

China and the Octopus Strategy

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Using an image or analogy can illustrate a complex phenomenon in a simple yet significant manner. Such is the basis for our argument in this brief *Commentary*, which seeks to bring to light certain aspects of China's international strategy.

For a few decades now, China has been developing its economic, political, military and cultural potential. Till the first decade of the 21st century, its rise was characterised by Deng's advice: "Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership". However, since the 2008 economic crisis, China has become more assertive on the international scene, especially in the economic, military and political fields. A new, nationalistic discourse, expressed throughout President Xi's speech at the 19th Congress in October 2017, has accompanied this assertion.

Indeed, careful analysis shows China's willingness to position itself as a powerhouse in the making. Specific excerpts characterize this tendency, presenting the country as a future "socialist country, prosperous and powerful", willing to achieve the "Chinese dream", being "closer, more assured and more capable than ever to achieve the objective of the great national renaissance".

In order to reach out these objectives, Xi Jinping declared that the military needs to "achieve the modernization of the army and national defence by 2035, and make the army a world-class power by the middle of the century". Indeed, 2049 marks the 100th anniversary of China's Popular Republic. Chinese authorities have therefore pinpointed this commemoration as deadline to reach the status of number one on the international scene and accomplish the "Chinese Dream", a project put forward by Xi Jinping since ascending to the communist party's top leadership in 2012.

So far, China's strength has been to move forward without appearing too imperial. By leaving leadership to others, it has progressed in a hidden way while strengthening its positions and capacities.

Behind a well-oiled rhetoric through which China displays a benevolent image, the Chinese agenda is in fact more obscure and based on Realpolitik: through the BRI, Beijing intends to reshape the world order in its image. While China presents the New Silk Roads as strengthening of global governance, it fails to mention several key objectives of this initiative: regain its status of Middle Kingdom (Tianxia 2.0), strengthen its exports, shape the new rules of trade & cyber, establish military bases abroad, keep consolidating its spheres of influence and controlling the Rimland, and finally exercise political pressure on other states (e.g. vote in China's favour at the UN) through the debt trap recreating dependent relations (Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Djibouti) and patron-clients relations (Laos, Cambodia).

China sees itself as superior and believes that its system is beneficial to others. It is interesting in this regard to quote in length Mingfu Liu, author of *The China Dream: Great Power Thinking and Strategic Posture in the Post-American Era*.

“In the Chinese Age, when China has the world's most material wealth and cultural offerings, it will not attempt to Easternize or peacefully shape the Western world, especially America, and in this respect, China is more civil than the West. But the more natural and more civilized something is, the more widely it will spread across the world. The Easternization and Sinification of the future will spread without being forced, and when that happens, America will find it hard to avoid being peacefully shaped into a form more civilized than it

is today. »

Contrary to the image it projects (harmony, peaceful rise...), China is thus behaving, like any other power that wishes to achieve the status of great or superpower. One major difference should however be noted: so far, Beijing has shown much more subtlety than other powers in the same position. *Mutatis mutandis*, it makes the country more dangerous for other powers.

The Chinese power has succeeded in implementing what could be called an octopus strategy. Similar to the octopus' behaviour, China disturbs and seduces, advances in an intelligent, cunning and subtle way. Without a hard skeleton, the octopus easily changes shape and configuration, a flexibility that characterizes China's policies in the South China Sea, for example, where it applies both a policy of punishment and rewards, the salami as well as the push and pull tactics. The octopus is also known for its camouflage to remain unnoticed, reminding us of China's policy on the international scene through its discursive power, which emphasizes harmony, norms and unwillingness to question the world order. Like the octopus, China is known for its "imitate while adapting" abilities. This is characterized in Beijing by replicas in terms of defence (planes, ships, drones, etc.), economy (high-speed trains, cars, etc.), which in some cases succeed in making its products competitive with the original (Made in China 2025). The same reasoning applies to the institutions it develops as alternatives to the existing ones, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Just like the octopus - as many laboratory experiments have shown - China is innovative and creative. A final similarity between this animal and the Middle Kingdom lies in their skills.

Similar to the eight arms/tentacles of the octopus, the New Silk Roads (maritime, land and digital) thus spread out to provide Beijing with a global integrative reach. While the brain of the "Chinese octopus" sends general orders, each tentacle (road) functions autonomously and independently executes its movements and positioning. The tentacles can also be seen as the different capacities of power on which China relies on to build the new silk routes, whether cultural (speeches, Confucius institutes), political (summits, visits, regional organizations and institutions), military (collaborations, bases, exports) or economic (investments, loans). Finally, with its powerful rows of suction cups, the octopus manages to catch its prey and inject a neurotoxin through its beak. Is this not what China is doing through its debt trap policy, which consists of granting loans to States that are then unable to repay, resulting in the transfer of ownership of strategic assets?

Why this analogy? Because the image of the octopus underlines that China, in its status of a great power, is not an exception and behaves like any other great power.

It is using all the means necessary to achieve its "Chinese dream" objective by 2049, which ultimately aims at becoming the world's number one. Unlike Russia and the United States, however, its action is much more cunning and skilful.



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