



THINK SOUTH ASIA12

THE RISING DRAGON: CHINA IN SOUTH ASIA AND BEYOND

EDITORIAL



Djan Sauerborn

Editor of **Think South Asia**

Policy advisor at SADF
Department of Political Science,
South Asia Institute (SAI) in
Heidelberg, Germany

Dear Think South Asia Readers,

In this, our 12th edition we aim to look at China's influence in South Asia and beyond. What are Beijing's stakes and aims in South Asia and is China being welcomed with open arms or are its attempts to gain a foothold in South Asia met with criticism and wariness? How is the new great power of the 21st century trying to expand its reach? Which implications does an ever growing Chinese footprint in South Asia entail? How does China view itself? How is China positioning itself on the global level? Which impact do domestic discourses have and how should we interpret them? These are some of the core questions our insightful contributors asked themselves whilst writing their articles.

Dissolving the "Collectivism" vs. "Individualism" divide

Is China really the intrusive nation,

hiding its true intentions under a veneer of promises of economic integration, foreign direct investment, infrastructure projects and technology transfer? The problem with autocratic regimes is that, in addition to and as a result of their curtailing of freedom, they are non-transparent. Observers are confronted with a situation where the lens through which they look at China remains blurry. This makes judging more difficult, but also more compelling. While criticism of China's policies which hamper the everyday life of millions is warranted, reluctance is creeping in as well. While judgment should always be the last link in the research-analysis-contextualization-judgment continuum, extreme relativism, where everything goes is also a stifling element to change. Deterministic arguments such as the notion of "collectivism" in China and "individualism" in Europe are not only false, over-simplified dichotomies

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that do not represent reality; they also create opposites that appear to be incompatible with each other. Many who point out to “collectivism” in China imply that there is a culture barrier to individual rights, that a democratic system “would just not suit” a country such as China. These views fails to incorporate the attempts of individuals, interest groups and several sections of civil society to aimed at carving out space for individual rights and opportunities. Using rigid notions of culture to depict a “we” and “them” status quo is not only inadequate, but inevitably leads to stigmatization and hostility which in turn erodes any basis for understanding and much needed constructive criticism.

The EU should use its normative plight, which has also come under heavy attack, to support those elements in China who are willing to stand up to repression. Raising a moral eyebrow here and there and pointing fingers is not enough. The EU also needs to find a way to combine economic prowess with a value based approach. Not an easy task, but necessary if it wants to stay true to its core merits and at the same time remain a relevant actor in world which is experiencing the rise of new great powers and global actors.

Dangerous Waltz between the Tiger and Dragon

The impact of a rising and expansionist China are more than evident in South Asia. The famous International Relations specialist Barry Buzan has stated that China and India are now

the two major competing forces in Asia, whereas their interactions are marked by patterns of enmity, competition but also potential areas of cooperation. China’s much dwelled upon strategy of supporting nations in South Asia in order to curbs India’s great power aspirations and keep the “tiger at bay” in its region, and India’s growing strategic partnerships with South East Asian and Pacific powers such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea is a stark reminder that the two most populous nations of our planet are growing more wary of each other. China has established a “string of pearls”, creating economic and strategic partnerships with countries such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Maldives to “encircle” India. The incursion of Chinese troops into the Indian territory of Ladakh on June 17th, 2013 once again highlighted the tension between the two states. Border disputes in Kashmir as well as Arunchal Pradesh have not been solved and will hinder rapprochement in the years to come. Both countries are economic power houses and have nuclear arsenals; their military buildup in the last few years is unsettling, to say the least and both are in dire need of new sources of energy for their booming societies. Indo-Sino relations and their implications have been titled the “New Great Game”. Although there have been some glimpses of hope regarding the strengthening of ties between the two countries, such as the first joint anti-terrorism operations and stronger economic interdependence, these are no “game-changers”.

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The China-Pakistan Nexus

The alliance with Pakistan is most likely the darkest of the pearls. The relationship between Pakistan and China has historically been coined the “All-Weather Friendship”. Many analysts today even go so far as to say that Pakistan is turning into a “client state” for China. China has supported Pakistan in several statements and initiatives on the issue of Baluchistan. In the 27th Meeting, 23rd Regular Session of the Human Rights Council on June 7th, 2013 the officials of Pakistan as well as China tried to block the hearing of Baluch nationals regarding the Human Rights violations committed in Baluchistan. Representatives of the US and UK urged the speaker to let the NGO representatives continue their

depiction of the situation. China needs Baluchistan, especially the deep sea port of Gwadar as an economic and energy corridor, Pakistan is in dire need of an investor. China also supported West Pakistan as it invaded East Pakistan in 1971 which led to massacre of hundreds of thousands of Bengalis. These atrocities were best summarized in the famous “Blood Telegram” sent to the US state department by Archer Kent Blood, the last American Consul General to Dhaka, East Pakistan. There have also been rumors of Chinese Support for Pakistan’s secret service, the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) with regards to its operations in India and Afghanistan.

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The case of Afghanistan

With most Western troops leaving Afghanistan in 2014 there are huge concerns regarding the future of Afghanistan. The army as well as the police is still ill-equipped to deal with the vast amount of security concerns that the country faces. While the west is pulling out, regional actors are moving in, increasing their strategic and economic ties with Afghanistan. The biggest regional investor this far has been China. China is interested in Afghanistan for three main reasons: domestic security, energy and trade routes to Central Asia, and exploitation of natural resources. China is concerned that the current volatile situation in Afghanistan could lead to a scenario where Uyghur separatists could operate from Afghanistan, thus creating a safe haven for anti-Beijing elements in the China's troubled western Xinjiang province. The Eastern Turkistan Islamic movement, who is responsible for terrorist attacks in Xinjiang province, was reportedly trained in tribal areas along the Af-Pak border. Chinese political elites have come to the conclusion that with the withdrawal of NATO forces, the People's Republic will no longer be able to continue its strategy of "free-riding" on Western security measures in Afghanistan. Unlike India, which has developed a "zero-tolerance" policy towards the Taliban in Afghanistan, China has opted for engaging and cultivating relations with the Taliban. China naively hopes that it can create some form of dialogue with the Taliban, thus preventing them from supporting Uyghur elements in return. The Chinese leadership has gone so far

as to support and court the Jamaat-e-Islami, one of the most influential and potent fundamentalist political parties in Pakistan, which wields considerable influence over several extremist network groups in Afghanistan.

A stable Afghanistan is in China's interest also because this means preventing negative spill-over effects to its bordering Central Asian countries. China has established strong ties to Central Asian countries, as it views these former soviet satellite states as a hub for its energy needs. In order to guarantee the import of oil without having to pass the overcrowded Malacca Strait, China relies on gas and oil imports from Central Asia. Former Chinese Head of Government, Wen Jiabao elucidated the importance of Eurasia to China in the opening session of the second China-Eurasia expo in September of 2012 where he highlighted that Eurasia presented the "Gateway to the West" for China, especially in economic terms. The National People's Congress regards Afghanistan as the much needed land bridge between suppliers and consumers of energy, in addition to generating trade corridors linking Iran eastward to China where it can find new markets it was not able to tap in the past.

Proximity and abundance of natural resources have always framed China's economic activities. And Afghanistan fulfills both criteria. Chinese state companies have been very successful in the past in outbidding western companies especially regarding mineral mines. In 2007, China agreed to invest

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\$3,5 billion in Afghanistan's Aynak copper mines (the second largest unexplored deposit in the world which has the potential to generate \$88 billion over the course of the next 30 years). This deal was the single largest investment in Afghanistan's history. That same year, the United States Geological Survey announced that it had discovered a number of extremely potent mineral mines in Afghanistan. In 2010, it was estimated that the value of these mineral reserves could reach between \$1 trillion and \$3 trillion; a true game-changer for Afghanistan which could become one of the world's largest producers of copper and iron. Further deals have indicated that the investment by the "China Metallurgical (Group) Corporation (MCC) was just one of many steps towards deeper resource exploitation in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, China has not displayed any willingness to engage in nation-building efforts. Beijing seems to be content with securing the country but has not been eager in helping the state and its institutions. China is pursuing that same strategy it currently hold in Africa, that is forging ties with whomever will allow them to tap resources. China will not be a stabilizing force in Afghanistan. As an autocratic regime it would also be ill-equipped to dish out advice. This is a role India will have to play, even if it feels reluctant to do so. Polls from Afghanistan have shown that India has the greatest approval ratings amongst the Afghani population. "Bollywood" films can be bought at every corner in Kabul. India has the "soft power" required to be accepted as a broker for

peace, change and democratic stability in Afghanistan. Without India, the prospects of an Afghan nation steering towards peace will never materialize themselves.

I hope you all enjoy Think South Asia 12 and that it enriches your day in some way or form. Please feel free to contact me at djan@sadf.eu if you wish to comment on our published articles or would like to publish an article* with "Think South Asia" yourself

Yours Truly,
Djan Sauerborn

* The views expressed in the articles are those of the authors and not of SADE. The authors are responsible for the content of their work.

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Sino-Pakistan Relations: Driven by Ambitious Economic Interests against Backdrop of Uncertain Political Stability



Joe Frederick

Assistant Director and Senior Analyst at the UK-based business risk consultancy Drum Cussac

On 17 January, the Islamabad-based Pakistan-China Institute (PCI) released its 2013 Annual Report on the status of Sino-Pakistan relations. The report catalogues the achievements of the year's activities. Notable highlights included the inaugural trilateral dialogue between Afghanistan, China and Pakistan that took place in Beijing in August, jointly organised by the PCI and its counterpart, the China Institute of International Studies.

The hard launch of the report merited the attention of some august personalities, including Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan Sun Weidong and Pakistan Senator Hussain Syed, founder of the PCI. There was also a phalanx of dignitaries, including parliamentarians and ex-diplomats. Ambassador Sun spoke on the occasion, extolling the positives of maintaining cooperative and friendly ties. China's chief diplomat in Pakistan described their relation as 'unique' and one that is 'gaining momentum'. Indeed, those are very appropriate terms for depicting Sino-Pakistan relations.

They are unique in the sense that two Asian states forged from crises in the 20th century have had a partnership

largely built on mutual security concerns over India, especially in their formative years. China and Pakistan have both fought India over contested geographic space on multiple occasions, with the former decisively seizing control of the Himalayan territory of Aksai Chin in 1962. However, Pakistan's official pivot towards China began just over a decade prior when it was one of few states to recognise the People's Republic of China (PRC) soon after its civil war in 1950. India, interestingly enough, recognised the PRC a year before Pakistan.

Ties hardened in the aftermath of the 1962 Sino-Pakistan war when Islamabad officially sanctioned Beijing's sovereign control of Aksai Chin, much to India's annoyance, and entered into a border accord the following year. Pakistan's fortunes have not been as favourable in this context, highlighted significantly by its defeat in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971, which paved the way for the creation of Bangladesh.

Yet, Islamabad and Beijing have converging interests in keeping India in check, at least militarily. Economically, trade has been positive and a critical driver to improving relations among the three but against a backdrop of political

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uncertainties, namely to do with on-going border disputes. Trade between China and India is growing and more than likely to continue on this positive trajectory. In 2000, Sino-Indian trade went from \$3 billion to \$66 billion in 2012. There is a really good reason for this—Beijing views India a less risky option for investment.

Islamabad and New Delhi have, at least on paper, showed willingness to improve trade relations, but in reality practice has been interrupted by a series of security, political and regulatory issues. During the 2012-2013 fiscal year bilateral trade nearly breached \$2.5 billion, which is remarkable. However, it was \$7.5 billion short of the potential trade outcome.

Sino-Pakistan relations are also unique in the sense that they are lopsided. Beijing has always played the role of benefactor, assisting Islamabad with vast amounts of aid. Compared to Pakistan’s other external backer, the United States, Beijing’s aid has always been considerably much less financially and narrowly focussed. Funds have been largely channelled into specific development projects like the Karakoram Highway, the Gwadar deep sea port in Baluchistan, and numerous power-generation initiatives.

China’s economic policies since the 1970s provided a solid platform for growth, enabling it to adopt expansionist behaviour on a global scale that still maintains a steady momentum. For Pakistan, its economy enjoyed relative prosperity during the early years but began to endure significant turbulence

post-Zia ul-Haq. For the past two-and-a-half decades, its economy has been challenged by due to mismanagement, political instability and deep insecurity. Despite this, Beijing has remained committed to buoying Pakistan as it views the South Asian state as a strategic lynchpin in the region and beyond.

Indeed, there have been a series of Chinese-funded projects aimed at ideally mutually benefiting both countries with the most high profile, and costly, revolving around infrastructure improvement, namely those designed to better bilateral trade and energy security. One initiative is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which has gained greater momentum in recent years.

This corridor will be a 2,000-km bi-directional conduit of trade, traversing some hostile and inhospitable territory between the southern port of Gwadar in Baluchistan province and Kashgar in China’s Xinjiang region. New rail and road networks will be constructed along a route that will largely follow the Karakoram Highway—another Chinese-funded project—and will be peppered with industrial nodes and economic zones.

The tangible benefits for Islamabad are evident in that the country will establish new transport and trade infrastructure. There is even discussion on constructing new industrial urban centres, and with this will come the creation of much needed jobs for Pakistanis.

For Beijing, the corridor will provide shorter access to Middle East and

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“Funds have been largely channelled into specific development projects like the Karakoram Highway, the Gwadar deep sea port in Baluchistan.”

Central Asian markets, especially when it comes to oil and gas. Currently, Chinese trade exists along the long and arduous 8,000 km maritime circuit through the Indian Ocean and around the South China Sea, which for Beijing is perceived to be becoming increasingly more politically hostile by states closely allied to the United States. Competition with India is also becoming fiercer.

China has also been contracted to construct two nuclear facilities in Karachi to bolster existing power generation in a country that is deeply affected by energy insecurity. The two ACP-1000 reactors (referred to as K-2 and K-3 locally) are being developed by the China National Nuclear Corporation, and aside from Pakistan, China has never constructed nuclear facilities outside the country. This only highlights the deep partnership shared between Beijing and Islamabad.

The reactors can produce around 1,100 megawatts of power, which will bode well in addressing current deficits. According to a 2013 study by the Institute of Electrical Engineers Pakistan, electricity demand is outpacing supply by a ratio of 10 to 7. Existing infrastructure can produce 17,000 megawatts, which is 5,000 megawatts short of demand. Economically, this is hampering industry. Politically, it is unsettling especially amongst an electorate prone to engaging in public unrest during prolonged outages. Islamabad is keen to see the reactors operational, not only to fulfil their pragmatic applications, but to dampen internal unrest.

Additionally, concerns over the payment of the \$9.6 billion price tag were alleviated when Beijing agreed to lend Islamabad \$6.5 billion with generous repayment terms—Islamabad has the next two decades to pay in full.

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“Sino-Pakistan energy ties will further be strengthened when China constructs two more reactors at the Chashma Nuclear Power Complex in Punjab.”

Energy from these two reactors will be a critical injection of power for southern Sindh, especially for Karachi which is Pakistan’s economic engine and a city constantly at thirst for energy. The ACP-1000 will also serve as a useful marketing exercise for any potential buyers in the Middle East. Ironically, none of these reactors have been built in China. Additionally, Sino-Pakistan energy ties will further be strengthened when China constructs two more reactors at the Chashma Nuclear Power Complex in Punjab—a facility also built with Chinese expertise and finances.

While these initiatives bode well, at least on paper, for Pakistan and China, the negative side, and quite critical, is the security dimension. Pakistan’s insecurity is well documented in public discourse and it is unfortunate that it has a destabilising influence on foreign direct investment. China has also expressed concerns.

Vice Director General of the Department of International Cooperation at the National Development and Reform Commission, Lian Dajian, and Ambassador Sun have expressed concerns over insecurity. In August 2013, Dajian stressed that ‘security issues and challenges could impede the speed of the project.’ A month later at Pakistan’s National Defence University, Ambassador iterated his government’s expectations that Islamabad would safeguard Chinese interests in the country.

Beijing is not paranoid with its concerns nor is it impervious to

Pakistan’s security challenges. In 2004, two Chinese engineers working on the GormalZam hydro-electrical dam were kidnapped by the Tehrki-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in South Waziristan agency. Construction was halted for six years in total. Then in 2007, two Chinese telecommunications engineers were abducted by a faction of the TTP in the Swat Valley.

Security issues would still dog Chinese investment even further, when in 2011 China Kingho Group extricated itself from a \$19 billion energy infrastructure construction deal in Sindh province due to insecurity. That year Pakistan experienced high levels of terrorism activity that accelerated in tempo and increased in lethality after the May death of Osama bin Laden by US Special Forces.

The country still continues on a path defined by this type of insecurity, which is undoubtedly influencing Pakistan’s downward trend of foreign investment. Recent Chinese activity, however, suggests cautious optimism with respect to its intended investment. Beijing is wary, and it is important to note that China’s support to Pakistan is not absolute.

In the 1971 war, Beijing did not come to Pakistan’s aid. And in the aftermath of the 1999 Kargil Conflict between Pakistan and India, the Chinese government deemed the issue a bilateral one. Despite this, Beijing still maintains close ties to Islamabad and likely to do so because it has few friends in the region. Its fear of encirclement by India and US even means that it will

“Its fear of encirclement by India and US even means that it will keep the hermitic and pariah state of North Korea as an ally.”

keep the hermitic and pariah state of North Korea as an ally.

Concerns over Afghanistan will gather greater momentum this year, especially with the upcoming presidential election in April and the anticipated withdrawal of NATO. Pessimistic observers, by which there are many, see Afghanistan falling off the precipice towards failed state status in NATO's absence. This is not appetising for Beijing given that China and Afghanistan share a border along the Wakhan corridor. The threat of militancy could spill over through the Wakhan as well as through Pakistan and Central Asia. Furthermore, China has investments in oil fields in northern Afghanistan and in copper mines south of Kabul. The status of their operations and output are unclear, but these investments would rapidly evaporate in the event that Afghanistan's security and stability nose-dived.

Pakistan's security is intrinsically linked to Afghanistan's, so there efforts will focus on containment and limiting spill over to the tribal areas. Any military engagements risk a profound backlash from Pakistan's indigenous Pashtun population, many of whom now inhabit Karachi—the country's financial engine. Therefore, pursuing the path of dialogue in the Afghan conflict is the way forward, but Islamabad's sincerity may be questionable.

China is demonstrating clear intent to support Pakistan economically, while concurrently executing its strategic calculus on South Asia to strengthen its sphere of influence and addressing more pragmatic economic requirements. This

even entails forging closer economic ties with India. For Pakistan, economic uplift hopefully will translate into improved political and social stability. A stable Pakistan bodes well for business.

China and Pakistan have mutual ambitions and goals with respect to improving the latter's stability, which will be driven by greater trade and economic exchanges. While Ambassador Sun expressed confidence that Sino-Pakistan relations were 'gaining momentum', an important variable for the success of these projects is addressing their security concerns. Failure to do so may halt any meaningful momentum. ■

“Pakistan's security is intrinsically linked to Afghanistan's, so there efforts will focus on containment and limiting spill over to the tribal areas.”

The Golden Dragon in Sonar Bangla: not all that Glitters is Gold



Dr. Siegfried O. Wolf

Director of Research of
South Asia Democratic Forum;
Lecturer in International Relations
and Comparative Politics at the
South Asia Institute, Heidelberg
University, Germany

Sonar Bangla or 'Golden Bangladesh' is not shining that much these days. Overshadowed by numerous months of massive violence which lead to hundreds of deaths and left ten thousands injured, disastrous consequences for the political system and social peace, the near future appears to be rather bleak. The flashpoint was once again the country's traditional rivalry between the two leading political parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in general, and their respective leaders Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia (BNP) in particular. As usual, the catalysts for the persistent political struggle were the general elections, held on 5 January this year. But where the issue of how to ensure free and fair polls is always heavily discussed and has in the past more or less regularly paralyzed the whole country, this time the level of conflict reached a degree which is new in quantitative as well as qualitative terms. Bangladesh did not only experience its bloodiest elections but also witnessed an erosion of its core principles -democracy, secularism and tolerance- which came under attack by fundamentalist and anti-systemic forces. It is out of question that the ongoing political turmoil has a tremendously negative impact on Bangladesh's economy as well.

The prospects seem even grimmer if one takes into account the country's strong dependence on foreign aid. Therefore, the decision of the current government to ignore all advice of numerous foreign observers to call for a new round of elections after the last one was largely boycotted by the oppositional parties was alienated especially the western members of the international community. However, it is unlikely that certain governments might use the option of reducing aid or other benefits in order to apply pressure on the recently established new AL government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Nevertheless, it will help to enforce an already existing strong tendency among Bangladesh's political leadership (both AL and BNP) towards 'diversification' of its foreign policy (the arguments of course are quite different). Besides the deeply entrenched pro-India sentiments within the AL, its leaders are aware of the manifold hurdles within the bilateral relations between Dhaka and New Delhi, for example water issues, illegal migration, cross-border terrorism as well as unsettled border disputes. The BNP, the main antagonist of the AL unsurprisingly was always on the lookout for support and partners from outside its neighborhood. This found its most concrete expression in the so called 'Look East-policy' >>

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of the BNP government in 2002, which aimed at establishing closer ties with countries in South East and East Asia. Consequently, like several other (smaller) states in South Asia, for example Sri Lanka or Nepal, Bangladesh initiated attempts to broaden its international ties. However, usually this process ends up focusing and concentrating on China. Dhaka is no exception, and pushed for a more intense relationship with Beijing. Closer ties with China seemed quite alluring. At a first sight, there is the deep frustration about the political and economic deadlock hampering any noteworthy and sustainable cooperation regarding trade and economic progress in South Asia. Subsequently China with its huge financial investments is being portrayed as an “aviator”, providing the necessary impetus to overcome its own weak economic performance.

Furthermore, it helps the ‘New Delhi critical elements’ within South Asia’s elites to deal with their endemic anxiety of potential Indian domination. Another facet of this very same mindset is marked by a historical insecurity and mistrust towards the role and trustworthiness of the US. Closely linked with this fear is the aim of some politicians in the region to reduce the significance of Washington as the preferred partner. The fact that Beijing supports Bangladesh -officially- unconditionally, at least when it comes to demands for pushing democracy, human rights and good governance, puts China even more in the forefront - compared to partners from the ‘Western liberal democratic sphere’.

But one can’t help but feel that this point of view is based on only short-term opportunities and denies or

“Bangladesh did not only experience its bloodiest elections but also witnessed an erosion of its core principles -democracy, secularism and tolerance.”

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fails to see the dangers of an “carte blanche” cooperation with China. Not only regarding the middle-term consequences for its own economy but also the long term political and social impacts factor in here. This is a phenomenon which one can find increasingly among Bangladesh decision- and opinion makers (especially amongst pro-Beijing leftists within the country’s media), who seem to become more and more enthusiastic about forging ties between Bangladesh and China.

A trend which finds its expression in an rising amount of contracts for exploitation of Bangladesh’s natural resources, related infrastructure projects, and a rise in military-to-military contacts which found its peak in an Defence Cooperation Agreement between both countries in 2002. Despite the absence of typical reasons for bilateral tensions like disputed borders and conflicts over resources and trade (routes), smuggling, illegal immigration, the ‘new’ enthusiastic attitude towards China seems quite surprising, for several reasons.

First, it ignores totally the ambiguous role Beijing played in Bangladesh’s independence movement. There is no doubt that China was more than just ignorant towards the Bangladeshis and their desire for liberation from Pakistan’s occupation. What today is downplayed as ‘initial insensitivity’ was actually a clear negative and deconstructive position of Beijing towards Bangladesh’s liberation. The challenging of the freedom struggle can be identified in the presence

of Chinese personnel supporting projects serving Pakistani interests, for example Chinese training for Pakistani soldiers in guerilla warfare. Also the creation of numerous Pakistan-China friendship societies was supposed to help undermine oppositional forces.. In other words, ‘Beijing’s loyal left’ had to help blunt anti-Islamabad feelings as well as neutralize ideas of autonomy like Mujibhur Rahman’s Six Point formula. At a later stage, these leftists started to give up their resistance against the ‘Six-Points’, but primarily because of improvement of economic conditions of Bangladesh which suffered tremendously under Pakistan’s policy of exploitation. But democracy or far-reaching autonomy was not on the agenda of the pro-Chinese elements. Another historical burden is that there was no Chinese response regarding the Pakistan Army crackdown in March 1971 and the subsequent genocide of Bangladeshi people. Therefore, it does not come by surprise that during the liberation war it became obvious that ‘Beijing leftists’ were largely convinced that the Bangladeshi freedom struggle is not a ‘real revolutionary liberation war’ rather a secessionist movement inspired by imperialistic influence originating from the India-Soviet Axis. Consequently many of the pro-China elements were not only hostile against Pakistan forces but also carried out militant activities against the Freedom Fighters (Mukti Bahini, also Liberation Army).

By assessing the initial conditions of ties between Dhaka and Beijing one has also to remember that after the

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victorious freedom struggle, China refused to recognize Bangladesh as an independent state and opposed Bangladesh's entry into the United Nations. In line with this critical view on Bangladesh, in the initial crucial years of Bangladeshi state-building China showed no interest in establishing diplomatic relations. Only after pro-Indian Mujibhur Rahman, also known as Bangabandhu (the father of the nation) was assassinated by soldiers in a coup d'état, did China start to build up friendly ties with the newly established military regime in 1975. Subsequently Beijing recognized Bangladesh and established a diplomatic mission. As such, China must be seen as a disturbing factor in Bangladesh's initial period with negative impacts on the country's future political trajectories. First of all, through China's pro-Pakistan policy (support for the one-unit approach), its aim to contain India and the Soviet Union as well as not to risk the emergence of a new US-China rapprochement (facilitated by Pakistan), Beijing contributed partly to the decision of the international community (besides India) to not intervene in order to stop the mass killings of Bangladeshis at the hands of Pakistani soldiers. Second, Chinese support for leftist elements in Bangladesh helped to destabilize the Mujibur government. Bangladesh at that time had to use coercive force to disarm and suppress militant activities of the leftists.

The latter is also responsible for the strengthening of the armed forces, which were sidelined by Mujibhur's

government because of his mistrust towards regular armed forces. This marks the fourth critical implication of China's earliest activities: it enhanced the tensions within the country's civil-military relations, especially through its support and close cooperation with Bangladesh's military regimes. In consequence, Beijing's strategy towards Bangladesh hampered the process of democratic consolidation. Fifth, China's role did not only lead to a continuation of violence but also enforced factionalism and polarization within the state and society in Bangladesh. The Chinese fueled the rising conflict between the AL with its pro-India, pro-Soviet, secular and army-critical views and the BNP being on the opposite side of political-ideological continuum but more in line with the Chinese interests. However, today one has to state that both parties are opening up for new foreign policy options which clearly include China.

There is also an additional reason why one should be skeptical towards any form of ecstatic mood with regards to Bangladesh-China ties. Because some Bangladesh politicians do not take into account the enormous threat of rising influence of Beijing in Dhaka. In order to get out of the Indian orbit Bangladesh is potentially moving straight into a complex matrix of economic and political linkages which will further deeply entrench new dependencies. In other words, China is expanding its leverage in Bangladesh to be able to exercise power to control the country's political decision-making processes. There are

“Beijing’s strategy towards Bangladesh hampered the process of democratic consolidation.”

“Beijing’s strategy towards Bangladesh hampered the process of democratic consolidation.”

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already several indications quite from the start of official diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and China which demonstrate the validity of this subversive “strong-arming”.

In 1978, as then Bangladesh’s Foreign Secretary S.A.M.S. Kibria was attempting to establish relations with Vietnam which alienated China which had a tense relationship with Hanoi to say the least. In order to please Beijing, which was miffed about Dhaka’s ‘autonomous move’, Bangladesh explicitly supported the Chinese position in the Vietnam-Cambodia conflict. Dhaka condemned the Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia which led to an end of the terror regime of Pol Pot and its Khmer Rouge which were responsible for one of the most traumatic genocides in mainland Southeast Asia. This was a quite surprising act for a country which had at the time just recently experienced genocide with 3 million victims.

Another remarkable case for the high leverage of China over Bangladesh’s internal relations is the case of the opening of a Taiwanese office in Dhaka in 2004. Basically this facility was supposed to function as a center aimed at promoting trade. However, in Taiwan it was portrayed as an official representation, which was able to carry out consular functions including the issuing of visas. In China’s view this was seen as a provocation and as a ‘turning away’ of Bangladesh’s support for Beijing’s ‘one-China-policy’. In order to bring Bangladesh back in line with

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the national interests of China, Beijing started applying pressure on Dhaka. In consequence, the Taiwanese office was 'downgraded' and strictly advised to function only as a 'business office'. In this context, it is also noteworthy, that the respective authority responsible for the opening of the office, who was nothing less than the then Minister of Commerce Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury, resigned. Furthermore, the government of Bangladesh ensured the Chinese authorities that it will continue to oppose Taiwan's membership in any regional and international organization which would confirm the status of being a sovereign country. Both cases - Vietnam and Taiwan - are not only manifestations of severe and effective intrusion into Bangladesh's foreign policy and in the country's political-administrative structure but also challenged the country's sovereignty.

In sum, there is the eminent threat that Bangladesh's political elite is not paying enough attention towards the larger strategic interests of China, namely to gain leverage in their country. It would be futile if Dhaka continued to ignore the tremendous imbalance in power with regards to China for the sake of outweighing asymmetries with India. Trying to play the China card against New Delhi by all means only leads to a limitation of Bangladesh's room to maneuver on the international stage. This is gaining more significance since the highly political sensitive and active people of Bangladesh are much aware of the traumatic events and international

constellations during their struggle for independence. Any further growth of Chinese influence in Bangladesh's future fortune and at the same time ignoring of Beijing's historical burdens might further entrench the political and social conflict and fragmentation in the country. Even if the 'Golden Dragon' glitter seems appealing, it will not help make 'Golden Bengal' shinier. The legacy of Bangladesh-China relations makes it clear - all is not gold that glitters! ■

China's full SAARC-membership: An Indian Debate



Bernard Beitelmaier
South Asia Democratic Forum
Fellow

“SAARC with the only partial exception of BIMSTEC has so far remained the exclusive instrument of institutionalized multilateralism in South Asia.”

SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation), though primarily known for its shortcomings, has been the only intergovernmental organisation that at least tries to mend the many socio-political fault lines of the region.

While it has been held captive to the ongoing attempts by its smaller members to bandwagon against actual and perceived Indian preponderance and hegemonic aspirations, SAARC with the only partial exception of BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) (India is attempting to build a regional forum without the participation of Pakistan) has so far remained, since its foundation in 1985 on a Bangladeshi proposal, the exclusive instrument of institutionalized multilateralism in South Asia .

Since 2005 the “China-card” regularly played to balance India in bilateral relations by countries such as Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and even Sri Lanka and the Maldives has entered the multilateral framework of SAARC.

At the 13th SAARC summit (the meeting of the heads of state or government) in 2005 in Dhaka, India was all set to grant membership to Afghanistan as SAARC's eighth member so the move by Nepal to link Afghanistan's membership to China's quest for observer status came as a rude

shock to India. Though New Delhi had been aware of China's intentions to play a more active role in South Asia, the linkage of Afghanistan's membership to China's entry to SAARC demonstrated impressively China's rising diplomatic and economic clout in the region.

India has long believed South Asia to be its sphere of influence (even showing implicit hegemonic aspirations like its “Indira-doctrine”) and considered SAARC as a South Asian organization with common problems of poverty, unemployment and slow economic development. The region was seen to be bound by common culture and common aspirations.

China's request for becoming an observer country was supported by all smaller members of SAARC, hence India was persuaded to show a certain degree of generosity. It gained observer status in the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) and indulged in what could be regarded as an expansion spree by granting observer status to the United States, Australia, and Japan to name but a few, creating one of the rare international organisation with more observers than actual members.

There are sufficient reasons for China itself to be present in SAARC as South Asia is a volatile region with possible spill-over effects which could potentially impact China. Besides bordering with five SAARC members, China is

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troubled by the disturbance and attacks made by Xinjiang and Tibetan groups, most of who take shelter and seek sanctuaries in South Asia.

Therefore, China's South Asia policy is committed to safe guarding the stability and development of China's South Western frontier region, the stable supply of strategic resources, the security of energy trade and SLOCs (Sea Lines of Communication), and South Asian stability in general with a view to avoiding involvement into any regional strategic conflict. So in yet another manoeuvre to counterbalance India's dominance Nepal and Pakistan launched an initiative to finally grant China full-membership status of SAARC at the 16th summit in Thimphu in 2010. India immediately vetoed China's accession attempt by referring to the provision of unanimity provided by the SAARC charter despite China's incentive of supporting India's full SCO membership.

As a compromise India in 2011 at the 17th SAARC summit in Addu proposed to include China as a dialogue partner in form of a so called 'eight-plus one' structure- eight full-fledged members with one dialogue partner. If granted the status of dialogue partner, China would be able to participate in all discussions and dialogues and also put forth its views on issues of discussion. However, it would not be granted voting power.

But contrary to having the issue off the table India still faces the smaller states' support for China's formal inclusion into South Asian regional cooperation;

a preference again made visible by Pakistan's renewed effort at the 18th summit in 2011 to set the China issue on the agenda.

This kind of stalemate has triggered a scholarly and partly public debate in India on the pros and cons of a further enlargement especially with regards to China. The participants like S.D. Muni, Sujit Dutta, Smruti S. Pattanaik, Moonis Ahmar, Chintamani Mahapatra, Sreeradha Datta, Swaran Sing, and Sanjay Baru can be grouped as supporters and opponents.

Articulate members of the opponent's category, for example S.D. Muni, Sujit Dutta, Smruti S. Pattanaik, Moonis Ahmar argue that China is culturally and historically not connected with South Asia, furthermore China's entry would make SAARC more dysfunctional in terms of power politics as "triangulation" between India, China and Pakistan would continue, while existing military ties with other SAARC members would be facilitated and expanded; New Delhi would still be confined to the region as a second class power.

Another argument against Chinese involvement points to an imbalance in terms of economic dominance of China, the yawning trade deficit for example is a matter of concern for countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

Supporters, however, argue that the economy or even democracy should not be regarded as a criterion for the membership of SAARC. As it was General Zia ur Rahman, president of

"China's request for becoming an observer country was supported by all smaller members of SAARC."

"China is culturally and historically not connected with South Asia, furthermore China's entry would make SAARC more dysfunctional in terms of power politics as "triangulation" between India, China and Pakistan."

"In the beginning, the organisation had two monarchs from Nepal and Bhutan, two military dictators from Pakistan and Bangladesh, and one authoritarian ruler from the Maldives, apart from India and Sri Lanka which were democracies at the time."

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“With the debate on a possible upgrade of China’s observer status in SAARC India has arrived at a critical juncture in its relations with this already risen power.”

Bangladesh, who had initiated regional cooperation as a part of his strategy to diversify Bangladesh’s Indo-centric foreign policy after Sheikh Mujib’s assassination. In the beginning, the organisation had two monarchs from Nepal and Bhutan, two military dictators from Pakistan and Bangladesh, and one authoritarian ruler from the Maldives, apart from India and Sri Lanka which were democracies at the time.

India’s concerns regarding China’s disruptive role in SAARC, are seldom shared by any of the smaller members instead they share a positive perception of a rising China acting as a South Asian power.

Nishchal Nath Pandey, for example, advocates strongly for Chinese membership at SAARC. “I don’t think

it is prudent to call China an ‘outside power’; they are also making in-roads in South Asia just like India has begun implementing its Look East policy. China has good relations with each of the SAARC countries, and its trade volume and interactions at all levels with all countries of SAARC have been increasing. In fact, for the bilateral trade to reach \$100 billion, Nepal could be developed as a transit state between the rising economic giants of Asia. Increasing connectivity between North India and Tibet via Nepal will prove a worthwhile venture for Indian goods to make use of the Shigatse – Lhasa– Golmud railway straight into the Chinese mainland. India should show its strength and demonstrate confidence regarding China’s entry into SAARC instead of fear and anxiety.” With the debate on a possible upgrade of China’s observer status in SAARC

India has arrived at a critical juncture in its relations with this already risen power – a situation grasped by the statement of former US-President Bill Clinton “Engaging with your adversary is not endorsement”. An unconventional and confident approach still coupled with the real risk of losing further influence would be to give up the notion of South Asia as India’s “near-abroad” or backyard thereby breaking free from some of its geo-strategic implications and related Chinese leverages. ■



Astrid Holzinger
Researcher at Wikistrat,
Contributor at the
International Security Observer

China's military modernization and technological advancements

Is being an economic power a determinant for becoming a military power? China is the second largest economy in the world in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) and purchasing power parity (PPP), the world's largest exporter and second largest importer of goods, an increasingly important foreign direct investor, and enjoyed an economic growth of 7-14% in recent years. Proportionately to its economic growth China's national defence budget has also increased by 500% in real terms since 1995 and by 175% since 2003, making China the second biggest military spender in the world after the United States. In 2013 China's official military budget was 114.3 billion US-Dollar, a number that according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) is estimated to be a third higher than officially claimed.

Despite today's large military spending, it was not until the beginning of the twenty-first century that China's military modernization re-emerged as a national priority. From the 70s until the 90s China's military build-up was subordinated to the central task of fostering economic development. At the 16th CPC National Congress in

2002 the former Secretary General of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Jiang Zemin declared that China shall 'push forward the modernization of national defense and the army on the basis of economic growth'. Since then China has devoted considerable efforts to the modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), with the aim to accomplish the dual historic tasks of military mechanization and full IT application.

Following the strategic military guideline to 'win local wars under the conditions of informationization', the People's Liberation Army has undergone substantial transformations. Two decades ago China's military power relied mainly on extensive manpower. Today the PLA is still the largest army in the world with an estimate of 2.3 million in personnel but its focus and strengths lie elsewhere. In order to account for the requirements of modern warfare China has reduced numbers in military personnel and obsolete equipment, strengthened strategic planning and management, adjusted its military structure and organization, and reformed military training and education. Large investments in the procurement and development of high technology weaponry and equipment

"It was not until the beginning of the twenty-first century that China's military modernization re-emerged as a national priority."

“In November 2013 Beijing successfully tested its first stealth combat drone the Sharp Sword.”



as well as in innovative defence-oriented research have increased the effectiveness of PLA's land, air, naval, and missile forces.

According to the latest report of the US Department of Defense regarding the military developments of China the PLA Navy has the largest force of combatants, submarines and amphibious warfare ships in Asia, including diesel and nuclear-powered submarines, modern surface ships, and the refurbished aircraft carrier Liaoning, which is less advanced than its American or Japanese counterparts but can be seen as a symbol of China's evolving maritime power. The PLA Air Force consists of a growing number of fourth generation aircraft fighters and fifth generation fighters

are currently under development that incorporate stealth and low-observable technologies such as the J-20 and J-31, while the PLA's Second Artillery consists of a diverse range of short to long-range cruise and ballistic missiles, including anti-ship variants, which are comparable with those of top-tier producers. These advancements allow the PLA to conduct a wide range of military tasks while expanding its operational reach beyond its borders. Among the most recent technological breakthroughs that have gained wide attention from experts and media is China's indigenous development of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). In November 2013 Beijing successfully tested its first stealth combat drone the Sharp Sword, a military milestone that has so far only been achieved >>

“China is largely dependent on foreign technology imports from Russia.”

by three other nations; namely the United States, France and Great Britain. The potential use of the Sharp Sword for an air-to-ground strike also signals that China has made the step from surveillance, intelligence and reconnaissance drones to combat drones. Apart from that China has achieved another military milestone in January 2014 by testing a hypersonic missile vehicle, capable of travelling between 5 to 10 times the speed of sound and delivering a nuclear warhead. Most significantly China is the second country after the US that has tested this technology capable of penetrating advanced missile defence systems.

These substantial technological and military advancements have put China on track to become a modern military power. However, there are still many challenges lying ahead. Previous decades of low and insufficient military spending are still being compensated for and the technology gap between China and major military powers remains visible. The level of military modernization in Chinese air and maritime forces for example does not yet match up with those of the US in terms of technology and combat capability. In addition there is a clear need for China to enhance its independent innovation of defence-related research and technology. China is largely dependent on foreign technology imports from Russia in areas such as high-performance engines, micro processors or guidance

and control systems, and some of its recent advancements appear to be the result of reversed engineering rather than home-based innovation.

In sum, China will have to overcome some obstacles until it reaches the status of a major military power but the outlook is promising. China's military has modernized more rapidly than in the past and its blooming economy is sustaining the increase in national defence spending, while military powers such as the US, Japan or the UK are suffering from major spending cuts as a consequence of the economic crisis. Moreover Chinese leaders, as expressed in a statement by former General Secretary Hu Jintao, are determined to underpin the country's status of an emerging economic and political power by 'building strong national defence and powerful armed forces which are commensurate with China's international standing'. Consequently China's goal of becoming a major military power in the years to come is a real and realistic prospect. ■

“Military powers such as the US, Japan or the UK are suffering from major spending cuts as a consequence of the economic crisis.”

Brothers in Arms? China's Military Relationship with Sub-Saharan Africa



Theodore Bachrach

Writer and Editor for
The International Security Observer
and works in UK Parliament

“China’s expansion in military spending is a neorealist bi-product of the economic expansion.”

The numbers speak for themselves. Between 2000 and 2010 China’s defence budget spending rose from over \$30 billion to almost \$120 billion. This is according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), who The Economist points out ‘usually adds about 50% to the official figure that China gives for its defence spending’. The estimated figure SIPRI gives for 2012: \$166 billion, a 175% increase since 2003 landing China firmly in second place in the global league of military expenditure. USA remains in number one with expenditure of \$682 billion. By contrast the entire bloc of nations that make up Sub-Saharan Africa spent an estimated \$22.7 billion on military expenditure in 2012, just over one percent of the global total.

China’s expansion in military spending is a neorealist bi-product of the economic expansion, if not transformation, the country has gone through since the turn of the century. Again the numbers speak for themselves: a GDP of \$1.1 trillion in 2000 grew to \$8.2 trillion in 2012 according to the World Bank. As China has grown as a power it has sought to also build alliances with regional blocs outside of Asia. With the eyes of the West focusing on the

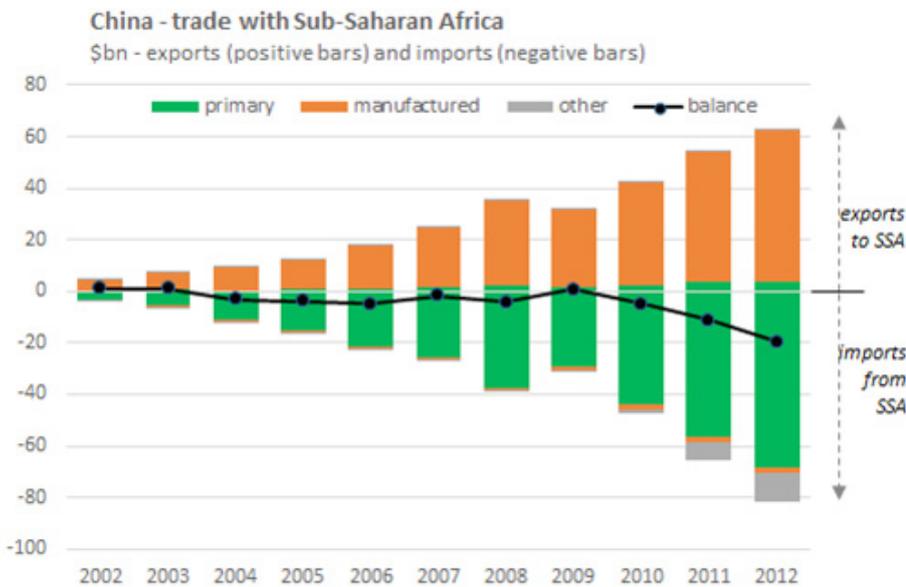
Middle East in the early 2000’s China focused on deepening the economic and political ties it had been building with Africa since the mid 1990’s. Catalyzed by Western condemnation of China for the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989 China sought new allies more in line with its own views of state governance many of which were found in 1990’s Sub-Saharan Africa. The plan has been a success. China has become a significantly more important trading partner over the past decade. In 2002, it accounted for 3.6% of all SSA’s exports; by 2012, the figure had reached 19%. There is a clear disparity in what one side is trading with the other as the 2013 UN Conference on Trade and Development figures show. Namely, one side exports manufactured goods to a growing market with increasing spending power as the other exports primary resources to a growing market with rapidly increasing fuel consumption demands.

China as Arms Exporter

The rise in China’s wealth has allowed it to seek security, the highest end for states. Today, China’s army, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), is still the largest army on earth with an active force of around 2.3 million personnel

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“New relationship with China actually perpetuates the economically exploitative trade relationships Sub-Saharan Africa had with previous colonialist masters .”

possessing nuclear capability, a modern air force consisting of drones, stealth fighter jets and domestically built J-16 fighter jets, Navy air-craft carriers and various earth and space based missile defence systems. China is also now a major global arms exporter though it does not produce official Government records of its Arms export activity. In March 2013 SIPRI announced China had become the fifth largest global exporters of arms. Between 2008-2012 it supplied 5 per cent of the world's major conventional weapons which placed it behind the US (30 per cent), Russia (26 per cent), Germany (7 per cent) and France (6 per cent). SIPRI point out that the volume of Chinese exports of major conventional weapons rose by 162 per cent between 2003-

2007 and 2008-2012, increasing from 2 to 5 per cent. Its arms exporter relationship with Sub-Saharan Africa had changed substantially during this time as well.

The table below from a SIPRI report titled 'China's Exports of Small Arms and Light Weapons' indicates that between 1996 and 2010 China went from the fourth biggest exporter of arms to sub-Saharan Africa to the biggest, with its 'market share' increasing during that period from 4% to 25%.

The largest recipient of arms between 2006-2010 is Nigeria (35%) with the fifteen other recipients including; Congo (Republic of), Gabon, Niger and Zimbabwe. The noticeable rise in arms trade activity has fallen into a wider narrative on the Sino-Africa

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Rank	1996 – 2000		2001 – 2005		2006 – 2010	
	Exporter	Share	Exporter	Share	Exporter	Share
1	Russia	31	Russia	51	China	25
2	Belarus	12	China	9	Ukraine	20
3	Ukraine	8	Ukraine	7	Russia	11
4	China	6	Moldova	5	Italy	6
5	Slovakia	6	Bulgaria	5	South Africa	5
6	Bulgaria	5	Belarus	4	Belarus	4
7	Canada	4	Israel	2	Moldova	4
8	United States	3	United States	2	Jordan	3
9	Italy	2	Italy	1	United States	3
10	Spain	2	Slovakia	1	Singapore	3
	Others	21	Others	13	Others	16

“These trades demonstrate that whilst wishing to trade China is in no rush to offer the advanced military capabilities it possesses to ‘allies’ in the region.”

relationship namely is it ‘helping or hurting’. The basic argument here is that the new relationship with China actually perpetuates the economically exploitative trade relationships Sub-Saharan Africa had with previous colonialist masters and does not allow SSA to diversify away from commodities industries which are highly vulnerable to market shocks and wars over control. A Washington Post article in 2012 said China was ‘flooding Sub-Saharan Africa with cheap assault rifled and ammunition’. Similarly in 2006 Denis Tull in one of the first major pieces on the Sino-African relationship summarises that by dispensing soft loans as well as arms deliveries Beijing is ‘seeking to cultivate the favour of governments in oil-producing states’. China has sometimes not helped itself in the PR elements of its arms trade activity blocking the release of a U.N. report of illicit arms transfers,

stopping the reappointment of an arms expert (Holger Anders) who uncovered Chinese weapons and seeking to restrict the U.N.’s budget funding arms trade investigations.

Under close investigation though China is not hugely transforming the military capability of the states it deals with. SIPRI point out that 27 of the 91 combat aircraft imported by Sub-Saharan African states during 2006-2010 were new F-7MG aircraft from China, one of the least advanced new combat aircraft available. It also supplied 18 K-8 trainer/light combat aircraft that was designed in the 1980’s. That is not to downplay the killing capabilities of the arms traded. One of China’s major exports to Nigeria was a production line for 7.62mm ammunition which can be used in, amongst others, AK-47 assault rifles and RPD machine guns. It also sold

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to Nigeria the machinery necessary for making the OBJ-006, the Nigerian equivalent of the Kalashnikov rifle. These trades demonstrate that whilst wishing to trade China is in no rush to offer the advanced military capabilities it possesses to 'allies' in the region. China is clear that it seeks to avoid conflict and focus on peaceful development. The focus on China's military rise and arms trading obscures other, softer, parts of China's relationship with Africa most notably its distinctly Chinese aid relationship. At the same time China is selling guns to Africa it is also; sending Chinese Medical Teams (CMTs) which have worked in 44 African countries, offering training and scholarships to African students for Chinese universities, sending youth volunteers, canceling debt, turnkey (complete) infrastructure projects, 'aid-in-kind' and technical assistance for projects which span from financial to agricultural. These sorts of activities may not sound particularly new; but they are for China.

It is not clear where China's military relationship with Africa will go as China does not openly state its military plans or publish records of activity. Time Magazine's Joshua Cooper-Ramo stated in 2004 what stills largely holds true today that when prognosticating on the plans China has for its military. 'China's complexity, its impenetrability, its more than occasional protective dishonesty all conspire to condemn most analysts to the fate marked by

Einstein: our theories shape what we observe'. China, to maintain its level of growth, is clearly in need of resources but to sign off the military trade activity as another component of a thinly veiled attempt to gain access to resources is to simplify the intentions of a smarter, leaner Chinese military transformed since the start of the century. Instead observers would be well served to see the military trade through a larger pattern of activity including debt-cancellation, 'no-strings-attached' infrastructure projects and co-operation in multilateral organisations such as the IMF and UN. These activities allow China to maintain what its economic growth has afforded it: act as a major global power and an alternative to the West for African states. ■

“China's complexity, its impenetrability, its more than occasional protective dishonesty all conspire to condemn most analysts to the fate marked by Einstein: our theories shape what we observe.”

Censorship, dissidence and state writership in China: Literary autonomy in the case of Mo Yan



Jan Knobloch

Freelance Journalist for Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung; MA student of European Literatures, Research Assistant and Tutor in Literary Theory at Humboldt University, Berlin.

“The party still reserves the right to decide about what comes in and what doesn’t.”

On a press conference in January, the Chinese minister of culture Cai Wu compared China’s cultural security to an open window. If one didn’t pay attention, the minister said, not only fresh air, but also flies and mosquitos might enter. He then went on to say that these enemy forces would have to be resisted. Although the distinction between cultural products that are seen as mere ventilation and the ones that amount to unpleasant insects is not as clear cut anymore as it was in the Mao days (Cai outed himself as a fan of thirty year old japanese and corean TV-shows, while the Backstreet Boys are banned from chinese websites), the party still reserves the right to decide about what comes in and what doesn’t.

When China embraced the concept of a culture industry about ten years ago, party officials targeted its output to account for five percent of GDP in 2016. This is not likely going to be the case. The urge to establish a high-octane cultural sector as a “pillar of the national economy” (Cai) still prevails, though. Primarily, this is not about the economy, but an effort to strengthen China’s soft power. While transforming public cultural institutions like operas and publishing houses into marked-based enterprises, the official discourse stresses that culture is never only a commodity,

but also a carrier of tradition and ideology that improves people’s lives. As one can see, the borders between culture and power discourse have become very blurry. “Flowers of War”, a hollywood-like movie production with an estimated budget of 94 million dollar starring Christian Bale is a prime example of this phenomenon, communicating a Chinese perspective on World War II to a worldwide audience. In American theaters however, the movie was a colossal flop in 2012.

Another Chinese cultural export made the headlines later that year though, when writer Mo Yan was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. How avidly this was seen as a new measure for international recognition in the People’s Republic can not be overestimated. Since the opening politics of the 1980s, China had developed what commentators called a “Nobel complex” – a collective obsession with the prize, especially in literature, which seemed to promise a postmaterial catharsis for the whole nation, the cleansing of a continuing inferiority complex by referendum. Over the years, the subject became an official policy issue. Articles and conferences started popping up, official delegations to Sweden were launched and there even was a science program on Chinese state television called “How far

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are we from a Nobel Prize?” What the authorities readily ignored, of course, was that the prize is given to individuals, not to nations. And although there had been some laureates in the past, none of them were to the taste of Beijing. Eight Chinese had won Nobel Prizes in the natural sciences, all of them either citizens of western countries or of Taiwan. Peace Prize winners Liu Xiaobo and the Dalai Lama are steely critics of the regime, Liu still being in prison today. And when by then french citizen Gao Xingjian received the Nobel in Literature in 2000, chinese authorities dismissed the Swedish Academy as “a small clique of so-called literary experts who harbor extremely unhealthy attitudes toward the Chinese people.”

The 2012 decision made officials recalibrate this discourse. Xinhua exulted that, at last, a “mainstream” Chinese was awarded the prize. A week later it was announced that Mo Yan’s home village Gaomi, where all his novels take place, was supposed to be transformed into a “Mo Yan Culture Experience Zone”. Fans and local officials poured into his father’s vegetable garden, telling him that his son was no longer his son (and his house no longer his house), but the pride of China.

A vivid controversy in and outside the country ensued about whether Mo deserved the price or not. International responses were mixed: Proponents like the Japanese Nobel laureate Kenzaburô Ôe or German writer Martin Walser stressed the aesthetic value of his works as well as his balanced portrayal of armed disputes between Japan and China. Walser even called him the

“most important writer of our age” and put him on the same level as William Faulkner. Especially inside the country commentators framed his persona as the agent of the “New China“, a propaganda term for the time under communist rule, stressing he had a broad audience of readers in all social classes. Others, like contemporary artist Ai Weiwei, criticised the decision, saying Mo was too close to the party’s line to develop a sovereign voice, lacked political dedication and showed no respect for the independence of intellectuals inside the country. Nobel literature prize winner of 2009 Herta Müller called the decision a “catastrophe”. With her remarks, Müller, who addresses her suffering under the Rumanian secret police Securitate in her own novels, spearheaded those who see Mo as an accomplice in China’s sophisticated censorship system.

There are two main incidents in Mo’s past which have sparked this discontent. The first one refers to a scene at the 2009 Frankfurt Book Fair when China was invited as the guest country. When opposition writers Dai Qing and Bei Ling unexpectedly showed up at a symposium, Mo left the room together with the official chinese delegation. After the incident, he told reporters he didn’t have a choice. He was part of a delegation, he said, not a private guest, and received a salary and health insurance via the Ministry of Culture. “This is the reality in China. Abroad, everybody has their own insurances. Without a job, I can’t afford to get sick in China”, Mo said. Secondly, and weighing in even more heavily in the eyes of critics like Herta Müller, together with ninety-nine other authors Mo

“As one can see, the borders between culture and power discourse have become very blurry.”

“What the authorities readily ignored, of course, was that the prize is given to individuals, not to nations.”

“Ai Weiwei, criticised the decision, saying Mo was too close to the party’s line to develop a sovereign voice.”

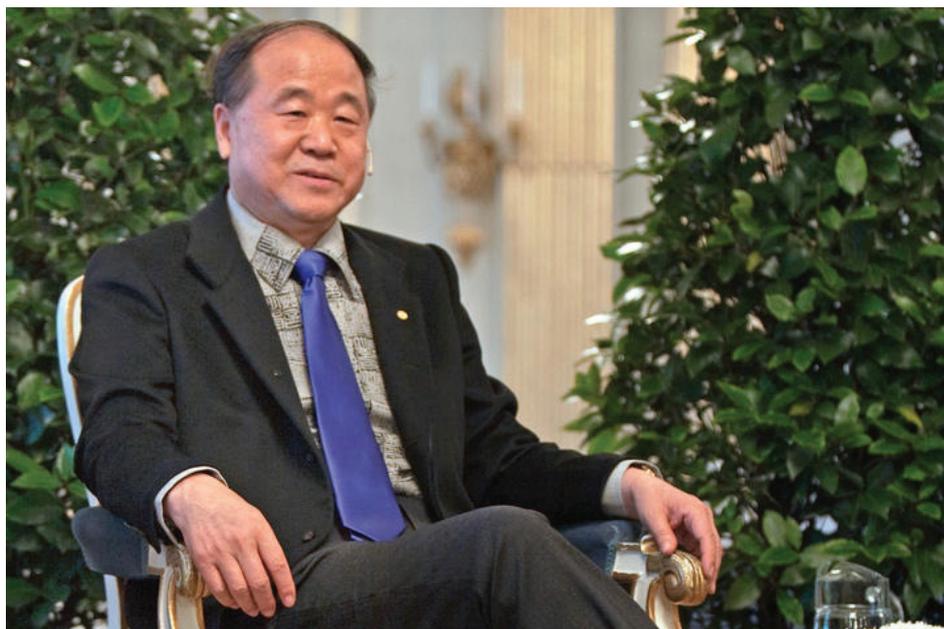
copied one page of Mao’s 1942 “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art” for its 70th anniversary. In these “talks”, Mao demands writers and artists to support the cause of the party with their work and firmly establishes the priority of politics over culture and freedom of expression. Proletarian literature and art become, after Mao, the “cogs and wheels in the whole revolutionary machine”.

These incidents are crucial because they lie right at the heart of the dilemma every Chinese artist has to face if he decides not to go into exile. The reasons for staying in the country are manifold and can be very different from acquiescence with the regime. Writers are not political activists. Mo Yan is the vice president of the China Writers Association, and has been awarded the Mao Dun Literature Prize by this very same organization. He has done what is not an easy thing to do for a writer who maintains respect for

his own craft: arranged a modus vivendi with a repressive regime and found a zone in between dedicated exile-literature and the depleted existence of a state writer where he feels he can work. Practices like copying the Yan’an talks could be filed as trivial formalities, then, basic patterns of relationship management, patronage and group loyalty that become meaningless in a state where everybody knows that public patriotic rituals are created by these pressure forces. His readers, one might argue, know he is not a fanboy of Mao’s censorship monologue. But that might be lazy thinking, too. Just how far did the mechanisms of repression penetrate Mo’s art, commentators asked? To see that this question, in its presupposed causality, is a stark oversimplification itself, we must take a look at Mo’s written word. It might be worth noting that by doing this, we are moving to a subject which, in the midst of all the vigorous discussions about

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“The reasons for staying in the country are manifold and can be very different from acquiescence with the regime.”



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the prize, faded more and more to the background. As Charles Laughlin notes, Professor of East Asian Studies at the University of Virginia, a lot of observers evaluated Mo by the criteria of the Peace Prize, “as a public intellectual, and for his contribution to the advancement of humanity”, and not by his literary achievements which form the criteria for the Prize in Literature.

Following the Swedish Academys formula, Mo Yans style has often been labeled “hallucinatory realism”: an earthy, raw and sometimes grotesque realism coalesced with fantastic and satiric elements which incorporate Chinese oral traditions and tropes as well as 20th century history. The stage of these tales, his hometown village Gaomi in the north-eastern province Shandong, in the words of his translator Howard Goldblatt becomes “a metaphor for the fate of China”. And still, what we see is not a micro-macro-relationship in which the village microcosm becomes an easily derivable representation of the whole state. Mo’s style is too multifarious for that. By assembling a kaleidoscopic array of voices and perspectives, it subverts Politburo-style language conventions that engulf in illusory objectivity. This aesthetic program complicates the task of state censorship, making use of a specifically literary approach to the world that evades a clear mapping of right or wrong, good or evil. God is dead – not only in the occident. Western commentators therefore often call Mo’s works “postmodern”, citing Faulkner, Garcia Marquez or Kafka as influences. Although in his early years at the People’s Liberation Army he openly tried to imitate these writers, Mo himself

concedes not to have read an awful lot of it. Influenced rather by storytellers from his childhood days like his grandfather, a travelling herbalist from whom he says to have memorised about 300 stories, some of them incorporated into his work, Mos intertextual and sometimes episodic approach also makes him appear as a cultural conservator in the eyes of Chinese readers.

In most of his books, Mo Yan sides with poor farm workers and people at the bottom of society. In the satirical *The Republic of Wine* (1992) for example, a special envoy is investigating a far off city where corrupt party officials are supposed to feast on little children. Episodically, the plot is paused, and we read letters by a young literate who requests artistic guidance from a master of the craft called “Mo Yan”. In 18th and 19th century literature, such mentor figures were often used as persons of authority, delivering orientation on inner-fiction value systems and persuading the reader of a clear moral standpoint. It is especially revealing that Mo Yans self-reflexive mentor takes up a more ambiguous stance: He tells his disciple in waiting that in publishing; there are only two criteria, ideological and aesthetic ones. “I never understood either one of them. And I mean that”, he goes on to say, and forwards the received texts to the publishers of the “Peoples Literature”. We, as readers, are confronted with a self-deprecating *mise-en-scène* of an authors (Mo Yans?) inability to develop clear guidelines for action under censorship, morally, artistically, and politically.

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“Can we demand more historical accuracy from a writer, just because he comes from a country headed by a repressive regime?”

“Sun diagnoses Chinese language as severely damaged by Maoism, thereby determining people’s cognitive categories.”

In German press, fears that by reading Mo Yan we might be consuming thoughts of a state poet were dispersed when his latest novel *Frog* (2009) came out in a translated version in 2013. The book, not yet published in English, deals with the emotional scars the one-child policy has left the country with. When a rough, crudely-humoured midwife that has helped give birth to as well as aborted thousands of babies is attacked by hordes of frogs at a nightly pond, Mo’s hallucinatory realism sharpens instead of blurs the critical potential of his scenery. The graphic characters for frog and baby are pronounced equally in Chinese, the croaking becomes a cacophony of screams of unborn babies. The phantasma here creates a visible imaginary for the usually invisible consequences of a government policy. Not even the first person narrator himself is spared of the terror, when his young wife dies during a forced abortion. In an interview with the German magazine *Spiegel*, Mo admitted that this storyline had an autobiographical background: He himself too had made his wife have an abortion for the sake of his career, he said, conceding what should later hit the headlines: “I am guilty.”

Thorough critics still maintain that Mo’s treatment of these topics remains flawed, though. Perry Link, one of the premier scholars on modern Chinese literature and Chinese language in the western world, argues that today the one child policy is criticised by government officials themselves. As Mo’s critique stays limited to local targets but never blames the entire political system, Link says, Mo plays into the hands of

Politburo tactics. Pointing at local abuses to excuse people’s misery keeps the top men far from the line of fire. Link also accuses Mo of smoothing the edges of history by enveloping particularly severe and politically sensitive stretches of the Chinese past in an archaically rustic cynicism, for which he coined the term “daft hilarity”. “For the regime, to treat [national catastrophes] as jokes might be better than banning them outright”, Link says.

In his *Poetics* Aristotle famously, in opposition to his teacher Plato’s critique of fiction, says that the poet’s task is not to inform about what happened, but about what might happen. More than 2300 years later, this postulation of artistic autonomy in its cautious formulation can still distinguish spirits. Can we demand more historical accuracy from a writer, just because he comes from a country headed by a repressive regime? Would we apply the same standards to a German writer composing a black satire on the Third Reich? Link’s argument, thoroughly thought through, establishes benchmarks for artistic endeavours that come dangerously close to those we normally apply to works of history: plausibility, coherence and, in a more naïve sense, trueness. But does it, as Charles Laughlin argues, really portray a “perplexing literalism, as if he expects creative literature to approach historical tragedies in the form of a documentary exposé, with statistics, graphic images, and generous doses of authorial lamentation”?

The daft hilarity argument works symbiotically with what Anna Sun

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has named Mo's "diseased language". Sun diagnoses Chinese language as severely damaged by Maoism, thereby determining people's cognitive categories. In her view, Mo Yan lacks the linguistic prowess to escape this Maoist language trap. His "jumble of words that juxtaposes rural vernacular, clichéd socialist rhetoric, and literary affectation" is "shockingly banal", Sun writes, while Laughlin rates this switching of different linguist registers as a satire of MaoSpeak. It is hard to disagree with his point that writers today, in contrast to the times of Dickens, can't afford to unite the diverse realities surrounding them into a unified linguistic as well as moral perspective. As German literary theorist Wolfgang Iser put it over 40 years ago, literary texts on their way to modernity are pervaded by a rising degree of indeterminacy – empty spaces and contrasting viewpoints that have to be synthesized by the reader into a continuously changing, horizon-dependent interpretation. To decide on whether Mo's language really is diseased, it would be helpful to actually study reader responses in China over the course of time.

Mo Yan, since receiving the Nobel, is a flagship of Chinese culture in and outside the country. He has acquired certain importance to the regime – jailing him for a verbal trespass would mean very bad press. His latest works suggest that he is on the way towards a new boldness, while his carefully calibrated frame of poetic license might have widened through the awarding of the prize. To return to Cai Wus skewed window metaphor, he might be a cool draught just developing the

habits of a nasty mosquito. Writers like Gao Xingjian and Zheng Yi do important work by denouncing the entire authoritarian system, and Ha Jin even switched his writing to English in order to clear his thoughts from the registers of a Mao-biased language. But demanding full literary dissidence from within safe western countries, where an attack on Chinese oppression gets you a collective round of applause, neglects the realities writers who decide to stay inside the country have to face. These writers, too, deserve an honest look at their work as an expression of individuality that goes beyond the binary logic of political manifestos. Precisely because artists in China are not free men, Westerners should not evaluate their work only by its degree of anti-government protest: this just adds yet another limitation of artistic freedom, which is already restricted by state policies. ■

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SOUTH ASIA DEMOCRATIC FORUM

Avenue des Arts, 19 - 2nd floor
1210 Brussels Belgium

djan@sadf.eu www.sadf.eu