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**The rise of China**

Chinese President Xi Jinping. File photo

Napoleon Bonaparte once noted, “China is a sleeping giant. Let her sleep, for when she wakes up, the world will shake”. His prophecy has seemingly come true. The dragon is waking up.

The rise of China is important to understand contemporary international politics. How it will be handled by the US will define the global politics of the 21st century.

The rise of China threatens the hegemony of the United States. The unipolar moment is arguably ending, and the era of bipolarity could be in the pipeline. Scholars of international relations differ on which system is stable. The hegemonic stability theory argues that a single hegemon in the world can help keep the world stable. Others argue that a bipolar system can keep the world relatively peaceful as there is somewhat a balance of military power, and no single great power is able to coercively dominate other states.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US came forward as the single hegemon. Now, China has become a peer competitor. The rise of a new power challenges the hegemony of the established power. As China expands its influence, the US is committed to contain it. Thucydides, an ancient Greek historian, noted that when there is an established power and another is rising up, the conflict between them is inevitable. Graham Allison coined the term Thucydides Trap to explain this phenomenon. He wrote: “In fact, in 12 of 16 cases over the last 500 years in which there was a rapid shift in the relative power of a rising nation that threatened to displace a ruling state, the result was war.” Although the two powers did not collide directly, they did indulge in a series of proxy wars that affected them and the whole world in a considerable way.

Will the rise of China revive the Thucydides Trap? Many scholars and strategists such as Henry Kissinger, John Mearsheimer and Graham Allison himself think so. However, some other scholars such as Joseph Nye argue that the two states will be able to escape the Thucydides Trap.

China’s Belt and Road Initiative is an ambitious project which is aimed to connect many countries in economic ties. It connects Asia with Africa and Europe via land and maritime routes. Underdeveloped countries are a major part of this project. The multi-trillion-dollar project is helping China become economically strong as well as the countries in which China is making the investments. However, there is huge scepticism that China might use these economic investments as a political tool in the near future. China is increasing its sphere of influence with the BRI.

The project can be seen as a positive-sum game in which China and other countries benefit mutually as they all will increase their trade capabilities as well as politico-economic integration that leads to development and stability. However, it can also be seen as a hawkish Chinese strategy that would make it a dominant player in the world which would challenge the existing global order.

China is following the model of stability through economic growth as cooperation between the states, owing to the economic interests, leads to stable and amicable relations. A peaceful rise of China can be an opportunity to show its ability to be a responsible power in politico-economic global leadership. For the region, a rising China can be an opportunity to have a profitable ally that can help the region become stable and developed.

On the other hand, a rising China can be a dominating and challenging foe, especially for countries allied with the US, that can turn the region hostile. For instance, India would look at Beijing's investments and interests in South Asian states with wary eyes.

The western part of China is not as developed as the eastern part. For China, the BRI is also an opportunity to develop its western provinces. It can also help China boost its soft power in the world. Chinese investments in economically underdeveloped countries can be a win-win for both parties as interdependence can take the driving seat when observed through a liberal lens.

On the other hand, it might also sound like a mighty ‘debt-trap diplomacy’ when observed through a realist lens as it can even interfere with the sovereignty of some states where policy dictations are also feared. For example, the case of Sri Lanka’s Hambantota port.

While China would consider the BRI as a part of globalization, the US would perceive it as a Chinese design to expand its influence, for example creating a String of Pearls in the Indian ocean. This would compel the US to try to contain Chinese naval power by building greater ties with India and other allies as well as spending more resources.

Although the BRI is a Sino-centric agenda creating a dependent relationship between China and other states, member states of the project are finding it advantageous to remain a part of it for their own good. The case of Malaysia, another member state, suggests otherwise. In 2018, Malaysia suspended some deals with China when Mahathir Mohamad became Prime Minister, but restarted after negotiations and amendments. This proves that member countries are finding it beneficial to remain a part of the BRI while pursuing their foreign policies. It means that they are considering it an absolute gain for everyone, rather than a relative gain for only China at their expense.

The recent G-7’s 40 trillion-dollar plan named ‘Build Back Better World’ is a counter-project to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. The geopolitical contest between the great powers is starting, which may lead to a new-cold war really soon. When the elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers. The underdeveloped world might become a victim of the great power rivalry under the guise of development.

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