

Ascendancy of China and Managing Possibility of Conflicts with Muslim Nations: A Preliminary Discussion

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This paper is a preliminary discussion regarding the ascendancy of China, focusing on managing and avoiding conflicts with Muslim countries. It will look at a range of angles: socio-economic, cultural as well as religious underpinnings across Islamic and Chinese Thought, exploring potential flashpoints. Harking back upon the history of the old Silk Route connecting Europe to China, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced China's most ambitious foreign policy and economic initiative yet. Announcing in 2013, he called for the infrastructural development of a new Silk Road Economic Belt through land and a 21st Century Maritime Silk Route through the sea together known as One Belt, One Road (OBOR). This ambitious program of infrastructure building will connect virtually every country in Asia via rail, road and sea. While this initiative portends great promise for further globalisation of trade and international economic cooperation, the risks involved are well-nigh imponderable due to its complexity, not least in terms of the number of nations involved, of diverse interests and cultural backgrounds. OBOR would involve at least 29 different Muslim nations of the Middle East, Central Asia and the littoral states of South Asia, as well as South-East Asia. The possibility for 'civilisational' conflict at every level will be a matter of when, not if. This paper discusses how the ascendancy of China as evidenced by the OBOR Project affects other peoples and how conflict can be managed or avoided.

Geo-Political Background to the Rise of China

In geo-political parlance the ushering of the new millennia is often touted as the coming of the New Asian Century. Any 'Asian Century' must involve the ascendancy of India and/or China as Asian powerhouses. Most geo-political and economic indicators show that China is ahead of India in leading the 'New Asian Century'¹. Thus, the rise of Asian influence in the geo-political stage is fore-grounded by the growing dominance of China. Whether this dominance is seen as a threat or opportunity, the impact upon the world, especially Asia, is undeniable. One major concern is how this rise has the potential to cause ruptures in the international order especially with regards to China and its many Muslim-ruled neighbours. It is thus a matter of great interest to study and seriously consider the ramifications of the ascendancy of China generally but more specifically, vis-à-vis Muslim nations. This paper aims to contribute in this direction.

The other side of the coin of the New Asian Century is the retreat of the West or more specifically the American retreat. When President George H.W. Bush announced to the world of the coming "New World Order",² few would have thought that this 'new order' is anything but to be moulded and led by the West, specifically United States of America. Today however, we see the rise of China, in tandem with the waning of America. Trade imbalances between America and China said to favour the later, China's huge holdings of American denominated treasuries, growing military presence of China in the South China Sea and economic presence in Africa, Middle-East and South-East Asia are all signs that China is rising. America on the other hand, especially under the leadership of President Donald Trump, has an 'America

¹ China beats India in almost all important socio-economic indicators as a developed nation. For instance, in maternal mortality rate; India: 174 deaths/100000 live births compared to China: 27 deaths/100000 live births (est. 2015); in GDP (purchasing power parity), India registers \$9.447 trillion (2017) compared to China 23.12 trillion (2017); in Revenue Budgeting, India's is \$248.7 billion compared to China's 2.672 trillion (2017). See <https://www.indexmundi.com/factbook/compare/india.china>

² The then President George Bush stated, "Out of these troubled times, our...objective - a New World Order - can emerge... Today, that new world is struggling to be born, a world quite different from the one we have known "in his 1990 speech before a joint session of Congress in September 11, 1990. See, Joseph S. Nye Jr., "What New World Order?", *Foreign Affairs*, 1992, pp. 84

First' policy that, at times, borders on an isolationist stance. The inward-looking policies of the current American administration sees it withdraw from international agreements and arrangements that were already in place. Trump's administration has threatened to withdraw from the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). NAFTA is an agreement which came into effect in January 1994 that was signed by Canada, Mexico, and the United States to create a trilateral trade bloc in North America. This agreement is now in danger. To the consternation of the global community, Trump also withdrew from the Paris Climate Agreement, a historic global agreement painstakingly arrived at to curb green-house gas emissions. This was already signed in 2015 by nearly 200 countries. Trump's bellicose demeanour has also alienated traditional allies such as the UK and Australia. More recently President Trump has announced import tariffs on steel products prompting the spectre of a trade war across the Atlantic and with China.

More relevant to the present discussion, another multinational trade agreement USA has abandoned is the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The TPP was a trade agreement between Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore and Vietnam signed on 4 February 2016, pending ratification. When the United States withdrew its signature, TPP was dead in the water. However, realising the importance of TPP to world-trade, the 11 remaining members led by Japan, agreed to proceed with the trade deal without U.S. participation in May 2017.¹ These withdrawals from international platforms must surely result in the reduction of American voice and influence. China has filled in these international strategic vacuums in the absence of American leadership. Thus, far from being spectators of the new world order, Asia will be its driver not least through the relentless rise of China.

¹ This new trade-agreement is called the 'Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)'. See, MSN, *Singapore signs APAC trade pact, which proceeds without US*, <https://www.msn.com/en-sg/news/news/other/singapore-signs-apac-trade-pact-which-proceeds-without-us/ar-BBK2qLc?ocid=spartanntp>

The seeds of the growth of China were already planted by Deng Xiao Peng in his macro-economic four modernisations initiative introduced in 1979 i.e. the modernisation of agriculture, industry, science and technology and the military. This policy gave impetus for the tremendous development we see in China today. An overarching economic explanation of this rise is the abandonment of the Marxist-Leninist model of economic development and the adoption of a controlled capitalistic one, friendly to private ownership and entrepreneurial spirit.¹ Economically, the central planning order imposed by Mao Zedong is all but gone even when politically there is little change in the communistic socialist political order. This application of the free-market principles upon the economy has uplifted the society economically. The disposable income per urban resident saw a staggering 30-fold increase from merely US\$46 in 1978 to US\$1404 in 2005 while the net income per rural resident went from US\$18 in 1978 to US\$436 in 2005, a quantum increases of nearly 25 times.² Significantly, according to a 2007 World Bank Report, the number of people living in extreme poverty has declined dramatically in East-Asia in 2001 compared to in 1981. In China the number alleviated from such poverty is well over 40 million.³ With such numbers we can understand why China loves globalisation as proclaimed by none other than the premier of China from 2002 to 2012, Hu Jintao.⁴

Globalisation can be defined as “the breaking down of economic, social and political borders”⁵ we have grown accustomed to. Nations and their peoples have taken sides to either advocate or resist globalisation. China today embraces globalisation seeing in it opportunities and inroads to greater prosperity. This took time as, historically, the ancient Chinese regarded

¹ Mahbubani is convinced that the rise of China is to be explained by its adoption of the "pillar of Western wisdom that underpinned Western progress". Kishore Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East*, *Public Affairs*, New York, 2008, pp. 52

² Gao Shangquan, *China's Economic Future: Challenges to U.S. Policy*, Joint Economic Committee, 104th Congress 1996, pp. 104-62

³ World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects: Managing the Next Wave of Globalisation*, 2007

⁴ Hu JinTao, "Why China Loves Globalization", *The Globalist*, June 2005

⁵ Abdul Halim Abdul Karim, "Islam and Globalisation", *Fount Journal*, no. 1, Singapore: NUS Press, 2000

themselves as the civilised, and the world and outsiders as barbarians and the era of Mao Zedong which decidedly broke China from its dynastic past brought it into an era of a 'closed' China that is insular and inward looking. This changed when the aforementioned 1979 modernisation program opened China. All of these can be seen as a preparation and build-up to today's OBOR initiative which is China's flag-ship effort towards globalisation.

The One Belt One Road Initiative

Harking back upon the history of the old Silk Route that connected Europe to China since the medieval times, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced China's most ambitious foreign policy and economic initiative yet. In the announcement he made in 2013, President Xi called for the infrastructural development of a new Silk Road Economic Belt through land and a 21st Century Maritime Silk Route through the sea together known as One Belt, One Road (OBOR). Through ambitious program of infrastructure building, the plan is to connect virtually every country in Asia via rail, road and sea. While this initiative portends great promise for further globalisation of trade and international economic cooperation, the risks involved are well-nigh imponderable. This is due to its complexity, not least in terms of the number of nations involved but also in terms of the multitudes of diverse interests and cultural backgrounds of the peoples of these nations. OBOR would involve more than 65 countries of which at least 30 are Muslim nations of the Middle East, Central Asia and the littoral states of South Asia, as well as South-East Asia.

The enormity of OBOR has not escaped anyone. According to Oxford Economics, the nations involved in OBOR together account for one-third of global GDP and 60 percent of the world's population, 4.5 billion people.¹ OBOR is impactful because it is a truly global initiative but more accurately it

¹ For detailed information of important economic indicators pertaining to China vis-a-vis OBOR see [https://d1iydh3qrygeij.cloudfront.net/Media/Default/landing-pages/ICBCS/B&R/China/ICBCS B&R China Connectivity Index White Paper \(ENG\).pdf](https://d1iydh3qrygeij.cloudfront.net/Media/Default/landing-pages/ICBCS/B&R/China/ICBCS B&R China Connectivity Index White Paper (ENG).pdf)

is trans-frontier as the mega-infrastructure planned under OBOR cuts across national borders. This requires reciprocity at the state-to-state level which must mutually agree regarding matters such as border management. Furthermore, such state-to-state dealings need to be done with a view of seeing particular states as elements of a whole that is OBOR. Thus, the success of OBOR depends upon proper management at the various levels of international relations; State to state in terms of neighbouring as well as non-neighbouring states; state to region; state to the global world, as well as in an increasingly corporate driven world, active involvement of multi-national corporations. Importantly, the success of OBOR hinges upon the national pride of the Chinese. It is significant that Premier Xi Jinping has even written the OBOR initiative into the ruling party's constitution making OBOR a top-down initiative directly putting its pride at stake regarding the success of OBOR.¹ This requires buy-in at the unprecedented international level - each and every country directly or even indirectly involved in OBOR has to clearly see its benefits outweighing costs of national interests. Clearly shared vision and leadership at the global level are crucial for the success of OBOR. Anticipating problems including conflicts at various levels thus becomes paramount.

Imponderables and the Art and Science of Conflict

There is always a bifurcation between theory and practice in any discourse. However, in the art and science of conflict management especially regarding international relations and governance it is even more glaring. Much of the theory of conflict management for instance, involves a series of scenario planning which may be saddled with too many permutations of possibilities. While variables can be calculated to project what will happen next, international players are difficult to predict. Nevertheless, we cannot avoid conflict in the sense of ignoring the possibilities of conflict nor is it wise to

¹ Huileng Tan, *China wrote Belt and Road Initiative into the party constitution. That makes it riskier than ever.*, CNBC, 31 Oct 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/10/31/china-wrote-belt-and-road-initiative-into-the-party-constitution.html>

refuse to engage the other party that is potentially adversarial. Furthermore, sources of conflict may also at the same time, be opportunities for co-operation towards mutual benefit. The anticipation of such opportunities and the avoidance of conflict become crucial. Thus, while being theoretical and even hypothetical is necessary, a more principled and fundamental approach is needed especially in the initial stages in envisaging conflicts.

Conflict management covers the whole range of strategies and techniques used to tackle conflict situations at the individual, corporate, societal and international levels whether at the earliest stage characterised by general unhappiness with the other party to the stage where there is a full-blown military conflict. The first stage is conflict avoidance where even when there is a milieu of overt dissatisfaction, the situation is well under control and indeed resolved before the emergence of open conflict. When such avoidance has failed, and conflicts develop, we come to the second stage of conflict containment characterised as preventing the conflict from resulting in disruptive and destructive behaviour but when there is failure to avoid such destructive behaviour, the third stage in the management of conflict is conflict settlement and resolution¹. Such theoretical analysis however, may not exactly fit into the conflicts that we see in real-politik. There are longstanding conflicts that elude amicable settlement due, for example, to the lack of an honest unbiased broker for peace. A prime example is the case of the ongoing illegal occupation of Palestine by Israel.² This illustrates as mentioned earlier, that the bifurcation between theory and practice is glaring in the art and science of conflict management. Nevertheless, we must still venture to study and analyse with a view of managing conflict. To ignore conflict management would prove costlier for any nation's long-term planning in the spirit of pre-empting problems at the international scale. It is

¹ Christopher Mitchell, *The Structure of International Conflict*, London: MacMillan, 1981, pp. 256

² Rashid Khalidi, *After Jerusalem, the US Can No Longer Pretend to Be an Honest Broker of Peace But that might not be a bad thing*, *The Nation*, 8 December 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/after-jerusalem-the-us-can-no-longer-pretend-to-be-an-honest-broker-of-peace/>

in this spirit of pre-emption of problems that this current analysis is carried out vis-à-vis the rise of China.

Flashpoints of Conflict in the Context of OBOR

A substantial length of China's land border is with Muslim nations. The borders are porous, and the identities of peoples concerned do not align with the strictures of national boundaries. Furthermore, OBOR spans the whole of the Asian continent. These add to the complexity of prognosticating conflict. However, conflict analysis could be made more manageable when analysis is done in terms of potential flash-points surrounding OBOR vis-à-vis China and Muslim states. These can be divided into 4 major regions as follows:

1. Iran and the Middle-East
2. Pakistan and South-Asia
3. XinJiang and former USSR; Muslim Countries of Central Asia
4. Malay-Muslim nations and South-East Asia

An in-depth analysis of each of the above flashpoints will go beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice to say that the potential for conflict would be wide-ranging. This is because of various cultural, historical and geographical factors even when the involved parties can generally be said to be Muslim on one hand and the Chinese on the other. Nevertheless, the four identified major regions of flashpoints would make our analysis more manageable without being too simplistic.

We begin with the case of Iran and the Middle-East. Iran's long-standing tension with America went as far as back as when the American CIA brought down the democratically elected Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1953 and installed the Shah of Iran. The backlash of such a nefarious act culminating in the Islamic Revolution form an important historical background to the

current on-going tensions between USA and Iran.¹ While the tensions between USA and Iran go unabated, there is unprecedented co-operation between Iran and China. In 2004, Chinese company Sinopec signed an agreement worth \$100 billion to develop Iranian's Yadavaran natural gas field. In return, Tehran commits to supply China 150000 barrels of oil a day for 25 years. Also, as part of the agreement, China will buy 250 million tons of Iranian liquefied natural gas over 25 years.² This agreement was dubbed the "deal of the century" and is on hind-sight, an important precursor to OBOR because China's on-going development requires reliable uninterrupted source of energy. Iran, already under longstanding sanctions by America is only too willing to provide. Iran has thus become a foothold of China into the Middle-East even when the region is now in turmoil vis-à-vis Yemen and Syria.

Indeed, the relationships between China and the countries of the Middle-East can be seen as a good case-study into how extreme the degrees of complexity international relations can be. Indeed, China's relationship between Iran in the context of the Middle-East compounded by its relationship with Syria, Turkey and Saudi Arabia especially since each of these countries has complex relationships between each other respectively. For instance, the three countries' different attitudes towards the current situation in Syria are telling. Syria has become the latest target in America's policy of 'regime change' and in spite of American support for the so-called Free Syria Army, China has clearly sided with the current Syrian government. Just as Syria announces victory after victory over the rebels that included ISIS, China has expressed hope that Syria is included into its OBOR initiative

¹ Details of the 1953 Iranian coup d'état which overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh of Iran was recently released and it is established that the coup d'état is due to the west's desire to control Iranian oil in the face of the nationalisation of the oil industry by Mosaddegh. See, Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "64 Years Later, CIA Finally Releases Details of Iranian Coup", *Foreign Policy*, Jun 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/20/64-years-later-cia-finally-releases-details-of-iranian-coup-iran-tehran-oil/>

² N. Janardhan, *China, India and the Persian Gulf: Converging interests?* in Mehran Kamvava, *International Politics of the Persian Gulf*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011, pp. 227

and has promised help in its reconstruction.¹ China recognises that Syria will play an important role in OBOR. But arguably, compared to Syria, Turkey would have an even bigger role as the OBOR land-link is planned to cut across Turkey that would connect the Mediterranean Sea to Beijing. While Turkey initially supports the American sponsored regime change in Syria, it is now worried that the fall of Bashar al-Assad would embolden the Kurdish separatists that Turkey has been dealing with for years. Indeed, the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 has given the Kurds a great opportunity for self-determination. This Turkish-Kurdish stand-off happening in Syria and Iraq mirrors another quagmire further south in Yemen between the Saudis and the Houthis. This civil war involving Saudi forces is yet another factor confounding China's relations with the Middle-East. This is because, oil-rich Saudi Arabia has played a pivotal role in Middle-Eastern politics and is also seen as an important node in China's OBOR plan. China is thus wise to strengthen its financial and economic co-operation with Saudi Arabia with a recently announced government-to-government trade deal worth over \$70 billion.² Thus, in spite of what seems like intractable differences between Iran, Turkey, Syria and Saudi Arabia, as well as direct intervention of USA in the Middle-East, China has managed to have close co-operations with all these Middle-east countries. This bodes well for the mitigation of conflicts between China and Muslims of the Middle-east even when the region is in turmoil following the 'Arabian Spring'.

Such close co-operation between China and countries of Muslim Middle-east illustrates an approach to international politics that is decidedly very different from the American approach of 'exporting' democracy and regime change under the guise of war on terror. Contrastingly, China does not seek to export

¹ Charlotte Gao, *Why China Wants Syria in its New Belt and Road: Chinese foreign ministry offers to support Syria's reconstruction*, The Diplomat, November 2017, See <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/why-china-wants-syria-in-its-new-belt-and-road/>

² Charlotte Gao, *Closer Ties: China And Saudi Arabia Sign \$70 Billion in New Deals: China says its bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia have entered a new era*, The Diplomat, August 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/closer-ties-china-and-saudi-arabia-sign-70-billion-in-new-deals/>

its brand of Communism and also played a moderating role vis-à-vis North Korea. China is also an even-handed force in the longstanding Israeli-Palestinian crisis. Unlike the USA, China has shown cognisance of the fact that this crisis stems from the ongoing brutal and illegal occupation of Palestinian land and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians by Israel which has gone on for more than 50 years with impunity in spite of numerous UN resolutions against Israel. Also, we know that the now fragmented Middle-East used to be the bastion of various Islamic empires which in turns through the centuries represent the Islamic civilisation having relations with the Chinese civilisation that were oftentimes nurtured by respectful diplomatic contacts and trade. There is a rich history of contacts and trade between the Islamic World and China through the old silk road traversing the Khyber Pass, north of India which was itself ruled by Muslims for hundreds of years.

We thus now come to the next potential flashpoint which pertains to Pakistan and South Asia. While there is recently greater co-operation between China and South-Asian countries like Sri Lanka via increased China's direct investments, the greatest challenge to China's influence in Asia is another Asian giant namely, India. China's war with India in 1962 due to a long running territorial dispute worsened by India's granting of sanctuary to Dalai Lama though short, is etched into the minds of both the Chinese and the Indians. This is a significant precursor of ongoing tensions and possibly future conflict. However, India's rival, Pakistan has, due to geographical reality, formed a buffer between China and India. While it is counter-productive to antagonise India, China's policy towards Pakistan has been a steady upgrading of relations. Pakistan in turn increasingly turns towards China for both investment and geo-political support. The latest announcement of President Trump to cease financial support for Pakistan¹

¹ Following a tweet by President Trump that states, "The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies & deceit", the State Department announced that the US will freeze most military aid to Pakistan. This could mean a withholding of up to \$1.3 billion in aid. See Saba Aziz, *Pakistan-US war of words over Donald Trump's tweet*, January 2018.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/pakistan-war-words-donald-trump-tweet-180102055709366.html>

has become a great push factor for Pakistan to embrace China even more. China has responded to this in the defence of Pakistan as a valued ally.¹ Pakistan is thus strategically important to China not only as a factor balancing India but also as an important neighbour to China.

Significantly, Pakistan together with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are all Muslim majority countries that border with China's restive XinJiang province. Indeed, this presents to us the next potential flashpoint in China-Muslim relations only this time, this flashpoint has foreign as well as domestic dimensions. Sino-Muslim tensions in the western-most region of China in what is formerly known as Eastern Turkistan, i.e. today's XinJiang, can be traced back for centuries but in 1884 it took a more familiar form in terms of international discourse when China emphasised the name of XinJiang (The New Dominion) to refer to the land in question thereby seen as denying the Turkic heritage of the majority of the people who live there, the Uyghurs. Indeed, the Uyghurs argue that they are the indigenous people of the land and should have an independent state.² This of course, does not sit well with the Chinese authorities. While there were promises made by the Chinese authorities to give the people of XinJiang greater autonomy, this has not happened in any significant sense. Instead, there are persistent reports of ongoing oppressive policies aimed at the Muslims of XinJiang. As long as this real potential for conflict is not addressed, OBOR remains a very risky venture, not counting as yet in our analysis, the sea route portion of OBOR.

As noted, the vision of OBOR is a combination of land links as well as sea routes. While 'One Road' harks back upon the old Silk Road, 'One Belt' refers to maritime shipping lanes that traditionally took advantage of the monsoons facilitating trading between India and China via the Straits of Melaka and the

¹ Reuters, *China defends ally Pakistan after Trump criticism*, August 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-afghanistan-china/china-defends-ally-pakistan-after-trump-criticism-idUSKCN1B20P8?il=0>

² Discourse on XinJiang self-determination came to a head when poet Turghun Almas (1924-2001) wrote the controversial *Uyghurlar (The Uyghurs)*, a book on the history of the Uyghur ethnic group of the XinJiang region published in China in 1989. See, Ildikó Bellér-Hann, *Situating the Uyghurs between China and Central Asia*, London: Ashgate, 2007

South China Sea. This is where the success of China's OBOR initiative would need the buy-in of South-east Asian countries many of which are majority Muslim. Considerations for the preservation of the integrity of the law of the sea, maritime security of shipping lanes and port readiness of all countries involved become important factors. In the context of conflict management and avoidance between China and Muslim nations, the sea-route portion of OBOR means that we must turn our attention to the Muslim countries of South-east Asia namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore.¹

In spite of the ancient Chinese often being characterised as insular and inward-looking, the Chinese have been known to venture far from home. As a result of the Chinese diaspora, if ever there is a second home for the Chinese, it would be South-east Asia. Since even before 19th century, millions of Chinese migrated to other countries and thus today, more than 30 million people of Chinese ethnicity live outside of China. Of these, over two-thirds are in South-east Asia. As foreigners to the region, the Chinese have proven to be resilient in thriving very well economically, socially and even politically in the countries of South-east Asia considered for the most part as the Malay-Muslim heartlands. The presence of these Chinese migrants and their descendants would undoubtedly be an important factor in the rise of China and its relations with the Muslims of South-east Asia.

Archaeological findings and historical documents show that China has a very long history of relations with South-east Asia. Indeed, this history spans two millennia involving trade, diplomacy and migration.² While this history is deep and much details need to be researched, the contacts between China and the peoples of South-east Asia are often well documented. History documents not only events but legendary personalities in the interactions

¹ Even though Singapore is not a Muslim majority nation-state, its largest minority constitutes Malay-Muslims and its close geographical proximity and historical ties to Malaysia and Indonesia makes Singapore part and parcel of the Malay world. It is thus important to include Singapore into our analysis

² Stuart-Fox has done an excellent study of the different aspects of the relations between China and South-East Asia. See, Martin Stuart-Fox, *A Short History of China and Southeast Asia: Tribute, Trade and Influence*, London: Allen & Unwin, 2003

between the China and the Malays of South-east Asia. For instance, we know of Admiral Zheng He (鄭和; 1371–1433 or 1435) who called upon virtually every port in Southeast Asia.¹ He visited the Malay archipelago, the Island of Borneo specifically Brunei, Java, Thailand, India, Arabia and went as far as the Horn of Africa, trading in goods and establishing diplomatic ties along the way.² The Malay Annals (*Sejarah Melayu* - written by Tun Seri Lanang in 1612) records mention the legendary Princess Hang Li Po (韓麗寶) who married Sultan Mansur Shah who ruled Melaka from 1456 to 1477. This same Malay Annals together with the historical record known as *Salasilah Raja-Raja Brunei* (Genealogy of the Brunei Kings) which was said to be first compiled during the reign of Sultan Muhammad Hassan (1582–1598) also mentioned the legendary Ong Sum Ping (黃森屏) a dignitary from China referred to as ‘Commander Huang’ who travelled to Brunei and was said to have married a Bruneian princess. The stories surrounding these historical characters though needing further research and verification and at times mixed with legends, captured the imagination of both the local Malays and the Chinese who have made South-east Asia their home and even intrigued the Chinese of China itself. Even though the history of the interactions between the Chinese and the Malays in South-east Asia is not without its share of conflicts, the history of the Malay world cannot exclude these interesting and colourful interactions with the Chinese.

Today the rise of China, however, sees a different kind of potential flashpoint in Southeast-Asia centred upon territorial claims and economic dominance. Of most strategic importance to geo-political power and global trade in Southeast-Asia is the Melakan Straits often described as the most important trade route in the world. Indeed, three times more oil flows through the Straits

¹ Edward L. Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming, 1405–1433*, Library of World Biography, Longman, 2007

² Eileen H. Tamura, Linda K. Mention, Noren W. Lush, Francis K. C. Tsui, Warren Cohen, *China: Understanding Its Past*, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, pp. 70

of Melaka than the Suez Canal.¹ The Straits of Melaka is the seaborne gateway for supply of every crucial commodity from the Europe, Middle-East and Africa to China. These straits are really a narrow sea-pathway whereby two of the most important Malay-Muslim nations of Southeast-Asia are adjacent to each other namely Indonesia and Malaysia. Passing through the Straits of Melaka is really passing through their coastal sea areas. This sea lane is ancient but if it is to feature as part of OBOR where there would be increasing China interests in it, China should be wary of it being a flash-point that would choke important trade supplies into China and affecting the whole of South-east Asia. Clearly, Chinese relations with the Muslims of Southeast-Asia is crucial for the stability and integrity of the Melakan Straits.

Control of South-China Sea is another flashpoint that can be seen in the context of China-Muslim relations in Southeast-Asia. As noted by Crump, Asia-Pacific, of which China is a major player, is not “one world, but many and that the ocean shared by the countries in the region defines remarkably few common interests”.² This explains the history of conflicts in the Asia-Pacific that is well documented.³ It is thus necessary for us to consider as noted by Rachman, a great source of tension in the South-China Sea today, namely, “China’s notorious nine-dash line”.⁴ This is a self-proclaimed territorial line which claims 90% of the South-China Sea as China’s territory and ‘exclusive economic zone’ in spite of the area being bitterly disputed by other countries. To add insult to injury, the area designated by China unilaterally as belonging to it encroaches upon the sea borders and fishing rights of fellow claimants. The nine-dash line is depicted in the pages of Chinese passports since 2012. Such a depiction shows that China’s territory supposedly includes the disputed Paracel and Spratly Islands not to mention

¹ Robert D. Kaplan, *Asian’s Cauldron: The South China Sea and the New Era of Competition with China*, London: Allen Lane, 2014, pp. 6

² Thomas Crump, *Asia-Pacific: A History of Empire and Conflict*, New York: Hambledon Continuum, 2007, pp. 333

³ Ibid.

⁴ Gideon Rachman, *Easternisation: War and Peace in the Asian Century*, London: Bodley Head, 2017, pp. 104

countless atolls and shoals which are also claimed fully or in-part by Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei.

China's aggressive bolstering of control over South China Sea asserting its exclusive rights appears to have the effect of annexing large swaths of the sea increasing its fishing grounds and asserting its claims to anticipated oil and mineral fields offshore. Indeed, China's land reclamation of shoals and atolls, building of concrete structures, helipads and even air-strips on several islands¹ in the disputed waters have stoked fears and concerns including that of the USA, Japan as well as Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world by population. The littoral states of the South-China Sea especially, China have much to do regarding conflict avoidance in South-China Sea and arguably, unilateral moves by China in asserting its claims would complicate the situation further.

Islamic and Confucian Worldviews: The Search for Congruence

The most fundamental potential source of conflict has to do with differences at the level of worldview. On one hand, China is really not just a country but a civilisation. On the other hand, while the Muslim countries are many, the psyche of the Ummah readily transcends national borders and indeed also represents another civilisation. China has a long history that adds complexity to the worldview of the Chinese not least because while the dominant religio-philosophical strain of China is Confucian and Taoist, the Chinese today form the greatest number of Buddhists though Buddhism is not indigenous to China. The entrance of Buddhism into China from India has led to a kind of syncretism of Buddhism and Taoism in the religious beliefs and practices of the Chinese. For the purposes of this paper, however, we will focus on the Confucian-Taoist strain of thought as these are historically the most dominant, especially in terms of how cultural values of the Chinese are identified and expressed. Indeed, even today, the Chinese are apt to quote Confucius or

¹ Robert D. Kaplan, *Asian's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the New Era of Competition with China*, 2014, pp. 12

Lao Tzu as inspiration for what they should do. For many centuries since even before the old Silk Road, the Chinese Confucian-Taoist worldview has come face to face with the Islamic worldview. One is firmly within what is described as the 'Abrahamic tradition', the other is not. Islam thus can be more readily related to the Judeo-Christian tradition and is firmly a monotheistic religion while Confucianism though not bereaved of religious underpinnings, is decidedly more a socio-ethico-political prescription for the Chinese people. Clearly much needs to be said by way of bridging these two worldviews.

The conventional route in relating different worldviews and ethical systems is one that employs the rubric of universalism versus cultural relativism. The problem with universalism is that all religio-philosophical traditions make claims to universality. The claim to universality may also lead to the imposition of culture and values deemed by one party as universal. The rigorous exportation of western values and western-style democracy deemed good for everyone is indeed the result of cultural arrogance coupled with the conviction of universality backed up by brute force. Given the plurality of cultural traditions of the world as well as the disdain for imposition of any particular cultural tradition in the name of universality, many in turn swing to the other extreme namely, cultural relativism. However, cultural relativism is also wrought with problems. While cultural relativism may mitigate the pretentious claims to moral superiority of any culture it levels all cultures as equally valid and suggests incommensurability between values of all cultures. Thus, unbridled universalism and unmitigated cultural relativism can both be seen as extremes not conducive for building bridges between civilisations.

An alternative approach that looks carefully at 'common denominators' while acknowledging differences is needed particularly when we analyse Islam on one hand and Confucianism on another. This appears to be an important

motivation behind the initiative of penning an open letter from Muslim religious leaders to the Christian churches of the world called A Common Word between Us and You in October 2007.¹ Indeed, such an approach is applicable in bridging the Islamic and Chinese worldviews. Interestingly in this regard, Confucius famously stated that there is “One thread” that traverses his teachings. In the Lun Yu (论语), a collection of sayings attributed to Confucius, also known as the Analects, we find:

子曰、參乎、吾道一以貫之。曾子曰、唯。子出。門人問曰、何謂也。曾子曰、夫子之道、忠恕而已矣

Confucius said, "Shen, there is one thread that runs through my doctrines." Tseng Tzu said, "Yes." After Confucius had left, the disciples asked him, "What did he mean?" Tseng Tzu replied, "The Way of our Master is none other than 忠 (Zhong - sincerity) and 恕 (Shu - fairness)." Analects 4.15

It is notable that Confucius himself did not elaborate upon what this “thread” exactly is. Instead, his disciple, Tseng Tzu, mentioned above, offered his answer. However, since it did not come directly from Confucius, it is not determinative. This lack of finality explains why to this day, Confucian scholars have debated about what this common thread could be especially in the current context. Nevertheless, this gives us a clear indication that there is, in Confucianism, a candidate for a ‘common denominator’.

In the Islamic tradition, the Qurʾān emphatically speaks of the “common word” that can be regarded as a common denominator that Muslims and non-Muslims can appeal to in inter-religious and inter-civilisational exchanges and interactions. The Qurʾān states:

¹ “The letter was initially signed and supported by 138 leading Muslim scholars, clerics and intellectuals, representing all significant denominations and schools of thought in Islam”. See, Demiri, Lejla (edtr). A Common Word: Text and Reflections. Muslim Academic Trust. UK.2012. pp. vii

﴿ قُلْ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ تَعَالَوْا إِلَى كَلِمَةٍ سَوَاءٍ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمْ أَلَّا نَعْبُدَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ وَلَا نُشْرِكَ بِهِ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَتَّخِذَ بَعْضُنَا بَعْضًا أَرْبَابًا مِّنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ فَإِن تَوَلَّوْا فَقُولُوا اشْهَدُوا بِأَنَّا مُسْلِمُونَ ﴾

"O People of the Book! Come to common terms between us and you: That we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, lords and patrons other than Allah." If then they turn back, proclaim: "Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to Allah's Will)". Surah *Al-Imrān*, verse 64.

While this verse is directed to the 'people of the book' i.e. those who have received earlier revelations and more specifically, the Jews and the Christians, the message is clearly an invitation to come to a common ground between the different parties. This common ground is the axiom of the Oneness of God (*Tauḥīd*) which is the timeless and perennial message brought by all the Prophets – to serve the one true God. This idea of Oneness (*Tauḥīd*) resonates more so with Taoism than Confucianism. The Tao Te Ching affirms the oneness of the Tao.¹ In terms of metaphysics, there are those who relate the mystical aspect of Islam namely, Sufism, with Taoism. However, in the context of ancient China, the intricacies of metaphysics are far removed from the masses. This explains why Classical Confucianism does not emphasise the metaphysical aspects of life but the ethical and socio-political. Indeed, contemporary scholars of Chinese thought, Wing Tsit Chan and Fung Yu Lan characterise Confucianism as a philosophical outlook that the Chinese called *Rú Jiā* (儒家), as a Chinese form of humanism.² Such humanism has a strong tendency towards a secular outlook even though Confucianism has undeniable religious

¹ Chapter 1 of the Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu reads, "The Manifest and the Unmanifest although different in name are One in essence. This Unity is the mystery of the Tao the unfathomable of the primordial ground the starting point of all manifestations." See, Karl Otto Schmidt, *Tao Teh Ching, Lao-Tse's Book of Life*, trans. Leone Muller, Lakemont, Georgia: CS Press, 1975

² Both these eminent scholars of Chinese Philosophy characterise Confucianism not as a religion but as a Humanistic philosophy. See Fung Yulan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953 and Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973

underpinnings. Indeed, Confucius himself participated in religious rituals involving ancestor worship. However, it is clear that rather than focussing his thoughts upon religion, Confucius is more concerned with the socio-political well-being of the people through the cultivation of a cultured and ethical life involving character development and respect. Confucian ethics however, eschews ethical debates pitting utilitarian and deontological stances of morality characterised in Western Ethics. Instead, Confucianism is concerned with character development and familial responsibilities. Herein lies a glaring commonality with Islam which also has a rich socio-ethical dimension.

The Confucian unmistakable concern for character development and ethics compels us to look at the Confucian conception of morality as a likely candidate for the 'common thread' in Confucian teachings mentioned by Confucius himself. Doing so, one would be struck by *Dé* (德), a central Confucian concept pertaining to morality. The word *Dé* (德) means 'moral character' or 'morality' but is usually translated as 'virtue'. It is a key concept in Confucian Ethics discussed often in the *Lun Yu* (论语) where we find descriptions of men with *Dé* (德) and how this concept projects the ethical and moral life seen from the perspective of the Chinese worldview. We find in the *Lun Yu* (论语):

The Master Kung said, "The superior man is concerned with Virtue (*Dé* - 德); the small man is concerned with (material) comfort. The superior man is concerned with law and order; the small man thinks of favours which he may receive."
Lun Yu, 4:11¹

Dé (德) refers to the moral sense of not putting oneself first. The above saying illustrates how *Dé* (德) stands in contradiction to being greedy, materialistic and self-centred. Indeed, *Dé* (德) is related to an orderly life

¹ 子曰。君子懷德、小人懷土。君子懷刑、小人懷惠。

leading to peace. Confucius thus seeks the moral development of one's character in the realisation of virtue. In Confucianism, the 'superior man' i.e. the sage (*Xun Zi*) is the moral ideal of Confucianism.

The counterpart key concept to *Dé* (德) in Islamic thought would be *Akhlaq* (أخلاق). *Akhlaq* like *Dé* (德), is laden with much meaning and to delve into these concepts would require explications beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes, we note that the concept-word *Akhlaq* (أخلاق) is Qur'anic and thus need to be understood in that light. This is important as this word is also used in Malay/Indonesian and as such is often equated with morality when in fact morality as understood today is secularised, *Akhlaq* is very much related to Allah and the Prophet of Islam ﷺ. The linguistic system of the Arabic language is such that words are derivatives of the radical or root-word. Through this system, we find that *Akhlaq* (أخلاق) is connected to *Khulk* (خلق) which refers to character; it is also related to Al-Khaliq (الخالق), one of the 99 names of God which means 'Creator'; it is also connected with the word *khalaq* (خلق) which refers to creation as well as the word *makhluq* (مخلوق) which means creatures or things that are created. *Akhlaq* can be defined as one's predisposition which is manifested in one's character and behaviour. Just as the reference point for a virtuous man as explained by Confucius, is the *Xun Zi* (sage), the reference point for a man of *Akhlaq* in Islam is Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Indeed, the Qur'anic description of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is that he is "*Khuluqin 'Adzim*" which means the best of creation or of great moral character.¹

There are of course, important differences between *Dé* (德) and *Akhlaq* (أخلاق) as these are after all concepts from two very different worldviews but, as concepts that are central to the idea of morality, both emphasise good conduct, respect for social order and humanity. While we must caution against equating *Dé* (德) with *Akhlaq* (أخلاق), the ethical aspect of Islamic and

¹ ﴿وَإِنَّكَ لَعَلَىٰ خُلُقٍ عَظِيمٍ﴾ "And indeed you (Prophet Muhammad ﷺ) are of a great moral character" ﴿وَإِنَّكَ لَعَلَىٰ خُلُقٍ عَظِيمٍ﴾ sūrah Al-Qalam: verse 4

Confucian Chinese worldviews can be an important bridge not only for mutual understanding but also a means of conflict avoidance.

Religio-Cultural and National Values

One must not forget that as a form of Marxism, Chinese Communism considers religious beliefs and worship to be mere superstitions that are deliberately cultivated by the classes in power to suppress and exploit people. Mao Zedong is of the opinion that religion is poison and compares Christian missionaries to Nazis.¹ The result is Mao's draconian persecution of all religions including Buddhism that has taken root in China for thousands of years. Indeed, such attitude towards religion though today is more enlightened, still casts a shadow upon any religious proselytisation and activism. Even movements that are arguably only pseudo-religious such as the Falungung were met with stiff persecution and crack-down.

As mentioned, China more recently has a more enlightened attitude towards religion. The natural human propensity for religion to meet spiritual needs and wonderment of the meaning of life is undeniable even in the minds of the most anti-religious Chinese. As long as there is the observance of a strict separation between 'Church and State' and that no religious activity is seen as undermining the national interests of China, religiosity of the Chinese Muslims is today somewhat tolerated and, in some pockets, flourished amidst reports of further persecutions. Thus, an important internal flashpoint in the context of China-Muslim relations is XinJiang as discussed above. The fault-lines of ethnicity and religion are significant within China itself. This is illustrated by the fact that due to religious and historical affinity, the Uyghurs do not identify themselves with the national values of China which is decidedly Han and Socialist in letter and spirit. Even so, China like other nation-states aim to have nationalism and national values be the over-riding unifying force taking precedence over and above ethnicity and religion.

¹ Michael Lynch, *The People's Republic of China 1949-76*, London: Hodder Education, 2008, pp. 107

Persecutions of Muslims in XinJiang and Buddhists of Tibet have a long history in China and yet, religion eventually comes to the fore even after policies that cannot but be described as 'ethnic cleansing'. Emphasising further nationalism in the face of today's age of globalisation seems futile. However, while national values can act as a glue that brings citizens together within a nation, national values reflecting the primacy of national interests of the respective nations of Muslims act to further fragment the Muslim civilisation. Even while Muslims across countries identify themselves as part of one ummah, Muslim nations are disparate in terms of national interests and national values. A good example is how the three Muslim majority countries of Southeast-Asia namely Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia explain their national values and aspirations – Indonesia has '*Pancasila*', Malaysia has '*Rukun Negara*' and Brunei espouses '*Melayu Islam Beraja*' even while in all three, the psyche of the Muslims is Ummatic. China would do well to understand these differences amidst the underlying unity coupled with different national interests in lights of OBOR.

Economic Sustainability and Security

The most obvious point of co-operation and impetus for conflict management and avoidance is the promise of economic prosperity for all involved. Infrastructure building represents great economic spending that would, under the Keynesian rubric mean heightened economic activities and development led by foreign direct investments and cross-country investments. OBOR would clearly kick-start the Keynesian cycle of increased spending, increased employment and in turn increase in demand for goods and services; all activities that lead to economic prosperity. Furthermore, the scale of OBOR means that dealings will involve multiple millions of dollars with promise of significant returns. China realises that this would need massive capital injection requiring global-scaled financial infrastructure. Towards building this financial infrastructure, China has created a bank and an endowment fund. Firstly, China spearheaded the creation of the Asian

Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2015. This is to support infrastructure development Asia-wide. AIIB is a multi-national organisation with 52 members, including several outside of Asia. Total capitalisation of the bank is US \$100 billion. Secondly, in 2016, China set up the China-Central and Eastern Europe Investment Cooperation (Sino-CEE) Fund, with an endowment of €10 billion with a view to increase funding to €50 billion. This fund focuses on Central and Eastern Europe and would certainly be available for mega-projects supporting OBOR.

However, while the quantum of spending can be derived at or estimated, the projected returns is not as easily quantifiable. Furthermore, nations involved in OBOR may only see significant returns in the very long term and the costs may very well outweigh the benefits. Developing or under-developed Muslim countries may not see the need for high infrastructural spending and are cash-strapped for such major projects. To participate in OBOR they would thus turn to loans to finance such projects. China has been criticised as using massive financial resources to acquire and take control of national assets such as ports and crucial infrastructures of other countries through credits and loans. The issue is that the terms of these credits and loans are designed to cause other nations to be so indebted to China that they are in danger of having the option of paying back these loans only by transferring ownership of valuable national infrastructural assets to China. An example is Sri Lanka which embraced OBOR by borrowing heavily to build its infrastructures including the Hambantota port. But the port has almost no container traffic and Sri Lanka could not repay the loans. To relieve itself of debt, the port was sold to China on a 99-year lease giving China control over the port.¹ Furthermore, some note that China is merely transferring Chinese-owned production capacity.² As over-seas projects typically involve

¹ Iain Marlow, *China's \$1 Billion White Elephant*, Bloomberg, 18 April 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-04-17/china-s-1-billion-white-elf-elephant-the-port-ships-don-t-use>

² Geoff Wade, *China to move production capacity offshore*, See https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/FlagPost/2015/August/China_to_move_production_capacity_offshore. Parliament of Australia. 07/08/2015

thousands of workers brought in from China and living in the hosts countries, bringing in workers from China does little to significantly increase the numbers of employment of citizens of these hosts countries. Furthermore, influx of these Chinese workers may in the long term, cause social and political problems for the host countries. While China's direct investments into host countries connected to OBOR is significant, other benefits to the hosts countries are less clear.

Sovereignty, Security and Global Environmental Interests

Undoubtedly the ascendancy of China would cause an architectonic change in the landscape of geo-politics. This rise of China cannot but put into question the supremacy of USA as world leader. However, the impact of the rise of China would arguably be more immediately felt by countries already geographically and economically connected with China. OBOR would add to this interconnectedness. Due to the trans-national nature of OBOR, any analysis of potential conflict must include revisiting the inviolability of national sovereignty as well as security and environmental concerns. These concerns will undoubtedly be felt in any negotiating table of international import and are the concerns of all of us regardless of religious affiliations.

Given the new interconnectedness of nations due to globalisation, the behaviour of one nation would invariably impact upon another and changes in conditions for such interconnectedness is extremely fluid. This requires international co-operation at an unprecedented scale even while sovereignty and security are to be respected. Thus, we should not be bound by 17th century Westphalian conception of the nation-state which often pits one state against another in a zero-sum game. It is in China's interest that other countries clearly see benefits by them participating in OBOR. The interests of the numerous countries involved in OBOR are obviously wide ranging and complex in terms of sovereignty, security and environmental concerns.

National interests including placating local political concerns will be intertwined with geographical environmental concerns. This in turn manifests itself as concern for the management of national economic and natural resources. However, physical geography may not respect man-made borders of sovereignty. A prime example in Southeast Asia is the river system known as the Mekong. This river flows southward through China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and finally Vietnam. Mekong is already heavily dammed. China has already built eight hydropower dams since 1995. However, with OBOR, 5 more are under construction and another 11 planned. Countries downstream are sounding the alarm that what China is doing upstream is threatening their livelihood.¹ The impact on the environment is devastating. Thus, ostensibly, the appeal of OBOR is economic growth but the pursuit of economic growth can conflict with environmental and ecological concerns.² Unbridled economic growth often results in high resources exploitation, pollution and wastage. Ecological concern which emphasises sustainability and sustainable development is often overlooked. While there is today advancement in green technologies, technical fix for environmental damage may not be enough for unintended or unforeseen environmental consequences.

While OBOR shows that sovereignty is intertwined with environmental concerns, OBOR also highlights risks to national security. In today's geopolitical milieu, nations are wary of the spectre of terrorism. Groups like Daesh underpinned by a distorted ideology disguising itself as Islamic has emerged as a threat and has a potential of causing OBOR to fail. As mentioned earlier, China has a long-standing problem in XinJiang regarding Muslim separatists. However heavy-handed crackdowns involving banning

¹ Daniel Rechtschaffen, *China's Huge Dam Projects Will Threaten Southeast Asia As Water Scarcity Builds Downstream*, Forbes, 3 May 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/outofasia/2017/05/03/chinas-huge-dam-projects-will-threaten-southeast-asia-as-water-scarcity-builds-downstream/#8b112465f6ca>

² The impact of economic growth upon natural environment in the context of national development is studied in for instance, Francisco R. Sagasti and Michael E. Colby, "Eco-development and Perspectives on Global Change from Developing Countries", in Nazli Choucri, *Global Accord; Environmental Challenge and International Response*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993

Muslims to even practice their religious obligations have only fuelled the extremists. Given the tenacity of the Muslims regarding adhering to their faith. China's policy of "prohibition on praying – even privately" will only instigate even more conflict. The risk of such conflicts derailing OBOR is even greater because extremists will only cite such oppressive measures as justification for violence and can act in partner countries of OBOR not necessarily within China's borders. Hence China would do well to find more creative ways to manage its Muslim population in XinJiang and not employ the old methods it used in quelling resistance in Tibet.¹

Conclusion: The Imperative of Conflict Avoidance

Discourse on managing conflict with Muslim nations in the context of the ascendancy of China would remind us of Samuel Huntington's thesis of a coming "Clash of Civilisations".² Managing conflicts at the civilisational level requires managing what Huntington describes as civilisational fault-lines. However, even though conflicts at various levels are expected to happen, his thesis of an all-out "Clash of Civilisations" is not inevitable. Avoidance and pre-emption of conflict can happen as evidenced by the resolution of the Cuban missile crisis even when the situation got very intense. However, since these are still the early days of the ascendancy of China, it is the responsibility of academics in geo-politics, international governance, international politics and economics as well as China experts, just to name a few, to lay the groundwork for understanding of the nature of this ascendancy and its full implications. As mentioned, a major concern is how this rise has the potential to cause ruptures in the international order especially with regards to China's relations with Muslim-ruled nations, many of which would be directly involved in OBOR. Considering the above as an

¹ "Every single measure you saw in Tibet is magnified in Xinjiang. The mechanism is similar, but the application is different". See Gabriele Battaglia, *What do Islamic State and Tibet have to do with China's crackdown in Xinjiang?* South China Morning Post, 18 Mar 2017. <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2079542/what-do-islamic-state-and-tibet-have-do-chinas-crackdown>

² Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, London: Simon & Schuster, 1996

overview, we may delineate the following points towards managing such conflicts:

1. Establishment of stronger and more meaningful linkages in terms of ideas and thoughts between Islamic and Chinese civilisations. It is a mistake to think that the connection between these two civilisations are confined only to mere trade and commerce.
2. Building upon aspects of history shared by both civilisations as a way of learning from the past and re-visiting co-operations in history in view of conflict avoidance.
3. Safeguarding the aspirations of both the Muslims and the Chinese peoples. Persistent reports of the ongoing persecution of Chinese Muslims are not only a source of potential conflict but also a source of great concern for Muslims globally. However, Muslim nations can be comforted by Chinese overtures that it will not unilaterally intervene directly in the Middle-East. Indeed, China's positive role in collaboration with Russia as a mediating force in resisting American-Zionist designs towards re-mapping of the Middle-East is welcomed by Muslim nations.
4. Leveraging upon the goodwill of the Chinese who have for generations become citizens in the Muslim world and are thus very familiar with Islamic sensitivities. These localised Chinese form a community best positioned to bridge the two civilisations. A case in point are the Chinese Muslims in Southeast-Asia who are comfortable with the Malay language and has accepted Islamic values as their own.

Geo-politically, China must be mindful that its ascendancy must not result in China becoming the new America or even perceived to be so. Real or perceived belligerence of China as the new super-power at the international stage will not bode well for the success of OBOR. In the context of conflict management applicable to the geo-political change due to the ascendancy

of China and in the specific case of OBOR, there is a need to seriously develop shared, overarching or super-ordinate objectives. It is these shared objectives that would form a strong background and justification towards resolving problems in the bud and thus avoid conflict situations. With regards to China-Muslim relations, a concerted effort is needed to emphasise 'common ground' by drawing from the religio-philosophical traditions of the two civilisations as well as leveraging on good relations at the various levels – the individual, society and national – that have featured in the long history of contacts between the Muslims and the Chinese.

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