

CHAPTER – 2
THE CHINA DREAM
AND
THE CHINESE CORE INTERESTS

The China Dream

The plenary sessions of the Communist Party Of China (CPC) are landmark events, as all members of the organisations must be present at all sessions so that key operational and other important decisions can be made.¹³

The CPC has a tenure of five years and typically holds three plenary sessions with the first two devoted to choosing key leaders and the third session is meant to devise strategy for guiding the CPC and state for the next 10 years.¹⁴

The first plenary of the 18th CPC in November 2012 saw Xi Jinping appointed as China's fifth generation leader. It was during this plenary session that the term the 'China Dream' was first mentioned by Xi Jinping.

From then on 'China Dream' has evoked much interest and considerable debate both within and outside China. But, before we go any further, it might be interesting to note that successive generations of Chinese supreme leaders

¹³ Chung-yue Chang, (23 Sep 2013). 'Chinese dream in the making'. Available at http://africa.chinadaily.com.cn/weekly/2013-09/27/content_16999422.htm. Accessed 21 Oct 2016.

¹⁴ ibid

have enunciated an overarching theme which shaped their reigns as well as the future course of the Chinese state.

Mao gave the call for the '*Class Struggle*' - basically aimed at erasing all memories of a past marred by Japanese and western domination. What followed actually was a disaster, except for entrenching the CPCs hold over China.

Deng Xiaoping called for '*Four Modernisations*'. This led to gradual but definite reform and opening up of the Chinese economy.

Jiang Zemin came up with the theory of '*Three Represents*'. His time at the helm saw deepening of economic reforms and spectacular growth.

Hu Jintao in comparison preferred to maintain a low profile. He changed focus from 'GDP growth' to building up of a '*harmonious socialist society*'. In other words, he worked towards reducing disparities in favour of a more balanced and equitable growth.

Coming back to Xi Jinping:

As already mentioned above, Xi Jinping first uttered the phrase 'China Dream' at the first plenary of the 18th CPC in November 2012. However, significantly, it is no coincidence that Mr Xi's first mention of his dream of "the great revival of the Chinese nation" came at a speech at the national museum in Tiananmen Square, where an exhibition called "Road to Revival" laid out China's suffering at the hands of colonial powers and its rescue by the Communist Party.¹⁵

¹⁵ ibid

Irrespective of its critique, it must be acknowledged that the slogan 'China Dream' has resonated with the general public in China. Apparently, news bulletins were full of his dream. Schools organised speaking competitions and there was even a talent show on television looking for "The voice of the Chinese Dream".¹⁶

Given the amount of debate surrounding the issue of China Dream, it is possible to ascribe two dimensions to it viz *internal and external*.

Internal Dimensions

To understand this, one needs to look at the internal dynamics of China at the time of and subsequent to Xi Jinping's ascension to power. Some salient characteristics are as follows: -

- Great disparity amongst the 'haves and have nots'. More pronounced between the coastal regions and the rest on the one hand and the urban and the poor regions on the other. Remember, Jintao tried to address this issue by focusing on more equitable growth.
- High levels of corruption and nepotism within the communist party.
- More vociferous demand for democratic reforms emanating from Hong Kong.
- Worldwide economic slowdown and concomitant slowdown in Chinese economy.
- Rising pollution, fewer jobs and ageing population.

¹⁶ *ibid*

Under these circumstances, it is possible that Xi's 'China Dream' could raise hopes, aspirations and nationalistic fervour with the aim of: -

- Consolidating his own leadership position in the face of resistance to his cleaning up of the party (corruption & nepotism being major focus areas).
- Perpetuating the hold of CPC over the people and the State in the face of rising sentiment for greater freedoms.
- Motivating the population and creating an aspirational class to fuel domestic demand in the face of falling exports and slowing economy.

Remember China has to maintain 7 - 8% growth rate to surpass US by 2025.

External Dimensions

There is an external audience as well is clearly evident from the fact that Xi Jinping has alluded to the 'China Dream' in his overseas trips as well.

In 2013 while meeting President Obama, Xi said, "the Chinese dream is about peace, development, cooperation and win-win results, and it is connected to the American dream and beautiful dreams of people in other countries."¹⁷

¹⁷ 'Xinhua Insight: Chinese dream is a dream for all' (12 Mar 2016). Available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-12/03/c_135878166.htm. Accessed 22 Oct 2016.

Again, in Sep 2015 while visiting the US, Xi said in a speech "The Chinese dream is, after all, a dream of the people, we can fulfil the Chinese dream only when we link it with our people's yearning for a better life."¹⁸

As reported by Xinhua¹⁹, Ni Shixiong, former dean of the School of International Relations and Public Affairs at Fudan University, meanwhile said the Chinese dream represents China's upgraded understanding of the world. "It is a dream with a global vision," he said. He further states, "a peaceful and prosperous country as well as a happy and stable society is not just part of the Chinese dream, but a common aspiration of the world. In a way, the Chinese dream is not just about China, but represents the common value and ideals of all human beings.

Once again, it would be pertinent to view the repeated references to the 'China Dream' in the context of prevailing set of actions/ circumstances concerning China: -

- Expanding footprint in Africa and Latin America.
- Improving and expanding ties & cooperation with EU and Russia.
- Chinese assertion (some time belligerence) in East and South China Seas.
- Defiance of US in UNSC and NSG.
- OBOR initiative.

¹⁸ ibid

¹⁹ ibid

In the above context, it may be noted that Shaheli Das states²⁰, President Xi has proclaimed China's commitment to the idea of multilateralism and has stressed the importance of key multilateral bodies such as the UN. China has taken keen interest in fostering synergy between the BRICS nations — Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa — resulting in the establishment of a BRICS Development Bank. This is part of a broader drive towards a new and a more 'equitable' international and political order.

The above suggests that China Dream is actually a vehicle to showcase to the world: -

- The Chinese achievements (which are stupendous by any standards) both economic and technological.
- Project an alternative to US dominance (by stressing on multilateralism).

One other feature that stands out is the many different articulations of the China Dream by Xi Jinping and indeed other prominent figures. Xi's first statement was "the great revival of the Chinese nation". However, Xinhua the official mouthpiece of the CPC presents it on its website as, "The China dream, after all, is the dream of the people. We must realise it by closely depending on the people. We must incessantly bring benefits to the people. Realizing the great renewal of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream for the Chinese nation in modern history."²¹

²⁰ Shaheli Das (7 Apr 2016). 'The awakening of Xi's Chinese Dream', East Asia Forum. Available at <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/04/07/the-awakening-of-xis-chinese-dream/>. Accessed 23 Oct 2016.

²¹ Chinese Dream. Available at <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/chinesedream/>. Accessed 22 Oct 2016.

One could therefore argue that it is being used as a flexible concept for articulation and pronouncement as deemed best under given circumstances. In fact, calling it '*a dream of the people*' is a *master stroke* of sorts as it not only allows the ordinary folk to identify with it but at the same time allows the State to modulate it as well.

'Core Interests'

The recent past has seen a lot of debate over Chinese articulation of their 'core interests' and what that could mean for China herself and the world at large.

After all what are these core interests? Like most other things concerning China, the core interests too have their own evolutionary history. It would therefore be useful to see the manner in which 'core interests' has found mention in Chinese discourse.

It appears that Chinese officialdom started using the term 'core interests' more often from 2004 onwards. At that time, the relevant context was the demand for independence made by the Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian ostensibly with US backing.

The term 'core interest' was clearly articulated in reference to Tibet first in 2006 by PRC Vice President Zeng Qinghong during his meeting with the then Sri Lankan Prime Minister Wickremanayake.²²

It would be interesting to note here that the Tibet issue pre-dates Taiwan as China had been staking claim over it from much before. The 1992 White Paper on Tibet stated, "there is no room for haggling" on the fundamental principles that "Tibet is an inalienable part of China."²³ The reference to Tibet as 'core interest' gave a clear indication of the territorial dimension associated with the use of this term/phrase.

In so far as Xinjiang is concerned, President Hu Jintao declared it as a 'core interest' during a speech he gave in Pakistan in 2006.²⁴

From the above it can be deduced that to begin with, until 2006 the Chinese 'core interests' were limited to Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang.

However, later in 2009 the contours of Chinese 'core interest' were expanded by a Chinese foreign office official namely Dai Bingguo. During the course of US - China Strategic and Economic Dialogue he mentioned that the Chinese 'core interests' had three components viz²⁵

- Preserving China's basic state system and national security.

²² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 22 April 2006. Available at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg/yzs/gjlb/2782/2784/t248856.htm>. Accessed 26 Oct 2016.

²³ Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "Tibet—Its Ownership And Human Rights Situation," government white paper, September 1992, Beijing, China, available at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/3711/t18996.htm#4>. Accessed 27 Oct 2016.

²⁴ President Hu Jintao's address at the Islamabad Convention Center, 24 November 2006, available at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg/yzs/gjlb/2757/2758/t285917.htm>. Accessed 30 Oct 2016.

²⁵ State Councilor Dai Bingguo, Closing Remarks at U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, Washington, DC, 28 July 2009, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/july/126599.htm>. Accessed 30 Oct 2016.

- National sovereignty and territorial integrity.
- The continued stable development of China's economy and society.

Michael Swaine, an analyst at the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, published a paper in 2010 with the China Leadership Monitor looking at China's growing use of the term 'core interest'.²⁶ He stated that during the 20th century, the Chinese used to refer to their "core interests" as "major national interests". The more regular usage of the term 'core interest' commenced from the 2004 only. Even though Michael Swaine's paper was published post Mr. Dai Bingguo explanation/qualification of the 'core interests', he chose to argue that the Chinese 'core interests' were mainly related to "sovereignty" and "territorial integrity". Keeping in mind the repeated references to the Chinese officials he further concluded that the Chinese 'core interests' related to Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang only.

As regarding South China Sea, Michael Swaine concluded that China had not officially identified the South China Sea as a "core interest." Some "unofficial differences in viewpoint, along with the likely dilemma involved in confirming whether the South China Sea is a core interest, together suggest the possibility of disagreement among the Chinese leadership on this matter," Mr. Swaine wrote.²⁷

²⁶ Michael Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior: Part One: On 'Core Interests,'" China Leadership Monitor No. 34 (22 February 2011). Available at <http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/article/67966>. Accessed 30 Oct 2016.

²⁷ Edward Wong (30 Mar 2011). 'China Hedges Over Whether South China Sea Is a 'Core Interest' Worth War'. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/31/world/asia/31beijing.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FChina>. Accessed 30 Oct 2016.

The first clear written enunciation of the issue at hand came out in the Chinese White Paper on "Chinese Peaceful Development Policy" in 2011. It described the Chinese 'core interests' as, "China is firm in upholding its core interests which include the following: state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification, China's political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability, and the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development."²⁸

This 2011 enunciation is far more encompassing. The scope has clearly been enlarged.

The above was followed by enactment of the National Security Law in July 2015. Article 2 of the law states, "National security refers to the relative absence of international or domestic threats to the state's power to govern, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity, the welfare of the people, sustainable economic and social development, and other major national interests, and the ability to ensure a continued state of security."²⁹

Though this law does not specifically mention 'core interests', it was linked to the same by Zeng Shuna, Deputy Director of the Legislative Affairs Commission of the National Peoples Congress. She said, "Our national security law is to maintain the core interests of the nation and other major interests," Ms. Zheng further said, "for safeguarding national core interests, China has

²⁸ The State Council The people's republic of china, China's Peaceful Development, government white paper, Sep 2011, Beijing, China. Available at http://www.gov.cn/english/official/2011-09/06/content_1941354_2.htm. Accessed 24 Oct 2016.

²⁹ China Law Translate, National Security Law of the People's Republic of China, Passed on 01 July 2015 at the 15th meeting of the Standing Committee of the 12th National People's Congress. Available at <http://chinalawtranslate.com/2015nsl/?lang=en>. Accessed 26 Oct 2016.

repeatedly said that we adhere to a peaceful path of development but will never give up our righteous interests and sacrifice the core national interests."³⁰

Zeng Shuna further stressed that the term was "restated in Article Two of National Security Law" and referred to "the political regime; the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the nation; and people's livelihood, sustainable economic development of society and other major interests."³¹

Ms Zeng's assertions are on the same lines as the one articulated by Dai Bingguo as early as 2009. Clearly, over the intervening period, the views expressed by Mr. Dai had found greater acceptance within the Chinese system.

At this point it would be pertinent to bring out that Ms Zeng's clarification was preceded by considerable debate within China herself.

Zingha Zeng, Yuefan Xiao & Shaun Breslin in their 2015 paper 'Securing China's core interests; the state of the debate in China'³² have analysed this internal debate at great length based on their study of 108 articles by Chinese scholars. Some of the important takeaways are as follows: -

- There is considerable debate within China on the issue of core interests including varying interpretations and components thereof.
- As regards the threat to core interests, there appear to be three distinct recommendatory themes viz. hawkish, moderate & dovish. A sampling of the same duly extracted from the paper are reproduced hereunder: -

³⁰ Edward Wong (02 Jul 2015). 'Security Law Suggests a Broadening of China's 'Core Interests'. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/03/world/asia/security-law-suggests-a-broadening-of-chinas-core-interests.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FChina&_r=0. Accessed 30 Oct 2016.

³¹ *ibid*

³² Zingha Zeng, Yuefan Xiao & Shaun Brislin (2015). 'Securing China's core interests; the state of the debate in China'. *International Affairs, Chatham House*, Mar 2015 issue.

- "China's core interests have faced unprecedented challenges since the Cold War. If sovereignty, political system, security, development and domestic stability constitute China's core interests, then, in this day and age, China's core interests have been suffering from unprecedented significant challenges in the past 20 years."

Zhu Feng, Professor at Beijing University

Zhu further argues that China needs a new grand strategy in order to protect its core interests.

- If we make a careful assessment, these six core interests [defined by the 2011 White Paper] are not under threat. Although the disputes in the South China Sea concern territory and sovereignty, it is not the same thing as territorial integrity and national sovereignty being under threat. Moreover, this problem has already existed for a long time. In the past 30 years, if China did not abandon development as its first priority because of the South China Sea, why should we change the approach now?

CPS

- "There are no big problems for China's national sovereignty and security ... but there are some prominent problems in terms of territorial integrity and national unity."

Liang Yunxiang, Professor at Beijing University

- The study concludes that, "There is something of a groundswell around the idea that China should now be seeking to be more proactive in

asserting and defending its core interests in an international order that often seems to be disinclined to change to facilitate China's rise (to say the very least). But there remain many voices of caution as well. This caution is in part at least built on a realization that perceptions matter in international politics. How China is seen by others—for example, if China is seen as being assertive or even nationalistically aggressive—can have real consequences if those others then initiate policies based on these perceptions to prevent China from getting what it wants.³³

Interestingly, the study also looks at countries which find mention amongst said articles in relation to the threat they pose to China's Core Interests. In percentage terms, the frequency of mention was found to be US (56.4%), Japan (16.66%), Vietnam (8.3%) and Philippines (7.4%). Together these constitute 88.76%. Interestingly there is no mention of India. In the absence of any clarification in the study on this aspect, one can only conclude that either India did not figure at all, or in percentage terms the mention was insignificant. Another interesting fact is that the image of Russia in the Chinese discourse is almost entirely positive.

Two other statements must be highlighted at the stage (both again quoted in the above-mentioned paper):

"We will stick to the road of peaceful, but will never give up our legitimate rights and will never sacrifice our national core interests. No country should presume that we will engage in trade involving our core interests or that we will

³³ *ibid*

swallow the 'bitter fruit' of harming our sovereignty, security or development interests."

Xi Jinping

'China should never give in while defending its core interests. Only when it comes to non-core interests should it make some compromise in order to ease the pressure on other big powers.'

Shi Yinhong, China Scholar

All of the above gives us reasonable idea to infer as to what all could possibly form part of Chinese Core Interests.

Inferred Core Interests

As is evident, the Chinese articulation about the core interests has transcended from being very precise (Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang) to the more flexible and ambiguous. When measured against time continuum, it would appear that the degree of ambiguity and flexibility is somewhat proportional to the growth of Chinese economic and military muscle. From this, one could also conclude that this is a well thought out and deliberate course which aims at laying down certain *clear red lines which are non-negotiable and other areas which are a forceful indication of her intent and desire.*

At this stage, it is a matter of conjecture as to, if and when the intent will get transformed into a red line. The separation of the two categories would depend on careful consideration of the extent to which the Chinese State would

exert itself to safeguard/enforce its will in the defence of these interests including use of force (war in the extreme). While there can be no definitive answer to this, some of it can be gauged by the kind of responses that emerge from China on specific issues. In this connection let us take the case of Taiwan and South China Sea.

Taiwan. In response to the Democratic Progressive Parties victory in 2016 elections, the Chinese run State media said, Taiwan should abandon its "hallucinations" about pushing for independence, as any moves towards it would be "poison".³⁴

A very robust and shrill warning.

South China Sea. In contrast to the above, in 2015 China had been more restrained in its response to the South East Asian nations on the South China Sea dispute.

Clearly China is modulating her response to various situations and events depending on how dear it is to her as also the degree to which she can enforce/safeguard her interests.

This approach helps in the following manner: -

- Domestically keep the nationalist sentiments (which it seems to have stoked by design under Xi Jinping) assuaged.

³⁴ "China media call independence 'poison'" (18 Jan 2016). *Taipei Times*. Available at <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2016/01/18/2003637475>. Accessed 30 Oct 2016.

- Internationally, develop strategy and responses based on reaction from other side. This way it can keep pushing the envelope in sync with her growing stature.

When seen in light of the above analysis, **Chinese core interests could be identified and listed as follows: -**

Non-negotiable

- Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang
- The survival of the CPC by ensuring social stability through continued economic growth.

Hardening Stance

- East China Sea
- South China Sea

Exploratory

- IOR Dominance

Finally, what needs to be seen is how the Chinese Core Interests impact India.

It is no secret that Indo-China relations are anything but harmonious. While there are multiple irritants, the major areas of concern are Arunachal Pradesh, and South China Sea where India supports freedom of navigation & overflight rights both as a matter of principle and geo strategic imperative.

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

ACC. No. G.R. 19952.....Date. 06/6/17

Arunachal Pradesh. China claims the whole state as her own. However, thus far her actions here have been restricted to lodging of protests and issue of stapled visas.

South China Sea. Here China does not envisage India playing any direct role other than providing morale/diplomatic support to the concerned South East Asian countries and the US. Hence, here too Chinese reactions have thus far been restricted to being critical of the Indian stance alone.

As of now, there does not seem to be a case for India to get into direct conflict with China on any matter of her 'core interests'. However, what the future portends, nobody can be sure.

Being 'watchful', therefore, should be the 'watchword'.

It is the largest of all Asian countries and has the largest population of any country in the world. Spread over nearly 20 million sq km, it occupies approximately one-fifth of the land area of Earth. Perhaps the single most remarkable characteristic of China to the rest of the world is the size of its population. Some one-fifth of humanity is of Chinese nationality. The population is unevenly distributed, with the major concentrations in the coastal eastern region. It is also ethnically diverse with a wide variety of indigenous peoples.

Robert Ross, "The Republic of China (Taiwan)", *Asian Affairs*, New Delhi, 2000, p. 100.

China, "Encyclopedia Britannica", 2007, <http://www.britannica.com/eb/China/China32337>, accessed 11 Nov 2007.