



Summary: China's continuing economic growth and expanding involvement in global affairs poses major implications for the power structure of the international system. One very important aspect of China's grand strategy is its continued emphasis on access diplomacy, or "politics of routes." China is in the process of aggressively securing access to natural resources, while simultaneously developing overland transport networks in pursuit of its national interest. Recent changes in the political climate in the Asia-Pacific region only increase the requirement to gain an understanding of Chinese thought concerning its implementation of access diplomacy.

The Geopolitics of Chinese Access Diplomacy

by Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy & Guy M. Snodgrass

China's continuing economic growth and expanding involvement in global affairs poses major implications for the power structure of the international system. China is taking decisive steps to improve its overall geopolitical position by securing natural resources and developing extensive transport networks, including roads, railways, ports, and energy corridors, in its neighborhood and beyond.

China is also increasing its influence through a series of international investments. Developing nations appear to appreciate the contracts provided by Beijing, especially when China offers investments that, other than recognition of its "one China" policy, impose no conditions. These investments run in direct conflict with those from nations like the United States, who typically require that performance metrics be met to receive funding.

The country is now a global actor of significance and growing importance and is increasing involvement in regions and on issues that were once peripheral to its interests. It is influencing perceptions, relationships, and organizations all over the world.

Thus, it becomes necessary to gain an understanding of Chinese thought concerning its implementation of access diplomacy.¹

Conceptual Framework

China is currently involved in a deliberate identification and prioritization of its foreign policy goals through the identification of resources required to sustain its economic expansion. Beijing is, in fact, focused on improving its overall condition and strength in several areas by exercising a grand strategy that seeks to pursue national objectives through increasing access to the international system.² Understanding this international envi-

¹ The terms "access diplomacy" and "politics of routes" have been used in this paper interchangeably. The term "access" normally subsumes all types of bases and facilities (including technical installations), aircraft over-flight rights, port visit privileges, and use of offshore anchorages within sovereign maritime limits. The term "access diplomacy" is used more broadly to include, for instance, access to markets, raw material sources, and/or investments, penetration by radio and television broadcasts, and access for intelligence operations. See Robert E. Harkavy, *Great Power Competition for Overseas Bases: The Geopolitics of Access Diplomacy*, (Canada: Pergamon Policy Studies on Security Affairs, Pergamon Press Canada Ltd, 1982), pp. 14-43.

² The grand strategy denotes "a country's broadest approach to the pursuit of its national objectives in the international system." See Robert H. Dorff, "A Primer in Strategy Development," in Joseph R. Cerami and James F Holcomb, Jr. (eds.), *U.S. Army War College Guide to Strategy* (Carlisle Barracks, P.A., Strategic Studies Institute, 2001), p. 12.

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ronment “is essential to the formulation of any sensible strategic policy,”³ because it represents both the means for access and the desired end that a state wishes to achieve.

A state’s grand strategy also provides an understanding of its long-term foreign and security policy goals. The key elements of China’s grand strategy may be described as follows:⁴

- Acquire “comprehensive national power” (CNP)⁵ essential to achieving the status of a “global great power that is second to none”;
- Secure global access to natural resources, raw materials, and overseas markets to sustain China’s economic expansion;
- Pursue “three Ms”: military build-up (including a naval presence along the vital sea lanes of communication and maritime chokepoints), multilateralism, and multipolarity; and
- Build a worldwide network of friends and allies through “soft power” diplomacy, trade and economic dependencies via free trade agreements, mutual security pacts, intelligence cooperation, and arms sales.

One very important aspect of China’s grand strategy is its access diplomacy or “politics of routes.” China is aggressively securing access to natural resources, while simultaneously developing overland transport networks in pursuit of its national interest.

The Politics of Routes

Routes (and the access they provide) play a key role in a country’s military affairs, as well as its political development, economic growth, and cultural change. Routes also provide “the means for the movement of ideas, the dominant culture and ideology of the political centre, to its

³ Williamson Murray and Mark Grimsley, “Introduction: On Strategy,” in Williamson Murray, Macgregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 5.

⁴ J. Mohan Malik, “India’s Response to China’s Rise” in Kevin J. Cooney and Yoichiro Sato (eds.), *The Rise of China and International Security: America and Asia Respond* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 178.

⁵ China has been focussing on economic development in its pursuit of CNP. The various elements of CNP include resources, manpower, economy, science and technology, education, defence, and politics. For a detail analysis on this, see Jian Yang, “The Rise of China: Chinese Perspectives” in Kevin J. Cooney and Yoichiro Sato (eds.), *The Rise of China and International Security: America and Asia Respond* (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 16-19.

peripheries.”⁶ The control over and expansion of routes have proven to be historically important in obtaining optimum economic benefit from trade with other states. To increase economic productivity, security, and market size, states may also form integrated regional groupings in which conditions of access are eased for member-states relative to non-members. Such regional integration policies often involve the joint expansion of physical channels of communication and transport. Mahnaz Z. Ispahani, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and South Asian expert notes, “In decisions on foreign infrastructural aid, economic, political, strategic, and geographical concerns intersect. The infrastructure of access is also dual-use: depending on its location and specifications, it can be an instrument of economic development or a tool of internal security or external defence.”⁷ Indeed, the control of the sea lines and points of strategic egress has become increasingly pertinent to China’s strategic designs in the Asia-Pacific region. From China’s point of view, South Asia constitutes a littoral giving China’s western regions access to the seas.

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The importance of establishing control over routes can explain the past, present, and future distribution of international political and military power. As Harold J. Mackinder writes, “A geographical-historical perspective on global strategy is made possible when matters are regarded from the point of view of human mobility, and of the different modes of mobility.”⁸ Roads, railroads, and ports have always been historically important as integrative, political, and strategic forces. “From the beginning, governments have strengthened their control over territory by supplementing

⁶ Jean Gottmann, “The Political Partitioning of Our World: An Attempt at Analysis,” *World Politics*, Vol. 4, July 1952, p. 515.

⁷ Mahnaz Z. Ispahani, *Roads and Rivals*, p. 10.

⁸ Harold J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (New York: Holt, 1942), p. 109.

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the natural means of communication and attempting to overcome the barriers posed by topography.”⁹ Large states built routes “for strategic and political reasons long before the economic significance of outlying areas justified such construction.”¹⁰

While demands for scarce natural resources, including energy, are accelerating, scarcities within a country may provoke competition and conflict with other countries over the access to alternate supplies of those resources. Resource scarcity is capable of generating a clash of interests and even of provoking conflict. If we consider the sheer size of China’s population, a race for resources is bound to occur. While China is trying to enhance its safety and security by increasing transport networks and access in its neighborhood and beyond, regional countries are concerned by these developments and are apprehensive about Chinese intensions.

Drivers of China’s Foreign Policy

Chinese presence and influence has increased so rapidly that it raises questions about China’s intentions and the implications for the emerging world order. According to a recent study done by Evan S. Medeiros, there are at least three historical factors that shape China’s foreign policy trajectory:¹¹

- China is in the process of reclaiming its status as a great power;
- Many Chinese view their country as a victim of “100 years of shame and humiliation” at the hands of foreign powers. This victimization narrative has fostered an acute sensitivity to coercion by foreign powers and especially infringements (real or perceived) on its sovereignty; and
- China has a defensive security outlook that stems from historically determined fears that foreign powers will try to constrain and coerce it by exploiting its internal weaknesses.

Medeiros explains that China’s view of its security environment has two overarching dimensions. The first is a widely

⁹ Nicholas J. Spykman, “Geography and Foreign Policy,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 32, February 1938, pp. 36-37.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹¹ For a detail analysis, see Evan S. Medeiros, *China’s International Behaviour: Activism, Opportunism, and Diversification*, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009).

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held belief that China’s success is inextricably linked to the international community, more so than ever before. The second is the pervasive uncertainty about the range and severity of threats to China’s economic and security interests. On balance, Chinese leaders have concluded that their external security environment is favorable and that the next 15 to 20 years represent a “strategic window of opportunity” for China to achieve its leading objective of national revitalization through continued economic, social, military, and political development. Chinese policymakers seek, to the maximum extent possible, to extend this window of opportunity through diplomacy.¹² Indeed, this is clearly visible in Chinese foreign policy and their growing weight in global affairs.

Beijing views Southern Asian countries as neighbors with whom it is especially important to have friendly cooperative ties, both to increase China’s own economic and political influence and to lessen the ability of potentially hostile powers to injure China’s interests. China views strategic links as a part of the normal repertoire of international cooperation and seeks to expand physical connectivity and strategic ties with South Asian countries.¹³ This is important to note when considering China’s strategic access to Southern Asia and helps to explain efforts like the China-Pakistan strategic relationship, which has resulted in the establishment of the Karakoram Highway and Gwadar Port projects. Thus, Chinese designs are driven primarily to boost economic growth and enhance security. Setbacks have occurred, however, when China acts in a heavy-handed

¹² See Evan S. Medeiros, *China’s International Behaviour*.

¹³ Based on Rajeev’s discussion with scholars in China at various institutions including, the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, CICIR, CIIS, Tsinghua University, SIIS, Tongji University, Fudan University, China Agricultural University, YASS, and Yunnan University during June and July 2009.

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fashion, such as when exerting claims to the South China Sea.

Broadly, there are two dimensions to Chinese access diplomacy. First, all of these investments are manifestations of China's economic rise. Building roads, railways, ports, and energy corridors are all very expensive investments. High levels of economic development are required to finance transport networks that China is now building, particularly beyond its borders. A second dimension is that these new lines of transportation will also be an instrumental part in increasing Chinese influence. As discussed earlier in relation to the significance of routes, it is clear that railways and better roads will bring Chinese goods, businesses, and investment, as well as cultural influence.¹⁴ Trade flows and inter-dependence will then subsequently develop. In fact, linking directly with neighboring countries is a new feature in China's foreign policy strategy. Certainly, China's influence is on the rise in a region where it was historically limited by the difficult terrain and vast distances.

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The main goals of Chinese strategic access are: regime security, territorial integrity, national unification, maritime security, and regional stability.¹⁵ Here again, Chinese desire to improve internal security seems to be a major reason to develop peripheral regions. The increase in uncertainty and insecurity in Tibet serves as a recent example, resulting in an increase in Chinese development in peripheral regions. These concerns have resulted in huge investments in infrastructure building, including the Tibet railway.¹⁶ Indeed, the

railway has boosted Tibet's domestic and foreign investment since its opening in 2006.¹⁷

The Chinese are incredibly sensitive about their territorial integrity and sovereignty,¹⁸ which may explain why a great deal of attention is being focused on integrating their peripheral regions to the heartland. China's Western regions lag far behind the coastal region, in terms of overall development. These transport networks in China and in neighboring countries are aimed at:

- Reducing regional inequality;
- Improving resource supplies;
- Securing national security and unity; and
- Ensuring economic growth and development.¹⁹

China is also aware of the possibility that its growing stature could be construed as a threat to other countries in Asia, resulting in a generally benign approach to gain influence through the use of investments, development packages, and diplomatic gestures.²⁰ China's behavior largely has been consistent with its policy objectives. From the Chinese perspective, it is thus very clear that its twin goals of maintaining economic growth and domestic stability are the motivations and drivers of its access diplomacy. China's priorities are protecting its sovereignty and territorial integrity, promoting economic development, and generating international respect and status. Though there could be a military component to these developments, this is unlikely to be the primary motivation. Interestingly, few in China are talking about the military dimension of these developments. Emphasis is always placed on the economic dimension of relations. However, the lack of information and availability of statistics on the economic benefits and activities adds fuel to the apprehensions among other countries including the United States and other countries in Asia. There is a need for more awareness and information sharing to bridge this knowledge gap.

¹⁴ See John W Garver, "Development of China's Overland Transportation Links with Central, South-west and South Asia," *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 185, 2006, pp.1-22.

¹⁵ Based on Rajeev's discussion with Prof. M. Taylor Fravel at MIT on November 6, 2009. See also, M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Search for Military Power," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 3, summer 2008, pp.125-141.

¹⁶ Tibet railway was completed in five years at a cost of \$3.68 billion.

¹⁷ "Qinghai-Tibet Railway brings investment to Tibet" available at <http://www.hktdc.com/info/mi/a/cbn/en/1X056330/1/China-Business-News/Qinghai-Tibet-Railway-Brings-Investment-To-Tibet.htm>

¹⁸ Prof. Alastair Iain Johnston of Harvard University mentioned this to Rajeev during his discussion on November 6, 2009 at Harvard University.

¹⁹ These points are based on the Rajeev's discussion with various scholars in 2009.

²⁰ Based on Rajeev's discussion at SIIIS in Shanghai on July 3, 2009.

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China's Access Diplomacy not Assured

China has enjoyed numerous successes in developing regional infrastructure in recent years in order to increase access to lines of communication and resources. Despite these successes, and China's best efforts, setbacks have occurred. One of the most recent and significant setbacks was Myanmar's decision to suspend the Myitsone Dam project in September of 2011.²¹ Despite decades of Chinese financial investment, Myanmar decided that the project didn't meet the threshold for continued construction. China's use of external labor for the project, the fact that 90 percent of the electricity generated would return to China, the environmental impacts, and Myanmar's scheduled chairmanship of the ASEAN multinational group in 2014 were all likely factors in this decision. Despite the specific reasons, this decision still demonstrates the vulnerability of China's access diplomacy, especially in the midst of a fluid political environment with Asian nations.

Conclusion

China's continuing economic growth and involvement in global affairs create inherent risks to the established international norms, especially in the Asia-Pacific region. For the local populations that reside in peripheral areas, China's prospective transport networks and access diplomacy means fresh possibilities for trade will likely exist. In times of scarcity, these nations will have access to Chinese and regional markets, ultimately becoming more closely linked with the rest of the world.

The *raison d'être* of Chinese access diplomacy is more commensurate with its rapidly expanding economic clout. Beijing aspires to ensure continued access to the raw materials needed to support its continuing urbanization and economic development. While China's intensifying links can be seen as a potential opportunity for the acceleration of regional integration, the long-term effects on the international system of a regionally connected China remain to be seen.

²¹ Yang R. Kassim, "Myanmar's China Policy Shift: Preparing for ASEAN Chair?." RSIS Commentaries, Nanyang Technological University, No. 043/2012, March 14, 2012.

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About the Young Strategists Forum

The Young Strategists Forum aims to develop a new generation of strategic thinkers in the United States, Europe, and Asia through a combination of seminars, simulations, and study tours. The project is led by transatlantic fellow Daniel M. Kliman with non-resident senior fellow Aaron Friedberg serving as faculty. The first Young Strategists Forum was convened in Japan with the support of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation. This initiative is part of GMF's Asia Program, which addresses the implications of Asia's rise for the West through a combination of convening, writing, strategic grants, study tours, fellowships, and partnerships with other institutions.

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