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New Imperial China: A Challenge for the US-Japan Alliance BY MASAKO IKEGAMI

Masako Ikegami, Abe Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington and Professor of Political Science at Stockholm University, asserts that China's current strategy "is to build up an international coalition, mostly consisting of non-democratic states, that challenges US hegemony."

The rise of China poses many questions, foremost of which is will a powerful China be a responsible member of the international community, complying with established rules and norms of the current global system? Or will it defy global standards, and strive instead to project its own rules and norms, thereby challenging the world order established by the United States? China is eager to dispel vigilance about its rise by trumpeting rhetoric such as "peaceful rise" or "peaceful development." The connotation is that China has learnt from history that emerging Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan directly challenged Anglo-American hegemony, which in turn triggered World War II and resulted in the ruin of both nations. Instead, China will progressively acquire global influence without clashing with the United States. However, since his power consolidation in 2003, Chinese President Hu Jintao has successfully implemented a proactive foreign policy to secure Chinese footholds globally in strategically important countries in terms of natural resources and geopolitics, from Africa and Central Asia, to Latin America. The intention is to build up an international coalition, mostly consisting of non-democratic states, that challenges US hegemony.

China is also pursuing a highly sophisticated strategy towards geo-strategically important neighboring countries, including North Korea and Burma, which are rich in natural resources yet domestically politically repressive. If Imperial Japan's Manchukuo policy during the 1930s is interpreted as (1) significant investments in economic infrastructure for extracting natural resources, (2) military interventions for protecting economic interests, and (3) social-political absorption/annexation via installation of puppet governments, then China's current strategy towards these countries could also be explained with such a model, namely the Quasi-Manchukuo model. China's current trajectory shares elements of Imperial Japan's Manchuria strategy in terms of incremental and discreet expansion of its strategic front initially disguised as industrial infrastructure investment or "economic cooperation." This suggests that China could be a new imperial power, notwithstanding its rhetoric of "peaceful rise" or "peaceful development."

Taking advantage of North Korea's isolation, China is steadily enclosing this country. China is the chief food supplier for North Korea, and accounts for nearly 90 percent of its energy imports and 80 percent of its consumer goods imports. China-North Korea bilateral trade continues to increase, including Chinese transfer of luxury goods which are banned by UN Security Council Resolution 1874 implemented after North Korea's nuclear test in 2009. Overall, China accounts for over 70 percent of North Korea's trade, and nearly 90 percent of foreign direct investment, of which almost 70 percent is for mineral resources extraction including coal, iron, gold, copper, zinc, and lead. China has acquired exclusive rights to develop the Musan iron ore mine, the largest open-air iron mine in Asia originally developed by Mitsubishi in the 1930s, as well as Rajing Port, a strategically important gateway to the Sea of Japan, originally developed by Imperial Japan in tandem with its development of Manchuria. Through robust targeted infrastructure investment, China is now integrating North Korean natural resources as a part of its own north-eastern industrial zone. This area overlaps with Manchuria where Imperial Japan



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heavily invested in industrial infrastructure, heavy industry, and munitions manufacturing during the 1930s.

Upon acquisition of the South Manchuria Railway in Northeast China following the Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5), Japan deployed the Kwantung Railway Garrison in 1906 to defend the railway and its economic interests. In 1919 this railway garrison evolved into the Kwantung Army that later triggered the Manchurian Incident of 1931, where Japanese forces staged an explosion along the railway line, which was blamed upon the Chinese, and resulted in the creation of the Japanese puppet state Manchukuo (1932) that led to the second Sino-Japanese War (1937-45). The South Manchuria Railway Company became the heart of Imperial Japan’s political, economic, industrial, and military activities in Manchuria, accompanied by a large-scale Japanese migration program along the gradually extending railway. The 1931 Manchurian Incident was a result of the Kwantung Army’s long-term strategy and careful planning to secure mineral resources. Indeed, without the abundant mineral resources and heavy industry in Manchuria, the Imperial Japanese Army could not have pursued or even contemplated a war with the Anglo-American imperial powers. Manchuria was the military-economic prerequisite for Imperial Japan to wage the Pacific War.

China’s recent investment in large-scale industrial infrastructures—roads, railways, pipelines—in strategically important, but internationally and domestically weak countries such as North Korea and Burma, is similar to Japan’s Manchuria strategy of old: a platform of economic activities to exclusively secure natural resources. China’s policy, often under the cover of “development” or “cooperation,” is solely for strategic purposes such as establishing military bases, as in the case of Burma’s Coco Islands. In addition, just as dual-use civilian-paramilitary Han-Chinese workers have migrated to Tibet and Xinjiang provinces, such as the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, the same could occur in Burma and other locations. In retrospect, Japan’s Manchukuo policy was a sophisticated strategic measure of stealth imperialism for a relatively weak latecomer imperial power trying to expand its own interests discreetly and incrementally by avoiding direct confrontation with established imperial powers such as Great Britain and the United States. Likewise, China’s Quasi-Manchukuo strategy is a measure of stealth imperialism for latecomer China to expand its vested interests while avoiding immediate confrontation with other major powers over strategically vital countries such as North Korea and Burma.

China’s increasingly aggressive territorial claims in the Yellow, East- and South China Seas betray its imperialistic nature, and is evidence that China does not abide by the basic international Westphalian system by which states’ borders are respected by international rule of law and mutual recognition of sovereignty. Instead, according to a prominent analyst of the Chinese military, Hiramatsu Shigeo, China adapts the People’s Liberation Army’s doctrine of “strategic frontier.” This is a denial of the Westphalian system based on geopolitical landscape, and is potentially aggressive and expansionistic, implying that strategic frontiers can be expanded corresponding to an individual state’s national power and force. Accordingly, the Chinese military has adapted the “Offshore Defense Strategy” for offensive operations along the First- and Second-Island Chains that cover the entire Yellow, East- and South China Seas, Taiwan, and Okinawa (Ryukyu Islands), as far as the Japanese archipelago, and expanding to the Philippines and Guam.

The world, including the US-Japan alliance, is now confronting this new imperial China, which is increasingly aggressive and expansionistic with a broadening international coalition of quasi-satellite, non-democratic states. Furthermore, China now has started a campaign which claims “Okinawa is an inalienable part of China.” This has fundamental implications regarding the nature of the US military base issue in Okinawa. In order to meet this unprecedented potential threat, the US-Japan alliance needs a fundamental shift of paradigm along with systemic change of organizational and operational institutions. Even amidst increasingly limited budget constraints, the US-Japan alliance needs a comprehensive review incorporating a new and deeper level of strategic planning, including a major adjustment of the allocation of defense resources, in light of this new imperialistic strategy on the part of China.