

China Aggressiveness in Indo Pacific Region: Impact towards the U.S's Hegemony

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ABSTRACT: Since the declaration of the nine dashed line in the South China Sea as its territories in 2009, China has aggressively embarked in a dual approach to assert its influence as regional power with massive global economic initiative, Belt Road Initiatives (BRI) and rapid militarization development that perceived as a threat to regional security and stability by the U.S. and regional states. This study has two objectives, namely to 1) study the threat that arising from military aggression; 2) discuss the threat from China Economic Assertiveness and 3) analysis the China's aggressiveness threat to U.S. hegemony. This study used qualitative data from 2018 – 2021. The concept of national security has being used to explain the phenomenon. Significantly, this study has found that, China military modernization and militarization program, inferring hegemony intent, provided credible security to its economic initiatives while providing effective deterrence against any threats to its national interests overseas and preserving its territorial sovereignty, the main reason behind the threat allegation against China is to protect the U.S. economy hegemony currently at stake if the U.S. losses its military dominance, a threat to dollar as international currency which have huge repercussion not only to the U.S economy but also other Western power dominating international trade of commodities and energy.

Keywords: BRI, China, Indo- Pacific, Military, The United States.

I. INTRODUCTION

China recent aggressiveness in Indo Pacific has sparked intense international political debates and regarded, as a deliberate act by Chinese leader, President Xi Jinping to reshape the regional geo-politic competition under the pretext of protecting China sovereignty and assuring its economic survival. These economic and military aggressions ignite deep suspicion, of the ultimate strategic motives of China in playing this “great games”, particularly its voracious craving for strategic ports worldwide. Although, activities of acquiring these ports seem to be so benign, but when taken in the context of China's militarisation program, particularly PLA navy global deployment, these arrays of Chinese-operated strategic infrastructures along key maritime route across Indian Ocean to the Pacific could be converted into a powerful network of military bases, “String of Pearls”, to support China's global naval operations

The root of China aggression debate perhaps originated from the commitment made by President Xi Jinping when he ascended power in 2012, to make China “great again” as global power supported firstly, by a strong domestic economic capable of generating substantial excess capacity for expansion beyond its border, in securing key supply line of critical raw materials and energy to ensure sustainability and create markets for its products. Secondly, a credible military force to provide deterrence posture and security to these economic development areas. He vowed to rejuvenate and restore China historical status through rapid transformation initiatives to become a moderate wealthy nation by 2020 before growing its richness and become fully developed great power by 2049. Key to his dream is China's military strength expansion achieved through PLA forces reformation and modernization by 2035 and becoming superpower military in 2050 (Kim, 2019).

On economic front, BRI is vital to President Xi strategy to expand China's global political outreach and leaderships and prove its worthiness. In 2017, BRI was embedded as part of CCP's constitution and serves as structural economic advantages, enable China to transport its goods, cheaper, faster and competitive than

competitors to Europe and other international markets, while securing reliable entry to wider and cheaper natural resources and energy, along its journey of becoming a wealthy and strong society in by 2049 (Russel & Berger, 2020). Beijing repeatedly insisted, BRI is merely about economic development and cooperation, with minimal military purpose. However, in 2019, China's defence minister openly stated China intention of forging friendly military cooperation within BRI framework with key objective of providing security to its huge global investment projects, while deterring any threat that would cause delays or sabotage (Xinhua, 2019). A force for defence not aggression, similar to western strategy during trade along the ancient Silk roads, where armed escort is used to ensure smooth trading journey.

II. CHINA MILITARY AGGRESSION

China aggression started back in 2009 with embarkation of Chinese government expansive sovereignty claims in South China Sea covering almost ninety percent of the sea termed as nine-dash line, imprinted on the 1940s map. Since then, China has aggressively building-up its military installation on several islands in the SCS to legitimize and defend its sovereignty claims, complementing its holistic military forces modernization. Dubbed as part of a broader strategic game plan to attain superpower dream that include consolidating military power under centralised political control, the Central Military Commission headed by President Xi to guarantee absolute loyalty of PLA while "cleaning up bad apples" both, in the party and military in the process. An integrated actions enable Beijing to focus on rapid strategic military modernization and expansion.

a. Modernization of PLA

PLA modernization aims at improving its war fighting capacity and capabilities focus on, firstly, increasing naval, PLAN and air force, PLAAF size, while proportionately cutting the army personnel by 300,000 as illustrated in Figure 1.1. Secondly, boost military command, control and operation by establishing five command theatres emphasizing on forces interoperability. Thirdly, introduction of Strategic Support Force focusing on space, cyber, and electronic warfare. Fourthly, acceleration of military intelligence development and integration with emerging technologies, particularly, artificial intelligence. Fifthly, drive "civil-military fusion", where civilian and defense industries teamed up to strengthen military towards a larger strategy, "Made in China 2025 initiatives", of transforming China into self-sufficient technological powerhouse (Bommakanti & Shivamurthy, 2021). The US Department of Defense 2020 report to Congress stated China military modernization has already surpass the U.S. military capabilities in several areas (US DOD, 2021).

Year	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
PLA Army	3.16	2.30	2.20	1.70	1.60	1.60	1.60	0.985
PLA Navy	0.35	0.26	0.26	0.22	0.26	0.26	0.23	0.260
PLA Air Force	0.49	0.47	0.47	0.42	0.40	0.33	0.40	0.395
Coast Guard	0	0.09	0.09	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.145
Strategic Missile								0.120
Reserves	5.00	4.00	1.20	0.55	0.80	0.51	0.51	0.510
Paramilitary	4.30	1.20	1.20	1.10	1.50	0.66	0.66	0.500
Others								0.150
Total	13.30	8.32	5.42	4.49	4.66	3.46	3.50	3.045

Figure 11: PLA Personnel Based on Service Branches From 1985 to 2020

Source: International Institute for Studies (IISS) *Military Balance*, 1985-2015 in Cordesman, A.H., Colley, S., "Chinese Strategy and Military Modernization in 2015: A Comparative Analysis" in Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., 2015, p.167; International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2021*, p.249. [8 March 2021]

PLA Navy has become a credible naval power with solid "brown water defensive capability" dominating the First Island Chain and in the process of becoming "blue ocean navy" capable of controlling areas outside the Second Island Chain with new advanced "anti-access and area denial capabilities." (Bommakanti & Shivamurthy, 2021).

The U.S. Department of Defense Report 2020 reported, "PLAN is the largest navy in the world, with approximate overall assets consisting 350 ships and submarines

Including over 130 capital surface warships as compared to U.S. Navy's force of approximately 293 ships as of 2020." Figure 1.2 demonstrated the PLA Navy Strength while Figure 1.3 illustrated PLAN naval

locations, provide firm evidence that PLAN modernisation effort would be critical in supplementing China’s assertive foreign policy.

1. PLAN current surface naval power includes 2 operational aircraft carriers, Liaoning and Shandong while the third carrier, Type-003 which is similar in size of the U.S. Navy’s super carriers is under construction in Shanghai with capabilities of accommodating combination of 36 aircraft including 24 J-15 fighters, six anti-submarine warfare helicopters, four airborne early warning helicopters, and two rescue choppers. The newer carrier, is speculated to be equipped with ‘sharp sword stealth drone’.
2. PLAN aggressively developing air power capabilities with intensive training for manning its new warplanes, H-6G and H-6J bombers resulted in better capabilities in carrier-based fighter jets, special mission aircraft and helicopters operation.
3. PLAN capital surface ships include two Type 075 amphibious assault ship, capable of carrying 30 helicopters including the new multi-role Z-20 helicopter, armoured vehicles, jet boats, amphibious tanks, and hundreds of marine troops to complement the fleet of Type-052D guided-missile destroyer and a new class ‘Nanchang’, Type-055 guided-missile destroyer besides the Type 054B frigate equipped with an integrated electric propulsion system. These third and fourth generation vessels is said to be comparable with U.S’ Arleigh Burke-class and Zumwalt-class, world top destroyers.
4. PLAN planned to double the number of its modern destroyers to an estimated 39 vessels by 2025 with additional six 052Cs, twenty-five 052Ds, eight 055s, along with several 054A frigates and Type 071 amphibious landing ships besides acquiring a nuclear-powered carriers equipped with electromagnetic catapult systems for aircraft launching. This would enable PLAN to have two carrier strike groups operating in the Western Pacific, and the other two groups for the Indian Ocean. Despite the lack of experience in operating carriers, the PLAN’s introduction of aircraft carriers will provide additional weight to the Chinese navy’s surface warfare capabilities.
5. PLAN subsurface segments, includes four indigenously developed Jin Class ‘Type-094’ nuclear powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) capable of launching JL-2 nuclear weapon with range over 7,400km and two Type-094A with upgraded radar, sonar and torpedo systems to complement the new Shang Class ‘Type-093’, Song Class ‘Type 039 / 039G’ nuclear attack submarine (SSN) and twelve Kilo class conventional fleet.
6. PLAN also has developed long range anti-submarine surveillance and intelligence gathering capabilities using cutting-edge Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUVs), first displayed to public during its military parade in October 2019 and in December 2020, these UUVs was reported detected in the Indonesian waters around Selayar Island.
7. Other in the pipeline is the next-generation SSBN, Type 096 equipped with twenty-four JL-3s nuclear missile with estimated range of over 10,000 km, which is capable of striking the U.S. if launched from China coast

Figure 1.2: PLA Naval Strength

Source: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020: Annual Report to Congress, Office of the Secretary of Defense (5 January 2023)



Figure 1.3: Major PLAN Naval Unit

Source: Source: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020: Annual Report to Congress, Office of the Secretary of Defense (5 January 2023)

In addition, air assets modernization and expansion push the PLAAF and PLAN Aviation, to become the regional largest and world, third largest air forces operating more than 2,500 aircrafts, of which approximately 2,000 are combat aircrafts - fighters, strategic and tactical bombers, multi-mission attack aircraft.(US DOD, 2021).**Figure 1.4** demonstrated PLAAF strength including ongoing upgrading works and replacement of obsolete weaponry with latest technologies.

1. By 2015, PLAAF has manage to replace roughly 51 percent of its ageing fighter fleet with the fourth generations fighter aircrafts. It is estimated that their number increased from 383 to 736 jets between 2010 and 2015, a 92 percent jump in air combat power.
2. PLAAF has received delivery of all 24 Su-35 advanced fourth-generation fighters it purchased from Russia in 2016. In the next several years, it will become a majority fourth-generation force.
3. PLAAF operationally fielded limited numbers of its new fifth generation fighters, J-20, while development continues on the smaller FC-31/J-31 for export or as a future naval fighter for the PLAN's next class of aircraft carriers besides further upgrading work for the J-20 to increase its capability including installing higher-thrust indigenous WS-15 engines.
4. Significant progress in the research and development of sixth-generation fighter aircraft equipped with its own drones and AI integration was reported and expected to be inducted into the PLAAF fleet by 2035. A feat that PLA has been placing on the role of technology in future conflicts, not only as a force multiplier, but also an instrument to ensure decisive victory at lowest cost.
5. Replacement of aging Mi-17 Russian transport helicopters with domestically developed Z-20 and Z-8G, where the Z-20 has high-altitude flying capability. The Z-11 WB armed helicopter is scheduled to enter the service in 2021 and newly home developed WS 20 engines will be used in the Y-20, also indigenous aircrafts.
6. Other homegrown technology - A new version of gyroplane, commissioned and deployed in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) since February 2020, the KJ-600 surveillance aircraft that completed its test flight in November 2020.

Figure 1.4: PLA Air Force Strength

Source: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020: Annual Report to Congress, Office of the Secretary of Defense. (5 January 2023)

Furthermore, PLA Rocket Force modernization enhances rockets, strategic nuclear and cyber warfare capabilities with wider range and larger inventory of conventional, ballistic and cruise missiles such as, more than 1,250 GLBMs and GLCMs with target range between 500 and 5,500 kilometers while the U.S, only have one type of GLBM with target range of 70 to 300 kilometers.”(US DOD, 2021).PLARF also equipped with integrated advanced air defense systems including long range surface-to-air systems comprising S-300s, S-400s, and indigenous domestic systems providing holistic, integrated and overlapping air defense system architecture.

b. PLA's Global Reach Expansion

PLA global expansion is primarily to provide security to China's economic initiatives span across 60 countries with over one trillion dollars investment while supporting military presence abroad. Firstly, given China's growing interests, PLAN established network of oversea bases to effectively serve its objectives especially when operating in far seas. Djibouti, a Chinese-operated port, is the first overseas military base opened, demonstrated PLAN commitment to protect China interests and support international security initiatives, as evidenced by evacuation operations it carried out in Libya and Yemen. However, as China's infrastructure investments are seen driven by strategic military goals, locations wise and choice of projects, it raises security concern.

In addition, China increasing military presence around Senkaku, Spratly and Paracel Islands waters, building massive military bases with advanced defensive and offensive weaponry, under the pretext of enforcing maritime law and protecting national interest within its sovereign territory, despite international arbitration rejection, raises another security concern. U.S.N. Admiral Philip Davidson asserts China capability of controlling the South China Sea in US-China war, while US Deputy State Secretary, Ms. Sherman expressed

concern with China's "military presence and construction of facilities" in Cambodia deemed arousing new hype of military threat. (Xinjuan, 2007). However, Professor Zhuang Guotu argued China has every right to build and deployed military within its territory to defend its security and interests (Philips, 2018).

THREAT ARISING FROM MILITARY AGGRESSION

China purported threat arising from its military aggression in Indo Pacific is ascertained by analysing their military modernization, build up and activities, including within disputed territorial water, particularly deployment of offensive assets and troops on strategic islands' military bases, and constant intrusion into neighbouring border.

a. Deliberate Infringement of Littoral States Sovereignty

The first threat, deliberate infringement of littoral states sovereignty, arises when China refused to accept the Hague Court of Arbitration decision on July 12, 2016 that ruled, China demarcation of nine-dashed line border has no legal basis. Despite the delegitimized ruling for its maritime claims, China continues asserting its ownership of area within nine-dashed line with persistence military build-up and activities on the pretext of protecting its territorial sovereignty. Whereas others view it as a clear violation of the international ruling and threaten littoral states which claim the same area as their territory. The Philippines has filed 45 diplomatic notes for continual incursions of PLA Navy and Coast Guard ships within its water with provocations, threats, or coercion against Philippine military and civilian vessels or planes which Mr. Teodoro Locsin, Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary views as deliberate action of China coercion towards the Philippines sovereignty and construed as a threat of China military invasion of littoral states if peaceful solutions fail (De Castro, 2021).

Despite numerous incident of incursions purportedly infringement of sovereignty have occurred, there is no serious security tragedy ever reported except for sinking and detaining of several fishing boats accused of illegal fishing and other harassments to activities conducted by other states within the disputed territorial water, illustrated in **Figure 2.5**, which Mike Pompeo, US State Secretary termed as China continuous bullying acts in the South China Sea to pursue its "three-fold strategy to achieve hegemonic objectives" (Pradhan, 2020).

1. Formalising its control over the nine dashed-line by declaring ownership of this area through renaming of all the 25 islands and reefs and 55 underwater entities in the South China Sea and established two districts under Sansha City to administer the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos on 17th April, 2020.
2. Neutralise opposition of the other disputants by use of military threats through intensification of its aggressive policy of encroaching into other states' exclusive economic zones, EEZs since 2014, particularly, belonging to Vietnam and the Philippines. On April 3, 2020, a Vietnamese boat with a crew of eight was sunk by a Chinese ship and when two Vietnamese fishing boats attempted to rescue them, they were also detained. Before that, Chinese Coast Guard vessels had intruded into vicinity of Natuna islands that led to a standoff between China and Indonesia. In the Malaysian EEZ, a series of targeted harassments by the Chinese vessels towards drilling operations in five oil blocks off the Malaysian coast including oil exploration and supply vessels operated by Petronas have led to several standoffs between the Chinese and Malaysian forces since December 2019. Chinese ships were also detected encroaching frequently into the Japan EEZ and territorial water in the East China Sea particularly, near the Senkaku Islands despite strong protests by the Japanese government.
3. Use coercive power to ensure submission of other disputants. Besides tempting them with financial aid, often China stops or threatens to stop commercial deals to compel other states to change their policies towards China. While financial aid has helped China to bring Cambodia to its camp, stoppage of import of banana from the Philippines was aimed at forcing that nation to change its approach. Pompeo also raised serious concerns over the scientific report indicating that China's upstream dam operations have unilaterally altered flows of the Mekong River that can cause draughts in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. This appears to be new tactics of coercion.

Figure 1.5: China actions construe as "Bulling Act" by the U.S South Pradhan, S. D. (2020)

b. Colonisation of Disputed Territory

The second threat arises due to China massive and determined militarization on numerous natural and man-made islands within disputed territorial water equipped with comprehensive military facilities and installation of offensive weaponry particularly, various purposes and ranges missiles systems, capable of striking any land, air and sea target as illustrated in Figure 1.6 below. Many views this development as an act of colonizing neighbouring territories and violating international ruling with potential escalation into wider areas in the future. A serious threat to regional peace, security and stability. AMTI reported these PLA occupied islands occupied are equipped with substantial military hardware and weaponry as illustrated in the Figure 1.7.



Note:

1. Combat ranges for fighter aircraft are based on J-11 fighters while bomber ranges are based on H-6 bombers aircraft deployed to Woody Island in Paracel and Fiery Cross, Subi and Mischief Reefs in Spratly archipelagos.
2. SAM and cruise missile ranges are based on HQ-9, YJ-62, and YJ-12B systems deployed on Woody Island, Fiery Cross Reef, Mischief Reef, and Subi Reef.
3. Radar ranges are based on KJ-500 airborne early warning and control aircraft estimated sensing capabilities against airborne targets at 25,000 feet and targets at sea level.

Figure 1.6: Chinese Power Projection in South China Sea

Source: <https://amti.csis.org/> [5 January 2023]

1. Woody Island in the Paracel is equipped with more than 20 aircraft hangars that can accommodate military aircraft including J-10 and J-11 fighter jets which are regularly deployed to the islands besides the H-6K bomber and the KJ-500 airborne early warning and control aircraft that was first spotted on the island in 2018 and 2020 respectively.
2. Woody Island has two large ports with harbour facilities that can berth bigger warships and provide supply and support facilities. It is also equipped with a wide variety of radar and sensor arrays besides deployment of several HQ-9 SAM systems and YJ-62 cruise missiles battery since 2016.
3. Duncan Island is equipped with wide variety of radar and sensors arrays and has a large port with harbor facilities besides helicopter base that consist of several hangars and eight helipads.
4. The Spratly archipelago, have three major military installations on man-made islands known as Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef and Mischief Reef. All of these bases are equipped with hangars and airstrip that can accommodate at least 24 combat aircrafts and several bigger aircrafts along with big ports for heavier and bigger naval vessels operations.
5. There are also installation of wide range of sensors and communications arrays including high frequency radar and advance electronic jamming systems.
6. Numerous guns and weapon systems are deployed on these bases including HQ-9 SAM systems and YJ-12B anti-ship cruise missiles since 2018.

Figure 1.7: China Military Capabilities on Islands in South China Sea

Source: <https://amti.csis.org/> [5 January 2023]

CHINA ECONOMIC ASSERTIVENESS

The U.S. views China massive international economic and trade initiatives, the BRI and its economic corridor pact with Pakistan and Iran, particularly in infrastructure development values over one trillion dollars around the world as an aggression with wider political intentions that rises concern of new form of threats to participating countries and the U.S. hegemony. These projects covering constructions of ports, industrial estates, maintenance and repairs facilities at strategic maritime choking points, complemented by network of land transportation system - rails and roads connected to inland China, when look in a bigger picture, constitute a network of strategic logistical supply chain that can support military operations. Moreover, China control of numerous power plant and communications infrastructures including digital installations with extensive distribution networks and coverage strengthen this argument of future military utilization.

a. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

BRI - Silk Road Economic Belt and New Maritime Silk Road, is aimed at “improving trade, financial, and connectivity; addressing infrastructure financing and development urgency; enhancing policy coordination and financial integration” (NDRC, 2015). China’s leaderships consistently framed it as a win-win economic cooperation that promotes world peace and development (Goh & Woo, 2019), while, deepening regional integration among states within Asia with extended connectivity to other continents particular Europe and Africa. Beijing has taken great efforts to ensure minimum or zero linkage between BRI and its PLA but, still the U.S and other states have doubts and worried of the real intentions behind this kindness particularly from the view of dual-functionality of projects built with military grade specifications. In some states, installation of digital infrastructure with Chinese indigenous technology fortified the suspicion of possible future threat. Figure 1.8 below illustrated the coverage of BRI initiatives across Asia, Europe and Africa, a strategic geopolitics network.



Figure 1.8: Belt and Road Initiative Coverage

Source: Paul, K. K. (2019)

b. China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

CPEC, a fifteen-year investment support package that bailed Pakistan out of economic difficulties in 2014, by easing some domestic issues particularly, economic under development, energy shortage, inadequate transportation networks, trade incompetiveness and unemployment. According to World Bank, approximately \$32 billion was invested by China mainly in critical energy and transportation projects, some completed and operational while some under construction, in the first five years of CPEC implementation. Furthermore, feasibility studies are being conducted for additional projects worth \$14 billion. CPEC when completed would connect Xinjiang, China to Karachi and Gwadar in Pakistan, creating an integrated transnational industrial corridor linking Pakistan’s economy to China (CPEC, 2021).

c. Iran-China Joint Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

Iran-China Strategic Partnership is a 25 years deal involving over \$400 billion strategic and economic investment signed on March 27, 2021 between Iran and China (Reuters, 2019). An initiative aligned with the ongoing BRI and major sectors to benefits includes oil, gas, petrochemical, renewables, nuclear power, and energy infrastructure. It also involves port construction to integrate Iran into BRI economic corridor and trade routes, besides, defence and security cooperation that include high technology transfer to the consternation of both countries' adversaries. It breaks Iran out of international isolation due to U.S. sanctions that adversely impacted its development, while supporting China global influence - economically and hegemonic ally, in Middle East and Indo Pacific region. In exchange, China is granted with discounted, continuous supply of Iranian oil.

THREAT FROM CHINA ECONOMIC ASSERTIVENESS

Reports by reputable organization including World Bank and IMF revealed, despite, the benefits brought about by BRI massive investment, there are several potential threat and adversity to host countries and the region covering national security, imbalance trade favouring China and international laws enforcement such as containment of terrorism activities.

a. Debt Trap Diplomacy

Key national security threat is the loss of sovereignty of host countries resulted from inability to service sovereign debts taken for BRI projects, known as Debt Trap Diplomacy. A well-crafted strategy using "benign" economic and financial assistance by China through its government linked private enterprises to expand their strategic Ministry of Planning and the People's Republic of China's National Development and Reform Commission on Nov 2017 (CPEC, 2021) global influence and hegemony. Often, developing nations, mostly low and middle income, are attracted to relatively cheap and easy terms loans offered by China to undertake transformative infrastructure projects that change the economic landscape and provided additional mileage to political leaders.

The trap arises when these countries fail to honour repayments commitment on time and Beijing will then offer another way out to barter, exchanging debts relief with strategic state concessions or other advantages, a clear threat to sovereignty. For instance, Colombo was forced to surrender the control and sovereignty of Hambantota port, regarded as strategic military location, to China for 99-year lease in 2017 deal after failing to repay over \$1 billion debts (Stacey, 2017). Pakistan, is also at the brink of losing Gwadar port and its surrounding economic zone sovereignty as slow development progress, and inability of these investment generating enough return to meet debt repayment dateline, risking default (Pauley & Shad, 2018). However, "full indebtedness outcomes will only surface upon completion of these infrastructure project and is operational as planned, usually a long-term return to investment and the success is influenced by various factors, controllable and uncontrollable" (John Hurley et al, 2018).

b. China Espionage and Cyber-warfare Threat

Furthermore, threat of spying and utilisation of key infrastructure for military operation. BRI enable Chinese government-linked companies to build and in most cases, provide continuous maintenance services giving them access to strategic and vital intelligence of host countries security preparedness, capacity and capabilities, a serious threat to national security. For instance, China has installed 820 kilometer of Fiber-optic line from Kashgar to Islamabad while Huawei, a Chinese multinational, accused of being a 'spy agent' for Beijing has developed several smart cities all over Pakistan using digital infrastructure supported by indigenous China technology such as Beidou Satellite network (Hillman, 2019). Higher probability to gain access into Pakistan's critical communication network and "big data" that is useful to military planners, risking information breach and potential espionage activities including intelligence gathering and cyber-warfare by disrupting and 'polluting' the networks particularly during conflict (Russel & Berger, 2020). On July 19, 2021, several governments in North America, Europe and Asia and intra-governmental organization including NATO and EU, condemned the widespread cyber espionage conducted by Chinese Government through its espionage group codename UNC215 operating all over the globe (Israel Research Team, 2021). They use their signature malware FOCUSJORD to intrude targeted network before deploying HYPERBRO malware, to gather intelligence using multiple information collection tools and techniques including screen capture and keylogging.

c. Threat to Regional Security

In addition, threat to regional security. A study conducted by ASPI concluded the dual-use nature of BRI infrastructure enable military usage, creating a strategic choking point along key maritime and energy route from Persian Gulf to Pacific oceans, with full port capabilities supported by shipbuilding and maintenance

facilities, resupply services, transportation and communication connectivity (ASPI, 2020). A chain of strategic infrastructures with high probability to fall into China ownership via debt trap diplomacy poses significant threat to regional security. As to date, China has taken control several of these strategic choke points, enabling the PLAN to station its assets and manpower to patrol the areas, a 99-year lease of Hambantota Port and 40 years operation rights of Gwadar Port (The New Strait Times, 2018). Putting China at the doorstep of its regional rival - India, and access to strategic position along critical waterway, commercially and militarily. PLAN consistent presence in these waters, present greater risk of navigation disruption and violation of commercial vessels passage as occurred in South China Sea.

Moreover, growing China's military presence in Pakistan would heighten threat to India and pressure stability in South Asia. However, it also raises the cost of potential conflicts between the two rivals and reduce the likelihood of conflicts, a good deterrence posture for the region plunged with continuous political and security instability. Incidence on February 2019, demonstrated China neutrality when Beijing did nothing to shield Pakistan against India retaliation after a terrorist attack in Pulwama, nor did it prevent Pakistan from countering air strike from India. Puzzling analyst with China intention on using its influence in the regional security affairs. Nonetheless, China backing will embolden Pakistan to provoke India, through stockpiling of new conventional and strategic arsenals and intensified its terrorist-proxy cross borders activities, forcing India to seriously adopt hedging deterrence policy to curb this growing China influence in Pakistan. China is in a delicate situation in choosing the right strategic partner in South Asia especially looking at its growing economic ties with India, worth 69.4 billion, four time bigger than Pakistan. Currently, it endeavours in dehyphenation policy, pursuing parallel relations with Pakistan and India, similar to U.S. South Asia strategy. Key concern is whether China support to Pakistan as valuable asset would encourage the worst of Pakistani behavior and converted into strategic burden, risking its relations with India.

d. Threat of Terrorism and Enforcement of International Laws

Another threat is terrorism. After 9/11 attack, U.S using UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1267, has pushed for a raft of terrorist designations to be kept under UN sanction including those associated with Pakistan national and organizations. However, in several incidences, China as UN Security Council permanent member with veto power has help Pakistan avoided these international sanctions by relying on bureaucratic procedure, instead of outright veto. China held the proposed listings with argument of its legitimacy and requesting concrete evidence of Pakistani affiliations that warrants multilateral censure besides rejecting India initiated designations that would legitimizing India's claims, if approved. Nonetheless, China, has approved execution of some actions against Pakistan's entities and individuals, demonstrating its neutrality and fairness. For example, China assented to the listing of responsible masterminds for 2008 Mumbai attacks, including Rehman Lakhvi and Hafiz Saeed of Lashkar-e-Taiba militant group, under UNSCR 1267. China also passed action against Haqqani Network members for attacks on U.S and international diplomatic infrastructure in Afghanistan besides, agreeing to sanction against Masood Azhar of Jaish-e-Mohammed, who is responsible for multiple terrorism acts in India, after years of persistence procedural block, in April 2019. Pakistani links to these terrorist groups, has put China in a difficult and vulnerable position particularly when the victims are Chinese nationals in Pakistan as illustrated in Figure 1.9.

Date	Incidents
May 2019	Pearl Continental Hotel, which frequented by Chinese nationals in Gwadar was stormed by Baloch militants, killing five people, luckily none of them is Chinese nationals.
November 2018	Militants attempted to attack the Chinese Consulate in Karachi, killing local guards.
June 2017	Two Chinese nationals, reportedly language teachers, were kidnapped in Quetta, Balochistan, and later found dead.

Figure 1.9: Terrorism incidents involving Chinese National in Pakistan

Source: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/27/why-terrorists-pwill-target-china-in-pakistan/>
(7 August, 2021)

e. Threat to Socio-Economic

BRI also poses threat to socio-economic of host country, as most trade and business agreements favoured China, while the mandatory condition on infrastructure projects financed by Chinese loan, deprives local people of business and employment opportunities. The signing of a free trade agreement in 2006, has resulted in increasing trade between China and Pakistan to \$16.2 billion in 2018, 11 percent growth per year on average, unfortunately, the big chunk was Chinese exports to Pakistan valued at \$14 billion while Pakistan export to China was a mere \$1.75 billion (World Bank, 2018). Despite, remedial effort through amended agreement in April 2019, improving duty-free access of Pakistani goods entering Chinese markets, the incremental change does not materialised as the underlying issue is poor economic competitiveness of Pakistani firms relative to the Chinese, resulted in flooding of low-cost Chinese goods, killing 200 Pakistani textile mills and significant loss of employment. Even, newly constructed modern integrated economic zones near Gwadar Port were reserved to Chinese companies, while, Gwadar 300 MW coal power-plant construction was awarded directly to China Communications Construction Company without prior offering to local businesses and most jobs are taken up by Chinese labourer with minor participation of local. A similar experience in almost all poor countries participating in BRI particularly those with domestic political instability.

THREAT TO U.S. HEGEMONY

China economic and military aggressiveness that propel its influence into more than 138 countries, is a serious threat to U.S. hegemony particularly, after the recent U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in defeats, crushing its ego to the bottom (Wang, 2021). On the other hand, China, steadily expanding its BRI to more than 2,600 projects valued at USD \$3.7 trillion, as at July 2020, where these dual functional infrastructure projects, strategically located at critical maritime choke-point provided China with military advantage towards its global power goals (Li, 2021). Thanked to its modernization effort and network of "String of Pearls", China now has credible blue ocean PLAN to match the U.S. Navy, in operating longer durations beyond its home bases. Strengthening China ability to protect its trade and overseas interest while limiting U.S "control" along key routes from Middle East to Pacific Ocean, hegemon characteristic championed by the U.S. China also has significant control over maritime affairs within South China Sea, including enforcing international sanction with its military, if required, another U.S hegemony aspect threatened by China.

In addition, China heavily fortified and fully loaded with advanced weaponry, forward island bases, scattered around East and South China Sea, supported with massive number of capital ships including modern destroyers such as Type 055 and 052, and complimented with nuclear capable submarine, pose serious threat to U.S aircraft carrier battle groups, the strength of U.S hegemony. Concentration of PLA forces within Indo Pacific region with land bases supports give China added advantage compare to U.S military with only one or perhaps two aircraft carrier battle groups in the region, with limited ships due to dispersion of its forces to meet commitment around the world and protection of homeland on two fronts, the Pacific and Atlantic. Supply chain supports also limited to mainly its regional allies, Japan, South Korea, the Philippine and Singapore besides its islands bases in the Pacific and Indian Ocean. However, analyst agreed that U.S Navy has huge advantage in term of superior military technology, naval experience and tactics, critical elements in naval warfare, put aside nuclear capabilities of both super powers.

On economic cooperation perspectives, CPEC and China-Iran Cooperation are serious threat to the U.S. as Pakistan and Iran have a very complicated, love-hate relationship, associated closely with political leaderships besides being label as having strong affiliation with terrorists. U.S. main concern would be the enhancement of Pakistan and Iran military capabilities and capacity particularly strategic nuclear weapon that threaten regional balance of power and challenge U.S dominance. With China strong interest in Iran oil supply, this is a feasible feat where China exchanges its advanced military technology for oil, while, Pakistan, already benefited from procurement of conventional submarine, new Type 054A/P multi-role stealth frigates, FN-16 shoulder-fired air-defense missiles and unmanned combat drone, the Wing Loong II UCAV (O'Connor, 2018 & Chowdhury, 2021). Pakistan also collaborated in the development of China, JF-17 Thunder fighter jet besides expanding its bio-warfare capability, including research on Klaxon, a deadly agent anthrax (Salman, 2020). These substantial military procurement and cooperation undeniable enhance Pakistan and Iran military capabilities and with China behind their back, poses a serious challenge to U.S hegemony.

Furthermore, China relationships with Pakistan and Iran undermine U.S. led economic and terrorist related sanction, either by China using its UN Security Council position to block those sanctions or simple does not recognised its legitimacy. Puncturing US hegemony ego. For instance, Iran, able to export their oil to and source almost all their needs from China, and the completion of future, 926-kilometer New Silk Road rail line, conveniently crossing Central Asian with potential expansion into Turkey would facilitate faster trade

(Financial Tribune, 2021). Plan to establish joint Iranian-Chinese bank is underway to facilitate financial movement, similar to China-Venezuelan oil deal, giving Iran access to fund for its development while securing China critical oil supply direct from Iran, breaking Western control over the valuable commodity. A real blow to U.S hegemony.

Finally, BRI provides platform for China entry into Middle East and establish a preeminent political position to fill in the vacuum created by the U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan, extending China influence into the petroleum-rich region, after forging strong cooperation with Pakistan and Iran while opening up opportunity to forge future cooperation with other regional states such as Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen. Strengthening China regional political dynamic and challenging U.S political hegemony in Middle East.

III. CONCLUSION

China aggressiveness in Indo Pacific can be summarized, primarily, China does have intention to become global power as visioned by President Xi Jinping and supported by China massive economic and military expansion initiatives, which is perceived by the U.S. as threat. China emphasis BRI as mutually beneficial regional development aimed at building productive capacity and capabilities with extensive connectivity for trade and people movement. Whereas, it's military expansion is for security purpose, protecting its vast overseas and national interest. Analysis reveals, China military forces modernisation, currently becoming world largest infers clear hegemony goal, while its true intention is unknown, rebutting U.S claims of regional threat but incline towards threat to U.S. hegemony. Incidents involving PLA in SCS provide insufficient evidence of ill intent except those caused by militia purportedly acting under Chinese government directives. Whereas, accusation of incursion into neighbouring states is mainly due to overlapping territorial claims, which is difficult to ascertain its legitimacy despite international ruling, denying China assertion of nine dashed line, which Beijing objected. China willingness to withdraw its forces on numerous occasions illustrated "considerate intention" while its constant provocation reflect its "taking chance" character, hoping other parties conceding their claims. Nonetheless, establishment of integrated fully weaponized military bases on several islands and networks of infrastructures capable of providing military logistical support along key maritime routes, does represent serious threats to the U.S. and regional security particularly when factoring change in Chinese leadership in the risk equation.

In addition, BRI is viewed by western-inclined, international organization such as World Bank as an instrument with "debts string" attached, does pose serious threat to national security of host countries. However, BRI is also crucial infrastructural intervention for low-income states to jump start their economy which is impossible to materialize otherwise. There is evidence to suggest digital network infrastructure constructed by Chinese companies has been used for espionage activities while cyber warfare could not be verified, as reported in 2018 involving African Union's headquarter. Furthermore, BRI's chain of strategic choke points if used militarily could threaten maritime freedom of navigation and littoral states security particular India is mere speculative, while China assertion that "String of Pearls" strategy is to provide security to China interest while maintaining stability does have merit. Accusation of China supporting Pakistan to veil terrorists by blocking UN sanction is adoption of different interpretation of terrorist by China within its right and its actions to facilitate trade with Iran against UN sanctions, a demonstration of opposing values to the west. Next, BRI does deprive local participation in project construction and related business, denying domestic employment and business opportunities, threatening host countries socio-economic security.

Finally, China rapid military modernization and militarization of Spratly and Paracel, supported by integrated "chain of pearls" along strategic routes in key regions provided China with comparable military supremacy, does pose a challenge to US dominance as "world police". With barrage of medium to long range advanced antiships missiles, China has the capability to threaten U.S Navy battle group besides ignoring U.S. sanction on Iran or Pakistan. Moreover, if China filled the vacancy left by U.S departure in Middle East regional politic, it could extend its strategic "pearls" into Yemen and Syria, providing access to the Mediterranean and enabling China to monitor U.S. trade and military movements in the region.

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