

A method in the dragon's shifting mood

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THERE is a discernible consistency in the way China views the world.

Through its inexorable rise in recent times, China has been making nuanced adjustments to its tactical postures.

Earlier in the decade, there was an internal debate as to whether *heping jueqi*, or "peaceful rise", should constitute a major doctrine. By late 2004, China had settled in favour of the less ambitious "peaceful development".

Mao Zedong laid down the policy framework. He said there were three worlds: The first comprising the two superpowers, the United States and the then Soviet Union; the second having for its members Europe, Canada and Japan; and the rest, including China, belonged to the third world.

Mao identified the first world as the source of "all instability". Later in 1974, Deng Xiaoping declared that China would join "the oppressed peoples and nations" in their "just struggle" against the "oppressors".

Since then, the rhetoric has been downplayed and tactics altered. Nonetheless, China's behaviour still derives from these principles.

Mao once said to an American journalist, Mr Edgar Snow, that China had no troops outside its own borders and no intention of fighting anybody unless its borders were attacked.

It is true that China did not then, as it does not now, have troops beyond its borders. It initiated hostilities only when it perceived its territorial integrity was di-

rectly threatened - by India in 1962 and by the Soviet Union along the Ussuri River later. When there were no such direct threats during the Indo-Pakistan war in 1965 or over Bangladesh in 1971, China did not militarise its strong verbal support for its staunch ally, Pakistan.

However, can Mao's words be taken literally given the subtlety of the Chinese language? As former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger once admitted, Chinese subtleties often went over Washington's head.

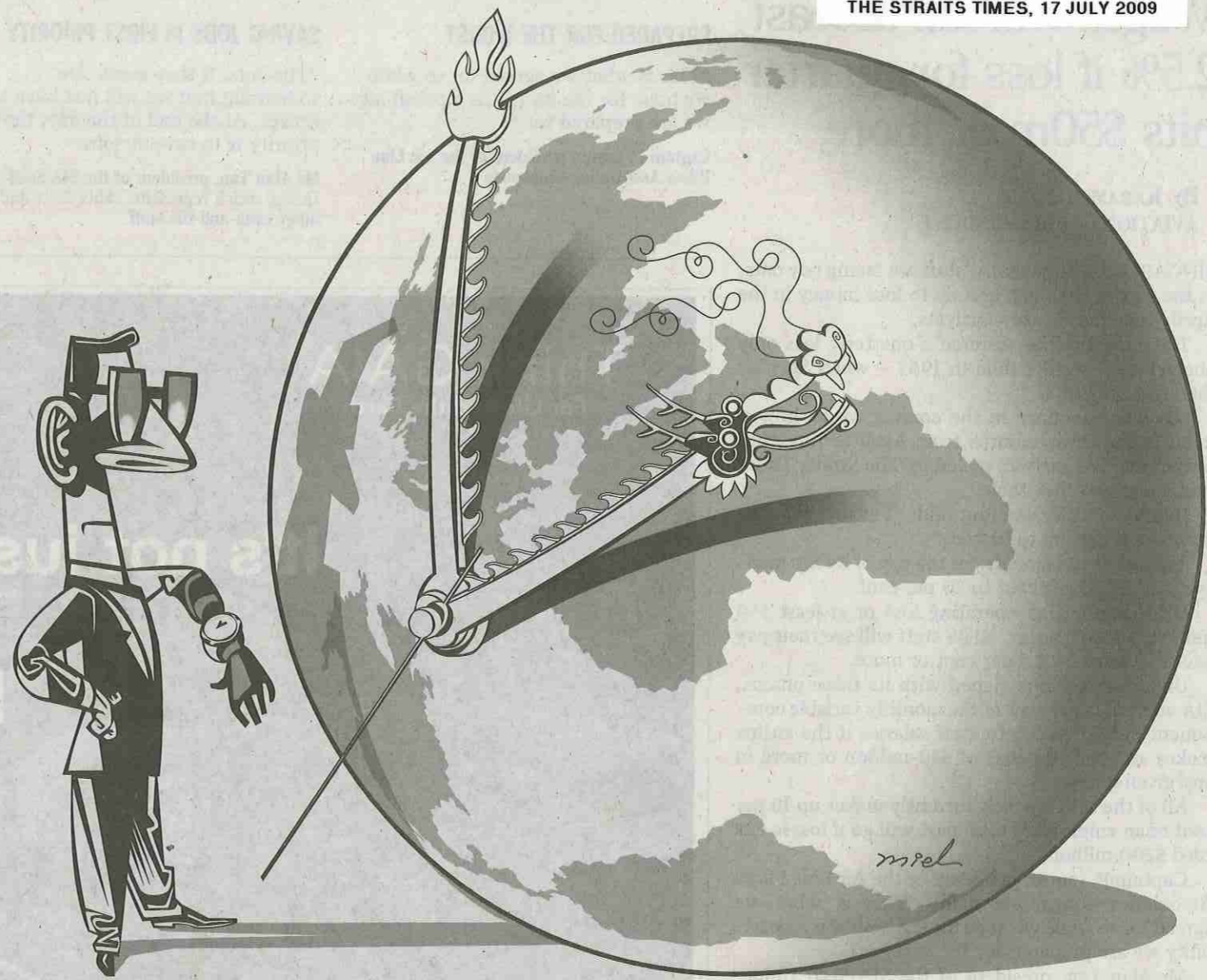
As China rapidly develops the capability to project military power overseas, there will really be no need to have troops stationed outside its borders. The navy is the fastest growing force in its military. China intends to procure four to six aircraft carriers in the medium term.

Its current defence budget, at US\$70 billion (S\$102 billion), is the second largest in the world. It has missiles that can hit targets anywhere.

While encroachment on its territory is a red line, as is any declaration of independence by Taiwan, it is unclear whether this is extended to cover its overseas interests such as energy and other resources in Africa, Central Asia and, more recently, Latin America.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the strategic decline of Europe, China and the US remain the principal protagonists on the globe. During the current financial crisis, the World Bank predicted that China will be the first country to experience a rebound. By Goldman Sachs' estimation, China will become the world's largest economy by 2041.

As current global politics evolve, China has behaved with extreme circumspection. It has improved working links with India but kept its powder dry. It has been



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building a network of connections with friends around potential adversaries that some have called "a string of pearls".

China has also suggested to replace the US dollar with the yuan as the global reserve currency. At the United Nations, its principled position has been "no interference in internal affairs". Therefore, in the UN Security Council, it vetoes ac-

tions against Myanmar, Sudan and Sri Lanka - largely due to the ramifications of that principle for itself.

China is, however, said to be quietly pressuring Myanmar to change. Its close relationship with Singapore, for instance, evidenced in the signing of the free trade agreement, signals pragmatism unencumbered by ideology.

Deng once metaphorically remarked that "it matters little if the cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice". This largely explains China's world view.

Beijing will formulate and follow policies consciously directed towards its goals, with implementation tempered by realism. Historian Andre Gunder Frank once quipped that the only thing to fear about a rising China is America's response to it. The Bush administration's Nuclear Posture Review in March 2002 reportedly identified China, among others,

as a potential target for nuclear weapons. China appears to take a mature view of these facts as it moves to position itself globally, which is its principal strategic aspiration.

Thus, the mood of the Chinese dragon, even though shifting at times, conforms to a method. This must be clearly understood if the world wishes to, as it must, accommodate and engage China in the decades to come.

China's external policy resembles a river that meanders slowly, so it does not change course suddenly.

Once asked about the French Revolution's impact on history, then Premier Zhou Enlai famously replied: "It is too soon to tell!"

Time is not necessarily of the essence. Time is on China's side.

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