CHAPTER 2

CHINA

'China is a civilisation pretending to be a nation.'
Lucian Pye, political scientist

IT'S BEEN TWO DECADES SINCE THE CHINESE GAVE A signal of intent as clear as the crystal waters around Okinawa. In October 2006, a US naval super-carrier group, led by the 1,000-foot USS *Kitty Hawk*, was confidently sailing through the East China Sea, minding everyone's business, when, without warning, a Chinese Navy submarine surfaced in its midst.

An American aircraft carrier of that size is surrounded by about twelve other warships, with air cover above and submarine cover below. The Chinese vessel, a Song-class attack submarine, may well be very quiet when running on electric power but, still, this was the equivalent of Pepsi-Cola's management popping up in a Coca-Cola board meeting after listening under the table for half an hour.

The Americans were amazed and angry in equal measure. Amazed because they had no idea a Chinese sub could do that without being noticed, angry because they hadn't noticed and because they regarded the move as provocative, especially as the sub was within torpedo range of the *Kitty Hawk* itself. They protested, perhaps too much, and the Chinese said: 'Oh! What a coincidence, us surfacing in the middle of your battle group, which is off our coast, we had no idea.'

This was twenty-first-century reverse gunboat diplomacy; whereas the British used to heave a man-of-war off the coast of some minor power to signal intent, the Chinese hove into view off their own coast with a clear message: 'We are now a maritime power, this is our time, and this is our sea.' Since then, China has rapidly increased its naval strength. It has taken 4,000 years, but the Chinese are coming to a port – and a shipping lane – near you.

Until now China has never been a naval power – with its large land mass, multiple borders and short sea routes to trading partners, it had no need to be, and it was rarely ideologically expansive. Its merchants have long sailed the oceans to trade goods, but its navy did not seek territory beyond its region, and the difficulty of patrolling the great sea lanes of the Pacific, Atlantic and Indian oceans was not worth the effort. It was always a land power, with a huge area and a lot of people – as of 2025 just over 1.4 billion.

In the 2020s it is also a world power. It may still lag behind the USA, but it has created a network of economic, military and diplomatic ties that guarantees it a seat at the table of any major geopolitical event if it chooses to be involved. The China of today is different from the one President Xi inherited when he came to power in 2012. For example, then China had around 250 nuclear warheads; by 2023 the number had risen to 410 and is expected to reach 1,000 by 2030. Beijing retains a 'no first strike' policy, and its stockpile is still dwarfed by those of the USA and Russia; but it no longer speaks softly and it carries a big stick.

Under Xi China has provided an alternative to the West and the liberal international order. By the time he began his third term in 2023, a new era of great-power rivalry was under way. The Middle Kingdom was back where it thought it belonged – at the centre of things.

The concept of China as an inhabited entity began almost 4,000 years ago. The birthplace of Chinese civilisation is the region known as the North China Plain, which the Chinese refer to as the Central Plain. A large, low-lying tract of nearly 160,000 square miles, it is situated below Inner Mongolia, south of Manchuria, in and around the Yellow River Basin and down past the Yangtze River, which both run west to east. It is now one of the most densely populated areas in the world.

The Yellow River Basin is subject to frequent and devastating floods, earning the river the unenviable sobriquet of 'Scourge of the Sons of Han'. The industrialisation of the region began in earnest in the 1950s and has been rapidly accelerating in the last three decades. The

terribly polluted river is now so clogged with toxic waste that occasionally it struggles even to reach the sea. In the 2020s China's 'War on Pollution' has seen significant improvements in water quality, but the 'war' is far from won.

The Yellow River is to China what the Nile is to Egypt – the cradle of its civilisation, where its people learned to farm, to make paper and gunpowder. To the north of this proto-China were the harsh lands of the Gobi Desert in what is now Mongolia. To the west the land gradually rises until it becomes the Tibetan Plateau, reaching to the Himalayas. To the south-east and south lies the sea.

The heartland, as the North China Plain is known, is a large, fertile plain with two main rivers and a climate that allows rice and soy beans to be harvested twice a season (double-cropping), which encouraged rapid population growth. By 1500 BCE, in this heartland, out of hundreds of mini city states, many warring with each other, emerged the earliest version of a Chinese state – the Shang dynasty. This is where what became known as the Han people came from, protecting the plain and creating a buffer zone around them.

The Han now make up over 90 per cent of China's population and they dominate Chinese politics and business. They are differentiated by Mandarin, Cantonese and many other regional languages, but united by ethnicity and at a political level by the geopolitical impulsion to protect the heartland. Mandarin, which originated in the northern part of the region, is by far the dominant language and is the medium of government, national state television and education. Mandarin is similar to Cantonese and many other languages when written, but very different when spoken.

The heartland is the political, cultural, demographic and – crucially – the agricultural centre of gravity. Four hundred million people live in this part of China, which sits to the east of the Heihe–Tengchong Line, also known as the Hu Line. This imaginary line is probably the most important geographical feature of the country and explains the starkly uneven distribution of China's population.

Draw a line, beginning in the chilly north-eastern city of Heihe on the Russian border, down to the tropical south-western province of Yunnan on the frontier with Myanmar. The land to the east of the line comprises 43 per cent of Chinese territory. It is less than half the size of the USA (which has 341 million people) but holds 96 per cent of China's population.

The majority of the Chinese population lives in the heartland of the country, east of the Heihe–Tengchong Line.

The reasons? Terrain and climate. East of the line the land is relatively flat, fertile and has water for growing food and for transportation, which leads to population growth and development. West of the line the deserts begin, and the further west you go the higher and drier is the land. This is where the majority of the 8–10 per cent of non-Han Chinese live.

Because the terrain of the heartland lent itself to settlement and an agrarian lifestyle, the early dynasties felt threatened by the non-Han regions around them, especially Mongolia with its nomadic bands of violent warriors.

China chose the same strategy as Russia: attack as defence, leading to power. As we shall see, there were natural barriers that – if the Han could reach them and establish control – would protect them. It was a struggle over millennia, only fully realised with the annexation of Tibet in 1951.

By the time of the Chinese philosopher Confucius (*c*.551– 479 BCE) there was a strong feeling of Chinese identity and of a divide between civilised China and the 'barbarous' regions that surrounded it. This was a sense of identity shared by 60 million or so people.

By 200 BCE China had expanded towards, but not reached, Tibet in the south-west, north to the grasslands of Central Asia and south all the way down to the South China Sea. The Great Wall (known as the Long Wall in China) had been first built by the Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE), and on the map China was beginning to take on what we now recognise as its modern form. It would be more than 2,000 years before today's borders were fixed, however.

Between 605 and 609 CE the Grand Canal, centuries in the making and today the world's longest man-made waterway, was extended and finally linked the Yellow River to the Yangtze. The Sui dynasty (581–618 CE) had harnessed the vast numbers of workers under its control

and used them to connect existing natural tributaries into a navigable waterway between the two great rivers. This tied the northern and southern Han to each other more closely than ever before. It took several million slaves five years to do the work, but the ancient issue of how to move supplies south to north had been solved – but not the problem which exists to this day, that of flooding.

The Han still warred with each other, but increasingly less so, and by the early eleventh century CE they were forced to concentrate their attention on the waves of Mongols pouring down from the north. The Mongols defeated whichever dynasty, north or south, they came up against and by 1279 their leader, Kublai Khan, became the first foreigner to rule all of the country as Emperor of the Mongol (Yuan) dynasty. It would be almost ninety years before the Han took charge of their own affairs with the establishment of the Ming dynasty.

By now there was increasing contact with traders and emissaries from the emerging nation states of Europe, such as Spain and Portugal. The Chinese leaders were against any sort of permanent European presence, but increasingly opened up the coastal regions to trade. It remains a feature of China to this day: when China opens up, the coastland regions prosper but the inland areas are neglected. The prosperity engendered by trade has made coastal cities such as Shanghai wealthy, but that wealth has not been reaching the countryside. This has added to the massive influx of people into urban areas and accentuated regional differences.

In the eighteenth century China reached into parts of Myanmar (previously known as Burma) and Indo-China to the south, and Xinjiang in the north-west was conquered, becoming the country's biggest province. An area of rugged mountains and vast desert basins, Xinjiang is 642,820 square miles, twice the size of Texas – or, to put it another way, you could fit the UK, France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Belgium into it and still have room for Luxembourg. And Liechtenstein.

But, in adding to its size, China also added to its problems. Xinjiang, which was populated by Muslims, was a perennial source of instability, indeed insurrection, as were other regions; but for the Han the buffer was worth the trouble, even more so after the fate that befell the country in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the coming of the Europeans.

The imperial powers arrived, the British among them, and carved the country up into spheres of influence. It was, and is, the greatest humiliation the Chinese suffered since the Mongol invasions. This is a narrative the Communist Party uses frequently; it is in part true, but it is also useful to cover up the Party's own failures and repressive policies.

Later the Japanese – expanding their territory as an emerging world power – invaded, attacking first in 1931 and then again in 1937, after which they occupied most of the heartland as well as Manchuria and Inner Mongolia. Japan's unconditional surrender to the Americans at the end of the Second World War in 1945 led to the withdrawal of Japanese troops, although in Manchuria they were replaced by the advancing Soviet Army, which then withdrew in 1946.

A few outside observers thought the post-war years might bring liberal democracy to China. It was wishful thinking akin to the naive nonsense Westerners wrote during the early days of the 'Arab Spring', which, as with China, was based on a lack of understanding of the internal dynamics of the people, politics and geography of the region.

Instead, Nationalist forces under Chiang Kai-shek and communist armies under Mao Zedong battled for supremacy until 1949, when the communists emerged victorious and the Nationalists withdrew to Taiwan. That same year Radio Beijing announced: 'The People's Liberation Army must liberate all Chinese territories, including Tibet, Xinjiang, Hainan and Taiwan.'

Mao centralised power to an extent never seen in previous dynasties. He blocked Russian influence in Inner Mongolia (part of China) and extended Beijing's influence into Mongolia. In 1951 China completed its annexation of Tibet (another vast non-Han territory), and by then Chinese school textbook maps were beginning to depict China as stretching even into the Central Asian republics. The country had been put back together; Mao would spend the rest of his life ensuring it stayed that way and consolidating Communist Party control in every facet of life but turning his back on much of the outside world. The country remained desperately poor, especially away from the coastal areas, but unified.

Mao's successors tried to turn his Long March to victory into an economic march towards prosperity. In the early 1980s the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping coined the term 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics', which appears to translate as 'Total Control for the Communist Party in a Capitalist Economy'. China was becoming a major trading power and a rising military giant. By the end of the 1990s it had recovered from the shock of the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, regained Hong Kong and Macau from the British and Portuguese respectively, and could look around its borders, assess its security and plan ahead for its great move out into the world.

If we look at China's modern borders we see a great power now confident that it is secured by its geographical features, which lend themselves to effective defence and trade. In China the points of the compass are always listed in the order east/south/west/north, but let's start in the north and move clockwise.

In the north we see the 2,906-mile-long border with Mongolia. Straddling this is the Gobi Desert. Nomadic warriors from ancient times might have been able to attack south across it, but a modern army would be spotted massing there weeks before it was ready to advance, and it would need incredibly long supply lines running across inhospitable terrain before it got into Inner Mongolia and close to the heartland. There are few roads fit to move heavy armour, and few habitable areas. The Gobi Desert is a massive early warning system-cum-defensive line. Any Chinese expansion northwards will come not via the military but from trade deals as China attempts to hoover up Mongolia's natural resources, primarily minerals.

Next door, to the east, is China's border with Russia, which runs all the way to the Pacific Ocean – or at least the Sea of Japan subdivision of it. Above this is the mountainous Russian Far East, a huge, inhospitable territory with a tiny population. Below it is Manchuria, which the Russians would have to push through if they wanted to reach the Chinese heartland. The population of Manchuria is 107 million and growing; in contrast, the Russian Far East has fewer than 8 million people and no indications of growth. In the decade since 2015 there has been small-scale migration south to north. This will continue and possibly grow, giving China more leverage in its relations with Russia. From a military perspective the best place to cross would be near the Russian Pacific port of Vladivostok, but there are few reasons, and no current intentions, to so do. Indeed, the recent Western sanctions against Russia following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and full invasion of Ukraine in 2022, have driven Russia into massive economic deals with China on terms that help keep Russia afloat but are favourable to the Chinese.

Below the Russian Far East, and south of the border with North Korea, are the Yellow, East China and South China seas, which lead to the Pacific and Indian oceans. They possess many good harbours and have always been used for trade. But across the waves lie several island-sized problems – one shaped like Japan, which we shall come to.

Continuing clockwise, we arrive at the next land borders: Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar. Vietnam is an irritation for China. For centuries the two have squabbled over territory, and

unfortunately for both this is the one area to the south that has a border an army can get across without too much trouble – which partially explains the 1,000-year domination and occupation of Vietnam by China from 111 BCE to 938 CE and their brief cross-border war of 1979.

As China's military prowess grows, Vietnam knows it could be overwhelmed by its giant neighbour. It does not aggressively press the maritime disputes it has with China and maintains good trade relations. That both countries are nominally ideologically communist has little to do with the state of their relationship: it is their shared geography that has defined relations. Viewed from Beijing, Vietnam is only a minor threat and a problem that can be managed. For their part the Vietnamese have spent the 2020s trying to balance between Beijing and Washington. In late 2023 US President Joe Biden visited Hanoi and secured a deal giving America access to Vietnam's large deposits of rare earth materials used in multiple high-tech industries. The two countries upgraded their relationship to a 'comprehensive strategic partnership'.

Biden made it clear that his visit was part of his administration's push 'to demonstrate to our Indo-Pacific partners and to the world, the United States is a Pacific nation and we're not going anywhere'. China responded three months later with a visit by President Xi, who agreed to upgrade co-operation on security matters and having a 'shared future'. Given their close proximity, they don't have a choice. Vietnam is hedging as to what that future will look like.

Continuing clockwise, Laos has borders with Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar and is considered by Beijing as a bridge helping to connect China with them to further its economic interests. The China–Laos border is about 300 miles in length, consists mostly of forests and mountains, and is populated by minority groups on both sides. A Chinese bank financed the building of a 257-mile-long high-speed rail track that opened in 2021 and runs from the border down to the capital, Vientiane, which lies next to Thailand. The journey time has been cut from eighteen hours to three. China has also helped develop the country's river network, which includes part of the Mekong.

Next door, in Myanmar, China has a much longer frontier and a more complicated relationship. The border runs for 1,358 miles and on the other side is not only territory long claimed by China but also a civil war. Until recently Beijing mostly backed the military junta in Myanmar, but hedged its bets with quiet support for some ethnic rebel groups seeking to overthrow the junta and establish autonomous regions. In late 2023 an alliance of three minority ethnic militia called the Three Brotherhood Alliance launched an offensive against junta forces throughout northern Shan State along the Chinese border. They seized numerous towns and cut roads, which impacted cross-border trade. The junta's counter-offensive saw shells landing on Chinese territory.

Beijing had had enough. Across from Shan State is the landlocked Chinese province of Yunnan. China is funding a long-term $1.3 billion project to link Yunnan, via 1,000 miles of rail and road, down to the Myanmar coastal city of Kyaukphyu where it is building a deep-water port and economic zone. Once completed it will give China direct access to the Indian Ocean, thus reducing both its shipping costs and its current reliance on the narrow and congested Strait of Malacca, through which most of its oil supplies pass. But the fighting halted work on that and other projects.

China brokered a shaky ceasefire in Shan State and followed up in early 2024 with a demonstration of power. The People's Liberation Army conducted huge live-fire drills along its southern border and said China would take 'all necessary measures' to safeguard its interests. What it wants is a buffer zone in the border regions to protect it from instability, and enough

security elsewhere to pursue its multibillion-dollar projects. It will continue to play both sides until one looks as if it might come out on top, at which point Beijing will throw the other under the bus. It's not personal – it's business.

As the jungle terrain of the Laos border reaches Myanmar, the hills become mountains until at the western extreme they are approaching 20,000 feet and beginning to merge into the Himalayas.

The Himalayas run the length of the Chinese–Indian border before descending to become the Karakoram Range flanking Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. This is nature's version of a Great Wall of China, or – looking at it from New Delhi's side – the Great Wall of India. The joint border is 2,100 miles long and until recently it cut the two most populous countries on the planet off from each other both militarily and economically. In the 2020s that is changing, but remains a factor in preventing a major land war between the two. They can now reach one another, but with limited force compared to what could be marshalled on flat land.

They have their disputes: China claims the Indian province of Arunachal Pradesh, which lies at the south-eastern end of the Himalayas next to Bhutan, and calls it 'Zangnan' or 'South Tibet'. India says China is occupying a large part of the Aksai Chin region at the north-western end. 'Not so,' says Beijing, which claims the area is part of its Xinjiang province. However, despite pointing their artillery at each other high up on this natural wall, both sides have better things to do than reignite the shooting match that broke out in 1962, when a series of violent border disputes culminated in vicious, large-scale mountain fighting. India was humiliated and lost more than 7,000 soldiers either captured or killed. The tension is ever present and each side needs to handle the situation with care.

Which brings us to Tibet and its importance to China. This part of the frontier is really the Tibetan–Indian border – and that is precisely why China has always wanted to control it. It is the geopolitics of fear. If China did not control Tibet, it would always be possible that India might attempt to do so. This would give India the commanding heights of the Tibetan Plateau and a base from which to push into the Chinese heartland, as well as control of the Tibetan sources of three of China's great rivers, the Yellow, Yangtze and Mekong, which is why Tibet is known as 'China's Water Tower'.

China is home to roughly 20 per cent of the global population but has just 6 per cent of the world's freshwater supplies. It matters not whether India wants to cut off China's river supply, only that it might have the power to do so. For centuries China has tried to ensure that it could never happen. The actor Richard Gere and the Free Tibet movement will continue to speak out against the injustices of the occupation, and now settlement, of Tibet by Han Chinese; but in a battle between the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan independence movement and Hollywood stars on one side and the Chinese Communist Party on the other – which rules the world's second-largest economy – there is only going to be one winner.

When Westerners criticise Beijing's policies in Tibet, the Chinese find it deeply irritating. Not dangerous – just irritating. They see it not through the prism of human rights but that of geopolitical safety, and can only believe that the Westerners are trying to undermine their security. However, Chinese security has not been undermined and it will not be, even if there are further uprisings against the Han. Demographics and geopolitics oppose Tibetan independence.

The Chinese are building 'facts on the ground' on the 'roof of the world'. In the 1950s the Chinese Communist People's Army began building roads into Tibet, and since then they have helped to bring the modern world to the ancient kingdom; but the roads, and now railways, also bring the Han.

It was long said to be impossible to build a railway through the permafrost, the mountains and the valleys of Tibet. Europe's best engineers, who had cut through the Alps, said it could not be done. As late as 1988 the travel writer Paul Theroux wrote in his book *Riding the Iron Rooster*: 'The Kunlun Range is a guarantee that the railway will never get to Lhasa.' The Kunlun separated Xinjiang province from Tibet, for which Theroux gave thanks: 'That is probably a good thing. I thought I liked railways until I saw Tibet, and then I realised that I liked wilderness much more.' But the Chinese built it. Perhaps only they could have done. The first line into Lhasa, the Tibetan capital, was opened in 2006 by the then Chinese President Hu Jintao. Now passenger and goods trains arrive from Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Chongqing, Xi'an, Lanzhou, Guangzhou and other cities. Several times a day. Every day.

They bring with them many things, such as consumer goods from across China, computers, televisions and mobile phones. They bring tourists who support the local economy, they bring modernity to an ancient and impoverished land, a huge improvement in living standards and healthcare, and they bring the potential to carry Tibetan goods out to the wider world. But they have also brought several million Han Chinese settlers.

The true figures are hard to come by. The Free Tibet movement claims that in the wider cultural Tibetan region Tibetans are now a minority, but the Chinese government says that in the official Tibetan Autonomous Region more than 90 per cent of people are Tibetan. Both sides are exaggerating, but the evidence suggests that Beijing is the one with the greater degree of exaggeration. Its figures do not include Han migrants who are not registered as residents, but the casual observer can see that Han neighbourhoods now dominate the Tibetan urban areas. This is particularly true of Lhasa, where the percentage of Han rose throughout the 2010s, according to studies of the 2020 Seventh National Chinese Census, while numbers fell in less developed areas.

China's massive population, mostly crammed into the heartland, is looking for ways to expand. Just as the Americans looked west, so do the Chinese, and just as the Iron Horse brought the European settlers to the lands of the Comanche and the Navajo, so the modern Iron Roosters are bringing the Han, and the Mandarin language, to new lands. Once, the majority of the populations of Manchuria, Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang were ethnically Manchurian, Mongolian and Uighur; now all three are majority Han Chinese, or approaching the majority. However, it will take decades for that to happen in Tibet, if it happens at all, owing to the reluctance of many Han to relocate to anywhere outside the urban areas.

Nevertheless, the number of Han who have settled there means that antagonism towards them will continue to manifest itself. The riots of 2008 have not been repeated, but they showed the depths of divide between some sections of the two communities. Tibetans in Lhasa burned and looted Han properties, twenty-one people died and hundreds were injured. Since then, dozens of Tibetans have died after setting themselves on fire to protest against Chinese persecution and forced assimilation. The use of the Tibetan language is increasingly restricted as part of Beijing's insistence that Mandarin (known in Chinese as the 'common tongue') be universally used by 2035, including by all ethnic minorities. The justification? The masses must be homogeneous to be unified. Religious persecution is also rife. Since 2023, Buddhist temples (as well as churches and mosques) must obtain official permission to carry out any religious activities, and senior Tibetan monks must denounce the Dalai Lama.

In 2024 more than a thousand Tibetans were arrested after a mass protest against plans to demolish six monasteries to make way for a hydroelectric dam. Government officials argue that the Party is bringing modernity and a better life to Tibet. Their crackdown will continue, as will opposition to Chinese rule. Only one will come out on top.

Finally, the clock hand moves round past the borders with Pakistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (all mountainous) before reaching that with Kazakhstan, which leads back round north to Mongolia. This is the ancient Silk Route, the trade land bridge from the Middle Kingdom to the world. Theoretically it's a weak spot in China's defence, a gap between the mountains and desert; but it is far from the heartland, the Kazakhs are in no position to threaten China, and Russia is several hundred miles distant.

South-east of this Kazakh border is the restive 'semi-autonomous' Chinese province of Xinjiang and its native Muslim population of Uighur people, who speak a language related to Turkish. Xinjiang borders eight countries: Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. It thus buffers the heartland, but it also has oil, and is home to China's nuclear weapons testing sites.

In addition, the territory is key to the Chinese economic strategy of 'One Belt, One Road'. The road is, oddly enough, a sea route – the creation of an ocean-going highway for goods; the belt is the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' – a land-based route formed from the old Silk Route that goes straight through Xinjiang and then turns southwards to the massive deep-water port China has built in Gwadar, Pakistan, on which it has a forty-year lease. The route is part of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project involving numerous road, rail and energy links, but, despite hundreds of miles of roads being built, progress has been slow and the project does not always win China friends.

There was, is and always will be trouble in Xinjiang. The Uighurs have twice declared an independent state of 'East Turkestan', in the 1930s and 1940s. They watched the collapse of the Russian Empire result in their former Soviet neighbours in the 'Stans' becoming sovereign states, were inspired by the Tibetan independence movement, and some are now again calling to break away from China. However, for China Xinjiang is too strategically important to allow an independence movement to get off the ground.

Inter-ethnic rioting erupted in 2009, leading to over 200 deaths. Beijing responded in three ways: it ruthlessly suppressed dissent, it poured money into the region, and it continued to pour in Han Chinese workers. Most of the new towns and cities springing up in Xinjiang are overwhelmingly populated by Han Chinese attracted by work in the factories in which the central government invests. A classic example is the city of Shihezi, 85 miles north-west of the capital, Ürümqi. Of its (metropolitan) population of 570,000, it is thought that more than 90 per cent are Han. Overall, Xinjiang is reckoned to be 40 per cent Han, at a conservative estimate – and even Ürümqi itself may now be majority Han, although official figures are difficult to obtain and not always reliable due to their political sensitivity.

There is a 'World Uighur Congress' based in Germany, and the 'East Turkestan Liberation Movement' set up in Turkey; but Uighur separatists lack a Dalai Lama-type figure upon whom foreign media can fix, and until a flurry of media reporting in 2017 their cause was almost unknown around the world. China tries to keep it that way, ensuring it stays on good terms with as many border countries as possible to prevent any organised independence movement from having supply lines or somewhere to which it could fall back. Beijing also paints separatists as Islamist terrorists. Al-Qaeda and other groups, which have a foothold in places like Tajikistan, are indeed attempting to forge links with the Uighur separatists, but the movement is nationalist first, Islamic second.

Beginning in 2009, gun, bomb and knife attacks in the region against state and/or Han targets began to escalate and threatened to become a full-blown uprising. However, Beijing's response was to incarcerate huge numbers of Uighurs in 're-education' camps, which began to be set up in 2014 and were dramatically extended after 2017. How many people are being

held is known only to the Chinese authorities, but many estimates put the number at 1 million. It is alleged that inmates are banned from praying or growing beards as part of a policy designed to strip the Uighurs of their religious beliefs. In 2019 China said it had arrested about 13,000 terrorists and 'broken up hundreds of terrorist gangs'. It also said it was now closing many of what it called 'boarding schools', a claim contested by many human rights groups and media outlets. A UN report in 2022 found 'patterns of torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment' in the camps, but Beijing said this was foreign governments spreading 'numerous rumours and lies'. It takes a similar view of the decision by the USA, UK, Netherlands and other countries to describe what is happening as 'genocide'.

Outside the camps, Xinjiang has been turned into a surveillance state. The regional government uses a grid management system that splits urban areas into squares of about 500 people. Each square has a government official in it. Every few hundred yards there are cameras that use facial recognition and AI to monitor the population.

China will not cede this territory and, as with Tibet, the window for independence is closing. Both are buffer zones, one is a major land trade route, and – crucially – both offer markets (albeit with a limited income) for an economy that must keep producing and selling goods if it is to continue to grow and to prevent mass unemployment. Failure to so do would likely lead to widespread civil disorder, threatening the control of the Communist Party and the unity of China.

There are similar reasons for the Party's resistance to democracy and individual rights. If the population were to be given a free vote, the unity of the Han might begin to crack or, more likely, the countryside and urban areas would come into conflict. That in turn would embolden the people of the buffer zones, further weakening China. It is only a century since the most recent humiliation of the rape of China by foreign powers; for Beijing, unity and economic progress are priorities well ahead of democratic principles.

The Chinese look at society very differently from the West. Western thought is infused with the rights of the individual; Chinese thought prizes the collective above the individual. What the West thinks of as universal rights, the Chinese leadership thinks of as dangerous theories that threaten the majority, and much of the population accepts that, at the very least, the extended family comes before the individual.

I once took a Chinese ambassador in London to a high-end French restaurant in the hope that they would repeat Prime Minister Zhou Enlai's much quoted answer to Richard Nixon's question 'What is the impact of the French Revolution?', to which the prime minister replied 'It's too soon to tell.' Sadly, this was not forthcoming, but I was treated to a stern lecture about how the full imposition of 'what you call human rights' in China would lead to widespread violence and death and was then asked, 'Why do you think your values would work in a culture you don't understand?'

The outcome of this viewpoint was demonstrated in Hong Kong.

That was a done deal the moment the British said goodbye. In 1997 the former colonial overseer handed back Hong Kong on the basis that for fifty years it would have considerable political autonomy and freedoms under the 'one country – two systems' formula agreed with Beijing. After less than a decade the agreement began to crumble. By 2003 Beijing had already persuaded the Hong Kong government that it would be a good idea to pass legislation banning sedition and subversion against the Chinese government.

Mass pro-democracy protests by the 'Umbrella Movement' put paid to that, and to further efforts in 2012 and 2014 by Beijing to ensure 'one country, one system' – the communist system. But in 2019 the largest protests ever were met with rubber bullets and tear gas; the

gloves were off and the pretence was over. The following year Beijing bypassed the Hong Kong government and imposed a national security law. It allowed a mainland security force to be set up in Hong Kong and criminalised dissent. Arguing for democracy could be interpreted as terrorism. There have been thousands of arrests, academics have been dismissed, the free media has been silenced and many dissidents have fled. If you want to run for office now you must be a Chinese patriot and respect the Party.

The drive to make Mandarin the common tongue affects the people of Hong Kong. Most are ethnically Han but speak Cantonese or one of several non-Mandarin Chinese languages such as Sichuanese. The government in Beijing has begun calling these 'dialects' despite them being unintelligible to people who only speak Mandarin. The Mandarin for the English phrase 'That's a bit of a stretch' is '*Zhè yǒudiǎn qiānqiǎng*'.

The deal between the Party leaders and the people has been, for a generation now, 'We'll make you better off – you will follow our orders.' So long as the economy kept growing, that grand bargain could work. However, the last few years have seen growth slow, and if it goes into reverse the deal is off.

The Chinese economy was hit hard by Covid-19, especially as Beijing insisted on shuttering factories as part of the 'zero-Covid' policy, which was only abandoned in 2022. As it tried to recover it has faced numerous economic 'headwinds'. The real-estate market, which constituted more than 25 per cent of the country's economy, blew up – sometimes literally, with numerous brand-new high-rise apartment blocks being dynamited because no one was buying them.

Like the overall economy, the property market had enjoyed a twenty-year boom. Rapid urbanisation fuelled demand, and higher wages saw people buying homes, which then increased in value. But by 2021 the economy had been ravaged by the Covid crisis, property prices were soaring, and the real estate developers were up to their high-rise blocks in debt. At the same time the Communist Party's rule that parents could only have one child was coming home to roost insofar as each year there were fewer children seeking a nest. The policy was only scrapped in 2016 and China faces a serious demographic problem. In 2015 the ratio of workers to retirees was ten to one; in 2020 it was five to one; and by 2050 it is forecast to be less than two to one. Significant reforms are required, including raising taxes and pension ages. They will not be popular.

The housing market shrank, debts were called in, the government restricted new borrowing and the country's property companies went into meltdown. China remains awash with 'ghost cities'. There are hundreds of urban areas consisting of dozens of huge finished and unfinished apartment blocks standing empty. In 2023 the former deputy head of the government's statistics department said there were so many empty homes that China's entire population of 1.4 billion people could not fill them. That may or may not have been an exaggeration, but it's hard to exaggerate the effect on the Chinese economy.

Two of the biggest property companies, Evergrande and Country Garden, had collective debts of $500 billion – roughly equivalent to the entire government debt of Belgium in 2024.

The hundreds of millions of middle-class Chinese consumers reacted by cutting spending and pulling their money out of property. Household savings surged by 80 per cent in 2022 – a third of disposable income was put in the banks and not into companies' products.

This was the background to President Xi's trip to California in 2023. He met President Biden and was keen to stabilise the two countries' relationship, but his focus was elsewhere, specifically a dinner where $2,000 got you in the room, $40,000 got you Xi. That was the price to dine at the same table as the president at the Hyatt Regency hotel in San Francisco. To

be fair, it did include a three-course meal featuring 'local season-inspired' vegetables in a champagne vinaigrette, a 'Blue Bottle Coffee Crusted' steak and a vanilla custard tart. But also on the menu was trade and investment.

According to Bloomberg, the top table included leading execs from Apple, Boeing, Pfizer, Mastercard and Gilead Sciences. Tesla and SpaceX boss Elon Musk had shown up earlier for cocktails but perhaps couldn't stump up the extra $39,990 for dinner. Xi knew that all of the executives in the room were aware of his economic woes, and also of his crackdown on how foreign companies did business in China: 2023 saw an 8 per cent drop in inward investment as the economy faltered and some foreign companies moved out.

New, vaguely worded legislation on state secrecy and data has increased the dangers of being detained by local and central government officials choosing to interpret the laws as they see fit. If the government wants access to company data held inside China, it must be handed over. In reality the Communist Party would most likely already have the information. A foreign company operating in China will be using emails and probably the intranet and a website. If so, the server holding any information of the branch of the company in China must by law be inside China's borders. Secure VPNs are not allowed to be used, meaning any data the company sends in or out of China is accessible to Party officials. There is a non-tech way of avoiding this. Do not send any information in or out of China. Otherwise the government will be reading everything and installing malware in an effort to extend its reach back to the company's overseas HQ.

This, and the reduction in domestic consumerism, is partially why companies are moving out. Xi had dinner with the titans of American capitalism to try to reverse that. He knows that failing to do so increases the possibility of the failure of the grand bargain – 'You're in charge – make us rich.' The demonstrations and levels of anger against corruption and inefficiency are testament to what would happen if the deal breaks.

Protests and strikes are mostly tolerated if they do not criticise the Communist Party or government policy. This explains why the 2022 nationwide demonstrations against draconian Covid restrictions were dealt with so violently. After hundreds of people gathered chanting, 'End the lockdown', amid scuffles with security officials wearing hazmat suits, the protest quickly spread and became more serious for the authorities. In Chengdu a large crowd chanted, 'We don't want lifelong rulers. We don't want emperors,' a reference to President Xi, who had scrapped presidential term limits. But it was Shanghai that saw scenes the authorities most fear. At a candlelit vigil a large group of protestors began chanting, 'Down with the Chinese Communist Party, down with Xi Jinping!' They held up blank sheets of paper to symbolise censorship, a tactic learned from the Hong Kong protests of 2020. This was too much for the authorities. The police moved in using pepper spray and batons to disperse the crowds and made numerous arrests.

The following month Beijing abruptly, and without explanation, ended the lockdowns and other restrictions. The reasons were probably as much economic as political, but Xi almost certainly knows Mao Zedong's maxim that 'A spark is all that is needed to set the prairie on fire.'

So the Politburo seems to have moved to extinguish the spark. It has less need to do this when it comes to anger about wages and conditions, as that is mostly aimed at companies and the government can deflect responsibility.

Unpaid wages are a chronic problem, especially for migrant construction workers. They are rarely given proper contracts and have little union support, because although all 'workers have the right to join and organise trade unions in accordance with the law', the law insists all

unions come under the umbrella All-China Federation of Trade Unions, and the ACFTU is run by . . . the Communist Party.

Despite that, there are strikes and protests. In fact, they are increasing. At a rough estimate there are hundreds of mostly peaceful protests every day across China over a variety of issues including pollution, rural land confiscation and working conditions. Reliable figures are scarce, but it is probable that well over 90 per cent of them target either local government or private companies. The Hong Kong-based China Labour Bulletin, which measures such things, reported that 2023 saw 1,794 work-related protests, up 216 per cent from the previous year. Many are due to workers not receiving pay for months on end. The CCP regards all acts of collective action against authority as a threat, but as long as it is not criticised it can take measures to encourage 'social stability' and compromise and/or resolution in disputes.

China has another problem – its ability to feed the population. More than 40 per cent of arable land is now either polluted or has thinning topsoil, according to the Ministry of Agriculture. China is caught in a catch-22. It needs to keep industrialising as it modernises and raises standards of living, but that very process threatens food production. If it cannot solve this problem there will be unrest.

The deal is holding. However, if you introduce mass unemployment, or mass hunger, the protests will explode in both number and the degree of force used by both sides. So China now also has a grand bargain with the world: 'We'll make the stuff for cheap – you buy it for cheap.'

Leave to one side the fact that labour costs have already risen in China and that it is being rivalled by Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam and others for price if not volume. What would happen if the resources required to make the stuff dried up, if someone else got them first, or if there was a naval blockade of your goods – in and out? Well, for that you'd need a navy.

Having gone clockwise round the land borders, we now look east, south and south-west towards the sea.

The Chinese were great sea voyagers, especially in the fifteenth century, when they roamed the Indian Ocean; Admiral Zheng He's expedition ventured as far as Kenya. But these were money-making exercises, not power projections, and they were not designed to create forward bases that could be used to support military operations.

Having spent 4,000 turbulent years consolidating its land mass, China is now well on the way to having built a genuine blue-water navy. In broad-brush terms, a green-water navy patrols its maritime borders, while a blue-water navy can deploy a task force of ships across the oceans, and, crucially, it can supply them at great distance from their bases.

In the past decade China has launched well over a hundred blue-water-capable navy ships and many more have been commissioned. It has overtaken the US and now has the world's largest navy in terms of number of vessels, although other metrics such as tonnage and ability are factors in which the USA is still superior. It may still take up to another two decades (assuming economic progression) for China to match the most powerful seaborne force the world has ever seen. But in the medium to short term, as it builds, and trains, and learns, the Chinese Navy will bump up against its rivals on the seas; and how those bumps are managed – especially the Sino-American ones – will define great-power politics in this century.

China is still restrained by a lack of what are known as replenishment ships. In 2024 it had only twelve such vessels whereas the USA, depending on definitions, had between thirty-one and forty-two including fifteen refuelling vessels. Nevertheless, China's twelve is double the number it had in 2015. In the last decade it has also developed shore-based support bases such as the one in Djibouti on the Red Sea, which it opened in 2017. By 2021 the capacity had been increased to allow aircraft carriers to dock there. The ports in Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota

(Sri Lanka) and Ream (Cambodia) among others are used for warships to take on fuel and supplies.

'What's the problem?' asks Beijing, pointing to the estimated 750 overseas military installations the Americans enjoy across the world, which were crucial in building its global economic empire. China intends to have a network of bases around the globe, giving it access to the major sea lanes, maritime chokepoints and seaborne energy routes.

One area in which they will keep an eye on each other is the Arctic, where rising temperatures are slowly opening a new northern sea route for trade. An open Arctic would provide China with a partial alternative to the chokepoints it must currently traverse. It has no sovereign claims on the Arctic, but in 2018 declared itself a 'Near-Arctic state'. The term has no official recognition in the international system, but Beijing is positioning itself to have a say in Arctic affairs. Since 2014 it has helped build the China-Iceland Arctic Science Observatory in Iceland, invested in infrastructure projects in Greenland, upgraded its scientific facilities on the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard and launched its first domestically built icebreaker. This is the power of presence, and China intends to increase its presence by conducting navy operations everywhere, including in the High North.

In 2012 China launched the *Liaoning*, a second-hand aircraft carrier salvaged from a Ukrainian rust yard. The young seamen who trained on it are the ones who in twenty years, if they make it to the rank of admiral, may have learned enough to know how to take a twelve-ship carrier group across the world and back – and, if necessary, fight a war along the way. Since then China has launched a third carrier, the *Fujian* (2022), and in 2024 announced that it was building a fourth. When completed China will have a formidable carrier group, but it's important to recognise it is still only half the size of the US Pacific Fleet's carrier force.

Aircraft carriers are useful for many reasons, including, as the *Kitty Hawk* discovered, making statements. In the summer of 2017, the Chinese sailed the *Liaoning* into Hong Kong harbour accompanied by two guided-missile destroyers, a guided-missile frigate and two corvettes. It was timed to honour the visit of President Xi – but it was also meant as a reminder to Hong Kong, and the rest of the world, of who controls Hong Kong, and who intends one day to control the South China Sea.

Gradually the Chinese will put more and more vessels into the seas off their coast and into the Pacific. Each time one is launched there will be less space for the Americans. The Americans know this, and that the Chinese have loaded their coastline with land-based anti-ship missiles to push them further away. This is a modern version of Admiral Nelson's quote that 'A ship's a fool to fight a fort.' China now has 'carrier killer' missiles positioned on its coastline which are thought to be able to track and reach aircraft carriers at a range of 2,000 miles.

The Americans have the most advanced counter-measures available, as well as their own 'stand-off' weapons; but even so Beijing is making the US Navy think hard about sailing through the South China Sea. Or indeed, any other 'China' sea. China's increasingly long-distance shore-to-ship artillery firepower will allow its growing navy to venture further from its coastline because it will become less vital for defence.

Between China and the Pacific is the archipelago that Beijing calls the 'First Island Chain', which in the event of war could act as a wall denying China access to the great ocean. There is also the 'Nine Dash Line', turned into ten dashes in 2013 to include Taiwan, which China says marks its territory. It is known as the 'Cow's Tongue' due to the shape the dashes make. China said the lines 'indicate the sovereignty of China over the islands in the South China Sea since ancient times'. China was claiming sovereignty of 90 per cent of that sea, including the Paracel

Islands, the Spratly Islands and the Scarborough Shoal. Five other countries have claims on territory within the Cow's Tongue, but only China claims all of it.

The South China Sea is a hotly contested area between China and its neighbours, leading to disputes over ownership of islands, natural resources and control of the seas and shipping lanes.

In 2016 a UN tribunal threw out most of China's claims, but Beijing ignored the ruling. It dredged rocky outcrops, poured concrete on them and began to build out. Some now have small docks, buildings, landing strips and missile batteries. Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), a state can claim 200 nautical miles from its shore as its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). China is creating 'facts in the sea', says they are sovereign territory, and then claims jurisdiction in all directions.

These disputes over ownership of more than 200 tiny islands and reefs is poisoning China's relations with its neighbours. Some are just rocks poking out of the water, but each one can be turned into a diplomatic crisis based on fishing zones, exploration rights and sovereignty.

An example came in April 2024. China calls the waters around the Scarborough Shoal part of the South China Sea; the Philippines point out that it is within their 200 nautical miles of EEZ and call it the West Philippine Sea. Manila sent two coastguard ships on a mission to the Shoal to demonstrate that it insisted on keeping the sea lanes open to its vessels. Three much larger Chinese vessels intercepted them and repeatedly used their water cannon against one of the ships, damaging its infrastructure and communications equipment. The ship was also rammed but was able to continue its mission and resupply Philippine fishing vessels. Without its burgeoning military partnerships Manila would not be able to risk making its point and engaging in such confrontations.

National pride means China wants to control the passageways through the Chain; geopolitics dictates it has to. It provides access to the most important shipping lanes in the South China Sea. Along this route come the materials China requires to make the goods it

manufactures, which are then sent back out to the world via the Pacific and Indian oceans. In peacetime the route is open, but in wartime it could easily be blocked, thus blockading China. All great nations spend peacetime preparing for the day war breaks out.

The geopolitical writer Robert Kaplan expounds the theory that the South China Sea is to the Chinese in the twenty-first century what the Caribbean was to the USA at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Americans, having consolidated their land mass, had become a two-ocean power (Atlantic and Pacific), and then moved to control the seas around them, pushing the Spanish out of Cuba.

The maps of the region that the Chinese now print show almost the whole of the South China Sea as theirs. This is a statement of intent, backed by aggressive naval patrols and official statements. Beijing intends to change its neighbours' and America's ways of thinking and behaving – pushing and pushing an agenda until its competitors back off. At stake here is the concept of international waters and free passage in peacetime; it is not something that will easily be given up by the other powers.

Free access to the Pacific is hindered by Japan. Chinese vessels emerging from the Yellow Sea and rounding the Korean Peninsula would have to go through the Sea of Japan and up through La Perouse Strait above Hokkaido and into the Pacific. Much of this is Japanese or Russian territorial waters and at a time of great tension, or even hostilities, would be inaccessible to China. Even if the Chinese made it through, they would still have to navigate the Kuril Islands north-east of Hokkaido, which are controlled by Russia but claimed by Japan.

Japan is also in dispute with China over the uninhabited island chain it calls Senkaku and the Chinese know as Diaoyu, north-east of Taiwan. This is the most contentious of all territorial claims between the two countries. If, instead, Chinese ships pass through, or indeed set off from, the East China Sea off Shanghai and go in a straight line towards the Pacific they must pass the Ryukyu Islands, which include Okinawa – upon which there is not only a huge American military base, but as many shore-to-ship missiles as the Japanese can pile up at the tip of the island. The message from Tokyo is: 'We know you're going out there, but don't mess with us on the way out.'

Another potential flare-up with Japan centres on the East China Sea's gas deposits. Beijing has declared an 'Air Defence Identification Zone' over most of that sea, requiring prior notice before anyone else flies through it. The Americans and Japanese are trying to ignore it, but it will become a hot issue at a time of China's choosing, or due to an accident that is mismanaged.

Below Okinawa is Taiwan, which sits off the Chinese coast and separates the East China Sea from the South China Sea. China claims Taiwan as its twenty-third province, but it is currently an American ally with a navy and air force armed to the teeth by Washington. It came under Chinese control in the seventeenth century but has only been ruled by China for five years in the last century (from 1945 to 1949).

Taiwan's official name is the Republic of China (ROC), to differentiate it from the People's Republic of China, although both sides believe they should have jurisdiction over both territories. This is a name Beijing can live with as it does not state that Taiwan is a separate state. The Americans are committed to defending Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion under the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979. However, if Taiwan declares full independence from China, which China would consider an act of war, the USA is not bound to come to its rescue as the declaration would be considered provocative.

The two governments vie for recognition for themselves and non-recognition of the other in every single country in the world, and in most cases Beijing wins. When you can offer a

potential market of 1.4 billion people as opposed to 23 million, most countries don't need long to consider. In 2015 there were twenty-two nations (mostly developing states) that recognised Taiwan; by 2025 that had shrunk to eleven. States such as Saint Lucia, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands kept faith, but China had spent the decade successfully peeling away the others, including Honduras, Panama, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Burkina Faso. Their locations match the regions where China has been busy buying influence.

China is determined to have Taiwan but may not yet be in a position to make a challenge for it with a full military invasion. It sometimes tries a soft-power approach to persuade the people of Taiwan they have nothing to fear in joining the 'Motherland', but its actions in Hong Kong have not enhanced that argument. Beijing's determination is not just driven by national pride; Taiwan's political system disproves the Communist Party's argument that democracy is incompatible with Chinese culture, and it provides an alternative vision of how the mainland could be run. However, the chief rationale for controlling the island is its enormous strategic value.

Seen from China's coastline, Taiwan represents the biggest brick in the wall in front of it. Control Taiwan and the wall is broken. Control of Taiwan would also allow China to dominate the waters north of the island leading to the Japanese island of Okinawa, and the Luzon Strait to the south leading to the Philippines. The Americans know that if Taiwan falls China will go on to control all of the South China Sea and eventually the Western Pacific. If they were seen not to come to the aid of Taiwan, then other allies in the region would at the least hedge their bets and lean towards China.

To deter an attack the USA retains the policy of 'strategic ambiguity'. In essence this means it will come to Taiwan's assistance if China attacks it – unless a Taiwanese declaration of independence triggers the attack. What is left unclear is what form the assistance would take. There is also the question of what the USA would do if China limited itself to appropriating one of the small Taiwanese-controlled islands just off the mainland, or blockaded Taiwan but did not attack it. In 2022 China rehearsed a naval blockade and even said it reserved the right to board Taiwanese ships and inspect them. This was a response to a visit to the island that year by the then Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi. China was so enraged that it fired multiple live missiles into waters surrounding Taiwan, held military drills, practised the blockade and temporarily ended co-operation with the American government on several key issues including climate change.

Another crisis came in 2024, when two Chinese fishermen drowned near Taiwan's Kinmen Island. Taipei said the vessel was within its waters and capsized while fleeing the Taiwanese coastguard. This was a chance for China to really up the stakes. It chose not to; instead it engaged in another round of provocative air and sea exercises demonstrating its ability to control the strait.

It was a sign of what it could do for real. A gradual blockade – tightened, then eased, then tightened again as China gauges reaction – is a possibility, albeit one that could still bring in the US Navy, which takes its role in keeping international sea lanes open very seriously. So China has options, and while compelling reasons exist for it to stage a full invasion, there are compelling reasons not to. It would require the largest amphibious assault in the history of warfare to meet defenders who know where the enemy is coming from and where it is going.

The Taiwan Strait divides mainland China from Taiwan across 110 miles of rough seas. Monsoons mean that an invasion would probably only be feasible in six months of the year – between November and April. A force of several hundred thousand troops and hundreds of ships and landing craft would be seen assembling weeks before the assault. As it made the ten-

hour crossing the Taiwanese military would target it using long-range missiles, jet aircraft, submarines, airborne and underwater drones and mines while attempting to absorb a massive aerial bombardment and cyber-attacks.

In 1944, ahead of the D-Day landings, the German defences were stretched along only 1,200 miles of coastline, there were numerous potential landing sites, and the Germans didn't know which ones would be used by the Allies. Taiwan is just under 250 miles long and has a handful of beaches capable of taking landing craft. All would bristle with defensive weaponry. A mile out from the beaches the strait becomes too shallow for China's large ships, meaning a long run in for the landing craft, which would take fire from shore defences, fast-attack stealth craft and helicopter gunships.

About 70 per cent of the island is mountainous. If they got ashore the Chinese troops would have to establish beachheads before venturing inland while relying on a potentially shaky 110-mile supply line across the strait. Taiwan's professional army is about 165,000-strong but it has 3.5 million reservists. If they fought, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) would be engaged in lengthy urban warfare. This would endanger Taiwan's semiconductor industry, which produces the majority of the world's most advanced chips. Conversely, if the factories were captured intact China would immediately have a choke-hold on the world economy.

Assuming a Chinese victory, Beijing would then have to sustain a huge occupation force. Along the way the PLA may have lost tens of thousands of troops; the Americans lost 7,000 taking the 5-mile-long island of Iwo Jima in 1945.

The above scenario assumes that the Americans did not arrive in time to reinforce the island or chose not to engage. However, if Washington had reacted when the invasion force began to be assembled, it could have had two aircraft carrier groups in the area within a fortnight. It can also use several military bases in the Philippines following a 2023 agreement upgrading the USA's access to installations, allowing it to build runways and pre-position equipment. Two of the bases face Taiwan and another is close to the Spratly Islands, which both China and the Philippines claim. Manila is also forging closer military ties with India, as seen in the 2024 purchase of Indian BrahMos supersonic anti-ship cruise missiles.

It is also feasible that Japan, Australia, the UK and other countries would join the Americans in either trying to deter the initial invasion or providing assistance in retaking the island. In 2021 the UK sent its aircraft carrier *Queen Elizabeth* close to Taiwan to signal that possibility. If other countries were drawn in then China would have to strike at targets in Japan, the Philippines and possibly even South Korea.

China's military has not fought a major war in more than seven decades and Beijing does not know the levels of its competence or corruption. There is serious rivalry between the different branches of the armed forces, and how they would function as a unit in conflict is a known unknown. It may have some of the best kit, but what if it is as inept as the Russian military was in the first year of the Ukraine War? In 2023 the *Shandong* aircraft carrier sailed round the back of Taiwan and practised launching its fighter jets. Several hundred take-offs were managed over three days, but that was still fewer than a US carrier can do in a single day. Another problem – most of China's submarines are noisy. Ambient sea noise is about 90 decibels. To avoid detection submarine engines need to be close to that level, but even the latest-generation Chinese sub operates at about 110 decibels while the Americans have numerous craft close to 90.

The leadership in Beijing has been explicit that forceful unification of Taiwan with the mainland is an option, but it must be asking itself several questions. At a time when its

economy has slowed, does it risk a massively expensive military adventure and more economic sanctions? Is it prepared to lose tens of thousands of troops? Most importantly – 'What if we lose?' A military defeat would not just be a tragic loss of life, a national humiliation and an economic disaster, it would probably end Xi's leadership, and possibly the leadership of the Communist Party. China has imploded several times; it may do so again.

And yet, war is not always logical. Emotions, pride and arrogance can also be factors. Therefore, although the better argument seems to be to wait, Xi, who turned seventy in 2023, may not be able to resist trying to cement his place in history. Under Xi China has moved on from Deng Xiaoping's phrase 'Hide your capacities, bide your time.' Its capacities are now seen to be formidable, but there is still choice as to when to use them. That is Xi's choice, and Xi's dilemma.

Diplomatically, China will attempt to pull the South-East Asian nations away from the USA using both carrot and stick. Too much stick, and the countries will tie themselves ever closer into defence treaties with Washington; too much carrot, and they may not bend to Beijing's will. At the moment they still look across the Pacific for protection.

If China fully controlled the South China Sea, from there Chinese ships would still have problems whether they headed towards the Pacific or the Indian Ocean – which is the world's waterway for the gas and oil without which China would collapse.

To go westwards towards the energy-producing states of the Gulf they must pass Vietnam, which, as we have noted, has recently been making overtures to the Americans. They must go near the Philippines, a US ally, before trying to get through the Strait of Malacca between Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, all of which are diplomatically and militarily linked to the USA. The strait is approximately 500 miles long and at its narrowest is less than 2 miles wide. It has always been a chokepoint – and the Chinese remain vulnerable to being choked.

All of the states along the strait and near its approaches are anxious about Chinese dominance, and most have territorial disputes with Beijing. This is another example of the pressure on the USA to act if Taiwan is attacked. Failure to do so would lead Singapore and the others to lean towards China, and eventually its Malacca problem would be resolved. US support gives these countries the confidence to push back.

As things stand, China's dilemmas extend even beyond the Strait of Malacca. At the far end of it, as it opens out towards the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, lies the Indian Navy.

There are hundreds of islands in this archipelago and among them are seven Indian Air Force and Navy bases. In 2021 India began an upgrade of its military infrastructure which has continued into the middle of the decade. Runways are being extended so that squadrons of fighter jets and an advanced surveillance plane can be stationed there, jetties are being modernised to take bigger ships, and along with missile batteries and radar installations, barracks are being built to permanently house infantry troops.

The new facilities are a response to increased Chinese naval activity in the Indian Ocean and the border clashes in the Himalayas. The upgrade improves India's ability to oversee all shipping movement coming out of the South China Sea and past its territory.

China intends to become a two-ocean power (Pacific and Indian). To achieve this it is investing in deep-water ports not only in Myanmar and Pakistan but also in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka – an investment that buys it good relations, the potential for its future navy to have friendly bases to visit or reside in, and trade links back to home. An example came in 2017. Sri Lanka had repeatedly asked China for loan after loan to build the Hambantota port, to which the Chinese had repeatedly said 'yes'. A Chinese state-owned company built the port, despite feasibility studies suggesting it wouldn't be successful. It wasn't. The Sri Lankan government

found it couldn't make the debt repayments and so handed over the port, along with 15,000 acres of land surrounding it and a ninety-nine-year lease. At a stroke, China had acquired a naval base a few hundred miles away from one of its main strategic rivals – India.

The Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal ports are part of an even bigger plan to secure China's future. As seen above, its lease on the new deep-water port at Gwadar, Pakistan, will be key (if Balochistan is stable enough) in creating an alternative land route up to China. From Myanmar's west coastline China has built natural gas and oil pipelines linking the Bay of Bengal and south-west China – China's way of reducing its nervous reliance on the Strait of Malacca, through which almost 80 per cent of its oil imports pass. The Americans and Japanese tried to muscle in, but neither has China's geographical advantage in influencing Myanmar.

China has spent the last decade on a foreign infrastructure shopping spree. It now has interests in more than one hundred ports in sixty-three countries. They include Dunkirk and Le Havre in France, Haifa in Israel, Piraeus in Greece and TCP Participações SA in Brazil. Beijing has taken a particular interest in Africa, where it has a strategy to source raw materials and then build road and rail links to ports it helps build to get the materials home. It has invested in dozens of ports in countries such as Kenya, where it opened Lamu port in 2021, Angola, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa and Tanzania. The Chinese don't just buy and build ports, they furnish them. China makes 96 per cent of the world's shipping containers and 80 per cent of ship-to-shore cranes.

It's a well-thought-out operation. By linking investing in resources, roads and ports, China is trying to future-proof itself against possible economic sanctions in the event of a crisis in the South China Sea. In addition, some of the ports it has built have 'dual-use' potential, meaning they could quickly be modified to allow Chinese warships to dock and resupply.

Chinese companies and workers are spread out across the world; slowly China's military will follow. With great power comes great responsibility. China will not leave the sea lanes in its neighbourhood to be policed by the Americans. There will be events that require the Chinese to act out of region. A natural disaster or a terrorist/hostage incident involving large numbers of Chinese workers would require China to take action, and that entails forward bases, or at least agreements from other states that China could pass through their territory. There are now tens of millions of Chinese around the world, some of them housed in huge complexes for workers in parts of Africa.

China is not weighed down or motivated diplomatically or economically by human rights in its dealings with the world. It is secure in its borders, straining against the bonds of the First Island Chain, and now moving around the globe with confidence. If it can avoid a serious conflict with Japan or the USA, then the only real danger to China is itself.

Lies told about Covid-19, China's human rights abuses and President Xi's unleashing of aggressive 'Wolf Warrior diplomacy' have seriously damaged perceptions of China. 'Wolf Warrior diplomacy' was shorthand for an assertive and often nationalistic approach taken by Beijing's senior diplomats from about 2017 which went into overdrive in 2020 during the Covid pandemic. By 2022 a Pew Research poll found that negative views of China were at near-historic highs in many of the nineteen countries surveyed. Human rights issues were regarded as a serious problem by 79 per cent of respondents, China's military power by 72 per cent. In late 2023 it was clear that Beijing could see the damage its 'Wolf Warriors' were doing and the diplomats were reined in.

At home China's ageing population weighs heavily on government finances. China may also fall into the 'middle-income trap'. This is the theory that a middle-income economy, built on low-value industries, risks being unable to compete internationally in selling mass-

produced goods because, as it becomes middle-income, wages have gone up. It then struggles to become a rich country because it cannot afford to shift into high-value high-tech industries and is stuck in the trap. President Xi is trying to avoid this by rewiring the economy and creating a mass-middle-class market at home while shifting to making and exporting high-tech goods, notably in clean energy technology, batteries and electric vehicles (EVs). The latter are coming to a car showroom near you.

Japan is said to have taken two decades to climb out of the middle-income trap – but China has advantages Japan did not. It is already making its mark as an innovator in industries such as robotics and space. Beijing has poured money into its satellite system and built anti-satellite weapons. It intends to rival the USA as the pre-eminent space power in the race to build the first Moon base. Crucially, it also either mines and/or refines more than half of the critical minerals required for twenty-first-century technology. Harnessing technology has always been a defining factor in the rise of power. China may fail at some things, but it will succeed at others.

There are 1.4 billion reasons why China can succeed, and 1.4 billion reasons why it may not surpass America as the greatest power in the world. A big depression like that of the 1930s could set it back decades. China has locked itself into the global economy. If we don't buy, they don't make. And if they don't make, there will be mass unemployment. If there is mass and long-term unemployment, in an age when the Chinese are a people packed into urban areas, the inevitable social unrest could be – like everything else in modern China – on a scale hitherto unseen. But so could its success.