



ENERGY SECURITY AND GEOPOLITICS IN THE 21ST CENTURY:

A CASE STUDY OF CHINA

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Abstract

In China's growth and development, geo-economics plays a vital role. Geo-economics is the major determinant of Chinese foreign policy behavior and strategy. For this purpose, China's foreign policy is changing, molding, and restructuring in line with geo-economics with immediate neighbors and the world at large. Since the 2009 economic crisis and slowdown, China has developed two-line strategies, i.e., reliance on domestic consumption and foreign direct investment abroad, to sustain economic growth and its role in the world. These all lead to the development of China's increasing role and its foreign policy engagements in the world. A qualitative research methodology is utilized in this paper. Both primary and secondary data was used. Data is analyzed through descriptive-analytical lenses and techniques. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of geo-economics in China's foreign policy. It is found that geopolitics is subject to China's foreign policy behavior. China is actively engaging with various states in order to meet their economic interests and priorities.

Key Words: Energy Security, geopolitics, connectivity, natural resources, geo-economics, investments, infrastructure developments, Latin America.

Introduction

Energy security and geopolitics are the two sides of the same coin. They are part and parallel to the policy initiatives and operational framework of great, rising, and middle powers foreign policies. Both energy security and geopolitics go hand in hand with policy options and implementations. From Rudolf Kjellen (1905) to Halford Mackinder (1904) and Edward Luttwak (1990), both geopolitics and energy security offer significant explanations of states foreign policies. The tradition of geopolitics is old but forever reinforced in the shape of energy security

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and securing key vulnerabilities of states and the uninterrupted flow of energy and vital natural resources. The Chinese geopolitical and geo-economic behavior is significant in this direction. Both continental and maritime shifts in China's behavior are based on the geo-economic and energy security at large. The connectivity wars, pipeline politics, energy security, self-sufficiency, dependency, and scarcity of resources are all part and essence of geopolitics and energy security in the 21st century.

In international relations and power politics, geopolitics is one of the major pivotal concepts for understanding foreign policy behavior. Geopolitics studies how and to what extent the geography of a state affects its power and interactions with other states. The term geopolitics was first coined by German geographer Rudolf Kjellen in 1905 by attributing it to the study of how geographical, social, historical, and physical features and factors explain the role of geography and power in international relations. He also signified the impacts of geopolitics on states' foreign policy behavior and interactions. In Kjellen's perspective and classical views, he emphasized the role of geography in nation-state policies. The tradition of geopolitics further developed with the advent of Halford Mackinder's thesis in 1904 and the theory of heartland (Mackinder, 1909). The latter becomes a synonym for great power politics. He also contributed to the understanding of great powers strategies, geographical pivots, areas of contests, strategic alliances, etc. He argued that all these variables are affected by geographical and historical factors.

Furthermore, geopolitics is part of a game of competitive zero-sum rivalries between and among nations. All states pursue their national interest, power, and security within and beyond their areas of influence and interests. Trade gains, resource utilizations, exploitations, and strategic-oriented investments are part of the greater geopolitical games. All wars are parts of geopolitical gains to a major extent (Flint, 2021). In the historical genesis, geopolitics was the consideration for understanding and changing dynamics within geographical locations and part of national grand strategies. The states having greater territory, natural resources, and significant locations are considered strategic assets and tangible parts of the state's power. It was also considered that nature and geography created various states, societies, and cultures all around the world that have their distinctions, pivots, and limitations too (Luttwak, 1990).

In the concept and tradition of sea power and geopolitics, Alfred Thayer Mahan influenced major strategic thinking from continental to oceanic. He argued that the seas influence the power of states and are a decisive factor in state power. Major historical great powers contend for and control sea lines of communications and international trade. The thesis was that mastering and controlling the seas is a major factor in great power status and influence. He contended that seas are great highways, floating bridges, and open and floating roads for power and prosperity.

Mahanian theory is re-imposing and still relevant in today's geopolitics and geo-economics. The great powers' naval and maritime initiatives and status and quest for controlling sea lines of communications for their trade, uninterrupted flow of energy, and areas of influence are common dots in the modern age. His significant contribution was "The Influence of Sea Power upon History," and he linked naval and maritime security as important for state power. These concepts are still evident and relevant in today's world. The fear of choke points, the politics of gas overseas, and major international trade and transportation. The merging disputes and alliances in the South China Sea, Indo-Pacific, and Indian Ocean are examples of seas and geopolitics. In the final one, one can argue that maritime aspects are key attributes of states' power and strategy (Sun and Payette, 2022).

The Germans defend policies of territorial annexations as part of thoughts of Keijillen's Lebensraum. This theory or thought was also called "geo-ideology during World War I, which resulted in the rise of Nazism and Fascism (Haushofer 1924, Bingen 2014). Borders and geographical regions were and still are considered as important in geopolitical tradition. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, open markets and free competition between and among states and MNCs have emerged as mechanisms for managing economic resources. The competition and new turn also emerged in geopolitics in the US-led world global economic order. The rebirth of geopolitics marked significant attention after the emergence of complex interdependence and a new era of globalization in the 1990s and onward. New political integrations and institutional parameters were formed by the US and the West to achieve geopolitical and economic objectives.

The dawn of new political discourses focused on international actors and their role in geopolitics. The trends continued in terms of relative gains and absolute gains. However, mutual and win-win gains are possible through international cooperation and alliances. The purpose remains the same

as in the shadow of geopolitics: achieving geo-economic or energy security gains. Geo-economics is part of geopolitics in one way or another, with aims to ensure economic security, revolving around energy, resources, and geo-strategy (Austvik, 2018). Geopolitics is geo-economics in essence. For example, one state occupies any state or territory that can be assessed or perceived in terms of economic gains. The question of Ukraine, Crimea, or indirect influences of states all relate to geo-economics.

Methodology

In this research paper, descriptive and analytical methodology is adopted by focusing on and answering the two basic questions. First, how do geo-economics shape and influence China's foreign policy? Second, what are the stakes and policies of China in the era of geo-economics? The reason for adopting qualitative methodology is keeping in view the nature of the chosen topic. Hence, the scholar utilized and consulted secondary sources from which inferences are derived. This research is basically exploratory in nature. First, the scholar tried to explore the influence of geo-economics on China's foreign policy and then analyzed the operational aspects with a focus on overseas mega investments and infrastructure projects. The scholar consulted and studied relevant literature and then reached a discussion, findings, and conclusion.

Significance and contributions

This research has multiple significances and contributions to the existing literature and China's foreign policy behavior. The advent of geo-economics and its influence on foreign policy behavior and great power competition resulted in significant development in world politics and foreign policy analysis. It is important to mention and point out the emerging trends and transformations in global and regional politics. Similarly, a case study of China in this context is mandatory and important to highlight the growing geo-economic interests and competition. From China's side, an approach of soft power in line with economic prosperity, development, and a win-win game is applied in various regions of the world. From the Chinese statecraft and policy perspective, it is a hallmark of their foreign policy and strategy to balance both continental and maritime influences in the shape of the BRI and blue water strategy, i.e., the String of Pearls Policy. These two policies have significance in world politics because of the ongoing geo-economic competition. Therefore, these are the significance and contribution of this research.

Theoretical Framework

The chosen theoretical framework is based on geo-economics. The theoretical framework serves as a lens to assess and analyze situations, studies, phenomena, and developments. In essence, states increase their power by economic means and methods. For example, broadly speaking, from Iran to Ukraine or Crimea, states use sanctions to secure their interests and influences. The national security of China is based on economic statecraft. China is putting major reliance on geo-economics. Power politics and great power competition are returned to economic means and methodologies in the context of strategy and interests. As argued by Wigell and Soliz Landivar (2018), China is using finance, mega-infrastructure, investment, and developmental projects based on economic interests in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. These operational aspects of geo-economics show that China is using geo-economic tools and frameworks. Indeed, China is becoming a major partner of the above-mentioned states in economic developments and cooperation. China extended its reach across the continents and considerable economic interests and influences.

Similarly, when a state uses economic power to enhance and protect strategic and geopolitical interests, aims and objectives (Fjeder, 2018) are considered as important aspects of international relations. Indeed, today's international relations and world politics are dominated by geo-economics. Academic scholarship and focus on states practicing economic means to achieve state interests are described as geo-economics as a form of power politics. There are derivations in geo-economics from classical geopolitics. Geo-economics assumes that controlling, using, and manipulating economic ties are modern aspects of geopolitics. Although geography is still a relevant and dominant factor in statecraft, the advent of geo-economics means and methods cannot be ignored (Wigell, Scholvin, and Aaltola 2018).

It is also evident that geopolitical objectives depend on geo-economics. As inferences drawn by Khan (2023), geo-economics is the interplay between geopolitics, operational foreign policies, and strategy at large. Furthermore, any state grand strategy revolves around geo-economics. It will not be wrong to argue that world politics has entered into the era of geo-economics. Geo-economics can also be viewed through hard and soft power. The same is true in the context of China's behavior at large, as evident in various parts of the world. In the context of China, geo-economics shapes and guides their foreign policy and statecraft. All major geo-economic-based

initiatives and interactions in Africa, Asia, Central Asia, and Latin America are part of operational aspects. Hence, it is evident that China is using geo-economics in statecraft and foreign policy interactions.

China as Leading Economic Power

China is emerging as one of the leading global economic and military powers. The geographical location and considerations are important aspects in analyzing China's behavior. Both geopolitical and geo-economic aspects are part and parcel or go hand in hand with China. From the shores of the South China Sea to the Indo-Pacific to the Strait of Hormuz and the Horn of Africa, the objective of China is clear: it is to use geopolitical aspects along with geo-economic lines and interests. China's spheres of influence are growing with time as their energy demand increases (Singh, 2022). In China's statecraft and modern strategy, the objective is clear and operational from its foreign policy behavior by using geopolitics and geo-economics simultaneously. Both continental and oceanic aspects are part of China's grand strategy.

Continental and Oceanic Turn

China's maritime initiatives can be explained through the prism of the Mahanian approach to sea power. Mahanian thoughts revolve around the influence and role of sea powers in history, maritime security, prosperity, and the use of seas for national power and prosperity. The oceanic aspects and control are major determinant factors in the power and wealth of any state. Grand strategy and dominance over oceans are important themes of Mahan's thoughts. There is a link between naval and maritime capacity, power, and use of oceans and seas for trading purposes and links with state security and prosperity at large. The naval and maritime power build-up and influence determine states' status in global affairs (Chris, 2010). The Chinese buildup of the Blue Water Navy and, importantly, the Two Ocean Strategy are part of efforts in this direction. It is important to mention that the US presence in Central Asia and across Eurasia is also a source of concern for China. Simultaneously, China is turning to both continental aspects of power and influences in the shape of OBOR and BRI, while its oceanic consideration is the Two Ocean Strategy and String of Pearls Policy. This behavior as part of China's greater strategy shows that China maintains or follows both strategic concepts of continental and maritime aspects. Therefore, it can be argued that Mahanian concepts are still relevant and guide China's behavior

in both geopolitical and geo-economics dimensions (Singh, 2022). The Rimland and String of Pearls policy is significant in terms of energy security for China.

China established a strong maritime presence in the Pacific and Indian Oceans under the framework of the Two Ocean Strategy. China initiated their maritime strength by aiming at economic and security aspects simultaneously (Sun and Payette, 2017). China's foreign policy behavior is mainly influenced by geopolitics, energy security, and geo-economics. In Chinese national objectives, aim to strengthen national security through economic aspects. National security and economic propensity are key dynamics and policy drivers of China's foreign policy. It is also important to mention that the economy of China works as both an external and an internal determinant of foreign policy. Thus, China wants to stand amongst the nations of the world as a great power. This legacy can be traced back to China's desire for a great power status. Under President Xi Jinping, China initiated threefold strategic, economic, and maritime strategies to balance Beijing's position in the world as a great power. These initiatives are also part of regional and global levels (Khurana, 2016).

China's economic growth is accelerating with time. China is one of the emerging hubs of manufacturing and the fastest-growing economy in the world. China is using economic muscle with aims to strengthen military might and resultant power status in the world. The US is under the debt of Chinese capital. China also increased its fuel supply and energy imports to meet the growing requirements of the economy. Indeed, China is becoming one of the greatest hubs of energy consumption and resultant economic growth. China has increased the outflow of FDI in various parts of the world, including Africa, Central Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. All these initiatives show that China has emerged as the central economic and capital hub of the world. China is following a strategy of less restrictive foreign economic assistance to attract third-world economies under its economic influence (Fambo, 2024).

China's Northeast Expansion

China is also expanding its influence and role in Northwest and Central Asia to increase its sphere of influence under the umbrella of economic and mega-infrastructure development projects. These initiatives purely aim to extract and control Central Asian natural resources and move to the heart of Eurasia because the latter determines the status of great power in an

economic context. China's aim is to maintain security along with economic lines, i.e., energy supply lines, enhancing national economic prosperity (Christoffersene, 2024).

China in Africa: geopolitical and geo-economic initiatives

To meet the growing energy demands for natural resources to meet the growing fuel demands of energy needs. It is evident that domestic resources can't meet energy demands. China is expanding its political influence in line with economic interests. However, it is important to mention that Chinese FDI and economic influences are welcomed in most of the states because they are based on comparative advantages and mutual economic dependency. Secondly, unlike the Western powers, China does not want to implement its political system and values abroad. The most important aspect of China's investment in various developmental and energy sectors, connectivity, transportation, and mega infrastructures in various states. These include Algeria, Angola, Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Africa, Sudan, and Djibouti. These initiatives and projects resulted in increased competition with the US, a major stakeholder in economic aspects in Africa, and the potential conflictual competitors (Roby, 2020).

Similarly, China's FDI flows increased since 2003 from \$75 million to \$1.8 billion by the end of 2022. Under the continuation of BRI, China boosts investment in Africa by \$29 billion in 2024. According to BRI investment report 2024, China's investments and infrastructure projects grew by 34% compared to the previous years. This investment focused on sectors-wise in various African states. In energy projects it accounted for 31%, in the mining sector 17.6%, technology 14.3%, and transportation sector nearly 12%. The top countries in Africa that received Chinese investment include South Africa, Guinea, Liberia, the Republic of Congo, and Morocco. These countries saw a significant increase in the FDI and various developmental and infrastructure projects (Jenkins, 2017).

China in Latin America

In Latin America, China is actively engaged in political, economic, and security interests and increasing its sphere of influence. On an important point, China used economic aid to convince Latin American states to halt diplomatic relations with Taiwan. On the same note, China is also interested in the natural resources of Latin America, particularly the oil resources of Ecuador and Venezuela. The latter is viewed by Beijing as a major potential ally in Latin America. China also

enhanced its relations with Cuba and established significant influence in the Panama Canal region. China's trade engagement with Latin American states has sped up since 2001 and onwards. In 2004, China National Petroleum Corporation invested over \$1919 billion in Argentina and also allocated a huge sum of the investment for oil exploration (Albright, Ray, and Liu, 2022).

From 2001 to 2023, China and Latin America's trade increased and doubled from \$13.030 billion to \$21.010 billion. China is the top foreign direct investor in the Latin American region. These intensified economic relations between China and Latin America have increased political engagement and greater cooperation for two decades. In this context, a major political impetus towards greater political and economic cooperation was provided in 2006 with the formation of BRICS (Winter, 2022).

Since 2000, the China and Latin American states economic relations were minimal. Initially, the Latin American exports were less than 2% for China. However, the Chinese maximum economic engagements in the region brought an exports and imports boom. The mutual trade between Latin America and China grew annually by 31 %. In 2021, trading relations exceeded over \$450 billion, and both sides expected that it would reach \$700 billion in 2035. Over this period, China stands as the second-largest trading partner of Latin American states after the US (Roby, 2020).

Despite massive Chinese investments across the various continents, there is always the perception that these economic initiatives are part of the new colonialism. However, the Chinese government denied the contentions and argued that it believed in mutual economic advantage as opposed to absolute advantage. In this context, the local and indigenous grievances associated with Chinese investments in infrastructure projects are subject to criticism. For example, in Latin America and the Caribbean, China's massive infrastructure projects will have far-reaching impacts and change the local industry, society, environment, and issues of land use. As mentioned by Myers, without developing local capacities and addressing labor issues, the region will largely become trapped under China's influence. The fear of trapped dependency is also inevitable if the local/host nations did not develop their capacities. She further argued that the investors should provide technology transfer and relevant training and education for the indigenous labor in order to maximize the benefits of massive investments. If these initiatives are not taken, the region will not benefit from the Chinese investments (Lewkowicz, 2024).

Further, the Chinese investments associated with mining lithium and other resource extraction are leveled as significant environmental concerns for the local population. This will also bring socio-environmental conflicts. The host nations and communities should negotiate on these projects to mitigate environmental damages and ensure the sustainability of these projects for greater and mutual economic benefits. The Chinese Overseas FDI Monitor for Latin America and the Caribbean noted that a total sum of \$8.748 billion in investment was received by LAC states (Lewkowicz, 2024).

Keeping in view economic and political engagements with China, many Latin American states strengthen their political and economic relations on strategic and geo-economic lines. In economic aspects, China's export revenues, transfer of technology, and FDI. In the economic realm, this led to transformations of economic dependency from the US and Europe to China. The number of Latin American countries is increasing in the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB). All the Latin American countries aim to access and obtain additional sources of finance and investment. In these policy engagements, China and Argentina signed an MOU for 23 billion in finances (Albright, Ray, and Liu, 2022).

Further, President Xi Jinping, under a foreign policy of opportunistic activism, moved to intensify and foster China-Africa relations and diplomatic presence. China arranged a summit of the Community of Latin America and Caribbean (CELAC) states in 2019 with plans and initiatives to expand bilateral trade, investments, exploration of natural resources, infrastructure developments, manufacturing sectors, and technological know-how. China also signed a joint plan of action with CLEAC states for the years 2019-21 to 2022-24 ("II China-CELAC," 2018). These Chinese initiatives are not free of difficulties due to the ongoing disputes in Latin American countries. For example, in Peru and Argentina, environmentalist groups hosted resistance to the mega infrastructure projects (Rosales, 2020).

Further, China adopted diplomatic initiatives in Latin American countries that advanced its economic priorities, enhanced regional engagements, and gained considerable soft image and support. There is a view in the US that Chinese initiatives are not a direct threat to US interests but are considered part of China's grand strategy to gain influence. These initiatives and engagements in LAC are counter to US influences in one way or another. In these efforts, China continues its diplomatic initiatives to be an observer at the Organization of American States and

a member of the Inter-American Development Bank and Caribbean Bank. Similarly, China is an active participant in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) (Bernal, 2013).

For the US, the growing and expanding economic and diplomatic influence of China in neighboring countries created a new policy dilemma. The US considers it a new Chinese challenge in the Southern Hemisphere. The policy options in the US are quite complex. For example, the US will try to match the Chinese active activism with a renewed framework with LAC. Similarly, it is important to mention and raise questions about whether they will accept China as a new partner of LACs. The US adopted the approach of viable and improved trade and diplomatic relations with LACs. However, it seems that the US will adopt a more proactive engagement and policy framework with LACs due to the economic rivalry with China and the latter's rise as a major global economic power. On the US side, the major policy option is improving and enhancing strategic partnerships and investments in LACs (Piccone, 2020).

To advance geo-economic and diplomatic interests, Chinese leaders initiated various visits since 2008, which led to the issuance of a LAC comprehensive policy. This policy was based on and under the framework of peaceful coexistence, economic dependency, a win-win situation, and a major emphasis on economic aspects, including an increase in trade, FDI, and infrastructure developments (Piccone, 2020).

All these initiatives under the economic pattern fit as pointed out by Luttwak that geo-economics is the continuation of politics by other means. Similarly, the notion of heartland and the classical tradition of geopolitics are revisited, and evidence from China's growing influence across the various continents. All these initiatives are part of the resources and the geopolitics by other means. Geopolitically, the BRI is the continuation of these efforts in one way or the other. The regional and global volatile situation, particularly in the South China Sea and Indo-Pacific, compels China to opt and shift and balance its maritime and continual strategy accordingly. The visible and empirical evidence in the shape of massive infrastructure and developmental projects as mentioned in the above parts of the paper confirm the theoretical and strategic underpinnings of China's foreign policy. These geopolitical and geo-economic initiatives are becoming the sole drivers of China's foreign policy in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

It is found that the Chinese pattern of geopolitics and geo-economics is not centered on its commercial, trade, and economic interests at all. For this purpose, China's maritime initiatives are purely guided by economic interests along with geopolitical calculations. Geopolitics is returning in the shape of geo-economics in theory and practice from China's mega investments and infrastructure projects across the world. Both maritime and continental aspects are guiding China's interest in these directions. China's turn towards the Mahanian school realized that the shift and focus of maritime waters, particularly development in the South China Sea, cannot be ignored. Indeed, the maritime security of China is linked to trade security and the uninterrupted flow of goods. China, as a major emerging economic and military player on the world stage, has considerably increasing influence over the economically significant areas. One example is the growing Chinese investments and economic influences in Africa and South and North America. These suggest that China realized the significance of trade, economics, and prosperity in their policy circles. The view and approach are clear from the Chinese pattern of foreign policy behavior, which is that China wants economic influence, partnership, and prosperity. For this purpose, their foreign policy is changing and shaped by geo-economic and strategic interests at large. However, the Western perspective is different and views China as a growing economic hegemon in the world. However, China, on official levels, denied these by arguing that mutual prosperity and economic interdependence are the main goals of their foreign policy interactions.

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