

## Power without Glory

*By Dr. John Bruni*

**W**hile we lament the bad news that seems to surround us – catastrophic fires and floods; economic crises; political scandal and corruption and the general decline of civility and virtue, we seem almost oblivious to the one spectre that is likely to remain the prevailing centre point of international relations for the next few decades – China.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is the world's workshop because of the West's desire for access to a cornucopia of cheap goods. It is the world's largest creditor because the West continues to live beyond its means and willingly mortgages its future with wanton abandon. Now China stands ready as the new international hegemon and it is we in the West who have effectively facilitated, encouraged and supported the rise and rise of China.

And the Chinese people? Over the years they worked steadily and silently on building-up their civilisational base, cleverly playing one country off against another, but generally just waiting for the right moment to make their move. As Western nations become weaker, it becomes easier for the Chinese leadership to reintegrate itself within the community of nations and take a major role in international affairs.

Today, China is no longer masking its intentions for international greatness. It has the population resources (1.3 billion); the economic weight (an average growth rate of 8-10% per annum) and the military muscle (2.2 million active personnel, 1.2 million reserves and 4 million paramilitaries) to wipe away any past humiliations at the hands of the West and Japan during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Driven by the enlightened, pragmatic children of the post-Mao politburo, contemporary 'Communist' China is no pliable stooge waiting for Western developmental aid and handouts. Armed with 21<sup>st</sup> Century technology that we successfully outsourced from their point of origin in the US, Russia, Japan and Europe, China is no longer considered a sleeping dragon. The dragon has awakened and we will feel the heat of its flame for years to come; first within Asia, then, like ripples in a pond, further a field in more distant realms such as Africa and the Middle East.

China has already carved a name for itself in Africa by granting un-tied aid to some of the continent's most wretched regimes in order to secure access to much needed commodities to fuel its population and industry. And, if the history of humanity is any guide, where the economic interests of the hegemon go, there soon is heard the march of its soldiers.

On this score alone, there is much to consider. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is rapidly modernising. While not at the technical level of that of the United States, the PLA's strategy is to raise its

technical specifications to a level between that of Europe and the Russian Federation, assuring for itself a steady and sustainable military modernisation. With this level of military technology secured, the PLA can put into place the pieces of its long-term power-projection capabilities – airborne expeditionary forces; aircraft and helicopter carrier battle groups; space forces; cyber forces and the like. In the foreseeable future, Washington’s primary concern will be China’s increasing ability to rapidly apply military pressure on a scale that the US cannot match. And considering the interconnectedness between Beijing and Washington, with Beijing owning trillions of American sovereign debt, the idea of America confronting China militarily is unlikely.

During the Cold War, the United States positioned itself as ‘first among equals’ in the West. The reality of course was very different. The US was the West’s hegemon just as the USSR was that of the Eastern bloc. But unlike the cultures of the East where despotism was deeply rooted in the political culture, American culture was about encouraging pluralism. Consequently the two competing blocs operated along very different lines. The West’s hegemon, the US, gave the appearance of being the head of a ‘federal union’ of like-minded states and this perception afforded it the legitimacy necessary to confront the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union on the other hand ran its affairs, both internal and external, as a repressive despotism.

What we are now witnessing in China is a ‘soft despotic’ system, held together by a relic of the Cold War – the Chinese Communist Party – which affords the country the unity and discipline necessary to confront its many internal and external challenges. As long as there is a lid kept on social unrest on the Chinese peripheries such as the Uyghur areas along the country’s western frontier and Tibet; and the consumerist culture of the West overwhelms the children of the Chinese elite and burgeoning middle class with superfluous distractions, major internal challenges to the politburo’s grip on political power seem distant. That is not to say that internal challenges will not present themselves as pockets of recurrent instability, however, so long as political opposition to the politburo is weak and divided, contemporary China as it is now configured, will not end in revolution or collapse. This point is reinforced by the ancient Chinese social norm of Confucianism which is making a major state-sponsored comeback aimed to shore up the continued acceptance of the Communist Party to a new, wealthy and upwardly mobile generation.

External to this is the fact that China has become too big to fail.

With much of the world’s manufacturing capacity and sovereign debt owned by China, how could the international community survive a Chinese collapse? Apart from the massive Arab sovereign wealth funds, China is the only other significant global lender of capital. The

parlous state of the American and European economies will continue to weaken their collective bargaining positions vis-à-vis Beijing and the Gulf Arab states, leading to an international power shift away from the traditional transatlantic zone.

Can the transatlantic economies overcome their 'era of austerity' to return to their former wealth and glories?

Not in the short or medium term.

Any such move would need to inculcate a return to economic protectionism; withdraw forcefully Western firms, investment and ancillary technologies from China; re-structure domestic economies into 'national economies' rather than supporting an amorphous 'financial globalisation' through existing multilateral institutions such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Such radical actions would be akin to waging a world war against China in order to stop the Chinese juggernaut from its inevitable rise to international primacy.

So what of the future? What will a world under the soft despotism of China look like? The transatlantic powers of the US and Europe will continue to talk tough on Chinese human rights abuses and of China's provision of aid to corrupt countries with appalling human rights records. The West will continue to send mixed messages to Beijing regarding its desire to create an Asian strategic containment zone without actually creating one. Without the willingness, ability or influence to

implement punitive actions against China to modify the country's behaviour, Beijing will accrue power at the expense of the West.

Western capital will continue to move without restriction into China. Capital knows no state boundary and is not bound by loyalty to any state – its only loyalty is to profit. Western jobs therefore will continue to be lost to China and technological and scientific advantages, once solely the domain of the West, will eventually be 'internationalised' and located offshore in the cheap manufacturing centres of Shanghai and Guangdong. The West and other countries importing Chinese goods will continue to complain about the poor standard of Chinese labour. But we demand our trinkets, gadgets and status symbols without waiting for a 'job well done', addicted as we are to consumerism which is our 'opium'.

The rise to primacy of Chinese soft despotism will have another effect. It will make international communities more agreeable to accept the very real flaws of their domestic political processes. Governments will exercise more overt measures for self-preservation, while oppositions will be sidelined, deliberately weakened and muted. Those who argue that the internet will act as the ultimate check and balance to this fate will need to look at how both the PRC and the US are waging their own campaigns to limit the freedom of online space – especially after the Assange and Wikileaks 'information attack'.

In conclusion, a Chinese dominated future will be very different from either the US hegemony over the West, or the former Soviet Union's hegemony over the Eastern bloc countries. An empowered Beijing may not be in the mood for consensus because it knows that the West will, for the foreseeable future, be financially and politically weak, and – dependent. Under these circumstances resistance to Chinese influence can only be feeble. Yet while the People's Republic may have the power, it is questionable whether it will have any glory in this new order even though its transformation to global hegemony will appear to be carefully managed through multilateral forums, the very multilateral forums that have given us 'globalisation' and all of its attendant uncertainties. There may, however, come a time in the not too distant future, when the temptation of national chauvinism will cleave the Chinese leadership from the international community, demonstrating once and for all that the dragon is awake and will not go back to sleep.

Chinese military on parade image:

<http://trendsupdates.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/chinamilitary1.jpg>

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