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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Beijing's Renewed Resolve: Treading the Path of Peaceful Development**

By Benjamin Ho and Oh Ei Sun

### **Synopsis**

*The announcement by Chinese president-designate Xi Jin Ping that Beijing would never compromise its security interests raised concerns that China would adopt an increasingly aggressive posture in international diplomacy. China's preoccupation with domestic affairs, however, suggests Beijing's pursuit of peaceful international relations for the foreseeable future.*

### **Commentary**

WITH LESS than a month before China's new leadership officially takes over, Beijing's foreign policy posture has been placed under the international spotlight, in particular its territorial claims in the South China Sea. The latest pronouncement by Chinese president-designate Xi Jinping that Beijing would never compromise its security interests could have raised concerns among its regional neighbours that China would adopt an increasingly aggressive posture in its international diplomacy.

In his recent address to the "collective study session" of the politburo of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Xi was unequivocal about his administration's mandate to preserve the country's interests: "No foreign country should expect us to make a deal on our core interests and hope we will swallow the bitter pill that will damage our sovereignty, security and development interests."

### **Raising popular expectations**

If one were to take Xi's speech at face value, it would seem that Beijing would not back down from its demands, at least in the foreseeable future. Echoing Xi's comments, albeit in a somewhat more bellicose tone, People's Liberation Army Lieutenant General Liu Yuan in a speech published by China's Global Times, warned against "accidental warfare". General Liu charged that both the United States and Japan feared China catching up with them and thus were "(using) every possible means to suppress China's development".

However the latest high-level talks between China and Japan indicate that such a zero-sum outcome may not arise if there is political will to curb overly great expectation. Such heightened expectations are an inevitable outcome of China's rise – or restoration – to global prominence. There could be an increased sense of entitlement among the Chinese people over Beijing's claims of global influence and wealth. International scholars have long debated whether China, which has benefitted from the current international order, is prepared to change the system to meet its global objectives. This, according to many Western scholars, would

entail challenging American military primacy in the Asia-Pacific, in particular resisting the American “pivot” or “re-balancing” strategy.

Prominent Chinese scholar Yan Xuetong has noted that China’s history of superpower status (during the dynastic periods) have imbued modern Chinese with great pride for their country. The slogan ‘rejuvenation of China’ (zhenxin zhonghua) started by Sun Yat-sen in the early 20th century and continued by subsequent generations of Chinese leaders reflects the thinking of a Chinese people who are increasingly desirous of a strong and prosperous China being taken seriously again in world affairs.

In his memoirs, former Chinese foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan likens China’s contributions to the world as “a gentle breeze” which had brought peace, friendship, cooperation and development. Indeed, this sense of Chinese benevolence is best captured in the speech made by Xi at the introduction of China’s next generation leaders during the CCP’s 18th Congress last November. Xi proclaimed China as a “great nation...(which has) made indelible contribution to the progress of human civilisation.”

### **Peaceful opportunity for all**

Contrary to the popular expectations Xi’s speech at the CCP politburo’s “collective study session” was on “Resolutely Treading the Path of Peaceful Development”. Xi emphasised that China’s dream of “grand renaissance” can only be realised “if the world environment is peaceful”. Without peace, he said, both China and the world could not develop uninterruptedly; without development, it was also impossible for both China and the world to have peace.

He also called on his comrades to “grasp the opportunity in concentrating efforts to settle our own affairs well, to make both the country and the people richer, and to better tread the path of peaceful development by means of continuously developing strength”. Thus the whole of Xi’s speech did not exude a sense of belligerence in China’s international policy.

Indeed Xi pointed out that a stable and prosperous world provided opportunity for China, and China’s development was also an opportunity for the world. He called on his comrades “to set their sights on the world, to better coalesce domestic development with opening up to the outside world, to align China’s development with the world’s development and interest of the Chinese people with the interest of the people of the world, and to enhance the mutually beneficial cooperation with other countries”. He also vowed that “China’s development must not come at the price of sacrificing other countries’ interests”.

### **Avoid being victim of success**

Paradoxically, the biggest challenge for Beijing is not to become a victim of its own success. While its brand of pragmatic policy has provided its leaders with considerable bandwidth to negotiate the ambiguous contours of international diplomacy, it remains to be seen whether that will satisfy the expectations of the Chinese people. With greater expectations, both from the international community and at home, Beijing’s leaders are faced with a far more challenging environment today than the post-Cultural Revolution society which Deng Xiaoping inherited.

Indeed as the ongoing maritime tussle between China and Japan demonstrates, both sets of leaders are faced with the challenge of weighing foreign policy considerations with the expectations of their own people. At some point, the Chinese middle-class – estimated by CNN at some 300 million, and almost the size of the US population - will demand a greater say (and share) of what goes on in Beijing’s foreign policy circles.

As the public sentiments from the latest North Korea nuclear test show, the Chinese people are clamouring for a change in the way its leaders conduct their relations with Pyongyang, thus giving rise to the possibility of a more vocal and demanding civil society, whose acceptance of de facto political authority cannot be taken for granted.

The past 40 years have witnessed a remarkable ascension of China, and with it, the rest of Asia to a role of global prominence and international influence. If the Chinese leaders play their cards well, and are able to improve their country’s international image, China will have much to contribute to the prosperity and well-being of the world.

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