

The New “Great Game in Eurasia”, Decline of the American Empire? Chinese Scholar Offers Insight into Beijing’s Strategic Mindset

By [Pepe Escobar](#)

Global Research, January 08, 2019
[Asia Times](#) 5 January 2019

Region: [Asia](#)
Theme: [Intelligence](#)

Essay by security expert Professor Zhang Wenmu gives a glimpse of China’s geostrategic outlook, from the ‘Western Pacific Chinese Sea’ to the far side of the moon

The top story of 2019 – and the years ahead – will continue to revolve around the myriad, dangerous permutations of the economic ascent of China, the resurgence of nuclear superpower Russia and the decline of the US’s global hegemony.

Two years ago, before the onset of the Trump administration, I sketched how the shadow play might proceed in the New Great Game in Eurasia.

Now the new game hits high gear; it’s the US against the Russia-China strategic partnership.

Diplomatic capers, tactical retreats, psychological, economic, cyber and even outer space duels, all enveloped in media hysteria, will continue to rule the news cycle. Be prepared for all shades of carping about [authoritarian China](#), and its “malign” association with an “illiberal” Russian bogeyman bent on blasting the borders of Europe and “disrupting” the Middle East.

Relatively sound minds like the [political scientist Joseph Nye](#) will continue to lament the sun setting on the Western liberal “order,” without realizing that what was able to “secure and stabilize the world over the past seven decades” does not translate into a “strong consensus ... defending, deepening and extending this system.” The Global South overwhelmingly begs to differ, arguing that the current “order” was manufactured and largely benefits only US interests.

Expect exceptionalists to operate in condescending overdrive, exhorting somewhat reluctant “allies” to help “constrain” if not contain China and “channel” – as in control – Beijing’s increasing global clout.

It’s a full-time job to “channel” China into finding its “right” place in a new world order. What does the Chinese intellectual elite really think about all this?

Never fight on two fronts

An unparalleled roadmap may be provided by Zhang Wenmu, national security strategy

expert and professor at the Center of Strategic Studies of the University of Aeronautics and Astronautics in Beijing, who wrote an essay published in August 2017 in the Chinese magazine *Taipingyan Xuebao* (Pacific magazine), that was translated recently into Italian by Rome-based geopolitical magazine Limes.



“Geopolitics” may be an Anglo invention, arguably by Sir Halford Mackinder, but it has been studied in China for centuries as, for instance, “geographic advantage” (*xingsheng*) or “historic geography” (*lishi dili*).

Wenmu introduces us to the concept of geopolitics as philosophy on the tip of a knife, but it’s mostly about philosophy, not the knife. If we want to use the knife we must use philosophy to know the limits of our power. Call it a Sino-equivalent of Nietzsche’s philosophizing with a hammer.

As a geopolitical analyst, Wenmu cannot but remind us that the trademark Roman or British empires’ ‘divide and rule’ is also a well-known tactic in China. For instance, in early 1972, Chairman Mao was quite ready to welcome Richard Nixon. Later, in July, Mao revealed his hand:

“One must profit from the conflict between two powers, that is our policy. But we must get closer to one of them and not fight on two fronts.”

He was referring to the split between China and the USSR.

Wenmu gets a real kick out of how Western geopolitics usually plays things wrong. He stresses how Halford Mackinder, the Englishman regarded as one of the founders of geostrategy, “influenced World War II and the subsequent decline of the British Empire,” noting how Mackinder died only five months before Partition between India and Pakistan in 1947.

He destroys George Kennan’s theory of the Cold War, “directly based on Mackinder’s thinking,” and how it led the US to fight in Korea and Vietnam, “accelerating its decline.”

Even Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former US national security advisor, “saw the decline of the American empire,” as he died recently, in May 2017.

“In that moment, China and Russia gave life to a strategic collaboration always closer and invincible.” Wenmu is positively gleeful. “If Brzezinski was still alive, I think he would see the ‘great defeat’ of the Western world – the opposite of what he wrote.”

Why Tibet matters

Chinese geopolitics predictably pays close attention to the tension between sea powers and land powers. Wenmu notes how, in the Indian Ocean, the British Empire enjoyed more naval power compared to the Americans “because it occupied the homonymous continent. And because it dominated the seas, the United Kingdom also threatened the Russian Empire, which was a land power.”

Wenmu quotes from Alfred Mahan’s *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* on the reciprocal influence between control of the seas and control of the land. But, he adds:

“Mahan did not analyze this relation on a global level ... Based on the priorities of the United States, he concentrated most of all on distant seas.”

Wenmu crucially stresses how the Pacific Ocean is the “obligatory passage of the Maritime Silk Road.” Even though China “developed its naval capacity much later, it enjoys [a] geographical advantage in relation to the UK and the US.” And with that, he brings us to the essential Tibet question.



One of Wenmu’s key points is how “the Tibetan plateau allows the People’s Republic to access the resources respectively of the Pacific Ocean to the east and those of the Indian Ocean in the west. If from the plateau we look at the American base in Diego Garcia [in the center of the Indian Ocean] we can’t have any doubts about the natural advantage of Chinese geopolitics.” The implication is that the UK and US must “consume a great deal of resources to cross the oceans and develop a chain of islands.”

Wenmu shows how the geography of the Tibetan plateau “links in a natural way the Tibetan region to the dominant power in the Chinese central plains” while it does “not link it to the countries in the South Asia subcontinent.” Thus Tibet should be considered as a “natural part of China.”

China is supported by the continental plaque, “which it controls along its coast,” and “possesses technology of medium and long-range missile attack,” guaranteeing it virtually a “great capacity of reaction in both oceans” with a “relatively powerful naval force.” And that’s how China, as Wenmu maps it, is able to compensate – “to a certain extent” – the

technological gap relative to the West.

Wenmu's most controversial point is that "the advantage that only China enjoys of linking to markets of two oceans crashes the myth of Western 'naval power' in the contemporary era and introduces a revolutionary vision; the People's Republic is a great nation who possesses by nature the qualification of naval power." We just need to compare "how industrial development allowed the West to navigate towards the Indian Ocean" while China "arrived on foot."

Get Taiwan

President Obama was keen to exhort at every opportunity the status of the US as a "Pacific nation." Imagine the US confronted by Wenmu's description:

"The Western Pacific is linked to the national interests of the People's Republic and is the starting point of the New Maritime Silk Road."

In fact, Chairman Mao talked about it way back in 1959:

"One day, it does not matter when, the United States will have to retire from the rest of the world and will have to abandon the Western Pacific."

Extrapolating from Mao, Wenmu elaborates on a "Western Pacific Chinese Sea" uniting the South China Sea, the East China Sea and the Yellow Sea. "We can use the formula 'southern zone of the Western Pacific Chinese Sea' to describe the part that falls under Chinese sovereignty."

This suggests a combination of Chinese forces in the South China Sea, the East China Sea and the Yellow Sea under a sole Western Pacific naval command.

It's easy to see where all this is pointing: reunification with Taiwan.

Under such a system, as delineated by Wenmu, Taiwan "would return to the motherland," China's sovereignty over its coastline "would be legitimated" and at the same time "would not be excessively extended."

Beijing's supreme goal is to effectively move the "Chinese line of control" to the east of Taiwan. That reflects President Xi Jinping's speech earlier this week, where he referred to Taiwan, for all practical purposes, as the great prize. Wenmu frames it as an environment "where Chinese nuclear submarines are able to counter-attack, the construction of aircraft carriers can progress and products made in continental China may be exported effectively."

The barycenter of Asia

One of the most fascinating arguments in Wenmu's essay is how he shows there's always a natural proportion – a sort of 'divine' or 'golden ratio' between the three strategic powers in Eurasia: Europe, Central Asia and China.

Cue to a fast tour of the rise and fall of empires, with "history showing how in the main zone of the continent – between 30 and 60 degrees of north[ern] latitude – there can be only 2.5

strategic forces.” Which means one of the three major spaces always becomes fragmented.

In modern times it has been rare that one of the three powers “managed to expand to a 1.5 ratio.” Before, only the Tang empire and the Mongol empire came close. The British Empire, Tsarist Russia and the USSR “invaded Afghanistan and entered Central Asia, but success, when it happened, was short-lived.”

That paved the way to Wenmu’s clincher:

“The law of the aurea section [Latin for ‘golden’ section] as the base of strategic power in Eurasia helps us to understand the causes of alternate rise and decline of powers in the continent and to recognize the limits of expansion of Chinese power in Central Asia. To understand it is the premise of mature and successful diplomacy.”

Although this cannot be seriously depicted as a roadmap for “Chinese aggression,” Wenmu cannot help but direct another hit at Western geopolitical stalwart Mackinder:

“With his genius imagination, Mackinder advanced the wrong theory of the ‘geographic pivot’ because he did not consider this law.”

In a nutshell, China is key for the equilibrium of Eurasia.

“In Europe, the fragmented zone originates in the center, in Asia, it is around China. So that presents China as the natural barycenter of Asia.”

Dark side of the moon

It’s easy to imagine Wenmu’s essay provoking ballistic responses from proponents of the US [National Security Strategy](#) which labels China, as well as Russia, as a dangerous “revisionist power.”

Professional Sinophobes are even peddling the notion that a “failing China” might eventually “lash out” against the US. That’s a misreading of what Rear Admiral Luo Yuan [said](#) last month in Shenzhen:

“We now have Dong Feng-21D, Dong Feng-26 missiles. These are aircraft carrier killers. We attack and sink one of their aircraft carriers. Let them suffer 5,000 casualties. Attack and sink two carriers, casualties 10,000. Let’s see if the US is afraid or not?”

This is a statement of fact, not a threat. The Pentagon knows all there is to know about ‘carrier killer’ danger.

Beijing won’t stop with carrier killers, the rebranded Western Pacific and reunification with Taiwan. It is planning the [first artificial intelligence \(AI\) colony](#) on earth – a deep-sea base for unmanned submarine science and defense ops in the South China Sea.

The landing of the Chang’e 4 lunar probe on the far side of the moon could even be

interpreted as the most extreme extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

These are all pieces in a massive puzzle bound to reinforce the grip of a new – Sinocentric – [map of the world](#), already in use by the Chinese navy and published in 2013, not by accident the year when the New Silk Roads were announced in Astana and Jakarta.

Wenmu ends his essay stressing how “Chinese geopolitics must distance itself from the idea that ‘one cannot open his mouth without mentioning Ancient Greece’.” That’s a reference to a famous Mao speech of May 1941, when the Chairman criticized certain Marxist-Leninists who privileged Western history – of which Ancient Greece is the ultimate symbol – over Chinese history.

Thucydides trap? What trap?

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