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How China Sees Itself and Its role in Asia

By Farish A Noor

Synopsis

The recently published collection of speeches by China's leader Xi Jinping offers a rare glimpse into the workings of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and how the country's leadership sees China's role in the coming Asian century. Tellingly, the speeches foreground China's place and role in the development of an integrated and prosperous Asia, but makes little mention of the West.

Commentary

'THE GOVERNANCE of China' which features around 80 speeches delivered by Xi Jinping, the leader of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the president of the country, is a hugely important book by any standards. Published recently by the Foreign Languages Press of Beijing (2014) and translated into English, this is obviously an attempt to tell the world how the senior leadership of the country sees itself and its role as the party that will determine the future development of the country and the role that China is likely to play in the Asian region in the coming century.

The speeches cover a wide range of topics from China's need for rapid economic development to the risks and costs of urbanisation and modernisation; from maritime policy to the need to secure China's land borders; from educational development to the promotion of Chinese cultural identity abroad as a tool of soft power and diplomacy.

Little reference to the US

More than half of the speeches featured in the book were delivered to local members of the CPC, Chinese students, members of the Chinese business community and other sections of the Chinese populace. Interestingly, only one speech obviously refers to the United States and only a handful speak to the powers of Western Europe.

The impression gained by the reader is that the leadership of China today is driven by pragmatism and realism above all else. Many of the speeches connect the themes of economic development with the need for national resilience and social security; and in one section there is the frank admission that the 'Cultural Revolution' of 1966-76 was a mistake 'wrongly launched' (pg. 159, footnote 3.)

Far from being revisionist in its reading of history, the book is frank about China's past shortcomings and what it needs to do to succeed in the future: This is the new China of today, which is the result of

a long transformation process that began with Deng Xiaoping's reform programme that took off at the 11th Congress of the CPC in 1978, and which has led to the hybrid model of a Communist state that has embraced globalisation and market forces.

An Asia Without the West

Another recurring feature of the speeches contained in this book is the apparent absence of references to the Western world, save for the 'century of humiliation' that China was made to suffer as a result of the Opium War. Xi Jinping repeats his call for the resurrection of China after a 'century of humiliation' at the hands of the West, though curiously the speeches hardly mention China's experience at the hands of the Japanese before and during the Second World War.

Also absent is the sort of bellicose rhetoric that was once associated with China in the 1950s-1970s, when the country was seen as a revolutionary Communist state engaged in an ideological struggle against its Western-Capitalist adversary. Reading these speeches today, the reader sees that that era of revolutionary activism has come to an end, along with the rhetoric that once positioned China in oppositional terms with the rest of the world.

Rather than framing China in dialectical terms against an Occidental Other, China is located in a complex relationship with the rest of Asia: At times China is presented as part of Asia, and at other times China is framed in a relationship with the rest of Asia. This gives rise to a different kind of dialectics altogether that is more nuanced and complex, and tells us more about how China sees itself as the country that will define both its own identity and Asia's in the decades to come.

The Asian Century from China's perspective

China's core concerns and interests become clear when reading the speeches in the book, and they are: the preservation of China's identity; the primary role of the CPC as the custodian and determinant of that identity; the need for the CPC to manage and direct the process of economic reform and development to make China a prosperous nation (by 2021) and a modern developed nation (by 2049); and the need for China to engage in soft diplomacy with the rest of Asia for it to succeed.

The last point explains in part the constant references to the 'Silk routes' of the past, when China was connected to the rest of the Asian continent via terrestrial and maritime logistical networks, and why China seeks strategic partnerships with all its Asian neighbours not only to securitise the land and sea-lanes, but also to foster economic co-dependency to help it boost its own local economy. Again, pragmatism and realism seem to be the guiding features of this policy, which also entails an approach of non-intervention in foreign political affairs on the part of China vis-à-vis its potential allies.

This vision of an Asian century to come is certainly Asian-centric, and almost without any references to the West or Western models, whether as dialectical opposites or counter-factual possibilities. It envisages an Asia that is in dialogue with itself, with China playing the pivotal role as logistical network-builder and the funder-creator of the new communicative infrastructure that will connect all of Asia.

Whether such a project can succeed, and whether Asia can truly afford to be self-referential in its identity-creation are questions of a more theoretical nature that can only be answered later. But for now 'The Governance of China' gives us a rare glimpse into the mindset and worldview of China's elite and their long-term plans for the future, and is a work that cannot be overlooked by analysts and policy-makers alike.

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