

By Invitation

China's Eurasia strategy to counter US naval power

China's 'One Road, One Belt' strategy can be understood historically, as a response to countering American naval influence by deepening its own links among Central Asian partners and East Asian economies.



Wang Gungwu

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In past writings, I have described the Eurasian landmass as having shaped world history for some 5,000 years before its role was steadily marginalised from the 18th century onwards.

The gist of my views on Eurasia's responses to global naval power may be found in the book, *The Eurasian Core And Its Edges: Dialogues With Wang Gungwu On The History Of The World*, by Ooi Kee Beng.

In that book, through a series of dialogues with Kee Beng, I laid out my ideas on the development of world history. I argued that there has been a shift in the centre of power, from the Eurasian land mass core to its fringes in the east and west. Geopolitical powers that were always continental in nature have in modern times become more maritime in nature. Maritime powers helped expand continental powers' dominance. As even China is realising now, the global is maritime.

But what we are seeing, in the last decade or so, is a pushback from the Eurasian core. What is happening today with seemingly unconnected events suggests that, with the rise of China and India, Eurasia might be finding ways to push back.

It is intriguing to look at China's recent "One Road, One Belt" proposals in that historical context.

The "Silk Road Economic Belt" is a plan to establish new trade and transport links across the Central Asian landmass, between China, Central Asia and Europe.

The "21st century Maritime Silk Road" plan is to form economic links in the South China Sea, the South Pacific and Indian Ocean.

Together, they are known as "One Belt, One Road". The maritime "Road" combined with the continental "Belt" might be expected to help resuscitate Old World commonalities.

What do I mean?

By Old World I am referring to the

era of history before the 18th century, when political power was vested in continental states.

In the last 200 years, the world has changed dramatically. That was the result of a combination of industrial capitalism, and revolutionary developments in the realms of science and finance that were enabled by the rise of global trade and naval power during the 17th-18th centuries.

Following that, the peoples of Atlantic Europe led the world to erect the pillars of modern civilisation that the rest have had to cope with ever since.

Take, for example, the way the British, Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish seafaring adventurers set up trading posts and colonies across the Americas and Asia. Their overwhelming dominance led to increasing defensiveness among the Eurasian continental polities.

There have been earlier attempts to push back against the new power structure, such as by the German and the Slavic empires in the 19th and 20th centuries, but none was successful.

UNITED STATES GOES NAVAL

On the contrary, the end of World War II made it possible for New World power to dictate new principles of progress to at least half the states of the West European continent.

That development had begun with the empowerment of the New World when the leaders of the American Revolution called for a turning away from the Old World. The young rebels offered a vision of manifest destiny that made it possible for them to create something that their ancestors from the European Atlantic had not been able to achieve.

Within a century of the country's independence, the largely maritime peoples who had first crossed the Atlantic to America as maritime settlers since the 17th century had constructed a new kind of continental power.

What distinguished this nation-building task in America was the determination to avoid the mistakes of the Old World. Among the worst of those were the religious wars that eventually led feudal rulers to establish dozens of narrowly conceived nation-states.

The greatest triumph of the New World state was to win a bitter Civil War that kept the United States

united. Having thus secured a rich continent for itself, this revolutionary state could by the second half of the 20th century harness all its resources to make it the most powerful global naval power the world has ever seen.

That advantage ensured that the US and its allies could win the Cold War of 1947-1991.

Their success confirmed the supremacy of the maritime global economy, one that could remain free from the constraints of sovereign land borders.

It persuaded the new post-imperial states in Asia to reappraise what could be done in response to superpower dominance. Some that had roots in the historic Indic and Sinic civilisations of South and East Asia began to realise that they needed to adapt their economies to maritime security and freedom in order to be free from the fear of

continental enemies.

The countries with that background noted the example of Japan, especially the strategies used to help the country recover after its defeat in 1945.

The "flying geese model" since the 1960s inspired the growth of a number of Asian economies. Japan, at the tip of the V-shaped formation of flying geese, developed first, passing on its technological advantages to other countries flying behind: the second-tier Newly Industrialising Economies of South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore; and then Asean. China followed suit after 1978 when Deng Xiaoping opened the country up to economic reforms, and India after 1992 when it introduced sweeping economic liberalisation following an economic crisis.

NEW MASTERS OF THE SEA?

Changes in these Asian economies

are now moving the world's economic centre to the east of Suez. If this trend continues, the countries around the Indo-Pacific oceans would in the 21st century be able to do what the Anglo-Saxon empires did for the Atlantic and Pacific oceans two centuries earlier, and become masters of their neighbouring seas.

The US awoke to this growing challenge and ostentatiously "pivoted" back to the Indo-Pacific and revived the alliances they had made during the days of the Cold War. To safeguard what they call the "status quo", they have belatedly identified the progress made by China to be the only serious threat to their predominance in the region.

It would appear that both American and Chinese leaders know that the Chinese are not seeking to replace the US as a global superpower. That would require

total control of the world's oceans that no power facing concurrent potential continental enmity (China shares a land border with Russia and India, and have territorial disputes with both) can hope to attain.

Thus, short of unlikely internal disasters within, the US has no reason to fear global maritime rivalry from China.

In that context, China and ultimately India, and even Russia, would each need different ways to stand up to a dominant US. In conventional analyses by international relations experts, they might consider developing their own slates of alliances to counter what the Americans have. But, if alliances are not feasible, what can be done to safeguard the influence they expect their developmental successes to bring?

CHINA TURNS TO EURASIA

China's answer to being hemmed in by a maritime arc of US allies seems to depend on financial, economic and technological responses that could draw the states of Eurasia closer together.

Recent examples are the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and other measures that reach further through the Maritime Silk Road and the Silk Road Economic Belt.

The core of these strategies will depend on the revival and relevance of key Old World values and institutions of the Eurasian continent that the American New World had sought to replace.

Seen together, the new linkages represent a call for the reawakening of multiple features of ancient Eurasian connectivity, that could make economies and societies vibrant, and enrich cultures through extended networks of trade and transportation.

If it is successful, it could be an answer to the claims of universalism that the US New World believes it can offer the Old World. If this is a credible understanding of China's longer-term thinking and aspirations it hopes to share with its neighbours, we can expect to see a new kind of defensive interstate Great Wall that uses interconnected economic clout along the Indo-Pacific coasts, as well as overland, to ensure that the Eurasian continent remains inviolate.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Wang Gungwu is University Professor, National University of Singapore (NUS), and chairman of the East Asian Institute and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

