report in Xinhua. "It has displayed, in full, the great national spirit with patriotism as the core."<sup>4</sup> National rejuvenation was an idea that had been explored by, amongst others, the elderly academic, Zheng Bijian.<sup>5</sup>

For Xi, however, articulating China's moment of rejuvenation and renaissance is not simply producing grand, abstract sounding, aspirational rhetoric—

something that had often appeared to be the case under Hu. China's prominence in terms of its role in setting up the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2013, in promoting the Belt Road Initiative, in becoming the largest trading partner from countries across the Asian region, hosting the G20 in 2016, and in taking a leading role in the moves to combating climate change at the Paris Convention in late 2015, were all manifestations of how it was actually already a country with a major global status.

This emboldened Xi to speak about a new model of major power relations when visiting the U.S. in 2013. While steering clear of anything hinting at China and the U.S. being a new G2, it did allude to some kind of parity. A similar move can be seen in the language of "civilization partners" used when Xi became the first ever Chinese Head of State to visit the European Union headquarters in March 2014. Once more, there was the stress on parity and commonality, in ways which made it clear that China was an equal partner to other major markets and powers.

For the region, however, the notion of common destiny is linked with harder strategies of dominance and control. China, the arch enemy of hegemony after 1949, does seem to be striving for hegemony here. And in the South and East China Seas, its use of tactics to change facts on the ground, like building permanent features on small geographical features, insisting on the vast nine dash line as its legitimate territory, and pushing up increasingly against American and other interests, is the location of its greatest commitments and the most visible sign of its regional ambitions.

For all the complexity of the claims in this region,<sup>6</sup> the most straightforward way by which to best understand China's intentions is to use two notions proposed separately by Henry Kissinger and Hugh White. For Kissinger, China is engaged in scoping out space—strategic space around its maritime borders. As a power which is new to maritime interests, this is already a radical move. For China, however, the main objective now is to claim symbolic control, almost like a game of Chinese "go," over as wide a territory as possible. And as with "go," the issue is not about establishing neat, horizontal lines of strategic space and their enclosed interests, but in building up control over bundles of space, in ways in which, at some point, overall control will pass into China's hands.<sup>7</sup>

For Hugh White, the question is broadly one of China trying to test the series of treaty alliances that it sees spread before it along the Pacific and linked by reciprocal commitments with the U.S. From Japan down to Australia and New Zealand, China sees a world which was largely created after the Second World War, and particularly during the San Francisco conference in the early 1950s, where there are legally binding treaty obligations which commit the U.S. to powers in the region. This is backed up by the U.S.'s formidable naval assets, far superior to anything China has even despite two decades of heavy investment and capacity-building. China's game, according to White, is to use the South China Sea in particular, and its economic prowess, to question, pick apart and subtly subvert the U.S. imperium across the Asian region. While not overt, the intention in Beijing is to raise questions about just how much the U.S. will continue to remain engaged,

but also to remind regional powers how much they have to gain from enjoying good relations with China.<sup>8</sup>

In 2016, this tactic has already borne fruit. The newly elected president of the Philippines, Duterte, undertook an extremely friendly visit to Beijing, vocally expressing his increased preference for relations with China despite the ongoing island disputes. In addition, despite U.S. opposition, the AIIB was successfully established and made its first modest investments regionally. More than this, the Belt Road Initiative was scoping out across the whole region a zone of economic common interest, where the focal point was clearly China and the benefits of engaging positively with Chinese economic development. There was no explicit up-front security price tag attached to this. There did not need to be. Clearly, countries were going to think twice before taking China on over issues that did not directly concern them. Even at the Association for South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the attempts to schedule a critical proposal about China in the region in 2016 were scotched through the support of member Cambodia. This was the sort of influence that China was increasingly able to exert through its rising economic, and political clout. And it was the sort of influence it wanted – covert, not clearly spelled out, but to those who understand China's diplomatic language and behavior (and most in the region do) very explicit.<sup>9</sup>

While the election of Hillary Clinton as President in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections would have most likely maintained the certainty of U.S. commitment to the region, under Donald Trump things are less certain. Trump's scrapping to the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) immediately opened up a space for China to create with more urgency its own free trade zone. The TPP had figured as a further manifestation of U.S. containment, creating a zone of countering economic interests without the Chinese involved. Ironically, therefore, it is the Chinese, usually accused of being rules disrupters and breakers in the international system, who look set to be the primary champions of free trade and a global norms-based trading system while the U.S. retreats to protectionism.

More enticingly for the Chinese is the idea that in Trump they are looking for someone whose primary mandate seems to be to get a better deal for the U.S. domestically, and to stop spreading itself across the world in ways that are not immediately in its own material self-interest. Trump, with no administrative or government experience, will worry the Chinese, as he does for most others, for his volatility and lack of background. But he also offers the opportunity to do a grand strategic deal. His less intense interest in international affairs, and his lack of real background and commitment to Asia, will arouse Chinese interests. In what ways, therefore, can they work with this?

#### AN ASIAN DEAL FOR CHINA UNDER TRUMP?

There is a way in which a Trump presidency offers the Chinese a chance to do a deal in Asia, along the lines originally alluded to by Hugh White. Of all the treaty alliances that the U.S. has, the most contentious, and in some ways the most

expendable, is that contained in the Taiwan Relations Act, passed in 1979 when the U.S. shifted diplomatic recognition formally from the Republic of China on Taiwan to the People's Republic. This act commits the administration to take to Congress any issue involving Taiwanese security, and contains a commitment to defend Taiwan security in terms of arm sales and training.<sup>10</sup>

It is precisely this kind of agreement that might arouse a more ambiguous or tepid commitment from the Trump administration. After all, Taiwan is not regarded as a sovereign state by the U.S. And for Xi Jinping, whose mission is to restore China to great nation status, the objective of final reunification is a critical one. Speaking with Vincent Sieuw, a Taiwanese political leader, in 2013, Xi had been blunt. "Looking further ahead," Xi had stated according to Xinhua, "the issue of political disagreements that exist between the two sides must reach a final resolution, step by step, and these issues cannot be passed on from generation to generation."<sup>11</sup> Such language was backed up by the remarkable meeting held between Xi and the then president of Taiwan, Ma Ying-jeou, in Singapore in November 2015.

The victory in the Taiwanese presidential elections in January 2016 of Tsai Ing-wen from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), a party traditionally more supportive of an independence agenda, the management of Cross Strait relations by Beijing has become more difficult. Historically, it has enjoyed poor relations with the DPP, and the era of the previous DPP president Chen Shui-bian from 2000 to 2008 was not a good one for Beijing. The difference now is that Taiwan as never before is beholden economically to China for economic growth. Wages have been stagnant on the island for two decades. Living costs have progressively risen. Grievances in particular from these two areas fueled the large anti-government election defeats in local elections in late 2015 and the 2016 presidential election. For Tsai, her main attractiveness was to map out a route by which the island might address some of its core economic problems. But at the heart of this is the fact that 70 per cent of the island's trade is with the Mainland.

Already in peripheral areas, China has placed greater pressure on Taiwan. Tourist numbers have been falling. Investments in China have been under greater risk. Attempts by Taiwan to diversify economic links with other countries has been one response. But finding a replacement for a trading partner that constitutes two-thirds of activity is not easy—and in the short term, not perhaps possible. For Taiwan, therefore, its economic and diplomatic space have never appeared more narrow.

Xi's government on the only issue remotely like that of Taiwan—the management of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region—have shown a harsh, uncompromising stance. This does not bode well for their understanding of the One Country, Two Systems rubric, something originally set up to deal with the Taiwan issue, but then transposed to the Hong Kong solution in the early 1980s. For Beijing, in fact, the country takes precedence over everything else. And the enforcement of Beijing-centric solutions against significant proportions of local opinion in the matter of the system by which a chief executive might be chosen in the future, and the right, in 2016, for legislators from pro-independence parties

to take up their seats in the local parliament has shown that the shots are almost always called from Beijing now, despite the promise under the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration for Hong Kong to have a high degree of autonomy.

This reflects a Beijing mindset which has never before been so categorical on its attitude towards what it regards as domestic issues, legacies from the colonial era of humiliation, which the outside world has no right to opine on. Taiwan belongs to the same category, and even though the island has de-facto independence, any expression of this has been met with shrill denunciations from Beijing. It too figures therefore as a domestic matter.

While any creep towards military treatment of the reunification issue is highly unlikely, the use of a more stealth-like process whereby creating a framework for Taiwan unification becomes a live issue is no longer such a remote prospect. For Xi, with such a strong sense of personal and national historic mission, even coming close to a potential agreement would place him in the history books. It would also be the most natural conclusion to China's renaissance, the final resolution of the split up, at least in the eyes of the elite in Beijing, of their country under foreign pressure and interference. Despite the fact that this historic narrative remains highly contested,<sup>12</sup> its emotional appeal is what most matters. And for the Beijing leadership, being able to deliver on this would be to secure the maximum legitimacy and support from a domestic population fed a diet of rousing nationalist propaganda for much of the last three decades.

There are two issues that arise from this possibility. The first is that with a president seen as a dealmaker in Washington, Beijing may well try to use some incentives to bring him to the table. The first is to work out what levels of commitment the U.S. under Trump might have to doing anything about the Taiwan Relations Act should it ever need to be invoked. The second is to locate this issue in something that seems much larger—the South China Sea area, and China's willingness to ultimately bargain and compromise over its demands in order to get the international community led by the U.S. to cede greater involvement, influence and perhaps, a unification track with Taiwan. Removing a part of their demands over the area of the nine-dash line would be one sign of their willingness to meet the U.S. halfway. They would be able to offer stability, certainty, and predictability in return for control over an issue they regard as their most central one—Taiwan's status.

The second issue is, of course, the fact that Taiwan is now a place with a strong local identity. It has been a well-functioning democracy since 1996. Surveys have shown that for the vast majority of Taiwanese their identity is as Taiwanese, not, as in the past, as Chinese Taiwanese. They watch events in Hong Kong with unease bordering on horror. If this is the end-point of the one country, two systems rubric, they want nothing to do with it. For most, their understanding is that they are independent but, through China's bullying, cannot say this.

The key question is just how assertive China wishes to be, how it reads, or misreads, the Trump presidency, and how deep in the end the international community is in their real commitment to doing something should Taiwan really

be placed under either sustained economic, or, in the worst-case scenario, military threat. There is plenty of space here for miscalculation on all sides. Ensuring that at least from the U.S. and its allies, regionally and internationally there is no ambiguity over support for Taiwan is therefore critical. Ambiguity would be disastrous. The simple fact is that with the assertiveness under Xi in the region, with the centrality of Taiwan's status to his and the understanding of his administration over historic mission, and the current lack of unity amongst the U.S. and its allies, never before has it been more likely that a flourishing democracy is under daily, and real, threat from a non-democratic neighbor. The issue of Taiwan and China, therefore, remains a crucial one, and one of the most important frontlines in the relationship between China and the region, and the rest of the world. It is an issue that no one can be complacent about.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Full Text of President Xi Jinping's Speech at Bo'ao Forum for Asia Annual Conference, 2015." accessed December 1 2016. <http://english.boaoforum.org/hynew/19353.jhtml>.

<sup>2</sup> These ideas recur frequently in the collection of Xi's speeches produced in 2015. Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> On the patriotic campaigns and the nurturing of a sense of national grievance and humiliation, see William Callahan, *China: The Pesoptimist Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Christopher Coker, *The Improbably War: China, the U.S. and the Continuing Logic of Great Power Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). On the tensions between Japan and China and their long history, see June Teufel Dreyer, *Middle Kingdom and the Land of the Rising Sun: Sino-Japanese Relations Past and Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> "Xi Pledges Great Renewal of Chinese Nation," *Xinhua*, December 29, 2012. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-11/29/c\\_132008231.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-11/29/c_132008231.htm)

<sup>5</sup> There is an iteration of this in the context of China's peaceful rise in a speech that Zheng made to the Brookings Institute in the U.S. almost a decade before in 2005: Zheng Bijian, Speech on China's Peaceful Rise, available at [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/20050616\\_bijian.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/20050616_bijian.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> For which see Bill Hayten, *The South China Sea; The Struggle for Power in Asia* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2014)

<sup>7</sup> For China as a land power until modern times, see Robert S Ross, *Chinese Security Policy: Structure, Power and Politics*, (London: Routledge, 2009). For Kissinger on China and the game of Go, see Henry A. Kissinger, *On China*, (New York: Allen Lane, 2011)

<sup>8</sup> Hugh White, *The China Choice: Why We Should Share Power*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Charlie Campbell, "After Days of Deadlock, ASEAN Releases Statement on South China Sea Dispute," *Time*, July 26, 2016. <http://time.com/4421293/asean-beijing-south-china-sea-cambodia-philippines-laos/>.

<sup>10</sup> The content and meaning of the Act are more fully spelled out in Richard Bush, *Unchartered Strait: The Future of China Taiwan Relations*,== (Washington: Brookings Institute Press, 2013)

<sup>11</sup> "China's Xi Says Political Solution for Taiwan Cannot Wait Forever." Reuters. April 2013. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-asia-apec-china-taiwan-idUSBRE99503Q20131006>,

<sup>12</sup> See the work of J. Bruce Jacobs on this, in particular J Bruce Jacobs, “Whither Taiwanization? The Colonization, Democratization and Taiwanization of Taiwan,” *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, 2013, 14(4), 567-586. doi:10.1017/S1468109913000273