

China's Economic Growth: Threats and Challenges to Chinese Economy and Energy Security

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Abstract:- Despite global pandemic Chinese economic growth rate was 2.3 percent in 2020. GDP surpassed US \$ 15 trillion and growth rate raised to 6.5 percent in fourth quarter of 2020 and US \$ 17 trillion GDP was recorded in first quarter of 2021. People Republic China's (PRC) gigantic military budget and revolution in military affairs (RMA) creates sense of hegemonic ambitions in its neighbours. Contrarily, United States (US) sights PRC has ambitions to expand its political influence, gain access to economic markets, change international order by replacing US. This potential asymmetrical and imbalanced relationship locks America in typical Thucydides trap. Washington reached conclusion that economic growth and military might are intertwined. However, it is dependent on China's energy supplies. PRC's rise can be slowed down by stopping or interrupting the flow of energy supplies. Range of threats are posed to PRC oil imports i.e. US aerial strike on PRC oil//gas pipelines, use of proxies specially ast Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) to disrupt oil supplies, terrorist attacks on oil containers on land and naval blockade in Persian Gulf. The inference drawn is energy security dependent on Strait of Malacca is Achilles Heel of China. This paper aims at probing Washington's capacity to disrupt or stop energy supplies to PRC in Malacca strait, Persian Gulf, land routes in Pakistan. It discusses various strategies including direct naval blockade, use of proxies and direct military strikes.

Key Words: China, Economic, Washington, Energy Security, Development

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1 Introduction

In post-Cold War era United States (US) emerged as sole superpower or hegemon. The protracted war in Afghanistan and prolonged military engagement in the Middle East consumed enormous economic resources. Futile protracted lost wars undermined America's soft image and created doubts about its military power abroad. Beijing critically observing US engagement in out of area operation draw conclusion mutual cooperation is prerequisite for economic progress and development. Economic reforms were introduced, free market reforms were introduced and direct investment was welcomed by China. Policy of war avoidance particularly with Central Asian Republics (CARs), Magnolia, Pakistan and Russia was adopted to acquire sustained economic progress. Conversely, benefits of globalizations were reaped and Chinese influence expanded globally. Eight hundred million [1] Chinese were lifted out of extreme poverty. Standard of living in China improved. It is ranked as second

largest economy in the world [2]. In 2018 World Bank while commenting on China's 9.5% economic growth rate termed it as fastest sustained expansion in the history. Today, it is world largest manufacturer. It has world largest foreign exchange reserves. China is US's third largest export market thus has become significant trade partner. Beijing by holding America's treasury bonds is helping US to keep its interest rates low and pay federal debt [3]. Sustainable economic development marked China as an upper-middle-income state. Despite global pandemic Chinese economic growth rate was 2.3 percent in 2020. GDP surpassed US \$ 15 trillion and growth rate raised to 6.5 percent in fourth quarter of 2020 [4]. China's economy is moving at a fast pace irrespective of trade war with US. The authorities created 11.86 million jobs and trade surplus with US reached US \$ 316.9 billion. Abovementioned statistics were confirmed by the record 18.3% growth rate, 14.1% industrial output and 34.2% retail sales in the first quarter of 2021 [5]. Economic indicators

were exceptional case because rest of the world was grappling with economic crisis hit by the global pandemic. It indicates surprising economic recovery of world second largest economy. China's GDP was recorded US \$ 17.7 trillion and growth rate had been 8.1% in the year 2021.

China requires energy supplies for continuous industrial production, to sustain pace of exports and generate foreign revenue. Economic progress, poverty eradication and sustainable economic development all relies heavily on energy supplies. Energy security therefore has become top policy priority for present day China. This unforgettable lesson was learned in 2003-04 by experiencing severe energy shortages that severely disrupted country's manufacturing output [6] and capacity to generate foreign revenue. Energy is playing crucial role in China's economic growth and development. It became world third largest oil importer and largest oil consumer in 2009 [7]. Conversely, demands for uninterrupted oil supplies have increased steadily. Today, it is world largest oil-importer and second largest oil-consumer in the world [8]. Seventy percent of its oil-consumption comes from oil imports. This figure will reach eighty percent by 2030. Uninterrupted secure energy supplies are essential for China's sustainable economic growth, development and economy. Territorial disputes in South China Sea and in South East Asia between China and its immediate neighbours are highlighted in news media and academic literature. Territorial disputes prevent Beijing to solely control or suppress regional and extra regional conflicts. Contentious territorial claims can result in crisis, potential conflict and out-break of war between China and its neighbours. China fears application of economic strangulation through energy cut-offs by its neighbouring rivals in future conflicts. Securing energy supplies is primary issue for Beijing. Fear of energy cut-offs stems from various reasons including,

- China's heavy dependence on energy imports through sea lanes of communications.
- Major energy supply lines at sea are controlled or dominated by US allies or US.
- US National Defense Strategy in 2018, identified China as a principal challenge and long-term strategic competitor to the United States. Pentagon maintains heavy military presence near Chinese mainland. Washington has signed strategic partnership agreements with China's immediate neighbors. Contentious relations over

territorial claims between Beijing and its neighbors can result in conflict resulting in China's naval blockade.

China's Military Strategy 2015, manifests Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs) is gaining significance in Chinese strategic discourse. It asserts that "the security of overseas interests concerning energy and resources, strategic SLOCs, as well as institutions, personnel and assets abroad, has become an imminent issue." Paper states that "... great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests," [9]. Document clearly highlights maritime disputes.

This paper aims at underlining threats and challenges posed to Chinese energy security in varying degrees like naval blockade, terrorist attacks, piracy and territorial dispute. Significant aspect of these challenges is these challenges lie in international waters, disputed territories and insurgency hit areas.

2 Achilles Heel of China's Energy Security and Economy the Malacca Dilemma

Malacca strait is jointly controlled by Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. It is 1080 kilometers long world busiest waterway connecting Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean [10]. This strait alone supports 25 percent of world's maritime trade [11]. 60 percent of vessels passing this strait are Chinese energy supplies from Middle East, Africa and South East Asia. It is significant trade route or SLOC for China's energy security and Chinese economy. If the strait is blockaded for Chinese oil tankers it will pose serious threats to China's energy security. Exports dependent economy will be seriously affected. This double edge sword is China's Malacca Dilemma. In November, 2003 Hu Jintao addressing the Conference on Economic Work of the Communist Party of China asserted Achilles Heel of China's energy security and economy lies in Strait of Malacca [12]. Naval blockade of Chinese imports and exports at Strait of Malacca was anticipated long ago. Strait serves as lifeline of China's energy imports as well. This vulnerability is discussed in Chinese strategic circles and abroad. Alternative routes include Sunda Strait and Lombok and Makassar Straits. However, these straits have disadvantages of being shallow or longer routes. The

estimated financial cost was around US \$ 220 billion per year [13].

Profound changes are taking place in Southeast Asia e.g. US projected its hegemonic presence by introducing QUAD and promoting power politics. US rebalancing strategy resulted in increased naval presence in the region by cementing strategic alliances with regional states. Southeast Asian states are buying advance weapons to cement their control over illegally occupied territories. Strategic changes have slowly and gradually exacerbated threats to Beijing's interests and hampers peaceful development in the region. Further, US enjoys strategic advantages vis-a-vis China because of advance military technology, capabilities to increase situational awareness, numerical strengths and operational military base at Diego Garcia. This military facility was used for reconnaissance in 1973, Arab-Israel war, to support Gulf War, Afghanistan and Iraq wars [14]. Washington replied to growing Sino-US strategic competition with alliance formations in South East Asia, Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean region to contain China. US alone is capable of blockading Malacca Strait to disrupt oil imports and coerce Beijing to back down in case of conflict. It is application of non-contact warfare strategy to avoid unnecessary loss of military equipment, trained personnel, attacks against military bases in the region and much costly full-scale warfare inviting direct attacks against US mainland. Naval blockades to cut energy supplies in the past have played crucial role in several cases. During World War II (WWII) US damaged Japanese economy and military through naval blockade [15]. Policy to slowly bleed enemy through economic strangulation can be a risky strategy requiring US to deploy credible combat capabilities. Question arises has US the capacity to successfully blockade Chinese oil shipments?

US imposed economic sanctions against geographically and economically weak and small nations for instance Iran and North Korea. Critical assessment of US policy ascertains despite limited options available to economically and militarily weak states Washington could not produce desired results. Chinese economic share/ contribution in global economy is more than twenty-five percent, its geographical size and military strength is gigantic. Washington can neither fracture energy security nor damage Chinese economy or declare victory against Beijing. The following section discusses different

scenarios in case naval blockade is imposed. It can result in following possible scenarios.

2.1 PRC Policy of Open Confrontation

US measures to disrupt energy supplies will certainly reduce Beijing's commercial activities within and outside its borders. Dire energy shortages can dreadfully affect Chinese exports resulting in economic crisis, power shortages sub-sequentially leading to political crisis at home. Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) presence in Indian Ocean at Sri Lanka, Gawadar and Djibouti. Huge defence budget endows People's Liberation Army (PLA) to carryout research and development activities in defence sector. China has evolved powerful armed forces and Anti Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities. Material resources available to PLA and dire consequences of economic strangulation enable Beijing to adopt policy of open confrontation. PLA can inflict formidable damage to US navy. Strategic planners in Pentagon may perceive to adopt policy of non-contact by imposing naval blockade similar to John F. Kennedy's 1962 Cuban naval blockade [16] against its contemporary rival. Pentagon's musing of non-contact warfare strategy can dangerously result in crisis leading to conflict escalation and open war with nuclear overhang.

2.2 Conflict-Prevention Strategy

Chinese authorities in response to US naval blockade may decide to avoid adopting policy of open confrontation. Conflict-Prevention strategy can involve oil-pipelines construction to import oil from Russia and Kazakhstan. Other options include PLAN contingents to safeguard oil-shipments. However, US navy attempt to directly confront PLAN security contingents safeguarding oil-shipments or missile strikes against oil-pipelines [17] will result in crossing Chinese threshold and patience level. Certainly, PLA's reputation publicly challenged will demand counter-strike. Inability to respond will fracture Beijing's deterrent capability in the region. Incapability will encourage regional rivals perhaps New Delhi to join hands with Washington and settle territorial disputes through coercive measures including use of force or threat of use of force.

2.3 Soft-Strategy

Beijing can orchestrate soft power strategy- a state's ability to achieve its national interest or persuade other states through attraction rather than coercion or

threat of use of force- [18] to maintain status-quo by utilizing energy reserves and importing extensive energy from Russia, Kazakhstan and utilizing Gawadar port for oil-imports. Simultaneously, Beijing will engage diplomatically for conflict prevention and conflict resolution with Washington. However, it should not be considered as a sign of weakness and hamper China's nuclear deterrent capabilities.

2.4 US Conventional War-Winning Strategy

US air, sea and land war fighting doctrines are considered as war-winning strategies because of numerical strength and qualitative edges it enjoys over enemies. Pentagon can orchestrate war fighting strategy against China because of PLA's smaller nuclear force size. In this scenario Beijing requires to expand nuclear forces and create sense of mutual vulnerability in strategic circles based in Washington. Fear of long-range residual nuclear deterrent force

will erode efficacy of US's sophisticated military technology and efficiency of deterrent forces. Certainly, it will preserve strategic stability and prevent future conflicts.

2.5 US Allies Response to China Specific Embargo

In prevailing international order states affairs are interconnected it resulted in complex interdependence. Therefore, world economy is interdependent US declaration of economic warfare against China will harm Western allies' economies. Will they tolerate sanctions? Can they sustain cost of economic war waged against China? The longer the blockade is continued the longer would be sufferings of US allies [19]. Efforts to disrupt Beijing's sustainable development will certainly disrupt sustainable development of European Union signatories. PRC is playing crucial role in global economy imposing energy embargo has global implications.



Fig. 1: Peoples Republic of China's Territorial Dispute with Neighbours

Source: [China's ambitious bid for Southeast Asia hegemony | Asia | An in-depth look at news from across the continent | DW | 24.12.2019](#)

3 Sino-Indian Hostility

Chinese sustainable economic development enables it to stretch military muscles and extend its outreach. PRC's military capabilities encouraged it to claim

over different geographical areas. It adopted policy to regain control of disputed territories. Expansionist policy is considered threatening by China's immediate neighbors. Sino-Indian unresolved protracted border dispute is resulting in horizontal escalation of hostility from Ladakh to South East Asia. Beijing viewed as a common threat by its Eastern and South Eastern neighbors is bringing them closer with New Delhi. Indian growing presence in South East Asia is worsening China's Malacca Dilemma. Look East Policy enabled it to enhance cooperation with South East Asian countries e.g. Japan, Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia [20]. It is evolving military cooperation. New Delhi is exporting missiles including naval and coastal defence version of BrahMos supersonic cruise missile to South East Asian nations. It is aimed at increasing defence capabilities of allies to counter Chinese threatening moves and encroachments. Strong anti-PLAN forces mean to use force or threat of use of force to disrupt Chinese energy shipments if required. In addition, Beijing's coastguard vessels and maritime militia can also be targeted in their hostile operations. Indian navy is strengthening Vietnamese naval forces by providing it five High Speed Guard Boats in December 2020. Keeping in view active territorial dispute India is playing a disruptive role by adding to problems in China's backyard.

Besides strengthening allies Indian armed forces established bases in Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Major Indian ships, aircraft carriers, fighter aircrafts and submarines extend its combat zone [21] against China. Substantial war fighting capabilities and geographical advantages enable New Delhi to disrupt Chinese energy supplies in Strait of Hormuz, Arabian Sea and the Strait of Malacca.

From above paragraphs inference can be drawn that Chinese Sea Lines of Communications are vulnerable to hostile navies. Energy imports to China can be disrupted in case war breaks out. US and India enjoy clear strategic, numerical and geographical edge over energy-hungry nation.

4 Threats to China's Energy Security in the Persian Gulf

China's oil imports reached 536.3 million tons in 2018 [22]. It is dependent on Middle Eastern oil-exporters for its mega oil-consumptions.

International Energy Agency (IEA) estimates that its energy requirements will reach seventy-six percent in 2024 and eighty-two percent in 2042 [23]. Since, 4.5 Million Barrels per day being imported from the Middle East through the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman it can be interrupted. Disruption in energy imports will pose serious threats to China's economy and economic lifeline. Navy's fifth fleet represents US immense military power in Persian and Arabian Gulf. Seventh fleet is largest forward deployed fleets with sixty thousand navy and Marine Corps, 350 fighter aircrafts, sixty battle ships it is operating in South Pacific, Indian Ocean and Arabian Gulf [24]. Fifth and seventh fleets can blockade Chinese oil containers at distant places. However, it is not prescribed owing to fear of conflict escalation.

Waging economic proxy can be considered appropriate step e.g. energy importers can offer higher price to PRC's oil-exporter disrupting oil exports. Political and diplomatic efforts can be launched to execute it. However, implementing this disruptive strategy will demand intense economic resources requiring diversion of economic resources from other important sectors for instance to purchase additional stocks of energy. Dangers of being bankrupt and diverse energy resources are making this task challenging. Consequentially, Washington can impose strict economic sanctions against Iran, key energy exporter to threaten energy security. According to estimates serious disturbance in energy exports will lower China's economy by six percent.

To deal with energy scarcity dilemma PRC maintains Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SRP). However, PRC has maintained opacity over amount of SPR, its ability to stock SPR and demands to meet its daily requirements. It frustrates experts to estimate PRC actual usage and quantity it stocks as reserves. Second available option is to enter strategic agreements with allies paving the way for supply of energy from their SPRs to meet China's energy requirements.

5 Vulnerability of Oil and Gas Supply

China is making economic gains because of industrial production heavily relying on energy supplies. Sustainable economic development enabled it to raise, sustain and modernize its armed forces and expand political influence abroad. US is locked in typical Thucydides trap- emerging power is perceived threatening by the ruling power/ hegemon

it results in war [25]. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Christopher Wray in July, 2020 clearly termed China “the greatest long-term threat” to US [26]. China is considered as a threat by US top ranking officials. US annual intelligence report released on April 13, 2021 by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence further exacerbated this threat. The report compiled by intelligence community based on declassified documents regards China as a major threat [27]. US intelligence community believes Beijing can pose challenges to US in different domains including military, technological and economic. Yet, it does not foresee direct war between the peer competitors. Mere presence of nuclear weapons stabilized strategic stability. It suggests war avoidance to avoid perilous future. Fear of mutual annihilation prevents direct confrontation. The ideal strategy for US security establishment and intelligence community is use of proxies including mercenaries, propaganda campaigns, insurgents, pirates and terrorists to disrupt energy flows en-route to china.

6 East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)

The group has presence in Afghanistan. It comprises of Uyghurs from Xinjian Western China. ETIM is Afghanistan based terrorist group. United Nations released a report in July, 2017 highlighting ETIM’s presence in Syria and several Afghan provinces including Badakhshan, Faryab, Helmand and Nuristan. Group members have long pursued independence for Xinjian province. Linkages with Al Qaeda, Jamaat Ansarullah and Katiba al-Tawhid wal-Jihad [28] empower it to expand its reach and carryout operations in areas beyond its reach. Peculiar features make it perilous and an ideal candidate towage proxy and target PRC’s energy supplies and development operations in South Asia. Proxy war enables US to avoid being unnecessarily exposed to charges of its involvement and direct confrontation. US intelligence officials can provide ETIM substantial clandestine financial assistance to slow the pace of peer competitor’s economic growth. In 2018, Beijing conveyed Islamabad that ETIM linked with Baloch insurgents [29] can carry-out potential terrorist attacks against Chinese workers and projects in Gilgit-Baltistan, Khyber Pakhton-Khwa and Balochistan. Later, crackdown was carried

out against ETIM [30]. Cao Wei expert on security studies at Lanzhou University presumed that ETIM was involved in July, 2021 bus attack. Nine Chinese workers working on Dasu hydropower project [31] were killed in the ETIM attack.

7 Chinese Countermeasures to Overcome Energy Security Problems and Potential Challenges

Washington can employ energy blockade against PRC the abovementioned scenarios manifests it will certainly result in war. This section endeavors to briefly discuss strategies and available options for China to overcome energy shortages.

7.1 Utilizing Strategic Petroleum Reserves

One of the answers to energy shortages or potential naval blockade to energy shipments can be to release crude oil from SPRs. Nonetheless, it is one of the risky options because this decision will shrink PRC’s SPRs at a fast face. In case of open confrontation PLA and PLAN or its air force will succumb to oil shortages. It will restrict Chinese armed forces movement and operational capabilities against overwhelming enemy power becoming paralyzed.

7.2 Constructing Foreign Naval Bases

China’s state owned Cosco Shipping Company was working on construction of container terminal for military purposes in collaboration with Abu Dhabi government. US lobbied with United Arab Emirates (UAE) to halt construction [32]. China’s sixty percent of oil is imported through sea vulnerable to hostile navies. It does not appreciate Washington’s firm hands on its economic throat. Probably, naval support base was under construction keeping in view potential threats posed by US and India to Beijing’s energy imports particularly in Strait of Hormuz. Natural competitors can easily cut-off energy imports to China’s Eastern ports. Inference can be drawn it was aimed at neutralizing hostile naval blockades in future conflicts. PLAN can secretly establish naval bases to support military operation away from mainland to prevent economic strangulation. Observers including Fickling believe China is constructing overseas ports in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Myanmar to expand its naval operational capabilities and convert them into

military bases in future to counterbalance US in the region.

7.3 Policy of Oil Mercantilism

China applied policy of oil mercantilism in pursuit to secure energy supplies at affordable price. Oil mercantilist theory advocates (Chinese) government intervention in oil imports to ensure sustainable oil supplies at affordable price and ensure energy security. PRC will thus be able to generate wealth, strengthen national economy and benefit domestic audience. The reliable energy strategy devised by oil mercantilists is state owned oil companies at home and abroad. It will ensure independent, secure, reliable and affordable oil/ energy supplies through state owned production within and outside state borders. Success of this policy depends upon robust diplomacy to develop strategic alliance, buy oil fields and shares in oil industries. Oil mercantilism is seen as viable strategy to price increase and military threats to its economy and energy security.

7.4 Construction of Thailand Energy Pipeline

One of the available potential options is to build a canal through Thailand's Kra Isthmus Canal. Construction of this particular route will decrease China's reliance on Malacca Strait. Unfortunately, strategic pundits have considered it impossible as once operational this route would require Beijing to take control of Thailand. Therefore, Thailand would not allow construction of Kra isthmus Canal.

8 Conclusion

This academic research endeavored to highlight China's economic growth rate. Significant aspect of this study is to highlight potential threats, challenges and obstacles posed to world second largest economy i.e. 18.3% growth rate, 14.1% industrial output and 34.2% retail sales in the first quarter of 2021. Beijing though helps US to pay its federal debt and interest rates low ironically Washington considers it as a formidable threat. Contrary to adopting neo-liberalist policy of cooperation both Sino-US are heading towards confrontation. This study highlights three potential threats posed to PRC's economy and sustainable economic development. First, threat to China emanates from US owing to Thucydides trap [33]. Second, wide ranging threats to Chinese energy supplies [34] are posed at land, on sea and from air. China is widening its options to increase security of

oil shipments. It took PLAN twenty years to evolve blue water navy and operate away from Chinese coastal areas. Hopefully within next decade PRC naval force will be in a position to secure sea lanes of communications. Decision makers are also considering options to import oil from Russia and Kazakhstan to address security problems posed to Chinese energy imports and reduce its reliance on Malacca strait. Oil shipments from Gawadar to Xinjiang province require restoration of peace in insurgency hit Balochistan. This volatile region can be used by PRC's potential enemies to target China bound oil tankers. ETIM [35] and Baloch insurgents can be used as proxy for this purpose. Third type of threat is the Middle Income Trap (MIT). MIT occurs when a particular state reaches given economic level but failed to adopt new sources of development and innovation. A state failure to address MIT and transform itself to new economic conditions result in pivotal declined economic growth rate known as middle income trap.

This study draws general inference that emerging power will pose psychological threats to hegemon in international system. Consequentially, hegemon will be faced with Thucydides trap resulting in crisis. Mismanagement of crisis will result in outbreak of violence.

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