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.

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.

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.” 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...
Chinese presence and influence has increased so rapidly that it raises questions about China’s intentions and the implications for the emerging world order.

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 intentions.

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:\(^\text{11}\)

- 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 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.\(^\text{12}\) 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.\(^\text{13}\) 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

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

\(^{12}\) 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.
China’s influence is on the rise in a region where it was historically limited by the difficult terrain and vast distances.

The main goals of Chinese strategic access are: regime security, territorial integrity, national unification, maritime security, and regional stability. 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. Indeed, the railway has boosted Tibet’s domestic and foreign investment since its opening in 2006.

The Chinese are incredibly sensitive about their territorial integrity and sovereignty, 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.

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. 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.

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16 Tibet railway was completed in five years at a cost of $3.68 billion.
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 SIIS in Shanghai on July 3, 2009.
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. 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.

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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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