



CHINA'S INITIATIVES FROM THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE TO THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION SHOW ITS WILLINGNESS TO ASSUME LEADERSHIP – AN ANALYTICAL STUDY FROM A POWER POLITICAL STRATEGY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This research article analyzes China's initiatives from the BRI to the SCO and argues that such Chinese initiatives show its willingness to assume leadership. This article discusses the BRI and the SCO from the framework of power political strategies. Firstly, it discusses the economic strategies of China. This part explains China's economic strategy from a geoeconomic point of view and discusses the BRI, the internationalization of the Renminbi, and the institutions initiated by China, mainly AIIB. It further discusses the economic domain of the SCO. Secondly, it discusses the political strategies of China and the political domain of the SCO. Lastly, this article discusses the military strategy of China. The final part discusses the security domain of the SCO. China's power political strategies vis-à-vis the BRI and the SCO portray that it is willing to assume leadership which, however, China denies publicly. The BRI, internationalization of the Renminbi, and the AIIB with China's influence are the key geoeconomic factors for China's power convening capabilities. The BRI is China's way to reach the world and resultantly, create a balance of dependency paving the way for all the roads leading to China. The financial institutions, mainly AIIB, are aimed at rivaling the Bretton Woods System which has been dominant since the Second World War. Moreover, the SCO takes care of China's cooperation mainly in the domains of economic, military, and politics in Central Asia, South Asia, the Near East, South East Asia, and Europe. Hence, the initiatives from the BRI to the SCO portray China as a new type of power and speak volumes regarding China's desire to assume leadership.

Keywords: China, BRI, SCO, Power Politics, Leadership

Introduction

China's willingness to rise to a global leadership role is manifested in its power-convening



initiatives ranging from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Its power political strategies through the BRI and the SCO indicate that China is summoning power to undertake global leadership. According to John J. Mearsheimer, in order to dominate Asia the way the United States of America (US) dominates the Western Hemisphere, China's definitive aim is to be the hegemon – the only great power in the entire system to counter the US efforts to establish its presence in East Asia in its Asian Pivot, Mearsheimer believes that China uses the BRI as a means to counter the American Asian Pivot which could possibly push away the US political influence from the region completely (Zakharov 2017). Moreover, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) serves many interests and power games. It is a nontraditional regional organization that is consolidating a new battlefield for East-West confrontation in Central Asia. Therefore, it has become an institutional instrument for China to pursue soft balancing policies against the US (Kocamaz 2019). This is, however, contrary to the officially stated position of China. China recurrently takes the position that it will never seek expansion, a sphere of influence, and more eloquently that it will never seek hegemony (Roy 2020). This position was also maintained during the last National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2022. President Xi Jinping said during his speech, “China pursues a defensive national defense policy, and its development strengthens the world's forces for peace. No matter what stage of development it reaches, China will never seek hegemony or engage in expansionism.” Despite such a stated position, China for the first time enunciated its ambition to contend for the global leadership in the 19th National Congress of CPC report. The sections of the report that highlight policy objectives for 2035 insinuate China's preparation for the global competition thus, paving the way for China's leadership at the regional as well as global level.

China's strategy for shaping its vision of a new type of global leadership is highlighted by President Xi's speeches (Breslin 2015). The leaders of China utilize high-profile international events to project a preferred image of how China will act as a great power and what it stands for. For example, President Xi's speech during the 2015 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) session highlighted China's role as a global aid actor and called for democratization of the global institutions which, in other words, means to have a greater say and role in those global institutions for China along with other developing countries. China's self-proclaimed fondness for peace and its predilection to build a new type of international relations are rehearsed and well-established Chinese positions (Breslin 2015). In the context of extending its territorial influence, Kaplan (2013) argues that China as an energetic economy for the past three decades will extend its influence not through coercion but through commerce. However, China's role as a global leader can differ from that of the US. Kaplan (2013) further argues that China does not adopt an armed approach to world affairs, unlike the US. China does not have a system of government or ideology to spread. China's goals, unlike the US, in international politics are not about moral progress. It is, however, pertinent to note here that Robert Kaplan expressed these views in 2013. The reality today is far more different than it was in 2013 or before the Xi Jinping era in China, especially after its initiation of the BRI in 2013 and wolf-warrior diplomacy.



China's actions in the form of initiatives such as the SCO and the BRI in recent times helped it enhance its power capabilities. However, its stated official position on its sphere of influence as a global leader has remained contrary to its actions. Therefore, this article aims to explain and discuss the hypothesis that from the BRI to the SCO, China's initiatives signal its willingness to assume global leadership sooner than anticipated.

Power Political Strategies and China's Role as a Leader

According to the power realist paradigm of International Relations (IR), a state that exceeds in military strength, size of territory and population, competence and political stability, economic capacity, and resource endowment, is a great power (Waltz (1979). A great power is assured by these characteristics to exert its political, economic, social, and military power to create its influence on the regional as well as on the global scale. The number of great powers and the polarity as its aftermath in the international system are determined by the power capabilities distribution (Varisco 2013). Continuous double-digit increase in annual GDP growth rate from 1989 to 2015 which, however, slowed down since then, especially after COVID-19, military expansion, and international trade and investments, are the factors that insinuate that China is a great power that China can utilize to assume its leadership in the world affairs.

The "Thucydides Trap" and Power transition theory depict that rising power, such as China in this case, can provoke opposition from dominant powers, like the US, along with eliciting it in their neighborhood which can resultantly cause tensions to grow and increase the probability of war. Despite its official reassurances to its neighbors and attempt to present itself as a 'new type of power', China is aware of the Thucydides trap. Therefore, the academic discussions on the BRI are presented as non-revisionist and non-threatening rising powers, unlike other rising powers in the past. However, China considers the BRI as part of its 'peaceful development' instead of 'initial peaceful rise' as the term rise shows more aggression which does not comply with China's official narrative of not seeking hegemony.

Due to the limited scope of this article, the discussion and explanation of China's power political strategies will be limited only to economic, political, and military strategies. Hence, this article will not discuss the Cyber Security and Space power strategies of China in the context of power political strategies.

China Economic Strategies

Edward Luttwak theorized in 1990 that military methods would be replaced by methods of commerce i.e., disposable capital would replace firepower, civilian innovation would replace military technical advancement and market penetrations would replace bases and garrisons. Therefore, the states have to act geoeconomically as states are spatially defined entities structured to defeat each other in the global scenario to employ war logic in the grammar of commerce. China's economic strategies are geoeconomic oriented. Blackwill and Harris (2016) highlight that geoeconomics is the use of economic instruments to achieve favorable geopolitical results. With



the growth in its economic might, China's temptation and ability have also grown to materialize its economic might to achieve Sino-centric geopolitical results. China as the world's leading geoeconomics practitioner is the primary reason behind the shift in focus of the global and regional power projection from military exercises to economic strategy. China plays the geoeconomic game at a maestro level. Zeroing in on business, avoiding political confrontations, and staying out of wars have enabled China to have far exceeding global influence than its existing economic strength. Not China's military might, but its ability to withhold and provide investments and trade, intimidate states because of China's economic influence across the globe (Blackwill & Harris 2016).

A Glimpse at China's Economy

According to Ian Bremmer (2016), China's economic might is its geopolitical power. Wayne M. Morrison (2015), a specialist in Asian Finance and Trade, argues that China's economy was not only isolated from other world economies but was also inefficient, centrally controlled, poor, and stagnant due to the economic policies maintained by the Chinese government under Chairman Mao before the commencement of economic and trade liberalization during the era of Deng Xiaoping under 'Reform and Openness' policy. In order to open up foreign trade and investment, the Chinese government implemented free market economic reforms in 1979. Such policies helped China maintain one of the fastest-growing economies in the world during the last three decades. According to the Trading Economics Website, China has maintained a 9.04 percent annual GDP growth rate from 1992 to 2022. The growth was previously touching double figures until 2015 which was further slowed down after the outbreak of Covid-19. Armijo and Roberts (2014) predicted that China's economy would surpass that of the US in terms of GDP measured in the purchasing power parity (PPP) by 2016, which China has successfully surpassed. They also forecasted that during the next decade, China's economy will also outdo the US economy in dollar terms which is yet to be seen. Moreover, China is not only the largest economy in terms of purchasing power parity but it is also the world's largest manufacturer, holder of foreign exchange reserves, and merchandise trader (Morrison 2015). China's economic might enables it to assume leadership which it exerts in different regions of the world by investing under BRI which according to Cohen (2015) can be described as a "new round of opening to the world" a phrase that President Xi used to describe his economic strategy.

Belt and Road Initiative: China's Inclination to Assume Global Leadership

"The BRI is essentially a new global architecture designed by China to frame its new role as a leading world power" (Alon et al. 2018). In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the BRI - China's most ambitious economic and foreign policy initiative. President Xi called for the building of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and a Silk Road Economic Belt which were collectively referred to as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In modern history, the BRI is possibly one of the largest development plans. The BRI is a part of China's connectivity plan to connect its regions with countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe. China launched the BRI at a time when its foreign policy became more assertive which implies that rather than being interpreted as a purely



economic initiative, the BRI can be interpreted as a geopolitical one (Cai 2017). Diesen (2017) in this context highlights that the BRI consists of the 'Belt' as a land-based infrastructure and the 'Road' as routes for maritime transport. The initiative is not limited to facilitating trade and reallocating China's capacity from the steel and construction industry. It expands to revive the ancient connectivity between the Eurasian civilizations and convert the large foreign exchange reserves of China into an international geoeconomic influence. Moreover, from the BRI, historical continuity can be recognized as China attempts to recuperate its position as the 'Middle Kingdom'.

China's strategy behind BRI is to become an economic locomotive that benefits all of broader Eurasia and will resultantly make China an economic center of gravity. Such a unique geoeconomic position will not only create mutually beneficial economic relationships but will also give rise to the interdependence that China can materialize to extract loyalty and political concessions (Diesen (2017). In a similar context, Leonard (2016) argues that the geoeconomic strategy of China is focused on the revival of the 'Middle Kingdom'. Just like in history, all the roads led to Rome during the height of the Roman Empire, similarly, China is building railway tracks, bridges, roads, cables, and a set of pipelines and shipping routes that would lead all the roads to Beijing. Beijing gains persuasiveness and leverage by making itself vital to every region around the world. The effects of such leverage would be to make Beijing the center of the broad geopolitical and economic system, leaving countries outside that are not well-connected with the center. This order is coming into existence pragmatically, however, without a grand plan.

With the BRI, China expands its "Going Global" Chinese government-sponsored development programs in scope and in size as part of the global "China Dream" objective. In order to frame its new role as a leading world power, China designed BRI essentially as a new global architecture. In the twenty-first century, BRI is the most ambitious illustration of global economic statecraft. Reaching more than 60 percent of the world population, covering 65 countries, 75 percent of its known energy reserves, accounting for approximately one-third of the global GDP and merchandise trade, the BRI is a prime example of economic statecraft (Alon et al. 2018). Contrary to this, China's "Vision and Actions" document of March 2015 demarcates the BRI as an undertaking that will benefit people around the world and will address the complex international and regional situation and the weak recovery of the global economy (Rolland 2017).

To provide China's leaders with sufficient motivation to initiate the BRI, the economic factors of the BRI were of high significance in themselves for the initiative. However, under the prospects of infrastructure projects to broaden the possibility of bilateral cooperation, China's political leadership deepens its influence within the BRI countries. A deeper look into China's sources manifests another set of factors that are central to what the political leadership of China wants to achieve. In order to secure China's periphery to counterweigh the US hegemony, China's greatest existential challenge, the projects under the BRI are meant to confront China's nontraditional security threats (Rolland 2017). Similarly, according to Garlick (2020), China's current leadership is moving away from Deng Xiaoping's advice of "never take the lead" in international affairs and



“keep a low profile and bide your time” by getting entangled more and more in the affairs of other countries, particularly in its neighborhood. President Xi’s policy of “striving for achievement” has replaced Deng’s safety-first policy. The BRI in itself is an indication of China’s shift to a more assertive foreign policy. The quest for the “Chinese Dream” drives China’s expansion which encompasses a wealthy, powerful, and revitalized China that the world reveres (Garlick 2020). This rationale behind BRI delineates China’s willingness to assume regional as well as global leadership.

The BRI: China’s Marshall Plan or a Response to the US ‘Pivot to Asia’ Policy?

China’s officials along with its media have been refuting the claims that the BRI is not China’s Marshall Plan. Cohen (2015) highlights that many Chinese authors writing for Chinese media have rebutted the Western media’s claims which described the BRI as “China’s Marshall Plan”. Similarly, Bondaz (2015) writes that Chinese academics and officials frequently stressed that, “the BRI is not like the Marshall Plan.” While quoting Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi who said that comparison of the BRI with the Marshall Plan is tantamount to comparing oranges with apples, Bondaz (2015) argues that the official claims of Chinese authorities stress that the BRI is based on the open cooperation which, in other words, mean that the Marshall Plan was not as per the narrative of China’s officials. In this context, Cohen (2015) highlights the Chinese media reports that claim that the BRI does not come with any political strings attached to it and is not an alliance, unlike the Marshall Plan which was aimed to contain the Soviet Union and to control the Western European Nations. Similarly, Bondaz (2015) argues that Chinese media editorials portrayed the Marshall Plan as conditional to the political attachments on the countries it covered in which Eastern European countries were excluded which caused the division of Europe. Contrary to this, the BRI is aimed to assist the development of China’s neighbors sans any explicit political condition. They stress that with the BRI China aims to share the benefits of its economic growth with other countries. However, Lin and Wei (2018) point out that the BRI could be the Marshall Plan for China. They further point out that China needs to develop an operating system that it could utilize to portray shared values and a common vision for the world focused on the China Model.

Such a system with the BRI will further impel the leadership role of China by enabling it to stick the world together through the BRI. Therefore, it can be argued that China’s actions under BRI seem to differ from its official statement that does not want to seek global or regional hegemony. On contrary to this debate, Garlick (2020) argues that the BRI, in large part, is a response to the US ‘Pivot to Asia’ Policy announced during the Obama Administration. He points out the arguments of Nadege Rolland (2017) and the former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who called for the creation of a new Silk Road for the US, India, and India’s neighbors in 2011 and argues that the Chinese Government might have taken the US push into the Asia Pacific very seriously and considered such an attempt to counterweigh China in the region by forming anti-China alliance with India. However, some experts argue that the Chinese reacted too quickly to a strategy that never existed, which China perceived as an attempt to contain it. Nevertheless, it is highly likely that the ‘Pivot to Asia’ prompted the Politburo of the CCP to initiate the BRI (Garlick



2020). To sum up this debate, Rolland (2017) argues that in the context of building challenges in the strategic domain i.e., the US 'Pivot to Asia' along with the economic domain i.e., the global financial crisis of 2008, the BRI can best be comprehended as an attempt to set the direction for China to achieve its ambitions as a preeminent regional power. Moreover, according to John J. Mearsheimer, in order to dominate Asia, the way the United States of America (US) dominates the Western Hemisphere, China's definitive aim is to be the hegemon – the only great power in the entire system. To counter the US efforts to establish its presence in East Asia in its Asian Pivot, Mearsheimer believes that China uses the BRI as a means to counter the American Asian Pivot which could possibly push the US political influence from the region completely (Zakharov 2017). Therefore, the rationale behind BRI to counter the US 'Pivot to Asia' cannot be ruled out. It is another debate whether China's consideration for a such policy was too quick and unwarranted.

Internationalization of the Renminbi – A Geoeconomic Instrument in China's Toolkit

Internationalization of the Renminbi is one of the key instruments in China's geoeconomics toolkit. China started pushing an internationalization policy for the Renminbi in 2009 which was aimed to encourage the use of the Renminbi in international investment and trade along with its inclusion in the reserves assets that the central banks in other countries hold (Xinbo 2016). In 2016, the Renminbi was added to the IMF's special drawing rights basket. It joined the US dollar, Japanese Yen, British Pound, and Euro in a special drawing rights basket of currencies. As a result, the Chinese economy was integrated into the global financial system. This could be reflected in China's substantial increase in international trade and the use of the Renminbi along with China's expanding role in global trade (IMF Website, 2016). In this context, Rolland (2017) argues that China gradually started the internationalization of the Renminbi with the establishment of the global network of offshore Renminbi clearing banks, integrated electronic infrastructure, and currency-swap agreements. She further highlights that for all these developments, the BRI can help serve as a stimulus by creating opportunities for greater use of the Renminbi in international transactions.

Financial Institutions with China's Dominance

In 2014, China's government initiated the multilateral financial institution called the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in which China is the largest contributing member. The AIIB was joined by 57 countries as prospective founding members and 23 more countries joined it as non-founding members in June 2017. The current number of members stays at 104 in 2023. Thus, the membership eclipses that of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) with 67 member countries led by Japan. The AIIB stands out as a key institution politically as well as economically with members ranging from Egypt, Great Britain, and South Africa to Chile and Brazil and an initial capitalization of 100 billion USD (Wang 2018). Moreover, in order to support the infrastructure developments in Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS), China initiated the establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB). In the NDB, China holds 41 percent of the shares while in the AIIB it has 26 percent of the voting rights and holds 30 percent of the shares. Hence, China gets a greater share of its say in the decision-making along with



managing operations of both of the institutions. Beijing's geoeconomic influence will naturally grow as more countries start benefiting from the services of the NDB and the AIIB (Xinbo 2016). Leonard (2016) argues that China is capable enough to overshadow the Bretton Woods Institutions i.e., the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and alter the economics of various regions of the world. On the debate of whether China wants to scrap or adopt the US global economic and political order, Ian Bremmer (2016) argues that China seeks both. Because of the path dependency, the IMF, the WB, and other such organizations are not going anywhere, so China aimed to maximize its leverage in them. However, gaining such leverage has been dependent on the US' willingness to accommodate China. Therefore, Beijing decided to go on its own, organize a party, and invite everyone to defect from the Bretton Woods System. The success of such an initiative is evident from the fact that many US partners joined the AIIB despite the US' admonition which is a snub to the US efforts to defend the liberal international order (Bremmer 2016). Additionally, Blackwill and Harris (2016) argue that the AIIB's financing of development projects will rival the responsibilities and reach of the WB. US officials have been warning its allies that the establishment of the AIIB is a deliberate attempt to weaken the international financial institutions established after World War II and since then, dominated by the US and Japan. Along with weakening the US influence in the region, the AIIB could provide China an opportunity to pull its neighbors closer to its orbit which will offer China increased geoeconomic benefits. Thus, paving the way for its leadership.

Economic Domain of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

The SCO comprising of member states from Europe, Central Asia, South East Asia, and the Near East (also, South Asia since 2017 after the Membership of Pakistan and India) is a regional (international) organization. It takes care of cooperation in political, economic, energy, military, and cultural domains (Haas & Putten 2007). Moreover, the SCO serves many interests and power games. It is a nontraditional regional organization that is consolidating a new battlefield for East-West confrontation in Central Asia. Therefore, it has become an institutional instrument for China to pursue soft balancing policies against the US (Kocamaz 2019). It envisages free trade as a regional response to the challenges of economic globalization (Haas & Putten 2007). China dominates the economic domain of the SCO. It regulates its relations with countries in Central Asia through infrastructure projects, energy agreements, large-scale aid, and increasing trade volume. It consolidates its partnerships and friendships with its neighboring countries through its neighborhood policy. Such a mutually beneficial cooperation ensures that China's development provides more benefits to its neighboring countries. In the long run, mutual dependency will create more solid partnerships which consequently will enhance China's soft balancing by decreasing the impact of other external powers (Kocamaz 2019). Therefore, China's actions under the economic domain of the SCO also suggest its willingness to assume global leadership.

Power Political Strategies of China

The BRI is China's political strategy to reconstruct a Sinocentric regional order. It is a vital project to increase and expand the dependency between China and Central Asia. It manifests an emerging



shift in China's foreign policy in favor of its arrival as a dominant regional player as well as a global economic player. This initiative is not a mere economic initiative but a symbol for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Kocamaz 2019) which China has been insinuating about its 'peaceful rise' later replaced with 'peaceful development'.

John J. Mearsheimer (2010), a realist, is pessimistic about the peaceful rise of China. He argues that in order to contain its power, most of the neighboring countries of China including Japan, India, Vietnam, South Korea, Singapore, and even Russia will join the United States. This is because of the fact that the power shift from the US to China may not be good for the peace in the neighborhood. China seems to be influenced by this view and trying to contain its neighbors by showing them a friendlier face. Thus, China tried to make its political situation better in the recent past. In 2015, *The Economist* in this regard published an article that talked about China's regional political development and said that China was not only showing a friendlier face to Taiwan but also to Vietnam and Japan. This friendly dealing of China with its neighboring countries was termed as high-level diplomacy which accordingly calmed some of the quarrels of China in Asia (*The Economist* 2015). This behavior of China contradicted Mearsheimer's argument at least for some time. However, China's political strategies have changed since then. In 2018, China returned to a one-man rule which can leave President Xi Jinping in office for life which means the Communist Party of China wants President Xi in office for the long run, in order for China to materialize its power political strategies. In this context, Lovell (2019) argues that since Mao Zedong, President Xi has pushed China's foreign policy harder than any of his predecessors. Moreover, to talk confidently about the global relevance of the CCP/Chinese model, President Xi is the first leader to do so since Mao. China under President Xi has an unprecedented ambition and opportunity to shape the contemporary world due to the global great-power vacuum created by the US under former President Donald Trump. In addition to this, Xuetong (2014) points out that China's political strategy has moved from "Keeping a Low Profile" to "Striving for Achievement". Keeping a Low Profile was a foreign policy strategy adopted by Deng Xiaoping in 1990-1991 which has now shifted to "Striving for Achievement" under President Xi Jinping. Moreover, Bely (2019) argues that ever since the central force in global politics has become China's rise, policymakers and analysts have tracked its path to potential ascendancy on a number of fronts mainly focusing on its economic size and military budget and capabilities. But China has exceeded the US in a crucial measure of global influence which is the size of its diplomatic network. Washington had the largest diplomatic network in the world for decades. Boasting 276 diplomatic posts, China has the largest diplomatic network in the world. This diplomatic network shift can mark a turning point in the great power competition. China does not seem to be interested in Deng Xiaoping's instruction, "Hide your strength, Bide your time" as it becomes more and more willing to deploy its global power by investing in far-reaching and active diplomacy in the world Bely (2019).

Political Domain of the SCO

The SCO through soft balancing policies has restricted a multipolar world to replace the disorder



of an unbalanced world under the US leadership. Through regional integrations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), China has taken a more proactive approach by using all of the benefits of being an economic power. In order to pursue a proactive foreign policy in Central Asia, the SCO is a vital tool for China which has increased its connectivity with Central Asia (Kocamaz 2019). Moreover, Kaplan (2013) argues that in an effort to counterweigh the US influence, the SCO seeks to unite Eurasian, mainly autocratic, powers. China, whose influence in Central Asia has grown at the expense of Russia, is a restraining factor against Russian military action in the region. A reasonably good relationship between China and Russia will provide impetus to the SCO. Because of the rise of China, Russia's hands may be weakened in the region which gives China more sphere of influence. Additionally, Diesen (2017) argues that as a platform offering a Eurasian alternative to Western Europe, an expanded SCO would become an emerging cornerstone of the multipolar world in the making. The SCO can also play an important role in South Asia by improving ties between India and Pakistan who were incorporated in the organization together in 2017. Therefore, under the political domain of SCO, China is expanding its sphere of influence not only vis-à-vis the US but also Russia and India which is a US ally to counterweigh China in the region. Furthermore, Kocamaz (2019) argues that creating anti-western norms is another significant aspect of the expanded vision of the SCO. China has created its own norms through the SCO that differ from Western normative preferences. This anti-western-norm-identity-creation process is pertinent to the claim of being a resurgent great power. State security and sovereignty, non-interference, territorial integrity, and the preservation of the political status quo are the norms that China follows.

Military Strategy of China

China has been transformed since it began to reform and open up. China's outlook on the world has changed with exponential growth in its political influence, technological capabilities, and economy. Today's leaders of China no longer allude to Deng's aphorism about hiding one's strength and biding one's time. China aspires to be a maritime power and sees itself as a continental power. It aims to turn its military into a world-class fighting force and has been modernizing its navy and army. Quite understandably and increasingly, China wants to secure its self-perceived rightful place in international affairs along with protecting and advancing its interests abroad (Loong 2020). In a similar context, while commenting on "*Xi Jinping's 19th Party Congress Speech*" Glaser and Funaiole (2017) argued that President Xi asked the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to be prepared to employ military power. Moreover, underscoring that "a military is built to fight" Xi called on the PLA to "regard combat capability as the criterion to meet in all its work" and to focus on "winning wars" if called upon to fight," they added. Moreover, during his speech, Xi also declared that by 2035 modernization of China's national defense forces would be completed. By 2049 (the 100th year of the founding of the People's Republic of China), Xi expects the full transformation of the PLA into a first-tier force. However, Glaser and Funaiole (2017) do not consider such ambitions of Xi unusual and comment, "rising powers often seek to reinforce their expanding security needs with military might." However, they suspect such developments of China as its desire to displace the dominant power of the U.S. in Asia. The US Defense Intelligence



Agency report 2019, “China Military Power” points out the same and argues that the goals of modernization by 2035 and full transformation of PLA by 2049 are built on “China’s 2013 Defense White Paper” which called for the Chinese armed forces to achieve a status corresponding to China’s international position. It has been aligned with the CCP guidelines to the PLA since 2004 to defend China’s expanding development interests at home as well as abroad.

The US Department of Defense publishes a report every year on China’s military development. The Report, “*Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2022*” highlights that during the first two decades of the 21st century, China has benefited from what it views as a ‘period of strategic opportunity’. During this period, China has benefited from developing domestically and expanding its ‘comprehensive national power’. The report warns that the Chinese leaders are focused on realizing a powerful China equipped with a world-class military that can help it secure its great power status with the aim of emerging as the dominant power in the region of Indo-Pacific. Moreover, through a perceived need to provide security for the BRI, China will probably be driven for the military bases overseas. The same report for the year 2015 highlighted that in order to fight high-intensity and short-duration regional conflicts; a comprehensive military modernization program is designed by China to improve its armed forces. Furthermore, it also highlighted that the primary driving force for China’s investment in the military is to prepare itself for a potential conflict with Taiwan. Other than that, China also increased its prominence in the preparation for the possible conflicts in the South and the East China Sea. Moreover, the international interests and the global footprints of China are also growing. The modernization program of China’s military is focusing more on the investment for a missions’ range beyond its own borders which includes sea lane security, peacekeeping, disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, and counter-piracy and power projection. In order to deny the challenges of benefits of modern warfare based on information, China has started centering its attention towards offensive cyber operations, electronic warfare capabilities, and counter-space. Additionally, in order to build infrastructure and use bases for civil and military operations to augment its existence in areas that are significantly disputed, China has started to reclaim the land in its outpost Islands.

Security Domain of the SCO

Cooperation under the defense and security domain of the SCO covers military drills, armament deals, security policy concepts, agreements, and counter-terrorism activities (Haas & Putten 2007). It has become a regional force and has been attaining significance in the security dynamics of Asia since its inception in 2001 (Amin et al. 2013). It is a tool for military cooperation and deepening neighborhood diplomacy, managing great power relations and mutually beneficial cooperation by using rising regionalism. It indirectly prevents other regional powers from making alliances with the US along with reducing the US effects in the region. The member states of the SCO, mainly China aim to create a balance against the US interventionism and unilateralism in the region (Kocamaz 2019). Moreover, according to the official China Military Strategy (2015), China aims to cooperate for stability, peace, and prosperity within the Asia Pacific Region with its



armed forces which also work with the SCO member states to further the defense and security cooperation within the organization. Thus, gaining influence within the SCO region will be inevitable for China. Moreover, according to Grace (2019), before the Xi era, China's domestic imperatives drove its participation in the SCO as the organization was originally founded to resolve China's border disputes with the former Soviet Satellite states. Under the security domain of the SCO, the "Peace Mission" series of exercises which began in 2005 have incorporated all members of the organization. The 2018 "Peace Mission" incorporated more than 3000 troops from all member states which also included 500 pieces of military hardware including tanks, fighters, and helicopters. Therefore, under the security domain of the SCO, China is expanding its military footprints abroad which indicates China's willingness to assume the role of global as well as regional Leadership.

Conclusion

China's initiatives from the BRI to the SCO indicate that it is ready to assume leadership at the regional as well as global level. Publicly Chinese officials continuously take the position that China does not seek hegemony. Thus, seeking the role of global or regional leadership seems out of the question. However, as analyzed in this research article, China's actions under the guise of the BRI and the SCO suggest the opposite. China seeks to replace the US mainly in the Asia-Pacific. That is why, the BRI can be termed as a response to the US' "Pivot to Asia" policy. China strives to connect itself with the various parts of the world through the BRI. It wants all the roads to lead to Beijing. It wants to create a path dependency and balance of dependence where all states in the BRI will be under Chinese influence. Moreover, the AIIB which aimed to support the BRI infrastructure is meant to rival the Bretton Woods System which has been dominant since the Second World War. Within the Asia Pacific, the AIIB is meant to counter the Manila-based-ADB in which Japan and the US are the largest shareholders. Despite the US warnings, many of its allies became part of the AIIB which suggests the increasing influence of China. With the internationalization of the Renminbi, the Chinese economy was integrated into the global financial system which was a major instrument in China's geo-economic instrument in its toolkit. In addition to this, the SCO which comprises members from South Asia, Central Asia, South East Asia, the Near East, and Europe is an organization that takes care of cooperation mainly in economic, security, and political domains. China's role in the SCO strengthens its power capabilities and increases its influence within the member states. It reduces the effects of the US and indirectly prevents other regional powers from making alliances with the US. Nevertheless, one cannot deny India's closeness with the US which can be detrimental to Beijing in the long term. China is aware of the 'Thucydides Trap' and the 'Power Transition Theory' and utilizes them effectively with Chinese characteristics. It reassures its neighbors and attempts to present itself as a new type of power and portrays its rise as a peaceful development alluding to its stated position of not seeking hegemony. However, its actions speak louder than words which indicates that its aforementioned initiatives insinuate a clear desire to assume regional and global leadership which China will clearly manifest not too late from now.



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