A review of China's relations with its neighbours

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1. Introduction

Since Deng Xiaoping’s reforms in 1979, China has been emerging from its “century of humiliation” and is receiving more and more attention from the West. While the “China threat theory” is quite popular in Western society, many Chinese people criticize China's foreign diplomacy for not being “tough” enough, especially with neighbours such as Japan that caused much misery to China in the 20th century. But from the Chinese government's perspective, the fundamental purpose of diplomacy is to safeguard the national interests no matter whether by “hard” or by “soft” means. Partly because of its rise, China has had many conflicts recently with several of its 14 direct neighbours.

This paper briefly discusses the Chinese ideology from a historical perspective, as it offers guidance for people to understand China's behaviour today. It then examines China's geopolitical situation and its relations with its neighbours. It notes that China's focus has shifted from the land to the sea. It also argues that the Chinese leadership is determined that China should resume its ‘rightful’ place in history.

2. The Chinese ideology from history

If the origin of Western civilization was a “Mediterranean” history, the history of East Asia was mainly a Chinese history. From the Chinese perspective, the other areas could only try to influence Asia's history, but could not determine it. The centre of Eastern civilization – the ancient Chinese core area – was so fascinating and powerful that most East Asian ethnic groups during the ancient period thought that who occupied this land would occupy the centre of the world. Therefore, it would not be surprised that the inhabitants, the Huaxia group (华夏族), of this land defined it as the “Central Kingdom (中央之国)”. This was very different from Europe during the same period, which usually had a balance of power among several ethnic groups except for the Roman period. This different phenomenon ultimately led to a different political view between the East and the West, namely the Western decentralized system and East Asian authoritarian politics.

Ancient China, as a powerful central country, could not ignore the existence of small

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1 which is called Han People today.
ethnic groups that surrounded it. In fact, this powerful big brother needed small brothers to protect him, but they could not have the same status. The Zhou People (周人) were very visionary – even before the Huaxia group occupied all the land that was suitable for cultivation, people from Zhou Dynasty had already put forward a Hua Yi Wu Fang theory (华夷五方论)\(^2\), which theoretically determined Huaxia group’s central position on this continent, and assumed other ethnic regions could only succumb to the “central family” (An, 2011). This propaganda was so deeply rooted that when other border groups had the chance to control the central land, they first had to find themselves a Huaxia origin (all groups from the Xianbei (鲜卑)\(^3\) to the Japanese did this, with only the Mongols as an exception because their horizon was already beyond East Asia). When an Emperor extended his country to the East China Sea and South China Sea, he had good reason to believe that he had already occupied all the important lands.

The real centre of Eurasia – the complex terrain of the North West side of China, actually makes China’s core area isolated on the Eastern side of Eurasian continent. “Barbarians” actually did have chances to change this situation. All they needed to do was to march into the central empire. However, the geopolitical difficulties were too obvious – even after the Mongols linked East and West on the Eurasia continent, the central empire would quickly return to its original state. Only after the Europeans linked China with the world did Chinese people begin to understand that they were not the centre of the world (Tianya.cn, 2009). Nowadays in Chinese language, the popular explanation of “Chinese dream” is the revival of Huaxia group. From the Chinese perspective, the “China threat theory” looks very unfounded since China’s position of being in the centre is very deep-rooted in Chinese people’s minds.

3. China’s geopolitical situation

China’s geopolitical situation was extremely dangerous during the Cold War period – the Soviet Union blockaded China from land, and the United States from the sea. China had only three allies – Burma, North Korea and Pakistan. In fact, North Korea asked for help from China to deal with South Korea, Pakistan needed China to contain India, while Burma asked for help to maintain the military government. The Indian-Pakistan conflict made it inevitable that Pakistan would be China’s most loyal ally. China, since 1949, has fought with big powers surrounding its territory: the Korean War with the US, the Sino-Indian War with India, the Vietnam War with

\(^2\) Hua Yi (华夷) is the same with Huaxia group (Han people). The core of the theory is that it categories all nations by geography, which are Hua Yi (华夷) in the centre, Dong Yi (东夷) in the East, Xi Rong (西戎) in the West, Bei Di (北狄) in the North and Nan Man (南蛮) in the South.

\(^3\) It is one of the ethnic minorities that originated from North China.
Vietnam and some skirmishes in Zhenbao Island with the Soviet Union.

At present, China’s geopolitical situation is much better than before. China has no pressure from the Northwest, and Russia is too busy with internal problems following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Vietnam could not threaten China without a Great Power ally. Taiwan has been recognized as a part of China by the US. And with China’s development, China and the US have become more economically interdependent.

4. China's relations with its neighbours

1) Taiwan

As China constantly declares that Taiwan is part of China, it is not suitable to name Taiwan as one of China's neighbours. But since it has not returned to China, and its location is so important for China's strategy in the Pacific Ocean, it needs a specific section to discuss issues in this specific region. Although the distance between mainland China and Taiwan is not great, Chinese emperors were not interested in the land overseas. Taiwan did not get attention from the Chinese emperors until the late Ming Dynasty. From then and until 1949, there were three large scale immigration movements from Mainland China to Taiwan. The earliest migrants in the late Ming Dynasty settled in the Tainan area (the Jianan Plain); migrants in the early Qing Dynasty were mainly in the middle area; while the immigration after 1949 mainly went to the North area. This is because of the terrain in Taiwan - the southwest has a relatively large plain which is the most suitable area for farming. Therefore, the original developing sites were in the south.

This has led to the phenomenon that in the southern region of Taiwan, local people have a lower degree of attachment to China (or the Mainland); while in the north, the period of immigration was more recent and so the memory of the mainland is clearer. The Democratic Progressive Party of Taiwan plays on the distinction between the old and new immigrants, thus currently the factionalism largely shows the partisan relationship with the mainland China. Currently there are more than eight million people living in the Taipei area, six million in the Tainan area, while the total population in Taiwan is about 22 million. There is trend that the population is moving northward, which is a good thing from the unification perspective (Tianya.cn, 2009). Here the conclusion that people living in the northern area of Taiwan would have a more positive attitude towards the unification is because they have clearer memories of the mainland China and they may still have relatives there (since the last
immigration wave happened during the Liberation War) than those people who arrived 500 years ago.

Currently Beijing has put forward a new direction - anything can be discussed under the “one China” premise (Sina, 2008). This has been greatly adjusted from what Deng Xiaoping originally proposed – “one country, two systems” - since Deng still put the country's political attributes in the first place. Now the problem is that Taiwan wants an equal political status with the mainland, while Beijing hopes to establish a superior-subordinate relationship and give Taiwan sufficient rights on this basis (Tianya.cn, 2009). There is a survey about Taiwanese attitudes toward Taiwan's future, the result is interesting as 53% Taiwanese want to main the current status quo forever, while 25% want to be independent, and 11% are in favour of unification with the Mainland (Kuomintang Official Website, 2011). It may be possible that when both sides reach an acceptable “one China” political plan and get more than 50% public support, Taiwan will come back to China. However an acceptable plan could not be easily reached since the “one China” can only be People's Republic of China, while Taiwan would not feel guaranteed in terms of democracy under this condition.

2) The unification problem on Korean Peninsula

The biggest problem on the Korean peninsula is the unification issue. From China's perspective, the opportunity for peaceful unification in the Korean peninsula is still very large, while the speed of this progress will depend on China and the US. This is mainly because China treats the DPRK as its proxy which can react when Japan and South Korea or even the US have some provocative actions.

It is generally agreed that the unification process would only be that South Korea unifies with the North. There is another argument that the unification problem has not been solved is because it is too expensive (Askew, 2013). Because North Korea is so poor. If it reunified the South would have two choices - it could let 22 million Northerners move to the south, or it could invest in new roads, schools, hospitals and so on in the north to try to keep them there. This is what happened to Germany. They could not refuse reunification. But it cost the West Germans a trillion dollars - and it is still costing them money today. North Korea is much poorer than East Germany was. There were 4 West Germans for every East German, while there are 2 South Koreans for every North Korean. The South Koreans have looked at this problem and understand the huge costs involved.

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4Personal communication with Professor Joseph Askew, 3rd July 2013.
3) Russia

The territorial issues between China and Russia rely greatly on both sides' strength - their abilities decide how much territory they could control. China gave up Mongolia when the Soviet Union was extremely strong; while Russia also gave up Central Asia when the Soviet Union collapsed. Currently China's relation with Russia is cooperation, as they have a common competitor - the US, and neither of them is powerful enough to confront the US separately. Besides, they both have what each other wants - oil and gas and weapons from Russia, manufactured goods from China.

However this cooperation seems to be short term because China's strategy might affect Russia's traditional sphere of influence, for example China's westward strategy, China's expansion of influence in Central Asia, and China's cooperation with Ukraine (Tianya.cn, 2009). In addition, both countries want to be leaders at least in Asia, and it is hard to say they really trust each other. Nevertheless, the current Sino-Russian relationship is quite good in general - Russia was the first country that Xi Jinping visited in March 2013, while China was also the first country outside the Commonwealth of Independence States that Putin visited in June 2012. In addition to that, China and Russia held a joint military exercise in the Yellow Sea in April 2012 and July 2013. This close Sino-Russian relationship is partly influenced by the international environment - the Western countries are forming a new strategy to better deal with the rise of a group of emerging powers including China and Russia. The on-going Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement negotiations will greatly change the current rules and standards of global trade, which will further challenge the prospective cooperation among the BRIC countries.

4) Kazakhstan

The neighbours on China's west are countries in Central Asia. There are three countries that are adjacent to China, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. All of them demarcated borders with China after their independence from the Soviet Union. China's relationships with the countries in Central Asia are quite good compared with the neighbours in the East and in the South. China is trying to increase its influence in Central Asia through cooperation on energy. Since China does not have any conflicts with those neighbours in Central Asia, the following paragraphs will talk about Kazakhstan because it is related to one of China's biggest internal problems - the Uighurs in Xinjiang region demanding independence.
The Xinjiang region is divided into two parts - the North and the South - by the Tianshan Mountains. The Uighurs mainly live in the southern part of Xinjiang, while the northern part is mixed with Han, Kazak, Hui, Mongolian and other ethnic groups. Encouraging Han people (mostly) to live in the southern area of Xinjiang and integrate the Uighurs is basically what Chinese government is doing currently. The problem for Chinese government there is that the Uighurs and Han people still have big differences in terms of both religion and race. Compared with China, the Uighurs could have more chance to have their own independent territory in another country, which is Kazakhstan. Because for two ethnic groups that are geographically and culturally close, mutual penetration is a very natural thing. Just like there are Kazakhs living in Xinjiang area, there is a large number of Uighurs in Kazakhstan too. Uygur internal statistics say that there are 2 million Uighurs in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan has a total population of 17 million, while there are 14 million Kazakhs worldwide (Tianya.cn, 2009). There are 9 million Uighurs in China, and the Uighurs have a comparatively higher birth rate than Kazakhs (Tianya.cn, 2009). Indeed Kazakhstan has been very sensitive on this issue. On the one hand, to increase the proportion of the main ethnic group, they want those Kazakhs that currently live abroad to “return” to Kazakhstan, on the other hand, it strengthens the ties with China to face the problem. This is also where the so-called “using Kazakhstan to control the Uighurs” policy comes from.5

5) Neighbours that may have geopolitical conflicts with China in the sea

Both European and Chinese initial understanding of the world were extremely limited, the only difference was that Europeans thought that the Mediterranean was the centre of the earth (sea power), while Chinese people thought that the northern plain was (land power). Since the sea was the only way to take people to the unknown continents, Europeans finally arrived in China. The Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, the United Kingdom and the US took turns on the global stage. When Eastern countries were forced to open their doors by gunboats, they also began to realize that who controls the oceans controls the world.

At the end of the Second World War, China's national government sent ships to the South China Sea and occupied a series of islands there. Then the government marked them on the map and announced its sphere of influence worldwide while those small countries in the South China Sea were busy with their independence. Two years later after the Nationalist government retreated to the other side of the Strait to Taiwan, the Communist party, as the successor to the Kuomintang government, appreciated the

5 The Chinese government never published this policy, but “以哈制维” is a popular term in Chinese civil society.
Kuomintang's pioneering spirit on the map (Tianya.cn, 2009). Under a more energetic regime, the South China Sea become the “South Sea” in the Chinese language, thus some Chinese people even think the South China Sea is China's inland sea.

Apart from this KMT expedition, the Chinese official position is that the islands were first discovered by the Chinese around 2000 years ago, and thus the Chinese claims predate any others. It is not sure this argument is legitimate enough for Chinese government to win those islands in the Sea, but it is sure that Chinese government is just postponing this debate. Actually in the Joint Statement between China and ASEAN in 1997, Chinese government has already put forward a principle of “shelving the disputes and seeking common developments (搁置争议，共同开发)” in the South China Sea (Joint Statement, 1997). China's general principle towards its neighbours in the sea could be summarized as the following: during China's peaceful rise, China thanks those countries, including Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, that support or help it; China peacefully cooperates and reasonably solve the disputes with the countries, such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei, that do not provoke or contain China; while for countries like Japan which Beijing claims provokes China repeatedly, China's plan is not only getting Diaoyu/Senkaku Island back, but also helping with the independence of Ryukyu Islands (China.com, 2011).

China's Strategy in the Pacific Ocean

The recent emphasis on the navy and the issues in the East China Sea and the South China Sea suggests that China is working hard to expand its interests in the Pacific Ocean. However there is a serious problem – the existence of the so-called “first island chain” means that China has access to a “sea” rather than an “ocean”. China’s coast could be divided into three regions – the Sea of Japan, East China Sea and South China Sea, which means that if China wants to become a global power, it needs to find a way out from these three regions (Tianya.cn, 2009).

China's strategy in the Indian Ocean

While China has a great interest in a breakthrough in the Pacific Ocean, it also keeps an eye on the Indian Ocean as freedom of navigation is important for China’s economic interests in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

China is also developing closer ties to Sri Lanka and investing in the port of Hambantota port. Hambantota port is an important part of China's “string of pearls” strategy, which also consists of Chittagong in Bangladesh, Sittwe in Myanmar and
Gwadar port in Pakistan. The significance of these projects is to reduce China's dependence on the Malacca Strait, and to make China become a big country across two oceans instead of only being active in the Pacific Ocean. The Chinese government also provided billions of dollars to Myanmar and been actively building highways, waterways and oil pipelines from the Bay of Bengal to China's Yunnan province. These activities not only aim to protect the Chinese commercial interests, but also act as a counter to India (Dougnac, 2013 and Tea, 2011).

In the past, Pakistan was always the first country that Chinese leaders would visit in South Asia. However, China's new Premier - Li Keqiang - chose India as his first state visit in May 2013, which does not mean Pakistan is not as important as before, but it shows that India's significance for China in terms of global diplomacy overweighs Pakistan's significance as China's geopolitical strategic partner (Ding, 2013). The biggest problem in the Sino-Indian relationship is the border issue. The never-demarcated line caused a Sino-Indian war in 1962, and recently a heated “tent confrontation” since April 2013. The war in 1962 showed that the border problem could not be resolved by military conflict. Peaceful negotiation may be the only practical way. Peaceful development, improving people's livelihood and achieving national prosperity are the more important and urgent tasks for both China and India. There is plenty of time for both sides to resolve the border issue peacefully through negotiation and discussion in the future, while conflicts can only make both sides suffer (Zhang, 2013).

5. Conclusion

This paper discussed China’s relations with its neighbours from a Chinese perspective using several online fora where Chinese people are actively discussing the behaviour and policies of the Chinese government.

From China’s development in the past few decades, it could be seen that ideology is no longer playing a primary role in China’s foreign diplomacy. For example during the Sino-Vietnamese war, the same ideology did not stop China and the Soviet Union moving from cooperation to conflict, while the distinct ideology did not hinder the cooperation between China and the US. Indeed it is not easy to clarify what it means to be a Communist in modern China, nor is it clear what it means to be a Capitalist in modern Europe. China is learning from the West during its development, and as China becomes more and more part of the world economy, it will come to devote itself to a peaceful international environment in order to guarantee its own interests.
China’s relations with its neighbours also show that although there are conflicts one after another, China has always preferred to solve the disputes through negotiation. In terms of several conflicts that could not be easily solved through negotiation, such as the Diaoyu/Senkaku Island issue with Japan and the border issue with India, it seems that China is just trying to postpone these disputes rather than starting a war. Internal development is still the main task for China, which requires a peaceful environment in Asia.
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